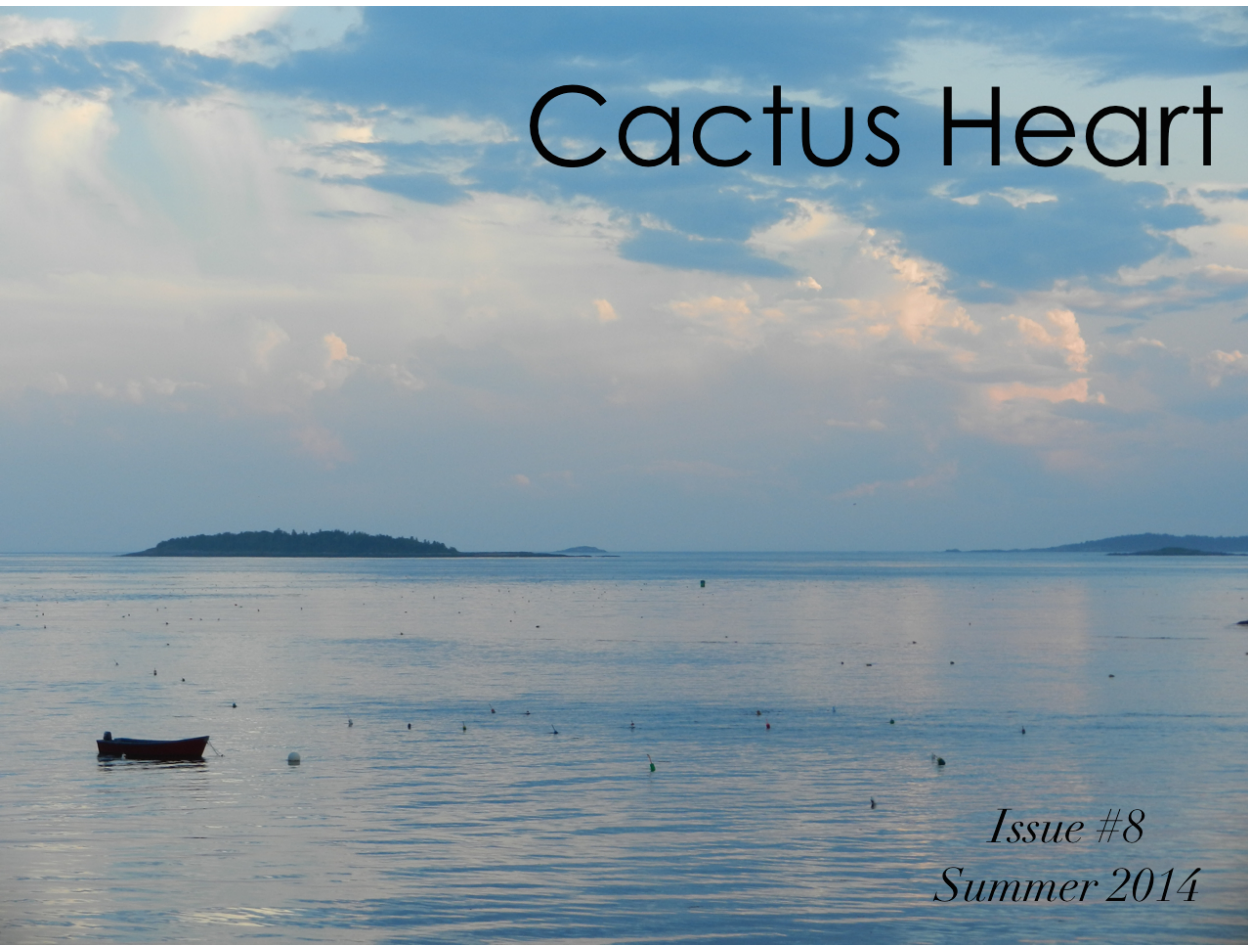
Cactus Heart
Issue #8
Summer 2014

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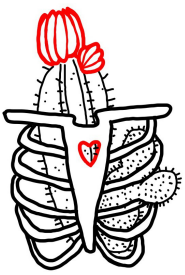

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Permissions for "Cellophane" included on page 115

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Orange-Blossom-Florida | Dave Petraglia

Editor's Note

This Summer issue (#8—can you believe it?) is brought to you by misplaced umbrellas fiercely missed as thunderstorms roll through, the verdant new leaves bursting on all the big, old trees in western Massachusetts, the smell of burgers on the grill, a cold beer sipped as the sun slips behind the horizon.

Big changes are afoot here at *Cactus Heart* headquarters. Sasha's leaving her post as Visual Editor for the greener pastures of bartending, and I'm gearing up to receive my MFA from Pacific University—the program I started right around the time I started *Cactus Heart*—and to top it off, Sasha and I are moving. No news on where just yet, but stay tuned.

We're also really excited that Killian Czuba is joining us, starting with Issue #9, as our Art Editor. She's a wicked writer and artist, and I'm really excited about what her eye will sight for future issues. And, did you spy our new logo? Thanks to Killian, this spiny little heart of ours is beating to a new image.

May your days be long and sunny during this season of abundance and beauty—

Sara

Wishes for the Full Moon

Emily O'Neill

North Amherst new
with waist-high corn.
Our beds: unmade,
unframed. Bike chains hung
over the porch railing and
Molly's cherry red convertible.
The neighbors tell us stories of heroin
& both of us are afraid, & eating
nachos, Muhammad

Ali a swarm of wasps
on the apartment wall.
Pass that summer through a filter of blue
light: flame & wink & lightning
alike. Pond water pealing across naked skin.
We were eternal, eternally cursed. I dyed
my hair blonde; the bleach didn't burn this time
but the bathroom felt like fire at the shoulder

of a borrowed field. Here we are in the city
now. No yard trapped in cracked amber.
No heaven when the wind combs us
clean. If only I could show you how I was,
alive.

Vacancy

Katie Brunero

The house was abandoned, but not like the stately Victorian they used to live in. This house crouched before them, a mass of unstained timber and stickered windows. They stood before the doorway, their backs to the long dirt road that led away from the peninsula and extended thirty or so miles before connecting with the nearest highway. Douglass kicked some mud off his canvas sneakers, his feet damp from the kayak ride, and walked up the cement steps into the house. His sister, Maggie-Anne, hung back, taking a moment to stretch her fingers and inspect their freshly formed callouses.

The house's doorway opened to face a narrow staircase, bordered on the left by a dim hallway that stretched twenty feet and ended in a pool of light. Standing in the dank entry, dust spinning through the air, Douglass wondered what it would be like to move back into his family's old home. He walked down the hallway, scanning the floor for footprints and rot. At least squatting in New York hadn't been a total waste, he thought,

bending just in time to avoid a splinter of wood protruding from a wall. He turned left at the pool of light, into a room, ten by fifteen and empty except for two large windows facing the cove. A small knob on the left hand wall caught his attention. Douglass tugged the knot of wood and when it gave, he pulled the pine door open.

Maggie-Anne faced the house, feeling trapped in the muggy reek of the swamp. A string of rusted nails lay against the cement foundation like forgotten ammo. It shouldn't seem surprising, she thought, that given the financial times, a new house might go unfinished, but there was something foreboding about the place.

"How long you think this has been abandoned?" Maggie-Anne yelled through the doorway, hoping her voice would project through the partially finished walls. Only the call of a loon answered, so she followed her brother's muddy footsteps into the house. Halfway down the hall, a rapid flapping of wings broke through the silence, startling her. As the younger sibling, her timidity was often pandered to, but acceptance did little to quell her fear. There were more than a few moments in her past where cowardice had led to actions she'd worked hard to forget. She passed through the end of the hallway, her chest and arms puckering in the musty air, and arrived in the small room.

Something shuffled on the floor above her. Fear combed through her hair.

"Doug?" she asked, looking at the ceiling: a series of pale, unfinished boards going gray.

Douglass's muffled response floated down to her: "Come and check this out."

She listened to thin boards creak above her.

"There's a hidden door in the room you're in. Walk to the wall opposite the bay. You can pull that knob and a panel will open," he said.

"What's up there?" Maggie-Anne asked, unwilling to lose sight of the outside world.

"Come on, you gotta see this."

Though Douglass was many years removed from his playful past, Maggie-Anne found it hard not to imagine him crouching to spring on her. She thought about one of the times he'd pranked her. As with most uncomfortable memories, it had been watered-down into a joke told at family parties. She remembered Douglass, seven years old, jumping out from one of her birthday presents, covered in pale face paint, screaming and waving his arms like a banshee. Warm liquid slid down her leg, gathering in the frill of her birthday socks. Her mother was so furious she'd grounded Douglass from seeing anyone, leaving only sister as a

playmate. Maggie-Anne figured that her bother had probably emerged worse from the event than she had; he didn't handle guilt well and she'd enjoyed the companionship.

That was part of the reason she'd invited him to stay at the beach house with her. He had dropped out of college four years ago, and neither she nor her parents had heard much from him during those years. When he'd contacted them a few months back, he'd been squatting with some unconventional people in a warehouse in New York City, and—what had been stranger—he had been willing to come home and spend the summer with her. Since his return three weeks ago, they'd been together constantly, and he still hadn't spoken to her once about why he dropped out or what his life had been like.

"I'm coming up, just stay where you are," she yelled, determined to be brave for him. She approached the penny-sized knob opposite the glass-less windows and pulled. A slim door swung open, revealing a staircase, spiraling upward. Sawdust floated into the light, gathering on the bridge of her nose and eyelashes. A sneeze shook through her. She rose up the stairs, two at a time.

Douglass was kneeling on the ground, gazing at the skeleton of a dog through the eye of his camera. He framed the photo carefully, conscious of the lines and angles. It was curled into a

fetal position. A few patches of papery skin clung to its ribcage, and what must have been organs were dried to flattened clumps. A collar remained around its neck, recalling missing flesh.

"God, the poor thing. What the hell makes you think I'd want to see this?" Maggie-Anne asked.

"Its name was Clover," Douglass said, eyeing the collar. "Must have been left up here alive, there are scratch marks all across the room."

Maggie-Anne gazed at the walls, wondering if the dog had considered jumping out one of the windows, but chose a slow death over a quick one.

"Who the hell would do this?" Maggie-Anne asked. "We should leave."

"The dog's been dead a long time. The dust on the stairs was undisturbed. I doubt whoever did this was planning on coming back." He took a few steps towards the dog's skull, zoomed the lens till it was inches from bone, and clicked away.

"Maybe they brought him up here and then had to leave in an emergency?" she offered, averting her eyes.

"Doubt it. Whoever started building a house this size, this remote, had money. It must have cost a fortune just to convince a company to build this far out. 'Course, might not have been the owners, could have been a builder who left the dog." He

lowered his camera, stood up, and walked around the dog to the window beside it. The dog had shaken up something in him, and as he looked out across the pond, thin strip of land, and surrounding ocean, he fantasized about moving far away, maybe to Vietnam or India.

Maggie-Anne sensed the beginning of another brood, and marched over to her brother. Her shoulder pressed against his. Unsure what to say, she followed his gaze. She saw their yellow kayak half-beached in the brackish pond water. The small cove, fed by freshwater, was rimmed with summer foliage. To the right of the peninsula, fifty feet out, was the slim canal they had come through from ocean. Douglass had noted, when they steered the boat into it to explore, that the sharp line of trees indicated it was man-made. She thought about the four-hour paddle ahead of them and rubbed her biceps. The sun was beginning to show shadows; they would have to leave soon to get home before it set.

"We can always spend the night here if you aren't up to paddling back," Douglass suggested.

"I'd sooner sleep in a crypt."

Douglass shrugged, his arm rubbing up against hers. "Here we have a roof over our heads, protection from animals, and a sheltered cove. Beats me trying to make a fire by rubbing sticks."

Maggie-Anne smiled at the idea, knowing full well Douglass had packed a starter log and lighter among the pile of potentially helpful wilderness gear they'd taken from their parents' cabin. She also knew he would have packed less if he'd been alone, but this was their first "exploration" that didn't include poking around the bay, and her brother was protective—at least that hadn't changed. A slight stench reached her nose, and the smell revolted her.

"I can't stay here with the dog. I don't want its ghost to get attached and follow me home," she said, half-joking.

Douglass frowned, thinking of all the unwanted memories that dogged him.

"Boo!" she said, giving him a playful push with her shoulder. The shove caught him mid-movement, and he stepped wide to the side, putting his foot through the dog's chest.

"Jeeze-us fuck, Maggie," he said. He removed his foot and several pieces of rib lifted up with it. She stood shocked, her face blanched.

"It's alright, Magg, relax." He kicked off the debris.

She remained fixed by the window, her face half-lit by sunlight. "I want to leave, now."

He nodded, and followed her out of the house. She boarded the kayak in silence, resting the paddle on her lap. Douglass gave

the boat a great shove and jumped in. They rocked dangerously, and thrust paddles into the water to steady the vessel. The need to take her away filled him, pushing out all other thoughts. He bent into the paddle's thrust, pivoting the boat. She heard the sweeping sound of the boat's belly running over weeds. The smell of pond filled the air as their paddles sliced into water, pulling out streams of topaz drops. With each quick, clean thrust he moved her farther and farther away. She watched the house shrink, and saw, in her mind's eye, the skeletal dog pacing the lip of the cove. Saw him whining after her, that raw, sorry plead: *don't leave me.*

She broke the glassy surface with a strong stroke, then held her paddle firmly behind her, angling them towards the exit. The tip of the kayak entered the narrow channel. She studied the bend in her brother's back, shouldering the heavy presence of trees, as they slid through the shaded water. Then, suddenly, the smell of sea filled her lungs, and the world was reborn.

Years ago, she thought, her brother would have been filling the silence with stories, in that unselfconsciousness way of his. Now he moved like a storm over the sea. She felt he was a person abandoned, stickers over his eyes, foreclosure stamped across his chest, every bone a beam left open to the elements. The only solution, Maggie-Anne thought, was to pry the truth

out of him, that, and set him up with one of her safe, high-achieving friends. Not that she thought it would solve everything; she knew there was something calcifying in her brother—she could see its sharpness in the way he frowned, new angles along his face, the branding of worry.

Douglass let his body rock with the waves, caught in a sliver of peace. If only he could hold onto the calmness, the trees passing by like film slides, his bubbly, bookish sister the same as he remembered her. She seemed so impossibly hopeful, so whole, as yet unharmed by reality. He wanted to lock her in the cabin—or rather, lock the rest of the world out.

"I'm thinking of having a party this weekend," she spoke to his back. He stiffened. "I've got a group of cool friends from Bates coming. I know some of my girlfriends would just die if you put them into your gallery show."

"I'm not really a fan of shooting people. And the show is *Mom's* idea. I never agreed to sell my photos.

"Well, my friends would love it, you know—"

"You see that bird," Douglass interrupted.

Maggie-Anne squinted into the fog, which had begun to roll in at a potentially hazardous rate, but near-sightedness prevented her from distinguishing any life amid the gray haze. Just like him

to change the subject when things are getting interesting, she thought.

He waited a moment before speaking. "I've been thinking of past lives. Funny, the circles of life—sometimes I really do think you have to give up everything to be free."

"You mean like, be a hermit?" she asked.

"Maybe."

"God, that's grim," she said, thinking that being alone was obviously the exact opposite of what he needed. "Should we be worried about this fog?" She let her paddle drag a bit in the water, keeping the boat a few hundred feet from shore.

"We're headed southwest with the tide, and we've got the wind on our side. I doubt it'll catch up with us, but if the wind changes, we may need to find a place to camp for the night."

"I'd like to avoid that if possible," Maggie-Anne said, paddling harder. "So, what was New York like?"

Douglass shrugged. "Nothing special."

"What did you do? I mean, did you meet any cool people?" Maggie-Anne took a stray curl in her mouth and sucked the salt off its tip.

Douglass thought about the first time he and Janie, his lover, had agreed to meet, in a Polish bakery down the street from where he squatted. They'd sipped from small cups of fifty-cent

coffee and shared white cake, strawberry filling oozing from its center. He thought about the fist time Janie described her husband's abuses. Her confession sparked a horrible flair of jealousy. He remembered, months later, what happened when he left her. He tried to stop thinking. Douglass replied: "NYC's like every other place. People look different, but underneath the skin they are all variations on the same thing."

"God, you've gotten depressing." Maggie-Anne wrinkled her nose in an effort to make him laugh. When he picked a college in NYC, she'd had a hard time picturing her light-hearted, woodsy brother bustling past the trunks of skyscrapers, but moving away had also seemed terribly brave.

Douglass shook his head, forcing a smile for his sister's sake. It was New York. They'd argued on the fire escape. He'd hit her, Janie. The shock in her eyes, the sudden flare-up of life, had almost made it worth it.

The fog thickened, blurring the line between sea and sky. The birds, which had been noisy on their morning trip, were strangely absent. Only the slap of waves broke the silence.

After a distance of consideration, Maggie-Anne forced out the question: "Why do *you* think Mom and Dad broke up?" He'd been away when their parents made the break official, and she'd never had the comfort of his perspective to temper her own.

"Who knows?" The peace that'd filled him was gone, replaced by emptiness so sharp it felt alive, like a stiff, knobby creature chewing holes in his chest. He dug the paddle in deep.

"Right," she said, "I mean, they still see each other, even while you were gone they were on really good terms. Hell, they have lunch once a week. I can't figure why they don't just get back together." Maggie-Anne rested her paddle on her knees, ignoring the incoming fog for a moment.

"Well, when they sold the house, I think like they lost the final thing that kept them together. Maybe they realized cultivating their collections were more meaningful?" Douglass continued paddling, pulling them both along.

"I hope my future husband has better luck with his career than Dad did," Maggie-Anne said, thinking of the string of universities her father had taught at and then left, never achieving the tenure position he chased.

"I don't think that was the issue, not really."

"What then?" Maggie-Anne asked.

"Well, I don't think Dad's infidelity helped much, but maybe even that wasn't the problem." Douglass felt the air growing cool, and paddled faster.

"What *infidelity*?"

"Mom never told you?" Douglass asked without turning around. The kayak dipped over a swell, rocking side to side.

"*Uh, no*," she said.

"I'm sorry, Magg, I figured she would have." Douglass shifted his weight from side to side, trying to keep the boat steady.

Maggie-Anne moved some words around her mouth, unable to voice them. She tried to fit this new information into her knowledge of her parents, but it wouldn't stick. She found it hard enough imaging her parents being affectionate with one another, let alone her father, a dignified archeologist, getting busy with some blond fraternity bimbo or kiss-ass exchange student on scholarship.

Maggie-Anne saw the darkened image of herself waver over the swells of sea. Bits of flotsam swept slowly past the boat. Douglass heaved them forward, fighting with the changing tide. With every stroke her brother seemed to be pulling away, like her parents had, into a single-sized space. *My father is a cheater*; it seemed to change everything and nothing at once.

The fog began closing in on them. Maggie-Anne steered the boat close to shore, despite Douglass's warning of rocks. The pace of the boat slowed as the siblings fell into a strained rhythm. A loon sounded from the mist. Douglass tried to focus

on comforting his sister, but other thoughts rushed in, muddying the intention. Maggie-Anne eyed the shore, which was growing hazy with fog. She squinted over his shoulder, trying to discern rock from swell.

"Magg, you're gonna damage the bottom of the boat if we keep this close," Douglass said, shaking his head.

"Why are you shaking your head? Is there a problem?"

"No," he said, looking up at the sky. "I'm just afraid we aren't going to make it home before dark at the rate the sky is clouding. Could be better to set up camp while we've got daylight left."

"No, Doug, I really don't like that idea."

"Might not have a choice."

They glided past a peninsula of rocks, and Douglass spotted a sandy cove. "Steer us in there Magg, we should check it out." He wanted her safe, yes, but he also wanted her to be free.

"You want to set up camp, there, in the middle of nowhere? What if something goes wrong?"

"It's not like you're alone," he smiled. "Plus, you oughta learn to live in the moment a bit," he said, then instantly regretted it.

"Sure," she said, thinking Douglass had been living a bit too much in the moment, ignoring their family's past and future

troubles. He could have helped, she thought, feeling the flush of familiar anger at his abandonment.

Douglass pulled the kayak onto the wet sand. Maggie-Anne lifted herself out of the boat and took a few strides across the shore, stretching out the soreness, willing blood to flow back into her legs. Douglass studied the sand, estimating how high the tide would rise. He fancied the idea of the water coming up and carrying him away to some place where he could place his bare feet upon cool sandstone and stand in the sun, unharassed for days on end. Maggie-Anne heaved their waxed-cotton bag from the boat and removed the starter log. She dug a pit a few feet in diameter and lined the bottom with smooth rocks. Douglass high-stepped through the underbrush, gathering fallen branches. He saw his sister tending the fire and thought about cooking s'mores with their parents over the old living room hearth. He felt the fire's warmth despite the chill of the late evening breeze.

Maggie-Anne threw a match on the logs and light exploded. The sudden illumination polarized the world, separating the beach into a binary, forcing every object to choose a side. Darkness pressed against her back. She heard a snap and imagined her brother foraging through the forest. *He's a stranger*, she thought. *Why the hell did Mom tell him?* The question irked her

like a grain of sand lodged in an oyster's belly. She felt a distance open up; first her father, now her mother. Douglass walked into the fire's glow and carefully placed his sticks upon the flame, smiling faintly. Maggie-Anne unrolled her sleeping bag and sat on top of it, fuming.

"Magg," he said, "we should take more trips like this."

"You think Mom knew Dad was cheating?" she asked.

He let out a deep breath, good mood dissolving.

"I think most women who are completely dependent suspect their partners of infidelity at one time or another," he said, remembering lying in bed watching Janie put up her hair before meeting with her husband. He recalled how she'd pick at the strands, spraying them into place, spearing them with bobby pins, wrenching and twisting and tying them, all the while punctuating the effort with curses and tiny sips of gin from a tea cup. He imaged Maggie-Anne in the same situation, and his stomach reacted as if he'd eaten the kindling and drank gulps of sea. Before he'd left Janie, she had insisted she was grateful for their connection, but he never managed to believe her.

"I don't think Mom knew. If she did, she would have told me, she would have tried to stop it," Maggie-Anne said, feeling as though she'd been slapped in the face. She silently willed her brother to care, to act as violated as she felt.

"Unfortunately, women don't always have the choice." He stared at her, waiting for her to grasp his meaning.

"But, god, can you imagine the betrayal she must have felt." She paused, chewing over her words, searching for meaning in the darkness. "I feel like, the fact that she still sees Dad, I feel like she's betraying herself." *And me*, Maggie-Anne thought.

Douglass scoffed. "Maybe Mom agreed to it." He watched the fire flicker off his sister's face, studied how it softened her anxiety, making her seem unremarkable. He was afraid of the places life would take her. The real world was crouching, ready to bite, he thought. When it happens, who will be there?

The heat of the fire rose in her face. She shifted, feeling the small mounds of sand beneath her, unyielding. The night pricked at the back of her neck. She felt like one of countless punctures in the heavy velvet sky.

"Douglass, how can you *dehumanize* Mom like that?" she asked, surprised at the word, one she'd never used before, coming to her rescue.

Douglass was at a loss for words. When he looked across the fire at Maggie, he saw his mother's face, crossed with worry. He tried to remember the sound of his mother's voice when she'd told him, but it slipped away. Instead, he saw the old Victorian where they grew up. He saw his mother in her apron, sipping

spiced wine and swaying to twenties jazz while she cooked dinner. It struck him that she'd known almost all the words to every song, no matter what the radio played.

"You don't get it do you?" Maggie-Anne asked.

"Don't I?"

Maggie-Anne glowered at her brother, praying he'd care, help her make sense of the situation.

He sighed, and added more sticks to the blaze. She let out a huff, turned her back to the fire, and crawled into the sleeping bag, sandy and fully clothed. She tried to think about tomorrow's party, and the fun that could be had, but her father kept popping up in her imagination, flirting with her friends.

There was something Douglass wanted to tell her, but the words wouldn't organize in his head. He imagined Maggie-Anne going to their mother's new apartment for the winter holiday, the place full of unfamiliar things, a plastic-smelling couch or never-to-be-used blender. He wanted to walk around the fire and place his hand on his sister's shoulder, to be a friend when she needed one, tell her he'd stick it out with her, but something about her shape stopped him. She seemed set as stone. Douglass shivered at the idea, and pushed at the fire with a stick.

Douglass lifted himself out of the kayak hole and into the shallow water. He pulled the hull of the boat onto the dry sand, holding it steady for Maggie-Anne, who rose on unreliable legs. Her arms were pocked by sand flea bites, and numb from the strain of paddling all morning. She helped him secure the boat to their ten-foot dock with shaking fingers. When they turned to go to the cabin, Douglass nudged her, but she didn't respond.

Douglass lead as they walked up the sandy path, bordered by dune grass, and into the beach house. Maggie-Anne spent the rest of the day preparing for her party, and the rest of the night bouncing from group to group and struggling to engage Douglass. When he slept, the thump of bass beat in his dreams.

The next morning he woke early. His sister was still asleep, her body on the floor and legs propped up on the couch. He thought she looked like she'd been wrestling with a tornado, and felt a heavy rush of guilt.

He walked over to her, and lifted her up onto the couch. He placed a scented cushion under her head and pulled a stiff blanket over her. Some guest had left without closing the door, and the chill of summer night still lingered in the cabin. He stepped over a toppled chair, and went outside. He shimmied off his shoes and walked barefoot to the shore. Crests of sea mirrored the sun. Occasional gusts pelted his arms and face with

sand. The rustle of grass against his legs felt strangely exotic. He sat, and stared out across the ocean, sick with himself.

After a time, he felt a presence. His sister sat down beside him, clutching the wool blanket. He felt her shiver and lean in. From the beak of a gull's mouth dropped a clam. It shattered upon a near rock, revealing a pale belly, wet with seawater, and for some reason, Douglass remembered the dog. More than anything he wanted to go back, pick up the crusted form, and carry it into the ocean—to let its skin soften and fill with the sea.

"Fun party, huh?" Maggie-Anne said, her face uncharacteristically void of emotion.

She needs reassurance, he thought. Already she's questioning herself.

"It was a party," he said, hugging his arm around her.

"I saw you with Emily. Her parents have a beach house not too far from here." She lifted her eyebrows at him.

"Magg," he said, turning to look out over the sea.

"I think I want to have another party next weekend, if you don't mind. I mean, everyone said they enjoyed it. And," her eyes followed the profile of his face, "it was nice to have you around."

"Next weekend?" He looked doubtful.

"Another kayak trip, then?" she asked, fear budding.

"No. I don't know, I was thinking maybe I'm ready for something new."

"New how?"

"India, maybe."

"What in god's name would *you* do in *India*?" she said, forgetting the blanket, which slid down her shoulders and left them open to the wind.

"I don't know, just live, I guess."

They stared at one another until he looked away.

"Magg, look, why don't we do it together?" He squeezed her too tightly. "You could easily pick your studies back up in a year or two. Think of it, when you go somewhere new, you're free from everyone's expectations, free to find yourself, to be someone new."

"I don't need to be anyone else." Maggie-Anne looked down at her bare feet, exposed to the chilling sand. She pulled them under the blanket.

"But it could be me and you again," he smiled at her, already knowing her answer. The seagull landed beside its prey. It quickly swallowed the belly, leaving fragments of flesh and shell to dry in the sun.

Inheritance

Anna B. Sutton

Your mother's body leaves first, withers,
escapes through an outer layer
that thins and yellows. Before death,

her skin embraces the name tissue.
The pockets of fat her children buried
their damp faces in—fed from—melt

like ice. Even her bones powder
under the weight of themselves. The body—
like anything else—is a lie, a tool, a crude

measurement of survival. It sheds what is
useless, and in the end, everything is.
Even you, with your pert breasts and fresh

blood, will mean nothing soon enough. Hold tight
to your own arms, keep yourself together
with plastic and glue. Tie your plump flesh

like a roast. She's been trying to tell you—
this body won't come back once it's gone.

Smith Quarry

Jenny Mary Brown

In summer 1983, the year I was born,
my dad climbed barefoot up laddered
roots of a big Vermont fir tree that
grew up the side of the steep hill.
He waited at the top of the quarry,
where dynamite shoots ran black
along grey granite, and jumped,
feet pointed like a sharp pencil,
into water as cold as spring snow.
After, he drank dark burgundy,
forgetting the terror he felt mid-air.

I'll search all over for it, everywhere I can,
then watch water fly down the rocks,
straight with no splash, only plunge.

Cellophane

Joseph Andrew Shapiro

Todd and I inch our way through the crowd of folks who have also waited on line to gain entry to Marie's Crisis this evening. It's Saturday night, and the place is packed with people who've come to sing. I'm surprised once again by the increasing number of straight young couples among the gay men who frequent this place. Marie's patrons seem far more mixed each time I visit; much more so than when I first came here, as a married man, sixteen years ago.

Marie's is a West Village piano bar that has served the gay community in its well-worn location since the 1890s. On the far wall hangs a faded and yellowed antique mirror etched with images of battle scenes from both the American and French Revolutionary wars. It always reminds me of that other revolution that took place only a block from here during the early morning hours of June 28, 1969, at the Stonewall Inn. The movement for gay rights in America began that night, when the

New York City police took their harassment of homosexuals in gay-identified establishments one step too far.

Not long ago Marie's was almost exclusively frequented by homosexual musical theater queens, who came to feed their craving for show tunes. There are also men who come here mainly to cruise for other like-minded guys: some dreaming of a newfound relationship, others on the prowl for a one-night stand. I've been both. I've seen all kinds of people here over the years—and I've kissed more than a few. But this evening is for Todd and me. For us.

Folks crowd around the upright piano boxed in by a Formica bar top, and against the much longer bar running along the far end of this deep, rectangular room, whose wood-beamed ceilings are rimmed with Christmas lights all year long. The exuberant energy is so strong that I can feel the resulting vibrations in the old wooden plank floor. They're singing a medley of tunes from the Kander & Ebb musical, *Chicago*:

> Cellophane
> Mister Cellophane
> Should have been my name
> Mister Cellophane
> 'Cause you can look right through me
> Walk right by me
> And never know I'm there . . .

I never come into this room without hearing a lyric that brings me back into my own life; that speaks to my own issues. Maybe that's what musical theater is all about. Or what it's about for me, anyway. So tonight I'm "Mister Cellophane" again, and I recall all the years of my life when those closest to me walked right by me without ever knowing the homosexual child, and later adult, inside; seeing only the boy, and then the straight-acting man, whom I chose to project. I wonder how much longer I'll be immersed in this painful struggle to understand how and why I felt the need to hide that "me." Then again, might it have been others who simply insisted on my invisibility?

We're working our way through the crowd now, edging slowly toward the far corner of the piano, where we see just enough space for the two of us to stand behind a youngish straight couple, perhaps in their early thirties. They're perched on stools to the right of Dan Daly, this evening's pianist and Master of Ceremonies. Dan is a slender man, with short-cropped brown hair, in his mid-forties. He looks pleased: his clear glass tip bowl, large enough for a family of goldfish, has just returned to the piano top filled with dollar bills after being passed among the patrons.

He starts to play, and I start to sing along. For the moment it doesn't matter if there's anyone else in the room. As it always

has, singing transports me to a secret place where I can begin to understand who I am and what my life is all about. In so many ways, the song he's now playing, "Where Is Love?" is a theme song for me. "Where is love? Does it fall from skies above?" The song is from *Oliver!* I first listened to it on a vinyl album with my childhood friend, Carl Brown, more than fifty years ago. We sang the song together, but Carl had the courage to answer the question *where is love?* long before I even dared to think about it. He came out of the closet about the same time that I stepped into it. He followed his dream to live a life that felt natural and right to him, as I ran away from mine. I'll never stop wondering what might have been if we'd followed that dream together.

""Til I am beside the someone who/ I can mean something to." Well, maybe I'm beside him this evening. I smile at Todd. He is a sweet, gentle person; the kind of man who always asks what he can do to make my life easier, more comfortable. We share a love of music and singing, and that's what brings us here tonight.

Dan Daly plays the introduction to "Do Re Mi": "Let's start at the very beginning . . ." A fellow on the other side of the room calls out, "What song is this?" I can't help myself: I blurt out, equally loudly, "Who let *straight* people in here?" Chuckles abound. The young man in front of me, the one sitting with a

woman close to his age, turns around, cracking up with laughter, extends his hand toward me and says, "I *love* your style." And he winks at me. I smile in return. Am I smiling at him? Or at myself, transported back in time, about sixteen years, sitting in this very room, next to *my* wife?

For the next two hours or so the songs, and the drinking, continue. Todd and I know most, but by no means all, of the lyrics. This charming young man in front of me knows all of the words. He's short in stature, with curly, dusty blond hair and gold wire-rimmed glasses, and in his tight-fitting, V-necked black tee he looks more like the young gay men in the room than their straight, more conservatively dressed counterparts. His black jeans are equally tight, and I'm curious about what we'll see when he stands up. I wonder if his companion realizes who he resembles this evening. She wears a large diamond ring. Assuming it came from him, I can't help but wonder if it was his effort to purchase her happiness and contentment, for I've already decided that he and I have a lot more than our love of show tunes in common.

Should I tell him that kind of appeasement only works for so long?

She sings quietly along with a few of the songs, but seems more interested in drinking and texting and checking her watch.

She appears to be wishing that she were someplace else. And who can blame her? But she isn't someplace else. She's here, sitting next to him. And almost never looking at him. She *must* be his wife, I think. If she were his fag hag, she'd be conversing with him and having fun.

He, on the other hand, cannot turn around frequently enough to share his enjoyment of the music with me and Todd. And I'm enjoying our unspoken camaraderie.

Seeing how unhappy his "wife" looks makes me wonder why she agreed to come to a gay bar with him in the first place. Could it be that she didn't know what Marie's was? Or does she suspect something and want to keep her eye on him? To this day my ex-wife claims that she never had a clue that I was gay. But then I never took her to a gay bar . . . at least not until after I came out to her.

The young woman's increasing impatience begins to wear on her companion, and as the evening progresses it seems more and more difficult for him to remain animated and joyful as he sings along with us and the rest of the boisterous crowd at Marie's. But he doesn't stop turning to look at us. Actually, it now feels like he's looking at me. As if he knows something more about me, or knows there is something more that I might understand about him. I think I detect a pleading expression on his face. His

eyes are glazing over. Or is this all in my imagination? Projected feelings, memories, anxiety from my past; it was, after all, to this same spot in late 1995 that I brought my wife, in a misguided mission to introduce her to what I had finally come to accept as my new way of life.

It was 1996, sixteen years ago, and I held the door to Marie's Crisis open for Lisa as music wafted from below. With a pained expression that seemed both hesitant and determined, she followed me down the stairs.

This was our third "visit" to a gay establishment since I announced to her, after eighteen years of marriage, that I was gay. I was both relieved and horrified when Lisa proclaimed that we'd find a way to continue making our marriage work. When I imagined coming out to my wife, the script always ended with her throwing me out of the house in what would be a scene of both devastation and liberation. I was trying to be clear that I felt a continuation of our marriage to be an improbable outcome. But having been with Lisa as friend, boyfriend, and husband since high school—twenty-five years of our lives—I felt, I knew, that I owed it to her to ease her into whatever transition was

before us, and to help her understand why it was happening. She needed to know that for me being gay wasn't just a question of with whom someone has sex. It was being part of a different culture, a unique awareness, a way of life. It was, for me, feeling more at home in a piano bar than at a ballpark. It was watching *Will & Grace* and relating mostly to Jack. It was that the Tony Awards were a highlight of my year, and I couldn't care less who was playing in the Super Bowl. And mostly for me it was a matter of whom and how I love. I hoped that these field trips would give Lisa that understanding as well—for my own peace of mind, if not hers.

And so we agreed that I would take her to some of the places where I felt I could be myself. I believed that her agenda was to demonstrate her ability and willingness to share my new "interests," as she labeled them. To show me how flexible and understanding she was willing to be. It was an extraordinary effort on her part, with a goal of keeping our eighteen-year marriage intact. She believed—I suppose she needed to believe—that this was my version of a mid-life crisis, and that if she waited it out, if she could survive it, I'd eventually come back to my senses and our marriage would resume its normal course.

But the thought of remaining in our marriage was terrifying to me. I was deeply hurt that she would question my integrity, as

she did when she dismissed my coming out to her—the ultimate confession of my truth—as a "phase" that I'd soon get over. At the same time, I knew she must love me very much to put herself through an experience as difficult and painful as this. Perhaps a profound sense of guilt was driving me, and I felt that I had no choice but to indulge her request to experience the gay life to which I was drawn.

And so there we were, an hour and a half from our suburban home, at a gay piano bar in the West Village. We sat together at one of the few small wooden tables. It was early evening, and the place was sparsely populated. The fellow behind the piano asked if there was something we'd like to hear, and I suggested a song from *A Chorus Line,* a musical that Lisa and I had enjoyed together.

As he began to play, Maggie Wirth, the singing cocktail waitress I'd known since her days at Eighty Eights—another piano bar—came over to take our drink order. I asked for a vodka tonic, and Lisa requested a Coke. Minutes later Maggie returned with our drinks in glass tumblers.

As I paid Maggie for the drinks, adding a generous tip, Lisa glared at me. "I'm not drinking that! I thought they would come in plastic cups. Who knows who drank from that glass last or what disease they might have!"

I was aghast that she could even think such a thing, let alone say it—and I felt the blood rushing to my face. Perhaps it was at that moment I truly realized the futility of trying to bring our very different worlds together. My mind flashed back to a discussion we'd had when Lisa was pregnant for the third time. It was 1986, and she was working as a registered nurse. The AIDS crisis had found its way to New Jersey, and she was terrified of sticking herself with a needle and contracting HIV. She no longer felt secure that her double gowns, her surgical mask, or her multiple latex gloves would protect her health and that of our unborn child. And so we agreed that she'd stop working as a hospital nurse and consider other, safer ways to contribute to our income, both during and after that pregnancy.

Now I sat red-faced in Marie's knowing that there was no connection between what had once been Lisa's legitimate anxiety about contact with HIV-contaminated blood and her baseless fear of using a drinking glass that may have been previously used by an HIV-positive man. I also knew that there would be no convincing her of that.

"Let's go," I said, and stood and walked toward the door.

The young woman who reminds me tonight so much of Lisa, still sitting at the bar and ignoring the young man who reminds me so much of myself, stands, twisting a handful of her straight blonde hair with her right hand, and works her way back through the crowd toward the stairs that lead down to the basement restrooms. Her young man puts his head down on his crossed arms. I can see that his eyes are open, and he's staring down at the dark tile floor. He remains in that position for quite a while. When he hears her return, he leans over the bar, puts a few dollars more into Dan's tip bowl, and tells her that he's ready to leave. She wears a look of relief as she heads toward the exit.

He wishes us a good evening. He looks so resigned.

"Hey, guy," I say to him, now looking directly into his eyes. "Why don't you just come out already?"

He smiles then, and winks at me once more. As if to say, "I knew you'd understand."

I put my arm around the back of Todd's slender waist and reach up to kiss his bearded face.

Why don't you just come out? It's the question I've asked myself for as many years as I can remember. Todd and I have been dating for only six months, but he's heard enough of my stories to understand that the pain of my coming out as a (then) married

father of three remains as real for me now as the moment it began. It's a feeling of loss that can't be resolved, for I could and would never wish my children away. Nothing is more important to me than my love for them. Yet I'll never know how I might have responded if someone earlier in my lifetime had asked me, "Why don't you just come out?"

Perhaps I would not have lived so much of my life caught between two worlds.

"I think I'm ready to leave now," I say to Todd. "It's been a long evening."

And then the crowd starts singing a song from *The Wiz*. We sing along, as we work our way to the door. "Believe in yourself, right from the start/ You'll have brains/ You'll have a heart/ You'll have courage/ to last your whole life through/ If you believe in yourself/ as I believe in you . . ."

And I surprise myself as I begin to cry.

New Larch Cone, Garn Lakes, South Wales | Cath Barton

American Mythology

Sara Emily Kuntz

It was an assignment,
find out your ethnic background,
so I asked: *What are we?*
and Dad replied: *American!*

Perhaps remembering the heavy
Germanic accent, Grandpa Lemanski's
hands as he carefully cleaned
the deep sea fishing lines.

Perhaps he was just being difficult.
Like how he stopped voting after 1972,
when he was eighteen and crushed
that Nixon got re-elected.

For my sixteenth birthday
he got me a reading
of my astrological chart
from an old friend.

She told me I was like Athena,
that I was born from the head of my father.
I'm more likely to compare us to Sisyphus.
Sometimes I'm the rock

he has to push until I fall again.
Sometimes he's the boulder
trapping me on that sweltering hill.

Because Homer Didn't Know What It Was Like, Helen Writes

Catherine Keefe

Last Night

I slip the red stiff apron string around my neck

my yoke
breaking in

this one small
armless kitchen dress

draping how so heavy
canvas brushes

on my knees

the tidy bow
tied behind my back by heart

by hands so used to moving
never touching what they want.

And then this dream:

in a Thracian meadow
I step upon an empty snake skin

and wonder,

what would it be like
to be followed

into hell?

Real Monsters

B R Sanders

Now while it's true that Charybdis and I eat passing sailors for fun, it's also true that no one's ever thought to ask us why we do it. Partly we do it because we are hungry. I'm always hungry: I have, like, ten heads. There's the six of them up front on snake's necks, and then there's the dogs' heads down below (all of those heads have very pretty faces, though, according to Chary). Partly it's because there's really not all that much to do here on either side of the Strait of Messina. We get bored. You would get bored, too, if you were stuck here. Bored and hungry, and then a ship full of brawny men slides by and what else are we supposed to do? What would you do? You would let your six strong, prehensile snakes' necks dart forward, let your jaws full of three rows of sharks' teeth bite into those men's arms or chests or legs, and swoop them off their ship and into your belly. If you had as many heads configured the way my many heads are that's what you'd do. Don't lie to yourself.

You know what else is true? Divine beings are gossips, down to the last. The humans who try to sail past me and Charybdis don't care all that much how we got here or why we do what we do. They're used to unimaginable things. They're used to enduring senseless things at the hands of creatures larger and smarter and more vicious than themselves. But the gods—the gods sometimes come to the bluffs and point first at me and my ten heads, and then down into the whirlpool prison Chary's trapped in, and they gossip. Rumors are born and thrive on those bluffs. Rumors find their way back to Olympus where I doubt anyone really remembers what's true and what isn't anymore. Depending on who you ask, I was born monstrous. I don't think so—I don't even think I'm monstrous now, even with my serpentine faces and canine fore-parts. I wouldn't say I was ever monstrous, but the stories spread around Olympus tell a different story.

Here's the thing you need to know about Olympus: the ones who have the power get to make the rules, but they don't have to follow the rules they set down for the rest of us. Zeus is the biggest of the big shots; surely you already know that. Zeus can

do and does do whatever he wants. Zeus turned himself into an eagle and plucked Ganymede off a mountainside. Zeus whisked the poor kid away from his friends and family (who all thought he was dead, by the way) to serve as his "cup-bearer." Whatever. We've all seen the way Zeus ogles Ganymede at the divine feasts. We've all seen the way Zeus watches and licks his lips at the way that poor boy's terrified arms shake as he decants wine into mighty Zeus' waiting cup. We've all seen the shadows of healing bruises on Ganymede's thighs—thighs that never age, thighs that will always be frozen in the perfection of youth from the moment the eagle version of Zeus swept him away from everything he knew. There's a pretense, but it's thin, and everyone knows what Zeus is up to with Ganymede, and no one seems to care. Even if you do care (and, I, personally do because Ganymede's a nice kid who didn't deserve this shit just because he's handsome), what can you do? Zeus is God of the Sky. He's Law and Justice Incarnate. What He Says Goes.

Definitely the Olympian men are in charge of things, but it's not too terribly different with the goddesses. All I'm saying is Artemis is a huntress, sure, but she's not nearly so straight as those arrows she's always firing off. But she's well connected—Mighty Zeus is her daddy. She's got all those lovely hunting attendants, each one nubile and girlish and all flashing eyelashes,

but still to keep her place up on the mountain Artemis has to play the virgin.

Now that I've set the scene for you, let me tell you about me. I've always been Scylla. I've never thought I was monstrous, but then again how many monsters know themselves for what they are? Maybe the Olympians were right. I don't know. I don't see how they could be, but I don't know. Anyway, I've always been Scylla and depending on who you ask I've always been monstrous. When Hera Changed me, she said she wasn't turning me into a monster but rather revealing the monster I was inside.

The only time I made it to Olympus was for my court date (and you know how that went). I was provincial. You probably know I'm one of the Phorcydes—one of the monstrous offspring of Ceto and Phorcys. Ceto, my mama, is a sea-witch. The Olympians loved her when they needed help and hated her when they didn't. You know all about my sister, Medusa, whose crime was she wasn't pretty enough and didn't care much about being pretty. And the triplets (you'd know them as the gray Stygian Witches) took after Mama and steeped themselves in magic the Olympians frown upon. We lived in the sea, deep in the dark belly of the sea, as far away from Olympia and its rarefied air as we could get. We had our own little watery pocket to live in and grow in. Mama and Papa didn't care what we

looked like or what we wanted to learn. They just cared that we were happy. So I didn't know until I left home that what I was—what I still am—makes me a monster in the eyes of those upstairs hypocrites.

I got an internship with a river god when I was old enough to leave home. I wanted to see the sunlight. I wanted to see the kinds of soft, warm light that come from above instead of the cold blue lights of the creatures in the deep sea. Mama and Papa let me go. They told me to be safe and to be careful, and I said I would. The problem was that I didn't know what was safe and what wasn't. I didn't know how to be careful. Anyway, my internship is how I ended up over by the Strait of Messina. Charybdis was already there—she was a nereid, but not one of those fancy ones. She was a hard worker. She hauled the tide in and pushed it out day after day, flushing the water through the small passage of the Strait and drawing it back in again when the time was right. The river god gave me a stream to take care of where the salt water and fresh water mingled, and I had a good view of Chary while she worked from my stream. I'd watch her pushing and pulling the water of the sea while I plucked out human detritus from my stream bed. I watched her relax between the tides while I meticulously and strategically placed

the rocks in the stream for maximized water flow and ideal aesthetics.

Let me tell you about Charybdis: she has hair made of kelp—thick red-brown bands of kelp that she wrapped around and around her head when she worked but which she wore loose and long between shifts. She has the skin of a seal, that slick dark gray-brown skin, smooth and shining. The work she did was hard; tide-work is physically intense, physically demanding. You have to be strong to do it. Especially your arms and back—she pushed and pulled those countless gallons of water with her bunched, hard muscles, muscles rippling beneath her sealskin. And she worked year-round; pulled tides in high summer and pushed them out again in the bleakest depths of winter. Like a seal she had a layer of fat all over, a resilient and enticing roundness to her. There's something compelling about watching someone do exactly the work to which they're suited. There's something seductive about seeing someone precisely in their element. She was there day in and day out, her and the tides she mastered, and I watched her perfect body perform its exacting work from the same bluff the rumor-mongers judge us these days. It's like those devoured sailor all over again: if you had been in my position, what would you have done? Would you have been able to somehow not fall for her?

One day the river god came by to inspect my stream work. I passed inspection. Afterward, while he sat in my stream and we shared a meal, I asked him about the brown-skinned kelp-haired woman down below. "Oh, that's Charybdis," he said.

"What's her story?" I asked.

He shrugged. "She's salt-water. I'm fresh-water."

"I'm salt-water," I said.

"No," he said, "you're brackish. That's why I gave you this brackish stream to tend. A little of both, not quite either."

"So you don't know her?"

"She keeps to herself." The river god eyed me. "Keep to your stream, Scylla. Leave Charybdis to the tides."

"Why?"

"There are rumors. She's not really the sort an impressionable young girl like yourself should hang around with. Your stream looks good. I'll come by again next week." He dusted off his hands and melded with the stream's water, melting and diffusing into it, letting it sweep him back to his home in the main river.

The conversation with my boss only left me more curious about her. He wouldn't be back for a whole week! It took two days for me to screw up the courage to go down and introduce myself. I arranged the rocks in the stream and picked out the

odds and ends that drifted in from the human towns. I rummaged through my things and unearthed a pot of honey. I watched Charybdis deal with the tides, and when she finished, I made my way down the rocky ledges. She lay in a pool of sunlight on a ledge of rock worn smooth by the tides she pulled in and out. Her kelp-hair was loose and draped elegantly over the edge of the rock. She lay on her back, naked, her powerful arms tucked up under her head. She was humming to herself some melody that used the rhythmic crash of the waves as her tempo. She didn't notice me until I was right up on her. I cleared my throat. She peered at me from the corner of her eye. "You got a message from Triton?" she asked. Her voice was husky and sharp.

"Me? No."

Charybdis propped herself up on her elbows. She looked me over. "You smell salty."

I pointed up to the bluffs. "I work the brackish stream. That one up there." The words came out stilted and tight. I gripped the small pot of honey so hard my knuckles hurt. It was surreal being face to face with her. Up close she had a raw, stunning power. I'd seen and studied the outline of her form, but I hadn't been able to make out the details of her face from way up there. She had high, sharp cheekbones and a strong, square jaw. Her

eyes were black—seal-like—and fringed with thick, dark lashes. Her eyes were soft, the softest thing about her. Up close her sealskin shone in the light. Her lips and her nipples both were a darker brown than her skin and tinged with mulberry red. When she spoke I saw the flash of bright white teeth.

Charybdis sat up and cocked her head to the side. "You're not from the rivers, though. You smell of deep salt. You've got ocean skin—blue-green, fish-scaled ocean skin. Bet you've even got gills, huh?"

I smiled. I let out a nervous laugh. "Yeah, I'm from the depths."

"What's an ocean girl like you working a piddly brackish stream up there for?"

"I wanted to see the sun."

"Is it everything you hoped for?"

And I looked right at her. And I grinned wide. And I said this right to her: "I've enjoyed the view." The moment held for a hot second. Chary raised her eyebrows. The corner of her mouth hitched up. And then I lost my nerve. I thrust the pot of honey towards her. "Here. All that work must leave you hungry."

She took it and turned it over in her hands. "What is it?"

"Honey."

She laughed. "You managed to get a sweet tooth down in the depths, ocean girl?"

But I was already backing away. "Just thought you might be hungry." I climbed back up the bluffs cursing myself for not being a smoother, more intriguing creature than I was. Sometimes in the days that followed Charybdis would stretch after her tide work. Sometimes she'd shield her eyes with her hand and peer up towards the bluffs, like she was looking for my brackish stream. But it was nearly two more weeks before I managed to gather up the gumption to go see her again. In my weekly inspection, the river god had told me to root my stones deeper in the stream bed: it was turning autumn, and the south wind was getting restless. I used that piece of knowledge as an excuse to seek Chary out a second time. I didn't have any more honey to bring her. Since I was going down empty-handed there was no need to brave the rocky bluffs—they scratched off some of my scales, and all that time spent in the open air dried me out. I ran full speed and leapt off the bluff, falling down down down into the buoyant saltiness of the pure ocean. I stayed down for a long while, sinking down to the floor as the wicked, willful waves smashed themselves on the rocks above. I flexed my gills. I took my time, and when I'd drowned my nervousness in the familiarity of the ocean, I swam to Charybdis' rock. I broke the

surface. She startled. She laughed and drew her kelp hair from her face. "Oh, it's you," she said. "The ocean girl from the stream."

"Hi, Charybdis."

"Hi . . . uh, I don't remember your name. Did you even tell me your name?"

"I don't think I did. I'm Scylla."

"Hi, Scylla. You bring me more honey?"

I shook my head. "That was the last of it. I didn't mean to scare you. If I had more honey, I would have brought it." I was babbling, and I knew it. I dropped beneath the surface and let the salt seep into me. I felt more centered when I popped back up again. "The river god—my boss, the river god—he mentioned something. You probably know already, but I thought I'd fill you in in case you don't. He said Notus, the south wind, gets restless this time of year—"

"And when Notus gets bored he loses his shit and causes storms. I know. I've been pulling tides here at the Strait for a few years now," she said. "Thanks for letting me know, though. I wish you'd been here the first autumn I did tide-work. I didn't know about Notus and his tantrums then and I really could have used the heads up." She leaned forward and smiled at me; rows of white teeth against full mulberry lips. "Hey, you look good in

the ocean. You shouldn't be up there in a brackish stream. The salt brings out the shine in your scales." She reached out and ran a finger down my shoulder. "I love scales. I always wished I had scales."

"Why? Have you seen your skin?"

She laughed. I laughed. "My mother said we always want what we can't have. Hey, are you hungry? I still have some of your honey left. I'll split it with you."

She helped me up onto her rock. She slipped into her living cave, found the half-full pot of honey and brought it back to where I sat. We sat side by side, spooning the honey into our mouths with our fingers until the pot was empty. When it was done, she caught my eye and took my hand. She licked each of my fingers clean with her smooth seal's tongue. And I was lost to her for good.

You can guess what happened after that. Remember, I'm one of the Phorcydes, and until I struck out on my own we kept to ourselves. I didn't know then what I know now, that wanting Chary was considered monstrous. I didn't understand at first why she only wanted to touch me, to kiss me and stroke me in

the confining privacy of her cave. She mentioned offhand once or twice that she had once known Artemis, that we had to be like Artemis and her attendants. I thought at first it was a game. I didn't understand the need to be discreet, but Chary did. We weren't big shots; we had to hide it.

I don't know what tipped off the river god, but I know he's the one who sold us out. Maybe I wasn't as careful as I should have been. I know once or twice he came by for an inspection and I wasn't there. I know if you know exactly where to look you can sort of see into the mouth of Chary's cave. Maybe he knew where to look. And maybe he saw us. It doesn't really matter. Given the state of things, we were going to get caught eventually. And since we weren't big shots we were going to have examples made of us when we got caught. It was a matter of time. I think Chary knew, and I think she didn't care. And I didn't know, but I think if I had I wouldn't have cared much, either.

So, we got caught. The river god tipped off the Olympians, and they planned a sting. Aphrodite caught us in flagrante delicto, as it were, and hauled us up to Olympus for "crimes against the natural order." A court date was set. Technically we were punished because Eros, that nosy little prat, had not pricked either of us with his arrows. Technically, we were

flouting divine law by daring to fall in love on our own terms and without divine intervention. Not that Eros was involved when Zeus stole away Ganymede. Eros' records were pulled and pored over. I was to be shot by Eros a few years later so that I would fall for some mortal prince, which probably would have led me to be turned into a tree or something. They gave me the choice to renounce my actions and end the relationship so that they could follow through with the plan, but their plan for me was not all that appealing, especially not compared to Chary. Charybdis, having once been a hunting attendant of Artemis', was supposed to remain forever chaste. Chary later told me that Artemis is a jealous creature, and that when Chary left the hunt Artemis told her she'd never have anyone else again. Artemis was there at the sentencing, by the way, looking haughty and violent.

So, we got caught, and the monstrosity of our relationship got spread all over Olympus. Hera turned me into this many-headed beast and trapped Chary at the bottom of a whirlpool so that all would know us for what we are. I got Changed, you know, because they had such plans for me and that mortal prince that now can never be fulfilled, but Chary just faced banishment.

At the sentencing, Hera called us monsters. Maybe we are monsters. I don't know, and really, I don't care, because the big shots messed up. It's not so bad having these ten hungry heads because Chary is right there, just a bowshot across from me. They gave me these long, sinewy necks, and when I walk to the edge of my perch and stretch I can crane my serpents' necks over the water and reach down inside Chary's whirlpool prison. Charybdis holds my multiple monstrous faces with her sealskin hands, and she kisses my rows of sharks' teeth with her mulberry lips, and we talk. I pluck out the sailors from passing ships, and she draws those ships down into her whirlpool. Chary picks through the wreckage, and sometimes she finds necklaces to drape around my many necks. And sometimes she finds pots of honey she breaks open and shares with me. She lets me lick the honey from her hands with my flicking serpents' tongues. She says it tickles, and she laughs with her soft black eyes bright and happy. She still likes my scales. She still likes how I smell of the ocean. The joke's on Hera, because this divine punishment really isn't so bad at all.

Upstream

Stewart Lewis

Bernadette Williams was a good wife. Her house was always impeccable, her desserts delectable, and her style calculated and confident. A real estate agent by day, she was successful and respected in the community. She was lithe and attractive, her figure barely indicative of approaching middle age. Her husband of twelve years was a commercial pilot and hardly ever home. It's not that she didn't love him; it was that something had gone stale was resurfacing. If you leave something alive to rest, it grows, unavoidably. It was her ecosystem of sex and nerves, her profound sense of daring, and that afternoon in 1992 was the beginning of something horribly wonderful.

Writing a check for a few items at the A&P and there, handing her the small bag with a slight apprehension in his face was the bag-boy, Drew, who perhaps subconsciously wanted to keep the bag, instead take Bernadette's arm and find a place where they could open it up, discover together what was inside.

She took the bag and Drew took her breath, unexpectedly. She turned and walked away; muttered something of a soft groan only she herself could hear, and then smiled. She knew he was right behind her, sensed his presence.

He said, "Hey, um, hi."

She reacted in a way that would have been expected from a 39-year-old woman getting hit on by a boy of just 18. Looked at him, a bit startled, and said, "Yes? What is it?"

"Would you like to see my fish?" Drew replied, looking like a white-trash cherub, a beautiful poor boy, a warm heart from a cold, cold life.

Next thing you know Bernadette was eyes wide, shoes off, and reeling in front of a giant fish tank in Drew's garage. Since she and her husband had stopped having sex three years earlier, something told her (in neon hues) that this was the time for the grand re-opening. Funny thing was, she didn't even have to seduce him. She turned around to ask him about the fish and he met her with his rushed lips, not harsh but with extraordinary grace. Bernadette was shaking inside, her whole body a tiny earthquake, the epicenter at the soft spot between her breasts, and he laid her down, right there in that garage in the middle of town. She had sold a lot next to that one two days earlier. The only block in town that was underdeveloped, affordable.

For a while they just breathed, next to each other, looking up at rotting wood on the ceiling that made intricate designs, an artistic decay. Then he kissed her again, those lips, the scandal of it, the bad-boy-bad-girl of it, the forbidden fruit. They had shared less than ten words and their bodies were speaking as if they'd known each other forever. Afterwards, after Bernadette and Drew both climaxed, they lay completely still, the fish circling above their heads, drawing impermanent halos in the water.

This went on for weeks, Tuesdays and Fridays, and Bernadette's ground became cloud, her eyes became sky, her skin formed sheen, water over stone. It was a resurrection, a rebirth, a most liberating and decadent sideshow. Her husband barely noticed besides an occasional *What's got into you* or *Where've you been*, his tone hackneyed and rhetorical. She wouldn't respond, just kept doing her little house duties, now with lightness and verve, a bounce to her step, a playful arc to her arm movements.

Drew was a simple boy, not too bright, took care of his alcoholic father with undying loyalty, and never knew his mother who left when he was four. He loved Bernadette's scent most of all. The sharp, quick smell of fancy soap, the citrus infused into her brown curls. He had always felt alienated at school, ashamed of his faded clothes and his talk-of-the-town father. He had no

other relatives, which is why he was not missed. It was a familiar story—high school boys with too much beer in their young, naive stomachs. Getting behind the wheel of a car. Such hopeful, promising lives viciously cut short. Drew was in the passenger seat, his only friend driving, the geek from the A&P.

There were only a handful of people at the funeral, huddled underneath a gray sky giving way to a rain so slight it was really mist. Bernadette stayed just out of sight but close enough to see and hear. The minister was stern and grim, and after mentioning that Drew never got "the chance to live" she allowed herself a thin, knowing smile.

She never told a soul. It was a secret that had found a home, was content to live there forever, inside of Bernadette's still beating heart.

It was a small stone at the end of the row in the town cemetery, on which only the word Drew was written, in black cursive. After that day, no one visited the stone except Bernadette, like clockwork every Tuesday and Friday, each day leaving a small, plastic, colored fish. They started to gather until months later there were hundreds of these plastic fish, covering the stone as if trying to get in. A migratory pattern stilted, caught, and piling.

Chickadees

Gabrielle Bates

Chickadees examine bark
searching for spider eggs
    soft cocoons and other
dormant life

    like me, all they want

is a few breaths, a dime's worth
of touching—

necessary membranes
    pecked broken
in the twilight.

The Raven Dad

Marco A. Domínguez

Her father has the eyes of a raven
digging in the front yard for food,

so she paints *Raven Dad Eating*,
a portrait of a naked man on all fours

with his mouth in the dirt, surrounded
by birds. Her father recognizes himself

in the portrait at an exhibition. She flies
after him, but he blends into the city

like a raven blends into the night,
so she paints *Raven Dad Blending*.

He refuses to see it, because he knows
she puts him in awkward positions

with birds and if blending is in the title
a bird might be blending with his skin.

She misses him seeing her paintings,
so she paints *Raven Dad Missing*, a self-portrait

of when she was little without birds, without
her father. Her father sees it by accident.

He calls one evening to make peace. She paints
Raven Dad Reconciling. This time it is a gift

for her father. He sits in his living room
in the same pose as the painting. One can't tell

them apart. A bird is perched on his shoulder.

The Prenup

Marc S. Cohen

That was the year people stopped giving a shit. They dropped their suspicions of each other, more from boredom than prudence, choosing instead to embrace a condition of general and unflinching hopelessness. No one bought baby name books anymore, consigning to their children their own fruitless quest for identity, and many desisted from reproducing altogether. Lovers grew languid, poets disenchanted. Conversations ebbed; speech seemed like something exhumed from an archaic past, wan and inscrutable. All told, everybody just felt a little more worn down than usual. They even cancelled the World Series when both teams were no-shows.

So after the breakup with Cecily, when the second judge in so many years gave one of his exes full custody to his child, Fisk reached a decision. He was quitting. Everything: his job, the city, life. With the shattered remains of the savings and dignity left him by a fair and impartial judicial system, he was going to move

to the country, where he would buy a small farm, learn to live off the land, and build things.

His friends went apoplectic. What about little Fisk? they cried. What about little Jess? They're with their mothers now, said Fisk. The courts have ruled. But you're a lawyer, they reminded him, and an experienced litigator. Yes, he sighed, and the Judge said I did a fine job making my case—right after she gave me two days access a month.

So Fisk left. He found a property about 100 miles from the city and moved his belongings there. He rented out the land to a young agronomist who was saving to start his own farm someday. Then he took out a lease on an office space in town and set up a small practice. His plan was to work two or three days a week, closing real estate deals and drafting and probating wills. The rest of the time he would mend fences, cut grass, and make storage bins for the barn. And a couple times a month he would drive back to the city to spend the few hours the courts conceded him visiting his kids.

Fisk was pleased with this plan. It was, he felt, a gentler alternative to suicide. And his friends eventually came around to this point of view.

The first client to see him was Jake Jacob. Jacob owned about seventy-five acres near Kirkland Corner, just down the road from Fisk's. He was a stout man with a limp left eye and a lower lip that hung like an extra jowl. Jacob sold Fisk his old water heater after Fisk discovered his had a leak. Jacob had a barn full of spare appliances he collected from people who didn't need them anymore. He took them off their hands gratis, fixed them up and resold them for a profit. Fisk was the first person he'd sold to in six years.

Jacob told Fisk he needed his services.

I want to sue someone, he said.

Anyone in particular? Fisk asked.

Jacob paused a moment in reflection, then said: I want to sue Jack Hackleton.

Who's Jack Hackleton?

Jack Hackleton, Jacob explained, ran the auction hall at Kirkland Corner. He ran three more auction halls in each of the neighboring counties. He owned a large estate up along the Fourth Concession. He was closing in on retirement, and his sons were slowly taking over operating the family business.

He was, in short, a very bad man.

I can see that, said Fisk. So that's why you want to sue him? Because he's a successful businessman?

I want to sue him because he's after my property, said Jake Jacob.

Hackleton, it seems, had been interested in Jacob's farm for a long time. It was right up the road from the auction hall, and he thought he could turn the land into a convenient parking space for auction nights. That way customers wouldn't have to park on the roadside anymore.

Jack Hackleton had made several offers over the years to buy Jake Jacob's farm, all at insultingly low prices. Jake Jacob's girls lived in the city, and had no interest in running a farm. He made them well aware of his disregard for Jack Hackleton. Not a month went by he didn't warn them, if they ever let Jack Hackleton near his farm, he would haunt them from his grave.

So now you want to sue him, Fisk said.

Yes, said Jacob.

Right, said Fisk. The problem is, I don't think it's possible to sue someone for offering to buy your land, even at an insultingly low price.

It *was* insulting, said Jacob.

Even so, said Fisk.

Jacob leaned over Fisk's desk and said: I cannot accept such a slight.

I understand, said Fisk, but I don't think the courts would allow it. What I can do, though, is add a codicil to your will that says that under no circumstances is your farm to be sold to Jack Hackleton.

Jacob sat back in his chair. He folded his arms resolutely. He licked his large lower lip. Then he said: Fine. Only instead of under no circumstances, can it say: *over my dead body*?

A few days later, Maisie Tillson came to Fisk's office. Mrs. Tillson worked in the flower shop next door. She and her husband owned a house at the bottom of Terrycloth Hill, just outside of town.

She was angry at her neighbor, Socrates Winslow.

Winslow owned the property just up the hill from her house. After a rain, all the water from his property flowed down into the Tillsons' yard, turning it into a cheap replica of Monet's Garden at Giverny.

I planted new begonias last May, she said. In June, we had that flash flood, and all the begonias drowned. You haven't experienced loss until you've raked up a pile of dead begonias.

Fisk looked at a photo of his children beside his desk, and sighed.

Let me ask you something, he said. Who lives on the other side of Socrates Winslow?

That would be Tommy and Jill Adams, said Mrs. Tillson.

And who lives on the other side of the Adamses?

The Woothrows.

And who beyond the Woothrows?

Teddy Phillips.

And beyond Teddy Phillips?

No one. Ted lives at the top of the hill.

So is it conceivable, Fisk asked, that Socrates Winslow isn't the only one with drainage problems? That he gets his water from Tommy and Jill Adams? And that the Adamses are getting their water from the Woothrows, and the Woothrows from Teddy Phillips?

It could be.

That's my concern. If you sue Socrates Winslow, Socrates Winslow may turn around and sue Tommy and Jill Adams, who will then sue the Woothrows, who will then sue Teddy Phillips. And do you know who Teddy Phillips will sue?

I can't imagine.

Gravity.

Gravity? Can he do that?

Sure. And I'm afraid he might have a good case, Fisk added, crossing his hands for emphasis.

How so? asked Mrs. Tillson.

Gravity, it seems, is what makes water run downhill, said Fisk.

No one else came to see him for a while. In the meantime, he read some articles on barn insulation, and on solar paneling. He was considering installing a wood stove in his living room. He'd recently noticed one sitting in a sale lot at Hackleton's.

Or he would try his hand at fixing things. Broken pipes. Unhinged cabinet doors. He was able to replace a ripped screen with the aid of *The Handyman's Guide to Screen Door Maintenance*. The local library was full of useful books like this. *How to Build Your Dream Garden Shed. Deck Construction in 32 Easy Steps.* Resources for everything, it seemed, except repairing a broken life.

Sometimes Fisk would catch himself staring aimlessly at the horizon through his living room window. He would have no concept of how much time had passed while doing this. The days were growing desultory and listless. He felt dislocated and divided from himself, like a tree ripped from its roots in a midwinter storm. It was April.

He took long walks to the edge of his property. The air was musky and fecal. It was a bit early in the season, but the farmers wanted to get a head start fertilizing their fields. It was like they were in competition to see who could spread their shit the farthest.

His friends from the city would call to see how he was doing. Fisk would tell them he was considering getting a wood stove. They warned him about house fires caused by sooty pipes. Electric is safer, they would admonish. He told them he wanted to go off grid, was even contemplating buying solar panels. Such the pioneer, his friends would say.

They asked him about his practice. He would tell them business was slow, but he was encouraged that all the farmers wanted to sue each other. No one asked him about his kids.

Then he would hang up, make himself supper, watch some TV and fall asleep on the sofa. He would dream of flash floods and chimney fires, and always wake up disappointed.

Saturday was one of his visitation days. Fisk got up at the crack of dawn so that he could make the 9 a.m. pickup at his ex in-laws' place in the city suburbs, 112 miles away. This was in accordance with the court order. The judge that dictated the terms of his relationship with his three-year-old decided it would

be best if he picked up the girl at Cecily's parents', that way her own parents couldn't meet and potentially quarrel in front of her. Fisk had argued strenuously against this arrangement, pointing out that Cecily's mother and father typically spent three or four months in Florida every winter, but the judge ignored him. The judge pretty much ignored everything he said during the trial. She treated him like a creature both voiceless and invisible, not even a common John Doe, referring to him only as *the father*. The father will see to it that . . . The father will agree to . . . In a way, he felt lucky; at least she acknowledged his paternity, though this was the one thing that was never in dispute.

He took Jess to the science museum. They played hide and seek in the bat cave, and clanged on metal drums in the music room. She laughed hysterically at the faces he made while his hair stuck up in the static electricity exhibit. In the sports center, he hugged her tight and helped her hit the ball into the roof of the batting cage. Then they sat together in the planetarium, and gazed at the stars like tentative lovers.

She asked him if there were any horses or donkeys on his farm. He said there weren't. What about chickens? I'm afraid not. Pigs? Nope. She asked if he would get her a pig for her fourth birthday. He gently explained that they didn't allow people to own pigs inside the city.

They ate pizza in the cafeteria, and she asked him about her half brother. Little Fisk was seven years old and living across town with his mother. She wanted to know if her brother was coming to her birthday party in May. He said he would have to get his mother's consent, but believed this could be arranged.

They left the science museum an hour before closing, because they were due back at her grandparents' at 5 p.m. This too was in compliance with the court order. He asked her if she wanted to go to the zoo on their next visit. She grinned and said Yes, then asked him when was he going to get some animals for his farm. He said he was working on this, maybe in a year or so, and she asked if she could come and see them when he did. He lied to her and said this was a possibility.

A little later, after pulling out of Cecily's parents' driveway, he would glance repeatedly in his rear-view mirror long after their house disappeared from sight.

When Fisk got back that night, he went to the local tavern to get shitfaced. He planned to drink alone, but Jake Jacob was there and offered to buy him a drink. Jake was talking to a bunch of farmers about another farmer, Tug McMillan, who just got engaged to be married.

Tug was 60 years old, and had never been with a woman before. His fiancée was 68. She was a staunch Presbyterian, and made it plain to Tug there would be no carnal relations unless they were wed.

They'd been dating five weeks when Tug popped the question.

The men at Jake's table were up in arms about this. You're a lawyer, right, one of them said to Fisk. Can't you do something to stop him?

Stop him from what? asked Fisk.

Stop him from making a complete ass of himself.

The men figured, at the very least, Tug should get the old goat to sign a prenup. That way if he changed his mind, or found the carnal relations weren't up to snuff, he could get out with his farm intact. Someone asked how he would even recognize what up to snuff was. Someone else pointed out she'd never been married either, and probably had no more experience than Tug. Everyone agreed if you're going to throw your life away for a virgin, leastwise pick one who's no older than 50.

They asked Fisk if he could arrange the prenup, and he told him he could try, but they would first have to get Tug's consent. He also pointed out the fiancée might still refuse to sign, in which case the prenup would be meaningless. They wanted to

know if there was some law that protected farmers from predatory Presbyterian virgins, but he said he didn't think so, though he would be willing to do some research on the subject.

It was after 1 a.m. when Fisk left the bar. He was stone drunk, but drove home anyway. He would have considered himself lucky to crash into a tree on the way, but there weren't that many trees along those roads. The farmers didn't like things obstructing their view during their crop tours.

That night, he dreamt he was still with Cecily. They were making out in the loveseat on her parents' back porch. Cecily was warm in his arms, and very receptive to his kisses. They groped each other ardently, and she started to gasp. Then her father opened the screen door, holding a paper in his hand. It was a prenup. He waved it at Fisk and demanded that he sign it. Now it was Fisk who gasped.

He woke up panting. His mouth was parched and rough as gravel. He lay staring at the dark ceiling awhile, angry that he still had feelings for her, angrier still that he hadn't asked her to sign a prenup on their first date.

Word continued to spread about Tug's wedding plans. There was talk the fiancée was listing her house for sale, and was

starting to prepare Tug's place for her arrival. She had already ordered the new wallpaper for the living room, and a pair of twin beds for the master bedroom. The bed which he'd slept in for almost 60 years would be sent to Hackleton's, together with his mother's antique dresser, writing desk, china, and dining room table.

The wedding was to take place at the old Presbyterian church on Dawes Road. Several of her cousins and their families would be in attendance. There was no word yet how many of Tug's people were invited.

In the meantime, people continued to approach Fisk for legal advice. Stacy Toggleton wanted to know if she could sue her contractor for the cracks she noticed forming in the walls of her backroom. The contractor insisted they weren't his fault, her husband had built their extension on top of a heap of landfill, rather than on a solid, concrete foundation, as per code, which was why the room was slowly sinking. Denny Murphy wanted to go after the county for erecting that annoying road sign next to his property, just before the turnoff to the highway, thus obstructing his view of the truck stop on the other side. Someone wanted to take action against the authorities for fining him for burning garbage in his back yard. Someone else wanted compensation for all the gravel the town plows had left in his

ditch that winter. And everyone was grumbling about the new windmills they were erecting down by the lake, over ten miles away.

And yet no one complained about the air, which was still acrid as ever. The whole world, it seemed, was covered in horseshit.

One bright, crisp day in early May, Fisk got in his car and headed off for Tug McMillan's place. He'd heard that Tug was starting to give way to pressure over the prenup, and decided to offer him some information about it. He drove the long muddy road to the edge of Tug's driveway, then parked his car and walked up to the front porch. He knocked on the door a few times and waited, then went to look for him in the barn.

As he approached, he could hear the sound of newborn piglets inside. Squinting into the dim light, he spotted the pen toward the back and walked over. There were about a dozen of them, some snoozing, others grunting contentedly at their mother's teats. He stared absently into the pen for several minutes, until he heard footsteps advancing behind him.

Tug was holding a tiny boar in his arms and feeding him with a milk bottle. He was the runt of the litter, Tug explained, and the bigger ones weren't giving him enough access to his mother.

That happens sometimes when they're so small, he said, so when it does, you just got to give them a little extra on the side.

Fisk inquired what piglets were going for these days. Tug asked if he was thinking of starting a pen, and Fisk said he was considering it. He asked if Tug was planning on selling the little guy in his arms. Tug said he wished he could, but no one would want him; they probably couldn't get more than two bacon strips off him.

Fisk smiled, then said what if a buyer wasn't interested in the pig for bacon. Tug asked what was the point of having a pig, then. Fisk paused for a moment in silence, before agreeing that would be pointless.

Winter Drive | Ron Brown

Vicious Law

Mary Robles

My pit bull's heart is pressed to the floor.
The wood is wet, he is the father.
I came to this field in agony,
I am shaved and awake

We make a bed.
I say, *this is the last night.*
He says *goodbye*
bowing down at my feet.

By noon his body is scooped into a rustling
garbage bag.
My body opens.
The snake

leaves

Paper house

M. Mack

When I try to picture Kansas, I realize I don't
know what it looks like—on a map or around
a man. When you describe downtown, I see
an expanse. When you describe the farmhouse,

I see the same, only on a hill. And then I think
of the flat, flat of Ohio highway. The way it is
to move along one on the way to another.

The Math

Kevin Carey

Mikey knew the horses. Read the race book front to back once a week, knew the mudders, the late starters, the closers. He could tell where and when and for how much better than anybody. He knew the math.

One summer night he hit a trifecta for nine hundred bucks, spent it all in the clubhouse buying drinks and dinner for twenty of his best buds. In high school he was the best math student in his class, could add numbers in his head in seconds, a real wonder boy. He was like rain man except he wasn't. He was a big heavy guy, tended bar until the barroom closed its doors and he shuffled off to the corners of the racetrack to hide in the shadows with his tip sheet.

"Do you know how much I almost won," he asked me one day over drinks at a bar on the beach. "Fucking thousands," he said.

I believed him. I was drunk and he was drunk and I had no reason not to. We're all products of "the almost." If I had

moved an inch to the right one night in the swamp I would have been dead at eighteen, the bullet so close it burned my skin. I was grateful for everything after that, even being thousands of miles from home with a rifle in my hand.

Mikey and I worked together a few times, pushing drinks and coffee, even worked the machines together in the last arcade on Ocean Ave before it burnt down. We talked a lot about Vietnam. He knew I did a tour. "I was too fat," he said. "Who wants a fat soldier, right?"

He was always willing with a twenty or two if I was down on it, never bothered me to pay him back. We fed each other that way. So when he asked me to do him a favor last Christmas eve in a barroom on the beach I said, "Sure."

Then he told me he wanted to die and asked if I would kill him.

"Are you out of your fucking mind," I said.

"I have cancer," he told me. "They're giving me two months, one thousand four hundred forty hours, eighty-six thousand minutes." He snapped his fingers in the air, "Then poof," he said.

He told me he had a gun, that he would write a suicide note but he couldn't pull the trigger. "I'm a coward," he said. "I know you're not."

"How do you know that?" I asked him.

"You went to war."

"I stayed high for two years, shot my rifle into the dark. I was no hero."

"You must have killed something?"

"Couldn't tell you," I said.

I knew that wasn't the real reason he asked me. He asked me because I was like him. I had no family, no wife, I bounced between the race track and the barroom, and whatever job paid more than the last one. And he asked me because he had no one else to ask.

"I don't think I can do that," I said. "I like ya Mikey, but blowing your brains out is not part of it."

"They do it to the horses all the time," he said.

"I don't do it to the horses."

"But you would if you owned one and it got sick."

"I'm not sure I would," I said.

He shifted on the bar stool, looked around at the empty Christmas decor, lights strung on the windows, red and green, some fake laurel over the doorway, a giant snowman on the sidewalk outside blinking Season's Greetings.

"I have ten thousand in a shoe box at home. Call it my will."

"Shit, Mikey."

"I know you could use it. I don't want to be buried with it, or give to the state so some jack-off's cousin and can pass it out like bonus money."

We looked at each other. "I got nothing else," he said.

"Fuck," I whispered.

At four in the morning on Christmas Day I followed him up Route 95 to Rye Beach. He drove an old Grand Marquis, brown and square. It tilted toward the driver side. After an hour we pulled into a vacant lot by a boarded up hotel called The Beachcomber. I watched him put the note on the dashboard. He locked the doors and stood there looking at me, his hands in the pockets of his long wool coat.

I pulled the car up next to him.

"What's the note say?" I asked.

"You can read it in the funny papers." He put the gun on the seat between us. A .45 Caliber Army issue. "It's loaded," he said. "And it's new."

I pulled out of the parking lot, the faint traces of sun peeking over the horizon. We drove for a mile or so, then stopped by a row of empty parking spaces beside a long wooden walkway to the beach.

It was cold, the front of my parka zipped up to my face, a baseball hat pulled tight. Mikey walked in front of me, the gun butt sticking out of his coat pocket. The sand squeaked as we walked, the salt air smell strong off the rolling white caps in front of us. I looked left and right. The beach was empty, not even a seagull up this time of day.

When we got a few feet from the water. He stopped, faced me. I could see the tears on his cheeks. He handed me the gun. "You know once when I was little I wanted to be a jockey. I remember my father taking me to the paddocks to see a horse a friend of his owned. I saw this little guy, not much taller than me then, dressed in the silks. I was twelve I think. I told my father and he laughed. I felt so stupid."

The wind picked up around us, blowing the sand at our feet.

"But I dreamt that night of being on that horse, holding the reigns tight, leaning into the turn like I used to see them do. That would have been something huh, big bastard like me on a race horse."

"Yeah, sight for sore eyes," I said.

He turned toward the water and took a deep breath and just like we agreed I fired once when he wasn't ready. He fell to his knees. His face in his hands.

I waited, the first seagulls of the morning flying past, squawking.

When he turned back I had already put the gun in my pocket.

"What?" he said, his eyes red.

"You want the gun? Do it yourself if that's how you want it."

"I don't get it."

"Take your ten grand and do something you like, Mikey. Go out that way."

He slumped into the sand. "That fucking thing almost took my ear off," he said.

"I'll be in the car," I told him.

His big shoulders shook.

I could hear him crying all the way up the walkway, a cast of blue falling over the dunes around me, a cold Christmas morning on the empty beach.

Getting Out

Carolann Madden

We were down in the canyon when night began to crest
the ridge, walking back, not fast enough, our long

shadows fading. What was it you said? That we are
all desperate in the dark. I disagreed,

child of dark canyons, woken from deep sleep
to watch meteors slash the atmosphere, feeling her way

along the split-rail fence to check a new filly,
letting her vision adjust to the dark. I could see.

I walked ahead of you on the path. You grabbed my pack
to keep from falling, the shadows played with your eyes

you said. When you think of that canyon, you remember
the dark. I remember the cold. I remember how long it took to
    get out.

Gravity

Lola Xylophone

"Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it." —*Proverb 22:6, King James Version*

I am maybe
in 7th grade when I walk into the kitchen
and find my father

with his bloated fish belly and worn
Whitey Tighties, rolling on the linoleum floor,
trying to give himself a blowjob.

I believe my father
is drunk but I could be wrong.
My father, with or without
any influence, is

staged and unfathomable.
My father tells me
he used to be able to do this

when he was younger,
that there are two ways
it is possible: either you must be
flexible or well endowed.

His eyes a murking color
I have never been able to identify,
his hair the color of old,
I leave him

heaving that awful gut
with its exploded navel
and wiry hair
toward those wanting lips, repeating:

Gotta let gravity help you,
gotta let gravity help you.

Cowgirl

Roy Bentley

When I was a boy among boys, girls in our neighborhood
stood apart. I'd see them staring at the creatures we were
as if they had an idea of what we were or were becoming.

The looks on the faces said we amazed and repulsed them.
Beth Vines was one of those girls. I recall her nudging me
to entertain the notion boys are diminished without girls.

She had taught me to ride my Schwinn bicycle, after all.
There was much I might learn from her. Sex, its promise,
and the first stirrings of anything like interest in another,

she was teaching me, had to begin with friendship. She
was patient as if any sort of a future could wait a while.
On Christmas, she came to my house after the presents

were opened. Tried on my Have Gun Will Travel holsters.
Adjusted the belt, the silver buckle shinier on her somehow.
She drew pistols that were mine and so now, by extension,

hers as well. She wore them around with such a huge smile
I didn't have the heart to ask for them back. I surrendered
my Palladin outfit. A silver-banded black hat, black shirt.

She went in a bedroom to change. She came out a cowgirl
wearing childhood-disappearing-before-my-eyes weapons.
A look of whatever it means to need a thing and receive it.

The Essay: An Essay

Robin Silbergleid

An essay should have a beginning, middle, and end. The beginning might be a personal anecdote. It might pose a question. It might offer a quotation for the reader to ponder. It might make a pronouncement. The nature of the beginning is for the essayist to decide. But the essay must have a beginning. This is a pronouncement.

Although high school students are routinely taught a form called the "five paragraph theme," an essay need not have five paragraphs. In fact, good essays rarely have five paragraphs. This, too, is a pronouncement.

An essay is not a poem, though it might resemble one. An essay is not a short story, though it might resemble one. When asked to define an essay, many essayists invoke the etymology of the term, which, to reiterate, comes from the French *essai* (that is, an attempt, a working through of an idea). In this case, I work through the idea of writing an essay. I have written many essays. I do not think many of them are good.

Good essays include "The Fourth State of Matter," "Mastering the Art of French Cooking," "The Body," "Laundry," "High Tide in Tucson," and "Artifacts." These essays are widely recognized and reprinted. I have not yet written an essay that is widely recognized and reprinted, though I aspire to do so.

When I was in college, writing an essay involved staying up for a good chunk of the night and eating Kit Kat bars and drinking Sprites bought from the vending machine in the dormitory lobby. Students gathered there for most of the night, not studying for tests, not working on essays. Before sitting down at the word processor (a typewriter that had the capability of storing documents on a hard square disk with the ill-fitting descriptor "floppy") to draft the essay, which was ordinarily due sometime the next day, I needed to reread an old essay, preferably one that earned an A+, in order to remember what a college essay was supposed to look like. Such essays were generally 3–4 pages in length, double-spaced, with one-inch margins and 12 pt font (although I admit one time I tried to fool my professor by using only 1.5 spacing, which she noted in green marker, obviously displeased), on a poem or story or novel I'd read for class. They opened with an introductory paragraph that included a clearly defined thesis and generally referenced

Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory, by Chris Weedon, which I carried like a bible for much of my sophomore year, along with a worry stone I rubbed compulsively in class. In this vein, they are not unlike the essays I ask my students to write (although no one has ever referenced Chris Weedon in an introduction). I suspect they have similar writing habits, with slightly more sophisticated methods of procrastination (Facebook and Google were not options available to college students in the early 1990s). Using this method, I completed an average of two to four essays per class, six classes per semester, for eight semesters. The essays are currently stored in a green binder on the shelf in my office; sometimes I still re-read them. Most deserved an A- at best.

Later, when I was in graduate school, I wrote essays generally invoking the same process, except the essays were longer, I did have access to the internet, and usually there was an extra day in which to revise before turning the essay in. Whole days went by when I did not speak to anyone and did not leave the study carrel in my room except to eat granola and yogurt in the cafeteria; when I finished eating, I went back to the carrel and the open word processing document and tinkered with the essay. Then I printed it and made corrections in colored pens. I revised one more time on the computer and printed a clean draft before

walking across campus to turn the essay in to the professor, whom I referred to by last name if he was an older man, first name if she was a woman, and both names if he was a younger man. My peers did the same; at lunch we talked about how strange that was, disturbed by our own sexism and anxiety about authority. I will confess, I still did not know what I was doing when it came to writing; a good fifty percent of my essays were, shall we say, "experimental" pieces with multiple columns or segments that referenced Helene Cixous, Virginia Woolf, and, sometimes, Chris Weedon. Still, my lowest grade was a single A- my first semester, which doesn't really count because it was the Introduction to Graduate Study course taught by a professor who thought I used too many commas in my sentences and routinely referred to me by my middle name, which I put on all my essays, in the top left-hand corner, sandwiched neatly between my first and last. (What can I say? I like the comma. And parenthesis.)

Now, ostensibly, I write and teach essays for a living. No one tells me what to write about, though, occasionally, I do do the assignments I give to my students (currently, they are writing autobiographies of themselves as writers). I write essays about my sister and my daughter, the way that I clean my kitchen, the psycho-social phenomenon of the to-do list, and sundry other

topics. Sometimes I read an essay, like "Mastering the Art of French Cooking," and I think, I wish I had written that. But it's already done. And then I think I have nothing to say that would be nearly as good as "Mastering the Art of French Cooking," and then I watch the film *Julie and Julia*, which is, not coincidentally also about *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, and I think, why is it that any whiny idiot can write a novelty blog and then get a book contract, but I can't seem to write an essay, and I have three advanced degrees from a reputable graduate program. But I digress.

Perhaps it will come as no surprise to you at this point that I have a problem with authority. It used to be that I had a problem with authority figures, older men in shirts and ties mostly, who told me that yes I did need to take calculus and no I could not have an extension on a paper. Sometimes such authority figures were shrill women, who wore go-go boots and hated children, who told me similar things. I was afraid of them. Desperately. And now I find myself an "authority figure"—I mean, I give students *grades* and submit them to the registrar's office—but I do not trust my own voice when it comes to writing an essay. (One of my students this semester wrote an essay on "The Impostor Syndrome," which affects successful

women who don't believe that they deserve their successes but feel like frauds in their jobs. I know of what she speaks.)

I am paid to write essays. I do not consider myself an essayist. (When asked by random strangers what I do, I will confess that I prefer to say *I'm a poet* instead of *I'm an English professor or an essayist.*) Herein lies the problem.

The essayist *knows* things. The essayist knows about human reproduction and molecular biology and Enlightenment philosophy and world religion. The essayist speaks (writes) confidently about these subjects. The essayist is the professor who can talk for two hours without once looking at his lecture notes; sit quietly, students, and listen to him talk. If this is the case, I do not know that I want to be an essayist. But I am trying (*essai*, remember?) to write the essay. I am trying to make the words shimmer as I write. Essayist and fiction writer Carole Maso writes of "the desire of an essay to be a horse." I do not know what she means, but it seems to be exactly right.

Perhaps the essay, like the horse, goes on a journey. Perhaps the essay, like the horse, stops to take a drink or eat some hay. (Of course essays do not have mouths. This is merely a metaphor used to get at something largely untranslatable and ineffable, which is all the essay can ever do.)

Perhaps the essayist (she) is different from the essayist (he). Perhaps the essayist (she) doesn't *profess*. Perhaps the essayist says *Come sit in a circle with me and let's talk*. Perhaps Helene Cixous and Virginia Woolf and Chris Weedon were on to something, after all.

Let us peek in her window and watch this new essayist at work. (Yes, this metaphor is creepy and voyeuristic, but aren't readers always voyeurs when they peer into the world of an essay?)

So: the essayist sits down at her desk. It is bare, save for a container of pens (a mug she bought her first year in college, white, with small pink and yellow flowers, that she has used for that purpose ever since) and a travel mug filled with coffee. Essayists need coffee, or tea at the very least. These things are supplies for the job, sort of like the carpenter requires a face mask when working with lead paint. The essayist puts on some music, perhaps classical radio or soft jazz, or perhaps she's one of those writers that require complete silence in order to work, the only sounds in the room are the hum of her computer and the click-clack of her fingers on the keys.

After she writes a sentence or two, the essayist stares out the window (don't worry, she doesn't see you there; you're hidden behind the weeping willow). She's thinking of where to go next,

turning over words to form the next sentence. She feels flushed, tired and energized. This is work, after all. She is not thinking about the outbreak of swine flu at her child's elementary school, or whether they will eat pot roast or chicken curry for dinner. She is not checking her email or looking up reviews of her favorite new television shows. She is at her desk. She is writing an essay.

The essayist writes her daily minimum—she thinks of it in the way the RDA works for vitamin C—500 words, before she lets herself get up from her desk. Perhaps she does a few stretches or simple yoga poses. Perhaps she puts in a load of laundry. Perhaps she decides to take a walk or rake the leaves. Outside, carpenters hammer nails into strips of wood for the neighbor's new windows. Outside, mothers push babies in strollers, stopping to adjust blankets and search for pacifiers. Outside, the essayist sees essays everywhere. She can't wait to go back to her desk and write them down.

Why I Stopped Eating Crabs

Susan Carter Morgan

evening fog settles thick on pond soup.

don't say a word, my uncle whispers,

resting his rake against weathered wood. we peer

over the dinghy. they shimmy with meaty pincers,

creep sideways along creviced sand,

moon breaks reflect on shimmering water,

and creatures—their eyes glisten like butter splattering

in a skillet, a desperate dance, they scrape the bucket,

jabbing pointed claws, luckless, fold into each other,

scoring metal. I bite my lip, quiet to the end.

Waiter, There is a Fly in My Soup

Valerie Loveland

In 1881, a fly fell from a collapsed bridge into a soup below.
William "Doc" Carver, witnessed the fall, wondered
if flies could dive as an act.
After a difficult training, they dove willingly.

Bland soup: flies refuse to dive. Salty soup: flies dry up
when they hit the liquid. Spicy soup: flies never swim out.

The babies hatch and grow up among broth.
Flies eschew ladders, they levitate
to the correct diving height.

Diving girls rode them into the soups.
The most famous girl, Sonora Webster was blinded
after the crowd spooked her fly, Red Lips.
She tumbled
into a chowder, eyes open. She dove in the dark
another eleven years.
Disney made a movie of her biography:
Wild Hearts Can't be Broken.

When I watch a bad dive, I worry my own retinas detach
from the splash.

The show got shut down. People claimed it exploited the flies.
The flies retired to a sanctuary
the few days remaining of their lives.
Flies are born performers, a few continued to dive
even after their retirement.

During their act, if the fly struggled to swim to the edge,
I rescued it with my spoon.

Broken Dreams | Barbara Carter

Bios

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

Born and raised in Birmingham, **Gabrielle Bates** now lives in Seattle, where she is an MFA candidate at the University of Washington and serves as an editor for the *Seattle Review*. She has been accepted to the 2014 Bucknell Seminar for Younger Poets and has work published or forthcoming by *Broadsided Press*, *Southern Humanities Review*, and *Redactions*. When she's not writing, Gabrielle can be found dancing in airports, interviewing tree carvers, or baking sweet potato chips with her husband Andrew.

Roy Bentley has received fellowships from the NEA, the Florida Division of Cultural Affairs, and the Ohio Arts Council. Poems have appeared in *The Southern Review*, *Shenandoah, Pleiades, Blackbird, North American Review, Prairie Schooner* and elsewhere. Books include *Boy in a Boat* (University of Alabama, 1986), *Any One Man* (Bottom Dog, 1992), *The Trouble with a Short Horse in Montana* (White Pine, 2006), and *Starlight Taxi* (Lynx House, 2013).

Jenny Mary Brown's work has either been featured in or is forthcoming from *Berkeley Poetry Review*, *Tipton Poetry Review*, *Sugar House Review*, and *Pale Horse*, among others. She is a PhD candidate in English for Creative Writing - Poetry at Georgia State University. She is currently the art director at *District* and the Editor-in-Chief of *New South*.

Ron Brown is a landscape and portrait photographer from a small town in rural Tennessee. His pieces capture the emotion and character of the scenes of everyday life in the south that sometimes go unnoticed in our fast-paced world. His inspiration is found by slowing down, taking a breath, and finding the beauty already present in the subjects around him. A recent college graduate with a degree in Communications, Ron aims to tell stories through a visual medium to his audiences.

Katie Brunero received her Master's in Creative Writing, and now compiles her stories in the slanted attic of a Victorian known as Murder Haus. When she isn't knotting fishing nets with sailors, or greeting mourners at her local funeral home, she likes to drink pails of weak tea and sit quietly in the sun. Her most recent work has been published in *Shoreline Literary Journal* and I*nterrobang Magazine*.

Kevin Carey teaches in the English Department at Salem State University. His work has won Best of the Net 2011 and was a finalist for The Million Writers Award 2012. He has a new chapbook of fiction, *The Beach People*, from Red Bird Chapbooks and a 2012 book of poetry, *The One Fifteen to Penn Station*, from Cavankerry Press, NJ. He has recently completed a documentary film about New Jersey poet Maria Mazziotti Gillan, called *All That Lies Between Us*. Kevincareywriter.com

Barbara Carter was born in Bridgewater, Nova Scotia, Canada, December 25, 1958. She is a self-taught artist who follows her inner voice, gut, heart, whatever you care to call it. In 1988 she began creating hand-stitched black, white, and gray images in fabric and had her first solo show. She has exhibited mainly in Nova Scotia, but her art has sold all over the world. She now creates in various media and uses color. Art for her has been a journey of self-discovery. Carter also writes and instructs art classes. www.barbaracarterartist.com

Marc S. Cohen is a writer, artist, and musician born in the United States and residing in Canada. He writes little existential pieces about people grappling with the indeterminacies of life, language, and love. His stylistic forebears include Samuel Beckett, Donald Barthelme, Sheila Heti, and Joel and Ethan Coen.

Marco A. Domínguez is a California poet and playwright whose poems have appeared in various journals including the recent issues of *Hunger Mountain* and *A Narrow Fellow*. He has attended East Los Angeles Community College, Northern Michigan University, and Texas Tech University. He currently resides in Phoenix, Arizona, with his wife.

Catherine Keefe is a California poet, essayist, and the founding editor of *dirtcakes*, a journal dedicated to themes suggested by the UN Millennium Goals to end extreme poverty. She is sea glass and sand. Hiking boots and a red dog leash. 3 djembes and a cowbell. A yoga mat. An apricot tree. A

wooden floor worn smooth dancing with her husband. Her poetry has recently appeared in *DASH Literary Journal, Lunch Ticket*, and *Tupelo Press Poetry Project*. She teaches writing at Chapman University and blogs at www.backyardsisters.com

Sara Emily Kuntz has a BA in writing from the University of Pittsburgh and an MFA in Creative Writing from Carlow University. As an enterprising copy shop employee she self-published ten single poem mini-books, as well as a small-run chapbook. She has been published in *Cabildo Quarterly* and *Rust + Moth*. Sara lives in Brooklyn with a big grey cat.

Stewart Lewis is the author of four novels including *You Have Seven Messages* and *The Secret Ingredient*. His writing has been translated into five languages. He is also a singer songwriter whose songs have been featured on many TV shows and in feature films. He teaches writing at the University of Maryland and does "City Life" reports for WNEW News radio in Washington, DC. He is a proud father of Rowan (daughter) and Oliver (French bulldog). For more information, check out www.stewartlewis.com

Valerie Loveland is the author of *Reanimated, Somehow* (Scrambler Books). Her poetry has been featured in Best of the Web and the Massachusetts Poetry Festival. She enjoys running, audio poetry, and open courseware.

Carolann Madden holds an MA in English from Boston College, an MFA in Poetry from San Diego State University, and is an alumna of the Seamus Heaney Centre's Poetry Summer School at Queen's University Belfast. Her work has most recently appeared in *Town Creek Poetry* and *Crannóg,* and will appear in the forthcoming book, *Women in Clothes* (Penguin, 2014). She is a founding editor for Locked Horn Press.

M. Mack is a genderqueer poet, fiber artist, and editor in or around Washington, DC. Ze is a founding co-editor of Gazing Grain Press, an explicitly inclusive feminist chapbook press. Visit hir here: mxmack.com.

Susan Carter Morgan is part-owner of a writing and arts studio in Virginia, where she leads writing groups and locks up type on an old letterpress printer. Her writing appears in *Literary Mama, Vine Leaves Literary Journal, Haunted Waters Press*, and the *Nearest Poem Anthology*, among others. Over the years, she has been a journalist, a teacher, and an online

community leader. She loves creating space for others to learn, write, and share. scmorgan.net/@downtownwriting

Emily O'Neill is an artist, writer, and proud Jersey Girl. Her recent work has appeared in *Muzzle Magazine, Paper Darts, Sugar House Review*, and *Whiskey Island*, among others. You can pick her brain at http://emily-oneill.com.

Dave Petraglia has appeared in *Popular Science, Popular Mechanics, Better Homes & Gardens*; more recently in *Agave Magazine, Dark Matter Journal, Thought Catalog, eFiction India, Loco Magazine, Gravel Literary Review, The Olivetree Review*, and *theNewerYork*. He's a writer, web and graphics designer, photographer and lives near Jacksonville, Florida. His blog is at www.drowningbook.com

Mary Robles was born in El Paso, Texas. She studied poetry at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. In 2005 Mary won BGSU's Howard McCord Prize for Poetry for her poem "Marigold" and her poetry has been featured in *Prairie Margins*. Mary recently spent two years living and working in Boston, MA, and has relocated to Cleveland, Ohio, where she continues to write poetry and lead advocacy efforts for the charity Animals Asia. She lives with her boyfriend of thirteen years, the writer and artist Joshua Rex. Her favorite poets are Larissa Szporluk, Louise Gluck, and Ted Hughes.

B R Sanders is a genderqueer writer who lives and works in Denver, CO, with their family and two cats. Outside of writing, B has worked as a research psychologist, a labor organizer and a K-12 public education data specialist.

Joseph Andrew Shapiro is a memoirist who writes about the LGBT experience in a predominantly straight world. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Hunter College, and is a Lecturer in Expository Writing at Hunter. Next year he will be offering a course at Hunter College in Transgender Literature – the first such course in New York City. Joseph is writing a full-length memoir, focusing on his experience coming out as a (heterosexually) married gay man, and a father of three adolescent children. He now resides in New York City with his partner, Todd, and their dog, Oliver.

Robin Silbergleid is the author of the chapbook *Pas de Deux: Prose and Other Poems* (Basilisk Press, 2006), as well as *Frida Kahlo, My Sister* (Finishing Line Press) and the memoir *Texas Girl* (Demeter Press), both forthcoming in 2014. Her previous contribution to *Cactus Heart,* "The Childless Women Remember Being Fourteen," earned a Pushcart Prize nomination. She lives in East Lansing, Michigan, where she directs the Creative Writing Program at Michigan State University, and raises her two children. You can find her on Twitter @RSilbergleid.

Anna B. Sutton is a poet from Nashville, TN. Her work has appeared in or is forthcoming from *Third Coast, Quarterly West, Barrow Street, DIAGRAM, Superstition Review, Pinch*, and other journals. She is a co-founder of the Porch Writers' Collective in Nashville; web editor at One Pause Poetry; sales and marketing assistant at John F. Blair, Publisher; and on the editorial teams at *Gigantic Sequins* and *Dialogist* journals. In 2013, she received her MFA from UNCW and a James Merrill fellowship from Vermont Studio Center.

Lola Xylophone earned an MA in Poetry from Southern Illinois University, and is currently an MFA student at Naropa University, where she is exploring the notion of the body as bridge and as barrier. Lola has had her poetry published in various journals, both print and online, and has self-published a novel titled *Serrated Soul.* She hopes that one day she will live in an underground house with a garden on the roof filled with sunflowers.

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Ripple Effect | Sasha Starr