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Cactus Heart

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Well | Susana H. Case

Tunnels to China

Leslie Maxwell

Susan has not gotten high for three weeks. She tells herself it is no big deal. She misses it, though, the feeling of being somehow let out of her own skin. She misses the tingling under her hair, the numbing of her scalp, the relaxation of her nerves behind her eyes.

She had not planned to stop getting high. She had learned, in the six months she and John had been dating, that he did not get high. When they first started dating, she did not tell him how much she smoked. She did not want him to judge her, and besides, she told herself, it was only her business, not his. Yet when they started spending more and more time together, she thought it would be the communicative thing to do, telling him.

After she told him that she liked to get stoned, he sometimes asked her about it. The way he asked her was never accusatory: just curious, as if the thought had just occurred to him. But still, she started smoking less pot, so that she would not have to answer

his questions. She didn't like answering the questions and the way they made her think about herself.

"Oh man, I smoked my share of weed back in college," John had said when she told him. "I mean, you know, I really got baked." John laughed at an unnamed joke, as if, Susan thought, he were recalling a memory just out of reach. "I haven't really done that since college, though." He rubbed the back of her head, and Susan felt as if he were judging her though he hadn't said anything about her.

She didn't really have anything to say except that she liked it, and that it made her feel calm, but she wondered if that was enough. She didn't think "it makes me feel good" was a good enough reason—not a reason for John, but for herself. She thought, then, that she would do the easiest thing and stop getting high. It seemed like the grown-up thing to do, she thought.

She and John like watching documentaries, and one night, they rent a documentary about people living in the subway tunnels of New York. The people living there had created a small city, a microcosm in this underground darkness. They had lean-tos; they stole electricity. They drank beer. They cooked on George Foreman grills and hot plates. They had relationships, boyfriends, girlfriends, kids. Rats ran around their sofas.

Susan is fascinated by the people living in the subway tunnels. She cannot imagine giving up life as she has always known it, life with sun and air, plants and trees, and going down into the ground, into a tunnel, to carry out her life. She wonders if she would feel differently if she had no home, no bed, and that idea frightens her. She wonders how the people in the tunnel got vitamin D. She imagines the pale waxiness of their skin, the way the melanin has retreated below the epidermis. She wonders if they ever leave the tunnel, and if they do, if they are blinded by the sun when they emerge.

*

Susan has not gotten high for three months. It is not that she used to get high every day. Sometimes, she skipped a day or two, a week, even. But some days, near the end of her day working from home as a graphic designer, she would roll a small joint and sit at the kitchen table, a saucer for an ashtray.

When she'd had a roommate, years ago, they liked to sit at the kitchen table together, when they got home from work. They lived in that old apartment building then, the one with two maple trees shading the windows and cockroaches inside the cabinets and

radiators so hot that, even in the middle of winter, their windows were always open. Their neighbors played house music at top volume any hour of the day. Susan and her roommate would talk about their days as they shared a joint. They could feel the bass jump in their chests. It made Susan feel like her heart was beating double time.

*

She still thinks about getting high sometimes, when she is with John. When they rent a cabin in the North Carolina mountains for a week, she thinks about it, and how there, amid the November trees and black sky, she would like to feel the smoke warm her lungs, to feel her limbs become weightless, to feel her eyes unfocus. If she could get stoned right then, she imagines, she will see something in the stars, learn something about the world, watch Orion chase the Seven Sisters.

Days, they hike, carrying water and granola bars in their backpacks.

"Are there bears?" she says.

"Sweetie, they're hibernating." He laughs, not cruelly but as if someone has told an unfunny joke, a supportive laugh.

"Isn't this wonderful," John says as they climb over tree roots and rocks.

When they stand on top of Mount Mitchell, the highest peak east of the Mississippi, it is foggy and cold. Susan cannot even tell they are on a mountain, much less the tallest mountain on the East Coast. For all she can tell, the ground just extends out, straight out in front of her, and she could walk for miles.

Atop the mountain, John takes her hand in his, clammy from the damp air, and he lifts their joined hands over his head: victory.

Nights, they drink wine by the fire John makes in the cabin's fireplace. John grills every night: mountain trout, pork ribs, hamburgers. They read: Susan catches up on the stack of magazines she has been letting languish for the past two months. John reads a nonfiction account of the final days of World War II.

She thinks about being high when they make love that week. She remembers what it was like to be high when she made love, slowed down and sleepy but electric. Instead, she tries to focus on the way John makes her feel.

The first night after they get back to Atlanta, Susan lies in her bed, in her dark bedroom, and lets herself think about getting high, about the way it used to lift weight from her eyelids. When

she closes her eyes, she can still see the stars from the mountain sky.

*

Susan has not gotten high for seven months. Two months ago, John moved into her three-story townhouse, seeing as how, he'd said, it was so much bigger than his condo, and, of course, that they love each other.

She'd had a joint hidden inside her lingerie drawer, tucked between the molded cups of a bra she never wore. But the pot had grown old and stale, or she knew it would be, and so she throws it away one day, when John is at work. She tries to decide if she should flush it down the toilet, tie it in a plastic grocery bag and toss it in the dumpster, or bury it in the yard, next to the dead finch she'd found last spring. It had lain, lifeless, on the wooden planks outside the sliding glass door that led from the kitchen to the deck.

She imagines the bird somehow coming back to life when she buries the marijuana next to it, that maybe somehow the pot might end its pain, like a cancer patient.

She decides to flush it, and she lifts the lid of the toilet, dropping the joint in the water. The water ripples when it landed.

The paper darkens in spots like tie dye. Dark green specks appear as the paper, sealed with the lick of a tongue, comes apart.

She pushes the metal handle of the toilet and watches as the leaves spin into the whirlpool. She considers lunging for what is left of the joint, but it disappears before she finishes the thought.

When John comes home that night, she regrets her decision, wishing she had kept the joint, not to get high but more for the mere fact of having it in her possession. Somehow, if she still had it and did not smoke it, she would have control. She would not be doing this for someone else. She would have the option to get high but was choosing not to.

Getting rid of the joint has made it seem less like a choice. It makes her feel weak, as if it is all or nothing, as if she had no choice: smoke it or flush it. She misses the smell of it: woody and ancient.

Susan signs them up for a mushroom-hunting trip in Stone Mountain. Through the woods, a guide points out edible and inedible mushrooms. "Cook this one with butter," the mushroom hunter says, "and it's better than sex." No one laughs; everyone nods. Susan wants to laugh, but she decides that the other amateur hunters on the trip will think her childish. John records the guide's

instructions in a small notebook, even when the guide tells them to never go mushroom hunting without an expert. Susan wonders why he records every note when he will never need them, and she asks him, when they trail behind the guide. "Just in case," John says, and he takes her hand to hurry to catch up to the hunter. They collect a small bag of morels, which Susan sautés in butter that night.

*

Susan has not gotten high for eleven months. She is mostly used to it, now. She tells John that she loves him.

She misses the way pot makes her sleep at night.

One day, when she is supposed to be finishing a project, she goes to the zoo. She stands for a long time, longer than any other visitor that day, in front of the naked mole rats. She watches the rodents climb over and on top of others. Their pink, translucent skin sags. Their eyes are closed, Susan knows, because they are blind. Naked mole rats spend their whole lives underground, in the darkness, and so they do not need to see. She tries to imagine what would happen if one of the mole rats were to open its eyes,

to suddenly have sight, to see its surroundings at the zoo. She wonders if it would die from fright.

They are small, about the size of her palm, and she watches as they crawl through the dirt tunnels, behind the glass, that the zoo has provided them. They crawl with such speed and exaggerated movement that Susan almost finds it funny, watching one blind mole rat bump into and fumble around another.

A group of children next to Susan squeal in disgust at the mole rats. They tell each other how gross the mole rats are, hairless and puny. Susan thinks the rodents are beautiful, their tiny whiskers, the way their front teeth jut out of their small mouths, their pig-like snouts. She likes the way their loose-fitting skin bunches and wrinkles, as if they are still growing, growing into their skin.

She especially likes that the naked mole rats live in colonies. She thinks how comforting it must be to know that there is always company nearby, even if the mole rats cannot see it. She likes the idea that they are never alone.

That night, John asks her about her day, and about the project she is working on. She does not tell him about the zoo, or about the naked mole rats. She does not know how to explain it, and so she does not try.

Days later, Susan is still thinking about the naked mole rats. One morning, she goes to the public library near her house and takes the encyclopedia off the shelf. She could look it up on the computer, but she would like to feel the weight of this book, seldom used, in her hands.

From the encyclopedia, she learns that naked mole rats do not feel pain. Their skin is missing a neurotransmitter that transmits the perception of pain to the nervous system. She remembers seeing the rodents climb on top of each other, scrambling as if over mountains, and she thinks that she would like to know the feeling of pressure without pain.

*

Susan has not gotten high for fifteen months. A few months ago, she started walking every day, through her suburban neighborhood. She sees the same dogs, the same people, on walks, in their front yards. She scratches dogs behind the ears. She makes small talk with their owners.

Sometimes, she imagines asking one of the dog's owners if she could borrow the dog sometime, take it for a walk. There is one dog, in particular, called Savannah, an Australian shepherd. She would like to take Savannah for a walk and watch her herd

something. Yet Susan has never had a dog. She would not know how to manage one on a leash, how to keep up with a dog's unpredictable movements.

It has become cold again, all of a sudden, Susan thinks. When she walks now, she wears a scarf and coat. She stays busy with her copywriting projects. She makes dinner for John most nights, a hearty soup or a stew.

One evening, over a bowl of Texas-style chili, they make plans to get a Christmas tree on Saturday. John agrees to take the decorations down from the attic on Friday night. Susan agrees to write Christmas cards. She has bought John a down coat for Christmas, which he asked for. Susan has asked for a zoo membership, so that she will be able to go anytime.

The next morning, Susan is putting away a stack of shirts in one of John's drawers. When she shuts the drawer, it does not close all the way. Something is caught in the back of the drawer. Susan opens the drawer and reaches toward the back to feel what shirt or pair of socks is stuck. Instead, her hand closes over something hard and square. She wiggles the box, unsticking it from the back of the drawer. When she pulls the box, it is a small, black cardboard box that fits in the palm of her hand. She takes

the small lid off the top, and she finds a small, black velvet jewelry box inside. Her heart thuds in her chest, so loud she can hear it.

She shakes the velvet box out of the cardboard one. She opens the hinged lid of the velvety box, and she sees a diamond solitaire ring, white gold, princess cut. She snaps the lid closed, puts the lid back on the cardboard box, throws the box in the back of the drawer, and tries to close the drawer. Her mind whirls, as she thinks about John proposing to her. She tries to imagine him, down on one knee, asking her to marry him. She tries to imagine why he wants to marry her. She tries to imagine what she will say. She thinks he will ask her at the Christmas light display at the botanical gardens. They made plans to go there on Friday night.

She looks down and realizes that the drawer did not close all the way. She opens it again and replaces the box more precisely, so John will not know she has seen it. She closes the drawer. She thinks she can see the box through the dresser, through the wood drawer, as if it is glowing inside the chest.

She turns away from the dresser so she will not see its glow, and she sees her tennis shoes, lined up in front of her closet. She will go for a walk.

She does not lock the door behind her. The Atlanta sky is gray and flat. The cold makes vivid her exposed cheeks. As she walks,

she feels the wind move through her hair, picking up pieces and putting them back down. She feels the cold touch her scalp.

She hopes that someone will break into her house while she is gone and steal the ring. She regrets hoping for that.

A dog barks nearby. She walks toward the sound of the dog barking. Susan stiffens her elbows against her ribs and digs her hands deeper into her pockets, as though the pockets of her wool coat are endless tunnels, the tunnels to China she tried to dig when she was a little girl.

She sees Savannah in her yard, but Savannah's owner is not nearby. Savannah barks, a greeting. She remembers Susan. Savannah's leash is looped around the iron stair rail leading to the front door. The front door is closed. Her owner has gone inside: a phone call, perhaps.

Susan sees no movement through the decorative glass windows at the front of the house. She walks to the steps and unloops Savannah's leash from the wrought iron. Because Savannah knows her, she is happy and eager to follow.

With Savannah's leash around her wrist, Susan runs, out of the yard and down the street. She does not usually run, and she breathes hard. Under her jeans, her knees do not bend easily. She can feel the cold air pierce the denim. Goosebumps rise on her thighs.

Susan runs, ignoring the dryness of her throat, the stitch under her ribcage. When she exhales, she can see her breath for just a second before she runs past it. For a second, she thinks it is smoke.

Nothing keeps

Lauren Hall

unless we bury it in tombs of salt. We live in glass houses filled with salt, pet white salt mice under a salt-edged sky, pray for hurricanes that crack and bleed oceans of salt. We are hard, clean, preserved for centuries. Then, on a Tuesday, Mr. Jacobs arrives with the mail. It crumbles to salt in his hands. *Now we'll never know*, he says. What we know: the half-life of the sodium sun, the salted corner of a blue sofa, that little dog standing on salt legs.

My Mother's Lipstick

Deborah A. Lott

I'm standing behind the cypress bush in our side yard, squeezed in between the bush and the water outlet. Hiding. If I move forward even a little, the cypress branches scratch my arms, and if I move back, the water outlet digs into my back. The sharp scent of chlorophyll from the bush fills my nose. I'm trapped. I've trapped myself. In my hand, I clutch my mother's lipstick. I'm clenching it so tightly that my hand sweats around the tube. It is my mother's only lipstick housed in a gold-toned container that she refills yearly with another stick of the same color. Always the same color: *Love that Red.* Part of her daily uniform. And only I know that the once pointed tip of that tube, hiding inside the gold case, as I am hiding in this tight corner, is now smooshed.

A few minutes ago, I watched my mother put on her lipstick, pursing her lips in front of the bathroom mirror, the lipstick scarlet against her alabaster skin. She stepped back and examined herself in the mirror, but took no pleasure in her reflection; vanity is for other women, she says. Lipstick is the only color on her

face, the only make-up she wears. Mascara gives her a migraine. So her hazelly green eyes always look undefined, innocent behind her glasses. My mother's lipstick smells of roses and wax. I am allergic to its scent, so as I watched her put it on, my upper palate itched and I had to scratch it with the back of my tongue. If I tried to kiss my mother now, I would sneeze.

My mother puts on her lipstick when she is about to leave the house, and today it means that *we* are about to leave the house. The lipstick demarcates the private, chaotic world of our family from the public world outside where she must be "presentable." Presentable at the market, the post office, the bakery, the bank. And the pediatrician's office, to which she has to venture more often than she would like, to attend to my stomachaches, allergic rashes, and other afflictions—all inherited from my father.

Today, after my mother walked out of the bathroom, I snatched her lipstick and smeared it over the front of my blue corduroy jumpsuit. In the process, I broke its pointed tip. I did not mean to break it—or so I tell myself. My intention was only to make a mark on myself, in the belief that making myself "unpresentable" would prevent my mother's taking me to get a polio shot. That is where I believe we are going, although that's not what my mother said.

Polio shots come in a series. I can't keep track of the number; it just seems as if they come without warning and will never stop. Worse, we have to wait in line at the pediatrician's night clinic to get one, where I hear the brief yelp of each child, a pause, muffled conversation, and then another yelp. Children emerge wiping their teary eyes, mollified by the red balloons they carry. I am not so easily placated. I do not just cry wanly, I scream. First in protest, as I buck and fight and kick. Then as the shot is delivered, and afterward at the affront of it all. The betrayal. The moment of greatest dread comes when the nurse lays my arm bare and dabs it with cold alcohol, whose pungency enters my nostrils an instant before the needle punctures my arm. It is that moment of forced exposure I hate most.

The last time my mother took me to get a polio shot, she lied. In the car, on our way to the clinic, she would not tell me where we were going. She made our journey into a guessing game, my nine-year-old brother, Paul, in the back seat playing along.

"Where do you think we're going?" she teased. It was only when we rode over the ancient bridge, which led to only one place, that the inevitability of our destination became clear.

"To get a polio shot?" I wailed. From the backseat, my brother Paul laughed. My mother laughed too. A collusion. I could have forgiven the lie, perhaps, but not the collusion.

She excused her deception afterward by saying there was no reason to tell me ahead of time and only incite "carrying on" that she would have to endure all the way to the doctor's office. Instead, although her evasion upped the amplitude of my hysteria, it limited it to the last fifteen minutes of the ride. But the lie is what stuck: no matter how many times she has told me the truth since, the lie is what stuck.

Today my mother has told me that we are going to the store to buy me a new tricycle because my knees are hitting the handlebars of my old one and the metal has rusted from being left out in the rain. I inherited the tricycle from my brother, so the prospect of getting a brand new tricycle of my own should make me happy. The problem is I don't believe my mother's story. I consider it too good to be true, a ruse to get me into the car so she can take me to get a polio shot. And maybe my ongoing suspiciousness is my way of getting back at her, of letting her know the schism between us has deepened and that I will never forgive the lie.

I tell myself that the lipstick's broken tip was an accident, that my intention was only to mar myself, because it is my marred state—spilled food, vomit spewed onto clothing, poster paint accidentally dripped—that makes me, in my mother's eyes, most unpresentable to the world. It is my messiness, my scene-making that causes other mothers to ask with their eyes why she cannot

control her own daughter, and so shames her. And yet I have done more than mess my own clothing; in anger I have destroyed something of hers.

I have committed this act impulsively, but as soon as I see the floridness of the red on my clothing, the way the lipstick has insinuated itself into the fabric, a bloody taint on the blue, I realize how seriously I have miscalculated its effects. I feel sorry for the jumpsuit that I love. I grieve my mother's ruined lipstick as if it is part of her body. I realize that my action is likely to incur my mother's wrath, to culminate in a spanking that will rival the shot in its quotient of physical pain. And her sadness will feel even worse than her teasing.

All this has brought me to this hiding place in the bushes where nothing can be seen, not the broken lipstick clenched in my fist, not the stain I have made on my clothing, not the shame and fear that now inhabit me. Maybe I realize that eventually she will find me or I will have to come out; maybe I realize that I do not have the power to reverse the outcome of my actions, only to delay it. That is often the only power I have as a child. And just maybe if my mother cannot find me, she will assume I've been kidnapped, and then she will be so relieved when she finds me safe that her relief will overwhelm her anger. I've seen stories like this on TV.

I am hiding with the same instinct for delay that makes me put my hand over my bottom as she chases me around the kitchen or down the hallway trying to spank me. If I really think about it, I know she will succeed in grabbing me and, with her far more powerful arm, moving my hand away. And yet I keep placing my hand over my bottom to protect it. I hold my hand over my bottom; she removes it. I replace it; she removes it; I replace it. Remove, replace, remove, replace, in a slapstick dance.

As with many of my impulsive actions, what I see in my head is very different once made concrete in the outside world. There was the day I thought I would decorate the walls of my brothers' bedroom with drawings of spiders. I had a picture in my head of how splendid they would look, their webs stretching from wall to ceiling, their faces beaming in the center of their webs. Of course, I could not reach the ceiling; by standing on my brother's bed, crayon in hand, I could only draw a messy approximation of what was in my head. The crayon smeared, the webs wobbled. Still I held onto the fantasy of their beauty up until the moment my mother saw them and began to rage. Only when I felt her hand wrenching my arm and dragging me off the bed did I realize just how grossly I had miscalculated. After my spanking, I lay in my bed across the hall, dejected, listening to my mother with a bucket

and brush, relentlessly scrubbing the wall, each stroke of her arm erasing me.

Did I give myself up or was I found?

I can't remember. My memory flashes forward to the back wall of the bicycle shop, its bikes displayed in racks, and then the salesman releasing from the rack above, my new trike. It is fire engine red, with multi-colored streamers coming out of its handlebars. I will ride that trike around and around our back patio until my knees begin to hit its handlebars, and those streamers grow gray and dingy and disintegrate.

Ten years later, I am fifteen, subsumed by depression and frustration, and my mother, at fifty, is rocked by menopause and my father's mental decline. I want her to somehow magically release me from a high school, a community, where I do not fit in, where I believe that every other student regards me as hopelessly marred.

In the midst of our warfare, I lock myself in her bathroom, trapped, trapping myself. I take her eyebrow pencil (she has enlarged her make up wardrobe with a few more items) and as I once drew spiders, I now draw ugly thick black lines on her tile countertop, on her mirror, cross-hatches of negation. I take her

lipstick (still *Love that Red*) and make angry graffiti of discontent all over her mirror—the mirror in which neither of us can see the other in her own image.

I pick up her razor and contemplate its sharp edge, hold it next to my wrist, considering. What if I cut my body, despoiled her bathroom with my blood—would she be sorry then? Would they all be sorry then? My mother rushes to clean the toilet if even a spot of menstrual blood is left on the underside of the seat. "Your brother might see," she says, ashamed, shaming. I lack the will to cut myself; I am still averse to any physical pain, to any puncture of my delicate flesh. What else could I cut with this razor? I look around the room but I am afraid to do anything irreversible, anything whose outcome could be worse than I can imagine.

This bathroom is my mother's only sanctum, the one room in our house she can keep pristine, and I vow to destroy it. I do so in a mad heat, screaming and panting and groaning as I paint my fury all over. But not the walls; I learned my lesson about walls. And then, after I have expressed the ugliness I feel inside, after I have pounded on the door with her hairbrush to make an unholy racket, and she has threatened to call the police, and I have goaded her to go ahead—after I have sobbed and cursed, trying to reach her, trying to force her to take in what I have done—I hear

her on the other side of the door, weeping as she ignores me. She will not look, she says, she will not see.

Once my hysteria is spent, once I know I have succeeded in wounding her, I emerge from my frenzy as if waking from a nightmare, and regard the room through her eyes. As it is between mothers and daughters, even mothers and daughters who do not get along, who do not understand one another, our selves have become inextricable: to harm myself is to hurt her, and to hurt her is to harm myself. Shamed by what has come out of me, I scrub every surface, every corner, relentlessly erasing every mark.

I clean her bathroom until it sparkles, even the underside of the toilet seat. I render it even more pristine than it was before I attacked it. We reach a weary détente. She enters the room tentatively, reclaims it, praises the result. But we never quite find our way to an unmitigated expression of love.

Prognosis

Kathryn Merwin

Patient Information: Almost woman, 20 years old. Skin resembling crushed nutmeg. Wearing father's pea coat.

Guardian/Next of Kin: Said only, "You can leave a voicemail. She won't answer the phone."

Symptoms: Fevered dreams. Cold sweats. Hallucinations. Feeling shelled.

Medical History: A pattern of leaving faucets leaking, undercooking chicken, letting the pipes freeze. Never been good at public speaking. Sleeps with Christmas CDs spinning in a warped blue boombox. Has a scar above right eye left by a man who said he wanted to carve something beautiful from something stone.

Recommended Course of Action: Avoid salt. It tends to burn the sores under your tongue you've forgotten haven't healed yet. Drink lots of water. If you don't like regular water, you can substitute with the flavored kind. There are lots of things you can substitute. A boy with skin like Mediterranean tile for your father. Dark, full-bodied wine for the hollow feeling just under your clavicle. Coral pink lipstick for a chapped, wind-bitten lip. A kettle of mint tea for the hot breath of a stranger. A hammock taut between the newel post and the armoire for your husband in a king-sized bed.

Allergies: Beestings. Celery green eyes. Girls named "Roseanna." The way the skin beneath your mother's eyes bloats like dough that hasn't been kneaded when you tell her you are moving to Canada to live with a forty-year-old rock star. She thought you were getting better.

Prescription: Focus only on inhaling and exhaling for five minutes each hour, from the time you wake to the time you retire. Leave your city apartment by fire-escape and move to a houseboat. The sea air will help widen your deflated-balloon lungs. Remember, a lot can happen within five minutes. A baby can be born. A trigger can be pulled. Your father can pack everything he owns into a trunk with black metal handles.

Funeral Arrangements: Prefers a sky burial. Would like to be laid to rest on the bough of a cherry tree, like Anne of Green Gables. Do not resuscitate.

Prognosis: You don't have to believe it. Will heal with time.

-TARI to –TATTE :
A lonely little love poem (found)

Art Allen

Transformed from suffix examples in a Handbook of Japanese Grammar by H.G. Henderson published in 1945

Yoyo-taru Hojo Gaden	The immensely wide Hojo Garden.
Ame furitari	Rain has fallen.
Hana wa migoro wa sugitaree domo nao shichibun no nioi ari	Though the blossoms are past their glory most of their beauty still remains.
Tazune-kikitaki koto ari	There are things which I wish to ask.
Mo ikimashitaro	I suppose he has already gone.
Yukitakariki	(He) wished to go.
Shojotaru tokoro da	It's an empty and lonely place.
Ware mo yukitashi	I too wish to go.
Na wa ie tatte (to itte mo) sonna hito wa arimasen	You ask me to tell you his name, but there is no such person.

The Man on the Edge of Sunshine

Nils Wolfcale

Not being a man accustomed to thinking such things into words, he was distracted at his inability to express to himself, what it was he could hear in the whistle of the breeze through something, a quivering scrap of jagged chrome, or the power lines overhead. It was in the soft clatter of the weeds in the ditch as well; sounds revealed as the roar of her engine faded away.

Like bees, drunk among spring flowers, since they had met, the air had seemed filled with a frantic ambient buzzing, not drowning out, but dampening other noise. Now suddenly, as though his hearing had been sharpened with the grind of her tires in the gravel, he noticed the sharp edges of sound as it reached him through the chill, crystalline air.

In the car they hadn't spoken—which should not have been unusual for a Monday—but there was distance too, as though the intervening air had been a corporeal thing. It had started the

evening before as he'd grown quiet and she'd pestered him with questions, and gotten on his nerves a little, for the first time, really. Now, detecting a frailer, distant sound as the crusher reduced the junked cars to pancakes, he turned, the scrap of paper with the address still in his hand.

The building before him was a squat affair of cinder block and white scabbing paint, an open truck bay yawning, and a yard behind contained within a chain fence. A fraying tarpaulin was stretched across the links yet he could see in the distance, stacks of cars above strands of barbed wire that sagged like washing lines. Looking up, he squinted and read, "Edison's Scrap and Salvage," painted above the door.

Lowering his eyes again, they remained screwed tightly down against the brightness of the sun off the painted block, causing everything, the building and the yard beyond, to appear strangely flat. But then he saw a glimmer of light within the darkness of the open bay. Raising a hand to his brow, he shaded his eyes. It was there again, and then gone, but for an instant it provided a peculiar effect as though the darkness alone possessed that third dimension, reaching backward a great distance, cave-like, from the face of the world. For a moment he remained, bemused by the trick. Until he saw the light a third time, a glimmer within the

blackness, like sparklers in the night of a childhood Fourth of July, exacerbating still the illusion of depth.

The smell of bearing grease reached him then. Loosing a crashing rubble of memories, it ushered a sinking feeling, and although he was a man unused to entertaining such nuisances, he muttered, "Never say never."

Starting toward the building then, he saw the glimmer of light once more, and stepping through the open bay, made out the arc of a welder. Like water in moonlight it burst and cascaded, and now the figure that held the implement was illuminated.

Pausing a moment for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, he called out,"Howdie."

He had raised his voice, but it was not enough to be heard over the urgent rush of the torch and the sputter of pneumatic tools.

"Howdie," he hollered again, louder.

The man, looking up, raised his visor.

"I'm looking for Kevin."

"In back," the man hollered back, and indicated with his chin.

Following the gesture, he started, past engine blocks, piles of gears, and tangles of muffler pipes. Cars on hoists seemed to hover in the air, and other men, blinking up, regarded him, the whites of their eyes shiny in the glow of grease-fouled bulbs.

As he went, the fume-laden air was thick in his nostrils and caught in his throat. And the noise, the drone of compressors, and scream of grinding tools, the clank of hammers and air wrenches like automatic gunfire, melded into a single frenetic din. As this was his milieu, the sound had always been familiar to him, so common as to have gone unnoticed, perhaps even comforting in its familiarity. But now suddenly it seemed to reverberate within him, driving him outside of himself, and distracting him although understanding was again reticent to coalesce into words. It was as though he had rubbed up against something, only recently… or rather maybe something had rubbed up against him, worn something off, like a tarnish, to leave him brightly exposed; or a protective layer, scraped off, the accretion having occurred so slowly that he only noticed it now in its absence. At the back of the shop, a door was open and light spilled from it out onto the floor.

At the threshold he stopped and took in the room as he called out his greeting again. Dinged filing cabinets and swollen journals lined the walls, a smudged calendar, a naked woman reclining on the hood of a car.

A man sat at a small desk, coffee in a styrofoam cup and a doughnut in hand, a magazine was spread out before him. Glancing up, he returned to his business.

"I'm Jerry, the new guy."

Jerry extended his hand, and the man seated at the desk stuck his out without leaving his magazine.

Jerry looked at the hand as it hung in the air. Then he stooped and grasped it, and in his grip, the hand was warm but dead, like a glove filled with sawdust on the end of a stick. Jerry released it and it fell away.

"I'm the new guy," Jerry repeated.

"Heard you the first time," Kevin said, still not having left his magazine.

Jerry waited for a moment, and then turned and looked behind him. Expansively he took in the shop. Familiarity was strangely set askew, the vantage of observer foreign to him, and the trick of depth turned inside out as now the sunshine and the world seemed far away.

"Don't just stand there for Christ's sake, come on," Kevin said, as he brushed past Jerry. "Sent me another Goddamn idiot," he added, as he started through the shop. "Hope you can pull parts, at least."

Hesitating, Jerry watched the man move a few steps away from him, and then followed.

*

The others left at the end of the day; five others all together. They wandered out, blinking into the blue air, and shuffling to their cars, parked out on the road, got in and drove away. Searching his pockets, Jerry followed until, feeling warmth on his back, he stopped.

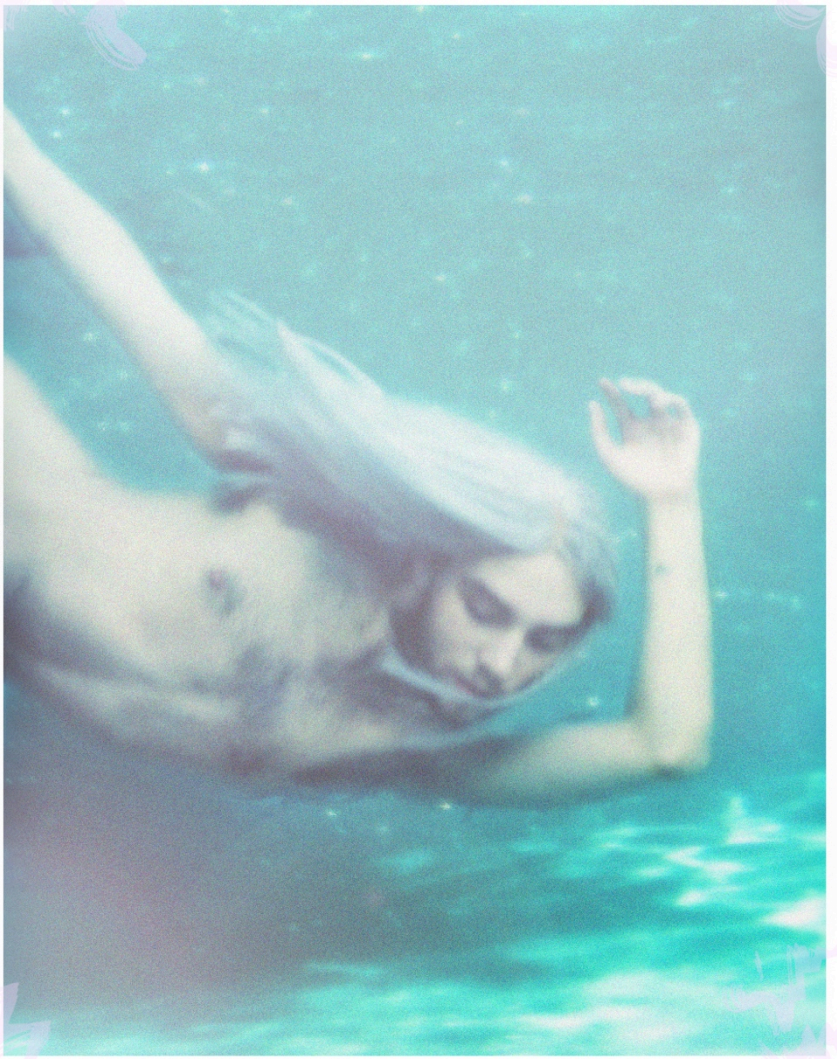
Turning, he closed his eyes, and raising his face to the sun, breathed in the fresh air and waited for the ringing in his ears to recede. When it did, he noticed again the breeze and the soft clatter of the weeds in the ditch, and remembering the morning, wondered again at what it was he had heard contained therein.

Opening his eyes then, Jerry found the shop before him again. The truck bay door had not yet been rolled down, and with the sun behind the building now, it remained dark within. But the optical illusion, the strange depth afforded the darkness was gone. Still Jerry remained, listening to the breeze, and thinking about the trick of the light.

And then he thought about the girl. She'd been with him all day, he realized, a little thing, like a smooth stone he'd once carried in his pocket. Or rather perhaps like a string, rolled into a ball, a single strand he'd paid out; unraveled behind him as he'd entered that morning, and followed back out again.

Still peering into the gloom, he raised a hand to shade his brow, and found a slivered outline as lamplight strained through

the seams of the closed office door. For a moment it was complete, and then movement behind the door interrupted the entirety of the rectangle. Another moment Jerry lingered, watching, and then turning, began to hurry as he resumed the search of his pockets, for another scrap of paper now, the one on which she had written down the numbers of the buses he would need to take to get home.



Comus | Sia Hyrula

6.3 | Sia Hyrula

Forced Reps

Gustavo Hernandez

Body building
Adobe unevenly
Piled
Blueprints sweating inaccuracy

Rounded I'm clear.

Loose, padded tourist
Along these dense giants
Brick broad temples
Flat white storefronts

Rounded I'm clear. They do not want me.

Flex and contract in a thundercloud
Pulley, iron, vinyl desert
Nimbus musk
Subjugating.
Is it important to know the pressure?
Know how much is outside?
Match it?

Rounded I'm clear and the strobes go right through me.

Submit a writ to that within you
Blending helix
Stacks of code, erect.
Ancestors arrived on spectral tread

The Aztec warrior
I bring him forward
The Spanish shopkeeper
Ledger clutched, he's whispering
Quietly cheering him on

O
    Grunt
Lord
    Heave
Please
        Lift

Disappointing the Buddha

Gregg J. Orifici

I was the new kid in the Buddha's third-grade class. My family had just moved to central Long Island the summer of '73, and I had already sweated with him at the nearby tennis camp where he gave lessons. On the court, Mr. Budah referred to himself in the third person: "Remember, the Budah says," he would advise, "keep your knees bent and head down," as if the universe—the all-knowing Buddha himself—not just my tennis coach, wanted me to swing through my backhand.

People listened to the Buddha. He was calm and serene and confident—a natural teacher. He had a deep voice, big hands, and strong arms that he would wrap around you, moving your weaker ones into position, helping you power through the ball. I heard the other kids' mothers talk about how attractive he was—"silver foxy," one mom called him. So I checked out his thick, black, curly hair speckled with gray, and noticed his muscular legs clad in the shortest of shorts, and considered him, imagined him, the way the moms saw him. I liked the idea that my coach was a fox, and,

when he turned out also to be my elementary school teacher, I was proud that he already knew and liked me.

At the beginning of the school year the Buddha took me under his wing. He encouraged me to play kickball and dodgeball at recess, making me captain, or pairing me off with other boys to practice writing or do art projects. In this way, I became friendly with Deano, the other tall guy in the class and also the most popular.

Buddha had a "no fighting" code that all us kids had to follow. He believed we should always be able to talk things out and that fighting never achieved anything. When fights invariably did break out—over stolen snacks or a wedgie, or even a friendly noogie—he gave out detentions liberally. There was nothing I wanted to do more than please the Buddha, to make him proud, but even at eight years old, we boys were already jockeying for popularity and the attention of girls. I quickly realized that being a teacher's pet was not the best way to make friends or get the girl.

There were three girls, all -annes or -ennes, who were considered foxes in my class: Dianne, Jillanne, and Laurenne. Dianne, a gymnast, would obsessively, it seemed to me, do one-handed cartwheels and backbends every free moment. Laurenne was kind of frail, but blonde and smart and pretty. Jillanne had long, black, greasy hair and not-so-straight teeth, but she was cool,

easy to talk to, and one of the best kickball players, boy or girl, on the playground. I decided to focus on Jillanne.

I started sitting next to her on the bus and tried to be on the same team as her at recess. Unfortunately, Deano seemed to have the very same idea. We started shoving each other around on the bus for rights to sit next to her. Jillanne, no dummy, played us off each other. Sometimes she would allow me the privilege, sometimes Deano. We became more like competitors than friends, and although I didn't want that, I felt like I had to prioritize. If he won Jillanne's affections, they'd always be together and I'd lose her *and* my friend. Better to have Jillanne and try to make time for Deano on the side, I thought. He'd be jealous, and maybe mad, but there were big popularity points for me in that, too.

Sometimes Jillanne wouldn't let either of us sit beside her, and Deano and I would be forced then to share a seat, shoving our knees against each other to get more room, creating a wall between us with our books, muttering at each other:

"She's mine. Butt out, Deano."

"Get lost. She feels sorry for you."

"You're a loser. Why would she like you?"

"You wanna fight about it, douche bag?"

In this way we ended up fighting with each other, later, on the classroom floor, when the Buddha was called away for a few minutes. We rolled around, grabbing shoulders and arms, jumping up and pushing the other down as soon as one of us managed to get up, squeezing each other's chests and abdomens so tightly we could barely breathe, as we bumped from desk to desk. Everyone except the three popular girls cheered us on.

At one point while I was on top I noticed how big and maroon Deano's lips were. Then I had this really unexpected and super inappropriate idea that it would be interesting to know what they tasted like. It was one of those moments that seem to focus in and linger like a close-up, while the rest of the world blurs out. I heard the crowd cheering as if from a distant place, and could no longer hear Deano's grunting and swearing. I just saw his lips moving in intriguing ways. I also felt how his arm and stomach muscles strained against me; it reminded me a little of tennis camp, with the Buddha holding my arms from behind and demonstrating proper form. But this was even closer, and with higher stakes. Even as my arms and legs were flexing to respond to Deano's escape moves, I somehow found time to assess the shape of him, the roundness of his shoulders and the way his chest flared out from his waist, and realized, like a slap, that I liked it, that I liked being close to him. That I liked touching him.

These were inconvenient thoughts just at that moment, destabilizing even. They reminded me of moments I hadn't connected before. Encounters that felt good but that I had pushed aside, like sitting tight together with the team in the dugout during a Little League game or helping another boy arrange his uniform and badges for a special Cub Scout meeting.

Deano managed to push me off him. He was about to get on top when the Buddha came back and the crowd silenced and all I heard was his booming voice.

"Five days, no recess" was serious punishment. A whole week stuck inside. The first few days, Buddha had us cleaning the classroom, other teachers' classrooms, even the sinks in the boys' bathroom. I was actually grateful for a timeout from the pressures of the playground, glad for the quiet time to think. We had to apologize to each other, and we had to work together. No punishment for me. It gave me the chance to study the boy who made me feel strange.

We started to become friends again, alone with no one else around. Deano was actually a nice kid. Sometimes our arms would touch when we were cleaning and he would move away, or give me a friendly shove and tell me to go clean over there, that I was crowding his space. I had no reply to this, except to move away, hiding the hurt and my growing frustration that I couldn't just

reach out and touch him. I wanted to tell Deano that it was okay, that it felt good, that we could be special friends and didn't need Jillanne. *But what if he didn't feel the same way?* I accidently touched him again, brushing his shoulder with mine. And he reacted the same way. A crushing thought occurred to me then, like a dodgeball hit dead to the gut, that I couldn't risk telling him how I felt. He might blab to everyone. And I'd be the class freak.

I knew then that my feelings were shameful, that there was something wrong with who I was and what I wanted, and that the only thing I could do was hide it and pretend it wasn't there. This was a lot to stomach, all at once, and I tried to imagine sucking it in, burying how I felt—*but for how long? Forever?!* The impossibility of this was like an empty stomach, deep and hollow, and I rebelled. I didn't want to disappoint the Buddha, but surely this was no longer a time for talking. It was a time for action:

"I won, you know. I had you down, you loser. Jillanne is mine."

Out of nowhere, it must have seemed to Deano, I instigated another fight. I kept gibing him, trying to bruise his ego. Then, determined to get him to react, I shoved him against the blackboard we were cleaning. Finally I got what I wanted—he shoved me back. In no time, we were wrapped around each other, trying to force the other down, and making a racket. And this time

I was determined to pay attention to the way he felt, the smallest details, and the way I felt being so close to him. I wanted to be sure.

I didn't protest nearly as hard as I should have when Deano straddled my chest and pinned my arms with his knees. "You can't take me. You're the loser. I've got you now," he jeered. He had this triumphant look on his face that was kinda foxy and powerful, like the Buddha when he hit a winner and pumped his arms in victory. I wanted to stay that way and take my fill of this intriguing boy, the new center of my world. But I knew I needed to struggle and fight back. I pushed him off me, and we were back to squeezing the life out of each other by the time the Buddha arrived and pulled us apart. He took me aside. He said he was surprised that a nice boy like me was such a troublemaker.

"What's wrong, Gregg? This behavior is really disappointing. You can talk to me. I want to help you, buddy," he said, trying to get to the root of things like the good teacher Buddha was. "You're a good student, and a good kid, I know you are. It's not easy to adjust to a new school, with new classmates..."

"It's not that," I said. Part of me was proud to be a troublemaker and not a teacher's pet, even if it meant disappointing the one adult in my life who seemed to know even remotely what was going on with me. What did my parents know

of any of the social pressures and romantic jockeying that was beginning to take charge of my life? How could I even begin to tell them? I also started to feel bad about alienating Deano just to touch him.

The Buddha put his hand on my shoulder as I stood there, arms crossed and silent. When I looked up into his kind eyes, waiting patiently, trying to understand, I felt ashamed and even more confused. His hand felt good on my shoulder, like at tennis camp, but in a different way. He wore a fitted button-down shirt with a blue bowtie, which seemed so out of place with the muscles of his chest that I noticed his body all the more. I smelled his cologne. Like when I was on top of Deano, the same disorienting sensation came over me, and it dawned on me that this thing I was feeling, whatever it was, was bigger than Deano. I wanted to be close to the Buddha, too.

I started to cry, realizing that what I wanted, what I was attracted to, was something about boys in general and out of my control. Certainly there was no one else out there like me—no other boy who wanted to be special friends with a boy in his class or on his Little League team. Or, *oh my God,* with his foxy third grade teacher.

I felt the fight go out of me. I wanted to crawl into the Buddha's arms and let go of all the too-heavy things I was holding on to, and tell him everything.

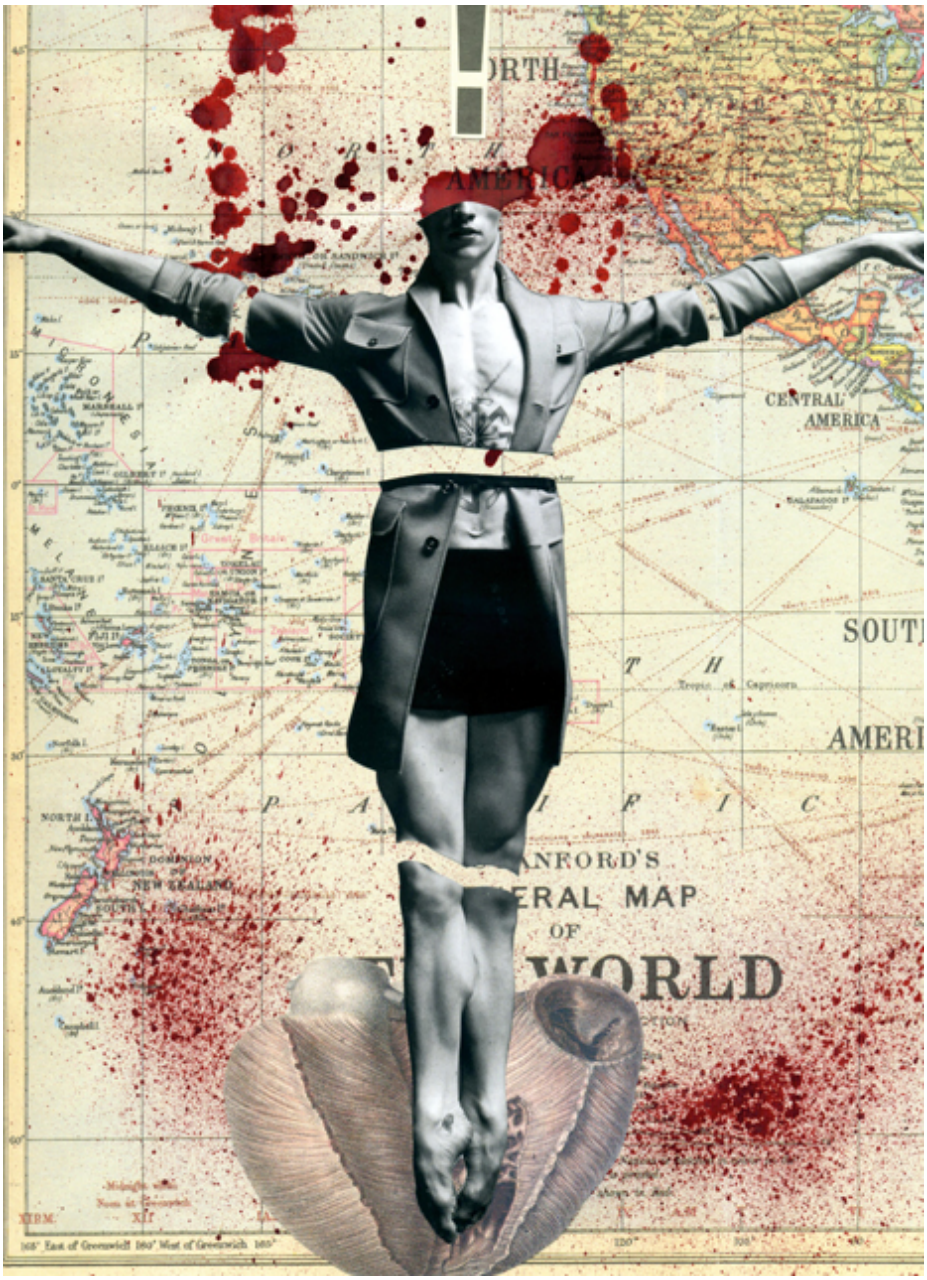
"I'm sorry," was all that I managed.

Outside the House with the Broken Windows

Dorsey Craft

His brother's bike had come over the hill
like a comic book punch, metal handle bar
like an exclamation point crashed
through the boy's mouth. His hair brushing
against the passenger side window, he tongues
gum where a grown-up tooth grew this morning,
tasting blood from the tear in his lip that leads
up to his nose. His brother stopped the car outside
a house with broken windows. *Stay here,* he said.
I'll only be a minute. White dots of sun are sketched
inside the boy's eyelids, a summer fever like dirt
and glass. He imagines his brother appearing
in the side view mirror, tall on the porch steps,
eyes soft like a dog's. Instead, the mirror
makes the boy a new face, a boy with scars,
who fights in hallways when a shoulder bumps him,
who draws only in his mind, outlining the shape
of a mountain on the outskirts of a town,
shading the sun on his stepsister's hair,
rounding the cherries on a tree in his yard,
panels on a page that only he can see.

Broken Egg | Óscar Varona



Irreal | Óscar Varona

Se rompe | Óscar Varona

Thicker Skin

Kevin Richard White

When she was biting my neck, I thought of the time that I wasn't allowed on the merry-go-round because I was too tall. Maybe it was the feeling of her teeth that I likened to the rejection, maybe it was our sweat that made me think of my own sweat that hot day at the carnival. She tried to draw blood but I pushed her away. I wasn't into blood during sex yet. I don't think I ever would be, but she slackened, and nibbled slightly, kissing the mark afterwards, her way of saying sorry. I looked at her but she started to move down to my chest. I remember the white horse with the chipped-paint eyeballs, the burning feeling of standing there and having the carny tell me, are you kidding me, dude? I was barely thirteen, but I guess that's more than enough reason for some people.

She asked me if I was alright.

I said yes.

She said, do you want to try candle wax?

I said I would try anything once, except blood.

She nodded and got up, went to the dresser, lit a candle, waited. Her bony, off-white back, her short haircut, the veins visible, the skin glistening, all from me, from a desire of something new.

I remember staring at the carny and balling up a bony fist but knowing full damn well I wouldn't strike him. I remember him sneering. He reeked of cigars. He said, keep going, there's other people in line.

I heard her say something but I did not ask her what she said. I rubbed my neck, numb from her love. I guess it wasn't too bad. But I didn't want to wake up the next morning hurt. Maybe a little sore. Enough to make me know I wasn't in some weird dream, that I was really alive, that I was in this with her, doing this with her, finally, even after I had to wait all those years for her engagement with my brother to end.

She came back with the candle, ready to drip. I closed my eyes, did not want to see it fall.

When the wax hit my neck, I thought back to the horse, its old, ordinary mouth teeming with splinters and bugs, begging for a rider. I went up to it and the carny grabbed my arm.

Don't wince, she said, it's alright.

I remember seeing the carny grow tough, mangy, like this was his own shooting range. I shook him off and got on the horse.

She let the wax harden on my neck and I felt her kiss my cheek, her perfume encircle me again, like it did all those times at Christmas parties in front of me, telling me that my turn would come right after my brother, to wait, that I would become next.

The carny said, get the hell off there. I kicked him in the shoulder as I grabbed the invisible reins. I struck him after all, I had to. I remember the sun beating on my acne. I remember thinking that this would get me in trouble.

She picked the wax off, rolled it into an orange ball and set it on the bedside table. She said, do you want to try it again?

I said, let me try it on you. She was eager.

The carny regained his composure and grabbed me around the waist like he was going to suplex me to the dirt. The music started up, the creaky organ wailing its creed in the sharp sunlit air, its sprawl spilling out to all others there. Hey, I said to myself. I'm young again. The carny tightened his grip and we began to revolve.

She was on her back now, clutching the sheets, anticipating the pain. I took the candle and I let it drip onto her chest. Her muscles tightened. I didn't realize I was licking my lips. It was a messy divorce for them both, which is why I'm here. She asked for me to do it again. I said I didn't want to burn her. She said, who cares. There was no point in caring, really.

The carny screamed to the operator to stop and out of the corner of my eye, a blurred form appeared, a man, security. I told them one more minute, I'm young again, damn it. The carny lifted me off the horse and he nearly dropped me and I almost hit my head on the horse next to me. I remember the kid on that horse screaming. I said, it's all good, they're trying to stop us before we hit full potential. The acne on my face hurt. I felt security climb on and he smelt of cotton candy.

I let it drip on her ribs, the tiny flame so close to my hand it was singeing my knuckles. I set the candle down in a glass holder and I kissed her as she murmured the pain she needed to murmur for years, never close to this pain ever, needing to have it in order to have more. I was glad I could help, but I began to think I wasn't doing this right. I wondered why our first time couldn't be normal, by the numbers. But I needed to stop thinking because it wasn't proper. We were both into growing thicker skin, so there was no better way by making a scar or two.

They both got me off the merry-go-round and I may have elbowed one of them by accident because I smelled blood, saw it on my t-shirt afterwards. They picked me up and threw me as far as they could, the carny sneering, the security wannabe growling because I tested his mettle, or lack thereof. They told me to leave.

I pointed back at the horse and told them that they needed to paint it.

We kept kissing and I finally had a chance to consummate now, going somewhere finally, let alone to my own devices, and I made my chance count. She slipped up, said my brother's name, but there was nothing a bite on the neck couldn't fix. She fell back into where she wanted to be, and we finished rather quickly, but it didn't matter really. She told me she loved me, which I'm pretty sure was her moving too fast, so I nodded and told her that I wasn't too big into the candle wax after all.

I called Mom. She picked me up and she had grocery bags all over the back seat. She said she was going to make dinner and she asked me why I had blood on me. I tried to tell her the story but I choked halfway through. We got home and I went upstairs to change my shirt because she said we had company. When I came back down, I saw my older brother and a new girlfriend sitting at the table. They both smiled when they saw me. Mom started to make dinner and she introduced herself to me, her hand smooth. My brother got up to help Mom, and as I sat down to talk to her, she started to light the candles on the table, and she smiled as she did so, asking me if I had a good day.

The doe

Helen Park

My boyfriend has no truck, so
The shot doe lies snug
In the backseat on a towel.
She reveals herself to us
In quiet, from the chest
Down to the pelvis.

From a few yards away,
She is a girl with feet up
Against the car window.

Clean as a whistle.
Something steams outside
Because it's winter.

Her fettered limbs,
With luscious chasm structured
By sinew, tendon, rib,
Simply a thing
Plucked and planted—
Wed to that open wound dripping blood
In that smug bucket, such eternal
Trickle of loss of will,
Her soapsuds-filled eyes betray this.

Her velvet ears and velvet nose
Ask to be fingered. Her organs
Thaw the ice outside
Because it's winter.

She lies nicely upon the towel.
Legs crossed.
Eyes bursting unctuous, nose cold and wet,
She accepts her steaming path to the bucket.
My boyfriend the hunter is heavy-footed and happy,
His story empties her from pearl throat to pearl belly.
Her cavity invites him in with its painful, exquisite feast.

Sleepaway

Sheri McCord

I was driving the "pet van," negotiating the twists and turns of a country road. A thick gray pall hung low to the ground despite it being midday, and my headlights shone through it. The snow on the trees and ground made it look like a scene from the Currier & Ives Christmas tins my mom collected. Back home in the Ozarks, the roads were full of hairpin curves that necessitated a slower speed, and in icy conditions, it paid to really know the road you were traveling since the imperceptible "black ice" could throw even the most well-equipped winter vehicle into a tailspin, sending it nose-diving into a ditch or headlong through a barbed-wire fence. The most infamous and hazardous turns had names like "Dead Man's Curve," and my parents spoke of them as casual points of reference. ("You know, Ol' Cougar, he lives a ways past Dead Man's Curve," my dad would say. With a sudden look of recognition, my mom would say, "Ohhhh…right.")

Having experienced these wishbone roads as a passenger, I'd watched and learned how to slow down before the actual bend, but then to accelerate through it. My physics teacher in high school told us that centripetal force was the magic that propelled a car around a tight bend and that accelerating would slingshot the car around. Or maybe it was centrifugal force. One of them, she said, didn't exist. But that was high school: facts without reasons and blind faith in a teacher whose main concern was whether she'd win Turkey Teacher Day for the fifth year in a row. Now, three years out of high school, not trusting the speed required for either force, centripetal or centrifugal, I snuck up on yet another curve—slower than I would if at home on Farm Road 156, the road to school, while shifting my eyes back and forth from the road in front of me to the side of the highway, looking for the owl that I'd been told would be there.

I was somewhere near Centralia, Missouri, and was following the crude directions my boss had given me. An owl was in distress. It needed me.

Initially, I moved to Boone County to go to college in Columbia, having received an academic scholarship to the University of Missouri, but I flunked out after a year. Not because I was partying, unfortunately, but because from the time I moved

into the dorms, I was sick in one way or another. Physically, mentally, emotionally—if there was a way to be sick in that first year of college, I found it. The receptionists at the student health center knew me by name.

My memory is reduced to a few snapshots from that first semester, and I fail to create any cohesive chronology of events: moving to Columbia by myself; an advance by my thirty-something boss at a pizza joint; never understanding music theory; my picture-perfect roommate; marching band practice; losing my virginity to a boy with a heavy limp; my psychology professor using a curse word in class (shit). The only class I did well in was English. During finals week of my first semester, I had come to the realization that I might lose my scholarship—the only way I could attend this school. My dad, who would later succumb to the throat cancer that created a hole in his throat, had told me by means of his mechanical talking device that once I was eighteen, I was on my own. I moved out of the trailer ("modular home") I had lived in since birth and moved three hours north without any means of supporting myself. As soon as I got to school, I had to get a job because even with my mom's care packages, I still had to make payments on a car, car insurance, food, and anything else. Even after I sought help at the student health center—seeing a

psychiatrist and counselor for free—I still wasn't well. My instructors all sounded like the Charlie Brown teacher. I worked, I studied, but I just wanted to sleep.

This quiet deliberation took hold of me, and what I remember most are the motions: I carefully counted eight Advil and forty-five Tylenol, all I had in my dorm room's medicine chest. I laid them all out on my bed, admiring the way their colors complemented one another—orange and blue, like someone's school colors. I picked up my Garfield phone and called my counselor, and we made an appointment for the next week, but it wasn't soon enough. Words failed. Actions spoke louder. So, with methodical deliberation, I swallowed all the pills one by one and immediately called an acquaintance (without telling him what was wrong) and asked him to walk me to the hospital on campus. Minutes later I was having my stomach pumped. It was Pearl Harbor Day, December 7, 1993, and the news on the TV above my hospital bed showed black and white footage of bombers. I thought of my dad, a World War II vet, and worried about his reaction to my deed. That anxiety aside, I suddenly felt safe. Not well, but safe.

For six days, I stayed in the psych ward voluntarily. I was only supposed to be there for three, but I arrived on a Thursday, so I

had to stay the weekend because "weekends didn't count" as a part of the three mandatory days. After my stomach was pumped, they found me a couch in the living area to sleep on since all the beds were full. I woke up surrounded by people all staring at the new girl.

Those six days introduced me to people that I would never have met otherwise. The woman who had postpartum depression after the birth of her latest son cried all the time. A quiet, well-dressed man who looked a lot like Alan Thicke from *Family Ties* heard voices in his head. A young inmate transferred from the prison in Fulton had some sort of drug-related mental illness. Heavily tranquilized, his eyelids were half-closed blinds. Another young man, a student, had tried to shoot himself in the head and lived to find out he had a thyroid disorder. One young woman with anorexia was constantly being given snacks to eat. Then there was the middle-aged man with black unruly hair and huge magnifying eyeglasses who stared at me all the time. I'd wake up from a nap in one of the chairs—I fell asleep anywhere in that place—and he would be sitting a few feet in front of me, staring and smiling. Once he placed a coffee filter on his head and started dancing around as if he were at some sort of pagan dance ritual.

He told me he had "college books" and was studying biology on his own. He wanted me to meet his mother when we got out.

I felt their pain mingle with my own.

The next semester, I was back in school but not for long. Among other physical ailments, I caught mono and ended up taking incompletes in most of my classes. Necessity, however, dictated that I work, and I did everything from copy girl to desk clerk to temping. But my longest job was the one with the highest turnover—not many people worked for a Humane Society for very long. Yet I knew about humane killing from growing up in the country. I'd occasionally hear about the cow with a fractured femur that had to be "put down." There was a company you called to pick up the carcass. Their workers came to your house in a huge dump truck with high sides, and two men picked up the dead horse, cow, or sheep and threw it over one of those sides. What I would have given to see over those sides.

My initial responsibility at the Humane Society was data entry. I filed cards on the animals when they came and went. Occasionally a stray pet would be reunited with its owner and those were special days—days when all of us thought anything was possible. Lottery days. Many pets were adopted to good, loving owners and only a few were returned—usually because the

new owner hadn't realized that they would be so much work or that a kitten or puppy would nip and bite. Most days were filled with animals coming in, sometimes in litters, and we were always looking for more space, so the way most animals left, unfortunately, was by being "put to sleep." When I entered this into the records, I had to indicate why they were put to sleep as well, and the options included "sick—respiratory," "sick—parvo virus," "bite case," and the most popular, "no space." These last responses were the most heartrending for me to enter into the cold, logical Lotus spreadsheet. I imagined each animal like a sort of baby Jesus, and I hoped we could find a manger for each. Finding space for things was something I was good at—and still am. Organizing things—files, closets, sock drawers, the scraps of fabric my grandma kept for quilting—came obsessively naturally to me, so this job of record keeping, arranging records, and occasionally answering the phone seemed easy enough for $5.75 an hour.

When I joined the staff there, John, the boss, outlined the stipulations of my job. He told me that I wouldn't have to clean the dog runs or wipe out any cat cages. He said I wouldn't have to take in animals, vaccinate them, or deal with potential adopters. He told me that I wouldn't have to put animals to sleep. Four

months later, I'd done all those things, plus I was now on a country road looking for an injured owl.

Living hand-to-mouth, I'd agreed take the after-hours position driving the large blue "pet van" when it came available. Having the chance to actually rescue injured animals seemed like good karma, righting the wrongs of animals' lives I'd taken in the past few months. It was the only time in my life that I carried a pager. The van, which had "Central Missouri Humane Society" stenciled on the side, was equipped with a prehistoric cell phone with a large curly cord that connected the receiver to its base. It plugged into the cigarette lighter and was for emergencies only. In the rear, the van contained all the essentials of the job: a catch pole (a long steel pole with a nylon loop on the end), carriers big and small, large leather bike gloves, and blankets.

I kept my clipboard next to me in the cab and once again examined the call I'd been dispatched to. A motorist had seen an owl sitting very still on the side of the highway (I imagined a Buddhist monk deep in meditation), and it was still there a few hours later when the motorist passed that way again. Owls sit in trees, not in ditches. Something was amiss.

Most of the animals' deaths were difficult to reckon with, and I dreaded the days I was assigned PTS (Put To Sleep) duty. The

term made the act sound nurturing, soothing, like a mother cooing her baby in her arms. But the fuzziest black-and-white kitten, the healthy but psycho Dalmatian, the little beagle with kennel cough—all died by lethal injection of an eerily blue substance called "Sleepaway." Every now and then I felt as if the case for putting an animal down was more humane than the alternative suffering it would endure if kept alive for a few more hours. A dog missing a leg, found in a damp ditch with maggots already dining on its decaying body. A cat using its ninth life after a hit and run. A raccoon with distemper. In a perfect world, we would have room and resources to heal them all, but this is no perfect world.

There were procedures we followed for putting animals to sleep. After a senior staff member assessed the space situation and the sick population, those on PTS duty were handed a handful of yellow cards and we looked through them hoping the animals we were closest to hadn't been chosen. Usually once a day we had to retreat to the PTS room for duty, unless by some miracle the animals were healthy and there was space—but that was a rare, joyous day.

The Sleepaway and xylazine, the local anesthetic we used to sedate the animals, were kept under lock and key in the vet's

office, and we had to obtain her permission before getting it. Sometimes sick animals had been moved into the room right away, and we took care of them first. The other animals had to be gathered, starting with the cats. One of us would collect the cats, placing them in their final cells, the cages that lined the PTS room. The small concrete room could have been an austere pet shop: no windows, steel cages, a long stainless steel table in the middle. The syringes—big and small—seemed out of place. The door to the PTS room opened only to the outside and was located in the back near the dumpster so that we could easily dispose of the animals. Out of respect, we carefully coordinated the whole process. Two people had to be present when euthanizing, and if someone else needed in the room, they always knocked to be sure an animal didn't suddenly jump away and escape. I also liked to think that it was out of respect that the door remained closed.

After guessing the animal's weight (we became good at this), we used a small needle to administer the anesthetic. Once the cat's breathing and heart rate had slowed considerably, the time had come. Because they had tiny veins, we were trained to administer what was called a "heart stick." Using a large-gauge hypodermic, we measured the correct amount of Sleepaway per the animals' weight—about two to three cc's for a cat or kitten.

Two fingers pressed down on the lingering heartbeat, feeling for the exact placement of the heart, and then the needle plunged through the sternum. We drew the needle up first, looking for a spot of blood mixed with the blue of the Sleepaway—this meant we'd found the heart. (If not: Try, try again.) Then we dosed the animal and waited. Death was instantaneous in most cases. When it was not, we administered more blue potion and hoped it would be over. We did not always hit the heart right away. Some of the animals did suffer. We were not veterinarians; we were college students.

After the cats, the bigger dogs were led in one by one. It took two of us to do the job, one holding its body and lifting a paw while twisting the forearm so that the vein showed clearly for the other one to stick. Smaller needles with four to six cc's of Sleepaway were used on most medium-sized or large dogs. A vein stick was preferable to a heart stick any day, at least in my book. The hardest part was finding the vein, but once you had it, there was no suffering as far as I could tell. Already tranquilized, the animal seemed to simply fall into a deeper slumber.

While on call with the van, I had had to put down not cats and dogs but mostly raccoons and possums. Canine distemper had infected many of them that summer and we could easily tell that a normally skittish varmint was sick if it was too slow, too friendly.

Back home we had possums, but I guess they were all healthy because I never really saw one close up. Despite their waddling gait, possums are stealthy nocturnal creatures who would invade our hen house at night, causing a ruckus that got my dad swearing and reaching for his shotgun.

One of my most memorable van jobs came from a nursing home. An elderly resident had seen it on the grounds while taking his evening constitutional and had taken some latent aggression out on it by bludgeoning it repeatedly with his cane. What resulted was a terminally ill possum with acute head trauma. When I arrived at the nursing home, a staff worker did a double take when I said I was there to pick up the possum. Then he smiled incredulously. At the time, I was nineteen but looked all of fourteen, and my long pigtails only added to my Pollyanna look. He showed me to the wounded creature and helped me scoot it into a large carrier—it was heavy, after all. As he carried it to the pet van, he asked me if I liked to go deer huntin'. I did not.

Back at the shelter, I appropriated the necessary amount of xylazine to anesthetize the possum, but it did not work to slow its heart rate down enough. Meanwhile, its raspy breathing continued and its already grapefruit-sized head was becoming larger. Drastic measures had to be taken, or this guy was going to suffer even more. I called the staff vet, and she authorized the use of

ketamine, Special K on the street, to tranquilize the possum. The poor thing. I kept upping the dose of Special K, all the way to six cc's—enough to slow down a Shetland pony, I thought—before it was finally ready for the Sleepaway. All of this was happening on a night when I was supposed to have a first date with a guy I'd just met, but I'd forgotten that I was on call. I stared at the hypodermic needle sticking out of the possum's chest, observed his labored breathing—raspy like a lifelong smoker—and called the guy on the phone: "Yeah, I'm going to be a little late. I'm stuck at work."

On most days, the animals chosen for death row were healthy but unwanted—there was no more room at the inn. Other times they had easily treatable respiratory infections, common in a closed environment, but sick animals were chosen over healthy ones in the pecking order that sealed their fate. Those animals looked into my eyes, saw me as a kind of protector as I cradled them to my chest like my own children, and then after they licked my face, they went limp in my arms. The daily departed were then sacked in Glad garbage bags and tossed into a dumpster whose sides were high enough to make it difficult for me to toss in a twenty pound dog. I did not want to see beyond those sides.

In an effort to spare the staff's sanity, the management made us all take turns being on PTS duty—even the new secretary. We all cried a lot. After a while, some would become more desensitized to the duty than others. Once two girls I was working with played with two dead cats like puppets, making them dance like Rockettes. I smiled at them—unsure if I should, but not wanting to condemn their behavior either, even though I could never bring myself to do the same kinds of things they did. If I had known that I would be killing animals, I'm not sure I would have taken the job, but I had it now and for the first time in months I wasn't worried about paying my rent on time. So to balance the good with the bad and make time-and-a-half, I got up in the middle of the night to rescue raccoons from apartments, liberate bats from bathrooms, and pick up any wounded creature that needed me.

Being raised on a farm, I had encounters with animals on a daily basis. At one point or another, we had a menagerie of cows, pigs, horses, dogs, chickens, turkeys, a mean wild turkey, ducks, sheep, two parakeets, fish, turtles, and too many barn cats. I named them all and, in one way or another, I was a witness to their deaths or disappearances.

My starkest memory of carnage back home was when two neighbor dogs went on a killing spree in our barnyard, wiping out all our fowl—chickens, turkeys, and ducks. It seemed senseless, an act of brute violence on the part of these dogs, because they didn't even stop to eat anything, like they were killing for sport. My mom and dad and I went out for the afternoon and returned to an eerie silence. The sight of all those carcasses made me so sad—what once was so alive, so much bustling about and busyness—was silenced, slaughtered. But I didn't cry right then. We surveyed the scene and remembered that we'd left Chico, my dad's Chihuahua, outside when we left. Chico liked to ride on the back of the seat of my dad's truck behind his head. All the old farmers carried Chihuahuas around. Dad called his name repeatedly (this was before his larynx was removed), and finally, from out of the woods, we saw a small brown figure come darting as fast as his four-inch legs could take him.

I knew animals, or so I thought. I sat in the woods often—the one that lined the northern border of our ten acres. With my cowboy boots I stepped lightly, trying not to crack a twig, attempting to blend in to the natural elements. I had Cherokee blood in me, my dad said, and I decided I had a gift when it came

to creatures. We *knew* each other. They could sense this, and I would protect them.

Although I often heard owls hooting from the trees in the woods and seen them on Mutual of Omaha's *Wild Kingdom* with Marlin Perkins, I'd never seen one up close, let alone touched one. Slowing down around yet another turn, I saw my owl—just sitting there like a hitchhiker. I'd never picked up a hitchhiker or an owl, and this sense of adventure, the unknown of a new experience, made my heart race. I parked the van, put the flashers on, and grabbed my gear: a large animal carrier, a towel, and the big leather owl-catching gloves.

The air, brutally cold, made me gasp for a moment. I stood looking at the owl from only an arm's length away. I wanted to memorize all of it. White and brownish. It matched its surroundings. Big brown eyes. It stared at me as only owls can do—steadily, piercingly, wisely. Like a misplaced garden gnome, it did not move from its spot. It did not try to flap away. Something was definitely wrong. I knew from experience—those possums and raccoons—that if a wild animal didn't move, it was hurt or sick. I examined it for another moment, continuing my tête-à-tête with it in my head before saying to it out loud, "Hi. I'm going to help you. Don't worry. Everything's going to be all right." The

procedure for picking up such a bird, I was informed by John, was to first drape a towel over it, then "simply" lift it into the carrier. This action sounded suspiciously easy to me, but John assured me that with the towel over its head, the owl would not freak out. (Had he ever rescued an owl? I don't know, but he had been in Vietnam. That's what he always told us when we questioned him.)

Like spreading a sheet on the bed, I cast the towel over its head. It remained still. I approached it like I approach human babies—with the awkwardness of not knowing how to hold it or what to do with it. A lone car drove by without even slowing down. Thinking that I should place my hands on its wings just in case it might want to flap them violently, I did just that. Its fluff was misleading; it felt heavy. Without trauma, I transferred it into the large carrier and sat it on the passenger side of the van.

I took my owl back to the University of Missouri's raptor sanctuary at the College of Veterinary Medicine, paying less attention to the severe turns. I'd now traveled this road and was familiar with the icy spots and the dry patches. Several doctors and students were awaiting the owl's arrival and were excited to see it. I think it was a barn owl, sometimes referred to as a death owl or ghost owl because of its mysterious white, heart-shaped

face. An evil omen in some rural communities, it was a talisman for me that day.

Had the owl not been sitting still in a ditch, I would not have known it was injured. Its pain was invisible. A balance of strength and fragility, the owl only looked out of place—not in pain. Not until it had been noticed not flying had it been seen in duress. A disruption in its normal way of being in the world had to occur and be seen before it could be helped. If it was afraid of me, I could not tell. If it was grateful, I did not know.

Animals do not communicate pain so differently than me. My pain was invisible. Only my parents and a few close friends knew that I had ended up in the hospital a year earlier and what kind of hospital.

All I could think of in the hospital was getting out. And later, when I saw dogs clawing at their cages or kittens working their paws through the bars, I understood the impulse to break free. While I was hospitalized, I didn't feel like I belonged, but at the same time I wanted my pain to be seen and heard. I wanted them to slap a big sticky Band-Aid on it—a Band-Aid large enough to hold back my heart.

At the time, I hoped good karma would help me, but waiting to feel better didn't seem to be working, and the actions I took

only seemed to propel me further into pain. It took years of motion to make me realize that I needed to wise up, sit still, feel the pain. And be okay still.

Rusty Dreams

C. Evans Mylonas

The car is a relic of the 60s.
It's become the diner's trademark.
Look for the old Chevy out front.

Her dress clings over a pot of crawfish.
Old man brung 'em this morning.
They're getting harder to find.
Even gator knows his numbers are limited.
People gotta eat.

The girl cooks up dirty rice in the back.
Truancy is due to pass again.
He'll eat his etoufee and overlook another day.

The old woman, like the girl, had dreams.
Blown away with the hurricanes.
That was when the car was new.

Arm's Race

Laura Page

I feel like I've always known
That Bonnie and Clyde
Were an arm's race of desire—

Kristeva on the lam.

I want to steal something sacred
And call it mountain.
And if you eat the scree, the stones
Of bud peaches, like peas—
With me,

Nothing will be tomorrow
And tomorrow again.
If you bite the bullet, and swallow the
Coercive haikus of our
History,
We can have now
And now
and now.

Alluvial

Erin Traylor

I love you like this Chokecherry
windbreak where we promised
each other the *first* time.

Love you like a gut flip, noiseless glide
into your sister's closet, to sneak
a corner-creased *Seventeen* from the stack

on the floor. Like spearmint
gum laughed onto the golden
retriever. Like your purple rubber-banded

braces. Before—when there was nothing I could say
to uncross you in the Suburban's
shadow.

Love you like a hiding place—beneath
the box girder bridge. Ceiling just tall enough
for us, cross-legged, leaned

against the wet, concrete wall. Love you like *fuck*
screamed into the mud,
into creek water. Love you like *nobody*

hears us. Like sliding white
sails of lamplight
across your glasses.

I love you like the secret
kept. Remember?
You were

climbing the rungs
before me, you were
gripping carefully.

Love you like our mica-shimmering

kneecaps & cardboard
briefcase of ditties
& dirty

fingerprints pressed to paper—
topographies the size
of postage stamps. Cut out,

carry like coins. Trade me,
thumb
for thumb.

I love you like a whisper's octave
leap, between sleeping bags,
when I could hear your teeth

showing. Like the mulberry-
stained balls of your feet, stacked
to one pedal, ready to

touch pavement,
        toss the bicycle &
                run,   like your gone

neighbor's trampoline
                the spilling rain
                        across its membrane, &

                our gold
        uncombed
jungle underneath.

Slice:
In Order of Least Resistance

Laurin DeChae

I'm a strand of web,
thread, paper, I am butter.
Spread me thin, melt me.

The gospel is written in graffiti on the bathroom walls for a greater sense of relief. Jesus loves you. Hail to the body parts biceps, bicuspids, butts, brains, and boobz. X marks the spot, the holy was here in this stall. What of the want? Get me free refills, medium rare, buy one get one. Get me family-sized, twenty count. Get me overflowing land of milk and honey, no ice, no lemon. Sectioned tenderloin, don't you swell just right. Serrate. You've got a smudge just there. For god sakes, wipe your face. Can't you hear us folding hands, wringing napkin necks with worry?

I am animal
hide. I am skin. Freshly cut,
sharper than diamonds.

Loop

Elizabeth Green

The bus is not crowded this morning but speckled with people here and there, moving at their own cadences. Some are very good at standing in the aisle because they take off their backpacks and put them in front of themselves. Once a man did not take off his backpack and continuously struck me in the face while everyone looked on. I was already having a bad morning, but I said nothing. I liked the taste of the injustice thrust upon me. I felt like a martyr and it made the slow pain of my workday that much more exquisite.

The same big woman gets on everyday with her morning Diet Coke. One day I will work up the courage to tell her that Diet Coke is just as bad as regular. In a first-level multiverse I might have already told her this. In a second-level multiverse we might have both discussed the physiological benefits of drinking battery acid every day before work.

*

Once a woman brought a dog on. When she got off the dog didn't leave with her. The doors closed, the bus drove away and she was gone. The leash was stuck in the door, and all she must have seen was the leash flapping like a wagging tongue as the bus drove off with her dog. No one could get the driver's attention. The dog blinked at us, satisfied. When he stopped at the next block the woman wasn't there. We all wondered why she wasn't running for the dog, and no one could spot her. I looked down at the leash, at the loop at the end—the perfect shape for my hand—like it was an answer.

*

A man is on his phone explaining something to someone he thinks is stupid. I automatically assume everyone is smarter than me except for people that breathe with their mouths open or walk around with food on their shirts or cough without covering their mouths. Those are my only criteria. The man is smart. He says, "Don't let it get above 160. You'll release the harsh tannins. You must keep it in the range of 150 and 160." The way he says *must* makes me wet. I study the back of his neck and wonder if he'll watch me leave the bus. If he'll ask me about the dog.

The Diet Coke woman is discussing Mars with a perfect stranger. They talk the way I imagine people talked about the moon landing when that happened. In another universe we might all be waiting to see when the life on Mars has finally shriveled up and died already.

*

I take the dog to work and let it curl up under my desk for the morning until someone notices its tail poking out from my cubicle and I have to get rid of it. Like it is old food or a gray hair. I would like to get rid of HR.

*

There is a point in my commute where I turn my head and look out where there is a welcoming river path occupied by runners and various other people that don't seem to have jobs or responsibilities. In another universe, I might be running down that path with the dog and I would be smiling instead of waiting for another morning injustice to befall me. On the other side of the window, I might not have been born to a family with a poor ability to pull themselves out of their self-made muck. Good

things would not be unattainable and I would not crave the bad. We would not be stuck within the feedback loop of our shortcomings. Here, we are simultaneously the perpetrators and victims of what we put into the universe.

The smart man is blocking my view and when he feels my presence, turns to me. He grins, red-faced. I think he is embarrassed for making eye contact with me, this stranger standing a little too close. I wonder if he's one of those guys who hate condoms. A spent Diet Coke can nuzzles my foot and I kick it back toward the big woman. It clatters and scrapes along the floor but no one looks around.

*

He fits nicely in my bed—a little too imposing, and I like that. He would be perfect but he told me that he isn't into choking or slapping so we just have normal sex and at the end I'm frustrated.

We drink a lot of wine in bed and he looks over at the dog that is cradled on a chair near the window and says, "When are you going to call the number?" Instead of answering I ask him what he thinks about Mars. He likes it when women ask him what he thinks and all this tells me is that his mother ignored him. My

mother also ignored me but I don't care so much when no one is listening. It's actually very peaceful.

He lies back and scratches his swatch of black curly hair and says, "There is either life on Mars or there is not. I don't understand how scientists are saying 'it's going to be difficult' to determine this. It's not hard to see life when it's around you, though most of the time it's ignored. That *must* be what they mean, you know. Maybe they aren't being literal. Maybe they are questioning whether or not they will give a shit when they see the little things squirming around in their microscopes." I mouth the word "must" at the back of his head.

*

Outside the dog and I stand on the sidewalk for a very long time, waiting for an answer on what to do.

There are posters everywhere for the missing dog. In another universe there would be posters up for the missing owner. I try to imagine her face but all I conjure is a wronged, fraught expression. In my mind, she is like this all the time and nobody seems to care.

This is not a good universe. The dog doesn't know what we are waiting for. People walk toward me on the street and they don't move

for me. They skim me as they continue to talk, as if I'm a telephone pole, an inconvenient inanimate obstruction. Maybe I am.

We walk to the river and share the path with other dog people, lone runners, and parents with strollers. The dog seems happy to walk. I get the impression that the dog doesn't get out much by the way it sniffs everything and pulls the leash. I don't worry about anyone recognizing it from the posters because all Shih Tzu dogs look exactly alike. I am waiting for the happiness to come. I am now on the other side of the bus's window. I wonder if it will come crashing into me like a wave, or in increments. As I approach a dog park, my little ward starts hacking uncontrollably. People take notice. I don't know if this is normal. My parents never let me have pets. Eventually it produces a puddle of bloody half-digested food.

*

The man still won't choke me. I tell him he needs to branch out once in a while and to stop being so afraid. That's what I'm doing. I am branching out, taking risks. He asks me why I don't get my own dog. I tell him that the universe gave me this one. It's a sign. A gateway to distraction and therefore happiness. He asks me again when I'm going to call the woman on the poster and again I deflect him with talk of Mars. He says, "It might make you

feel good. To let it go." When I don't answer right away he gets up to leave. He says, "Take the dog back. I feel like I'm sleeping with a saboteur." I mouth "saboteur" at the closed door.

*

After getting her address I take the dog to the woman. She opens the door so fast that her crutches fall in a cataclysmic bang. I don't remember her having crutches, and no one on the bus did either. The dog begins to shake. The woman steadies herself on the door and stands with permanently mangled legs, all distorted and bent. In a third-level multiverse, this might be the norm, but my understanding of multiverses tends to stop at level two. She ushers me inside and after securely closing the door she holds me so tightly that she loses her balances and now I am holding her up in a very close, almost sensual embrace. I feel her breasts squish against mine as the dog runs circles around the room, its nails clacking on her hardwood floor, leash trailing. I watch the loop at the end of the leash. A perfect oval, worn from hand oil and time. I wait to feel something good, like the smart man said. Her neck smells like salt. She wants to be let go, but there has to be something more here. There has to be something more.

Bones | Susan Sweetland Garay

Bios

Art Allen is currently living and studying in Oxford for an Mst in Creative Writing. His poetry has previously appeared online and in print in several national and local literary publications including; IS&T, Cake, The Elbow Room, The Cadaverine and Dink.

Susana H. Case's newest book is *4 Rms w Vu* (Mayapple Press, 2014). She is the author of four full-length poetry collections and four chapbooks, including *The Scottish Café*, just re-released in a second edition by Slapering Hol Press and also previously re-released in a Polish-English version, *Kawiarnia Szkocka*, by Opole University Press, A Professor at the New York Institute of Technology, her photos have appeared in Blue Hour Magazine, pacificREVIEW, and San Pedro River Review, among others magazines.

Dorsey Craft is an MFA candidate in her third year at McNeese State University in Lake Charles, LA. Her work has appeared in Deep South Magazine and Barn Owl Review. She lives in Houston with her husband and a Corgi named George.

Laurin DeChae is a MFA candidate for poetry at the University of New Orleans, where she acts as the associate editor for Bayou Magazine. Her work appears or is forthcoming in Harpur Palate, burntdistrict, Rust + Moth, Crack the Spine, and elsewhere.

Born and raised in Portland Oregon, **Susan Sweetland Garay** currently lives in the Willamette Valley with her husband and daughter where she works in the vineyard industry. She has had poetry and photography published in a variety of journals, on line and in print. Her first full-length poetry collection, *Approximate Tuesday*, was published in 2013 and she was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2014. Her second collection, *Strange Beauty from Aldrich Press*, will be available in December 2015. More of her work can be found at susansweetlandgaray.wordpress.com.

Elizabeth Green lives in Philadelphia. Her fiction appears or is forthcoming in McSweeney's Internet Tendency, Spork Press, Fwriction: Review,

Necessary Fiction and others. She is on the fiction committee for Philadelphia Stories and is a playwriting mentor for the PEN Prison Writing Program. She tweets @egreenwrites

Lauren Hall's work has appeared in NANO Fiction, The Conium Review, The Rumpus, Cleaver, The Lascaux Review, and others. She was awarded the William Carlos Williams Prize for Poetry at the University of Pennsylvania, where she received a Masters degree. She currently lives and writes in Boston.

Gustavo Hernandez is a first-generation Mexican immigrant. He is a fiction writer and poet. His writing career began in fourth grade when he was paid three Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles stickers to write a poem for a classmate's girlfriend. He lives in Santa Ana, California and recently returned to school to pursue a bachelor's degree in English. He can be contacted at goldenarmor17@gmail.com

Having grown up with an overly romantic artist of a mother, who'd dance alongside his marine father in the kitchen, **Sia Hyrula** was bound to have an eye for romance and art in some form. He studied dance for four short years as a kid before realizing photography and visual arts were where he was best able to express himself. His art tends to have a focus on romance, form, regality, emotion and fashion. With a story in mind always ready to be told, he finds himself shooting and editing almost constantly to keep up with his ideas.

Deborah A. Lott's work has been published in the Alaska Quarterly Review, Bellingham Review, Black Warrior Review, Cimarron Review, the Nervous Breakdown, Los Angeles Review, Puerto del Sol, Story Quarterly, Referential, Salon, and many other places. She teaches literature and creative writing at Antioch University, Los Angeles. Her essays have been shortlisted by Best American Essays three times and she has been thrice nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Leslie Maxwell's writing has appeared in Juked, Blunderbuss Magazine, The Fourth River, and Lockjaw Magazine, among other publications. She lives in Durham, NC, where she teaches writing to college students and community members. Find her online at lesliemaxwell.com.

Kathryn Merwin is a native of Washington, DC. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Barely South Review, burntdistrict, Folio, Slipstream, Notre Dame Review, and Jabberwock Review, among others. In 2015, she was awarded the Nancy D. Hargrove Editors' Prize for Poetry. She currently serves as Co-Editor-in-Chief of Milk Journal and Managing Editor of The Scarab.

Sheri McCord writes creative nonfiction about growing up in the rural Ozarks and living in Missouri. She has a PhD in English Literature with an emphasis is seventeenth-century British literature. She teaches as an adjunct instructor at several St. Louis universities, works as a writing consultant, and teaches yoga.

C. Evans Mylonas is a contributing writer for the Oshana Regional Library Newsletter in Oshakati, Namibia. After volunteering for three years in Namibia, she has returned to her hometown of Houston, Texas. Ms. Mylonas has been published in Thema Literary Journal, Skipping Stones Magazine, Bangalore Review, and Atticus Review, and is a two-time scholarship recipient to Western Michigan's Summer Writing Program in Prague. She is also a photographer and a winner in last year's Skeleton Coast Post photo contest.

Gregg J. Orifici is an international educator and MFA student at the University of New Hampshire. With a neglected law degree, he has lived and worked in Europe and across the United States. He is fascinated by misunderstanding, the longing of the spirit, the serendipity of self-discovery, the ache of loneliness. Gregg has published poetry in several magazines and reviews, as well as nonfiction essays in Hamilton Stone Review, about his heart-opening but strangely closeting pilgrimage across Spain, and Hippocampus, about the discovery of two seminal books *The Lord Won't Mind* and *The Joy of Gay Sex*—and his unlikely teenage coming of age at the Walt Whitman Mall. He is currently working on a memoir, *The Men Who Would Not Be Mine*, an accounting of love's discards and takeaways, age 8-45.

Laura Page is a wife, mother, and poet living in the Pacific Northwest. She is a graduate of Southern Oregon University, where she studied English Literature and was the recipient of her program's annual award for non-fiction writing. She has also been a panelist for the Southern Oregon Arts and Research conference. Her chapbook, *Children, Apostates*, is forthcoming from Dancing Girl Press, as part of their 2016 chapbook series. Her poems

and essays have appeared in The Fredericksburg Literary Review, TINGE magazine, and Kindred, among others.

Helen Park received a BA in English and is currently working on several pieces about family and gender and a novel loosely based upon three chaotic and legend-worthy generations of women in her family. Her work appears or is forthcoming in BlazeVOX, Sleet Magazine, Inertia Magazine, Cleaver Magazine, Referential Magazine and The Flexible Persona, among others. She has also published a poem in the Asian-American female anthology, *Yellow as Turmeric, Fragrant as Cloves* (Deep Bowl Press, 2008).

Erin Traylor recently graduated with a bachelor's degree in English from Salisbury University, in Maryland, and now serves as co-editor-in-chief of the fledgling literary magazine, Milk Journal. Her work has appeared in Cheat River Review, Red Earth Review, Permafrost Magazine, Germ Magazine, and other online publications. Currently, she lives in Siesta Key, Florida, where she plays roller derby and challenges herself to walk far distances barefoot. In her spare time, she loves to run, write poetry, read short fiction by authors such as Karen Russell and Julie Orringer, observe nature, contemplate lunar phases, and devise new, improved methods of wish-making.

Óscar Varona is a writer and a collagist from Madrid, Spain.

Kevin Richard White is the author of the novels *Steep Drop* and *The Face Of A Monster* through No Frills Buffalo. His short fiction has been previously published by Akashic Books, Tahoe Writers Works, and Page And Spine. He lives in Pennsylvania.

Nils Wolfcale earned a Bachelor of Arts from Ohio State University and an Associate's degree from Hocking Technical College in Nelsonville, Ohio. His stories have been published in the Roanoke Review and Piker Press. He lives on a small farm in Northern Michigan.

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