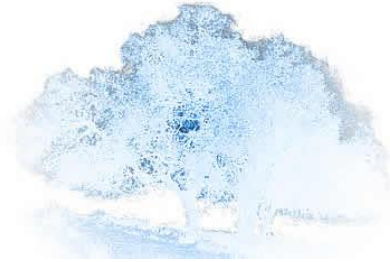


PVR 10



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**A special thanks to all those involved in promotion,
especially to the Cal Poly Pomona faculty, staff,
and students who made this possible.**

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Dear Readers

This year marks the 10th edition of *PVR*. Rest assured it has seen its tribulations, from a 2010 rebirth after a lengthy hiatus on the tail of four publications in the early 2000's, to the annual management of the time and effort required to maintain the quality of work that *PVR*'s readers and contributors have become accustomed to—all of this while we continue to write and try to accomplish our own dreams.

The difficult times are the true measurements of success, and, thanks to a growing group of dedicated contributors, we have watched a humble publication that struggled to find enough work to publish morph into a compilation of work that reflects a caliber of writing that our editing team has never before seen.

With this we would like to welcome Ian Cressman to our editorial team—a student of English at Cal Poly Pomona—who has been instrumental to this issue, and especially in enabling us to work through some issues we've experienced in the past weeks. We look forward to working with him in the future, and appreciate both his attention to detail and his deliberation on fiction this year.

And thanks to Marta's work behind the scenes, 2016 promises an unseen growth in the reach of *PVR*, as we will have a featured panel at the *Pacific Ancient and Modern Language Association* conference

where several of our contributors will feature their work. Though this may seem a modest acknowledgment, it represents a professional and literary **applause** to those who have published with us thus far, and we are forever in your debt for your consistent support.

To get philosophical for a moment, it seems to us that our (and your) creative capacities are much more than a hobby, more than a career. Our creativity has, as Foucault writes, become an "aesthetics of existence," and we are grateful to facilitate this creative exchange with you.

We hope that you are able to enjoy this year's publication with all the fervor that we did in reviewing your work. Sadly, we cannot include each of the pieces we enjoyed, and that is year-over-year the most complex and regretful component of this project. We both appreciate and understand the effort and willpower it requires for someone to pour out their values, ideals, opinions, their content *and* discontent, into a single piece of work, and we hope you continue to do so.

Thank You,

Ryan & Chris
PVR

HAUNTED BARN

At the northern end of old orange grove
the huge and weathered barn waited
like a monolith from ancient times.

We were 11 when our older brothers whispered of its power.

Our first expedition one October
we belly-crept through dirt clods
hard oranges our ammunition
and there vast and creaking in the wind
the barn, bigger than our imaginations, loomed.

We waited on a gray and windy day,
prone and scarcely breathing
like infantry soldiers in World War II,
for the crazy old man with his shotgun to emerge.

He never did.

Two months later we arrived with switchblade knives
(bought from the Pomona Valley Hospital gift shop)
and touched its timbered
carapace, slid open finally one enormous door
and in the dust-filtered light beheld
bins of coal, piled 8 feet deep.
This was the secret? Dirty old coal?
We carried a handful off and wove our way back home.
Twelve months pass. One winter day
we gathered again and navigated through the orange grove
on one last expedition. The barn stood frozen
in its clearing, a bit smaller and forlorn.

This time the other door was locked.
We broke it with a swinging hatchet
as the wind moaned and rain splattered
against the huge carapace. Not deterred
we slid it open with all our might.

Piled haphazardly inside in randomness
were rows and rows of tombstones—
names of the dead murmuring in the golden light.

Something fell or beat against the wood.

We squeezed through the closing door and fled
while thunder boomed overhead.

Two weeks later we came home from school
and the old grove was bulldozed;
trees piled 3 stories high, festooned with oranges,
the old barn razed and gone without a sign.

The following year my father bought a house
on Yorba Drive, at one edge of that orange grove,
close enough to that old barn that its vestige
flickered on my bedroom wall at night
during rare thunderstorms
and names and dates appeared.

~ James Hickson

ANCESTORS

From the beginning
I am a jumble of parts:
Garage sale, junk yard,
My great aunt's nose, my mother's chin
My father's eyes.

She's going to take after you,
Relatives say dismissively.
In response, I scoff
And turn up my great aunt's nose at them.

My lungs heave with my ancestors'
breaths;
I bite my tongue to keep their words
From spilling.

I tell them:
I am not my race,
I am not my gender,
I am not the sum of my ancestors.

But, at the end of the day,
Relatives justify my rebellion:
"Oh, she's just like her grandmother."

~ Ananya Bhargava



"Childhood Memory" ~ Saul Villegas

His ghost was with me that morning
Wandering round my room
While I tried to write,
Lifting the corners of my laundry,
Making the dust dance in the light.

I could not bare to look,
To look at the shape that cast the shadow.
I knew it was his ghost,
But was stricken with the terror
That it might be something else...

Not a ghost at all,
Just the shadow of a tree.

Turns out
Not being haunted
Is what really frightens me.

~ J. Harker Shaw

When all fear withers in the woods

The wind avoids the valley.

She roams beyond the endless sea

And returns stagnant.

The same mountain and the same cloud

She roams beyond the endless sea.

When all the light dims in the sky,

Nature creeps at night expanding.

She roams beyond the spinning planet

And returns static.

The same planet and the same sea

She roams beyond the endless void.

~ Ivan Rios



"The Birth of the Indigo Phoenix" ~ Jannelly Herrera

Vow. You say it's barely a word at all;
Small and easily lost, or otherwise
Misplaced among the details with other
Sundries and minutia—collecting like dust.
Over time etiolate, gray to white;
Becoming thin, brittle—transparent
And fragile as rice paper. I try to
Walk and not leave a mark; Exit cum gratia,
But the thought is too late.
Yes, time has passed, so quietly—fading
Softly, steadily draining brio—turning
My heart into a curio, small and easily
Lost or otherwise misplaced. Taedium vitae.
I close my eyes and wish you away.

~ *Viv Eliot*

SONNET FOR ALEX

Forgive me, Mr. Pope, for I have sinned.
Perhaps I am a beast, greatly misplaced
Among the humans, since I'm not chagrined
About the way I worship how he tastes.

You say He's worthy of my Sunday best
'cause He makes sense of chaos and decay,
But it is wholly true I'm graced and blessed,
For he already does this every day.

If he, like He, could turn water to wine,
We'd drink the sea, emerge from it baptized;
But, Oh! I think, it's truly more divine
How he can turn prison to paradise.

Forgive me, Lord and Sir, Ethereal Prince:
In him, not Him, I've found my Providence.

~ Ruby Villarruel

DEATH AND DINNER PARTIES

The most inappropriate topics of conversation arise at dinner parties. I was at one when someone asked someone else what depression is and why her sister felt she needed drugs for when it was so obvious that she didn't need drugs and that her doctor was over-prescribing, and that she should just be trying harder to stop being depressed.

Maybe it cannot be explained to someone who does not suffer from it. It may well seem ridiculous from someone else's point of view...

Everything hurts. The top of my head hurts, my hair, my bones, my brain. My skin is tight and cracked and bleeding and painful. My joints hurt and I can't move very well and my eyes cannot stop leaking. These are minor things. Not the things that really hurt.

There is no way to explain the depth of the pain, how it is in the bones, how it is in my consciousness, in my subconsciousness, in me, never leaving.

The heart hurts. Not the pink construction paper one – the real, muscle one – it really hurts. It feels like it is ripping in half or struggling to beat, or to stop, or something, and all the while it pounds, a punching pounding, reminding me that I am alive, that I am still alive, that I am not near the relief that only death can bring.

I think about death – not like an angst-ridden teenager does, or like a mother from an underdeveloped country does, or like the martyred saints did, or maybe not like anyone else, or maybe exactly like everyone else. I don't think of an afterlife – I don't want an afterlife – one life is bad enough. I think of how to die. I think about veering into an oncoming semi. I think about driving off a bridge. I think about drifting off with pills. I think about slashing. I think about the bang of a gunshot to the head. But, if anyone knew or cared, there would be no worry because I can't do that. I don't have the strength. I don't have the will to die. I don't know that it will stop the pain. I will probably still hurt. Even after death there will be no relief.

I think about failure, how others have failed me, how I fail others, how I have failed myself. I think about how my parents failed to notice that I was dying, that I was starving myself, that I was alienating myself, that I was not alive. I think about the failure of the stories: that no prince could ever come, that no peace could ever come, that no future would come. I think about my failure, as a human, a mother, a woman, a scholar, a functioning person, a part of the whole, broken away and free floating, not in the good way that defies the ordained, but in the way that lets me drift into oblivion, removed from society from family from self, from the pain. (Sorry, I am waxing poetic now.)

I think about how I can never stop, never be a person, never be whole, never be happy, never be normal. I think about extremes, about nevers, about such things as good and evil, and doubt the existence of either.

So, I tell the woman at the dinner party that she does not understand her sister, that she does not understand that it is not understandable, that the sister doesn't need her to understand. I explain that the sister needs her to stop: to stop telling her to get better, to stop telling her the doctor is over-prescribing, to stop telling her that she has to stop, to stop treating her like a child who has been bad, to stop trying to understand. She doesn't want her to understand. She doesn't need her to understand. She needs her to stop underestimating the disease because the disease can kill and maim and hurt and destroy from within but also from without and from outside and from sideways and from ways you cannot imagine.

At another dinner party, I overheard an acquaintance talking to a woman about her daughter's suicide attempt. She described it as "selfish." Her daughter was selfish for doing this to her mother. Do you know what it's like to lose your entire life but be alive to realize that every day?

2016. Nine years. Suicide, attempted.

2008. One year since my suicide attempt... actually, more like a half-assed attempt. I don't even know if I actually wanted to die. I was in the car, blurry-eyed from crying, crying that I couldn't prevent even when my three sons, whom I had just dropped off at school, were in the car. I wonder what they were thinking when I drove away from them, still crying, and telling them it was not their fault.

I was in my car. Alone. Crying. Driving.

I saw a semi on the other side of the road.

I accelerated to 140 clicks.

I'm not sure how far into the oncoming lane I swerved. I don't know if the semi driver even realized I was in his lane – it may be that I seemed to just be hugging the center line. It really doesn't matter, because I pulled back into my own lane and decelerated.

Strangely, in the previous three weeks I had had three traffic infractions. A speeding ticket on the way to the baseball field. Not that unusual. A miscalculated a familiar turn, smacking into a cement divider, causing \$500 damage to my car. Never did that before. A U-turn at a red light in front of a police car. Okay – that was bad, even for me. So, it makes sense (!?) to me that the car should have been my weapon of choice. Still, nobody realized anything was wrong.

I went home and made a plan. I chose the second day of school in the fall. I would take the boys to school in the morning, go home, take all the pills I had, and go to bed – easy. This relieved me. I was still depressed, but there was the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel – only eight weeks away – and I was going to float right into it.

All there was left to do was to write the cliché letter telling my family members not to blame themselves (although I thought they should because they couldn't see something was wrong).

I never wrote the letter. I never even began composing it in my head.

I don't know why, but I called my doctor one day. I don't actually remember

doing that, but I must have, because there I was in his office. I don't even know what I told him, but I remember him asking me a question he had asked before: "If I had a pill that would cure your depression, but would make you gain 20 pounds, would you take it?"

I had always answered, "No way." That day, I whispered, "Yes."

Of course, he had no such magic pill. But it showed that I was desperate. He prescribed new antidepressants to add to the ones I was already taking, and demanded that I see a therapist again. And she had a trick up her sleeve.

"You have to give me six months. Six months to convince you not to kill yourself. And you have to promise me that you if you feel like that you will call a suicide hotline."

"I can give you the six months. But I doubt you'll convince me that life is worth living," I replied calmly. "But I won't call a hotline – I can't picture myself doing that."

"Then what can you picture yourself doing?"

I thought about it for a few minutes – what would I do?

"I'll drive myself [is that a good idea?] to the ER, and go lay down on a bed. Just like that – no talking to a registration person, or a nurse, or a doctor. I'll just walk in and lay down on a bed."

One day, I mentioned to my therapist that it had been eight months since our agreement.

"Do we need to re-negotiate?"

"Suicide doesn't seem close to my mind now."

And so, a year has passed since I (maybe) pulled my car in front of a semi. I mark this anniversary because it reminds me that I was very close to the brink. Even if I never actually get there again, I know that, if I was there once, I could easily get there again, if I was not vigilant. Suicidal thoughts are never going to vanish, but death isn't in the cards right now.

2016. You are probably thinking that this is a self-indulgent piece of crap. After all, I didn't try very hard to commit suicide, I haven't died yet, nor am I in any present danger. Maybe you see this as a self-pitying look-at-me-I'm-suicidal rant. Writing this is self-indulgent. It gives me a chance – forces me – to put two and two together to get five.

I don't think about suicide every day, but I do think about it, and even sometimes believe it is immanent. Nevertheless, it helps me to write this down, and then, in a sane moment, re-read it. At other times, though, it opens old wounds, or I find new ones or put myself, at least temporarily, in that desperate place. It could be dangerous. But, although the pen may be mightier than the sword, it is not going to kill me, at least not today.

2009. Today, even as I write this, I am considering taking all of the pills I have stashed. An overdose. Just take the fucking pills and go to sleep and it will all be over – no more pain. Fuck everyone else – they don't get it anyway. I have gone completely insane. I can't control my actions or my emotions. I can't remember what

I need to do today, and I don't care what I have to do today, or any more days. My heart has stopped beating. My lungs are labouring to breathe. My legs hurt and can't support me. My fingers hurt as they clench this stupid pen, which, after all, will not save me. I just want to go to the hospital, the psych ward, and lie down on a bed – strap me down, sedate me, and go away – just leave me like that forever. I might as well just stay here.

2010. I learned I am not crazy. Three psychiatrists confirm this.

2014. Despite the fact that I can barely function in my day-to-day life and I don't see any means to a solution or a happy ending, I realize that I have been kicked to the curb many times, and have succumbed to my illness many times, but I keep getting up and I keep fighting. Rather than staying down and shutting down, I get up and face it, as painful as it is. It seems I am stronger than I thought I was. And why do I continue to fight in the face of near certain defeat? God damn it! I am a frigging optimist. I still, somehow, believe it will work out, or at least get better, or something. I am dumbfounded. I am a dark, pessimistic, brooding person. But, it seems, above all, I am an optimist. Me. The biggest pessimist out there; the bitterest, most disillusioned, fuck-it-all-up person, an optimist. And that is the biggest mystery in life to me.

2011. This entry differs from previous entries in several ways. First, I usually write in my journal to work myself out of a depressed state. Today, I want to remain here – I just want to be depressed and not even try to bring myself out of it. I feel most comfortable here; I am perversely happy here. Second, I usually write with no intention of anyone reading it. This specific entry is meant to be read – or I am writing to an imaginary audience of at least one other person. I don't know why. Finally, to anyone reading this, I probably don't sound depressed. I am not sobbing or shaking. The pages are staying dry. I am lucid enough to mind the syntax and grammar (and imagine an audience). There are no incoherent ramblings or repetitions of words. I am calm enough to get through my day with no one thinking that I am depressed. Outwardly, I seem fine.

But, as calm and lucid as I am, I am depressed and I have thoughts in my head that, even as I think of them, I know are irrational and that in a few days they will seem skewed, even ridiculous, to me. Nevertheless, I am depressed and I am thinking thoughts that I know are not right, but I believe them anyway. The rational side of me is losing the battle today. And I am going to allow it. I am tired of fighting back and holding on until it passes, if it passes. I am tired of worrying about sinking too low. I am sick of pretending that I am okay and that I believe that happiness is possible. I refuse to be on the losing side of the battle any more, today. I have no energy to face any more days, good or bad. I would just really like it all to end. I thought about cocking a rifle. I don't have a rifle. I thought about swallowing pills. I do have enough of those, but I can't be bothered. I mean, really, I would have to get up, get the pills, get water, and it would take several shots to get enough of them down, and take some anti-nauseates so I wouldn't throw up... can't be bothered. And

when I say I want it to end, I don't necessarily mean end in death – that's just one possibility.

But as much as I want to sleep right now, I continue to write. Why? Because I want to get this out, down on paper, on the record, so if somebody reads it, somebody will know that even though I look okay, I am not okay. The thoughts are here. The pain is here. The heartbreak is here. The tears are close to the surface and death is never too far out of reach. To come to an end without death requires a cure or a treatment, and there is neither, so as long as I am alive, I will have depression, suffer from depression, battle depression. After a while, this seems futile.

Why do I want somebody to hear anyway? Maybe I don't really want someone else to hear. Maybe I want to say it just to say it. Maybe I want to see it written down. I want somebody other than me to see it written down and, maybe, just for a second, feel it, bear it for me. I don't want somebody to read this and feel sorry for me, or comfort me, or help me. I don't want people to read this and wonder who they know that may be feeling the same things. Maybe I want somebody to read this and appreciate the life lived without depression – how much better it is. Maybe I don't. Maybe I don't care why it is read, or who reads it, or how it affects somebody, or what somebody makes of it. Maybe it just doesn't matter. It doesn't need to be read by anyone. It just exists in me, and I am a writer (allegedly), so I put it on paper. It might just be that simple. Part of my need to write this stems from my insularity: I can't be the only person who feels like I do not fit in, or belong to, or live in, a society ... unobserved, not contributing, not interfaced.

But what is it that I want to say? I want to say that I feel like crap. I feel like crap, and I feel tired, and I want to go to sleep and not do anything ever, about anything or for anyone, even for myself. The other thing I want to say is that I really do feel physical pain. It is tangible. But none of that is really the physical pain. The physical pain is the emotional pain that is so heavy and dense that I actually feel it.

What else? Here I am in the land without things or people, where there is no time, no life, no death, or nothing real. If I wanted, I could invent whatever I wanted and it would be real to me, here, now. But I can't be bothered to do that either. I can't believe I can still hold onto a pen, let alone write. If I left this in manuscript, a reader would see that my writing is becoming sloppier –some letters are deformed, the lines are crooked, and the words are becoming larger. My mind is less controlled.

Now my tears are flowing, making my bed wet, and I will have to blow my nose, and I'll have a harder time breathing when I'm sleeping, and when I wake up I'll have a headache, red eyes, and mascara down my cheeks. I guess I'll look the part then. I'll look depressed.

At least I won't have to suffer through old age alone. I will never be a white-haired, arthritic, diseased, dependent old woman. I know I will kill myself long before that. At least I can control some things, like when and how I die and when the suffering stops and when being alone won't hurt so much.

2016. I think that the previous paragraphs sound whiny and idiotic, but I won't cross any of it out because I wrote it down so it should stay, otherwise this blathering would somehow become a lie – an untelling of some “truth” that my warped little mind has made. So here it stays – the most painful part of me, dying to find relief, knowing it will never come; lamenting what has never been nor will ever be; mourning the most human of emotions that has eluded me for my whole life and will continue to evade me until my death. I think this is really what I wanted to say. This is why I really want to sleep – because besides not feeling the pain of depression, I am not lonely when I am sleeping. It is not necessarily that when I'm sleeping I dream of being in love, or having love, or giving love, which sometimes I do. It is the absence of pain... the longing, the grief, the awareness, the inexperience, the future, the past, the present – all because of this one little thing.

Idiot. You think too much like a made-for-TV movie, a Hallmark card, or a Kodak moment. Life isn't like that. Most people don't have what you want (do they?). You can't quit life over that. Stop being so selfish and go help someone who is much more in need than you are. Stop acting like an angst-ridden teen-ager. Stop fantasizing. Stop dreaming. Stop.

Rudely, I interrupted the conversation: “A suicide attempt is NOT a selfish act!” She just looked at me. They both just stared at me. When it was me, I genuinely believed that it was the best thing to do for everyone, by relieving my own suffering and freeing everyone from worrying about me, nursing me, and being embarrassed by me.

I doubt I'll be incited to another dinner party.

~ Jane Arsenault



"Pinot Noir" ~ Melina Ahmadzadeh

MEALS

Dinner rolls around: it's a quiet affair.
Dad is in the corner, his eyes drifting afar.
Like a bird in flight, flying away, flying over
The array of food, over you,
And over your mother.

Breakfast is rushed,
A lone pancake and a dash of milk,
Eaten beside a hospital bed.
There is a grey vacancy in your grandmother's eyes:
She's as good as dead.

Lunch is a furtive affair.
The bathroom tiles glint suspiciously.
Two fingers down your throat,
The taste of pasta and bile in your mouth.
Your blood never looked this red before.
You don't make it to the door.

Dinner takes place in another hospital bed,
You lie alone, a bowl of untouched soup by your side.
Your mother has a meeting,
Your father is asleep.
Your butler pops in to say,
He regrettably has to leave.
You assure him it's okay.

~ Ananya Bhargava

IN THE PUDDLE OF WINE

whine within whine within a puddle of red wine
a night vacant of imagery
a night full of hackneyed laughters and hijacked smiles
the candle's shadow was marking the position at which
a ghost can knock at the gates of ash.
fearing the invasion of memories
that kept echoing in this moonless night
still other whines were uttered in succession
with no pause in between.
the final dregs were still bubbling in the glass
—post card series from an aching soul

~ Ali Znaidi



"The Allegory of the Divine Consciousness" ~ Saul Villegas

NAZARETH (FOR EDEN)

benedicta qui venit in nomine domini

["Blessed is she that comes in the name of the Father"]

-Dante, after John the Baptist

I.

To this city of rice and weddings,
overflowing like a toppled barrel
of pearls, we Jews ascend.

Driving up the mountain
that hovers over Galilee
like revelation, it seems
from the windows of
our puny Peugeot that
here, Jesus speaks
Arabic and wears
a *kaffiyah*.

II.

Pigeons flee the gait
of Eden—17 months quick,
lumbering through gardens

in slow-motion with seahorse
curls bouncing, with eyes
aflake.

She is curious, un-gated.
Eden tickles even the severest
cherubim to chuckles; she is endless
and intoxicating like the first
bedouin's desert dream.

III.

The *hortus conclusus*: a steeped square
where pilgrims meet—nuns and
African executives—under an English
sign that reads, “Know the Truth of Islam,”
with Aladdin's golden lamp in the bottom
corner and a number to call. Here, the old
men tell stories from twisted teeth
over boards of backgammon. Here,
another mother leans to bless
our child in a mythic language

we don't understand; she places
her hands upon each of Eden's

chrysanthemum cheeks and incants
some arid mantra of Muhammad
(or the Muses) above these stones
and blossoms quarried
to cities. Here, the world
is constructed through
words like a prophesy.

IV.

When the actual Messiah
comes to these hills of holy
fire, she will don a pink
tutu with ruffles that crest
like waves, her pupils ever
expanding outward
from desert sands like
another Big
Bang.

When the actual Messiah
comes, the parchments
of prophecy will be doused
in glitter glue and sparkles, then
crumpled and tossed to the alley,

like any other good metaphor
once the truth it signifies
is understood.

~ Andres Wilson

STOLEN BICYCLES (A POST-MODERN *UBI SUNT*)

Where are
those two
city specters
stealing night
behind blue-sky
bicycles?

Down Frederick Douglass
Boulevard ground the gears
that last night when I
saw their legs—feet
drowned in rotten shoes—
barely pushing pedals down
with the cadence of a drunken
dog.

They shifted too soon

from the Harlem hills
to the owl alleys, dim
and dangling as broken streetlights,
from the Harlem hills to the slimy

Central Park cul-de-sacs—rancid
and dizzying as her junkie body. Their eyes
of death strung like loose threads of hemp
over scarred wrists or the crusty tufts of Riot-Grrrl
curls through which fingers might have run,
many summers ago, on Ferris Wheels
of endless revolving, when all
was perhaps a grenade
of possibility.

Before it seemed every-
day the itchy two would wave
plastic cups, shake Red Sox caps, raise
disintegrating laurel branches like Daphne's
own, over-pulled by Apollo

along the verdant flanks of Olmstead's
mind. "Spare change?" She would
ask, pretty and pockmarked—a pearl
in black rags with her black
beau—and he (a man without
a face to me for he might have been
me in some alternate universe
in which the divine will is no less

arbitrary) sat on the sidewalk,
smelling kaleidoscopes.

For them, I remember
having once bled the cheap
caritas of pastrami sandwich
to soothe tingling desires
of which I am thank-
fully ignorant.

Afterwards, Mahmoud who ran the bodega
admonished me “she lies; she
doesn’t want food. Let her
die,” from the sanctity of
Taqiyah, with the top shirt button
choking.

Who knows if
the little sprite(s) even ate
the sandwich, dreadful
as she was; just another exile
from a Massachusetts mill town
at the core of the rotten apple—

or so she had told me.

A bicycle's spokes
ever spin the new—
turn through wind
into nothingness again,
spin to escape to somewhere
else—like the imagined
New York of boring sub-
urban childhoods. A rider
chooses gears—feels
the body twist with the turns,
hovers off
the saddle in the hills,
and moves, always moves
or else falls.

Did they get where they were going?

Ubi sunt?

~ Andres Wilson



"City Wheel" ~ Alex Duensing

THE ATHEIST I MET

He reminded me of Rimbaud's dessicate priest,
That fossil.

(Shining patches on a suit too worn
to ever be worn again

Stains upon a shirt collar

from breakfasts long digested

Threads from cuffs that once had been pristine
but now bore dust and dandruff.)

Right at the first, he pinned me with his eye:

"You're a young man," he said, a lie;

"I don't need to tell you about their fraud,

"Their withered drunken tit they call a god,

"Their childish sucking at him and their wrath

"To all who do not deign to walk their path."

(He did not need to tell me.)

Why he chose me so I'll never know

What promise did I have, or even show?

What did he hope to gain from such a scene

As that he made, that ragged gentleman,

Whose meat was anger and whose teeth were words.

I would not know; I had to leave the train.

I left him in our car to sit alone,

But fancied that he'd spend the journey with his friend, his
foe,

And never even pause in talking so,

And spit his spit and on a naked altar swear

And rage against a god who was not there.

~ *Nick Milne*

What know you of the
Tidal bore of Hell?
That roaring pulsion
 ships
 all
Lifts
To dripping lips
So lofty leering down.

What know you of this
Current or this wave?
This line invisible
 Dragging
 all
 along
Their courage flagging
As it raises them,
 and sipping
 swills them down.

I will show you all this
Maelstrom in the dark.
I will shoulder your repulsion
As you struggle on the shore,
The faint beating of your hands
 Fluttering
Your ragged breath in mine
 Stuttering
Your heartbeat on the swell
 Guttering

And those wide and widening lips above us
Muttering
What poor dregs these are
For one who hopes to dine;
Give him something more,
A bloated whale,
A cask of rancid wine.

~ *Nick Milne*

WHAT HAPPENED TO MY LIFE?

Thursday (early evening):

I find myself walking down Main Street in my hometown, passing shops that have been closed for over 15 years. Some of them never existed. All of them thrive in this moment. I am suddenly overwhelmed by unexplainable warmth transmitting throughout my body – down my arms, through my hands, extending to my fingertips. It's her! Gripping my hand as tightly as her tiny counterpart can manage, it's my beloved Susanne! How did she get here? I don't know or care. I am only in this moment. That familiar smile alleviates all the pain of the last five years. I now hear John Lennon's posthumous song "Grow Old with Me" playing as we walk along the quaint downtown street, hand in hand, arms swinging. Where is this song coming from, though? There are no speakers within sight. Who knows? And who cares? I'm with Susanne, and that's all that matters.

We enter a shop. I am not sure what they sell, but I do not concern myself with such matters. Now she's gone! Where did she go? A salesman distracts me by describing the hottest new product, which turns out to be a smartphone. I do not need a smartphone; I just need Susanne. "Grow Old with Me" continues to play and at a louder volume. Suddenly, the building shakes violently! Is it an earthquake? A marble pillar that I did not notice before collapses in slow motion and then...I scream! It lands on my chest, and I am sure to die. "You are going to die, sir," the salesman assures me with an odd smirk. "You will not need a smartphone now." I am not afraid of death; in fact, I welcome it. But first, let me see my Susanne one more time.

She reappears! Where was she? It doesn't matter. Her eyes well with tears; mine do the same. "I am going to die," I tell her. "No, we just got back together!" she replies. I ask her to hold me as I die, and she complies. I hope life will be good to her once I'm gone. I await death. It's running late. Where is it? I don't know what to do besides stare into the eyes of the only true love I have ever known. I sing in near unison with John Lennon:

*Grow old along with me,
Whatever fate decrees,
We will see it through,
For our love is true.*

She cries hysterically now. I do the same.

"What the hell?" I ask an empty living room, as I wake up. Why am I having dreams about her again? It's been five years! I thought I was over her. I sniffle a bit. Through pooled tears, I look at the digital clock on the cable box. I cannot see it clearly, so I wipe my eyes. It's 6:30 PM! I get up from the couch and stumble toward the bathroom. I have dark circles under my reddened brown eyes from a lack of sleep, and I look each of my 35 years. The thinning brown hair on my head reminds

me that I am no longer the young man who felt her love. But why am I still dreaming about her? I use the toilet and flush. I wash my hands with soap and think about all the men leaving the public restrooms at work who do not. I dry my hands with a towel.

"You are appreciated," Tupac Shakur sings through my cell phone. "Dear lady, don't you know we love ya? Dear mama, place no one above ya." I answer it.

"You still coming over?" my mother asks.

"Yeah, sorry. I was watching ESPN, and then, the next thing I knew, I fell asleep on the couch. I just had the strangest dream. I was walking down –"

"Well, supper will be ready in about half an hour," she interrupts. "I knew you'd be late."

"You know me well."

"Hey, your brother is coming over, too, and he has some big news for you."

"Oh no! Tell me it's not what I think."

"Yeah, he and Stacey are getting married! And – don't tell him I told you – but he's going to ask you to be the best man!"

"God damn it! Why me?"

"Calm down! And try to act surprised and honored when he asks you. I wasn't supposed to say anything, but I figured you would need to be warned first."

"Well, I think he's stupid."

"For God's sake, don't tell him that! He loves Stacey, and she loves him. I honestly don't know what you have against her."

"I know, Mom. She's a really nice girl. I just hate what she represents. My little brother's getting married. We're all getting old. The only thing left to do now is die."

"Oh, Joel, I don't know what I'm gonna do with you! Hey, you're not gonna believe what your Aunt Annie said on *Facebook* the other day. She's starting it up with your Aunt Lisa again and..."

Four years and nine months ago:

I sit down at the computer to learn what's going on in the cyber universe. Surely, someone else's life must be more interesting than mine. On my iTunes, Conway Twitty – my dead grandmother is to blame for me listening to crap like that – sings, "And if you should ever find it in your heart to forgive me, come back darlin'. I'll be waiting for you." My thoughts immediately shift to Susanne. I log on to my email account. I know it's unwise to send her a message. Our relationship is over, and her parents and friends hate me. The people at her church will never forgive me. Perhaps Jesus won't either. But I can't help it; I still love her. I click on "compose new message" and start typing.

Dearest Susanne,

I know it's only been three months since I ruined our relationship, but I just want to tell you I'm sorry and I need you back. I know I hurt you beyond

belief, and you said you didn't know if you could ever trust another man again. But if you give me one more chance, I promise I will spend the rest of my life making up for my mistakes. I am sorry I have taken you for granted. You are the best thing to ever happen to me, and, without you, my life is meaningless. Please, let's just talk. I know we can make things right. You always said no love was as good as ours. That's still true. Please call or email me back.

*Love always,
Joel*

I click send and then immediately regret it. It's too late now, though, and I know I would've regretted not sending it even more.

Friday morning:

I awake, but I do not remember my dreams. No matter. It is better to wake up without wiping away tears. I think this is going to be a good day! I use the toilet, wash my hands with soap, dry my hands with a towel, shave, brush my teeth, and then take a shower. It is a rather enjoyable shower, so I stay in a few minutes longer than usual – but not too long, as I do not want to give the utility companies a chance to soak me anymore than usual. Breakfast is now on my mind, so I make my way to the kitchen and then decide I deserve bacon and eggs. I spray Pam in the skillet, but before I can crack the eggs, my phone rings. “The boys are back in town. The boys are back in town,” Thin Lizzy sings. It must be Max!

“hey sugar tits u got plans 2morrow nite” he texted.

“doin whatever ur doin playa whats the plan” I text back.

“ur boy met a dime last nite and i told her bout u and we are meeting her and her fine ass friend at subterra 2nite if ur down”

“sounds good bro what time should i come over”

“get here at 9 that way we can predrink b4 hittin the club”

Four years, eight months, and twenty-nine days ago:

I awake. I know Susanne must've received that email by now. I'm too nervous to see if she responded, but I'm too anxious to put it off. I use the toilet first, wash my hands with soap, dry them with a towel, and then venture toward the computer. I'm hungry, but breakfast can wait. I log on to my email account, and I have three new messages. The first is spam telling me about breast implants. I do not need them. The second is from Susanne, and the third is a forward from an aging coworker encouraging me to support the troops. I am not too worried about the troops at the moment, so I click on Susanne's message.

Dear Joel,

I just got your email, and I really don't know what to say. Although I feel sorry for you because (to be honest) I still love you, I cannot see you or give you another chance. Where were you when I was home alone crying every night? You were with that whore! My family hates you right now, and everyone at church would think I was an idiot if I got back with you. Look, you know everything happens for a reason. I never thought we'd break up. I always thought we had the best relationship ever. But it's over now, and I know there's a reason for that. I need to see what God has planned for me. Sorry, but we both need to move on.

Sincerely,
Susanne

My heart beats tremendously, and my eyes are filled with tears. David Bowie's "Space Oddity" plays on my iTunes. Planet Earth is indeed blue, and there's nothing I can do except log off and fill my life with whatever distractions will get me through the rest of it.

Friday afternoon:

After using the public toilet, I wash my hands with soap, notice two guys walking out without washing their hands, dry my hands with three paper towels, and then return to my office. There's only an hour left of work, and then my day is over. Thoughts of partying with Max fill my imagination. I hope these girls are hot. It's Max's doing, so I know they are! I think about leaving work early. I'm pretty sure I can split without anyone noticing. Maybe I'll check *Facebook* first. Yeah, that's a good idea. I log on. I have no new notifications or messages. I'm disappointed that no one messaged me in the 15 minutes since I last checked, but I know it's silly to feel that way. I decide to glance through the newsfeed anyway and see how everyone's living. Billy Green likes Foo Fighters and Green Day. So do I. Jacob Wilson is glad it's Friday and is looking forward to hitting the clubs this weekend. God, I hope he's not at Subterra because I hate that douche bag! I only accepted his friend request to keep peace at the office. Rose Swickenburger is moving on up in Farmville. Congratulations on your awesome achievement, Rose! Joe Haggard thanks God for all his blessings. I hate it when friends do that. I have some choice words for Joe's imaginary God, but I know to keep them off *Facebook*. Otherwise, there will be a mass exodus from my friends list, as if I have cyber leprosy. Sasha Hamilton and 16 other friends changed their profile pictures. Cute pic, Sasha! Your tits look nice in this one! Susanne changed her relationship status to engaged. Damn! I knew she was dating a guy, but I didn't know they were there already. Shit!

Saturday night:

The doorman at Subterra lets us in without paying the cover, so we tip him. We enter and then snake our way through a myriad of bodies toward the bar. The DJ sees us and nods. Good guy. He spins Biggie Smalls singing, "I see some ladies tonight that should be havin' my baby, baby." Bouncer Josh offers a sly smile and a "What's up?" Misty, the sexiest bartender in town, gives us a wink, a slightly seductive smile, and a "Hey guys!" We are local celebrities. Max is still looking about for our girls. The anticipation is growing. Which one of these ladies will I take home tonight? Max taps me on my left bicep.

"There they are," he says, subtly pointing his head in the direction across the bar. "The two blondes at the table in the corner."

"For real?" I respond. "God damn, son! You've outdone yourself this time."

"Yeah, and the tall one's all yours, you lucky son of a bitch! You're the big winner tonight."

"Well, neither of us are exactly losers," I say. "They both look a little young, though. What are they about 22?"

"Probably. I didn't ask. They're old enough to be here, so that's good enough."

The short girl recognizes Max, smiles, and waves. We maneuver our way through numerous fit bodies toward their table. My girl looks delicious in her black high-heeled shoes and skin-tight black shorts showing nearly all of her long, tan legs. Jesus Christ, this girl is fine as hell! So is Max's girl. I doubt these pretty things have a brain between them, but that's okay. They'll serve their purpose. My target's yellow t-shirt is rather tight, and it is embroidered with red sequins and the peculiar phrase "What happened to my life?" I don't think a girl her age can realistically ask such a question. But for an evanescent moment, I wonder what exactly *did* happen to her life? Has she ever known struggle or suffering? Has she ever experienced true love and then later heartbreak? Does she have dreams, and what they are? Of course, I'm quite sure her shirt is just some silly social commentary or contemporary pop culture reference that I'm too old to understand. But, then again, it doesn't really matter.

"I was starting to worry," the short one says. "You said you'd be here like 40 minutes ago."

"Oh, we got tied up with some shit," Max lies. "We're here now, though, so the party can officially begin!"

"By the way, Max, this is my best friend, Whitney."

"Nice to meet you, Whitney," Max says while shaking the tall one's hand.

"And, ladies, tonight is a treat for both of you because you get to meet my esteemed colleague, Joel Clark. It's not every day you meet a man of his caliber. And, Joel, you've already met Whitney. This lovely little lady here is Heather."

"Ladies, it's nice to meet you," I say.

"Oh my God, I love your hat!" the tall one says, pointing to my black fedora. "Can I please wear it?"

"Maybe, later...if you're a good girl," I respond. "But *only* if you behave!"

Sometimes, I can't believe what a douche bag I've become these last few years, but all the tricks that Max has taught me seem to work again and again. Why would I ever be myself when this routine is so much more effective? The tall blonde girl responds to my lame ass with a smile that only a beautiful, stupid girl can wear. I know this is going to be easy.

Twelve years ago:

I awake from a very short rest. Although I'm tired, I feel prepared. I'm about to take my last final exam of the semester! But first, I have my ritual morning toilet visit. I would like to take a shower, but I don't have time. Instead, I get dressed, grab a granola bar for breakfast, and then I'm on my way. I open the door and find an envelope with my name in huge colored block letters. It must be from my beautiful Susanne! I open the envelope, and I immediately recognize her handwriting.

Joel,

I was actually kind of sad that I couldn't see you last night, so I felt like I had to write you a letter to surprise you with this morning, even though I know I will see you tonight. I hope you don't think I'm high or anything. But I kind of am. There's something about the way I feel when I think of you. It's like I have no worries and I'm just so happy! I'm always thinking how lucky I am to have you and that no one else gets you but me. How did I get so lucky? God has truly blessed us! I feel bad for other people because they will never experience a love like ours.

By the way, the flowers you gave me last week are still alive! Isn't that incredible? They're not even wilting! They're like superflowers! Anyway, I can't wait to see you tonight. I love you so much, baby, and I always will. Good luck on your final! I know you're going to kick its butt! I love you so much!

*Love always,
Susanne*

Sunday morning:

I am driving 90 miles an hour down Highway 41, and I'm being pursued by the police. The flashing red and blue lights are getting closer, and I know I'm headed for jail. I try to press my foot on the accelerator all the way to the floor, but I cannot. The radio plays Cyndi Lauper's "Time After Time." I don't even like this song, but then I look to my right and see Susanne sitting in the passenger's seat. It's now my favorite song! "You sure are driving fast," she says. "You better slow down before we get hurt!" "I'm sorry, Susanne," I respond. "I will slow down, if it makes you happy." I then look in my rearview mirror and find that the police are gone! I look back to my right, and

Susanne is still there. Lauper continues to sing, "If you're lost, you can look, and you will find me, time after time." "I love you, Susanne," I say. "You're the only one I will ever love, and I promise I will never hurt you again." She smiles and squeezes my hand. "I love you, too," she says. But then she vanishes. Stunned and dismayed, I return my eyes to the road and discover that I about to crash into a jackknifed semi truck!

"No!" I murmur, as I awkwardly struggle under the covers. My breaths are heavy, and my head is slightly sweaty. I open my eyes and notice the tall blonde girl from the club lying to my right. We're in Max's spare bedroom, and I am safe. I cannot believe I had another strange dream about Susanne. The tall blonde girl awakes.

"Huh? Are you okay, sweetie?" she moans.

"Yeah, it's cool, girl. I just had a nightmare. No big deal. Let's just go back to sleep."

~ Jeff Carr



~ Lauralee Sikorski

I AM BECOME

I am become the flattened thumb
That pens until the sword goes mum,
Till screeches fade into a hum,
I am become, I am become.

I sculpt the hate and carve the numb
To make a bust of martyrdom.
With high relief and sides of rum,
I am become, I am become.

A melody emerges from
My pounding on a tragic drum.
It sings in fours, ba-dum, ba-dum,
Iambic, um, iambic, um...

~ Ruby Villarruel



"Verde Viva" ~ Rubia van Roodselaar

I happened upon
the right moment—

A classically trained violinist
A soul-claimed guitarist,

an Asian woman and a Black woman,

availed a veining, the drug called clarity
orchestrating, hammering, nailing

A Bridge Over Troubled Water

Les rues,
every genre

folk, bluegrass, jazz
neo-soul, classical

syncing into
a storm.

~ *Jewel Pereyra*



"Listen" ~ Kurisutein Lopusak

ODE TO A PARALLEL UNIVERSE IN WHICH MANY SELVES EXIST

Go to your canoe by the flickering rushes.
Wade in up to your knee. Bite the tether

that binds you to shore. Climb in, pant legs
sopping. Bring paper. Bring scissors. Bring

a torch. Embark with no farewell. Shove off
cleaving the waves that would gulp you. Become

the oar that incises. Wound the water
with kinetic ions. Cut the dark with wood.

At the center of the lake find the thousand
floating lanterns. Flameless, mute as reliquary.

Cut one thousand paper dolls. Make sure
they have your face. Make sure you clothe them

in satin or armor so they are emboldened
for either type of battle. Drop them into

the opalescent curtain that licks and swishes
your boat. Watch them sodden, saturate. Watch

them uncompress. As each dissolves
one lantern lights. And this is what we call

wishing. Make sure you utter what you
would have for all these martyred

selves. Write it on the reeds. On your hands
if you must. Cover your body in letters.

Write it in water. Empty your pen. Make
the basin an ink grave. When all the rocks

stain midnight blue, the sky may mistake you
for mirror. If this should happen, extend your hand.

Prepare your palm for burning. If no light enters,
open your throat. Answer it. Roar down the stars.

~ *Catherine Kyle*

ODE TO A PARALLEL UNIVERSE IN WHICH ALL BUT TWO HANDS ARE FULL

In the dream I am gripping
a younger self's hand. Dragging

her through the city. Architecture
glowering, gray-belled granite,

muscled and jutting as terse army
men. Cobblestones bark as we jerk

around corners. We are running
for our lives. I know if we make

one false turn, one bad swerving,
we will bump into the butcher

with the moon-glinting knife.
The old woman with the ether.

Just as I am faltering, eyes darting
between tunnels, a future self

grabs my hand and breaks into
a sprint. Like this, we are guided:

three paper dolls, linked at hand,
at hemline. Six feet clattering

toward the maze mouth. Dodging
clay shingles that loosen and collapse.

Something indestructible: the self
in continuity. A chain of fire-eyed maidens.

~ *Catherine Kyle*



"If only . . ." ~ Reza Hashemizadeh

BROKEN CHAIN

They texted every day for nine weeks. Some days, it was only brief lines like “How are you doing?” or the even shorter “What u wearing.” Other days, it was long chains of dialogue better suited for an actual phone call, a real conversation.

But that wouldn't have fit. They had met only once, first at a cramped, sweaty club with bad lighting in East Hollywood, their pressed bodies communicating what couldn't be heard above the pound of bass. Then a couple hours and a few miles away at a motel off Sunset Boulevard, so old it boasted color TV sets on the fading outdoor marquee. The carpet was blotted with cigarette burns, the bathroom sink missing a chunk of plastic near the drain, so that water spilled slowly off the side onto mottled yellow tile when Dana went to wash her hands.

He was visiting from Oakland, he had gotten the room the day before with three of his friends, who mysteriously disappeared once they arrived that night after the club shut down.

Not much happened - it wasn't exactly the height of romance, but enough transpired that Dana lost an earring on the hard mattress and thin, flowered sheets of the motel bed. She received a ride home that night from a friend, kissed him one last time in the spotlight of her friends' headlights outside the motel bungalow.

Dana wouldn't commit to Skype, so they texted. They didn't even gchat - her email address felt more personal than her phone number, and she wanted to limit how much they knew of each other.

Then the messages stopped. She didn't realize until the second day, but after that, the missing text was all she could think of. Pride kept her from sending more than two nonchalant “hey's,” and after another week of radio silence and a long game of King's Cup in a friend's garage, she messaged him just one word. “Dickhead.”

Three more weeks went by and she stopped thinking about him. She met a philosophy major who wrote poems about water, trees and occasionally, her. Then an actor, who modeled on the side. He was all cheekbones and pecs, but not much of anything else.

Dana forgot. She graduated, found a job. She met a bartender this time, who mixed her drinks with elderberry and egg whites, and told her he always knew exactly what she wanted.

It was a year later, when she had polished off a bottle of wine one night, alone in bed, waiting for the bartender to finish his shift and come over, that she searched for *him* on Facebook. She hadn't quite realized what she had done until his name was spelled out in her search bar. His profile had been

made public, just waiting for her to find it, filled with long chains of memorial posts, pictures, sayings, emojis. The funeral had been held in San Francisco.

Dana imagined his mother or maybe his father going through his phone, filled with grief, scrolling through their long conversations, up to that moment when they stopped. She suddenly felt naked, ashamed.

~ Laura Picklesimer

*May we with God's help spend the coming year better than the past
which we purpose to do if Almighty God will deliver us from our
present dreadful situation*

In God's country promises don't matter
but desperation trumps reason every time.
Silence on the ridges fell thick like snow,
and stomachs shrieked with expanding hunger.
The ravens' croaks taunted them with echoes-
surrounded them so they had nowhere to hide.

No more cattle; *nothing left but one hide*
to eat. Starving slowly; what's the matter
with eating the dead? No screams will echo
through the mountains. They were running out of time.
They became human scavengers from hunger;
they couldn't fill their bellies with the snow.

Spring's smiling face was frozen in the snow.
Ravens followed their tracks to pick clean hides
and pluck meat off carcasses dead from hunger.
The group had to stomach human matter
in order to buy themselves extra time;
their sorrows reverberated like echoes.

Eyes averted 'round the fire, sobs echoed
in the cold around them. Frostbitten from snow,
frozen with fear. Nine months is a long time
to be in the high lonesome snacking on hides
for nourishment, yet flesh is only matter
on which ravens feed to placate their hunger.

The wilderness laughed about their hunger
and reminded them of their shame in echoes.
Satiation achieved in a matter
of guilt-ridden gorging atop the snow

under the eyes of the raven that hides
as it watches and waits, biding its time

until the scraps are tossed aside. This time
human mistakes won't interfere with hunger.
After months of cleaning and eating hides,
stuck in the Sierras, abashed by echoes
of regret, they became stronger than snow
through ingestion of their dead party's matter.

The echoes dwindled away over time.
Snow buried bones scraped from hunger, but
winter couldn't hide decaying matter.

~ Kaitlyn Irwin

DIXIE CUPS OF ACACDEMIA

The Ph.D. tells us to bring
thermos bottles full of champagne
and Dixie cups
to our next seminar.
He says no one takes him seriously.
He might be joking; no one laughs.

“In academics, nothing matters.
You can sit in your ivory tower,
submit articles to amicable journals,
and have a good life.”
I wonder if I should giggle.
He might be joking; no one knows.

I turn to the humorless brunette next to me.
“Should we be writing this down?”
She shrugs and I see her pen:
dixie cups?

~ *Natalie Morales*



"The Book Festival" ~ John Miranda

I peel back my rusty fingernails
to find your breath full of contempt,
nestled comfortably on the beds of my naked fingers.
I flash them before still eyes
longing for a flicker or a nod.
I find nothing.
The air between us heavy,
silent.
Our throats—
bound in collusion.

I peel back your words
to find your head full of questions,
caressing the crooks of my bent knees
like a stray dog begging for shelter.
I take off my face
hoping you'll see me.
But you are blind,
and I was so busy looking in front
and behind—
that I never saw you not seeing me.

I peel back your chest
to find a sparrow with no wings
reaching for the sky like
rain reaches for earth.
I feed it and water it
but it cries out in pain.
The caregiver cannot give
what the patient,
foolishly—
does not want.

~ *Brittany Bras*

ON LEAVING A HOMEGOING SERVICE

From the funeral
to the afterparty
four of us in a car, saying how
nice he looked.

And he did
in the suit Darien bought in Atlanta
and the gold necklace he got
from Auntee on his 70th birthday.

We sat behind her at the funeral.
Her red head
down the whole time,
my second cousin's arm
around her to keep her from
falling any further.

That was over now.
Mourning had mutated into
a family reunion and we were all
seeing cousins we wished we
knew better.

*How long you been here?
When you goin' back?
Who made this chicken salad?*

It had just the right amount of mayonnaise.

Sometime later, I took a picture of
Nicki and Eva, promising to send
it to them,
having no intention
of sending it to them.

They didn't even ask.

I wish I still printed pictures.
It would be nice to have something to put in
my scrapbook except these
obituaries.

~ Kavon Franklin



"Young Father" ~ John Miranda

A SERIES OF PLACES WITHIN PLACES

There was the smell of smoke and the roar of traffic. There was graffiti, most of it was graphic. There was plenty of pavement, broad stretches of brick partitions, clogged rain gutters, collections of chain-link fences, and here and there some old window shutters. There were dented-in garage doors, curbs and ruts - a couple of stray cats and some mangy old mutts. There were rickety staircases, lonely cellar doors, shattered glass windows, empty flower boxes, and in the concrete there were a lot of holes and quite a few grooves. There was plenty of yelling, some honking, some sirens blaring, and some violence quelling. There were tree tops and branches, climbing up and reaching over the walls, and there were abandoned bikes, forgotten frisbees and deflated basketballs. On some of the walls there were metal spikes, on others there was barbed wire, over by some were sheets of wood, broken down trucks, and an old tire. There was a dead skunk that stank like the dickens, flocks of wayward pigeons, endless streams of leaves, dead rats in the gutters and a dozen or so chickens. There were empty beer bottles, tire tracks, cigarette butts, crumpled up garbage from McDonald's in brown paper sacks. There were dandelions growing, drainage ditches overflowing, and cracks in the pavement showing. There was an stained, tan couch, and nearby was a soiled old mattress, and more than one mouse. There were telephone poles, there were wires, there were shoes dangling off them by laces, and posted on the poles were paper fliers. There was writing and pictures, there were rewards, detailed descriptions and a lot of other words. There was trash just about everywhere, glass shattered all over the place, discarded needles and a waterlogged cigar case. There were gunshots, and there were plenty of liars, there were burned up matches and there were many, many fires.

~ Andrew Woodyard

QUALITY TIME

father looks out the windshield
nimbostratus means rain he says
i ask why the evening is hot
he says its so that i can appreciate the breeze

i ask why fathers ford f3 doesnt run
she was made to look pretty he says
i ask if im pretty
he says boys arent pretty

the light turns yellow
father guns it and runs over a cat
he asks how my new baseball glove fits
im thinking about the cat and name him sunshine

georgios is packed for a tuesday night
father tells tammi he will have the denver omelet
i order the meatlovers
tammi smiles and father says only fatties and fags order the meatlovers

i watch the condensation slide down the side of my water glass
father says his cubicle-mate frido is retiring and moving to uzbekistan
i say i wish to travel to catalina island
father says mike butcher didnt get out of east moline by kicking beach sand

father chugs his water like its bourbon
i can hear his prosthetic tapping beneath the table like a clog
hes uncomfortable or hungry
i wonder if sunshines family knows they will never see him again

tammi brings out steaming plates
my poached egg is scrambled and bacon sizzling
i watch father drizzle tobasco on his denver
i think about how to tell father im not a boy anymore

im not a boy anymore i say
men pay for dinner he says
and girls i say
he looks at his watch

when he drops me off at moms house i dont know when i will see him again
mom is in a dead sleep on the couch
i kiss her goodnight
she smells like the hospital

~ Jac Manfield



*"Ce ne est un our Peluche (The Treachery of Childhood Images)"
~ Andrew Woodyard*

AUTUMN LEAVES

I hate Breast Cancer Awareness month. It's a reminder that last month the illness took my mom away from me. Whether it was boys, my best friend Nadine leaving me for an upperclassman, or my hatred towards my teacup-sized breasts, she'd listen to me and understand. I miss our times flying the pink kite we made together, cooking dinner, and going to a café with my dad. She was a lawyer, inside and outside the courtroom. I admired her intelligence and firmness whenever she argued with someone.

My dad is still smiling. He's acting like everything is still the same? I don't understand why.

It's the first week of October. The Autumn Art Show is at the end of the month. It's a competition between students at my school. Everyone showcases their paintings and sculptures. Whoever wins first place gets a ten-thousand-dollar scholarship. If I win, I can go to a college outside my city. I'll be able to leave my empty-feeling house, and I won't have to deal with the pain of my mom's death.

Grey clouds crowd over the sky. My dad parks his grey truck in front of the school. As I walk towards it, I hear my ex-best friend Nadine shout my name. The last thing she told me was, "Sucks that no boy likes you." Then we stopped speaking to each other.

Before she says anything else, I yank the car door open and sit inside the truck. Nadine shouts my name again. I shut the door.

"Hey, Cassidy," my dad says, "do you have lots of work to do today?"

"Aside from my painting for the Autumn Art Show, no. I did everything today in the library," I say.

"Great. There's someone I want you to meet."

"Who?"

My dad pauses for a second, then says, "There's this woman I've been talking to. We get along really well. So I asked her out on a date."

My mouth falls open. There's no way I heard him right. He can't be seeing a new woman already. I'm still not over Mom's permanent absence from our house.

"I need a second opinion on her," he adds.

"Not sure if your seventeen-year-old daughter is the best critic." To be honest, I don't want to see this new woman. My dad is a people pleaser, so I know he wants to make me happy. But I'll just tell him that I don't like her. As a girl who pretends that the boys in her favorite romance novels are her boyfriends, I understand that he is feeling alone.

"But you know me best. I'd like to know what you think of her."

"I'd love to hang out with you, Dad, but I need to finish my painting."

"You have an entire month to do it. One hour won't be so bad."

"I want the scholarship more than anything. The more I work on my painting, the better chance I have at winning."

He sighs, then says, "Next time."

When he drives out the parking lot, he turns to the right.

Home was the one place that used to always be clean. Every time I'd open the door, the couch cushions would be neat, the sink would be empty, and the coffee table would be clean with just coasters on top of it.

Now, I come home to uneven cushions, dishes piled inside the sink, and newspapers and books splayed across the table. I have to pick them up to find the coasters. Now I miss Mom more. To her, a messy house was unbearable. Even a cup ring on the table would make her run to the kitchen, rip off a paper towel, and wipe it until it was gone. Her office is the one clean room in the house. Her russet desk still shines, and her charcoal leather chair is positioned just as she left it. The one thing that's changed is that her desk is clear without a neat stack of papers.

"Dad, why don't you clean anything?" I ask, marching across our bronze, carpeted floor. I step on this morning's newspaper.

"It's a habit," he answers.

I grimace at the stench of leftover sauce. First, I start with the seat cushions, pressing them down so they look neat. Next, the piles of newspapers and books. I stack the newspapers so nothing is bent, and then push the books back into the bookshelves. Then I rinse the dishes. I hold my breath as I wash off the sauce. When I reach for another ketchup-splotched plate, my dad stands beside me and rinses off the leftover crumbs.

"I can do this myself," I say. A man who starts such a mess cannot be trusted to clean every speck off a plate.

"Well, I don't want you to wash all these dishes alone. It'll be exhausting," he says.

"I've done it for years."

"A little assistance won't hurt. Isn't it a nice change to have some help?"

He washes a pumpkin-colored plate, his fingers rubbing small circles in the middle of it. I snatch it from his hands and scrub off the leftovers at double my usual speed. For some reason, he's smiling. There's something different about this grin. It doesn't look like his usual smile.

"Not when it slows everything down," I respond.

He sighs. "Be more flexible, Cassidy. Barbs always says that sticking with the familiar keeps you from accepting great changes."

"Barbs? Is that a new sports buddy?"

"She's the woman I've been seeing."

So that's her name. Barbs. It's far from my mom's name, Sharon.

I say, "I don't agree with what Barbs says."

"Well, you don't have to. You should give her a chance."

Hearing him say this is like buckets of paint splattering onto a wooden floor. "My opinion isn't going to make a difference."

"I'd like for you to try. I know this news is still sudden to you, but it'd be nice to know what you think of her."

"Not now, Dad. I still need to finish my painting. I haven't even painted on the sheet."

"Please don't act this way, Cassidy."

“Like what? All I’m doing is working on a project that’s due this month.”

“Pushing away anything you’re not used to.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “Does Barbs know about Mom?”

He opens his mouth, then says nothing. Scratching the back of his head, he sighs as if I’ve asked a question is impossible to answer. “Yes. She does. What you need to do is accept that I have someone else.”

Now I wonder if he even cares about Mom. I turn away from him and walk up the stairs. He continues calling up my name, begging me to please, oh please, give Barbs a chance. I ignore him.

When I come upstairs, I go inside my room and stand in front of my easel. Ever since my mom’s death, I’ve been unable to paint a solid image. I’ve stood at this easel with nothing in mind.

I dab my brush into a bucket of pink paint. I stroke my brush across the canvas, moving it around until I come up with something. My eyes widen when I examine the image on the canvas: a chain of intertwining pink loops resembling the Breast Cancer Awareness ribbons. I wipe the pink from my brush and splotch black, dark blue, and purple paint across the sheet until there is no trace of pink. Crap. Now it’s a mess. I give up.

Looking around my room, my eyes lock onto every framed photograph hanging over my walls. One photograph is of me when I won my school spelling bee. My mom is on one side while my dad is on the other. They’re both kneeling and hugging me. Another is from my eighth grade graduation. My mom is holding a bouquet of ivory roses while my dad is leaning closer to me, mouth opening with the corners curving upwards. He’s raising a fist in the air, the same thing he did when I won the spelling bee. The third photograph is from last year’s Autumn Art Show. My mom is hugging me while my dad is pointing at my painting, his smile the same as the one in my eighth grade picture.

That family doesn’t exist anymore. To forget about this pain, I decide to alphabetize my bookcase. One book I pull out is the first romance novel I bought. Funny thing is, my dad is the one who made me read romance stories.

As I scan through the book, I remember when I first bought it. At the time, Nadine and I were still friends. Every guy liked her. No boy looked at me.

“No boy likes me, Dad,” fourteen-year-old me said to him at a bookstore.

“They’re high school boys,” my dad said as we went upstairs. “They’re too stupid to know what’s special. They’re missing out on an incredible girl. By the time they run to you, you’ll already be with a boy worthy of you.”

He led me to a bookshelf of bright-colored books. When he pulled out a book, he read the back of it. “Check out this one, Cass,” he said, handing it to me. “Sounds like a boy you should find.”

I laughed at this. My own father, a man who loved sports and worked as a coach, was recommending teenage love stories to me. He explained that he wanted me to escape into the book world, where my imagination could help me understand myself. Turned out to be the best thing he did. I enjoyed every page and thanked him for picking it.

“I really liked the boy in this book,” I said. “Why can’t he be real?”

“He will be one day,” he said, winking at me. “He pulled you in and made you smile. That is the type of boy you should be looking for.”

“What if I can’t find him?”

“You will. He’ll give you the same feeling as that boy.” He pointed at my book. “Cass, no boy is going to turn away from a girl who is loyal, hardworking, and honest. The wrong boy will. But not the right one.”

This memory makes me appreciate my dad. I shove the book back into the shelf. Maybe I am being too unaccepting. He needs love in his life too.

It’s the second week of October. Outside, the wind blows against the trees, bending them backwards. All the orange, yellow, and brown leaves fly off the branches and drift into the wind. The grey clouds crowd together, flooding the sky and blocking every ray of light.

I’m teaching my dad how to cook Mom’s special pasta salad. He cuts the block of cheese into miniature triangles. I raise an eyebrow.

“Dad, you’re supposed to grate them,” I say.

“Why not try something new?” he offers.

“It’ll come out funny. Mom and I followed the instructions, and the pasta turns out fine.”

“We haven’t even tried it yet.”

“Maybe on your own time, Dad,” I say, sliding the block of cheese back to me, “but let’s stick with what we know.”

I set up a timer on my phone. Even now, it still feels strange hearing the water boil without my mom bragging and laughing about her pathetic opponents in the courtroom. One argument with her, and you stopped talking.

Once again my dad asks, “Do you have any plans this weekend?”

“Homework and painting.”

“How about getting out of that routine and going someplace fun?”

“Painting is fun.”

“Except you do it all the time. Why not go somewhere with me and Barbs?”

“How is she?” I ask out of courtesy.

He grins. This time, it’s the same way he smiled when he was with my mom. “She’s wonderful, Cassidy. You’d like her. She’s kind. She’ll make you food when you’re sad. Best of all, she’ll find some way to make you happy. She also hates staying indoors. She loves going places like the movies, a sports event, a park, or a museum.”

Barbs doesn’t sound like my mom. My mom was a tougher kind, scolding me if I procrastinated on class homework or failing a test because I prioritized paintings. Like me, she preferred staying indoors either reading or watching a movie or TV show.

My dad asks, “Do you think she sounds wonderful, Cassidy?”

There he goes again. People pleaser. “She sounds like she makes you happy,” I answer.

“Come with us this weekend. I can’t continue seeing her without my own

daughter knowing who she is or what she even looks like.”

“When I’m not busy, Dad.”

I can’t meet her right now. If I say I don’t like her, he’ll stop seeing her. Then we’ll be sad all over again. He needs to decide for himself. Besides, he knows her better than I do.

Instead of sitting at the dining table, I scurry over to the stairs, grasping my bowl of pasta. Even when the bowl burns against my hands, I still hold on to it.

“Cass, come on,” he says as I take a step. “I’m getting tired of you avoiding everything.”

I continue up the stairs. To be honest, I am too. But it’s better this way. At least I can swim through the memories of me, him, and my mom.

My dad and I are at the park. He convinced me to spend one hour of father-daughter time. He also brought along the pink kite. Flying the pink kite here at the park makes me miss my mom even more. We used to do this all the time. Being here with my dad feels strange.

“So how do you fly this thing?” he asks me, studying the kite’s pink cloth.

“You just hold onto the bridle and let it fly,” I answer.

My dad follows my instructions. The wind gusts against us, causing the kite to flap into the grey, cloud-covered sky. He struggles holding onto the bridle, yet he smiles like he’s trying to enjoy flying the kite. I take the bridle away from him and hold it myself.

“But I had it,” he says.

“Yeah, but you’re not used to flying it in this kind of weather.”

The autumn leaves fly off the tree branches. The kite flaps through the gust. A flurry of orange and yellow leaves drift into the wind, spiraling as the gust blows.

“You look like a kite professional,” my dad says. “Maybe Barbs and I will come here, and you can teach us how to fly it.”

“You guys can learn on your own.”

“But you’ve been flying one for years.”

“Teaching something new is not my forte,” I say, clutching the bridle. It’s already strange flying this kite without my mom. Flying it with someone new is too much to take in.

Near us is a family of three: a mom, a dad, and their toddler daughter. They’re sitting on top of a cherry and white plaid blanket, a wheat-twined basket beside them.

“Isn’t she the best mom in the world?” the father asks his daughter.

“Yes! This is the best family in the world!” their daughter says, clapping and jumping up and down.

I turn away from them. The rest of the happy families around us include a couple who seem to enjoy spending time with their kids. I have one parent, and I’m not the one who’s smiling. But there’s something different about my dad’s grin. He smiles even when nothing has happened. The corners of his mouth look like they’re held up by clothes pins.

My dad asks me, "Cassidy, why are you trying to avoid Barbs?"

"You've known her for two weeks. It's not easy for me to talk to someone in that amount of time."

The wind gusts against us. A tornado of bronze, yellow, and pumpkin leaves whirl through the gust, creating a fall-colored kaleidoscope. To keep my balance, I plant my feet into the muddy ground.

I say, "Besides, I need to make sure my painting is perfect."

"I'm sure whatever you paint will be marvelous."

I smile at this. "Thanks, Dad. I appreciate it."

"No problem. Can Barbs come too? I'd like her to see your masterpieces."

"I'm not sure if they accept anyone outside the family. I'll check the admission guidelines."

"That would be great. I hope she can come. I don't want you to have an audience of one."

I've never had to check the guidelines or the ticket prices. All I've known is that admission is free for the showcasing artists and their family. Friends and guests outside the family need to be paid for. This will be the first time I check them, and it hurts thinking about it.

It's the third week of October. Junk is still heaped everywhere from the sink to both the coffee and the dining tables. I clean it all up.

"Sorry again for the mess, Cass," my dad says, arranging the newspapers into a neat pile. "Both my jobs have been a hassle, not to mention the bills have been stacking up."

"Understandable," I say. "You work on the bills."

"Thanks, Cass. Also, Barbs is coming over. She's cooking dinner for us." He's bringing her over again? I use the same excuse. "I have an art piece to finish. Also, I'm not hungry."

"You can't paint without eating something. It will hurt your creative thinking."

"Thanks for caring, Dad. But I haven't even touched my paintbrush, let alone stand in front of my easel today."

Before I walk upstairs, I see him sitting on the couch with a picture of me, him, and Mom on his lap. Surrounding the photograph is a frame made out of popsicle sticks, something we made together when I was a child. As he stares at it, his eyelids flicker, the corners of his mouth curved down. The same face he and I had at Mom's funeral.

"Dad?" His eyes pop open. "What's wrong?"

His clothes pinned-smile returns. "Nothing, Cass. I love this photo and the popsicle-stick frame. Making this with you and your mom is one of my favorite memories. Don't mind me. You have a painting to finish."

When I go upstairs, his face flashes into my mind. Why did he make that face again? He smiled like he was forcing himself to be happy. The photograph he held was an old one, so I don't know why he was staring at it. If he hasn't moved on from

Mom's death, then why is he seeing another woman?

I decide to go to my favorite cafe. I don't want to be in my house right now. I can't convince him to stop dating her. Besides, I still remember his face. The same baggy eyes, the slouching shoulders, the frown curved down across his face. When he talks about Barbs, he smiles like he's talking about my mom.

Everything in the cafe is still the same. Everywhere families sit at the bronze, square tables and honey-shaded chairs. They're all laughing and sipping the newest ice-blended, whip-creamed topped drinks. The children's feet swing over the chestnut wooden floor. Hanging on the wall are paintings of trees with orange, gold, and copper leaves covering the branches.

My dad and I used to sit at the table next to the window. He helped me whenever I was mad at myself.

"I know I shouldn't talk back to you or Mom," I said one day. "I'm a horrible daughter for lashing out on you two."

He said, "Well, we all get mad. Even your mother and I have been mad at each other. You're human, Cassidy. Sometimes, those emotions get to you. As long as you try to improve yourself, then you're doing okay. We'll still love you."

I smiled, and we went back to whatever book or assignment was in front of us.

I crane my neck to search for a table. Nadine is sitting at the same table where my dad and I used to sit. I grimace.

I still remember freshman year, bitch, I think.

Before I leave, I notice Nadine's face. Crimson flushes her eyes with bags sagging underneath them. Her face is clear of makeup, something I've never seen. Springs of her copper hair are winded outwards like she hasn't brushed it since this morning. A venti paper cup sits in front of her. It's the same thing I did before and after my mom's death.

I glance at the exit, then back at Nadine. Maybe I should speak to her. After my mom's funeral, I was desperate for anyone to help us feel better. When I walk over to Nadine, I pull out the chair and plop onto it.

"Cassidy?" Nadine says. "Why are you sitting with me? I thought you hated me."

"I've made that same face and drank that same size of coffee when my mom was sick. Even after her death, I still frowned and drank venti-sized drinks. No one should look or feel sad without comfort."

Nadine's eyes drop down. She tightens her face, lowering it so all her attention is on the coffee. She props her head onto a balled-up fist.

"What's wrong? You can tell me," I say. "I'll listen."

"My mom has it."

Breast cancer? But I don't ask this. Even now, it hurts to even think about the illness.

"I'm sorry," I tell her. "I know how you feel. When someone you love is suffering, you feel helpless. Everything feels empty."

Nadine pauses, and then says, "That's how I've been feeling. I don't know

what I can do to make her feel better.”

“Just be there for her. That’s enough”

For a moment, Nadine stares at me. “Maybe that’s what I should do. Thanks for the advice.”

“Hold her close while you still can.”

Nadine nods again. I tell her that I’m going to get something, then rush towards the front again. When I return, I give her a cheese Danish.

“I ate this all the time to make me feel better,” I say, handing the Danish to Nadine. “I hope it helps. My mom and I used to eat cheese Danishes all the time. It always makes me feel closer to her.”

Her eyes climb to meet mine. She grabs the Danish from my hands and eats it. “Thanks, Cassidy. I’m sorry about your mom too.” After taking a bite, she adds “I’m also sorry about freshman year.”

This is something I did not expect her to say. We were so mad at each other that we looked the other direction if we were in close proximity.

“You’re apologizing now?” I say.

“I knew you felt left out. I ignored you just so I could give my undivided attention to a bunch of boys who didn’t even like me. I’m sorry that I ignored you. At the same time, I wish you would have listened to me. I tried to apologize to you, but you ignored me.”

“You did the same thing.”

“Because you didn’t give me a chance. To be fair, I did the immature thing. I should’ve tried to apologize to you.”

I ponder over the last thing she said. Nadine looked like she wanted to tell me something, but I turned away from her.

“Why didn’t you apologize?” I ask her. It’s a question I’ve wanted to ask for a long time.

“Cassidy, you never change how you see others.”

I think about everything she has said. To be honest, I ignore people whenever they upset me. I’ve never forgiven anyone. To me, apologies are fake. One bad thing and I loathe them forever. I’ve never believed a person could change. I either think someone is a best friend or an enemy. But after talking to Nadine, I don’t think this way. Our conversation feels real and honest.

“A major flaw of mine,” I admit.

“It goes for both of us,” Nadine says. “We should’ve talked to each other.”

“It’s something I need to do from now on.”

My phone chimes. I’ve received a text from my dad. He’s asking me to come home and hang out with him. He adds that Barbs left the house.

Before I take another step, Nadine says, “Thanks for talking to me. I needed it.”

“No problem. Thanks for also talking to me. You gave me a lot to think about.”

We grin at each other, waving goodbye as I exit out the cafe.

It’s the final week of October. My dad and I are at the park again. I finished my painting today, which I’m not happy with. It’s a blob of autumn colors. My dad

convinced me to spend time outside and relax.

“Did you find out about the tickets?” he asks me.

I busy myself by unwinding the string. Earlier, I checked the guidelines. For guests outside the family, tickets cost \$5.00. If Barbs comes to my art show, it will be the first time we pay for the guest.

“Are you willing to pay for guests?” I ask him.

“If it means supporting you, I’ll do it.”

“You really want her to see my mess?”

“It’s not a mess to me. A mess is something made because the person didn’t care. They refuse to clean it up because they don’t see how it’s problematic to others around them. But you try, Cassidy. You spend so much time painting, aiming for your goal. That painting is made by you through hard work and care. That’s not a mess. It’s art that everyone needs to see.”

I grin. He’s not being the people pleaser I’ve labeled on him. He’s a supporter.

“Thanks, Dad.”

The kite flutters through the sky. Sunlight gleams through the clouds as they part, the floating sheep wools shrouding the beams. Golden leaves shower from the branches. The warm wind blows softer. As the autumn leaves cascade to the ground, my pink kite spirals with them.

“Doesn’t look like the wind will blow,” my dad says.

I dash towards my kite. When I pick it up, I hold it against my chest. I remember my conversation with Nadine. The tension between us disappeared because we gave each other a chance.

I say, “Let’s go home, Dad. I need to scrap my painting. I’m not happy with it, and there’s a lot I need to change.”

He widens his eyes. “But your art show is tomorrow.”

“Doesn’t matter. I want to showcase a masterpiece, not a mess.”

We stroll over to the parking lot. When we get inside the car, I say, “Don’t worry about paying, Dad. I’ll pay for Barbs.”

The art show is taking place in the cafeteria. Sculptures of clay-crafted humans and abstract shapes looping through each other sit on the long, copper tables. The other half the cafeteria displays paintings of every shade from egg-yolk yellow to dusk blue.

Barbara, sometimes known as Barbs, stands out from this room of bright, rainbow colors. We met when my dad picked her up from her house. She’s a short, woman with hips curved out like two dinner plates. Her black hair curls over shoulder. Cherry lipstick glows from her smile. Barbara looks nothing like my mom. She doesn’t have springs of strawberry blonde curls that cascade down her back, thin lips glossed with pink lipstick, her narrow glass hips, or her tall stature. Even in heels Barbara wouldn’t be as tall as my mom.

Still, when we were driving her to my school, I forced myself to smile and chat with her. I answered all her questions about school (I spoke about my

schoolwork and grades rather than my lunch hour), my love life (my boyfriends being the ones in my favorite romance novels), and what I like to do (read and paint, which I'm sure made her think I was a boring teenage girl). While we were talking, my head hung down. I couldn't look at her. She was too different from my mom, both in appearance and speech.

Even now, as I show my paintings to guest and families of my classmates, I can't glance at her. While everyone else's family is gazing at their child's artwork, hugging them and saying how they're so very proud of their little artist, my audience of two is someone I've known all my life, and someone I've known for an hour.

My eyes drag to my painting: autumn leaves piling over each other to portray a girl with honey hair. One eye is clear with a brown pupil while the other is blended with the tangerine leaves. Mahogany fills up the background.

"Your painting looks incredible," my dad tells me. "I'm proud of you, Cassidy."

I beam at him. He pats my back, then says he'll check out the other paintings.

"Yours is definitely the best," he says, "but Barbara and I want to see what else is around."

"Cool. Enjoy looking at the different art pieces," I say, meaning it.

As my dad and Barbara walk away, I think about the last three art shows.

I listen to the conversations scrambled throughout the room.

"Thanks for coming here, Mom," a girl says. "I appreciate it. I know you're busy tonight."

"I'm so glad both of you were able to come!" a boy says to his parents. "It means a lot to me."

"You guys called off work just to be here?" a pair of fraternal twins ask their parents. "You two are the best!"

My mom's hands used to be interlaced with his, and they'd cheer over my paintings. But there's one memory that replays in my mind.

It was last year's art show. My parents toured around the cafeteria. When they came back to me, my mom said that I should try to use darker colors for my paintings.

My dad said, "It's her style. If she uses dark colors because everyone was doing it, she'd be copying another style. Not creating her own. It's art after all."

Just like today, I beamed at my dad. Even back then, he'd been my number one supporter.

I study my painting. I'd come up with it the day before and painted it in eleven hours. It was a huge change, but it resulted in a painting that I'm now proud of. But I wish I had the same support like the other kids.

When they return, my dad says, "Well, there were some interesting paintings and sculptures. Some made me wonder what these kids have been going through."

I laugh. "If it were Mom, she'd suggest for me to mimic whatever craziness she saw."

Both my dad and I glance down at the ground.

Barbara says, "I'm sorry about your mom."

"It's okay," I say. "One month without her is tough, but I know I need to move on. Maybe not now, but sooner or later."

For a minute, there's silence. Barbara's mouth drops open. My dad opens his mouth, but says nothing. My eyebrows furrow. Why is everything so quiet?

"A month ago?" Barbara says.

My dad scratches the back of his head. "It's hard to explain."

"You never told me that. I assumed it was a year ago."

Barbara glowers at my dad, then marches away from him. I don't know what's more shocking: That Barbara found out four weeks later, or that my dad is making the same face he did when they lowered my mom's casket.

He hangs down his head. The face returns. This time, it's mixed with shame. His shoulders slouch and his eyes hinge on the ground.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I assumed you told her," I say.

"Don't apologize. I should've told her when your mom died."

For the rest of the art show, we tour around the cafeteria. I win first place and the ten thousand dollar scholarship. Even when they hand me my tall trophy, I don't feel victorious.

When we get in the car, my dad says, "Congratulations on winning. I'm sure an art school will accept you."

"Maybe I'll go to school here, Dad. If I leave, you'll just be alone in our house."

"Well, I deserve to be alone. I'm terrible."

As the leaves float past us, first brown, then orange, then yellow, I say, "No you're not, Dad."

He shakes his head. "You don't have to make me feel better."

"No, Dad. It's the truth. You're not. She doesn't understand, that's all."

He takes in a deep breath, then lets it out. "Cassidy, I've been so lost without your mom here. I didn't even tell Barbara because I knew she wouldn't want to see me. Like I said, I'm the terrible person for seeing someone so soon after your mom's death. All because I didn't want to be alone. I didn't even ask if you were okay with it."

Seeing my dad like this is like looking at a portrait that nowhere near resembles the model. Thinking about all his smiles this past month, they weren't smiles out of joy. Dad has also been struggling with Mom's death. I was trying to keep everything the same. He was trying to cope with the change. I should have asked him why he was seeing Barbara. But I was so busy cleaning the house and trying to recreate life with Mom that I never tried.

"We need to clean the house anyway," he says, turning his key into the ignition.

Now that Barbara is gone, we can return home. I can still hold onto memories of me, my dad, and my mom. But I hate seeing my dad with the baggy-eyed face. His entire body is hunching forward. If he doesn't see her now, he'll be sad again.

"Don't worry about that," I say. "You need to talk to Barbara." Saying this aloud hurts, reminding me that my mom will never come back. But this is for my dad's happiness. Not mine.

"I don't think she wants to see me."

"You can't just avoid her. Talk to her and see what happens."

"I don't know, Cass. She may walk away from me again."

“At least try, Dad. I’ll stay by you.”

My dad pauses. After a minute, he drives out the parking lot and turns left, the direction away from home. The grey clouds separate, the sun’s light beaming through them. As a waterfall of autumn leaves cascade from the tree’s branches, the wind drifting the golden ones away, I clasp my hands together and hope that Barbara will reconcile with the man I now accept.

~ *Trish Caragan*

INTERLUDE

when your rain
finally winds down
between the rocks
the gravel
the dust
the sand
sapping up the space between them
plowing itself a path
and reaching
stretching out
holding desperately to itself behind and here and there and forward
and falls onto my crown
I have already learned to breathe beyond air.

~ Charisse Weston

ON SINKING

HOW TO SURVIVE QUICKSAND

...your friend asks,
from underneath a palm leaf
that obscures her face.

i am sorry, she says, i did not hear the beginning.

On Sinking

for more than half of our relationship
you are dead.
and i try, to no avail,
by
forcing the warmness of my breath
and the floods of my waters
down your throat, hoping to relieve the coldness that hollows your chest,
to resuscitate you.
after year three
i relent.
i pull my hips down to the floor
raise my chest up
and recoil my arms beside me,
bringing myself upright, away from you.
i sit there.
long.
and, slowly slowing
the pace of my self,
i slide backwards,
and then forward,
and begin, as if in ritual,
to make circles—crescents that dig deep into the earth.
this is a healing way.
i tell myself
when i have gone too deep.
i grab ahold the branch of a palm
with low-hanging, blood red fruit bursting from its blue
and green tendons.
then, in year five,

when finally i am so far away i can not see you,
you let out a moist, gritty gasp so overflowing
that it shakes and soddens
the soil I lie beneath.

~ *Charisse Weston*



"Rural Scene" ~ Pamylla Marsh

SONG FOR SPILLED OLIVES

with your words
You've found a way to bottle Dali and Kant, and spill ancient gore
across my home, a surf, truthful swaying
pink curtains conceal a ravaged contraption
your words dance *corridos*.
when their eyes fabricate lines of what should be
and bring marrow to motion,
I let her past batter my knees
like lies never told, but known.

you say a clumsy eavesdropper is your sunlight
el, que oye tus movimientos
and your ridges are diurnal; when I listen, anthesis
and he; the careful swayer
knows nothing if it is not the movement of our home
for he is the blind inertia of what was and should have been
still, his tongue, it dreams a *corrido*
hive-like choreography hums cosmogony
historical residue cancelled by his rhythmic stroke
across her ridges, he found
the groundwork of skin and everything within
and in reciprocity the soil held him
he grows warm in its grit
an angel in filthy clouds, he watches
your olives, crammed and spilled *ad nauseum*

~ *Francisco Marquez*

CEMENT FLOOR

We built our wings
with granite
and expected it to take us far
we actually spread it shamelessly
willing it to take us far
It didn't.

We flew finally but it was
like those who didn't
even have wings
and we dizzled
hoping our limbs won't fail us
if these poor excuses did
but it didn't... for a while.

We hoped to soar
from rooftops
and be God for once
but we dangled from
merciful trees
praying it was farther off the ground
Sadly, it was.

'Let us fall' is a heresy
"We shan't smell the coffee
to clear our hazy heads"

Let us fall
to wake
to rise again
to let real feathers grow
to heal our heady flights
to dash us more sense.
Let us fall on cement floor.

~ *Oseyomo Abiebhode*



“Ebony Fleece” ~ Otha “Vakseen” Davis III

BEFORE YOU GO

Outside the Funeral Home

Taylor G is crying, and cursing, and trying
to light a Marlboro, his brown suede coat is soaked
through with the May storm. I'm beside him
wearing my nice black dress. Taylor G takes the unlit cigarette
and his lighter in one hand and pulls me against him.

I hold an IGA grocery bag of peaches. I thought
it only rains at funerals in movies, and I'm already
pulling away from him and trying to write this poem.

I want it to be about how the mother cries
like her son is crushing the sky above her,
and how that boy looked in the months before today, smiling.

But instead, I can only write about Taylor G's shaky breaths
pushed through his long skinny fingers as he flicks the unused cigarette
onto the rain-slicked grass. I don't write

about the boy, or even his family, I write about
the peaches: furred, swollen and wet, sunset skin bruised,
a bagful of red summer hanging heavy from my hand.

~ Cu Fleshman



"Water" ~ Doina Ciobanu

On the night we finish our house, I wear a red bandanna,
you wear a faded baseball cap, both our bodies are more clay
than muscle and bone. Our eyes have cooled to pumice,

and our house dries behind us. Tonight, we baptize
each other in the sand of the backyard, where nothing
grows. Tonight, we swallow ribs of cacti, bandage

our cuts in tarantula silk, and the prairie dogs howl.
You sunbake the snake of my vertebrae, I petroglyph
the shale of your back, and I forget that this night

is the story I tell myself when I need to close my eyes,
and turn nothing at all
into something I can hold in both hands.

~ *Cu Fleshman*

THE BASKET CASE

After surveying her antiques booth on Thursday morning, Mel thought her ex-husband's crime might be slightly mitigated if it weren't always the YMCA wire baskets he took. For example, Clay could have taken the ugly elephant tiki statue that had been around since Mel's dad managed the booth, months before. Numerous trinkets lined 130's shelves, useless two-dollar-ninety-nine pieces that Mel would have been glad to see vanish overnight, only to appear mysteriously down the hall in Clay's booth. But no, it was always just the goddamned, customer-favorite YMCA baskets.

That morning, the ceiling fans whirred overhead, manufacturing a little breeze that spun the manila price tags tied to Mel's items. She walked into her booth and stood on tiptoe at the metal shelving unit that formed the right wall of her booth. Mel pulled down one of the two baskets Clay had left behind, and wondered if she should even check her ledger balance to see whether the missing four had sold. Instead, basket in hand, she walked to Clay's booth, 122 at the end of the hall. The pockmarked wood floor squeaked under Mel's weight and sent up clouds of dust motes that glittered in the morning sun.

When Mel arrived at his booth, Clay had his back to her, reaching up to one of his higher shelves. He'd always been an early riser when he and Mel had been married, up before dawn to restock at the mall, Georgie's Antiques Barn. Now, hearing Mel's approach, Clay set something down on his shelf with a *plink*, turned, and smiled at her. Mel could see a gleam of sweat high on his forehead, and on his cheeks under his wire-rimmed glasses. The morning air was thick and humid inside the mall. "Morning, Melissa," Clay said.

"Baskets," Mel said, feeling her skull pulse with anger. She shook the one she held, then pointed to the four that nested side-by-side on a small art deco coffee table at the front of Clay's booth. The baskets were old storage bins: rectangles of steel mesh, the wire rust-spotted and gray from years of use at Huxton's Y. None of the baskets had the price tags Mel had tied on the day before.

Clay still grinned at her. "I got those years ago, from the YMCA," he told her. "They're mine."

"I took photos this time," Mel said. She pulled her phone from her pocket and waved it at him. "I've got proof."

Behind his glasses, Clay's small, bright eyes leapt at the dusty booths around them. There weren't many shoppers this early on a weekday, and none of the antique mall's patrons had made it to the second floor yet.

Clay asked, "Do you want to get Georgie this time, or should I?"

Mel tightened her grip on her basket. She turned and walked away from Clay, back to the staircase in front of her booth. She walked down the steps, feeling each dusty wooden stair bow beneath her feet, turned the corner, and walked to the register down the narrow aisle formed by antique booths 8-16. She passed shelves of windup tin toys and cast-iron cake pans, bumped her hip on that one marble-topped desk that Booth 10 seemed incapable of selling.

Behind the register, there was only the blue-haired teenage girl, new and young enough that Mel hadn't yet bothered to learn her name. As Mel walked up to the check-out, the girl looked up from reading something on the counter. Her eyes widened, she turned her back on the counter and pushed through the flowery curtains that led to the darkened backroom, in the wall behind the check-out space. Mel looked down to the counter at what the girl had been reading—the *Huxton Daily* newspaper. She hadn't known people still read that. From the backroom, Mel heard muted whispers, then a loud grunt.

"Every damn time," Georgie said to the teenage girl as she waddled out of the backroom, swatting away the curtains with a chubby paw.

"This will only take a sec," Mel said. She held up her basket, fingers tight on the wire mesh.

"It better," Georgie said.

They left the teenage girl with her paper to watch the register, and Georgie followed Mel upstairs to Clay's booth. The stairs and floors creaked especially loud beneath Georgie. By the time they reached 122, Georgie's breathing was labored.

Clay leaned against an oak armoire, writing with a ballpoint pen on something cupped in his palm—probably a price tag, the bastard, Mel thought. He looked up, smiled at Mel and Georgie, and tucked the pen and whatever he'd been working on into his pocket.

Mel noticed that the number of baskets on the coffee table had increased to five. She pulled out her phone again. "I took photos this time," she said. She unlocked her phone and pulled up her Gallery app, sliding her finger down the screen until she found the pictures she wanted. She tapped on the photos she'd taken of the baskets at her house, the day before she tagged them and placed them in her booth.

Georgie squinted at Mel's phone. Her breathing quieted for a moment, her mouth half-opened. She looked down at the five baskets on Clay's coffee table, then at the one in Mel's hand. Mel turned her phone off and slid it back into her pocket.

Clay said, "I got these from the YMCA myself." He gave Georgie a sympathetic smile, wiped his palm over the film of sweat on his forehead, and flicked his hand away. Miniscule droplets flew through the air.

Georgie took a deep breath and said, "I don't know, Mel. They all look the same to me."

Mel's temples throbbed. "You're kidding me, right? He stole these from me."

"You don't know that," Georgie said. Her breath rasped in her throat. The fans spun overhead in a soft whine.

Mel said, "This is favoritism." She seized on a word that came to her suddenly, from years of English classes gone by. "This is nepotism."

Georgie tipped her enormous head to one side. "What's that?" she asked. She turned and lumbered away. The back of her yellow t-shirt was stained with dark patches of sweat. Mel watched Georgie go—with each step, her behemoth body threatened to topple sideways into a 20's wardrobe, or a military-grade filing cabinet, or a wire coatrack, draped with mink coats and fox-fur scarves.

As Georgie disappeared down the stairs, a thirty-something guy appeared at the end of the hallway. The man looked down the row of booths, then started for 122, where Mel and Clay still stood.

He picked up one of the wire baskets on the coffee table and said, "Excuse me, how much for this?" His voice was high and he had a lisp that softened the ends of his words.

Clay beamed at him. "Nineteen-ninety-five," he said.

Mel had priced it at fifteen dollars even.

"Give me a damn *break*," she said, and stomped out of Clay's booth, back toward her own.

Later that day, Mel told her mother, "Clay's done it again." They were leaning against a lavender-painted wall in the first-floor lounge room of St. Francis' Assistance Home. Nearby, liver-spotted men and women shuffled in a line across the room to a formica countertop, where the nurses had placed watered-down coffee in plastic cups and cookies on a faux-crystal tray. It smelled like cranberry juice and urine.

Her mom looked at Mel through bleary blue eyes. Mel noticed for the first time that they were starting to go gray around the edges of the irises.

"Those baskets again?" Mel's mom asked. "Thought you said you took pictures this time."

"Yeah, well, he still said he got them himself," Mel said. "Georgie didn't believe me when I showed her the photos."

"Damned old broad," her mom said. "We never had this problem when your dad ran 130."

One of the old women walking toward the cookie tray coughed once, then started coughing hard, drawing Mel's eyes and nervous glances from the old folks as they shrank back and walked around her.

Mel had to look down to meet her mother's eyes. "I'm fixing to take matters into my own hands," Mel said over the sound of coughing.

"Hon, you ought to just take our things to a new mall," her mom said. "Maybe one down by Columbia."

Mel shook her head. "We've been at Georgie's Barn years longer than Clay," she said. "If anybody's going to leave, it'll be him."

Mel's mom paused, eyes narrowing. "What're you aiming to do to Clay?"

Mel started to answer that she had no idea, but she was cut off by a particularly loud cough from the old woman across the room. Mel looked up at her; her thin shoulders were hunched and from what Mel could see of her face above her withered hand, she looked grim, determined. Finally, her fit trailed off in weakening little coughs, and she slowly continued on her path to the counter, picking up a sugar cookie from the plastic tray. The people around the woman continued to skirt by her.

Mel jerked her head in the direction of the woman as she turned away from the counter of cookies and coffee. "What's wrong with her?" Mel asked.

Mel's mom squinted at the woman as she walked by them again. "Miss Contagion?" she asked. "Walter's wife, Laura. They live in the apartment a couple doors down from us. She had that swine flu a couple weeks back and now Walt's got it. They say Laura isn't contagious anymore, but I bet you anything that either she or he is going to give it to the rest of us. Look at her, touching all the cookies."

"Swine flu?" Mel watched Laura over her shoulder as the woman shambled past her, out of the lounge room. Mel recalled an outbreak, a few years before her parents had moved into St. Francis' and Mel quit her diner job to run Booth 130. Her manager had given all the employees a lecture about proper hygiene, and what to do if a kid coughed anywhere but his hand. Mel turned back to her mother. "That's what I'll do to Clay," she said, surprising herself.

"Really, now?" Her mom raised her penciled-black eyebrows at her. Her graying irises shifted past Mel.

"Yeah," Mel said. She was already running over ideas in her head—she'd seen Clay wash his hands maybe once a day when they were married. If she put the baskets in the booth at the right time, Clay would be the first to touch them. "It'll be like karma. Clay deserves it."

"Honey," Mel's mom said. Her lips were pursed.

"This is for the booth," Mel said firmly. "For Dad. For all of us."

Her mom looked at Mel for a moment. She said, "If you're sure."

As it turned out, Walter was happy to help, especially once Mel told him her parents' names. "I went to high school with your daddy," Walter said, voice croaking, gurgling with some kind of liquid. "Great guy. Shame we both wound up in here."

He was lying in his bed, propped up on a stack of pillows. The light came from the window in thin white rays that slanted over his body. Besides Mel and Laura, the only other thing in the room was the nightstand by the bed, and on top of that was nothing but a pillbox and an opened water bottle. The room was stiflingly hot.

Mel stood by Laura at the side of Walter's bed, holding a Ziploc bag with damp paper towels inside. Laura gave her nervous sideways glances as Mel stared down at Walter and wondering if she really wanted to do this to Clay after all. There was a thin, clear tube that ran across Walter's cheeks and up his nostrils; the plastic caught the early morning sunlight and glittered like water on his face. Walter's eyes were bright and runny, and every few seconds he sniffed hard, creating a phlegmy sound that filled the small bedroom.

Walter said, "So, you just need me to cough on that?" He lifted one hand barely above the bed, pointing to the bag in Mel's hand.

Sweat was beginning to bead on Mel's forehead. But she thought of the smile on Clay's face as Georgie told Mel that all the wire baskets looked the same.

"Yes, sir," Mel said. "Right in here." And she parted the top of the Ziploc bag, holding the opening toward Walter's mouth.

When the old man got started coughing, he almost couldn't stop, and continued long after Mel said thank you and closed the bag. Walter's hacking

sounded much worse than Laura's had the day before, deep in his lungs and wet. Mel looked up at Laura, and was met with the old woman's scowl.

Walter's coughs finally slackened, and he lay back on his stack of pillows with his face creased and eyes streaming. Laura picked up the water bottle from the nightstand. Walter said, voice barely audible, "Tell your daddy," and he was interrupted by his wife, who held the bottle to his lips, trickling water into his mouth. When he finished drinking, Walter weakly waved the bottle away and continued, "Tell your daddy I say Hey."

"I will," Mel said.

Laura led her out of the apartment. When Mel stepped outside into the cool air of the hallway, Laura closed the door behind her without so much as a goodbye. Mel wiped the sweat off her forehead with her palm. She avoided looking at her parents' door, just a few yards down, and instead headed for the elevator at the end of the hall. She made it to the first floor without seeing anybody else. By the time she unlocked her car in the parking lot, the Ziploc bag was sweating in her tight fist.

The next morning, Mel woke to her alarm clock at five, three hours before Georgie's Barn opened. Mel walked through her dark, silent house to the garage, flicking on lights as she went. She flipped on the garage light to illuminate shelves of antiques, the result of years of her dad stalking eBay, attending every auction in Huxton's city limits, and sifting through Goodwill stores. Clay had helped move everything from her parents' house to hers, but Mel forced the memory from her mind.

The concrete floor was cool against Mel's toes. She walked across the garage, past rows of Chinese brass kettles and Hummel figurines with big blue eyes, carved balsawood fertility statuettes and cracked iron bells. The antiques formed a small labyrinth Mel once loved, but now felt vaguely threatened by—it seemed to her as if things appeared and disappeared almost on their own, and the sheer quantity of them never changed.

In the back corner of the garage, between the unused folding door and an enormous pine dresser Mel hadn't figured out how to move, there was an untidy stack of ten YMCA wire baskets, the last of a fifty-piece lot Mel's dad had picked up from an estate sale.

Mel took three off the stack and brought the baskets upstairs. She set them on the floor of the entrance hall, then went to the kitchen to grab the Ziploc from the counter. She took the bag to the entrance hall and sat down cross-legged before the three baskets. She opened it, the crackling sound of the Ziploc breaking the quiet of the house. The paper towels folded inside were still damp from the day before. Mel picked up the first basket and wiped the napkins across it, making sure to dampen all of the wire mesh. Once that basket was covered, Mel moved on to the next one, and the final one. She left the baskets on the floor and went back to the kitchen, threw the paper towels in the trash, and washed her hands twice with the antibacterial soap she'd picked up from Wal-Mart after visiting Walter.

As Mel worked, the house brightened around her—now she could hear birdsong outside, and the light streaming through the windows was more yellow than blue. Mel walked through the living room to her bedroom and got dressed for the day. She picked up the wire baskets on her way out of the entrance hall, and walked out to her car in the driveway.

The drive to the Barn was short, fifteen minutes or so. Mel pulled up to the front door just as Georgie was unlocking the front door for dealers. Mel got out of her car, stacked baskets in hand, and walked to the door.

Georgie turned and raised her eyebrows at Mel. “You’re up early,” Georgie said.

“Yeah, wanted to get a head start this morning,” Mel said.

Georgie opened the door. “There you go,” she said. She lumbered inside ahead of Mel, flipping on switches. The lights clicked on, and the ceiling fans began to spin lazily. “Would you mind doing the upstairs for me? Hate them damn stairs.” Sweat already shone on her forehead, beaded on the folds of her neck below her chins.

“Sure thing,” Mel said.

She walked down the aisle of Booths 8-16, bumping the baskets into the desk at Booth 10, and went up the stairs. She hit the switches for the second floor, on the wall at the top of the stairs, then walked to her booth, blinking in the sudden light. Mel’s shelves towered over her. She noticed that, finally, that damned elephant tiki was gone, and there was an empty space on the shelf where it used to be. Mel set the baskets there. She considered tagging them, but she knew Clay. He was always at the mall first thing in the morning every day, ready to bring those baskets back to his own booth.

Mel walked back downstairs. Every time she imagined Clay picking up the baskets her heart felt as though she’d taken it out of her chest and squeezed it tight. She walked down the aisle, past the register, where Georgie was sliding the drawer open.

“See you later,” Georgie said, reaching into the drawer and extracting a stack of tens in one pudgy hand.

“Bye,” Mel said, opened the front door, and nearly ran straight into Clay.

They both stumbled back a step. At the sight of her ex-husband, carrying a cardboard box under his arm and staring at her with confusion, Mel felt her heart squeeze tight again.

Then that grin spread over Clay’s face. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you wake up this early, not once in twenty-two years,” he said.

Mel’s nervousness dissipated. “Bye,” she said again, and pushed past him into the warm morning air.

The baskets turned up in Clay’s booth by the next day, then they were bought up, and Mel forgot about them. She didn’t see Clay again until Thursday afternoon. When Mel carried in a small mosaic end table with a box of stereoscopic viewing cards balanced on it, the mall was quiet. The blue-haired girl was at the counter,

leaning against it and flicking through pages of some gossip magazine. As Mel passed, the girl's eyes rolled up to look at her, then back down to the magazine.

Mel walked down the aisle, the table bumping back into her stomach with every step. The cards slid back on the table and rested against Mel's chest. She turned the corner to the staircase and walked up, lifting the end table higher to clear the floor. In her booth, Mel set the table down near 130's entrance.

Mel picked up the stereoscopic cards and moved them deeper into the booth, placing the box on a shelf next to the battered wooden viewer. These days she didn't like going into the back of 130, more and more often she had a feeling that the tall shelves might topple onto her in an avalanche of antiques, but she'd always been fascinated by the stereoscopic viewer. She flipped through the box of cards first, picking a weathered one out at random—sepia-toned duplicates of a Civil War battlefield. Mel slid the card into the viewer's slot and looked through the binoculars at the photograph, suddenly bright and three-dimensional. Golden dead bodies and brown grassy hillocks leaped at her through the viewer's lens.

"Melissa?" a voice croaked behind her.

Mel jerked the viewer away from her face and turned. It was Clay, standing a few feet away at the entrance of the booth, watching her with a worried stare. "Melissa," he said again. His voice was harsh and rasping, as though he was dragging his throat over gravel.

"Hi," Mel said. The fans whirred overhead. Mel realized she was holding the viewer up like a weapon, and she placed it back on its shelf, the card still in the slot.

Clay appeared to have difficulty speaking. He brought a hand to his face to smother a cough, shoulders twitching inward. When he looked up again at Mel, his eyes were bloodshot behind his glasses. His cheeks had a fine layer of stubble, like silvery grit that caught the afternoon sunlight slanting through the window.

"How are you," he said, after several silent seconds.

"Fine," Mel said. "I'd ask you, but I think the answer is pretty obvious."

Clay either winced or smiled, Mel couldn't tell. He appeared to be looking around, inspecting the booth as though it had been weeks since he'd last set foot in it. Mel could see his fingers shifting as he rubbed his hands together, could hear the wooden floor squeaking as he shifted his weight from left to right, left to right.

Mel looked at her feet, and noticed an untagged cast iron flower frog on one of her lower shelves. Mel pulled a spare manila price tag and a ballpoint pen from her pocket and asked, "What do you want, Clay?" She wrote in *VINTAGE Flower Frog—Cast Iron!* on the tag's "Item Description" line.

Clay started to say something but was overcome by a violent coughing fit. Mel turned to watch him, holding pen and price tag in one hand, and resting the other on her hip. Clay looked like he was trying to smile or even laugh, but his face kept twisting in deepening coughs. When Clay finally had his lungs under control, he drew in a thick, wet breath and asked, "You hear about Georgie?"

"Nothing," Mel said. "What happened?" She slid the price tag and pen together in her fingers.

“She’s been hospitalized,” Clay said. He cleared his throat loudly. “I hear it’s swine flu.”

Mel’s fingers stopped. “Oh,” she said. “That’s awful.” She turned away from Clay. She set the price tag back down on the shelf and she began writing on it again—inventory code *MT9760*. The ballpoint was running out of ink, and Mel had to dig in with it, gouging into the manila tag. She thought of Georgie on the last day she’d seen her—had it been it Tuesday, or Wednesday?—after she’d placed the baskets in the booth. Georgie hadn’t looked sick, she thought, she’d groused at Mel because 130 had just barely broke even on rent the month before.

Clay seemed to wait a moment for some kind of further speech before he said, voice gratingly fond, “Mel, ever the stoic one.”

Mel shook her head and wrote 7.99 on the line for Price. “Stop talking like that,” she said. She noticed she’d begun to sweat, moisture dampening her underarms and her lower back beneath her t-shirt. The summer air was suddenly even more cloying than usual, oppressive and heavy. Mel inked in 130 on the “Booth” line, then stretched to grab a cone of twine from its spot on one of the higher shelves. She unreeled a couple inches of twine from the cone, wrapped the loose end around her fingers, then yanked hard to break the piece off.

“Like what?” Clay asked.

Mel threaded the twine through the hole in the tag. She bent down to pick up the flower frog from the shelf. She put the twine through one of the frog’s neat holes, close to the edge of the disk. She tied the string in a knot, tightening it until the tag was pulled against the cast iron surface.

Still standing at the front of the booth, Clay whistled, a long, low sound that he used to fill empty spaces in conversation. Mel used to find it endearing, at some point long ago. “Anyways,” he said. “I was thinking about going to see Georgie sometime. You know, bring flowers.”

“That’d be nice,” Mel said, placing the frog back on its shelf. She looked up and down the shelves, and picked up another unpriced item, a small, blue glass bottle that had a palmetto tree and the words *SC Dispensary* embossed on its sides. Mel vaguely recalled her mother telling her years ago that *SC Dispensary* meant cash. She wondered if she should call her mom for the price, or just try to find a similar bottle on eBay and guess from there.

Clay coughed, weakly this time. “Worried I might be coming down with it, too.”

Mel looked up at him. “Be a damn shame,” she said, voice smooth. “You take care of yourself, now.”

The fans purred quietly overhead.

Clay nodded. He took a last look around her booth, as if he was searching for something particular. His mouth was a hard, straight line in all that glittering stubble, and his red eyes were narrowed. “Yeah, you too,” he said at last. He turned and walked away, wood floor creaking hard beneath each step.

Mel looked up at the tallest shelves above her, and stood there for a moment, waiting for all their contents to come crashing down and bury her.

When Mel came to visit St. Francis' on Saturday, she told her mother what happened.

"You got *Georgie* sick?" her mom asked, voice shrill.

"I guess so," Mel said.

"I knew that swine flu thing was going to be trouble," her mom said.

"Swine flu isn't fatal," Mel said, crossing her arms.

"Oh, it sure as hell can be," her mother said. "What were you thinking?"

Through the apartment door behind her mother, Mel could faintly hear the sounds of a television playing. She thought of bringing up Walter's condition, but instead she asked, "How's Dad been this past month?"

Mel's mom sighed deeply. "All right, he's all right. Come on in."

Mel followed her mother inside the apartment, bracing herself against the scents of stale food and Safeguard soap that wafted through the house. Mel forced herself to take a few quick inhales as she walked to the living room with her mom. The television in the corner played Jeopardy, the final round theme song peeling from the speakers.

Mel could see part of her dad's head over the top of the armchair, a few tufts of wispy silver hair sticking up at different angles. Mel took a deep breath and walked to him, kneeling on the carpet at the foot of his chair. "Hey, Dad," she said. She forced herself to look at him instead of the ground.

At the sound of Mel's voice, her dad's left eye jerked to look at her, and the left half of his face twisted up into a smile. He made a low, guttural noise in his throat that could have been laughter, or a greeting. In his lap, Mel noticed a few pages of folded newspaper, the *Huxton Daily*.

"Your dad's made progress this week in therapy," Mel's mom said behind them. Her voice had changed—she sounded bright, overly cheerful. "He did really well yesterday. Took a few steps."

"Yeah?" Mel asked. She watched her dad's face for any signs of communication.

He continued to smile halfway at her. The right side of his face drooped in folds of skin. His good eye was wide open, the deep brown iris surrounded by threads of red blood vessels.

Mel searched for something to say. "I'm dealing with Clay—that problem with the baskets, remember?" she asked.

Her dad's head twitched upwards. He made the same guttural sound again. The wrinkles of his forehead creased—in frustration, Mel thought—or maybe he was just telling her to continue speaking.

She said, "He's going to stop stealing from us."

Mel's dad made a noise that might have been the word *you*. His left hand slowly curled into a fist, his index finger pointing to Mel's chest.

Mel swallowed hard. Jeopardy still played in the background, the contestants' voices tinny and small. "From *us*," she repeated. She fought down a desire to stand up from the carpet and run out the front door, never come back to this apartment.

Mel's mom, still standing behind her, said, "You want to watch something else?"

Mel's dad hummed a single high note. Her mom picked up the remote control and started flipping through channels until she hit some show that appeared to be about psychotic birds. A young blonde woman walking through a forest was attacked by a flock of crows—black birds poured down from the trees like rain, smothered her in feathers.

"This good?" Mel's mom asked over the cawing and the woman's hysterical screaming.

Mel nodded. Her mother sat down on the couch beside the armchair. Pressed into the carpet, Mel's knees began to ache. She watched the television as the show continued. A gray-faced man was on-screen, standing by one of the yellow numbers that marked the crime scene, writing on a clipboard.

Mel glanced at her father. His eye had drifted away from her, focused on the television set. She looked down at the *Huxton Daily* in his lap. The front page was full of small columns with the titles *Local Boy Missing*, *Feared Abducted*, and *Policeman named Huxton Hero of the Month*. The central article was longer, a solid block of text. Mel read the bold, black headline: *More Hospitalized in Outbreak*.

~ *Cu Fleshman*



"More Than You Know" (Oil on Canvas) ~ Lauralee Sikorski

BROTHERS AT THE WADENA INDOOR POOL WITH A DIVING BOARD

The neighbor Heely girls were going.
Fact. We could go, too—just round up
some dough in fifteen minutes. Tick-tock.

We raced barefoot, moving a wake of
driveway dust from their door to ours.

I was tired of drawing mansions on a hill.
You were tired of playing a *yes-sire* butler.
Boyhood dryness seizing summer wetness.

Male counterparts to the Heely chicks, all
of us hiding in our eyes the welts on our skin.

Their father smacked them even harder.
Their mother disappeared for weeks.
Their flower bed bred thistles & beer cans.

But they had the admission fee. We didn't.
They had an Uncle Les to drive. We didn't.

They had polka-dot beach towels. We didn't.
Hurry it up, pussies. We ain't waiting all day.
We foraged the house for a dollar-fifty fee.

I stole ninety-five cents from mom's coat pocket.
You unearthed a quarter from beneath the steps.

I discovered a dime behind the toilet. You lifted
a dime from the bottom of the trashcan. Not enough.
Then. Ah. Dive for the nickel of balance propping

up the kitchen table. It wobbled and tipped.
We laughed so hard. We almost missed the ride.

I wish we had. Life might be different.

I confiscated the pennies from father's loafers.
You extracted three pennies from his sock drawer.

How little we wanted back then. Not even
two dollars. Evenness, we'd learn as men,

was not our strength, betraying us even at birth.

Our weekly allowance was the space between
parent's fighting—a small gap between a large

chasm spreading hate, ending in *it*.
That's it. I've had it. Shut it. Forget it. Fuck it.
We knew who we were—the byproducts of it.

The Heely hags sang and drummed the
dashboard. Uncle Les told a joke about a fag,

a priest, a bar, & a one-legged whore named
Israel Vatican. It was funny. I think. We laughed.
I think. I was distraught. I think. Were you?

It's three dollars now. You don't have enough.
Don't look at us. We barely got it ourselves.

We sat on the sidewalk. Beggars without
a cup, a sign, a clue. 2 hours felt like 4½.

You guys look homeless. Let's go, doofuses.

The Heely girls squeezed chlorine
from their bangs & bragged about
backstrokes & summersaults & air

guitar & lifeguard cuties & chocolate
pudding & cheesy nacho fries.

Uncle Les parked in the back of XXX.
Life's an unfair cluster-fuck boys.
Best to learn that now.

~ *Samuel Cole*

ONE THING IS NOT LIKE THE OTHER

At 9am, I arrive

carrying my 1,200-mile-away unrighteous gayness,
dressed in Carolina Herrera & Hugo Boss,
wanting acceptance influenced by love,

& am met at the front door & pointed to the kitchen table

by my father's criticism of an unprofessional
haircut, underemployment, & good lord
son, can't you see God's frown on your weight,

now come lift & haul two, forty-pound salt-pellet water-softener bags

into the bedroom & go in the living room
and ask Jesus hanging above the couch
about world-approving rebellion.

At 9:15am, pastor arrives

carrying his 10-minute-away righteous straightness,
dressed in checkered sleeves & moon boots,
wanting acceptance influenced by love,

& is met at the front door & pointed to the living room couch

by my father's Praise the Lord, look who looks
so well, great leader of the Cornerstone flock, & good
lord son, can't you see God's smile on your height,

now go rest & relax on this gloriously, bountiful day & flourish

in knowing Jesus's completion sees and keeps
and wants and loves your world-denying rebellion.

~ Samuel Cole



“Looking and Seeing” ~ Joanna Madloch

Michael pulled into his garage. By the time he got home it was dark. He opened the door into the house and the kids (cats) were nowhere to be seen—they usually ran to the door at the sound of the garage door opening. He turned on the light and called them: “Huxley, Max, Princess.” No shows. Shaking the food bag never failed to produce them—but not this time.

He began to panic—could he have possibly left a door, a window open. He ran to the living room, turned on that light and got the shit scared out of him. Two men were waiting for him.

One put himself between Salvatore and any escape route.

Now he was panic squared. They had stupid hooded jackets but the hoods were down revealing two military crew cuts and faces out of WASP central casting.

“Where are my cats?”

The taller one said, “Ran upstairs when we came in—they’re all right. The real question is...” then he paused for effect, “are *you* all right?”

“No I’m not all right. What do you expect? What do you want? If this is a robbery or kidnapping you picked a very broke dude.”

Besides being scared shitless, Salvatore was totally shocked, bewildered and confused. This made no sense. What did they think he was mixed up in—drugs? Did they think he was someone else--a drug dealer? What a joke! Was this something from when he worked in a federal prison?

The slightly shorter one spoke. “Have you read any Arabic lately?” The tall one was looking for some recognition in Salvatore’s face.

All he got from Michael was, “What?”

“Arabic,” the short one repeated.

They were younger, late twenties, both seemed fit but each was much thinner than Salvatore’s 250 pounds. So far they showed no weapons. He figured that they thought he was an old guy and two against one—no problem. Probably right. If this were a robbery, he’d help them carry the crap to their car if it got rid of them faster. He certainly wouldn’t resist. But he knew this wasn’t just a robbery.

He answered. “I wouldn’t know Arabic if it was tattooed on my nose.”

“Have you found anything in your office at Shrine that looked like Arabic?”

“No.”

“Would you still feel that way if we started kicking the shit out of you?” The shorter one punched him in the face. Michael took it on the mouth. He was very scared. His glasses were knocked off and he had this thought of how hard it would be to find them later because he can’t see without them—the weird stuff you think of even in extremis.

“No, I haven’t even cleaned up that mess yet so I don’t have any idea what Mohammed had in there.

“Did you know Mohammed?”

“By sight.”

“That’s all! You never communicated with him?”

“No.”

The shorter one hit him again. It was like a sting rather than a hammer. He had round-housed both punches flat-footed without putting any body into them. He wasn’t an expert. Salvatore had not been in a street fight since he was a teenager. Then, there had been plenty. It was very rare that a single punch could knock someone out—that was mainly movie fiction. The last contact he had of any kind was fifteen years ago—the last year he belonged to the Ketsugen Karate dojo in Corona, Queens. He hadn’t had a match since then but he remembered what it was like to be hit. And he still exercised like hell. This turd definitely wasn’t a knockout kind of guy. Despite being terrified, Michael was thinking, thinking. He feigned that the blow hurt him much more than it did by backing up and flinching and putting his hand to his face and rubbing his jaw—he was buying time—for what he had no idea.

The taller one handed him photos of Arabs and Westerners. “Tell us who they are and we’ll leave you alone!” Salvatore didn’t believe that.

He looked at each photo carefully, holding them right in front of his eyes because: 1) he had to without his glasses on, and 2) he didn’t want them to see any reaction in his eyes. It was with the greatest display of mental effort and acting ability that his face showed them nothing even though his mind was in chaos at the only picture he did recognize—Bruce Ganelli, an inmate at the prison! As totally weird as this was, some intuition told him he had better keep it to himself. “I don’t know any of these people.”

He was hit again--this time in the stomach. Salvatore doubled over and groaned. He was faking. He had been doing hundreds of reps of stomach exercises a week for twenty years—along with reps for the rest of his body. He hadn’t started life at 250 pounds. He got there by working at it. When he had taught high school he had believed it wasn’t a bad idea to be big—it didn’t hurt in prison either.

Tall said to short, “Whaddya think?”

“I think we gotta a liar here who wants to be a punching bag.”

Still doubled over, Salvatore shuddered, cringed, and whined, “Don’t hit me anymore. I’m gonna get sick.”

Tall: “What? Puke? There’s the garbage pail. You got no sympathy from us. Just tell us what you know?”

“I don’t know anything.”

Short: “Let’s go up and see if his cats know anything?”

Tall: “Skip that and let’s cut to the chase; we don’t have all night for this.”

Short: “Yeah, so listen Mr. Wimp, we’re just gonna hurt you a lot to speed this up.”

This time the tall one hit him. He wasn’t a lot better than his pal. Then both hit him repeatedly. They hadn’t thought about kicking him. He bent over to guard his balls—the one place that could disable him. Salvatore felt like Muhammad Ali in Zaire with George Foreman. He took the pounding until, like Foreman, Dumb and Dumber got tired. They were huffing and puffing—they were not so fit after all. These were two assholes that assumed the old guy had no chance. You know what they say about assume: Don’t make an ass out of u and me. Michael curled up against the wall as if he were knocked out. Would the two morons leave now, convinced he knew nothing.

Tall: Whadda we do? He doesn’t know crap.”

Short: “Or he’s pretending--Plan B—we take back him with us like we were told.”

This was not what Salvatore wanted to hear. He had enough sense left to know that they weren’t going to take him now and then bring him back later.

“Tall: “Buzz our ride.”

Short got out some little hand-held gizmo and pressed a button.

Whatever chance Salvatore had, it wouldn’t be against three of them. Dumb and dumber were standing right next to each other, shoulder to shoulder, waiting for their ride. The driver couldn’t be too far off—maybe two minutes, one minute. Salvatore was still leaning against the wall. He remembered Cardozo and how he used to break up fights. He jumped off the wall with his arms raised and landed on the pair of adjacent shoulders, wrapping his arms around their necks. Then he went slack. They couldn’t hold up his 250 pounds. Once they were down, he jumped backed up and kicked tall in the balls that the moron didn’t know enough to cover up. Tall screamed and was done for at least a few seconds. Short got up and swung

at the head he had thought so easy to hit just before. Michael blocked it and grabbed Short by his collar and without letting him go began throwing him into the wall, stunning him. Then he hit him, not roundhouse, not flat-footed, but with a pivot of his hips that threw all his weight into a right propelled straight forward from his shoulder. He heard and felt Shorty's face break. Tall tried to grab Salvatore's legs and trip him. Try tripping a tree. Salvatore kicked Tall in the head. Time, how much time before number three got here.

None--the third man arrived and he wasn't Orson Welles. He had a gun with a silencer. The game was up. This guy was older, colder, hard, and a lot more capable looking than Dumb and Dumber had turned out to be. The third man looked at the two morons on the floor.

"This is what happens when kids are sent to do a man's job. Mr. Salvatore I apologize for the incompetence of these two amateurs. I see that they were sloppy and inefficient. Tall and short looked up from the floor clearly terrified at number three. "Too bad.... "He shot Shorty in the head. Tall screamed. "Shut up, open the garage, pull the car in, and put your pal in the car." Tall obeyed with no hesitation.

"Now, Mr. Salvatore, I am a believer in efficiency. You will begin telling me everything you know before I count to three."

Michael thought, *how movie*.

"One... two..."

And then number three collapsed to his knees and fell on to his face. Behind the late number three was another man with another gun with another silencer.

With a thick accent, he said calmly, "Already shot other one in car. I come nick of time--like cavalry—so American." He laughed.

After all this, now a comedian with a gun and silencer.

"Are you the police?"

"What--with accent like mine?"

The accent was one he had heard in New York from some of his students—Israeli.

"I am secret agent—he laughed again—"I always want to say that—like James Bond."

"—And you have a license to kill."

"Only bad guys."

“What am I?”

“I listen to whole business with these three, and I think you know nothing.”

“You *listened!*”

“Sure—American technology very good.”

“Are you saying my house is bugged?”

“No, you not that important—I hear with little toy I aim at your house. I learn you smart, tough guy. Do you want to be secret agent too?”

“You heard and let them beat the crap out of me.”

“Very sorry but I also need to know if you know nothing.”

“And you think I don’t.”

“This my belief—what you Americans say—‘hunch.’ He put his gun away.

Michael asked, “Should I call the police now?”

“Not possible. Some things must not be known yet.”

“Like what.”

“Cannot say—then must kill you.” He didn’t laugh.

“Gee, thanks—but do these guys have friends that might not be done with me?”

“Many. But now on we watch you, protect you.”

“Are you Mossad?” This was the Israeli version of the CIA.

“What you ask—do I have ‘muscles?’ Sure—this one.” He waved his gun.

Definitely a comedian!

“I meant who are you with?”

“Cannot say.”

“Because then you must kill me.” This time he did laugh.

“Were you following them?” Michael never gave a thought that maybe he was the one being followed. James Bond didn’t answer.

Michael remembered he had three corpses in his house. “What do I do with Moe, Larry, and Curly?”

“Ah! Three Stooges. When boy—love to watch them—they help me learn English. With my partner will take trash for you. You must not tell anyone this. You must believe—how they say--is over your head—is too dangerous for you to tell.”

“That seems apparent!”

“You go find cats—have two cats for my daughter—when bad guy say to look for cats I almost come in.”

This was too surreal—David Lynch on acid. “So you love cats?”

“Sure, better than many people.... I think if you like cats you okay.”

Obviously.

“We dump trash, partner get rid of bad guy car. Then you all set.”

And he rubbed his hands like they had just neatly finished a little project.

The partner came in—said not a word—apparently also Israeli.

When they finished, ‘James Bond’ returned.

Michael was squinting, looking around for his glasses. ‘James Bond’ saw them by the sofa, got them, and held them up. “You look for this?” Michael took them and put them on.

“You should get contacts like me—much easier for all this fighting and running around shit.”

“Tried, couldn’t tolerate them because I’ve got bad allergies.”

“My daughter and my niece too.”

Michael saw that the Israeli was about 50, had full brown hair with lighter sun streaks on top, thick eyebrows, possibly originally a Russian. He had on a trench coat much too big for him so that its shoulder lines were sliding down his upper arms. One presumed that the extra girth of the coat was meant to hide stuff under it.

“Me and partner go now.”

“Suppose some cops stop you.”

“No worry—have, how you say, high friends in places.”

“You mean friends in high places—the other way means something else.”

“Bond” furrowed his thick brows, thinking, then laughed, “Hey, I see—like pot head--pretty good, I make joke, don’t even know—I tell my high friends.”

Anyway, not worry, if cops stop--make phone call—no problem.” He rubbed his hands again as if all the solutions in the world needed nothing more.

“Okay Salvatore, we done—please remember, say nothing!”

He knew Michael’s name. “How am I supposed to explain my face?”

“Say you mugged—this America—everyone will believe you.”

He was about out the door when Michael said, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Did you really have a hunch because of my cats?”

“Sure, why not—also someone say you okay.”

“Who the hell do we both know?”

He laughed: “Jonathan Pollard.”

~ *David Garrett Izzo*

JUNE FIRST

my mother and I decided
when I should come back
home.

June first.
she told me that it will be
alright. I will find a job,
hang out with my friends,
and play with the dogs.

my mother knows me
too well. *I know you will be upset,
and will cry. like you did at the end
of high school.
like you did after college.*

my mother talks about incentives.
she mentions family
and friends. she encourages me
to apply for jobs, but she fails to mention
love.

she doesn't know my love
will bring me home. the love of a stolen homeland
demands to be felt. the country aches,
and I will have to witness
it getting back on its feet, as I grow
older. I will write until my fingers ache,
my children born, and my homeland free.

my mother asks me to come back
after graduation. she knows it's hard
to be in between spaces.
I listen to her spill
her heart out, as I clench my hands
together. I wait for her to end the Skype session
so I can listen to my heart
violently beating. wipe my tears, and begin
packing.

~ *Laila Shikaki*

THE BOOK OF IF: AN INDEX OF LITERARY CONDITIONALS

1. If Achilles had been dipped into the Ganges by his tongue instead of the Styx by his heel, Western war-literature would be on a more communicative, less combative course by now.
2. If Aesop was indeed born a slave, his attitude toward grapes is not entirely surprising.
3. If Shakespeare's brain could have been scanned and uploaded into immortal software, it would have written a renunciation of *Romeo and Juliet* during the Seneca Falls convention and a prequel to *Richard III* during the waning days of the British empire.
4. If the Bhagavad-Gita's battle-scenes could be announced via Tao Te Ching drumrolls, the Mogul Empire and the Mongol hordes would have conducted better diplomatic relations.
5. If the Mayflower Compact and the Magna Carta were messages to one another, Manifest Destiny and the Marshall Plan could swap footnotes.
6. If Eskimo poetry possessed a hundred words for different kinds of sand, our equator would be an inseam instead of a waistline.
7. If the Elizabethan Renaissance and the Italian Renaissance could have agreed to overlap for a decade and a half, the Sistine Chapel may have sported a Shakespeare mural.
8. If the setting of *The Sun Also Rises* were transferred out of Spain to Sunset Boulevard, matadors' red capes would turn into parking valets' red vests.
9. If Captain Ahab's footprint and peg-print could have been preserved in slow-drying Hollywood cement, Captain Hook's hand-print would be a harvest moon.
10. If Dr. Zhivago trekked across bayou instead of tundra, seafood gumbo and beluga caviar would hold saline-content contests.

11. If Heraclitus' river that can't step into twice intersected the Ganges where it foams with the residue of burned bodies, our ideas on reincarnation would need to be altered.
12. If an Oedipus Complex could be reduced to an Oedipus Simplex without a manual or medication, maternity would never have to endure such molestation.
13. If Rumi's dervish spin were not only counter-clockwise but counter Coptic-wise, the Crusades would have less of a culture-clash and more of a conflict between cutlery.
14. If Keats' Grecian urn contained the ashes of a burned suicide note and Henry James' golden bowl contained magnolia seeds, our sense of gestation would have slipped into reverse gear.
15. If every aria from *Madame Butterfly* could be translated into leaky faucet, half of our postmodern haiku would hurry to serenade slippage as well as silence.
16. If D.H. Lawrence's obscenity trials all ended in sprung juries, James Joyce's would have ended in a slipped-disc stenographer.
17. If Lorca's firing squad had been blindfolded with pages from the King James Bible, a literary history of European socialism would have chapters carved out of class compassion.
18. If the Grimm brothers' surname were a bit less downbeat, the Black Forest's oak-to-elm ratio might shift at the same rate as its ankle-grabbing root to sky-blotting branch ratio.
19. If the wax used to plug Odysseus' ears from siren-song and the wax used for Icarus' wings were the same substance, the wax used for the candle used to commemorate the first Olympics would owe as much to bees as it owes to paraffin.
20. If a Freudian slip could be converted into a Freudian skip, Confessional Poetry would be as cathartic as a coughing fit.

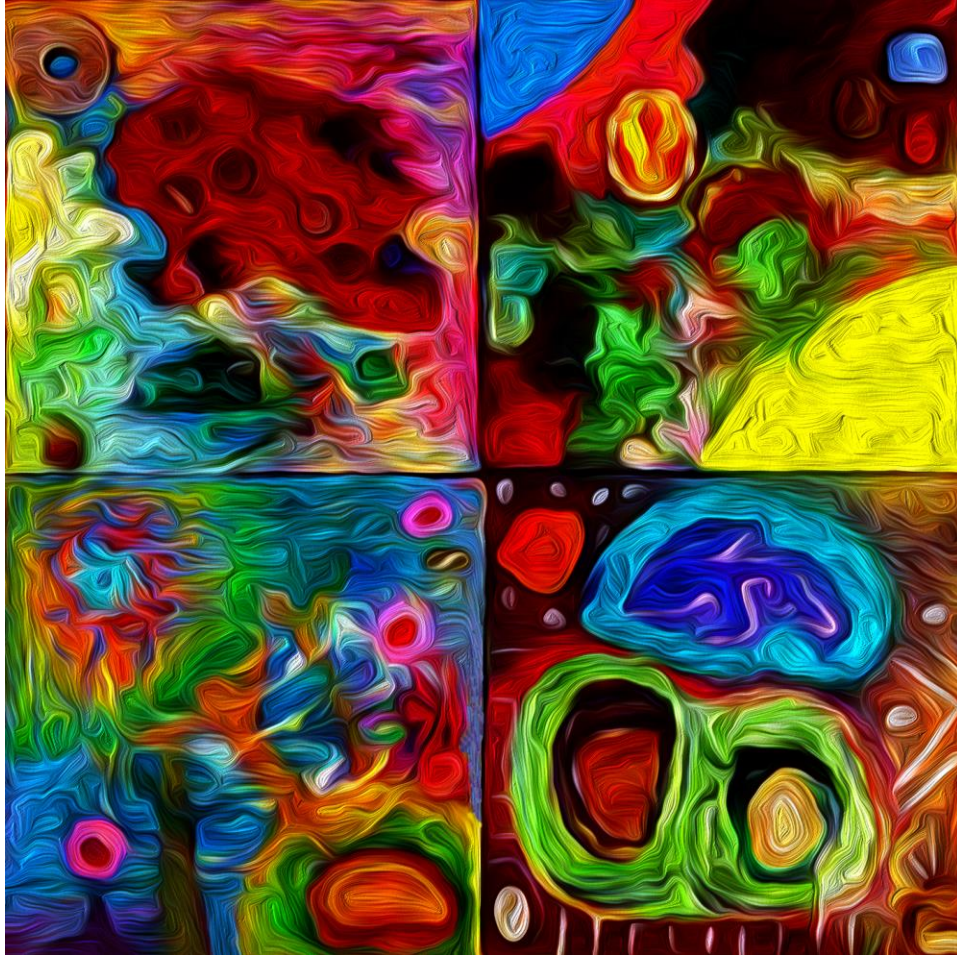
21. If Thomas Wolfe and Virginia Woolf had co-founded Rome, lions would have fed on critics as well as Christians during the glory years of the Coliseum.
22. If Wallace Stevens as an insurance man hadn't specialized in covering cattle en route to their being slaughtered, his poetry might have featured less fruits and more cuts of meat.
23. If *The Grapes of Wrath* cannot be allergic to a bookmark made of denim, then *Pride and Prejudice* cannot be addicted to bookmarks made of silk.
24. If one of John Keats' pens and one of William Blake's brushes were used as Big Ben's hour hand and minute hand, our sense of literary history would be heavier on the loitering and lighter on the hurrying.
25. If the *and* in *Crime and Punishment* is more suspenseful than the *and* in *Man and Superman*, the *of* in *The Count of Monte Cristo* is less possessive than the *of* in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.
26. If the capital city of e. e. cummings' home state were as uncapitalized as his pen name, 'boston' would be a verb as well as location on a map.
27. If Pinocchio's ears grew a termite-nest when he heard a half-lie, Cyrano de Bergerac's nose would dwindle every time he smelled his own seduction surrogacy in mid-speech.
28. If a carnation looks blue after ten hours of reading *The Scarlet Letter*, an orange looks self-named after ten minutes of reading "The Yellow Wallpaper."
29. If *Sands of Iwo Jima* were written on fly-paper and *The Lord of the Flies* were written on sandpaper, our genre oversight committees would need to invert some of their own criteria.
30. If Jean Valjean's parole hearing were conducted by a committee of blacksmiths, the Man in the Iron Mask would be granted a conditional flip-up visor.

31. If Hans Christian Anderson created a character willing to place his pinkie-ring into a crack in the Wailing Wall, windmills would flourish along the West Bank.
32. If a round of musical chairs were played to the closing-credits theme song to the Book of Job, most participants would up with splinters in their haunches.
33. If Mark Twain's sense of Missouri were as opposed to Manifest Destiny as his sense of Connecticut were opposed to the Confederacy, his sense of Nevada would be as opposed to the upcoming New Deal as his sense of Florida was opposed to the Free Soil Act.
34. If Sherlock Holmes hid his cocaine in his nightcap's nipple instead of the upturned toe of his Oriental slipper, Dr. Watson would keep his camaraderie in his calipers instead of his kit-bag.
35. If Odysseus had been tied to a dirigible's gas intake instead of a galleon's mast, our cultural sense of space would be more aerial and less oceanic.
36. If Goldilocks could go platinum and a samurai's top-knot could be twisted into a tsunami, Rapunzel's French braid would be a Fibonacci spiral.
37. If Captain Nemo's surname refused to anagram into 'omen,' a Jolly Roger flag hung from a clothesline would learn to uncross its crossbones and wink its unpatched eye.
38. If Blake's 'doors of perception' swung outward as well as inward, its hinges would need to be lubricated with Kentucky bourbon as well as Afghani opium-juice.
39. If tying Big Ben's bell to Beowulf's tail could have prevented the War of the Roses, twisting the treaty that ended the Gallic Wars into a Gordian Knot would have prevented the Battle of Hastings.
40. If John Hancock's fingerprints were as ostentatious as his signature, his fossilized middle finger would be a Maypole danced around by the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

41. If H. P. Lovecraft's surname took itself more literally, its bearer would have been on the Kama Sutra's advisory board.
42. If Sisyphus' boulder could knock down Moses' ten-pins, the pebbles that Demosthenes placed in his mouth to rehearse and improve his orations would be the by-product.
43. If *Gravity's Rainbow* were converted into a tint-scattering prism by an act of spectral origami, its middle chapters would tend more to the indigo-of-irony than the aubergine-of-earnestness.
44. If Christopher Wren based his rebuilding of London's skyline on a John Milton rhyme-pattern, the Tower of London and the Tree of Knowledge would intertwine at their upper limbs.
45. If F. Scott Fitzgerald's second-cousinhood to the man who wrote the Star-Spangled Banner possessed any real creative impact, West Egg, Long Island would have a clearer view of Fort McHenry.
46. If a haiku is indeed approximately 1/5,000th of the average novel, music is overdue in creating a form that is 1/5,000th of the average symphony—a six-second micro-sonata to haunt the mind with its fleeting presence.
47. If one stares at one of Ad Reinhardt's "black paintings" while listening to John Cage's "4.33" long enough, the title page of a book will suddenly appear overcrowded.
48. If typewriters had tuning pegs, we would have already had our Ali Akbar Khan of the spacing bar and our Segovia of the reset key.
49. If the grapefruit-shaped blue dots that George Orwell had tattooed on his knuckles while in Burma were tributes to the Hindu practice of *bindi*, a Lord Shiva de Milo statue would be missing eight arms.
50. If H.G. Wells' sense of time-travel weren't as Victorian as his inability to keep his moustache trimmed evenly, a ghost-writer's inkwell would eventually evaporate into its own alibi.

51. If Dickens' *Edwin Drood* is unfinished because it featured too many opium dens and Hemingway's *The Garden of Eden* is unfinished because it featured too many afternoon cocktails, Henry James' *The Ivory Tower* is unfinished because of a lack of such libations.
52. If the final word of Joyce's *Ulysses* were "maybe" instead of "yes," the first word of *Finnegans Wake* would be "puddleplop" instead of "riverrun."

~ *Kimo Reder*



"Ideas Converted to Energy" ~ Alex Duensing

GODIVA CHOCOLATES

Life
was
messy

no
matter
how
rich

now
my
hands
are
clean

and
I
am
sweet

~ Danny Barbare



"Thoughts in Vogue & Fashion" ~ Eghosa Akenbor

GIRL FROM YOGA CLASS

I postured into the form of a writer
at the base of a lattice-topped park pagoda
scribbling, "Caitlin in beautiful,"
beneath the wing
of a wooden form of a bird.

I want to be the writer
of the memory of gestures,
how you gestured towards a flock of pigeons
who angled for the posture of the aesthete
perched on public square sculptures.

After an hour of exhorting our forms
across ancient yogic twists and re-twists,
I thought of the formless
and how I've yet begun to practice
while you attempted, but failed, to hold
the posture of the crow.

Towards which form will class
be inching to next time
I see the sun gesturing again
its angled rays
thru sliver thin curtain openings
and onto the space
at the back of your ear.

~ *Victor Vargas*



"Negativo #1" ~ Rubia van Roodselaar

ILLUMINATED ANGELS

When I walk the desert I walk the coyote;
When I walk the mountains the sun sets my left—
the palm, spring, spring, nightly illuminated angels,
this is why the moon is shy; why, the night,
why the eclipse below the sea?

Does *la luna* dip *el mar* in America?
Curtains close, lips open wide, once shut,
I step out, the pale sand, rocks therein
thunder on the dust.

So when I walk alone
Billie Holiday sings “Blue Moon.”

Where goes the coyote then?
What does the coyote, who bellows
no howl but yelps—the yelp the yelp—
his paw stuck the mud.

The palm, in spring, the luna-lit,
el mar she sleeps, but not he.
Continue he, with she his left, afar
to flags he march, to march the moonglow,
Scorpio, play low and play low and let go.

Fetter me, fetter me, and then fetter me again.
Swallow me, swallow him swallow her,
Swallow now swallow past, swallow then,
Swallow free—the Swallow with batwings—
He swallow and he fetter and he walk right,
the drapes are drawn—advantage the luna-light.

I meant to write you, but time is a motherfucker.
Will you walk me, or am I alone
with Holiday?

Go on, gamble on.

Right, then continue, walk the strip,
be quiet, be gentle,

American Woman at the shop enrages over Spain,
American Man on the strip begs full price for shitty art,
American girl drops her purse and loses her child,

American boy obsesses over thugging, but he drinks too much.

Leaves fall, trees burn, and then recollect,
the cycle begins—the sands wind up—
the coyote yelps again,
snaps his ankle,
chokes his freedom,
bleeds his fur,
with mange,
he huffs, and then he eats the moon.

So, I meant to write you,
but the Ace is an orgy in effect,
and in it I want no part.

It is warm, sure,
but in the desert the soul is deceased,
so when I walk *la noche* alone,
I listen to Billie Holiday,
and she tries to listen back.

~ *Ian Cressman*

FATHER TIMELESS

I had better

Write it

Down

Before I forget

A **symptom** of old timers

Damn you, Time,

an absentee Father, s t r e t c h i n g so *thin*

while the crow's feet loom larger from head to chin

Age is but a number—

I'm a young soul—

Surely I'll

Tick

Tock

Tock

Tick

Forever, like a timeless Timex

Running on a Wal-Mart battery.

Rolling back those prices,

What, no 40% discount on the years?

Draining... so.... slowly... in the... moment...

I ran too many

red

YELLOW

green

lights.

Throwing *caution* to the wind,

Forgetting to breathe each moment in.

But memories inevitably fade

As quickly as they came—

And...

And...

I don't recall—What was I ...

~ *Chris Baarstad*

IMAGES & WORDS

Once infinitely there, you walk into distances,
mirage of myself, vision withdrawn as water
from sand, marrow from the bones of our
ancestral land.

Who am I but you—once stuck in an infinite
regress of mirrors, image stopped by
the image of itself, its bridged ends departed
and unclear.

I once stood where you stand now, in the
deep, receding pastures of unthought,
a dandelion spore shaken loose
in a sudden wind, undone by it.

I once caressed the blades of grass, watched
as they surfaced through the crevices
of my fingers, softly molded by
the pressure of earth and sky, of that
endearing soil, cold to the touch,
which filled the curved depths
of my hands.

I had glimpsed the gallant plane, shrouded
in a veil of clouds, tearing through truths
and heavens it could not comprehend,
and bore the stark distance—
the glaring, insurmountable difference—
between myself and the firmament, and,
nevertheless, felt at one.

Unencumbered by myself, I stand together
with you now, where, imperceptibly there,
the solid ground which bears our
disparate weight holds us tenderly

to the sun, renders us in relation to its
solar mass, its hydrogen glint nourishing
the moving magma of our skin,

the draped blanket of pavement carrying us
to that temporary residence
of sky and oak, whitewashed
in the calming vagrancies of now.

Feel this. Be engendered in the image
of our image now, in its impossible sameness,
weight and counterweight on the most
sensitive of human scales,
incommensurable, yet balanced
firmly on the thin tip of our desire.

For one day, you'll inhabit a different image:
a coat loosely caressing a waist,
a barrette between the latticework
of your hair, where childhood
is but a strand, a singularity at the
center of its black hole,
infinitely dense,
spun finely at the edges, nestling
it within its threaded warmth
against the shears of an undone world;

or the delicate architecture
of a bended knee,
gathering unto itself what
constitutes it,

cropping up from the laced trim of a
black dress fallen lightly from a waist,
slender, soon swollen with its
own momentous turning;

or the sharp tip of a heel carelessly grazing
the air, then resting there with the poise
of a steadfast soul staring
into that long embrace—drawn in the
gentle gravity of that final draft—
to the other side, as to a warm,
forgiving shoulder;

or perhaps, even perhaps, a smile which
tightens into the hardness of an ancient
stone, even you—a once fluid spirit
wrenched from the wind, so fatefully bound
where the others gather, their eyes
transfixed to the dark, discarded alluvium,
the blank canvas of a starless ground,
its black and silent earth staring back
at them, gazeless, yet profound;

but perhaps not—even then, might you be
the filament, a pistil yielding
to a precarious wind, softened by
the strength, by the restoring centripetal
force, of its sustained breath;

and, finally, the sheer profile rendered
as shadow in the absence of your presence,
transposed through deep green panes
of glass, before the shadows pass.

For in you and through you, I see the end
of this, the end of me. Ereignis—
to come upon a clearing, the sky's
thin blue through shuddering palms,
unfolded in their wrinkled hands
of flight, disclosing the phenomena—
all that is or can be brought to light.
All this, and more ...

What are we, here and now,
terminally facing the deaf touchstone,
cryptic and mute
behind the monolith of self-assertion,
a truth unkept in its dispassionate
dispossession of the self.

What is World,
this ubiquitous becoming—
no more an image than a word;
no more, your eyes said, than a long
breath drawn, held in, released—
no more than the time it takes a word
to slip off your tongue,
engulfed by the air.

~ *Ryan David Leack*

BIOGRAPHIES

OSEYOMO ABIEBHODE

Oseyomo Abiebhode is a student of communication in the University of Benin, Benin City. He is interested in writing poetry and stories, and fancies himself a good singer, although he says his voice is nothing like it used to be.

He has been writing for a while about things that do and do not concern him. He enjoys dreaming about things he will never be or do.

MELINA AHMADZADEH

Melina Ahmadzadeh is a graduate of Cal Poly Pomona, with a BFA in Graphic Design. Her passion for illustration always shows through in her work, combining traditional pen & paper with modern digital styles. Her work has been featured in galleries and art shows in Los Angeles, Pasadena, Pomona, and Anaheim. She will be pursuing an MFA in Graphic Design this coming fall.

EGHOSA AKENBOR

A painter, a fashion designer and a high school teacher, who reside in Benin city, Nigeria. The experimentation and exploration of my subconscious thoughts, feelings are foundation of my idea as an artist. Everything around me is a potential material for art. View my art on <http://eghoartculture.wordpress.com>

JANE ARSENAULT

Originally from Summerside, Prince Edward Island, Canada, Jane Arsenault writes poetry, drama, fiction, and creative non-fiction, as well as literary criticism. Afflicted with a mental illness, Jane frequently explores the depths of depression in her works. Recently, she has published in *The Waggle* and *Feminist Spaces*.

CHRISTOPHER BAARSTAD

Christopher Baarstad received his MA in Rhetoric and Composition with a secondary focus in early American literature from Cal Poly Pomona. He has taught a multitude of composition and writing courses at different community college campuses across Southern California and currently serves as the lead technology and curriculum liaison for a modest private school junior high international program in Anaheim, CA. His primary literary interests are mythology and dystopian literature with a splash of cardboard page kid's books that his daughters seem to fancy.

DANNY BARBARE

Danny P. Barbare resides in the Carolinas. Enjoyed walking his dog, Miley, till she began to walk him no matter what kind of training or leash. He has been writing poetry off and on for 35 years.

ANANYA BHARGAVA

Ananya Bhargava is currently a second year student at the University of California, Los Angeles. She is pursuing a double major in Economics and English. She writes for her college's feminist newsmagazine and spends her spare time chronicling the adventures of her cat, and talking about Gilmore Girls and Captain America to anyone with an ear to spare.

BRITTANY BRAS

Brittany Bras is currently a second year graduate student with a primary emphasis in Rhetoric and Composition and a secondary emphasis in Literature at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. It is here that Brittany also teaches freshman composition. Poetry has been a part of Brittany's life since childhood. Writing, for Brittany, began as a way to confront the death of a beloved dog, and now focuses on the way the mind behaves, or misbehaves, in relationship with others and most importantly, in relationship with the self.

TRISH CARAGAN

Trish Caragan is a current undergraduate majoring in Creative Writing at UC Riverside. She enjoys reading and writing romantic teen stories. Trish knew she wanted to write romance novels after reading *This Lullaby* by Sarah Dessen, her favorite author and biggest influence. Her other favorite authors are John Green, Jenny Han, Stephanie Perkins, Huntley

Fitzpatrick, Morgan Matson, Laurie Halse Anderson, Nicholas Sparks, and many, many more. When she's not reading or writing, she's either talking to friends or listening to upbeat pop music. One day, Trish hopes to write books that will impact people the same way that Sarah Dessen's novels have impacted her.

JEFF CARR

I currently teach English at Indiana State University and am a part-time creative writer by night. My short story "Labor Day" was published in the inaugural issue of *The Julie Mango*, a Canadian literary journal. I have also published works in academic journals such as *The St. John's Humanities Review* and *MP: An Online Feminist Journal*.

DOINA CIOBANU

I am a Southern California painter favoring landscape and abstract art. I reside in Riverside county but I work in San Diego county. You can see symbolic references to prominent impressionistic painters of the 19th century like Monet, Manet, Matisse and others and their artistic vision in my own art. Most of my paintings are mixed acrylic/oil. Capturing the California light is extremely important to me, as I think that it is only here that you can find all these shades of green and blue that I try to render. Other paintings can be seen on my website at:

<http://doinaciobanu.weebly.com/>

SAMUEL COLE

Samuel Cole lives in Woodbury, MN. He loves to sing, STEP, photograph lanterns, hang with friends, boo bad movies, and of course, write long into the night.

IAN CRESSMAN

Ian Cressman is an English Literature student at Cal Poly Pomona; he is currently pursuing a career in publishing and editing—largely a side project to his own literary pursuits. His primary scholarly interests include 19th and 20th Century American literature ranging from Henry James to Ernest Hemingway (his favorite novel is *The Old Man and the Sea*); along with a strong appreciation for the works of writers such as Henrik Ibsen and Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Other interests include adoration for all facets of artistic expression—including anything from the works of Hieronymus Bosch (a major influence on Cressman's poetry) to filmmakers such as Stanley Kubrick and Ingmar Bergman. As such, he pursues any and all forms of art which provide the inescapable rapture of emotional ingenuity—be it the graphic novels of Alan Moore, the music of Björk, or simply the fresh and forward-thinking writing of his contemporaries and peers—he believes that all forms of art can tell a story; whether it is visual, audible, or simply emotionally affecting. His other interests include early American history, Mexican-American relations, politics, religious studies, linguistics, Anthropology, and even the burgeoning advancements of art in the

fields of Television and Video Games—essentially nothing is off-limits in terms of inspiration. He also enjoys travelling cross-country, hiking and camping in California, and drinking dark beer. Cressman currently resides in Chino, California, likely reading Mark Twain in a comfortable corner with a cup of coffee as his maniacal cat Fox sprints about like a hyper child.

OTHA "VAKSEEN" DAVIS III

While working on hit records in the music business has played a driving force in his career, it's Vakseen's (born Otha Davis III) passion for the arts that has served as his key to sanity in the fast paced entertainment industry. The self-taught, Floridian has developed a distinct collage-influenced painting style (Vanity Pop) that fuses elements of surrealism, cubism, photorealism and fashion design onto canvas. Drawing inspiration from women, emotions, and popular culture, his paintings deal with the theme of personal identity and evolve around society's idolization of beauty, as well as the enhancements women endure to obtain this level of "perfection". Currently a resident artist at The Hive Gallery, his paintings have been featured by major brands like Adidas, Complex, Vibe, Bombay Sapphire Gin, Juxtapoz Magazine and Tupac Shakur's estate, in addition to being sold to collectors and art enthusiasts worldwide. To view #Vakseenart visit VakseenArt.com

ALEX DUENSING

Alex Duensing. Graduate of William Paterson and Columbia? Yes. Ran for St. Petersburg, FL City Council? Yes. Won? No. Stopped Mayan Apocalypse on rooftop with performance art? Yup. Strange but nice fellow? Clearly. Able to create mechanical engines that run completely on the energy a person creates while appreciating a painting? Not Yet.

VIV ELIOT

Viv Eliot is a recent graduate of Texas State University where she received her Master of Arts in Literature. Currently, she is an independent scholar working on a book dealing with the spatial relevance of ghosts in literature. When she is not reading about ghosts, she spends her time hanging out with her two daughters, binge watching Netflix, and whiskey sours.

CU FLESHMAN

My name is Cu Fleshman. I am Vietnamese-American, originally from South Carolina, and I graduated from the creative writing program at the South Carolina Governor's School for Arts and Humanities. I am currently a sophomore English major at the University of California, Irvine, and I teach art. My work has been published in the *Adroit Journal* (2015), as well as the South Carolina Home Builders' Association's Newsletter. My writing has also been recognized by the YoungArts Foundation, and I received a silver medal with distinction portfolio award from the Scholastics Art and Writing Foundation.

KAVON FRANKLIN

Kavon Franklin is an assistant professor of English at Alabama State University. She received a BA in journalism and an MFA in creative writing from the University of Alabama. She earned a PhD in English from Florida State University. Her areas of interest include African American history and cultural studies, narrative nonfiction, film and media studies, and twentieth and twenty-first century American literature. Past awards include the McKnight Fellowship, the Blount Junior Scholarship, and the Chips Quinn Scholarship. She has reported for the *Commercial Appeal*, the *Herald-Dispatch*, and the *Tuscaloosa News* (among other publications).

J. HARKER SHAW

J. Harker Shaw is a writer and illustrator from Scotland and is one of the three poets featured in 'Songs of the River.' She now lives with her partner and dog in London where she is working on a PhD on Percy Bysshe and Mary Shelley.

REZA HASHEMIZADEH

My name is Reza Hashemizadeh and I am an independent artist from the city of Winnetka, CA. I would like to submit my Art for consideration for your upcoming publication. I hold a Masters in Visual Arts from the California State University Northridge. Using mostly recycled paper as my main materials I create work that comment on my personal love-hate relationship with consumerism.

JANNELLY HERRERA

Jannelly Herrera is an award winning oil painter, based out of Southern California. She completed her B.F.A in Drawing and Painting from the Academy of Art University in 2007. In addition to her extensive artistic background, Jannelly also possesses a passion for education. Recently she completed her M.A in Teaching and Learning from the University of Redlands. She spends her time exposing students of all ages to art, through workshops and the public education system.

JAMES HICKSON

James Hickson, a Pomona native, is a retired librarian who lives in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. His poetry has appeared in books and magazines for over five decades.

KAITLYN IRWIN

My name is Kaitlyn Irwin and I am a very simple person. I happen to love writing poetry, and I took some creative writing classes at UCLA while I was working towards my English degree over the last couple years. The poems I am submitting were written within the last 6 months and a very wonderful professor helped me edit them to be what they are now. I hope you will enjoy some, or all, of them. As for my short biography, here goes: I graduated from UCLA with an English degree in June 2016. I love reading (especially Stephen King novels), cats, and running long distances. I grew up in Kennesaw Georgia and that's where I hope to end up some day—I miss

the dogwoods every spring. I don't like to talk about myself too much.

DAVID GARRETT IZZO

David Garrett Izzo is an English Professor who has published 17 books and 60 essays of literary scholarship, as well as three novels, three plays, two short stories, and 18 poems. David has published extensively on the Perennial Spiritual Philosophy of Mysticism (Vedanta) as applied to literature. He is inspired by Aldous Huxley, Bruce Springsteen, his wife Carol and their five cats: Huxley, Max, Princess, Phoebe, and Luca. Two of his novels are fantasies with cats as characters: Maximus in Catland and Purring Heights.
www.davidgarrettizzo.com

CATHERINE KYLE

Catherine Kyle holds a Ph.D. in English from Western Michigan University. She teaches at the College of Western Idaho and writes grants for The Cabin, a literary nonprofit. She is the author and illustrator of the hybrid-genre collection *Feral Domesticity* (Robocup Press, 2014); the author of the poetry chapbooks *Flotsam* (Etched Press, 2015) and *Gamer: A Role-Playing Poem* (dancing girl press, 2015); and a co-editor of *Goddessmode* (Cool Skull Press, 2015). She also helps run the Ghosts & Projectors poetry reading series. Her graphic narratives, fiction, nonfiction, and poetry have appeared in *The Rumpus*, *Superstition Review*, *WomenArts Quarterly*, and elsewhere.

RYAN DAVID LEACK

Ryan David Leack is an English Ph.D. student at the University of California, Riverside, where he studies rhetoric, composition, 20th century American literature, and critical theory. His main interests lie in exploring the place of the university in facilitating a substantive rather than procedural democracy, in fostering critical thinking in first-year composition classrooms with critical theory, and in resisting the terror of neoliberalism by resurrecting philosophy, as Foucault says, as a way of life, an aesthetics of existence. He also hopes to find a place for the poetic imagination in his work, having been published in poetry journals such as Pif, RipRap, Contemporary World Literature, Strong Verse, and Word River, as well as in Pomona Valley Review, of which he is now the Editor-in-Chief. He lives a quiet life with his wife and daughter in Pomona seeking Thoreauvian tranquility and harmony with words.

KURISUTEIN LOPUSNAK

Kurisutein Takagi Lopusnak is a self-taught artist, born in 1980 in Tokyo, Japan. She grew up in California where she spent most of her time drawing and painting. She studied psychology and received her B.A. from the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) and her M.A. from California State University Northridge (CSUN). www.kurisutein.com

JOANNA MADLOCH

Joanna Madloch is a NJ-based photographer. She has a Doctorate in Humanities from the University of Silesia (Poland) and teaches courses in Humanities and Photography at Montclair State University in New Jersey. She is an author of a book dedicated to Joseph Brodsky's poetry and over 25 scholarly articles published in the US, Poland, and Russia. Her recent photographic work connects with her research and concentrates around the topic of seeing "the other" photographer. She is working on a book about the portrait of a photographer in fiction, a character that she interprets as an archetypal trickster and monster. She often acts as a juror at photographic contests.

JAC MANFIELD

Jac Manfield is published writer and poet living in Southern California. In addition to being a member of songwriting/production team KEPLER, he will have graduated from University of California, Riverside with a degree in Creative Writing. During his time at Riverside, he studied under the mentorship of Michael Jaime-Becerra, Charmaine Craig, and Reza Aslan.

FRANCISCO MARQUEZ

Francisco Marquez is a second-year Philosophy major at the University of California, Riverside. He is from Bell, California and His goals are to become an

optometrist in hopes of being part of the fight against retinitis pigmentosa.

PAMYLLA MARSH

I am a native Californian who has been writing almost all my life. I have written for a local newspaper in the past, but especially enjoy writing freelance short stories and poetry. I also am an avid photographer, primarily of nature and subjects of historical interest.

NICK MILNE

Nick Milne is a part-time professor in the University of Ottawa's Department of English. His work has appeared in Tin House, Slate, Canadian Literature, and the Bull Calf Review.

JOHN MIRANDA

I am a Cal Poly Pomona 3rd year undergrad student. I'm majoring in Graphic Design and have an interest in illustration and 3D art. My work has been in a few shows on campus and Pomona. My work is very reflective of the 70s. Most of my inspiration comes from old photographs of my parents and cinema. You can find more of my work on instagram: Larzaruss.

NATALIE MORALES

Natalie Morales's short stories and poems have been published in Conceit Magazine, Chiron Review, and Cornell University's Rainy Day Literary Magazine, among many

others. She is currently compiling a visual chapbook of found poetry.

JEWEL PEREYRA

My name is Jewel Pereyra and I am submitting five poems to your publication. I am a Filipina-American writer and researcher from San Diego, California. Currently, I am serving as a Peace Corps education volunteer in Banteay Meanchey, Cambodia. In the Fall, I will be attending Georgetown University as an English Literature MA Candidate and I will also be the Lannan Graduate Associate for the Lannan Center for Poetry and Social Practice.

I graduated from the University of California—Los Angeles, concentrating in American Literatures and Cultures and Women's Studies. Some of my work appears in The Columbia Journal of Literary Criticism, UC Berkeley's Vagabond: Multilingual Literary Journal and Comparative Literature Undergraduate Journal, and The California Journal of Women Writers.

LAURA PICKLESIMER

I am an MFA graduate from Cal State Long Beach. My work has been featured in Riprap, Watermark Journal and the California Current Writers Series. I live in Los Angeles and teach English and creative writing.

KIMO REDER

Kimo Reder is an Assistant Professor of English at the City University of New York's Borough of Manhattan campus. He has published work on early American utopian communities, gastrosemantics, and animistic object relations in modern verse. He is currently working on book projects that include a maxim-map of Manhattan and a collection of "rogue linguistics" taking up Wittgenstein's challenge to write a philosophy of language composed entirely of jokes. His writings have appeared in Callaloo, The Antioch Review, Transverse, Mandala, Antae, UCLA Westwind, Mantis, and Brooklyn Voice, and he has presented his work in settings ranging from the National University of Singapore and the University of Toronto to the Bowery Poetry Club, Venice's Beyond Baroque Center, and Kelly Writers House in Philadelphia.

LAILA SHIKAKI

Laila Shikaki is a twenty eight year old poet from Palestine. At the age of 6 she decided that she would grow up to be a teacher. At the age of 26 she realized that poetry was her calling. Receiving her M.F.A from Chapman University, California, Laila realizes now that she is home and teaching at a university that both of her dreams are coming true.

LAURALEE SIKORSKI

Lauralee Sikorski is a Connecticut born award winning artist currently living in the Midwest. After Art showings in Chicago,

Northwest Indiana, and Michigan she traveled to London where she was Juried into a Raw Arts Exhibition at the Candid Arts Center. Here her artwork was purchased into a private collection. She continued to show abroad in another Juried exhibition in Berlin and continued showing through out the U.S. Along with being published in National Arts and Literary Journals, earlier this year her art work was featured for the second time as a Cover for Branches Magazine now celebrating 25 years in Print! Influences: In 2004 she received her teaching certification for Hatha Yoga and has continued her training with multiple certifications including Meditation and integrates these Eastern Disciplines with the creation of art work.

RUBIA VAN ROODSELAAR

Rubia started her journey in the Arts during her teens, working as a Jewelry Designer in Brazil. She later moved to Canada and then to the United States, earning a B.A. in Architecture from UC Berkeley. She further studied Studio Arts at the College of Marin in San Francisco, at California State University Bakersfield, and at the Glassell School of Art in Houston, Texas. Her artwork has been exhibited at juried shows across the United States, and commissioned by collectors and museums alike. Her most recent solo exhibit happened at the Brazilian Consulate General of Brazil in Los Angeles, located in Beverly Hills. She works with a wide range of themes and mediums, including oil and acrylic portraits and landscapes. Her current body of work features bold, rich contrasts recalling the

faceted brilliance of gemstones and the exotic colors of the Brazilian rainforest. She lives and works in California.

VICTOR VARGAS

Victor Vargas was raised in Texas, received an undergrad degree from UT Austin, a Ph.D. in English from Claremont Grad Univ.(2013), and serves as an adjunct faculty member at Foothill-DeAnza and California College of the Arts.

RUBY VILLARRUEL

Ruby Villarruel is a UCLA alumna with a degree in English. She is from Boyle Heights and enjoys reading, updating her poetry blog, and volunteering with kids to help them improve their writing.

SAUL VILLEGAS

Saul Villegas grew up in a rural town in Avenal, California. He studied his artistic amateur style in school being oblivious to other subjects. Since his early years he found art fascinating and devoted his entire time to sketching, drawing, and painting. In middle school he found art could become a business and started to work after school hours to paint local window displays for extra cash for art supplies. After school programs kept his creative mind accelerating by exposing him with the artistic project throughout the community. As an adult, Saul continued his education studying painting at the San Francisco Art Institute. The environment of structured art gave him the direction to the style and

media that revolutionized his artistic skill. His combined skill of the traditional application of art in painting and in graphic design has been the vehicle in which Saul's creative versatility has demonstrated his intense imagery in his portfolio called MODERNO. He has utilized the label for his entire work to advocate his Latino roots through the visual arts and philanthropy.

CHARISSE WESTON

Charisse Pearlina Weston is an artist, poet, and writer. She has exhibited and/or performed in various venues including Project Row Houses, the Lawndale Art Center, and DiverseWorks, and has participated in residencies at Alabama Song Houston, Sunblossom Residency, Vermont Studio Center, Atlantic Center for the Arts (June/July 2016) and will be a Southern Constellations Fellow at the Elsewhere Museum this summer. She has received awards from the Artadia Fund for the Arts, the Santo Foundation, the Sally Hands Foundation, and the Dallas Museum of Art's Arch and Anne Giles Kimbrough Fund. Her publications include "The Red Book of Houston: A Compendium for the New Black Metropolis" (2015, self published) and "Fantasy Objects: A Book of Words and Images" with poet Ronnie Yates (2014, onestar press, Paris). She studied at the University of Edinburgh (MSc), the University of Rouen, and the University of North Texas (BA). She will be attending the University of California-Irvine as a MFA in Art candidate this Fall.

ANDRES WILSON

Andrés Amitai Wilson was named after the Spanish guru of classical guitar, Andrés Segovia. The younger Andrés was coincidentally also trained as a guitarist at the Berklee College of Music before taking up literature at Columbia University while working as a musician in New York City. A native New Englander (his maternal ancestors were the first African American family to settle a town you have never heard of, just north of Boston), Andrés is a Ph.D. Candidate in Comparative Literature at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, where he also teaches. Andrés' music, poetry, prose, and criticism have appeared widely in print, on record, and on the web. When not picking apart some abstruse theoretical statement or trying to coin one of his own, chances are quite good that you can find him going on zany adventures with his four-year-old daughter, Eden, running up or down some mountain, or breathing deeply atop his yoga mat. www.andreswilson.com

ANDREW WOODYARD

I'm a writer and artist from Southern California. I've had fiction published in Perihelion Science Fiction, Morpheus Tales, The Realms Beyond and twice in Phineas (where I've also had poetry published as well). I've also had artwork published by the Writing Disorder, Inlandia, Statement, twice in Phineas and in the Pomona Valley Review.

ALI ZNAIDI

Ali Znaidi (b.1977) lives in Redeyef, Tunisia. He is the author of several chapbooks, including *Experimental Ruminations* (Fowlpox Press, 2012), *Moon's Cloth Embroidered with Poems* (Origami Poems Project, 2012), *Bye, Donna Summer!* (Fowlpox Press, 2014), *Taste of the Edge* (Kind of a Hurricane Press, 2014), and *Mathemaku x5* (Spacecraft Press, 2015). For more, visit aliznaidi.blogspot.com



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