Cactus Heart

Issue #6

Winter 2013

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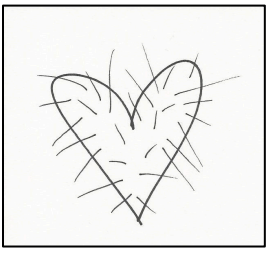

Cactus Heart Press
Northampton MA
2013

Issue #6 published December 4, 2013
by Cactus Heart Press
www.cactusheartpress.com

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Submission guidelines: http://www.cactusheartpress.com/submit/

Table of Contents

Photos & Art

Reviews

Editor's Note

Tis the season of busyness, with the holidays and year's end upon us, and because of that I'm keeping this editor's note short and sweet.

I'm a bit in shock that Issue #6 is here. And that #6.5 (our second print issue!) is just around the corner. It's a milestone—and more issues are already in the making.

Issue #6 has so many themes within it: ghosts, geography, travel, war and its aftermath, love. All these beautiful evocations of the things that drive us as human beings—there's Kelly Chastain's essay, "And the Cow Jumped over the Trailer," which moved me to tears the first time I read it; there's our first mermaid story, "Scaleless" by M. W. Fowler; there's Mahtem Shiferraw's gorgeous ghostly poem, "On Cremation"—really, every single piece in this issue shocks and wounds and delights me. My heart overfloweth for all the words, and the writers who trust *Cactus Heart* with them. May this issue hit you as hard as it has me.

Issue #6 also welcomes aboard Marin Sardy as nonfiction editor. I think you'll love the pieces she's chosen, and I'm so pleased to have her join *Cactus Heart*. Working with her and Thea and Sasha is such a privilege.

Happy Snow Days,

Saskatchewan Sunset | Jessica Reimer

the soft forest (with prisms)
a lullaby, April 2013 (Boston)

Cassandra de Alba

everywhere moss for you to curl into sleep,
creek babble, clean air, a spot where a fawn
has just got up and wandered off. birch trees
with endless bark and the rocks are all velvet,
stone walls made of clouds, birds tumbling
in a bright blue sky. chimes at dusk, owls
at night, in the morning a smell like lemons
and just-cut grass, a feeling like the world
opening up, like your heart turning over,
restarting.

My Friend Marcy Has Cancer. I Don't (Yet).

Holly Pruett

I

As the crowd of thousands marched downtown to the site of the Occupy Portland encampment, I left to run an errand. I'd been holding a handmade cardboard sign: *"My friend Marcy is WAITLISTED FOR CHEMO—Thanks, Wall Street!"* Many of the people reacting to my sign—whether supportive or averse—thought I was the one waiting for chemo. Even the AP photographer who snapped the picture of my sign that ended up on Internet sites around the world asked, "Is that about you?"

They thought I was the one with cancer. In the coming days, I began to wonder.

An hour after I left the rally, my belly began to feel like an air pump was inflating a basketball inside me. And I grew cold, so cold, despite my wool socks and heavy Guatemalan wool sweater. My teeth clacked and chattered. By the time I got home from my

errands I had to unbutton the jeans that had required a tighter belt notch only that morning.

I forced my stiff, aching muscles up the stairs to my house and cocooned myself in a wool blanket in front of our fireplace. When the wracking chills still wouldn't subside, my partner Amber found the thermometer. We were stunned when it registered 102.7 degrees. Must be broken. She took her own temperature—normal.

It was about 7:00 p.m. when I reached my doctor, who found it very odd: high fever and severe bloating, but no nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea, which you'd expect with food poisoning or a flu. We agreed that I'd try Tylenol and Gatorade and go to the ER if it got worse.

I woke up in the morning without a fever. But the bloating—I was still so unbearably full I found the idea of eating preposterous. I headed in to see my doctor. They took an abdominal X-ray and sent me home. Once they viewed the film, they wanted an ultrasound. I drove out in Friday afternoon rush hour having drunk the requisite 32 ounces of water—four tall glasses of liquid on top of the basketball in my belly. I was in agony.

I figured I wouldn't get the results until Monday, but my doctor called and left a message around 6:00 p.m. It wasn't a

reassuring "all clear." His voice sounded concerned. He told me to call him on Monday.

II

Marcy's unexpected diagnosis of Stage IV ovarian cancer had ripped the security blanket off our cozy community. In her early 50s, the poster child for effortless exercise and wholesome diet, Marcy exemplified clean country living. I had barely paused to admit my own emotional response to the pronouncement of her terminal disease. I had swung into action, attempting to impose order on this chaos by taking notes at her doctor's appointments, organizing brigades of helpers, setting up communications systems.

The Monday morning after my ultrasound, I drove to Marcy's house to accompany her and her husband, Mike, to see her surgeon, a highly respected gynecological oncologist on whom she had pinned her hopes.

During Marcy's diagnosis eighteen months earlier, Dr. C had gone in through her belly button to remove the small amounts of disease in her abdomen—debulking, they call it—but the cancer had already spread to her chest. Although the surgery and subsequent chemo had produced a blessed remission, her cancer holiday was over. The disease was clearly on the move once again.

Marcy's meeting with her medical oncologist had left her in despair. She wanted the surgeon to offer something more aggressive, to deliver some hope through scalpel and sutures.

Marcy wore one of her trademark loose skirts. Despite her willowy dancer's frame she had always favored prairie skirts that allowed her unrestricted movement (and she was constantly in motion). Just before her diagnosis, she had shocked all of her friends by favoring chic new slim corduroy jeans. But the bloating that accompanied her chemo had become, in cancer-speak, her "new normal," and now it was back to skirts. I was wearing a loose skirt that day, too, to ease the bloat in my own belly. And to hide it.

Over the weekend I'd received an email from one of the national ovarian cancer listservs I had subscribed to, promoting the checklist of early detection symptoms we all need to internalize, like the monthly breast self-exam we were trained to do in the early days of the pink-ribbon movement:

Symptoms of Ovarian Cancer

Bloating

Pelvic or abdominal pain

Difficulty eating or feeling full quickly

Urinary symptoms (urgency or frequency)

(www.ovariancancer.org/about-ovarian-cancer/symptoms)

I said nothing of my weekend worries to Marcy and Mike. An extrovert, I'm used to sharing (perhaps over-sharing) the details of my daily life. But not emotions—especially fears, especially existential fears of the sort that if spoken you imagine might obliterate you through their very utterance. Fears like: could two friends end up with the same supposedly rare cancer? Fears like: am I counting on my friend's cancer to somehow provide me with immunity? Fears like: am I going to worry myself into getting cancer if I don't already have it?

I was happy to stuff my own unknowns into the glove compartment for the morning; I preferred the immediacy of their fears to my own. I clamped down the impulse to distract us all with small talk or spiritual-silver-lining reassurances. We drove to the appointment in shared tense silence.

Marcy's meeting with the surgeon delivered further devastation: he had nothing in his bag of tricks to help her. She fled the claustrophobic confines of the consultation room as soon as he left. I waited to get the paperwork and found Marcy and Mike in the parking lot. If I'd been unsure about conversation on the way there, I knew without a doubt there was nothing I could say now. Marcy was in full internal lockdown, desperate to be out of the car and back in her home doing the touchstone rituals she had devised to help her tolerate the intolerable.

As I pulled into the driveway she opened the door, "Sorry… rude…by myself." She fled, with Mike not far behind her. I sat in my car getting her records release documents in order and offered a few inadequate words to Mike when he reemerged to fetch the documents. Then I pulled around the corner and called my doctor, expecting to hear reassurance in my ultrasound reading. Instead he told me there was a mass over my left ovary. He wanted an MRI to provide more detail. But first I should get to my gynecologist for an exam.

III

Cancer World. It's how writer Steven Shapin describes our modern existence in his review of the book *The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer* by physician Siddartha Mukherjee. Mukherjee calls cancer "the quintessential product of modernity." Modern advancements mean more of us have cancer. We now outlive the diseases that killed our forebears before they had the chance to get the Big C. And the toxicity of our environment surely breeds more malignancy. How could it be coincidence that my father and his sister's husband both died young of the same rare brain cancer, having shared no genetic link, only mutual employment in the family's fuel tank cleaning business during my dad's summer breaks from college and medical school?

Shapin, in *The New Yorker* (Nov. 8, 2010), argues that the modern impact of cancer goes beyond those who have the disease. He writes that historically, "The agonizing manner of cancer death was dreaded, but that fear was not centrally situated in the public mind—as it now is." Shapin describes "two new kinds of beings in the modern cancer world." One is the lucky patient who is now able to manage her once-fatal cancer as a chronic illness with miracle drugs like Gleevac. But Cancer World is also inhabited by the rest of us who are waiting and watching, "legions of the screened and the tested, who become more and more aware of the dangers battering away at their cells from the external environment and lurking inside, encoded in their genes."

Just a month before my high fever and basketball belly, a surgeon excised a bad mole from my right tricep. The cells weren't cancerous, but apparently that's where they were headed. The mole is gone now, clean to the margins, but even in its absence, it increases my chances of developing a melanoma. So does the fact that my dad had a melanoma (separate from his brain cancer). And that my mom had another form of skin cancer, now known to be predictive of increased risk of the deadliest kind. My annual preventive visits to the dermatologist are now on a six-month schedule.

I'm a bit of an early detection nut. I'm not a hypochondriac (am I?); I don't spend my time imagining myself filled with disease. But I don't hesitate to call the doctor when I'm not sure what's going on in my body. And I do every test they suggest.

I'm the daughter of a doctor, a man who knew he wanted to be a doctor as a young boy despite neither parent having graduated from high school. "He never went through the I-wanna-be-a-fireman-or-cowboy phase like the other little boys," his older sister told me. "He just wanted to be a doctor."

Thus I was born into my faith in the medical system. Not a blind faith: I believe that if you tell the doctor what's going on, he or she will work with you to figure it out and will try to make you well or keep you safe. I have a strong sense of entitlement, being raised the daughter of a doctor, white and well-educated. They work for me, these doctors and diagnosticians. If I have questions, they will answer them.

And so I've been thoroughly probed and scanned and dissected. A lump removed from each breast in a procedure that strapped me to a narrow table, my arms pinned out to either side, crucifixion-style. A colonoscopy in my mid-40s. Suspicious moles carved out and shipped to the lab. X-rays, a CT scan, an MRI, and a PET scan to follow a nodule in my lung (nodule: another word

for tumor, but writing tumor sounds melodramatic given its eventual disappearance).

And four years earlier I had been diagnosed with a bumper crop of uterine fibroids—inside my uterus; hanging from the outer wall on a stalk like a banana; embedded in the wall of my womb. Because I never had the heavy bleeding or cramping that plagues many women with such growths, the obvious solution, hysterectomy, seemed like overkill to me (fibroids are the leading cause of hysterectomy in the United States). But the bulk of my fibroids, equal to a six-month pregnancy, became tiresome. I felt obstructed from within when I did certain yoga poses, when I bent forward on my bicycle. My gynecologist warned of bowel and bladder difficulties; my chiropractor thought my breathing could be impaired and my skeletal system skewed.

I researched my options and opted for an embolization procedure to reduce the bulk without surgery. A radiologist inserted a catheter through my femoral artery and propelled microscopic pellets through it to block the blood flow from reaching the fibroids. I pictured them withering on the vine. A year later, my gynecologist reported with some amazement—she'd been a skeptic—that they had reduced in size by 50 percent, the optimal result expected from the procedure. Since then, I'd thought little about them, except during my annual pelvic exam as

my gynecologist continued to marvel about the fibroids' reduced dimensions.

IV

The day after I accompanied Marcy on her futile pilgrimage to her cancer surgeon, I lay on my gynecologist's exam table. She asked the question that seemed to solve the mystery of what had happened five days earlier.

"Did it feel like what you experienced when you had your embolization?" Yes, I realized, it was exactly like that. I don't know why it hadn't occurred to me sooner. The procedure had involved an overnight stay in the hospital to control the high fever and severe pain that accompanies the death of the fibroid tissue when its blood supply is blocked. Now my gynecologist studied the original MRI that had guided the embolization and felt confident that it was consistent with the ultrasound that had alarmed the radiologist and my primary care physician. She would send both scans back to the radiologist to be sure.

It made sense to me now: some of the remaining fibroid tissue had gone into a death spiral. As it died—became necrotic, to get technical—the sanitation department kicked in. Fire up the incinerator (hello, 102.7 fever) and bring in the scrubbing bubbles of inflammation.

Still, I was relieved to get the call from my gynecologist three weeks later confirming that the radiologist had finally issued the all-clear. For now, anyway. The mass that had rung the alarm bell appeared consistent with the early pictures of the fibroids. But as with my dermatologist, my monitoring interval is now at the half-yearly rather than annual mark.

V

My friend Marcy has cancer. I don't. Yet. I belong to that tribe born of modern medical diagnostics: the precancerous. The Worried Well.

Six months after my belly bloat episode, on the eve of Marcy's 53rd birthday and the second anniversary of her admittance to Cancer World, I joined her and three of her closest friends for a concert by N.E.D. "N.E.D. is cancer talk," Marcy explained in her email invitation. "It's what we all want to hear after a CT scan—that we are No Evidence of Disease." By definition, Stage IV cancer is considered incurable, so the women in Marcy's cancer network strive instead to "dance with N.E.D."

Made up of six full-time women's cancer doctors from around the country, N.E.D.'s slogan is, "Breast cancer has a ribbon—but gynecological cancer has a *rock band!*" The theater buzzed with snappy women dressed for a party. The band started playing—

original hard rock ballads belted out by the lone female doc, a hyper-athletic cross between Natalie Merchant and Janis Joplin—songs of love and heartbreak for the ovarian and uterine cancer patients whose disease inspires a rock band but very little funding for research.

They brandished their guitars and drums and microphones and filled our ears with the beat of the human drama—the *full catastrophe* as Zorba the Greek called it. Marcy and her three younger pals hit the dance floor and threw themselves into it, giddy, gossiping, mugging for photos. I couldn't quite go there. My mind was busy worrying, calculating how I could get Marcy a doctor like one of those up there on the stage, a rock star doctor who would feel as passionately about saving her as I did. And my heart was stuck on the story she and a support-group friend had told us before the concert started. A year before when N.E.D. had come through town, the youngest member of their ovarian cancer group had shown up and danced her ass off. She'd been on her feet the whole show, having the time of her life. And then she'd gone home and died—that same night.

Anything can happen at any time. Watching all my risk factors—submitting to the twice-yearly exams and all the scans and probes, keeping my body strong, and eating as healthfully as I can—provides absolutely no guarantee that I won't get cancer or

any other illness. Maybe a serious illness isn't even in my cards. I could get struck by a car and killed as I ride my bike to Marcy's house.

I reside in what Shapin calls "the risk-factor world [which] holds out hope for avoiding cancer while recruiting masses of us into the anxious state of the 'precancerous.'" The insurance companies know that's my address, too. Because I've done all the diagnostic tests recommended to me, my only option for individual coverage, pre-Obamacare, was through the state high-risk pool.

My friend Marcy is dying. I'm dying too. We all are. She knows what's going to be on her death certificate. I don't. The lumps in my breasts, the moles, the fibroids, the solitary pulmonary nodule—they're all benign, every one of them. So far.

During the episode of mysterious high fever and miserable cramping and the escalation of doctors' concerns, I wasn't afraid that I was going to die. I'm too good of a rational risk-calculator for that.

My fears reside at a deeper level. Am I big enough, small enough, brave enough, smart enough to proceed with open heart and open eyes through a world that gives Marcy cancer and me just a small dose of necrotic tissue? What sense can I make of a world that gives and takes away so randomly, that offers such

exquisite beauty and love and joy and deals out such indiscriminate suffering? Can I make peace with a world that offers certainty, ultimately, about only one thing: my death, and the death of everyone I love?

Questions, I know, no MD or MRI can resolve.

Ho Chi Minh at Mouth of Source, 1941

Benjamin Goluboff

Socrates: And if they were in the habit of conferring honours among themselves on those who were quickest to observe the passing shadows and to remark which of them went before, and which followed after, and which were together; and who were therefore best able to draw conclusions as to the future, do you think that he would care for such honours and glories, or envy the possessors of them? Would he not say with Homer, Better to be the poor servant of a poor master, and to endure anything, rather than think as they do and live after their manner?

Glaucon: Yes, I think that he would rather suffer anything than entertain these false notions and live in this miserable manner.

—The Republic

Marx named he the mountain,
and the river, swift and cold
at the border, he called Lenin.

After exile, Ho entered
Cao Bang province like Adam
naming the landscape.

Ho fished in Lenin's waters,
and made of the shoots that grew
on the bank a healthful soup.

For shelter he had the cave in Marx,
called locally Pac Bo, Mouth
of Source, for the springs that rise there.

Ho slept on a plank in the cave
in Marx, and wrote there
the founding documents.

History does not say what Ho saw
shadowed on the wall, or if he knew
that the shadows were shadows.

Hannelore on the South Face

Cindy St. Onge

The cold painted her porcelain
as her eyes blackened in the marble
of her head, and though she seemed to look
right at you, begging you not to leave
her there, best guess is she died
about 20 minutes ago.

Her plea, just a noise up from the ice
and in the wind off the rocks: the residue
of her last thoughts and the steam
that thickened in her throat.

She believed that if she just sat down
to catch her breath that she'd get back up.
And now she's a leather woman who
watches all you salmon headed upstream.
For what?
A just current will carry your ragged scales,
your red parkas, your heavy boots
back down the slope, flotsam
caught on the jagged rocks.

The wind groans through
the hollows of her skull
like a conch announcing ceremony.
Once her breath returns she'll tell you

about the dream she's having, of flying
off the mountain, fearless and barefoot
and how good it feels to get up off of the snow.

They Call Me Slinger

Lauren Davenport

Greek Island Love—The Sequel
Catered by: Foodworks
Peppered feta pockets with curried lamb wrapped in banana leaf

I told Ayuku when I started, the movie thing was all about the food not the fame. I love the smell of warm feta. Once it seeps into my pores, there's no stopping me.

The polished gold sign on the door of the Canary Club on 80th and Broadway was not what caught my eye. Instead, the neon green flyers, taped with flimsy strips to the wall, dog-eared, as though clinging for dear life, grabbed my attention. They read EXTRAS HOLDING. That meant good food because I could smell it. I wasn't homeless or unemployed, just bored. And I loved baked feta.

I opened the heavy door and detected the scent of phyllo dough. Hot, flaky, lightly seasoned with pepper and a hint of rosemary—unusual, but not for Foodworks. I'd tasted their fig cookies before. Next, I was hit by the casino lighting. It eliminated real time. I felt right at home.

My first obstacle was a young boy mummified in wires. I could identify him as male only by his two large hands that fumbled through glossy piles of pictures. His baseball cap sheltered his eyes, ears, and hair from view. He was a vision in rubber, all microphone and cable, all plastic security badge. Mr. Man in Charge. I wore my blue gingham dress, average enough for any occasion, yet revealing enough to show that I was not ready for the compost pile. I rubbed my teeth with my front fingers, and approached the card table. Bones aligned, chin stiff.

"Headshot," he said, smacking his hands one, two on the table indicating the stack. I saw a series of photos that were all eyes.

"Ummm." I pulled my shoulders up towards my ears and held them there for a moment. I caught a whiff of cinnamon.

"No umm,"' he said, pointing towards the door.

"Oh, yes," I said. "Mmmmmm." I pressed my hand against all those wires.

His cell phone rang. His walkie-talkie talked. He pushed me aside.

"Jesus, it's not paying!" His hands gave the green light, so off I went.

The cream carpet, the speckled tiles around the proscenium, and the raindrop-shaped crystal chandelier were the only permanent fixtures in the room. Everything and everyone else was

in transit. Most of the nobodies sat in blue plastic chairs, chattering away or tapping on or with something—a pen, his feet, her hair, the floor. I dashed for the buffet table but was stopped by a man in a black vest, t-shirt, and jeans—a walking industry ego that spelled d-e-t-o-u-r.

"Please take your seat. Fred is about to talk to the group," he said, pushing me towards the available plastic seat. I wedged myself between some girl who was all teeth and another who was all hair.

"Don't you just love Billy Kurt?" Toothy said.

"What a bod!" Pantene Wash n'Go said.

"I hope we get to say hi to him, don't you?"

"Yeah, that'd be cool," I said.

"I wouldn't kick him out of bed for eating sushi if you know what I mean," Pantene said.

I'd never heard of Billy Kurt, but I didn't go to the movies. It was ten bucks a pop, and my part-time job at Madame See's Salon didn't really allow spare cash for entertainment. Some *Little Red Riding Hood* in German in black and white was the last movie I'd seen. I'd snuck in to escape the cold.

Mr. L.A. in black shuffled out to address the crowd.

"I just spoke with Billy," he said, "and he wanted me to remind you folks that you are the heart of this film. Without you

there could be no *Greek Island Love*. There would be no blood, no guts, no glory. You, the folks of crowd scene four, and the extras for the café break-up scene, you are the heart of it all. Oh, sorry, let me introduce myself. I am the assistant to the assistant to the assistant's assistant."

He paused for effect. The "ooohs" and "ahhhs" bounced off the speckled tiles. A frantic coffee-mug-filled hand bounced up, and its jittery owner said, "Did you do *Athens Lost & Found*? I love your work."

"Why, yes, that was me."

Another hand shot up.

"Will we get to meet Billy?"

The man in black mumbled something into his headset. He turned back towards the crowd.

"Oh, you are such a lucky group! This just in. You are about to meet an incredible man. The man who inspires me each morning. He's on his way here now—my boss: Ned Fliyle."

"OH MY GOD!" Toothy screamed and fainted down to the cream carpet.

Ned walked in making a quick pit stop at the food table. I wanted to lick the little piece of feta that dangled from his lower lip. He was a carbon copy of the man in black, except he wore a larger headset.

"Hello, folks!" he said.

"I just want to remind you of a few things. Gerry'll be by shortly to take a few of you off for some close-ups, the rest of you will get assigned to a group waiting area while Melinda tells you the rules. It's a pleasure to have you here. You may be wondering why you volunteered to spend the day and possibly the night with us. Now it may feel like we take the same scene a thousand times. But, just remember, you're part of something—something romantic, something terrific. So relax, enjoy the food, meet some fellow crowd members and, above all, have fun!"

The applause hurt my ears.

"This is the most exciting thing that has ever happened to me," a blob of a lady with dyed red hair and a sweatshirt said. She spoke to no one in particular. I headed for the food table. I was getting a food headache. I hadn't eaten a decent meal yet, just some crackers and a juiceless Macintosh apple.

The tuna wraps were adequate, the melon fresh. But nothing beat the peppered feta with curried lamb wrapped in banana leaf. The cheese melted on my tongue. I closed my eyes and saw *Antigone* begging to bury her brother. I could smell honey, feel the sun on my skin, the ancient stone of Greek amphitheatres playing real dramas. Just as I relaxed on my paradise island—Bam! The sharp, bitter taste of the lamb thrust in and out of me—as though

I discovered mud covering my sneakers and bruises all over my ankles from a fall. My mouth was on fire. I was sweating, aching. My mind screamed, "More, more!" The tropical fruity banana leaf brought me to the edge of myself and cooled me down with its soothing, refreshing aftertaste.

I opened my eyes, exhausted, wondering if I could handle another round. Oh what the hell, I thought. This time I dipped the feta pockets into the toasted almond salsa.

Once I'd stuffed myself until I felt the food at the top of my throat, I turned to slip out the door. But as I tried to steer my way past a group of hair-brushing girls, I tripped and landed in the middle of Extra Warfare.

Melinda, the frantic manager of the extras, was trying to get a short, bald man to put on a toupee.

"I can't do that, I'm SAG!" he shouted at her. He beat the dusty, reddish piece, like a rug, letting it fall to the carpet.

"I can't either, I'm AFTRA it's not allowed. Those are the rules," another bald man said.

Melinda mumbled something in Greek.

"You do it then," she said to me and pulled me over to a makeshift dress and make-up area.

"She's not bald and she's well…a she, but she will have to do," Melinda said, passing me over to a very, very tall man named Bill. Bill had long, straight, black hair.

"They don't pay me enough for this." He rolled his eyes towards the ceiling.

"Come on, darling, let's make you into a sugar daddy."

Several hours later, I was planted with a bunch of bald men in front of a blue screen. In this scene, Billy breaks up with Amber. She leaves him for one of the bald men—the one who offers her the merlot. All the takes were so calming that I started to nod off. I focused again when I heard Billy's line.

"Baby, it's time I started dancing again."

Billy was one of those perfect people. He had an evenly proportioned face and Sea of Aegean eyes. When he broke Amber's heart, I couldn't help sucking in my breath.

The crew sent us home with an autographed picture and a brown bag dinner. Not too bad, but a little heavy on the mustard.

When I returned home that night, I opened the door to the living room and heard the happy chatter and secret language of my roommates with their boyfriends. Sheila was with Dave in her bedroom. They were shouting invented lyrics to Nirvana tunes.

Janet and Craig were in her bathroom speaking baby gibberish. I rushed to my room and shut the door. I couldn't sleep—something about being surrounded by the cooing and nesting sounds of early love makes my thoughts wander, my senses alert to the amplification of my own hollow space.

I thought about John. The last time I'd seen him was in a small restaurant in Little Italy. Because it was nine-thirty, the waiter was anxious to sell us the last lobster. He said he'd make a special dish. Lobster, scallops, calamari, all over a bed of fettuccini al dente. I wore my favorite orange strappy dress because my girlfriends told me I looked like a starfish when I wore it. John had something important to discuss. I assumed that he was going to propose. He had misbuttoned his shirt so that the left side hung longer than the right. I didn't mention it.

The ice in the water glasses melted and lemon flecks floated in the glass. I drank four glasses while John buttered a large, flaky piece of sourdough bread. He took both of my hands.

"The last two years we've spent together have been the happiest moments of my life. I will never forget the time we played hide and seek in the New York Public Library. Or when we learned bocci ball in Central Park."

He excused himself saying he needed to use the restroom. I wasn't going to get my happy ending. John never used a toilet

during a meal. He had an iron bladder. The waiter brought the lobster. It looked sad and defeated, its single claw wrapped in a rubber band.

Space Alien Friends
Catered by: Imperial Foods Inc.
Saucer Sausages, Asterfries, Galactic Mousse pie

The salon was chaotic, traffic worse than normal. The streets were blocked off with yellow tape around the neighborhood. Delila, the new girl with a license in reiki and facial massage, didn't show up. Mrs. See's most loyal customer, Cynthia Schwartz, was coming in for a seaweed treatment. We were short staffed. I'd been training to learn to apply facial masks. Mrs. See pushed me into room four.

"No more than four minutes. Each application."

I thought she meant that I shouldn't let the mask get too dry. I did a decent job but I was distracted by the pineapple in the scrub. I wanted to drink the bottle of milk and honey. Instead, I listened to a Korean lady in the next room brag about her grandkids.

There was a shout from the corner room. I opened the door while my client's mask dried. Mrs. Schwartz was running from her room, her face still coated in a green slimy tint.

"I can't bear it, it's like being buried alive!" she shouted, running out of the clinic.

Mrs. See sighed.

"Another one afraid of close spaces."

She fiddled with the figures on her notepad. We lose a lot of money to the seaweed treatments. A person has to get wrapped in tight, white blankets and then in tinfoil and stay on a table for twenty minutes. Mrs. See let me try it once. I had a dream I was underwater shouting but no one could hear me. My skin did come out buttery. I asked to take my lunch break. Just my luck, a crew was filming an alien-landing scene right across the street! That explained the roadblock. I looked for the colored flyers and slipped into the industrial doors. I was met with an assistant type, but this guy wore a headband with two blue alien antennas. I knew he'd have a sense of humor.

"Looking for someone who is way out there?" I asked, cozying up to his sparkling receptors.

"Can always use an extra cadet." He removed his glasses, then placed them on again. A habit.

"Reporting for duty then, sir." I fondled one of his space ears.

"Straight on through to Pluto and beyond." He waved me in.

There was a different scene this time. Trekkie convention types. Geeky skinny guys who spoke in wavering adolescent tones

and disguised their knowledge of quarks and black holes with movie trivia and juggling. I went for the buffet, but this bulky guy shoved me away, saying, "They aren't letting us eat yet." Who put him in charge? Then again, in the game of survivor, he wins. I sat next to one of the skinny guys. He asked me if I'd read the screenplay.

"There isn't one. This is all improv," I said.

"Really? Wow. Cool. I took classes at Second City." He straightened his t-shirt.

"Impressive," I said.

My lunch hour was almost over. But I could smell the bitter apple wood sausage. I could see the chocolate. My cramps were bugging me. I needed something sweet.

"You do this a lot?"

"Nah, not like you, I bet."

He introduced himself as Ayuku. Ayuku was some weird alien stage name. These guys were hardcore. He showed me his *Star Wars* watch.

"It's a collector's item."

We were quiet for about ten minutes.

"You married?"

"Lesbian," I said. "Not into dick."

Works like a charm every time. I'd tried putting on a gold band for a while after John left but that never seemed to stop guys.

"Attention, all aliens. Please report to the halo deck for re-entry molecular construction," said a woman in a sort of storm-trooper getup. She was reading her cues from a digital prompter that reflected words from her cop-colored visor shades. I liked this place. The whole cast and crew stayed in character.

Ayuku and I got whisked off together.

"I hope we get to see Billy!"

"Billy Kurt?"

"You know him?" Ayuku lifted his mask to his forehead. He had two faces.

"Well, yeah sort of," I said.

"What's he like?"

Ayuku shouted but I couldn't answer because of all the action. We wobbled back and forth on each leg, opening our mouths as though emitting noises. The sound engineers would fill in screams later. Billy's big line was, "Women love me." Then he shot us. He would discover that we were friendly and offering him the fountain of youth to sustain the dying human race. He blew it.

I'd blown my lunch hour. I'd call Mrs. See when I got home and explain that I'd had a migraine. She would understand.

Sometimes, she's come to the shop with sunglasses asking everyone to be quiet.

Ayuku and I dashed for the buffet.

"I'm starvin' Marvin!" he said. His twisted front tooth glistened.

"Yep," I said.

After John disappeared I stopped eating for nearly two weeks. I couldn't hold anything down. I lost ten pounds. A friend came over with a pint of chocolate mousse ice cream. I was cured.

The Galactic Mousse Pie, was, simply put, out of this world. There were four layers of chocolate and a fifth of raspberry jam—Space Goo. The pie was frozen in a rice-paper-textured dough that melted on my tongue. It made me think of kissing. Especially a first kiss, when the tongue kind of doesn't know what it's doing and sort of jolts around looking for something warm, spacious, or inviting. Kiss Pie, that's what it should be named. The sausage was good, but Imperial Foods is known for dessert. I'd attended a wedding upstate where they served cantaloupe sorbet between courses. Imperial delivered the same liquid feeling with this pie.

Ayuku said, "You OK?"

I leaned over and planted a frozen one right on his lopsided lips.

"You're no lesbian," he said.

"Try me." I went in for another while feeling his skin through the hole in his t-shirt.

Desert of the Dead
Catered by: Gastronomie
Coffee-dipped couscous, prune tartlets, and apple puree bisque

I hadn't eaten a decent meal in weeks. Mrs. See took me back on the condition that I work weekends with no lunch break. I read astrological predictions in the free papers. They warned me to stay away from dormant volcanoes and computer screens. I got on See's good side when I suggested a peanut butter foot scrub. Mrs. Schwartz signed up for a series saying there was nothing like having someone touch your feet. She wanted to know why I wasn't married. I asked her if she had a son.

"You're much too good for him," she said.

On my first free Sunday, I decided to roam the Upper East Side. My stomach ached. I felt constipated. I was headed to the park when a crowd caught my eye. There was a camel! I'd never seen a camel before and was shocked at how large the hump was. I was ushered over to the blue EXTRAS HOLDING flyer.

The gatekeeper this time was a woman. She wouldn't let me near the entrance. "You're not the right look." She pointed me towards the exit.

"Yeah, you're right," I said, exaggerating my slumping posture and shuffling my feet like a cartoon.

"I know how you Scorpios are about procedures."

"Oh my god! How did you know I was a Scorpio?"

Bingo.

"Oh, I can tell, I'm really an astrologist—I just like movies," I said.

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, I could give you a reading."

"Well, they do need some backups, ya know, just in case Billy wants—"

"Billy Kurt?"

"You a fan?"

"Who isn't!"

I told her she was loyal but if a man crossed her she would put rat poison in his tea. She laughed. I said she would stumble on her true love. Something to do with a garbage bin.

"Wow. Weird. Well, I do live in a basement apartment. The cans are right there."

"You never know."

"You're really good," she said. "How do you know all this?"

"It's all in your sun signs," I said. "But be careful when your Saturn returns. Avoid major changes."

She let me in. Thank god for the free horoscopes in the papers. I couldn't get to the food but there was plenty of water. I drank six glasses and went to sit among the other dead. They wore black. A few mummified adults practiced haunting noises. A guy who was cast to drown in the Red Sea asked me if a person floats in salt water.

"Welcome, living dead," the assistant began. Everyone hushed.

"Without you there could be no awakening, the Great Sea would not flood, the desert would suck us all dry." He was reading from a note card and kept picking his ornamental nose.

"Let me hear your best possessed sound."

Everyone howled. Someone started to sing a Halloween song about bones. Mr. Assistant shared the plot hoping to clarify the lost look on our pitiful faces.

"This is one of the greatest love stories of all time. Humankind has been washed ashore, dead or barely alive—that is where you come in, my friends. There remains one man, one great man."

Everyone clapped. People chanted, "Billy, Billy, Billy"—it felt like a baseball game.

"Yes, our hero, Billy, known in this film as Phil, is determined to save us all. Most importantly, to save the woman he loves, Alice. He discovers a secret antidote, microorganisms in the water that when doused in Startree coffee allow people to live."

"Cool," said a guy with cropped hair.

The extras kept checking their watches—expensive gold timepieces. The women extras had professional highlights and wore brand name make-up. Was this a corporate deal? There was a lot of Startree coffee on the set.

My stomach hurt. The crew wanted us to flail our arms and legs giving the impression that we were immersed in water. I felt faint. I tried to reach for the couscous but a baseball-sized thud hit my stomach and sent me. Reeling.

I had to get out of there. I couldn't even breathe. Something had gone wrong. Marie, the set manager pulled me aside by the ear. She whispered something about Alice's accident.

"All you have to do is sit up when Billy walks by your flailing corpse. Just say 'knew you'd come, I knew you'd find a way.' You'll get a credit!"

"Can I have dinner instead?"

"Billy's all booked up," she said. She sighed heavily. "Oh. Ok we'll see what we can do."

All the extras hated me.

"And you are?" A thin brunette gawked at me. But there was no time to answer, places were called. Billy was only willing to do one take. He was apparently furious Alice "slipped" in the shower. He walked out in his tunic. Everyone started flailing, and gyrating. I was clutching my stomach. My flesh felt like cellophane paper.

An airy noise came from me somewhere. I was mortified. They were still rolling the tape. I felt my stomach tighten. Billy crossed to me. He lowered his tunic. He smelled like taco meat. There was a tiny glimmer of sweat on his brow. The room went blurry. I could smell, but no longer see.

Billy said, "You knew I would come, didn't you?"

I smelled refried beans. I love Mexican food.

Once John made me a TV dinner. We watched *Casablanca* while I devoured the cheese, lettuce, beans, and finished the taco meat. When John looked down there was nothing left for him to eat.

"You like food more than any girl I've ever met."

"Is that bad?"

"You're not fat. So it's ok."

Eating around him became awkward. I was afraid he was counting.

Everyone was silent and frozen. Billy stared at me, his sea eyes floating up toward mine. The smell was everywhere. He looked like an oyster that lost its pearl. I stood up from my spread-eagle flail and licked his chin. He tasted like something between a falafel and a burrito—greasy, sweet, soft. Spittle and drool dripped from my lips, puddles of it dripped from Billy's chin. I took little pools of spit and flung them at Billy's face. My slinging strokes were deliberate, forming heart shapes on his cheeks.

I stopped licking and shouted, "Yeah, yeah, I knew you'd come but the real question is will you stay, you bastard? You are so good at showing up, but could you just stick around for once goddamn it. What is it with you men?"

He wiped his face. The mummies began descending upon me to throw me as far out of the place as they could but Billy held up his arm to stop them. He was smiling. He liked it. He wiped more of me from his face. I heard one of the extras say that the scene was very organic.

Famous folks are into some weird shit. Although I haven't had a gourmet meal from a movie set in awhile, they say I'm a legend among the extras. It's true because people smile when I walk down the street. They know who I am.

Once I ran into Ayuku and he asked for my autograph. He asked me what happened that day.

"I was hungry."

"Were you really pissed?"

"Yeah."

"Boyfriend?"

"Ex-boyfriend."

"You are one rotten lesbian."

We hang around each other now, but it's not serious like it was with John. He told me that the extras call me the Slinger. I have a t-shirt that they gave me.

An agent called to give me a bit part in an upcoming movie called *Escape from B School*. I might take it but like I said to Ayuku it's not about the fame. It's the food.

Lily Finds a Story about Jack on the Internet

Carla Schwartz

Jack is sure he placed the small 19th century bas relief frame he
picked last week
in the glove box, after handing over a fifty.

The dealer had had no idea of the value.
With a potential buyer lined up, Jack *needs* to find that treasure.

Jack looks in his car once more. The March night air sears his
skin.
His torch runs dim. He fumbles the lock, then he's in.

Hold it right there, he hears, from the right.
Jack remembers the gin he drank earlier.

He thinks, *This is my house*, *where I grew up. My car.*
I don't need the Man in my face.

Jack's face, sewn in a permanent frown.
No one *needs.*

The policeman reads his rights.
Jack wants his quiet night, inside, to read more about beaten gold.

What is your name, the officer asks.

None of yours! Ah, there you are, my precious… Jack turns to the frame.

It must have been the gin. Jack slams the door on the officer's
shin
when he approaches the car.

The blotter reports a knock at the door. A woman opens,
Yes, I know him. My husband. "Arrested," it says. "Assault."

Lily tells her sister the story as she slices garlic. Husband.
Close call, her sister says. Another close call.

Beach | Vivienne Gale

The Once We Were

Steve Mitchell

In Sophie's version, I was muttering to myself (which I was) when we met, muttering like some sort of professorial street-corner vagrant declaiming Milton between gulps of Mad Dog. We were standing in the produce section of a Harris Teeter and she was trying to get to the spaghetti squash while I muttered finger to chin, eyes trailing at my feet until I finally looked up at her with a thin tremor of shock. She'd tell friends I appeared displaced, like an alien struggling for his bearings in a strange, new world.

And she liked to talk about it, she enjoyed telling the story, her body taking a new posture, slightly more erect, as she haltingly extended a hand toward the now-invisible squash and withdrew it, extended and withdrew, around my described movements. She might have worked that gesture into a hundred paintings (I certainly don't know, I never understood her paintings) but in those moments she simply enjoyed enacting it.

Our friends would laugh, every time; more at her joy in performance than the mysteries of the story itself, and I would

half-heartedly attempt to explain myself, falling back finally on the easy (but true) excuse that, well, I was already in love. Bill would stump into the kitchen for another round and Maggie would nestle herself even deeper into the lumpy frame of the couch. Others would jostle with their chips, or tidy the abandoned playing cards and Sophie would position herself before me, no matter whether I was perched on a chair or deep in a couch; she would turn, throw out her arms, and fall backward into me as if into a pool.

Our friends knew the particulars, having heard diverse versions over the years. At times their responses resembled the audience-participation elements of a cult movie. Ellen or John might shout or mutter, for dramatic effect, "and then he turned toward me and…" or announce loudly and definitively, "I like Spaghetti Squash!" They knew the particulars, at least her version.

The first words spoken (me to her), the following interjected questions usually stepping on the toes of her answers: "Uh, what do you do?"

"I'm a painter, what about you?"

"I'm a security guard, what do you paint?"

"Oils, acrylic, mixed media."

"Mixed media, what's that?"

"It means I can glue a bug to the canvas if I want. I painted a tree once, I mean I put paint on the tree and painted it. Once. What do you guard?"

"Space. I guard space," I elaborate in response to her blank look. "Right now I'm guarding an empty building."

"I'd kinda like to see that."

"Well, there's nothing to see really. It's just, you know…space."

And in her telling of the story, the conversation might shift or stall, but some things remained constant. I continued to stand directly in front of the spaghetti squash and she, having already set her mind to the delicate threads of the fore-mentioned vegetable, determined to wait me out or shift me in my orbit. So, she continued to talk to me, despite my unredeemed social awkwardness, my late-onset Asperger's, hoping to negotiate a position from which to snatch her prize until, as she would tell it, something ineffable (well, she wouldn't use that word) relaxed in her and the squash loosened its hold on her awareness and she began to listen to me, she actually looked at me, and she began to enjoy our conversation.

So there we are, she liked to say: I look like I don't know what, coming from the studio covered in paint and glue and he's wearing a shirt with a frayed collar and some jacket his mother

probably bought him ten years before (here, I would nod) and he pivots to face me every time I move, like a goalie protecting an invisible net and he's oblivious, completely oblivious.

"Do you like it?" she asked, with an air of impatience I wouldn't have noticed.

"What?"

"Guarding space."

"I like the space. Not so much the guarding." She wrestles with this answer while I stumble forward, "Painting. I guess you like that," grinning at my own awkwardness, "I mean, you wouldn't do it if you didn't like it."

"Yeah." She smiles. "I like colors." She fondles the stain on her grimy sweatshirt. "Red. Today was a red day."

"How do you do it?"

"Paint?"

"Just like that, he asked me how I did it. And there was something about the innocence of the question that compelled me to answer. I mean," (and here her hands would rise before her in a semblance of mock abandon) "if a five-year-old asks what happened to Fluffy after she died, you can't just say, 'Well, she's rotting in the ground.' You have to make up some kind of answer.

"'Sometimes,' I told him, '…sometimes I put the brush on the canvas and wait for the first stroke…'"

He nodded, she would say, nodding blankly herself, he nodded as if he knew exactly what I meant but I knew, she would say, that he had no clue. It was only later I would find out that he understood completely.

She became exasperated somehow, impatient somehow, rushing the next words in order to have the question and the exchange over for good: "…and sometimes I paint and paint and wait for the image to appear."

And I stood there, staring at her as if it took a very long time for her words to fall within earshot. As if they were traveling over a vast abyss and I had to parse their meaning from fragments of echo.

Here, Sophie would pause quite a long time for dramatic effect, a gaping, puzzled, innocent look on her face, turning within the room to each member of the audience (some who raised their glasses in familiarity), attempting to impart a small measure of her confusion at my open expression and the stuttering pause in our conversation.

And finally, she would shrug her shoulders, returning to the role of herself, but not before the gift of a glance to me, wherever I was in the room, a glance with the tiniest nested caress.

She shrugged, shaking off the whole idea of a conversation, "But right now I'm thinking about dinner. Some sort of dinner."

She edged toward the obstacle that was me, a pantomime of shouldering to a crowded bar, muttering now to herself, "Squash maybe, but what kind?"

At which point the gathered crowd, taking my role, would intone in unison, "I like spaghetti squash!"

She laughed. And I laughed. She extended her hand to me, wherever I was, swallowed by the sofa or gangly on a ladder-back chair: "My name's Sophie."

Taking her hand, "Hi, I'm Doug."

And she would accomplish a graceful half-turn and fall back into me.

And the beautiful and variegated versions of that story were told, branching and coalescing as water strained through smaller tributaries and finally meeting again at a cardinal point, told and re-told until they weren't any longer, until we were no longer together, and each version of the story quietly folded itself into memory.

Crazy in Love

Jason Allen

That night
we dismantled our bed

loaded mattress boxspring frame
linens blankets and pillows
into the bed of a pickup

then drove the miles
to the ocean sand
to unload the pieces

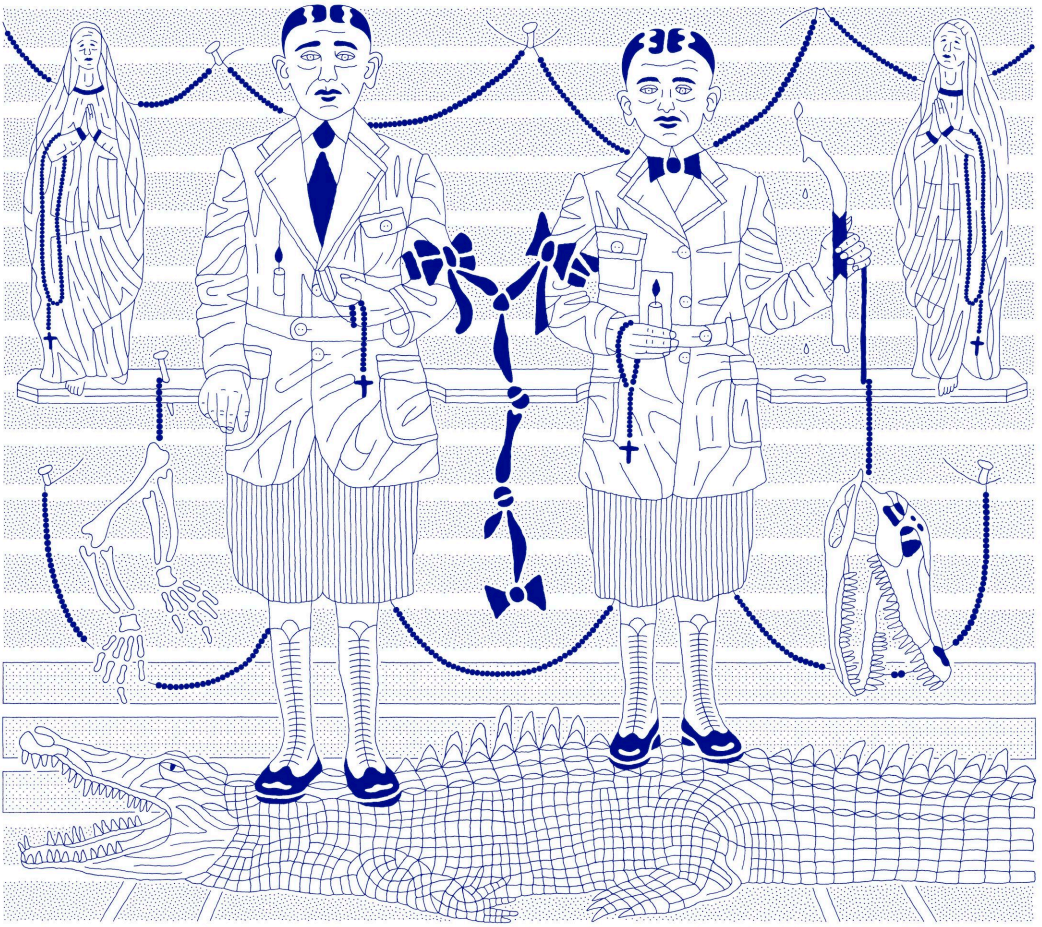
to reconstruct it all
against the wind and sound
of beach break and swells;

we tucked ourselves in
to watch the meteor shower

and crystal points above
that spell out stories so old
everyone has forgotten the point;

we slept there
in our bed on the beach

for no better reason
than to dream.



The Making of Brothers | Dmitry Borshch

Hearsay

R. S. Carlson

Guy says, ya know,
long after the war
working across a couple different borders
a couple different translations
another guy he met said
he'd had a friend who said
last of his time in the jungle
he was prison camp guard

Camp was who knows where
who knows how far from
which hamlet down some trail off
who knows what dirt road
who knows how far from what town
actually on a map

Guy's first month out,
some headquarters sent orders, sent bullets,
sent prisoners, sent pay, sent rice, sent tea

Camp commandant requested a medic,
medicines for guards and for prisoners, bandages,
pigs, chickens, more rice, more tea

Headquarters sent orders, sent bullets

Camp commandant repeated requests

Headquarters sent orders

Camp commandant repeated requests

Courier never returned

Rice gone, tea gone,
guards foraged for bamboo shoots
hunted rats for protein

With no supplies to answer the prisoners'
starvation
dysentery
dengue fever
malaria
jungle rot

Commandant told his men to
find their own ways home as best they could
after they gave the foreigners
the last grace left to give.

Half-life

Callum Angus

August, 1962

Reginald steered the Jeep over the ruts in the service road that the previous night's rain had molded into a moonscape of craters and gullies. The Utah sun baked the ground into a glaze of remembered rain while the three men bounced along the grid of military tracks stubbled with green sagebrush.

"A ciggy says that deer exploded," said Carl from the passenger seat, cheek round with tobacco. Behind him Sanford snorted and kicked the seat.

"I'll raise you a pack," he said. "All that rain? She's no where near bursting."

Carl stood up on the floor of the Jeep, gripping the windshield to steady himself as they neared a stand of willow now lush and green where yesterday it was brittle twigs. His gray t-shirt was already dark with sweat where it hugged his armpits.

"Hah!" Carl crowed. Reginald slowed to take in the gore. The day before the deer was swollen with the sun's heat. Now a bodyscape of congealed blood, innards and matted fur hummed with flies.

"Add it to my tally." Sanford scowled and looked away. "Assuming we make it out of Dugway."

A while later they left the vehicle and set out past flowering cacti. Reginald and Sanford picked their way over the cracked mud pan while Carl whistled tunelessly, digging with the toe of his boot to send scorpions running.

Every day they patrolled the same stretch of earth. They were meant to lay the traps out in straight, parallel lines to cover ground efficiently. But usually they tossed cages down in the dust as Reginald drove just fast enough to keep the grit out of their eyes. The cages were made of steel wire for rats and weasels. Not to kill but to keep alive, if just barely after hours spent with no water in the baking sun. Dead rats didn't test nerve gas.

Sanford shivered as he held open the burlap sack and Reginald upended one of the metal cages. Sanford knew the trap to be hot to the touch. Though the work gloves were back in the Jeep, no sign of discomfort creased the other man's brow.

He shifted his gaze beyond Reginald's shoulders as two brown rats tumbled into the bag to sit as dead weight at the bottom. Carl

had disappeared behind a clump of willow, perhaps to take a leak or jerk off. That left the two men collecting and counting rats.

"No weasels today," said Reginald. He squinted down the line of traps.

"How do you know?" said Sanford. They walked to the next cage and he let the bag dangle heavy between them, dank with unconscious rodent flesh.

"All them traps still in a straight line. Rats don't make nearly as much of a fit as a weasel when he's spitting mad." He spit to his left, emphasizing the point.

Sanford nodded slowly, saying nothing. Reginald often spouted statements of apparent natural fact, which on closer inspection turned out to be only frighteningly simple logic. It didn't matter to either man the ratio of weasels to rats they caught.

They came upon the next trap and Sanford tossed the bag down. He grabbed up the cage with his bare hands. He tried to hold it steady, tried to yank the door open while the limp rat crumpled in the corner, but its heat seared through him. He could only let it burn for so long before dropping it in the dust and Reginald reached for his hand on reflex.

"Idiot," he muttered. They often performed this ritual. Sanford tried to pick up the hot cages and Reginald inspected his

palm for blisters after. Sanford would think, in the dry morning air, that the three hands took up an odd sort of space. The cool water from Reginald's canteen shocked his palm, moisture evaporating immediately from skin to air.

Their reverie was broken by a shout from behind the willow where Carl had disappeared, and they took off running, senses attuned and wary to any flick of a twig or shadow impersonating a rattlesnake.

Carl was pointing excitedly toward a notch in one scrubby dune. A bobcat crouched, muscles taut and throat running a high-pitched, eerie growl. Its right hind foot was twisted unnaturally, bones fur and claws crushed in a solid mass by the jaws of a rusty coyote snare. The trap was chained to an iron stake driven into the ground.

"Where'd it come from?" asked Carl. He was pacing.

"The foothills," said Reginald. "The rain brings everyone down." For a moment, Sanford imagined the life of such a creature. Nothing but scorpions and a dusting of scat and bones inside a cave. But the sun. It would still be there, even if out of sight—announcing its presence below the surface in the sweet relief of being shaded from it.

The three men stared at the cat staring back, punctuating its dry growl with heavy panting. It was thirsty, and clearly weak

from dehydration and hunger. It had long since given up tugging on its ruined leg.

"We should shoot it," said Reginald. The others nodded. The cat curled back its upper lip, baring fangs.

"Did you remember the rifle?" said Sanford.

"Yeah," said Carl. "It's in the trunk." The Jeep had no built in storage compartment save for a large plastic box that rattled behind the seats and held their guns, ammunition, food. They had never used the rifle out in the field before.

Reginald stepped toward the bobcat. Its growl pitched higher, a frenzied whine mingling with wavy heat. Its muzzle was stained with blood from licking its wound.

"Go get the gun, Sanford," said Reginald. But Sanford was frozen by the bobcat's stare. Despite all the pain it was in, inflicted by a bored rancher, he could read in its eyes its determination to keep them away and yet somehow remain alive. It could not do both.

Reginald turned to his companion. "Get the damn gun," he said. Sanford stayed rooted. Carl made no noise. Reginald sighed and turned his back to the cat.

"You think it's gonna make it?" he asked. Sanford broke the feline's gaze and looked at the ground.

"It—wants to." It was all he could get out under Reginald's stare.

"It wants to?" he spat out. "That don't matter fuck all. Even if it did get outta that rusty trap, that cat wouldn't make it a day out here with a bum leg like that."

"We could bring it back," said Carl. He circled closer to the bobcat. It pivoted, keeping Carl in its gaze. Reginald and Sanford stared at him.

"Bring it back?" said Reginald in disbelief. He threw his arms out wide. "And do what with it, Carl? Keep it as a fucking pet?"

"It'd be the Bobcat of the Shit-eating 109th!" laughed Carl. "We could train it to dig our latrines." He was within spitting distance of the cat and crouched slightly, arms half risen and tensed at his sides. The pointed tufts at the tips of the animal's ears pricked up.

"Ha!" Reginald smiled. "You're fucking loony." He turned to Sanford "Get the twenty-two before this idiot gets any more ideas for his goddamn petting zoo." Sanford looked at Carl.

"Carl's right," he said. Reginald rolled his eyes, and Sanford rushed to cover his tracks. "Not to keep it, I mean. But, Reg, we spend all day killing rats and weasels and snakes. It's not hurting anyone, just look at it—"

"It's in pain, is what it is," said Reginald. Still, he took a few tentative steps toward the cat. It limped away, dragging the chain behind it, eyes darting frantically back and forth to keep all the men in its sights. "Where would we put it?" asked Reginald.

"Those old kennels," said Carl from his crouching position. "Where they used to keep the hounds." Several rusted chain link cages sat on the edge of base. Back when the number of volunteer soldiers on the base was in the hundreds, the hounds were dispatched after tests to sniff out the still-breathing forms of men sprinkled like daisies with nerve gas. One morning the soldiers were woken up by piercing silence. The hounds had been shipped out, a disappointment to many—they made splendid alternatives to human company in the desert.

"It doesn't need to stay long," said Sanford, sensing the argument was won. Reginald knelt to retie his boots. "Just a few weeks until it can walk."

Reginald straightened up and raked a hand through his hair. "Carl, bring the Jeep around. I ain't carrying this cat a quarter mile through the weeds." Carl let out a whoop, springing up from the ground. The cat shrank back from the movement with a hiss.

Next to the idling Jeep the bobcat settled into an anxious moaning, prickling Sanford's hair. Carl and Reginald came at the cat slowly from opposite directions, arms held out to their sides.

Carl darted in, grabbing the hind left foot not caught by the rusty trap and Reginald moved to hold behind the scruff of its neck. The bobcat whipped its head back and forth, screaming. Its muscles bunched and flexed between the two men, claws drawing deep scratches down their arms as they tried to find purchase on the fur.

"Sanford!" shouted Reginald above the caterwauling. "Dammit, open the trap!" Mesmerized by the struggle, Sanford shook his head and rushed forward to step on the catch releasing the cat's foot from the metal jaws. Seeing the injury up close he realized it would be a miracle if the foot could ever be walked on again.

Between the three of them they wrestled the cat into the plastic lock box in the boot of the Jeep. Reginald took off his shirt, streaked with blood running freely from eyebrows to wrists, and wedged the cloth beneath the box's lid to save an inch of air flow for the creature. He made Sanford sit on the box, where he stayed the whole ride home, watching the blood dry on the back of Reginald's neck, frequent yowls sounding beneath his ass.

That night, after the bobcat had been sedated and its foot bandaged by Roger, the base doctor, Reginald and Sanford leaned

against the chain links. They pressed their noses between cool, metal diamonds leaving indents around their mouths. Reginald passed Sanford a bottle of applejack.

"We'll get her back out there soon," said Reginald. Sanford laughed bitterly and took a drink.

"So she can go back to being poacher bait," said Sanford. The cat lay still on cracked concrete, chest barely rising and falling.

"Yup. And only if she doesn't get all twisted up inside from drinking our water. Give it here." Reginald snatched the bottle from Sanford's hand.

"She lives anywhere in a ninety mile radius she's already got those chemicals in her," said Sanford. "Probably born that way, with six tits or something."

"I think cats are supposed to have six tits," smirked Reginald.

"Yeah?" Sanford spat into the dirty water bowl set in the corner of the cage. "Well, I don't know. I didn't grow up no country boy like you. 'Sides, it doesn't matter either way how many tits she's got. You heard Roger—with a leg like that she can't go back."

"We'll see," said Reginald, knocking back the rest of the moonshine. He drummed lightly on the cage, then rattled it harder when it was clear the cat would not wake.

"Probably die of infection first," said Sanford gloomily.

"Hey, this was your stupid idea for a pet." Reginald turned to look at his companion. "What's eating you now? Don't tell me the idea of keeping her around doesn't lift your mood?"

Sanford stepped out into the dirt road that bisected the Dugway Proving Ground military base. It was a smaller operation, diminished to several dozen men from the heyday of the Korean War when hundreds cycled through. The quiet was oppressive. The Utah desert carried no chirping crickets, no lice scratching away on sleeping birds. He walked down the dark road and Reginald fell into step beside him.

"Your first test tomorrow?" he asked Sanford, who nodded slowly. "Agent Buzz or mustard?"

"Buzz," Sanford said. Reginald tossed the empty bottle from hand to hand, thinking.

"Why'd you come out here, Sanford?" Sanford shoved his hands in his pockets. "East Coast guy like you, some rich parents back home. You coulda gone to school, become a English teacher or something." Reginald barked out a laugh.

"I could say the same for you. Why the hell are you out here? What are any of us doing out here. Too stupid to stay out of this shit hole."

"Mm. Money's good," said Reginald.

"The pay's shit, you know it," Sanford shot back. "You'd make more working on Daddy's coal vein in Appalachia. Don't go asking me why I'm out here, offering my balls on a silver platter to be dipped in acid, when you're just as dumb."

Reginald shook his head. "Appalachia..." Sanford waited for him to continue. They passed the Captain's manicured lawn, a green oasis. The Captain's windows were dark, reflecting back his trimmed shrubs and empty concrete bird fountain.

"Hell, Appalachia would've gotten me before any mustard gas could," said Reginald. Sanford rolled his eyes.

"One toxic fume exchanged for another, Reg. Just different weather." He aimed a kick at the Captain's picket fence.

"That's not what I mean."

"What *do* you mean, then?"

"What do I mean," he said, his tone mocking enough to bite at Sanford's gut. "Why leave embroidered curtains and pool hall dances, Sanford? Why leave behind the post office where they know your name and how big your cock is or the city blocks where no one remembers your face? Why leave the girls and the skirts and school and church? I could go on."

"I'm not stopping you. You've obviously worked up a diatribe—let's hear it. Why leave 'em?"

"Because none of it matters!" He rounded viciously on Sanford, backing him up against the whitewashed fence planks. "It's shit that hems you in. Makes you think there's no place but the corner drug or the drive-in, the old water tower for a fix in the dark. Don't pretend you care for that bullshit any more than I do."

Sanford made a small noise that bled into the dark and sounded like 'who's pretending.' It made Reginald angrier.

"Dammit, Sanford. Every man is here because he'd rather toast his skin black with chemicals than let the rats have all the fun. Thought you woulda figured that out by now." Reginald took a step back and watched Sanford closely. Sanford avoided his eyes, instead tracking the map of inflamed red scratches criss-crossing the larger man's forearms. Reginald turned and stalked up the road toward the barracks, yanked twice on the plank door that always stuck and then slammed it behind him.

Sanford hurried through breakfast and then to the bobcat's cage with his sausage scraps. He poked them through the chain links and watched the cat look up at him, then return to sleep.

"Hey." He rattled the chain links. "Hey cat. Eat your food." The cat lay still under the tin roof in the quickly warming shade. A

few bread crusts and some chicken bones lay near its hindquarters. Reginald's been here, Sanford thought, and then ran for the idling queue of Jeeps that would bring him and the other volunteer soldiers to the testing grounds.

The procession drove into the desert, turning at marks invisible on the ground, but when viewed from a plane became large circles and grids extending for miles to map out human pain. Watchtowers built from parched pine boards stood evenly spaced across the orange ground.

The men were dropped at intervals, told to stand here, stand there, don't close your eyes, leave your mouth uncovered.

The generals drove off, leaving Sanford in the line of nervous soldiers. Pale yellow clouds fell from the planes in thick mists, blotting out the horizon. In the clutch of the misfiring neurons Sanford embraced the idea that he was dictating action to his body. Or inaction, as it happened to be. How it breathed and ate and fucked were all uncontrollable. That grasshopper left on instinct, he thought, watching through heavy eyelids as it leapt away. That snake—or was it a hare?—disappeared underground. Those rats, those hundreds—no thousands—of tiny black rats now swarming over his feet and playing with his boot laces. Why weren't they running? They blanketed the ground with their shiny black fur and small claws. How is it that they stay, he wondered.

He felt his muscles grow leaden as he fell to the ground, breathing shallowed. He thought that maybe some can pity the poor Appalachia boy. But he might say he's having fun. Might say it beats diaper pins and dark corners, getting to hurl his sack of nerves and spit into the path of the most destructive, inhuman thing ever made.

Tiny brown weasels joined the swarm of rats, and Sanford grew increasingly paranoid that they were going to crawl up his nostrils on their way to his brain. But, incapacitated as he was, face smashed into the sand, he couldn't struggle. Fortunately he lost consciousness from too much BZ gas—Agent Buzz to the soldiers—before seeing how far the rodents were going to invade his body. He felt their whiskers brush his cheeks, their paws pattering over his clothes as he blacked out.

Sanford came to, a rough hand stroking his brow as he lay prostrate on a cot. Reginald's other hand kept up a steady pressure on his bare legs and arms with a cool, damp rag. With his sweat glands shut down a near constant application of moisture to his skin was needed to avoid heat stroke.

Sanford didn't know how long he had been unconscious. He'd never seen Reginald after a test—didn't know where he

sequestered himself or who nursed him. In the warmth of the dark barracks he watched the other man's hands. Sanford tried to hide his discomfort at noticing a few of the tiny black rats frolicking around his kneecaps.

"The hallucinations fade after a few days," said Reginald quietly, radiating a planetary calm. Stacks of syringes lay on a nearby table, the antidote to BZ needing to be injected into muscle every hour. Reginald picked one up and punctured Sanford's skin, slowly administering the clear liquid. Sanford stared past Reginald at the barrack wall where pictures were tacked up of bare-chested men, muscled backs turned toward the camera and painful looking blisters festooning their skin. He was grateful he hadn't been selected for the mustard gas tests.

A gunshot echoed through the thin pine walls of the barracks. Reginald threw down the cloth.

"Stay here," he said as he ran out the door and merged with a stream of soldiers heading toward the sound. Sanford sat up to follow, shooing away the rats scampering over his sheets. Though his vision was slightly doubled, he threw on a pair of slacks and walked out the open door to follow the commotion.

The soldiers gathered around the kennels where a stocky man stood, hat cocked and rifle gleaming over his shoulder. Behind

him the bobcat lay on its side, a pool of dark blood spreading on the concrete beneath it.

"Never shot a bobcat before," the man said. He waved to his trophy inside the cage. "Might never have gotten another chance."

Reginald broke the man's nose. He staggered back and fumbled the rifle, which Reginald grabbed by the muzzle and swung the butt into the shooter's diaphragm. He lunged and pinned the man beneath him, landing more blows before he was pulled off by onlookers, the other man's face a bloody mess. Everyone was silent and Reginald shook off his restrainers. He walked away toward the far off pillars of desert rock.

The bobcat was never spoken of again. After sneaking rat poison into the shooter's milk for a week after the incident, Carl disappeared and no one asked after his whereabouts. Months later the men were told that the major battery of tests was complete and they were all to be honorably discharged. Sanford returned to New England, got a teaching degree and shuttled back and forth between high school chemistry class and his one-room studio. He never learned what happened to Reginald after their time at Dugway. Eventually, almost all the nerve agents used by the United States Army—millions of pounds of Buzz, mustard, a highly toxic chemical weapon called VX—were rounded up on

rusted out transport ships that were scuttled and sunk to the bottom of the ocean.

Brownie & Chipper

Kirby Wright

The *aina* makes demands. Brownie's thankful her husband Chipper built the bamboo shanty and filled it with axes, picks, and shovels. It's stocked with carpentry tools too: hammers, handsaws, a block plane, and chisels. She's proud of their cinder block home overlooking Pailolo Channel and the water catchment tank on stilts the *paniolos* helped them raise. She worries about the tank running dry this summer and Chipper waiting another decade for his Army pension. Driving cattle at Pu'u O Hoku Ranch made him angry because he was jealous of Paul Nolan, the silver spoon Irish rancher. Chip's anger turned him mean the morning she joined his cattle drive to Puko'o Harbor. It was the kind of mean that burns up everything good between a man and a woman. He made her rope a cow and drag it into the sea, until the horse beneath her was swimming and pulling a swimming cow. She tugged the cow past the breakers to a waiting sampan. *Kanakas* treading water secured a girth around the animal's belly and the Portagee captain hoisted it up and onto his deck. Brownie

pulled hard on the bridle and guided her horse back to shore. Sharks came from the barrier reef. The small ones circled. A big tiger shark went for her horse and that's when she pulled her rifle.

Clearing trees brought hate when she matched Chipper swing for swing. Now husband help is tough to come by. Brownie swings the long ax at a *lilikoi* and the blade sinks into its watery trunk. Yesterday she dropped one with a single blow. She swears the land is more *wahine* than *kane* because it's fickle. No rain like last year. Cut down a tree and two spring up. Hard dirt where once was soft. Scorpions everywhere. The July mouth of Kainalu River is clogged with sand and *pilau* water. She swings again—the tree leans and yellow fruit falls. Hot as blazes today, made hotter by denims and *palaka* shirt. She feels sweat on the brim of her *lauhala* hat. Winter's coming, she thinks, the season when monsoons force open Kainalu's mouth and rain fills the tank. She danced the Charleston last Christmas in the falls spilling off the tank's lip and remembered the boy in the white linen suit at the Moana Hotel in Waikiki, the blond from London who promised to return before boarding his steamer at Aloha Tower. She was sixteen. He was seventeen, sent overseas by an industrialist father to kill his dreams of becoming a Great War hero. She watched her belly swell waiting for his telegram, a postcard, any sign. "Goddamn you, Brownie," she mutters and swings again. The

blade breaks through—the *lilikoi* tumbles. She talks to herself to ease fears of being abandoned again, to make believe she has company on an island where conversation is hard to come by. But she's glad to be away from the tsunami of gossip in Honolulu, where she lived like a ghost in a Kaimuki shack with her mother. She remembers Mr. Fujita behind his meat counter. "Go home, Brownie, go home," Fujita scolded, "yo' muddah's credit all broke." She hates herself for leaving Buddy behind. She should have stood up when Chip called her son *keiki manuahi* and denied his visits to Moloka'i.

She hears snorting and sees Bella pawing the dirt in the corral. The mares want barley. Sometimes she brings them mangoes. She'd built the corral and painted it Chinese red when Old Man Ah Ping gave her five gallons for three flapper dresses, a set of heels, and a hat that made her look like a gangster. "Lucky *wahine*," he'd told her, "you and Missus Ah Ping same size all ovah."

Brownie picks up the short ax. Mornings like these with no trades and clouds too thin to drop shadows turn the homestead into a prison of 50-foot *kiawe* entangled in a web of vines. Only a quarter of the *mauka* land is clear. Brownie smells the stink of *kiawe* pods baking on the dirt. She dreams of a place to raise mares, her stallion Ringo, and their foals. She keeps Ringo roped

to a stake to keep him from getting the mares *hapai* before the land is cleared. She wants wide-open pastures framed by *kiawe* posts strung with gleaming wire. She wants *kama'ainas* driving the public road to respect her for turning acres of gnarled trees and smothering vines into a horse ranch.

She approaches a *kiawe* with the short ax. Sometimes she thinks there is no ocean at all behind the cinder block house and that the paradise Chipper promised was only a lie to ball-and-chain her. She swings. The blade barely cuts, the tree sending its iron-tough message from blade to blistering handle. When Chip worked alongside she chopped till her palms bled. She swings again—this time the ax spits out a wedge as white as bone. She hates gloves. Gloves soften the will. Gloves don't leave calluses or the ridges of scars. She likes shaking hands with the Kaunakakai men so they feel the work in her, especially the Filipinos who think they have it tough in the pineapple fields on the west end.

Pau hana time, Brownie will drag *kaka* lines into the sea for night fishing. Chipper never helps. She will drop hooks baited with octopi legs and tether her lines to the posts between storm windows. She wants *ulua*, the sweetflesh swimming over the twilight reef to feed in the shallows. She loves pan-frying fillets and boiling heads for chowder. Chipper will sit at an open window drinking red eye as the lines move up and down with the

tide. A year has passed since they've made love. Chip will hobble to the point at dusk, where young Lani waits on a quilt spread over the sand. Brownie wishes she could keep her man tethered like Ringo.

She spots Chip on the *makai* edge of the field. He's slow as molasses because of missing toes. He wears only jeans. He hobbles to the gate and dangles arms over the top beam. "Hui," he calls, hands cupped around his mouth. "Brownie!" "Wot?" she fires back. "Make my *kaukau*." She tugs the peak of her hat down to cover an eye. She recalls her mother saying a man stays faithful with three squares a day and being the boss in bed. She drops the ax. "Comin'," she calls. "Comin', Chip."

Her voice sounds *kupanaha*. It's deeper and carries more weight, as though another *wahine* is trying to break through.

Glossary

aina: land
hapai: pregnant
kaka: heavy cord line with hook and weight but no pole
kama'aina: local
kanaka: Hawaiian man, sometimes used derogatorily
kane: man
kaukau: food
keiki manuahi: bastard son
kiawe: mesquite
kupanaha: strange, queer
lauhala: pliable leaves of the screw pine; woven together to make hats, mats, and roofing thatch
lilikoi: passion fruit
makai: ocean side
mauka: mountain side
palaka: checkered white and red print on cotton cloth
pau hana: after work
paniolo: cowboy
pilau: stink, polluted
pili: grass used for thatching roofs
pilikia: trouble
Portagee: Portuguese
ulua: skipjack
wahine: woman or girl

The Boat

Suzy La Follette

The light was dim like twilight, the dock
empty; the only boat coming in was ours.
Alaskan-magic-trick-morning-light,
the same that fooled us the night before
(spent our last dollar on lobster). On the dock
we stood next to each other
exhausted but ready for the work
of the boat to relieve
empty pockets, lonely nights apart.

The boat was only fifty yards away
when they fired you, the small wake lapping
against the worn wooden dock.
You didn't pass your drug test,
and I must be a better liar.

What are you crying for? you asked me.
I'm the one they are sending home.

I found out later, the crew expected
me to go home with you, to protest, to argue.
That is when you should have known
about us. Instead, I dried my eyes, walked
the gangway and went to work.

Scaleless

M. W. Fowler

When she washed up on shore, Clara was found by a kid with a red sand pail that had a yellow handle and color coordinated shovel. Curled upon the sand, she was slimy from the sea and not appropriately covered by seaweed and starfish, and the kid nudged her with his shovel because he thought that she might sting him. Clara woke, and blinking her pearl-like eyes, she watched as the kid's mother rushed over to her son and snatched his shovel away.

"Get help!" said the mother, scolding her son away before turning to the sight of Clara trying to stand.

Clara stood crablike before wobbling and falling back onto the sand. She wiggled, feeling the sand all over her body. She had never felt sand stick to her skin before, and she looked downward at the sand that seemed to be attracted to her grain by grain—upon her toes, feet, shins, and thighs. *These are my legs*, she thought. She had lost her tail! And she felt as though the princess-worthy legs that had replaced her tail didn't fit her like they should.

"What happened to you?" the mother asked, covering Clara's bottom half with a sarong and straightening her hair so that it covered her breasts.

The mermaid blinked as she stared at the mother, then the ocean. The sarong felt dry and warm, and she suddenly realized how dry everything was here.

The son returned with the college intern, Sally, who was there to do research on the dead things that had washed up along a three-mile stretch. A sea storm had churned the waters all night long. A cruise boat had sunk, but most of the crew and all of the passengers had been saved.

"Were you on the boat?" asked Sally.

"Not on it."

The mermaid felt at her lips. They felt as if they had fallen asleep and just woken up. Her whole body felt that way. Sally continued to check the mermaid's vitals, though she wasn't really qualified for mermaid physiology.

"Are you sure you're OK?"

The mermaid giggled because she could hear the seagulls squawking hungrily about the dead things on the shore. It wasn't the sort of answer Sally had expected, and she insisted that she buy the mermaid some lunch. She figured the mermaid was merely dehydrated.

Sally had some extra clothes in her car, and after the mermaid had changed into them, they had lunch at a little café that specialized in personalized pizzas.

She didn't want seafood, she told the waiter, when he told her that today's special was shrimp pizza. She'd had enough of that. She wanted something that roamed around on dry land, she said, trying to describe a chicken. Sally raised her eyebrows. They ordered a barbecue chicken and cheese pizza with extra cheese and extra sauce. When the waiter left, Sally asked, "How did you end up here?"

"I'm here to meet a prince."

Sally raised her cup of coffee to her lips and said before she drank, "There are no princes anymore." She shook her head. "What really happened? How did you end up on the beach?"

Blushing, the mermaid played with the yellow paper umbrella in her drink. It was her second glass of hand-squeezed lemonade. She liked the way "hand-squeezed" sounded, and she said it to herself every time she took a sip.

Everything on the surface, she thought, was sugary. All of it needed salt or more salt. And none of it was adequately wet.

After Sally was satisfied that the mermaid was well enough to be left alone, she dropped her off at the tiny library. The tropical village had a tiny of everything, except the large houses on the

hills, the fishery, and the occasional cruise ship, which was almost the size of the island.

The library was cute, thought the mermaid, and she found a seat in the corner that was quiet and overlooked a lane of cobblestone streets and pastel painted facades. The librarian was a middle-aged woman who wore a dress with large flowers printed on it. She helped the mermaid find a book about princes, and the mermaid spent the afternoon reading. The mermaid was horrified to learn that the princes were all just as horrible as their fathers, and the princesses were almost as bad.

Eventually, she'd had enough of reading—it made her eyes dry—and she left the library. She wandered the streets and shops for a few hours until she felt dehydrated. She wanted water, and she was tired already of drinking glasses of it. As she passed a glass house with a fountain outside, she had a wonderful thought. She would take a swim.

The old man who lived there was quite startled—and secretly delighted—to see the mermaid swimming in his fountain. He watched her for several minutes before calling his wife out of guilt to see the mermaid in the fountain.

"She is something, isn't she?" said the old woman. She was an aquarist, and she thought the mermaid was the perfect subject. "Invite her to our party this evening."

The mermaid was not at all embarrassed when the old man interrupted her splashing the water in his fountain. The man was timid, she thought, as small sea creatures are that hide in their shells for protection. He couldn't keep his eyes off of her legs, and he asked her if she would like to come to their party later that evening.

"Will there be princes?"

"Have you lost your slippers?" the old man asked, laughing jollily at himself for being clever.

The mermaid smiled at the answer, wiggling her slipperless toes in the water.

"I am not sure I am looking for a prince. Not after that book I read."

"Well," said the old man, feeling his beard and wondering if he would be more prince-like if he shaved, "there will be many fine specimens at the party tonight. My wife and I would love you to be among them."

The mermaid looked over the old man's shoulder and saw his wife in the window of the second story, overlooking the courtyard. The mermaid waved, and the old woman waved with her fingertips.

"I will be there," said the mermaid, delighted that she had been invited to the party, which she believed was a smaller version

of a ball. Looking at her legs again, however, she realized that she did indeed need slippers to replace her flipper.

The mermaid had gone shopping, trading some old coins she had found once in a sunken ship. Then, she had walked the streets until evening, and by a happy chance, she found herself again outside the glass house, where people were arriving in shiny cars, in shiny dresses, and with shiny jewelry. The mermaid watched as one smiling group of people after another went inside the house. She walked up to the house, gave her best smile to the man at the door, whom she swore she had seen driving a moped taxi earlier that day, and was let inside.

Inside, she met a woman who introduced herself as the glass house architect. She saw that the mermaid had good teeth and good legs, so she assumed that she might be a potential client. The architect asked her if she liked the spaciousness of everything. The windows were all splendidly tall and ocean facing, and the finishings were all delicious gems that rivaled the view of the sea. The mermaid and architect walked from one corner of the house to another until she stood on the balcony. The architect insisted that the mermaid see the gem-tipped handles in the bathroom.

"The sea has many gems," said the mermaid. "None are used to open drawers."

The architect muttered to herself something about the young being unable to appreciate beauty, and she handed her empty champagne glass to a young waiter who had one of his shirt tails poking out of the back of his pants. The mermaid thought that he looked like a large penguin—sort of.

As soon as the architect hooked her arm into that of the old man who lived in the glass house, joining the smaller party within the party, she laughed loudly, though she had only caught the tail end of the joke. The old man saw the mermaid and winked. It made the mermaid smile.

She continued watching the architect and house's owner, a man who looked as if he had practiced hello and goodbye a thousand times. The intern showed up a half hour later with her reluctant boyfriend, who was still in high school. The mermaid and Sally exchanged a friendly wave. It was Sally's boss who owned the house, she learned.

Sally enjoyed some caviar from the buffet, and the mermaid thought about Sally asking her how she was born.

"In a shell, like an oyster," she had said. She was born in a shell that was buried aside the vent of an underwater volcano. The

bubbles of gas rose to the surface, and the mermaid felt that it was her destiny to do the same.

She wasn't supposed to do it, but she sometimes went to the surface and looked across the waves. She saw a dolphin jump out of the water once, and another time, a shark plunged into the air as it caught a bird within its sharp cage. When she had first gone to the surface, she held her breath. She was terrified that she would breathe in a surface-dweller disease. She'd heard the stories about ancient sailors who breathed a sickness upon one another. On one occasion, at the surface, she had cried for the first time when she saw a whale washed up on shore. She'd cried plenty of times underneath the waves, but she'd never felt her tears running down her cheeks.

She had come to the surface this time to find a prince because there were none under the sea anymore. There hadn't been princes for as long as anyone could remember, but now the last of the eggs had hatched. They had to find a prince.

The night before, she had followed a ship with a prince aboard. It was named the Royal Pacific, and it was as large and white as the clouds that filled the sky. She could hear the people aboard singing and dancing, and she thought that this prince must indeed be a joyful man.

She followed the ship all afternoon, and the songs died away as the sea darkened and churned under the winds of a storm from a land to which the mermaid had never swum. It was too tiring to stay at the surface, and the mermaid watched from below as the ship tilted back and forth in the wind, up and down the fronts and backs of waves frothing with white caps. In the storm, the ship was lost, and the men and women fell into the ocean.

The mermaid swam amongst the bodies, searching for the prince. She found him sinking to the bottom, unconscious, and she caught him by his sweater. Wrapping her arms around him, she swam him to the surface, and tipped him over the side of a lifeboat. The prince coughed the water free of his lungs, and immediately, he pulled other passengers from the waves.

She watched as the prince sailed away in the lifeboat, leading the other lifeboats across the bobbing waves. The prince looked back one last time, and she wondered if he had really seen her. Had any of them seen her, or would they all have a tale about a young woman who deftly swam them each to safety.

The sea was changing everywhere. It was filled with objects from the surface. She'd once found a car that had fallen off of a barge. It was brand new and shiny, and she sat inside of it and wondered what the surface-dwellers did in such things. She only

needed her tail to take her wherever she wanted. But it seemed to her that surface-dwellers rarely used their legs.

Another man cleared his throat, and the mermaid turned to face him. She blinked. He was ebbing awfully close, she thought, and then she recognized him as the prince that she had saved the previous evening.

"In art," he said, staring at her legs and feet, "we constantly study youth and its beauty. The landscapes," he said, pointing to the sea, "are always young because they are always dying and being reborn, from the highest mountain to the deepest part of the oceans."

The mermaid nodded her head, and she turned towards the sea that reminded the glass house with its shimmering waves that nothing was forever and everything was forever.

"Are all of the parties like this?"

"You mean," said the man, stepping closer to her, "are they all so fake?"

The mermaid turned to stare at him. He looked younger than she remembered. He opened his lips slightly to speak, and for a moment, she was afraid of what would come out. She was held in his breath, and she could feel him trying to prolong his answer, which she already knew.

Just then, the man was called away by his date.

"Excuse me," the man said.

The mermaid exhaled after he had walked away.

Across the room, the date waited for the man to return to her. She was some crafty girl who had made a skirt from the scales of the mermaid's tail, and in each of the scales, the mermaid saw one of her memories. She felt naked for the first time in her life, and she suddenly wanted her tail again. She could almost feel herself swimming within the ocean. She remembered the currents of warm and cold water, thick areas of salt, as if clouds, through which she would dash, and there was the feeling of racing fish, large and small through the unending waters that made her realize that within the room full of these people with legs she would always have to keep a secret from them. She, too, in their eyes, would always be a fish, and to her, they would always be something other than a fish. The dreams, so many dreams, of living among them sunk into a place within her where there was no air to breathe.

Before she knew what she had done, she had left the party and was in the street, in the rain. She ran through the rain. She had been to the surface plenty of times in the rain, but that was different. She stood in a puddle of water, and she looked across the street to the woman who was wearing her tail.

"Are you feeling OK?" the prince asked.

"I'm wet!"

"That happens when you stand in the rain in a puddle," the woman said nastily.

The man came over to her then. He held out his hand, and the mermaid looked into his eyes as she let him guide her to a store awning.

"You seem awfully familiar," he said.

She looked to his date who stood on the opposite side of the street. She wondered if her tail had any nerve endings left, if it were able to sense the rain.

The man gently squeezed her hand, and she let her eyes meet his.

"Your boat," she said. "The storm, that's where we first met."

He looked down her body, to her legs protruding from the hem of her skirt.

"But what happened—"

She pointed to the woman opposite them.

The man laughed, shaking his head.

"I can't believe it," he said. "I thought you were a figment of my imagination. You called me a prince…"

"I don't believe in princes anymore."

"Good," he said. "Because I'm a captain in need of a queen."

"What about your date?"

He looked at the other woman, who had crossed her arms and stood staring wild-eyed at the two of them.

"It was her skirt that had caught my eye. I saw her trying it on earlier today, at the beach. Something in one of the sequins that—I."

"They're scales," she said. "Like fish scales."

"Are they?" he said, wincing to see each of them again. "The next thing I knew, I was at the party with her. Then, I saw you at the party, and I knew something wasn't right, that I'd made a mistake. And I saw you in the water—"

"Everything here is too dry," she said, holding her other hand out into the rain.

"I feel the same way," he said, letting his thumb massage the top of her hand. "That's why I became a sailor."

She looked again into his eyes, and neither of them hesitated as they kissed. The raindrops fell all around them, and they could feel the water streaming over their skin. She felt as if she were beneath the water again, holding her breath as she swam for the surface. When she opened her eyes, he was there.

On the corner of the street was the aquarist from the glass house. She had watched the mermaid in her glass house all evening as the mermaid floated about the guests—all of them, she

thought, herself included, were fish who had washed up on the island for one reason or another. The mermaid had fascinated her until now, when she kissed her prince on the sidewalk. Now all the old woman could think about was whether their children would have tails. She looked back up the street, to her glass house with its fish, and she felt that the tide had changed for all of them. The mermaid had come, the finest specimen she had ever collected, and she would never find anything better.

She turned to the brokenhearted date of the captain.

"Stupid girl," she said. "Stop your crying. We have to prepare to swim."

The old woman snatched the skirt from the dated woman, and she ran down the cobblestone roads until she was on the beach and then in the ocean.

The old man and the party-goers watched from the glass house as the old woman swam into the sea, the ripped skirt catching the moonlight briefly before sinking below the surface. The old woman sank soon after, and the party-goers felt the cold bottom of the ocean in their throats.

And the Cow Jumped over the Trailer

Kelly Chastain

Cows know things. Don't let anyone try to tell you that they are meat sacks on four hoofs with nothing between their ears but a thick plate of lard-filled bone. They know the sound of the lawn mower will eventually yield bags of fresh-cut grass. They watch us shucking corn for the weekend's family barbeque knowing that we'll let them eat the husks and eventually the cobs. They know what it means when my dad backs the trailer with its slat wooden walls into the pasture, and one of the herd is singled out, filed inside, and driven away. They stand stock-still at the edge of the pasture, circling the distraught mother who bawls like an incessant foghorn, her moo pulled from the end of her tail. Guttural. Low. Forsaken. When we hauled my steer off that morning, it came as no surprise to my thirteen-year-old ears to hear that long desolate call from the fence line.

They all knew damn well where we were going.

Our biggest mistake was never halter-breaking him as a calf. His mother, a prize-winning pure-bred Black Angus, edged away from the halter all her life, but once you lassoed her in the web of ropes she followed you like a puppy. She'd set up her own feet in perfect formation when we stopped, as if the world had turned into one giant show arena. This guy, her third calf, knew nothing of 4H and county fairs. He did know something about slat-railed confinement, his last memory of it, locked in the stanchion having his balls banded so they'd slowly suffocate of blood, die, and fall off somewhere in the field. His future would not consist of breeding with hot Angus heifers, but in providing Sunday's pot roast. Surely that had to have played in a loop in his head as my dad eased the Jeep onto the two-lane highway, the longest 12.2 miles of his life, in the direction of the auction yard. The fear thickening his blood to gravy.

Even the mere suggestion of confinement clouds our eyes like cataracts where we are blinded by the slightest glare of what we don't want, or, in some cases, what we can no longer bear. It's there where our futures morph into a dissonant blur. We aren't the only ones who fix our gaze on a filmy undesirable horizon. Cows stare into the same vista.

The Jeep zipped down highway 99 through the bucolic landscape passing winery signs and fields of raspberries. My dad kept the needle at fifty-five, and headed against the steady line of morning commuter traffic en route to Portland. I can't remember all the details but I can tell you this: it was Wednesday because that's the day the auction ran, and it was morning because it was still crisp outside. The Jeep jerked in the lane and when I looked back the first time, I watched my steer turn nervous circles in the trailer. My dad kept an eye on the road and the other on the rear-view mirror. We stayed at this for a few minutes, the hurky-jerky pull on our vehicle more and more pronounced.

"Dad," I said, the alarm mounting in my voice. "He's climbing out."

I am sure there was a string of profanities that left my dad's mouth sounding something akin to this, "Son of a bitch! What the…? Jesus Christ!" Scanning the narrow roadway for a place to pull off, his eyes darted back and forth calculating the few options in front of him: the ditch and the weigh station about a half mile further up the road. His arm came across that middle space between the front seats to shield me from an unseen danger, and his voice, loud, saying, "Hang on, hang on, hang on" as he gunned it toward the wide spot stretching out before us.

My dad pinned the accelerator to the floor as my cow climbed the side of the slatted wood trailer, one rung after the other. We whipped into the weigh station across from our friends' fruit stand, and before the Jeep came to a full stop I had the door open, my seat belt unbuckled, and somehow had wriggled out from under my dad's hand holding me against the seat as he slammed on the brakes.

Everything slowed down, the thump-thump of my Keds on the black top, my eyes wide and staring at the trailer where my cow had climbed the wall and jumped. All four hooves lifted off with nothing but eight feet of air between him and the ground and freedom. Those hooves suspended for a second too long, arcing in the sky, charging, running through the thin molecules, away, away, away.

I read somewhere that fear is nothing more than a simple misunderstanding of circumstances, and that once all of the questions are answered, even if the news is horrible, the fear subsides. Still if those questions go unanswered for too long the fear overtakes logic, and suddenly ideas and actions once considered too risky become palpable choices. It must have been there, on that flat stretch of country road, that my cow decided the situation had become too much to bear. In the haze of an

adrenaline overdose it made perfect sense for my perfectly sane and healthy cow to jump out of a perfectly good trailer while driving a perfectly respectable speed toward the predetermined ending place. But therein lies the problem, an ending place, something that steer, whose name I cannot recall for the life of me, could wrap his horn-free head around.

About this time my dad would begin an affair with a co-worker that would end his marriage to my mom, cause the sale of the farm, and the broken family diaspora. His choices, seeming few, the constraints, perceived or otherwise, closing around him like the locking door of the stanchion, the tight squeeze of a neutering band. The risks now bearable, the sneaking around, their time spent at work devising a plan for both of them to get out of the hell hole of everyday life. Looking back I wonder if he told her, the other woman, how he gripped the wheel of the Jeep and looked to providence to send that god damned steer ditch-side and out of the oncoming traffic where he would absolutely, positively kill someone if they hit him.

I am too old now to think badly of his decisions or the way in which he executed the final blows that dissolved everything. It still puzzles me, but I wasn't the one driving. I wasn't the one throwing my hand in front of my daughter, doing everything I

damn well could to keep it under control until the hurricane force winds swept us up away, away, away.

The moment the steer touched down, time picked up speed. His momentum carried him forward stumbling toward the ditch. I ran and ran, forever in his direction, and jumped like the gymnast I still was, planting my right knee behind his shoulder, all one hundred ten pounds of me shoving him into the ditch, out of the ceaseless oncoming stream of traffic, down, down, back into confinement. Twisting around with my back arcing into his, my legs pushed against the side of the ditch to keep him there. His hide, sweaty and rich with dirt, the smell of the pasture rising into my nose. I held him there. Animal against animal.

In the midst of a struggle, our minds flip through our experiences like an old Rolodex file, looking for a solution to our current conundrum. Most times, we drum up abstract thoughts with little connection to the present situation. So in that moment I knew the following: Simon, my cat, was probably asleep in my tree fort, the hamburger my mom had taken from the freezer that morning sat in the sink in a bowl of water thawing, and the Jeep was still running. My cow, on the other hand, knew other things like a serious shot at escape lie in getting out of that ditch, that home was tailward and about a three-hour walk away, and that his

mother was likely still calling for him in the only pasture he'd ever known. Unlike me, his determination sprang from a linear thread.

Many things, I wouldn't know until later. That afternoon when he appeared on the auction floor with his weight flashing in red LED numbers above the auctioneer's head, I would discover that I had wrestled an 1,192 pound steer to the ground. I wouldn't know until moments later that two men from an auction yard a few towns over had watched the entire scene unfold and pulled in behind us to help. It wouldn't register for a few seconds that my half-ton cow had jumped for his life when no other option, presented or otherwise, seemed the right thing to do. His knowledge of a short future in a packing plant livestock pen closed in around him, the weight of it too heavy to stop him from sliding over the tipping point. Just jump. Get off the disorienting ground. Run for something solid. Run. Away, away, away.

With that knowledge we stayed in the ditch at that wide stretch of road beside the weigh station. It could have been either a moment or an eternity that the steer and I imposed our will upon each other.

"Stay on him, stay on him," one of the men from the auction yard yelled to me. I pressed my heels hard into the ground, the muscles in my thighs screaming and shaking. I felt the animal

beneath me, fighting to find his own legs, to push himself up and make another run for it.

"Just stay down," I whispered to the steer, over and over, my mouth inches from his ear. His black eye stared back at me, wildly determined. I wanted to stop time, to pull him out of the ditch, throw my arms around his neck like I did his mother's so many times, and tell him I'm sorry it was all going down like this. It wasn't personal. Not on my end anyway. Instead, I arched my back and pushed into him with all my might, the tissue and tendons flexing, the hardening of sinew beneath me, and him forcing his way up. My mantra continued, "Just stay down." I felt myself rising off the ground despite my best efforts. "Please," I added, and out loud that time, where everyone could hear it.

The first man planted his knee behind the steer's shoulder and threw not one, but two, halters around his head. His gloved hands working faster than any calf roper I'd seen. Cinching the rope behind the ears and jaw, he wrestled the cow's head. His flannel shirt blew open, unbuttoned, the tip of it grazed my cheek and smelled of alfalfa and oats and wide-open pastures, a phantom freedom. My dad and the two men worked him from the ditch and stayed clear of his rear hooves, kicking wildly. Desperately. Furiously.

With the men coaxing on all sides, I stood there shifting on my feet, caught between wanting to help and being in the way if I tried. They returned him to his six-by-ten-foot cell, this time tying both halters to the trailer tongue, giving him less than eight inches to maneuver, and yet, he persisted, and only a mile before the auction yard would he tire himself out with pulling and fighting.

"I've never seen anything quite like that," one of the men said. They looked in on the steer, each of them inspecting him.

"All I could think," my dad began, "was if he jumped the other side into oncoming traffic." His face was pale, something I rarely saw. I stood outside their silence as they tallied the implications of that, the financial ramifications, the lawsuits, the ambulance bills, and the potential loss of life, all something I couldn't yet fathom.

I got the address of the two yardmen so I could mail the halters back to them, we shook hands like real men, and after piling into their truck, they turned back onto the road with one last glance at the steer still fighting against the ropes and the trailer and the inevitability of the slaughterhouse. My dad and I stood there for a long moment, each of us on opposite sides of that trailer, looking at the steer and wondering how he didn't break a single bone.

"Jesus Christ," my dad said, shaking his head.

My brother would say the same thing in a few years when everything fell apart. Soon after, I would say it in my head when I saw her, this airborne steer's mother, my 4H bottle baby, standing in someone else's pasture. I would stare through the grime-covered bus window on my way to school, not even an eighth of a mile from where the steer jumped out of the trailer in his last bid for freedom. His mother's image, grazing in that pasture, would haunt me all day, and I would not believe it until I saw her again on the way home. Then I would have a truth, the cold hard version of it, to placate the oncoming fear.

We climbed back into the Jeep and drove away, my dad and that steer and I, into a future that would come down on us as hard and as inescapable as the butcher's knife.

Virginia

Ricky Garni

Shortly after midnight I thought about my old third grade teacher
Mrs. Melville and how much I loved her and how she used to kiss us
all on the forehead as we left the classroom every day at 3:00. One day
she even invited Hampty and me to see her new color TV console that
was hidden in her stereo. She offered us apples and crackers to eat and
cherry fruit juice to drink. All of this was very good and nice to think
about until I opened the newspaper and discovered that Mrs. Melville
fell down on the railroad tracks on Thursday, July 12th, 1965 at 4:00 p.m.
Yes! Mrs. Melville fell down that day an hour after she kissed us, and
ten minutes before we were safe at home eating sugar cookies, and
15 minutes before we watched more Indians die on television, and
precisely when my mother stared out the window at the bluebird
that had flown to the power lines to rest its tired body.
We were saying *mmmm,* and Mrs. Melville was saying
James, James, help me, James was saying *I am here,*
Virginia, I am here and Mom was saying *Please, God,*
let me do this, and the bluebird was saying nothing
and Father was simply *hidden away.*

On Cremation

Mahtem Shiferraw

*

When would you like
to die?

It is a simple question.

If you knew, would you hide?
If you didn't, would you worry?

Would you choose how?

Old age, great illness, to die
in your sleep?

Would you still love?

How much of yourself would you give?

Would you still have
the courage to wake
every morning?

Would you
rather not?

*

WHEN WOULD YOU LIKE
TO DIE?

Gail says
she bought the plot
a long time ago—
not when she discovered
her illness, which didn't
quite change things, but which did somehow—
but when she fell in love.

Here, dear, she said, here
is where we'll be, in a few years,
and that if we're lucky, lying
skull to skull, our bony fingers
carving the soil. Our teeth will
look terrible.

He says, I am sure your
hair will fall first.

Here, my love, my hair
your hair.

*

WOULD YOU CHOOSE HOW?

There are so many different
ways to do it.

Margo handles her clientele
professionally. She lights a
cigarette, blows circles of winds,
unfrolicks her hair.

The pill, of course.

—Lipstick smeared whispers—

And the pillow.

She lights another, furious gestures.

The wrists, I remind her.
And tall buildings.

Too bloody.
Too messy.

What if I survive, both?

Yes, what if?

*

OLD AGE, GREAT ILLNESS, TO DIE
IN YOUR SLEEP?

It's a Tuesday night.
A tall dark haired man
sits on a soggy couch, his
shoulders arched, nostrils
flickering at every breath.

His wife approaches quietly,
kitchen knife in one hand
cross on the other.

You see this vein, she says,
this blue one, popping out
from his skin?

That's mine.

*

IT IS A SIMPLE QUESTION.

Esmeralda unties her shoes
one more time, knotting
gray strings
over and over again.

She says
it's not as complicated
as you think.

I will trip on these knots,
fall off the bridge,
get hit by a car.

I say,
I brought you bleach.

*

WOULD YOU STILL LOVE?

I dated a boy once
who thought he was death.

He wore black capes, dark makeup
butt-cracking jeans. He spoke of
the afterworld, the damned, the just.
He ate bloody meat and fresh guts,
warm still. He called me darling.

Darling, look into my eyes.
What do you see?
Do you see death?

Because that is how
it must look like.

Not white light,
then absence.

Yes, I see it, now.

*

WOULD YOU STILL HAVE
THE COURAGE TO WAKE
EVERY MORNING?

Angelique likes to sleep;

she lays supine, her skin
opening up like warm tulips
her feet tracing cold walls
her heartbeat softened by
the night.

Though Mondays are quite different.

That's when she sprawls on her side;
legs lifted up to her chin
palms cupped as if in prayer
eyes wide open to adjust to darkness.

That is how she wants to die,
womb to womb.

Though she dies a little
each night.
*

HOW MUCH OF YOURSELF WOULD YOU GIVE?
Mayumi wants to know
who killed her father, like that,
like an animal, who hanged him
upside down, from the sycamore,
who lacerated his back, who took
one eye, and left the other, solitary,
by itself.

She wants to know
if the leaves swallowed his last
words, if the winds softened his
pain, if the earth drank his blood.

All she has to do
is smell your fear:
have you heard something, dear?

Have you heard about my father?

HAVE YOU HEARD ABOUT MY FATHER?

And she will know. If you have.
She will know if you have that eye.

*

IF YOU KNEW, WOULD YOU HIDE?
IF YOU DIDN'T, WOULD YOU WORRY?
Marlena wants to be a boy.
She says the little girl in her
died; she can't recall when.

She will come back home
as Marlon.

Her father won't understand.

*

What would be my last thought?

Would I think of you? Or would
I think of the last thing I started but
didn't finish?

Would it matter that I had this list,
this long list of people
I wanted to kill, or love
before I died?

Would they think it was a
suicide note or a sweet goodbye?

Would I die again?
Would I love a ghost
again?

*

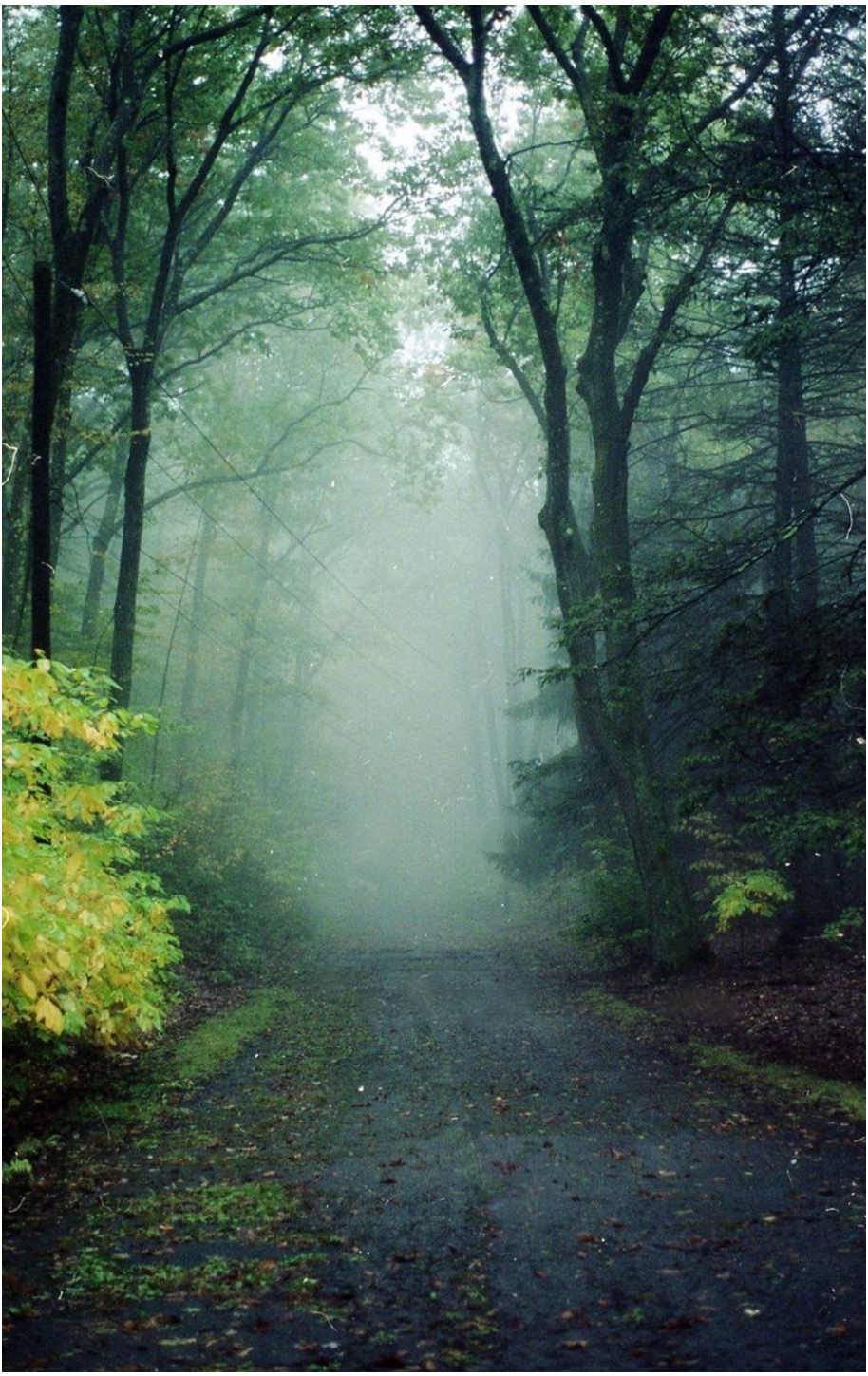
Apposed

Caitlin Elizabeth Thomson

I never bought ghosts
as metaphor, they are too stubborn
for that. Unpredictably showing
up at the mall, funerals, or a diner,
jealously eyeing the scrambled eggs.

They refuse to leave church sanctuaries,
but avoid graveyards.

Many are still addicted to television.
They gather in the electronics departments
of big box stores, wishing that they
could change the channel.



Into the Fog | Beth Maciorowski

The Most Constellations

Reem Abu-Baker

This story has come out many ways—as a joke, as a confession, as a plea for or against sympathy—but it has never come out true. It has worked its way into the dust and corner things of the dimly merging days, shrinking to something constant but unstable. This is a story about guilt, but it is not an agonizing guilt. It is a background guilt. Specifically, it is a guilt about lack of action. Specifically, it is a guilt about lack of guilt.

Here are facts: Sara died in late summer 2009. I know this because I had just graduated high school, was surrounded by a smoggy pride for having been admitted to a university with very green grass and very gold roofs.

There was a ceremony, and afterwards my robe and honors sash were left limp on a closet floor as I drank the night's first vodka-something at my older friend Kelsey's apartment. I liked to say that I did not enjoy high school parties.

Here I will stop giving only facts: Sara died in late summer 2009. I know this because I was at her funeral. I was supposed to

be camping. But instead of sitting catatonic by a sputtering fire on a small mountain, speechless from a combination of Keystone Ice and Colorado chronic, I put on a stiff black dress in which I cried and reminisced about Sara. They said it was an accidental overdose on Ibuprofen or Advil, some strange fluke of proportions and livers and stomachs. I believed them. I went on strike against damaged destroyed bodies.

I held Sara's daughter at the funeral. She was named after a flower and not a car.

I didn't look at the stars that night because I was in the city, at the funeral. I didn't trace the most constellations I ever have and I didn't make a meteor wish about dorm rooms. I saw the building lights go out and I thought very hard about beauty and pain and transience.

I will say that Sara had been a good friend, that the last time I saw her had not been that party at Kelsey's the night after my high school graduation.

The party was in the strange apartment building where Kelsey lived with her boyfriend Evan, the sort of place that exists between the city and the suburbs, and is filled with the waxy-skinned angry children of the upper-middle class.

I'd never liked Evan but the night after my graduation we drank champagne and stood in front of the open refrigerator together, eating sliced provolone from the package.

Sara came to the party late and very sober. She came from her class at nursing school. She got drunk quickly because of an empty stomach.

I will admit that I did experience some concern for Sara when she insisted the gallbladder was located in the throat. I would like to say that I decided to take extra care, to pay extra attention, keep my arm around her while Kelsey poured me shots of 99 Bananas. That we danced together, sliding across the floor in our sock feet.

If I didn't make sure to sleep next to Sara when she passed out on the couch, I am certain I found a blanket to tuck over her legs and up to her chin. I am sure that I shook her awake, poured water down her throat, made her fall asleep normally before I crashed onto the floor with a boy whose name I am sure I knew.

I would like to mention again that I never liked Evan. I'd tried to talk Kelsey into leaving him several times. But he was there that night and I was trying to give him a chance. It is important to remember that I was eighteen. It is important to remember that I did well on my AP tests. It is important to remember the champagne and the darkness and that I never liked Evan. What I'm saying is I could've been hearing things. What I'm saying is no

one would lie on the floor next to a mostly naked stranger and listen to someone get raped.

What I'm saying is that Sara died in late summer and that was months later and it's likely she never remembered that night. I was at the funeral. I held her daughter. I cried exactly like everyone else.

Mulberry Street

Alan Ferland

Rusted chain-link fences
stretch the length of crumbling sidewalks,
containing little ones in yards
of crabgrass and dirt
supervised by parents
on their tenth cigarette break.
Rainbow colored toys
strewn about the yard
drowned in the storm that night.

Their neighbor
needs three things
before the cops show up:
Stitches, a dumpster for his red-stained shirt,
and an alibi
that won't place him
at the house where
someone died
from a robbery gone wrong.

And tight-lipped locals
never saw the Mustang doing sixty
in a twenty-five,
or heard how many times

Crazy Louie was shot,
or knew how much borrowed money he lost
on the game last Sunday.

Tips

Lis Anna

Tupelo Honey's real mom died when she was real small but she loved her. That's how she ended up in the sticks with Auntie Monster and her boyfriend, Thursgood. It was funny how someone named him Thursgood, like he worked in Washington or was a King, because mostly he was good for nothing. At home it was all crazy, all the time. Auntie Monster called herself a business owner but they weren't nothing but a bunch of hooch runners. Hauling it. Drinking it. And whatever small amount of sane left in their brains was distilled a long time ago. But that place had a roof and walls. Or so they liked to remind her. Auntie and Thursgood had run off in the middle of the night in a frenzy of screaming and door slamming. The silence was nice but the shack was low on provisions.

Tupelo Honey put on her Sunday shirt and set off down the old, dirt path that led to the county line and that's how she found that dead man floating face up, staring straight into the blazing gates of heaven. She'd never seen anything dead in all her life

except maybe a bug or some furry thing squashed on the side of the road. The dead man's eyes bulged like the nastiest sight you done laid eyes on. But here's the thing. He was so quiet out there, floating under a clear, blue Mississippi morning with all of those Jesus bugs racing past his head. There had probably never been a finer morning in Jackson County and he was too dead to see it and Tupelo Honey thought that was a real shame.

She stared at him, trying to figure out if she'd ever seen him before and got this terrible fear he might step out of the water and snatch her up. She was gonna run away from the floating dead man when her eyes, god help her, caught a glimpse of those shiny new Wing Tips on his feet and boy were they nice. All leather and polished and pointy toed, looking like they cost a pretty penny. So, her mind got to thinking about how if she could get those shoes she could take them and sell them for money. And that was a fine plan so she rolled up her good pants and stepped barefoot out into the water where mud squished up between her toes. She said a quick prayer in Jesus' name cause she was about to lift some shoes off a dead man and would need a nod from the Holy Ghost. She reached down sure as she pleased and tugged a wet shoelace. The shoe was stiff and wet and she wrestled with it. The man kicked up a stink. She tugged hard. His body sloshed around in the water until the shoe came free and she tossed it onto the

bank behind her. She leaned over again and tugged on the second one cause one shoe is useless unless it's a piece of art or something.

After she wrestled those shoes loose she took them over to the quiet, little boy in the house with the blue door off the boulevard. Then she walked right down to the police station and asked the woman with big hair and pink fingernails if she could talk to Sheriff Dietrich. He saw her right off, but wasn't smiling, because policemen are trained not to smile.

"Sheriff, there's a problem," she said.

That didn't make him look any happier. "What's going on, Tupelo Honey?"

"See I was walking down that old path that cuts from our property down to the county line and there's a dead man floating out on that lake where the Canadian geese come to hang out in the winter."

The Sheriff blinked. "What did you say?"

She sighed big and long and irritated and repeated what she'd just said.

"Are you saying you saw a dead body?"

"Yes, sir. Dead as you ever saw."

"Are you sure?" He knelt down and leaned in so close she could smell the bologna sandwich on his breath. "You're positive it wasn't just someone playing a prank?"

She thought about wrestling them shoes off of his big feet, knowing he was already up at the pearly gates with St. Peter trying to decide if he'd been naughty or nice and just kept that part to herself.

"He's floating out in the water, all bloated, staring straight up into the sun like it ain't burning holes through his eyeballs."

Sheriff put his hand on her shoulder and looked worried. "If you're telling the truth then I'll have to ride out with a deputy and if we get out there and there's nothing going on then you'll cost the taxpayers a lot of money."

"I would never steal from a taxpayer," she said real loud.

Sheriff stood up and said to the big woman, "Get Officer Harper in here. We're going to ride out and see what Tupelo Honey is talking about." He adjusted his gun belt and turned to her. "You can ride in the patrol car."

She got to feeling all silly with excitement over riding in a real police car. The Sheriff let her ride in the middle and she pointed this way and that as Enoch Harper asked her questions and wrote the answers down in his little note pad. The Sheriff had no idea

there was a bootlegger path back there and Tupelo Honey was kinda irked about having to reveal her secret pass through.

Aesop was a quiet boy. He liked flowers, gardenias and braiding his mother's hair. That was before the war, before his daddy went off that fine day in June and returned in a box. He remembered his mother out on the front porch; hand over her mouth, talking to those men who'd come to tell her the truth. The locusts buzzed in anticipation of evening and the cicadas chirped. The sight of his mother crying, which he'd never seen before, made him want to mash up all of the bad things in the world until they were nothing but a fine dust that he'd blow away like he blew out the candles on his ninth birthday. Daddy never saw his tenth. Aesop was a quiet boy. He liked candy wafers and the women on Sunday all dressed for church. It was early summer and the earth was moist with the yielding plenty that came after a wet spring. You couldn't sit on the ground on account of the fact that a dark stain would appear on your britches so he sat out in the patio chairs rocking, watching his mother inside. She didn't cry anymore but she stared out the kitchen window at the carriage house where Daddy's workshop was set up. Nothing had been

moved. Not a wrench or pipe or Saturday Evening Post. That's just the way it was.

Until that day in July when bugs were singing and his mother was in the kitchen cleaning pots and pans with bleach and the stinging in his nostrils was so awful that he walked out onto the front porch and watched the robins all a flitter in the birdbath. That odd little girl with the braids and buckteeth showed up, sneaking along the hedges. She asked him to keep an eye on a pair of shoes. Aesop was a quiet boy. The kind who could watch a pair of shoes and keep a secret for a long time. No one asked much of him. That crazy, little girl was like a crack of lightning in his life and made him smile. No one paid her any attention because her mama was dead and she lived out in the woods with a bunch of derelicts. He'd heard people around town talk about her when he was supposed to be buying flour for his mother. "That poor little girl," they'd say. And he'd stop listening and imagine the rest. That was his favorite part. Filling in all of the blank spaces with more interesting things. Like that pair of shoes, damp and musty, that sat on the windowsill in his bedroom under the blazing sunlight. Little flecks of dust rose in streams of light like a thousand tiny angels hovering to get a better look. Praise be to God, his mother would say.

He imagined that maybe those shoes were his daddy's and the little bucktooth girl found them in what could only be explained as a divine act of mystery. He took them gently from the windowsill, setting them quietly on the hardwood floor. He slipped his foot inside where it was cold and made his sock wet. His mother had cleaned his room for the day, so she'd be downstairs polishing and scrubbing and wouldn't bother him. He pulled off his wet sock, then the dry one and hid them both in the bottom of the clothes hamper, under the cloth used to wash behind his ears. Back at the windowsill he lifted the shoes again. The smell of lake soaked down into the soles, a smell so rich and black it spread out under everything, like the boogeyman, dark and unknowable.

Aesop was a quiet boy and lived up to this notion as he stepped barefoot into the shoes, first left, then right, riding back on his heels, just enough to lift the toes off of the floor. He imagined the sound of his daddy's footsteps on the stairs, calling out to his mother in a glorious roar, "I'm home, Sylvia. Where's my boy?" He imagined the very act of finding the shoes would draw his father back from the hereafter. It was then and there, Aesop knew he must hide them and never let them go.

Lara had known sorrow. It wasn't a bother to her. The world went on spinning. A big, dusty, round rock that hurled through outer space. It was something she thought about often. Outer space. Two of the most boring words in the entire human language spoke separately but once combined they became exotic, the stuff of mystery.

Outer space.

Most of the space in her present world was filled with the long dead furniture of Mr. Morris' deceased mother, god rest her soul. A wife was not in his destiny, he said, what with all of the work he did and getting up in the middle of the night and having to go out because the world had come undone. Mr. Morris said respectable women couldn't live under the same roof once they knew what he'd seen. Lara hated the women who drowned their babies upside down in buckets of dirty water and the men who stabbed people until all of the blood ran out of their bodies and left them in the morgue. Mr. Morris had seen those things with his own eyes. That was why the Jim Beam bottle followed him from room to room. The bottle and Lara.

She reckoned she could wait a lifetime for a man like Mr. Morris to notice the pretty green flecks in her eyes and the way her white skin glowed all pretty in the late afternoon light. She wasn't an old maid yet. There was still time. So much of it. Time

was another thing she considered on those mornings full of work. She imagined whole lives they'd never had together while she ironed his shirts, running her fingertips down the sleeves, lightly caressing the buttons, folding open the collars, unzipping the trousers. The bathroom smelled like shaving soap and Bay Rum. She inhaled deeply, polishing the faucets. The places she wanted to visit cascaded through her mind. The seven wonders of the world. They could see them together, hand in hand. Since her mama passed through the pearly gates no one waited on her to return home. They had been a small family. Then her mother fell down and Mr. Morris helped in every way, even carried her from the car into the house when she was discharged from the hospital. The whole time Lara stared up into the night sky trying to remember names of the constellations. Then Mr. Morris called her name and the sound of his voice was like a beacon in the darkest night and she followed.

Now his birthday had come around. In the old days his mother fussed and fiddled, putting a small party together for her only son. She bought a nicely decorated triple-layer chocolate cake from the bakery and sent out invitations. It was nice. She was a good mother. But when she was gone, Lara realized that no one would be there to celebrate the day he was born. So, she made a secret trip downtown, wearing her navy coat and smart handbag.

She wondered what in the world to buy until her eyes caught a glimpse of the perfect gift. A pair of Wing Tips sat on top of a display stand in the shoe department. A man needed a good pair of shoes. Sturdy, solid and attractive. A man needed a good pair of shoes to walk confidently into his future. She purchased the Tips on the spot and had the box wrapped in powder blue paper with a big silver bow.

On his way into work, Detective Morris drove past the house on the boulevard with the blue door but didn't stop. Some nights he parked his unmarked Ford ten blocks down behind Jackson Tire and from there walked the distance through shrubs and silence to Sylvia's back porch. She, too, waited in the shadows and when she saw him they slipped quietly into the carriage house. In the dim light of the hurricane lamp her skin glowed the color of warm cinnamon. And his breath inhaled her kisses that landed on his lips and face and hands. Years passed in secret. Except before it was more complicated. Her husband had been alive, his mother, too. But the two obstacles to their future died away and he snuck over often to see her. If anyone recognized him prowling around in the shadows, he said he was on official police business. Even that would be different soon. They were going to move. All of

them. Together. To the edge of Harlem where worlds converged and people didn't stare at the color of their skin and pinch the corners of their eyes up in disapproval. He had to think of the boy and his future. His boy. That strange, quiet boy who looked so much like him but with dark skin. He'd tried not to love her, for her sake, but he'd been terrible at not loving Sylvia. Be careful who you love because you'll love them forever, his mother used to say. Truer words were never spoken. From the first time he'd seen Sylvia walking home from church when he was just seventeen, he'd loved her madly. Now she was a widow. And once you've married the wrong person and been set free you look upon the world with a bigger vision, a little hunger, that rumbles deep in your belly.

He looked down at the pot roast sandwich Lara packed in his lunch. The reports on his desk sat in a golden pool of lamplight. The station was quiet. At that hour most desks were empty. His eyes drifted to the stack of reports. He'd spent all day running leads and come up with zero. The big black rotary phone on his desk rang. The metal spring on his chair groaned as he rolled forward to answer.

"Jackson County Sheriffs Department. Detective Morris speaking."

"What's buzzin, cuzzin?"

"Who is this?"

"Is this the heat?"

Detective Morris straightened in his seat. "Who is this?"

"Who I am doesn't matter jive daddy. Who I know is what makes a difference."

"Who do you know?"

"You know how you're always looking for those hooch runners filling up your county with Shine?"

"How do you know that?"

"Because I've seen you out there hoofing it in Nowheresville, man. Listen. You got something I want. I got something you want."

"What's that?"

"Tips."

"*Tips*?"

"Yeah, like where those hillbilly hooch runners are and how they're sneaking it down an old, dirt path straight to the county line. *Your* county line."

"How do you know?"

"Same way I know the sky is blue. I seen it."

Detective Morris shuffled papers around on his desk looking for something to write with. Finally, he flipped the top of his

fountain pen off. "Give me directions. I'll drive over, check it out."

The moon glowed high in the sky. Detective Morris pulled his unmarked Ford into a grove of trees, cut the engine and listened. Tree frogs and locusts hummed. Insects chirped *skeet skeet skeet.* The earth was soft. He looked down at his new Wing Tips. It was the first time he'd thought of anything other than busting up a moonshine ring in the half an hour it took him to drive out to the woods, based on a tip from a slick mouth stranger trying to bust his cousin out of county jail.

Light from the dashboard reflected off his shiny Wing Tips. A more practical man would have the sense to keep a spare set of shoes in the trunk. Barefoot was not an option. Hell, if he ruined them, he'd drive down to the department store and buy a new pair, so as not to hurt Lara's feelings. His eyes adjusted to the dark silhouette of leaves under the light of a full moon. He closed the door to the Ford gently, certain he knew how to cut down the path by the lake without getting lost. The slick mouthed stranger delivered detailed instructions during the call. He was hot to get his cousin out. Morris was hot to bust up a Shine ring and get the letter of recommendation needed to transfer to a precinct in Harlem. He passed the lake with the tree frogs covering up the sound of his footsteps with their loud, ancient song. He was sure

he'd walked more than a mile when a lamplight flickered in the distance. He slowed to a stop, his ears trying to discern each sound. Footsteps, bottles clanking, car doors opening and closing. He pressed forward, to the edge of the wood, where he saw plain as day, a lamp in the window of an old shack. He patted his hip several times before realizing in his haste he'd left his gun belt back at the station, hanging on his chair. He bent over to pull his backup .38 Special from a leg holster when he heard a single twig snap. Morris rose up fast, flashed his badge. The dark figure of a man watched.

The wind blew through the trees, and a whip-poor-will broke into its haunting song. Then the hard blow of a pipe wrecked his brain. He stumbled, turned, and was smacked again harder. His nose burned, blood filled his mouth. He fell to the ground, and reached for his holster but heard the crack of his own skull and felt the pain rush down his arm in a thunderous rage. By now he realized there was more than one dark figure. He tried to tell them he was on official police business, to put his hands in the air, but the words mixed with blood in his throat and gurgled, until he sputtered and closed his eyes. An image of Sylvia filled his mind. He could see her standing, bright and pretty in a white dress with tiny blue birds flying around the hem. The rich brown of her skin glowed copper in the fading sunlight. She held out her hand to

him as she called to their son. But he could not reach her and his eyes drifted to the lightning bugs, hovering and flickering above the lush mid-summer grass. He felt a dark stranger pull his gun from the holster, then drag him along the path. Rocks dug into his shoulder blades but he could not move. Some deep, hidden fear in him rose up. Off in the distance he heard the sound of a little girl singing and he begged with all his strength, *please find my boy. Tell him I'm coming home.*

The Lost Country | Laura Story Johnson

Red Dress

Kristen Zory King

It was red—the dress I wore the night I lost it
to a curly haired boy who said he liked my legs. Red.
A muddy, bloody magenta. Use your imagination, I'm tired.

Or maybe it was blue and I wore it to bring out my eyes,
ensure that that boy would notice something, anything
other than my ass. It could have been purple, evoking royalty,

silently telling him *I am a woman that exudes confidence,*
demands respect—a foolish and failed grasp at self-esteem
from the eighteen-year-old mind of an English Major, French
Minor.

Perhaps it was green, the same spring green I imagined
at age twelve when my cousins would pinch my tits
and laugh at *the little buds that refuse to blossom.*

I used to picture strings of ivy curling around my spine,
pointy little buds poking my lungs, ready to jut through my nipples
and bloom into the most beautiful red flowers anyone had ever seen.

Back to red, but the dress I wore on the night I first laid on my back
and wondered what all the fuss was about wasn't really a dress at all,
it was a pair of jean shorts showing off those legs he liked so much,

and a t-shirt with sweat stains from a late September sun.

Housesitting

Kate Garrett

That night he touched me
in his ex lover's bed.
It wasn't right; she'd
been our wedding guest,
and her sheets were clean.
Her flat smelled like
the sound of festivals at dusk—

all purple skies and gypsy skirts.
She was old enough to be my mother.
Most of them were. So when he asked
again where I'd been all his life,
I said, *School, of course.*

A few hours before, some local
kids had told us about the spirits
in the mines. So I, drunk
on too much southwest
northern soul, decided to throw
his post-pub chocolate

down a disused shaft.
But I couldn't find one
in the dark, and his laughter
took my breath. I might have guessed

what was to come: on our way
back home the bats swarmed,
silent, above the river.

Sleepover

M. Brett Gaffney

Two girls play pretend: vampires.
The glow of the small television,
muted, strobes the walls,
the room full of shadows.

They practice biting
on stuffed bunnies and bears
then on each other, sheets
concealing them from sight,
door locked to the adults
who've forgotten how
to let the night fill their bones.

The girls play so hard
their fangs grow in, muscles
pulse with supernatural strength.

Together they trade blood till dawn,
skin moon-bright with discovery.

Morning finds them wrapped
around one another as if for protection
from the sun and all its followers,
the smell of breakfast calling
to two girls who've long since gone.

Controlled Hallucinations by John Sibley Williams.
Hayesville: FutureCycle Press, 2013.
$14.95. 78 pp. ISBN 978-1-93885-322-7.
Reviewed by Theodosia Henney.

Over the course of the sixty-three poems (distinguished only by roman numerals) that comprise *Controlled Hallucinations*, John Sibley Williams explores a great many realities, some more accessible than others. Several of the pieces get wrapped up in their own abstract imaginings or slip into cliches, a tendency of which the author seems aware- "I try to trace each cliche back/ to a curious hand/ tapping a white cane/ in hopes of rediscovering/ my blindness" (XLVIII).

However, a great many of the poems redeem themselves with sharp, quiet, well-placed images, often startlingly tender, such as in XXIII: "you're still sleeping/ somewhere outside me" or the final line of XLIII, in which the author notes with regard to a lover "Our hands are the same size." Throughout the manuscript, the most successful moments for this reader were those in which Williams employed the fluidity of objects and events to explore small human moments in manner both sparse and unhindered by melodrama. Several pieces blurred the lines between the narrator and the natural world, attaching the inner workings and desires of an individual to an embodied experience in the outside world, as in XVL, where the author writes "where I am part of the rest of the world/ and can rain invisible/ over my miles of rotted fenceposts/ and my muddy field."

Additionally, moments of concise lyricism punctuate many of the poems in this collection, such as in LIX, "I can be cloudburst, yes,/ and I can be my own prey./ I can be you/ or, if you say it,/

none of these." There is even some sly humor hidden in the manuscript, such as the short poem XXIX: "Don't be late!// In half an hour/ we'll be casting/ our permanent roles/ in each other's lives."

In its best moments, *Controlled Hallucinations* surprises with graceful lines and striking imaginings of the many ways in which a person can navigate relationships with others and with the world outside one's self: "You are born and I am born/ every day/ as strangers.// The wonder isn't that we love/ as if from different cities/ but that we are different cities/ absent railroad tracks, wires, common language,/ yet still we wake/ in unison" (XI).

Men and Their Whims by Laura Madeline Wiseman.
Cleveland, OH: Writing Knights Press, 2013.
$5.00. 34 pp. ISBN 978-1-62840-293-3.
Reviewed by Sally Deskins.

Men and Their Whims displays poet Laura Madeline Wiseman's familiar passion for her characters and knack for page-turning personable narrative. As in the University of Nebraska faculty's other writings, underlying issues of gender, politics, war and sexual identity are interwoven in this eloquent, touching 19th century story of Matilda and George Fletcher (native Iowan siblings) using research and imagination, subtle irony and wit.

"Family Legends: Geo and Matilda," summarizes the lives of the main characters: Geo serving in the Civil War, becoming deaf, being jumped at night, his sister fighting the courts for mistrial and mistreatment in the system.

The second half of the poem establishes Matilda by nicknames given to her by newspapers: "Queen of the Platform," "The Diamond of the Day," and "Young Spellbinder"; her poetry on "reform, service and imprisonment"; her adventures with President Grant.

Section I follows with impressionistic verse, timely war letters, and precious moments of love and tragic veteran consequences.

"On Comrades and Disease," a letter to Matilda from Geo, queries to the whereabouts of his brother-in-law in the war, marching through mud and sleeping on the floor. Then, bringing his infected friend to aid:

"…When I come to, I cannot hear—
one of my ears deaf by cannon, the other
by measles. The Sisters believe I, too, am to die."

This raw account directly demonstrates the utterly complex woe of war.

Wiseman stuns with absolute irony as Geo remembers in "The Kill Dance": "…Fingers splay against him and all he can do is slide his arm under the comrade's neck and chest and hold his head as the blood plays them for what they are: buffoons of butchery, he, the abolitionist and the other, ex-slave, freed to kill until dead."

Wiseman's strong verse might suggest anti-war sentiment, she doesn't do so outright; Matilda brings Geo hope: "…Little Geo, you can still love."

"Picking for Silver," an ode to confidence-building physical work, follows Matilda in a mine as she realizes: "…Once, all I wanted was to be a man, to marry…Today, I follow the flow…wanting to follow something more," exuding Wiseman's enduring feminist ideals.

"Journal Entry: Love" alludes to Walt Whitman in citing "Song of Myself," in poetic style and in intimation—as Whitman was supposed to have been homosexual, so might have been Geo, a societal taboo at the time. Wiseman sweetly takes readers through Geo's first time hearing the "L" word from his admired one:

…I laugh, throaty and effervescent,
all the while feeling the *l* down the length of my body
like a purring, a tuning fork, and the *e*
silent, soft, sliding off into the breathe.

We're startled back to reality with "Sentenced," as Geo writes of his condemnation for a crime he didn't commit, unable to hear and speak up for himself from Illinois Penitentiary.

In Section II, "On Love: In Mr. John A. Fletcher's School," a letter from Matilda to Geo cleverly utilizes math poetically, and thoughtfully recalls childhood memories and hopes for war's end.

> When it snowed, our teacher walked with me
> home to carry a volume of grammar
> to you, Geo, sick with fear and eager to know
> *1 (his elocution) ± 1 (his stories of England) ≤ t (his lips*
> *as he spoke)*

Matilda responds to the oft-asked "Grant Question" by politicians: "*Why speak for U.S. Grant*?" The answers reflect motivation still given today by passionate activists: "…debt, depression…*The Maimed*…*The Lost*…*Slavery is not dead and never will be*—pick your mark in shackles: women, children, negroes, workers."

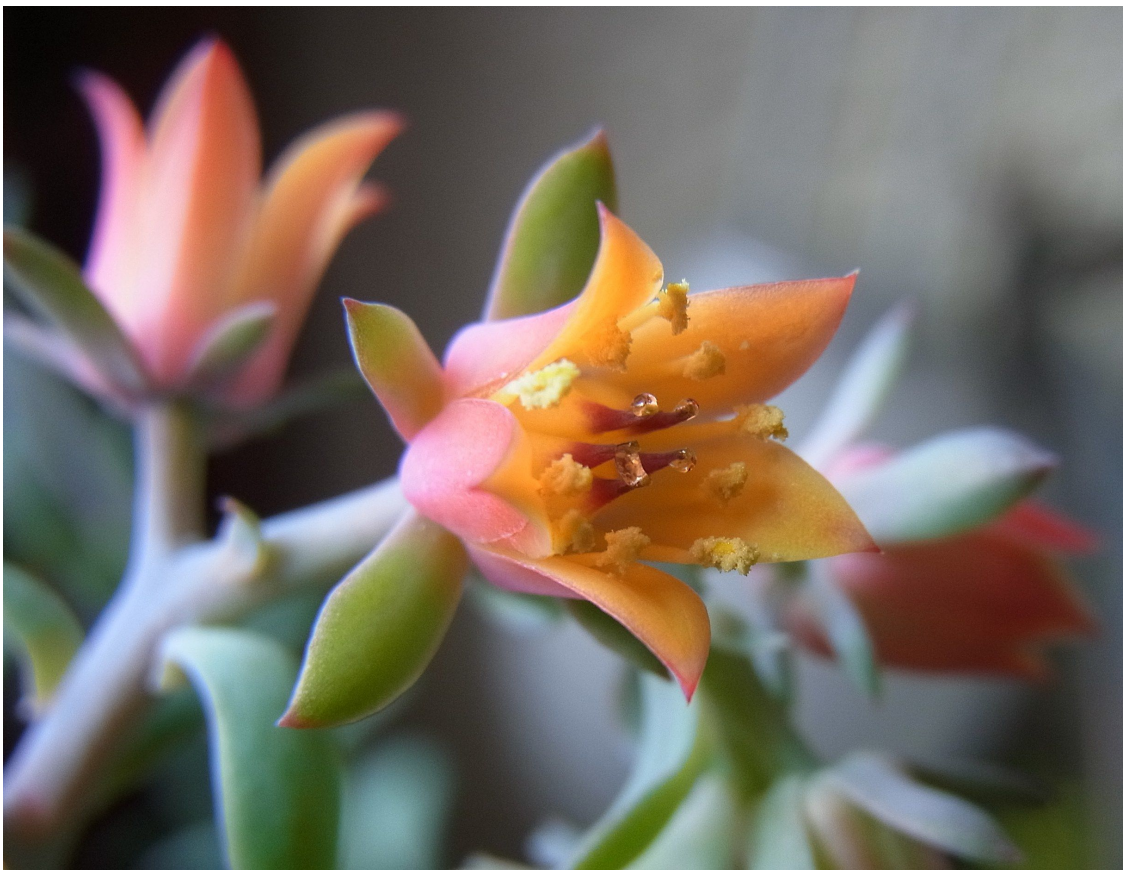
Wiseman's sense of humor reveals itself in "Euphemisms: On Grant" as Matilda notes the descriptions of herself in clips from various newspapers. She cheekily describes one rag as "His cock" (politely precluding it with: "you'll have to forgive this language").

"The History between Us" artfully describes Matilda's unconditional love and heartache for Geo:

> In our day, so many won't listen, won't understand
> all the ways there are to love,
> but Geo, I think you and I agree,
>
> our names are written in water
> and this history is all that we have rippling between us.

So Wiseman fittingly closes: on the surface, a warmly written tale of a woman and her brother during tumultuous times. Moreover, the subtle, timeless tragedy of the silenced exemplifies injustices that still remain—for veterans and war, for sexual identity and gender inequalities, and for general political red tape.

Through rhythmic prose, lists and letters of retelling, questioning, searching and ultimately relenting, in *Men and Their Whims,* Matilda and Geo Fletcher are evidence of those who fought before us. Their tenacity lives on in Wiseman's rich poetry. In *Men and Their Whims*, we are challenged and moved quietly through the backdoor of Wiseman's exquisitely told history and homey narrative.



Succulent | Cath Barton

Bios

Reem Abu-Baker lives in Denver, where she is the Assistant Editor for the Colorado Encyclopedia, the Program Coordinator for the Colorado Book Awards, and an editor at *Y'all'd've*. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Word Riot*, *Flash Frontier*, *100 Word Story*, and *Thin Air Magazine*.

Cassandra de Alba's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Red Lightbulbs, Illuminati Girl Gang, NAP,* and *Drunken Boat*, among other publications. Her most recent chapbooks are called *Bloodlust (No Spaceships Allowed)* and *Special Bitch Academy*. She lives in Massachusetts (with two Emilys and a cat named Roger Mindfucker) and blogs at outsidewarmafghans.tumblr.com.

Jason Allen is a poet and prose writer with an MFA from Pacific University. He is currently living in upstate New York and pursuing a PhD in creative writing at Binghamton University, where he is at work on his first book of poetry and his second novel. His work has been published or is forthcoming in: *Passages North*, *Oregon Literary Review, The Molotov Cocktail, Spilt Infinitive, Pathos*, *Life With Objects*, *Apercus Quarterly*, and other venues. He hopes to one day meet Tom Waits and buy him a cup of coffee.

Callum Angus is a writer, photographer and artist living in Portland, Maine. His essays and poems have appeared in *Wilde Magazine* and *Original Plumbing Magazine*, and his visual work can be found online at www.calangus.com. He is the founding editor of *nin*, a literary journal of erotic poetics named after Anaïs Nin.

Lis Anna's fiction has been published in *Word Riot, The Blotter, Petigru Review, Hot Metal Press, The Smoking Poet, Eclectic Flash, Paper Skin Glass Bones, 491 Magazine, Fiction Fix, The Monarch Review, 5x5, Red Booth Review, Hint Fiction Anthology, Chamber Four, Emyrs Journal, Literary Laundry, Barely South Review, Flash Fiction Offensive, Flashquake, Steel Toe Review,* and *The MacGuffin Literary Review*. You can learn more about her at:
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Cath Barton is a writer, photographer and singer who lives in Abergavenny, South Wales. She saves her life, one day at a time, on www.blipfoto.com/Cathaber

Dmitry Borshch was born in Dnepropetrovsk, studied in Moscow, today lives in Florida. His paintings have been exhibited at the National Arts Club (New York), Brecht Forum (New York), ISE Cultural Foundation (New York), and the State Russian Museum (Saint Petersburg).

R. S. Carlson teaches literature, linguistics, and writing at Azusa Pacific University, Azusa, CA. His poems have appeared in *The Texas Review; Birmingham Poetry Review; Poet Lore; The Cape Rock; Genre; The Hawai'i Review; Sunstone; War, Literature and the Arts; Viet Nam War Generation Journal; Colere; Rockhurst Review, Slake, Wild Violet*, and other literary magazines, print and online. His poetry collection, *Waiting to Say Amen*, is available from Lulu.com, Amazon, or Barnes & Noble in downloadable e-book or print formats.

Kelly Chastain is a graduate of Pacific University with a BA in Creative Writing. She works in both Fiction and Non-Fiction, and has been published in *The Burrow Press Review, Isthmus Review, OutsideIn Magazine*, and others. Currently, she blogs at kellychastain.com, is working on a historical novel, a series of memoir vignettes about growing up on a farm, and travel writing pieces for an upcoming trip to Portugal.

Lauren Davenport lives in Seattle but her Cactus Heart always resides in Brooklyn, NY. Her work has appeared recently in *Long Story,Short, Case-in-Points, The Yellow Ham*. She dreams of winning the *New Yorker* Cartoon Caption Contest but wonders if it's rigged.

Sally Deskins is an artist and writer, focusing on women and feminist writers and artists, including herself. Her art has been exhibited in galleries in Omaha, New York, Philadelphia and Chicago, and has been published internationally. She has curated various solo and group exhibitions, readings and performances centered on women's perspective and the body. Her writing has been published internationally in *Her Kind*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *The Cottage Reader*, *Galatea Resurrects* and others. She edits the online journal *Les Femmes Folles* (Femmesfollesnebraska.tumblr.com), and has published two anthologies of art and writing.

Alan Ferland obtained his Bachelor's degree in Creative Writing from the Chester College of New England, a school that unfortunately closed its doors in 2012. He lives in Alstead, New Hampshire, and is currently writing a noir detective series. Authors Jim Butcher, Raymond Chandler, and Edgar Allen Poe are all major sources of influence. Alan also shares the same first name and a passion for writing with a video game character named Alan Wake, the protagonist from a psychological action thriller with the same name. His favorite movie is *Sleepy Hollow* and he orders any meat possible on his pizza.

M. W. Fowler received an MA in Writing from Coastal Carolina University. His works have appeared in numerous journals, including *Jelly Bucket*, *Lunch Ticket*, and *A cappella Zoo*. He is also the author of *Ezra Sound: How I Became a Giant* and *Wayward: scifi stories & poems*, and is from Myrtle Beach, SC. Feel free to say hi on Twitter: @MWFowler9

M. Brett Gaffney, originally from Houston, Texas, is an MFA student in poetry at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, and an associate editor of Gingerbread House literary magazine (http://gingerbreadhouselitmag.com/). Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Medulla Review, Newfound, Ruminate, Psaltery & Lyre, Stone Highway Review, Slipstream, Wind,* and *Penduline*.

Vivienne Gale is the founder and Editor-in-Chief of *Tendril Literary Magazine*. Sometimes she has time to do other things like write and take pictures. You can see more of her photography at www.digitally-captured.tumblr.com.

Ricky Garni is a writer and designer living in North Carolina. He is presently completing a collection of tiny poems entitled *What's That About*, dutifully banged out on Faye Hunter's 1971 Smith Corona typewriter in purple cursive typeset, and dedicated with great affection to her memory.

Kate Garrett was born thirty-something years ago in southwestern Ohio, but moved to the UK in 1999. Her poetry pops up here and there, online and in print. She is a final year BA Creative Writing student at Sheffield Hallam University, and lives with her three kids, three cats and a computer programmer. She also has a website, if you like that sort of thing: www.kategarrettwrites.co.uk.

Benjamin Goluboff teaches English at Lake Forest College. Aside from a modest list of scholarly publications, he has placed imaginative work—poetry, fiction, and essays—in more than a dozen literary magazines. Some of his work can be read at: www.lakeforest.edu/academics/faculty/goluboff/

Laura Story Johnson was born and raised in Iowa and has lived in New York City, bush Alaska, Mongolia, Boston, Austria, west of the Zambezi River in Zambia, and in Chicago. Her photography has most recently appeared in the *Apeiron Review, Animal: A Beast of a Literary Magazine, Vine Leaves Literary Journal* and *Foliate Oak Literary Magazine*. www.laurastoryjohnson.com

Kristen Zory King is a poet residing in Rochester, NY. When not writing, sleeping, or watching trashy television, she can be found working at a non-profit literary center (www.wab.org), planning programming for adult and youth readers and writers. This is her first non-academic publication.

Suzy La Follette received an MFA in poetry and non-fiction at Antioch University Los Angeles in 2013. She was an Associate Editor for *The Splinter Generation* from 2011-2012 and is the founder and editor of *Spoken Word Review* (http://www.spokenwordreview.com). She published an essay in *How To Make a Life as a Poet,* a book by Gary Mex Glazner, and her non-fiction piece "Reading Smoke" was nominated by Antioch to represent the school in AWP's Intro Journal's Project. She is currently posting a sonnet a day for a year in her blog at: http://suzylafollette.tumblr.com. She is a firefighter and lives in Austin, TX.

Beth Maciorowski is a self-taught film photographer from western Massachusetts who enjoys developing her film at home in the bathtub.
More of her work here: https://www.facebook.com/pages/Beth-Maciorowskis-photography/146140398743124?ref=hl

Steve Mitchell has been a construction worker, cowboy, substitute teacher, chef, and has developed and managed a mental health program for the chronic mentally ill. His fiction has been published in *The Southeast Review, storySouth, Contrary, The North Carolina Literary Review*, and *Flash Magazine*, among others. His short story collection, *The Naming of Ghosts*, is available from Press 53. Steve has a deep belief in the primacy of doubt and an abiding conviction that great wisdom informs very bad movies. He is open twenty-four hours a day at: www.thisisstevemitchell.com

Holly Pruett faces her fear of death by organizing the PDX Death Café in Portland, Oregon, creating end-of-life ceremony as a Life-Cycle Celebrant, hanging out with her godchildren every week, and getting out into nature as often as possible. A longtime community organizer, she curates stories of commemoration and creative celebrations on her blog: www.hollypruettcelebrant.com/blog.

Jessica Reimer is a freelance writer and editor based out of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan (Canada) who recently decided to try her hand at photography and design. She is the owner and operator of Paper Plane Communications (website coming soon) and currently manages her portfolio via a personal blog (http://jrwritesthings.wordpress.com/).

Carla Schwartz is a poet, poetry filmmaker, photographer, and lyricist. She has performed and read her work in the U.S., Canada, and Australia. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in several journals, including *Fulcrum, 05401, Common Ground Review, Wordgathering, Stone Highway Review, Boston Poetry Magazine, Literary Juice, Emerge Literary Journal*, and *Equinox*, among others. Her book, *Mother, One More Thing* is forthcoming with Turning Point Books. Carla is also a professional writer with a doctoral degree. Check out her website at carlapoet.com. You can like her on facebook, where you can download recordings:
https://www.facebook.com/pages/Carla-Schwartz/95997611519?sk=app_96687436973

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Cindy St. Onge is the author of three collections of poetry: *Curse of the Firstborn, Traffic Along the Ghost Roads,* and *Vigil*. She was a finalist in 2012 for both the New Millennium Writings award, and the Knightville Poetry prize. Her fourth collection of poetry will be released December 2013, by Grizelda Press. Her poetry has been presented live for the Broken Word and Stonehenge reading series in her hometown of Portland, Oregon.

Caitlin Elizabeth Thomson resides in the rural Pacific Northwest. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in numerous places, including: *The Literary Review of Canada*, *The Liner, EDGE, Echolocation*, and the anthology *Killer Verse*. Her second chapbook *Incident Reports* is forthcoming in 2014 from Hyacinth Girl Press. You can learn more about her writing at www.caitlinthomson.com.

Kirby Wright was a Visiting Fellow at the 2009 International Writers Conference in Hong Kong, where he represented the Pacific Rim region of Hawaii and lectured in China with Pulitzer winner Gary Snyder. He was also a Visiting Writer at the 2010 Martha's Vineyard Residency in Edgartown, Mass., and the 2011 Artist in Residence at Milkwood International, Czech Republic. He is the author of the companion novels *Punahou Blues* and *Moloka'i Nui Ahina*, both set in Hawaii. *The End, My Friend*, his futuristic novel, was released in 2013.

Generally Bill Yake's "publications" have been poems rather than photographs. See more of his images here: http://www.flickr.com/photos/myake/. On the poetry front Bill has two full-length collections of poetry: *This Old Riddle: Cormorants and Rain* (2003) and *Unfurl, Kite, and Veer* (2010). His poems also show up in magazines and anthologies serving the environmental and literary communities—from *Wilderness Magazine* to *Anthropology and Humanism*. Recent poems have been featured in an essay in *Poetry*, in Robert Krulwichs NPR Science Blog, on Seattle's NPR station, and in *Between Earth and Sky*, a book by the renowned instigator of forest canopy research, Nalini Nadkarni.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to:

NewPages

Lambda Literary Review

Poets & Writers

Duotrope

[places for writers]

The Review Review

& all the friends, family, writers, readers, and fellow Twitterers who help spread the word.

& an extra big thank you to all the writers and artists who submit their work—without you, *Cactus Heart* would be nothing at all.