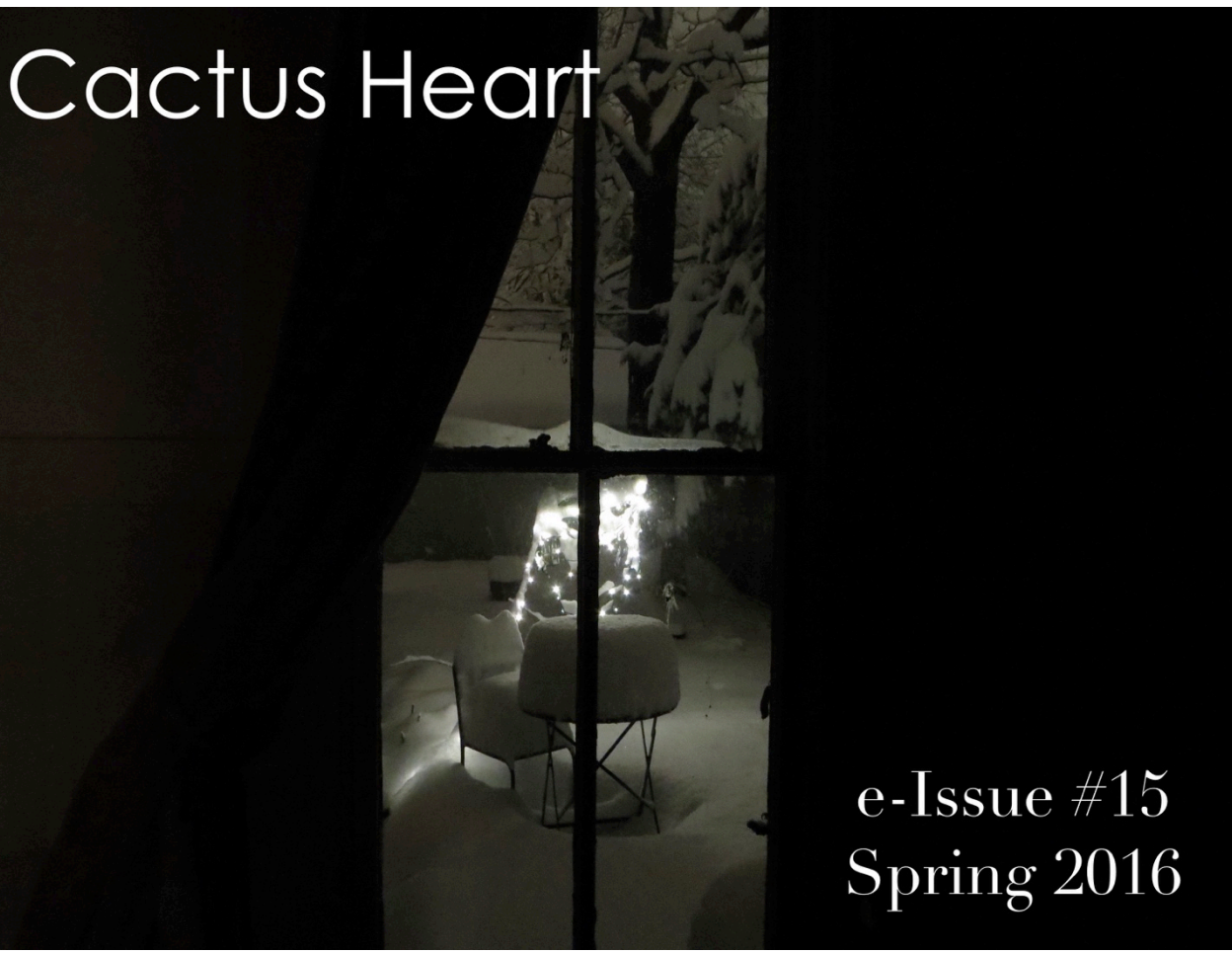
Cactus Heart



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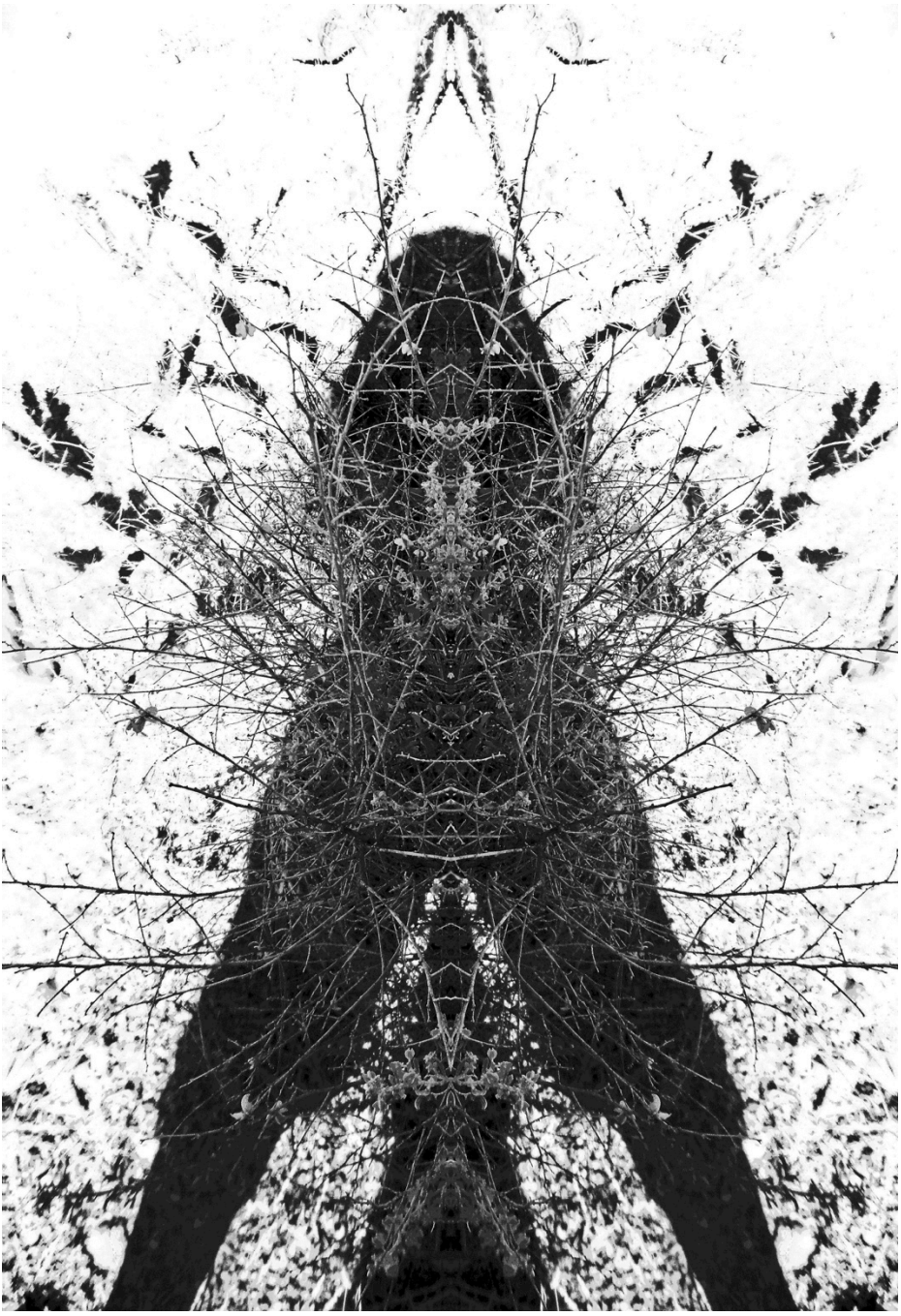

Mother-Daughter (grey-scale) | Marsha Rosenzweig Pincus

The Flower Doesn't Dream of the Bee

Rachel Cruea

I wake from a soft, bandaged dream, walk down the hall and all at once I'm no longer fighting you. I can't remember the shape of your teeth, no longer worry where my water comes from. Packing my suitcase, I forget the shuttered sun glancing from my back door. I wander through a public restroom for months. While washing her hands, a girl in a green dress tells her mother she wants to be a painter. "There's no such thing as painting" her mother reminds us. Once they leave, I climb into the ceiling and crawl until I reach a house at the edge of a tipped field where the wind rarely visits. The marigolds in the window box sleeps soundly, dreaming of rain while the bee watches above. "Will you undress me?" the house whispers. "Yes." I say, and feel the night die.

Butterfly

Andra Emilia Fenton

When Carlota was five she counted one, two, three. One number for each second she could stay on her bike before it tilted to one side. The white sole of her sneaker against the pink plastic pedal, *one*. The weight of her leg turning the metal spokes, *two*. Her sneaker at the end of a circle near the ground, *three*.

She found comfort in numbers. How they explained the world, ordered it. How she could use them to track her progress.

Carlota's body was short and pale. She had raven hair that pointed straight to the sky. Her older sister, Milena, was long and golden. When the sun hit the tip of Milena's nose, it polka-dotted it with soft brown freckles, *besos de angel*, angel kisses, the maids called them.

But it was not the girls' shapes or skin or angel kisses that made them different. In Carlota's view, the distinction lay in the fact that Milena could do anything. This of course, was not true, but the idea had been firmly implanted in Carlota's brain the morning she saw her sister ride her bike through their gated

community in Mexico City. Not only did Milena ride with no hands, she spread her arms wide. She let the air blow through the spaces between her open fingers. She didn't count seconds. Falling was impossible.

The theory was further proven the first time the sisters competed, holding their breath in the family pool. Carlota surfaced mid-challenge, seeing her sister still underwater, she submerged again. Milena had seen Carlota's red suit move upward as she went for air and her legs bend as she came back down. She never mentioned it. Milena still won.

Sometimes Carlota would cry from holding her breath underwater. She'd start at one end of the pool, convinced she could make it to the other. But after six or seven seconds she would panic. Stop counting. Open her eyes. Look down. Look for the tile swordfish.

The swordfish adorned the middle of the pool floor. His location let her know how much longer she had to go. After finding him, she'd keep her eyes open until she'd reached the far end of the pool, her salty pupils burning with chlorine.

Her cries were silent little bubbles. The bubbles traveled to the surface. Milena watched for bubbles. When she saw them she swam fast to meet her sister.

"Were you crying?"

Carlota wouldn't answer.

And Milena would lick her cheek: "You taste like chlorine."

Carlota would try to lick her back but Milena would move her face making her little sister furious. Milena would ultimately let her sister run her tongue across her own chlorine cheek. And they would laugh. Chasing each other in and out of the rectangle pool until they'd both licked each other's faces so much that all they could taste was skin.

Carlota did not resent her sister's skills, she admired them. She watched Milena carefully, trying to decipher where they'd come from. It was Milena who had shown Carlota how to adjust the strap on a bike helmet and how to do a flip turn in the water. It was Milena who had taught Carlota how to cup the water with her palm to swim freestyle. How to turn her head as she opened her shoulder. How to keep her windmilling arm straight and then angle it to puncture the surface of the water.

And when Carlota did not excel at swimming freestyle, because she wanted to breathe with every stroke, Milena taught her to swim breaststroke. Carlota followed her instructions and soon her palms were pressed together like a sharp arrow when she rose to breathe and her legs kicked like a frog's—first, to the far end of the family pool and a year later, to the end of the pool at the 7–9 age category Swimming Finals in Morelos.

The sisters spent so much time in pools that after their first meet, their parents hired a swim coach to come train them twice a week. His name was Salomé.

The girls didn't like Salomé because he wore a speedo, which they called a thong, and because he brought his family to eat tuna fish sandwiches by the pool when the parents were gone.

But Salomé helped Milena improve her freestyle and Carlota improve her breaststroke. When either of them complained of being tired, or brought their squirt guns into the pool, he made them swim extra laps. He also forbade licking.

"Licking is for animals," he said.

By the time Carlota was ten she was using bigger numbers. One hundred and eighty two, the minutes she could keep a hula hoop spinning around her middle while performing daring feats. Like letting the hoop drop to her hips and then making smaller and faster body circles to propel the hoop back up to her stomach.

Five hundred and four, the number of seconds it took her to swim breaststroke the length of their pool sixteen times.

After swim practice, Carlota usually sat on the laundry room floor in front of the clothes dryer. It was a warm place to wait for her suit to dry. And one day, as she sat there, in the dripping red

bathing suit, she noticed Salomé standing in the doorframe. She'd never seen him in the house before.

"Aren't you cold, Carlota?"

She didn't look him in the face at first and called him the thong man in her head and laughed.

"Carlota! I'm talking to you. Don't you know it's rude not to answer people when they're talking to you?"

"Sorry, *profe*, I couldn't hear you because of the dryer."

And he softened. "Come here, you're soaked."

He wrapped her in a towel and it was nice.

Then he sat on the floor.

Lifted her onto his lap.

Slipped one hand inside the towel.

And gently pushed one finger inside her.

It stung.

She ran out of the laundry room, past the white kitchen, down the green steps, and jumped into the pool.

She rubbed hard with both hands on the lycra between her legs trying to wash the sting off.

She went numb and sank to the bottom of the pool.

She found the swordfish there. His pink and yellow body shone through the water. The swordfish made the pool fancier, she had thought before. But that day, she talked to him. She

thought he could hear her and be her friend and understand. He said nothing as she ran her toenails across his tiled gills and traced his shape over and over with her big toe.

Carlota didn't know how long she'd been in the pool. But her parents had come home because a maid came to fetch her for dinner. When she walked up the steps she noticed her hands had turned into tiny white leather gloves. Her feet were grooved through and through from the wet. And the tips of her toes were striped with tiny bleeding cuts.

Her parents sat down at the marble table and didn't say much. They asked about the swimming lesson. Salomé had gone home.

Milena knew something was wrong. She crawled under the table pretending to have dropped her knife and licked Carlota's curled up fingers.

"*Ay!*" Carlota smiled a little but didn't try to lick her sister back.

"*Que haces? Comete la sopa!*" the mother ordered.

So Carlota finished her soup and after dinner when her parents slept, she went down to the pool to talk to the swordfish. Milena watched her little sister from the steps. And just before Carlota climbed, naked, out of the water, Milena ran back upstairs.

In the dark, Carlota made her way to the sisters' shared bedroom. She left a trail of wet footprints on the white kitchen floor and on the soft grey carpet.

Once Milena heard the bedroom door close, the pajama drawer open, and her sister slip under the covers, she turned from her own bed and looked at Carlota.

"Carlota?"

"*Que pasó*, Milena?"

"Are you sleeping? Did I wake you?"

"Yes, you did," Carlota lied as she turned her face toward the wall.

"Carlota, tomorrow I'm going to show you something I've never shown you before."

"Ok."

At six a.m. Milena was already in her blue swimsuit, goggles on her forehead, two fuzzy towels around her neck. She pulled Carlota out of bed by her ankles and noticed the cuts on her toes but pretended not too.

"Get up! Get up!"

And Carlota did and looked around for her red suit but could not find it. Then she remembered why. She chose one from the drawer and made her way down to the pool.

"Ok first you have to get the kick down. Glue your legs together like you're a mermaid and then flip your tail. Like you're gliding through a wave."

And Carlota tried it and did just fine.

"Now let's do the arms. Start with them stretched out in front. Lift your head and open your arms behind you, palms facing up. Make two big circles. When your arms are above your head bring your hands to each other. Good. Now, dive them in."

And Carlota tried and did it well.

"Now do the kick and the arms together."

And Carlota did but when she started holding her breath and counting the seconds she choked on water.

"You can breath every time you come out," Milena said.

And Carlota did just that. With the open spinning circles of her arms and her mermaid tail she swam past the swordfish. Past her red bathing suit at the bottom of the pool. Her strokes faster than ever. Faster than she could count.

The Tracks

Jessica Dur Taylor

When you suggested we walk instead of take the train, I figured it was another wily scheme that I had better indulge. I'd already said no so many times: to sharing a backpack so you could bring your guitar, to living off avocado and Inka corn to save money. I grinned and clapped my hands together and said, "Sure. I'm down to save sixty bucks."

You were right about one thing. God, it was gorgeous. The early morning pink, the rising sun gilding the white-capped Andes, our breath like smoke, both of us wearing half the contents of our backpacks, so woefully unprepared were we for Peru in July. The tracks snaked as far as we could see into a distance carved out of white-capped green. "Down there," you said, pointing, "is Machu Picchu, the most beautiful place on earth." And buoyed by your proclamation, I tightened my waist buckle and hitched up my pack.

For two hours we walked on the railroad ties, spaced just far enough apart that we had to step-leap to each one. We were silent

as the sun warmed our layers off and brightened the cornflower sky. You tied your dreads on top of your head. When the first train signaled its ornery blow, I was ready for it. I followed you into the brush and crouched low. I supposed you were right about the train-riding tourists, too, missing out big time, their video cameras crowding the windows, dutifully turning their experience into memory. "We get the real view," you said, and I couldn't disagree.

It was like a game, stepping on the planks, alone among the thickening trees of the mountain valley, listening intently for the distant hoot of the next train. Each time it passed, we were sprayed with a fine mist, which I ignored. Three hours in we had already exhausted our supply of trail mix, and my legs were quickly tiring of the tedium of the broadly spaced wooden ties. When I stopped to sip my warm Diet Coke, you called it "Satan's beverage of choice." I told you there was something green stuck in your teeth and you didn't even try to get it out.

We soldiered on. My neck ached from looking down. My backpack chewed up my sore shoulders. "Sometimes suffering is a good thing," you said, and I knew then that you'd never be the one to break it off. No matter how bad it got.

Out there on those tracks, as the minutes thickened and slowed, I counted all the reasons I'd been tempted to end it

before. The way you never washed your feet before bed, even when the sheets were crisply clean. That time we got in a fight about the electricity bill (which I paid, always) and you said, "I just hate pieces of paper with writing on them." And the worst: how the previous summer you had bailed on me the night before our trip to Southeast Asia. I'd had to fly to Bangkok alone, without a plan or a companion, because at the last minute you realized you just couldn't "swing it" financially.

But for every transgression, redemption. You were fiercely you, without apology. You smiled more often than not. I loved pulling into the driveway after a day of teaching to find you on the porch, strumming your guitar, maybe sewing a patch onto your pants. You knew how to take it easy. And actually, you not coming to Southeast Asia turned out great. I met lots of people, grooved on my own rhythm, had a chance to miss you. To discover what I was capable of, on my own.

Suddenly, six hours into our walk, we were saved. Two guys driving a maintenance vehicle took pity on us, emptied our pockets of a few sols, and laughed at us all the way to Aguas Calientes, the tourist town at the base of Machu Picchu. "Why you no take the train?" they kept asking. You grinned and signaled to the panorama; I shrugged and rolled my eyes.

But by the next morning, shoulders bruised and toes caked with dried blood, I decided to let it go. Being mad at you, it got old. This was an adventure, I told myself, one we'd tell stories about for years to come. And after a few weeks of traveling together, weeks of scant showers and constant negotiations and too much competitive Ping-Pong, we needed something resembling excitement.

Even though it was full of overpriced tourist kitsch (indeed, a town built solely to service the tourists visiting Machu Picchu), Aguas Calientes had its own steep-cobblestone-street charm. I followed you into the only vegetarian buffet and loaded my plate with samosas. Let you talk me into the hot springs at night, open wounds on my shoulders be damned. But the trauma of the tracks taunted me at every footfall. How would we get back to Ollantaytambo? Train tickets were only sold roundtrip, and I knew you wouldn't cop to buying one now, after we'd already made it one way. But we couldn't possibly try walking it again, could we? What if no one saved us a second time around?

All these years later, the question that most nags at me is this one: Why didn't I save myself?

I cringe a bit when I remember how we visited Machu Picchu. Of course we could have afforded the forty-dollars-apiece

entrance fee, but I agreed with you (righteously, naively) that such an ancient wonder should be free to whoever wished to worship it. This time you were right: Sneaking in was almost too easy. We climbed up through the jungle for two hours (marveling at how light we felt without our packs) before finding ourselves within view of the old stone walls and terraced landscaping. Lingering there awhile, our sweaty skin turning cool again, I inhaled your lavender and armpit smell, admired your lion's mane of reddish dreadlocks. With you, I thought, adulthood remained just out of reach, the way I'd always liked it.

We found some tiny wild strawberries and gave thanks to Pachamama, who, you told me, would not mind us taking some of her bounty—as long as we gave something back. So I didn't object when you tipped over our water bottle (already nearly empty) even though water seemed the last thing this lush ground needed. And then we scrambled over a few rocks and moseyed right on in with the rest of the snap-happy tourists.

Machu Picchu looked just like all the postcards, except crawling with people. I loved climbing up and down the terraced slopes through low-hanging clouds, a dirt-clean smell in the air. We met those two rugged Aussies who'd hiked in the proper way, on the Inca Trail with tents and camp-stoves. When they politely

asked why we hadn't thought of that, you were quick to reply. Our way didn't cost us a thing.

I couldn't help but think, didn't it?

Still, for a day or so it became easier to agree on even the simplest of things: coca tea instead of coffee, alpaca sweaters over kitschy vases (souvenirs should be practical). You even threw me a bone: "I'm glad I didn't bring my guitar after all. Too much to lug around."

But the night before we left Aguas Calientes you made promises you couldn't keep. "It won't be so bad. We know those tracks now, know what to expect. Someone is bound to stop again." I tucked these away just as I did the mound of snacks on the bed, within easy reach, and grabbed at them more desperately the next day, as each passing hour revealed some new horror. Three in, the trains whooshing by in half-hour intervals, you pointed to a smattering of white tissues littering the railroad ties and laughed as I wiped the mist—what I now knew to be urine—off my face.

Five in, my not-yet-healed blisters broke wide open, oozing with each painfully spaced railroad tie. Seven in, I started carrying my backpack on my belly, as though pregnant with something I could not get rid of. "This is not adventure," I spat, "this is bullshit."

"What happened to that girl who was always up for anything?" you sneered. "Why are you becoming such a fun-killer?" I had no answer.

Nine in, I wept bitterly, my shoulders openly bleeding, my mind hallucinating maintenance vehicles. Ten in, I actually welcomed the cool spray of urine from each passing train. How many hours of walking the railroad tracks did it take to get back? Twelve? Thirteen? I cannot accurately say.

Here's what I remember: The sun was setting, pink over the Andes, and it was just cool enough to see our breath. We hadn't spoken for hours. When you said, "Let's just go get some dinner and forget this whole crazy day," I finally said what I should have said before. No.

Bowing

Tim Robbins

When I was 14 I memorized *Invictus*.
Now all I remember is, "My head is
bloody but unbowed." I think of all my
bowing since then. Escaping glares
of bigger boys, offended by my being.
Aping obeisance when a man in a
pleated dress intoned, "Let us pray."
Baring my nape to barbers' clippers.
Drinking from mountain brooks.
Standing solemn as a medalist when a
Saudi woman, careful not to touch me,
hung a charm around my neck.
Lowering my face into men's laps.
Getting down on my knees, searching
the carpet for a stray baggie and
praying, actually praying,
"Never again."

Considering, Then Reconsidering, the Croissant

Nicholas Finch

Your brother messages you on Facebook from a small barracks in the middle of a dying field in England. He tells you that all he had for breakfast was a croissant and he is still hungry. You consider the croissant and what he means by it. In Paris yesterday, 129 people were killed and 350 wounded. When the news first broke the death toll was a speculative three. Now it is 129. You do not answer your brother. Scrolling down your newsfeed you notice many friends have a French flag pasted over their profile pictures. Facebook asks if you too would like the French flag over your profile picture. Think of the croissant and the 129 killed and 350 wounded. At one stage it was only three. You put off the question and continue to scroll but the more you scroll the more flags there are and now the question is a demand. You leave Facebook for the BBC's website. There are still 129 dead and 350 wounded in Paris. In eastern France a derailed locomotive has killed at least ten. Men, women, and children die of thirst from more than just a drought in Ethiopia. A man is

murdered for his home in Israel. Two girls are raped and murdered in Brazil; the order of events has yet to be confirmed by officials. A man in Libya is murdered in a US air strike. You return to Facebook because at least the sadness there is a singular sentiment that can be illustrated with a flag pasted over a picture of oneself. However, you question this sentiment. Simply put: Is a flag enough? With 129 dead and 350 wounded. Your brother on a base in the middle of a dying field in England had a croissant for breakfast and that was not enough. You reconsider the croissant and the news. Your English brother may have thought there were only 100 dead this morning as he ate his croissant, as the news had suggested. A brother in eastern France, riding a train this morning, might have—surely had—assumed the train would arrive at its destination. He bears a wallet that carries pictures of your niece and sister-in-law. A nephew in Ethiopia is thirsty and he is too young to understand why your brother refuses him water. Your nephew doesn't understand that necessity for him is only suggestive—not guaranteed. Your Palestinian sister has lost her home and husband and if she still had the carpet that was inside her former home she would not be able to afford the adequate cleaning supplies necessary for removing blood from a carpet. Your brother in Brazil must decide whether or not to have an open or closed casket service for his thirteen-year-old daughter.

The latter is most likely. He wishes to imagine, if there was enough of a face left to have an open casket service, that her face would read peace. Your Brazilian brother knows that this would be unlikely—a death like that is not quiet. Your Libyan brother may or may not mourn the man murdered in the air strike, but he saw the flagless planes come through the skies as a bird might, dropping bombs that fell like fruit, making a splash of rock and stone. There was no blood in the splash—controlled carnage—but there was a body beneath the wreckage. In Paris your sister still has the receipt for the concert ticket she bought your nephew. Your brother-in-law cannot throw away the broken and bloodied patio furniture to his restaurant because they have been condemned and reduced to evidence. You and your sister and brother-in-law have lost mothers and fathers and grandparents and sons and daughters and nieces and nephews and aunts and uncles.

Croissants are not French. They were originally Austrian. They were made to celebrate a victory that thwarted a Turkish invasion. Despite knowing this, when your brother mentioned his croissant you immediately thought of Paris. This suggests that time and place and people are all incidental—it is the thing that is the matter and nothing makes sense if you consider the time and place and people. The toll still rings in at 129. You wonder if your

brother at the barracks is a good brother. Or if he's a good person. Or at the very least a good soldier. You wonder what he meant by mentioning the croissant and if the answer reconciles any of the aforementioned thoughts. You wonder if you are a bad person for having yet to put a flag over your profile picture. You know the number (129) and the time and the place and the people and you know that at the beginning it was three, then ten, then 54, 100, 120... Here you've made a mistake because at the beginning it would've been zero, but you seriously doubt it was ever 0 because there was always death and someone was always going to die somehow. Though the number itself, 129, does not matter. What matters is that there is a number at all. The number itself, 129, means as little as the flags on Facebook. They are both attempts to supplement a meaning we are still trying to grasp like someone putting a fork through water so to drink. In this case, both efforts are well intentioned and the water is an inexplicable grief. I don't want to put a flag over my picture because it seems a futile gesture, but I'm afraid my Facebook friends think I'm a bad person—a bad brother—if I don't, so I do. They don't seem to realize that the number doesn't matter; it is that there is a number that matters. Reconsider the formerly Austrian croissant. Consider that one day all of our bodies will crumble and flake away like a croissant. Slowly flesh will rot away to dust and the bones that're

left will crumble to more dust and this dust will be colorless, odorless, and flagless. Consider, please, that we all crumble like croissants all the same. Now you can reconsider your English brother in the barracks. You hope that he's a good brother, as you should hope for all your brothers and sisters. For it is, simply put, the brotherly or sisterly thing. You reconsider Paris, and greater France, and Ethiopia, and Israel, and Brazil, and Libya—for it is never about the numbers or the exact quantities of the matters but the matters themselves. Finally you reconsider the flag as a not-so-bad thing because at least it's a start at something. You still wonder if your brother is a good person or soldier. You stay on Facebook, staring at all the flags and all the people trying strike meaning out of anything. You are certain the number will be different but you do not go back right away to the BBC because you know the answers will change but the questions will undoubtedly remain the same. You wonder if your brother will go to war, or if he'll have another croissant to combat his hunger.

Soul in Limbo | Arielle Lipset

Leviticus

Mazzer D'Orazio

Brandon slams his tray down across from me and I know one-on-one must have been rough.

"Hey little buddy," I say. "Why the long face?" I'm always doing that—talking in dumb clichés. It's part of my schtick. It would probably be more insufferable...if I weren't a 220-pound guy who could kick everyone's ass in here if I tried.

"Keller's trying to say I was diddled again."

I have to laugh. "How many times do I have to tell you? Diddled is good."

"No it's not. It's disgusting and inaccurate. He's got me talking through my family members like they're suspects in a line-up."

"If I had to guess? I'd put my money on the uncle. It's always the uncle."

Brandon hits me with all his strength on the bicep.

"No touching," a guard barks.

"Listen, Brandon," I say. "I'm serious right now. If they are trying to convince you that you were diddled, it's a good thing. It

means they think you can still be saved. For me? They abandoned the diddling hypothesis after the second session. I've been called defiant, intractable. It's like I'm goddamn Seabiscuit or something."

Brandon's stopped listening to me, and I take no offense. I know I talk a lot and it's kind of off-putting. He's looking down at his food and his lip is starting to quiver.

"Hey buddy," I say, and then I realize what's wrong. He's looking at the burger in front of him. See, they reject vegetarianism here on account of it's a trait of sissiness. And since sissiness is supposedly what got us all in here, they won't have it.

"Hey," I whisper. "Hey, while they aren't looking."

Brandon refuses to move a damn muscle and it kind of drives me crazy. I mean, if the kid could only help himself once in a while, I don't think he'd be so goddamn *sad* all the time.

In this place, there are pitbulls, and there are puppies. Brandon's definitely a puppy—a sad, fluffy, kind of cute one—but I like to think of myself as a pitbull. Of course I only like to *think* of myself as a pitbull, but maybe to everyone else I'm something different. Maybe I'm just a big old clumsy mastiff that just knocks shit over all the time, like that dumb Howard Huge cartoon my mother was always cutting out and sticking on the fridge.

Metaphors always work more accurately if the thing you're describing isn't yourself.

Okay so, forget pitbulls, forget puppies, forget mastiffs and whatever else. I'll try to be as literal as possible. In here, there is no happy. There's either sad or mad. So Brandon, right now, is sad. And although it's weird and twisted for him to be sad, I get it. Brandon loves his mom, and he still hasn't stopped trusting her. She's just so disappointed in him or whatever, and coming here is like what he has to do to get back in her good graces. I know that someday he will realize how wrong this all was, but he hasn't come to that conclusion yet, and it breaks my heart.

So while Brandon's sad all the time, I'm just mad. I gave up sad as soon as I walked through the heavy double-doors and got a whiff of the goddamn hypocrisy this place reeks of. I don't care how long they keep me in here for. I'm not going to sit here and live a lie just so they'll give me a gold star. Hell, most of the people that *run* this place are clearly living lies. I wouldn't give them that satisfaction of confirming that they're doing the right thing.

I try not to be too clumsy as I pull the burger from Brandon's buns—and yes, I'm aware of how that sounds. I take a big dollop of my spinach side and put it where the burger used to be. I hate that green shit and Brandon loves it.

Brandon grins. That's how he is, always holding out for someone to save him. In fact, I think he still hasn't even given up on God to do it for him. During morning prayer, he actually looks like he's praying.

He takes the edges of the bun between his thumb and forefinger and kind of seals it around so nothing will spill out and give him away. He takes a big bite and sighs in relief. I don't know what's so wrong with meat to him, but we all have different priorities, I guess.

He's still smiling when the guard has moved on from our table. He's got bigger fish to fry—the bulimic boys are done with their meal so it's time to monitor them for the next hour or so.

"Hey," I whisper. He looks up with his big brown eyes. A puppy in headlights. I steel myself so I look really serious. I do not want him to think I am fucking with him. Not now. "You are so cute when you eat."

I take a huge bite of my double burger. I'm done talking, at least for now. I don't need him to respond. I don't need anything from him except to exist in this place with me.

He raises his head to follow the path of the guard. He looks from side to side. No one is within earshot.

"So are you," he says, so quietly that I'm not sure if I'm imagining it. But then he gives me a quick red-faced smile and awkwardly buries his face in his spinach burger.

And this gives me hope that one day, I'll make it out of here as a whole human being. Which is exactly the same way I went in.

from “Z” | Robyn Renee Hasty

from “Z” | Robyn Renee Hasty

from “Z” | Robyn Renee Hasty

body (a composition)

Charlotte Covey

you, eyes the color of gun-
metal. *you*, strings to your fingers, bow to
your neck. when music escapes
your lips, when you cast
tall shadows on the carpet. index tracing
soggy notes left in the teapot, covered
in hot water, in the leaves
at the bottom. *you*, hands that save, wrap me,
wrap the ring i threw in
the river, swam in two weeks
later, fished it out (the mermaids
kept it safe). your mouth
when small death catches. *you*,
arms that flicker—lights i follow
home.

On the Aborigines Valuing Memory over Things

Alyssa Jewell

Uncle Jack clubbed a penguin
in the Antarctic for scientific purposes.

It was a different time.

Its poor yellowed belly, wing feathers
plucked and full of rot
can be seen in our local museum's
taxidermy exhibit for a ticket price of $9.95,

but *why don't they just throw it away?*
my grandmother asks—

she has no sentimental bone
but loves the living, will side with them.

And I've searched for that certain blankness,
a wringing out of my memory and rain-heavy shoulders
but still can't bear to throw away my aunt's
horrible ash tray. She was gone at thirty-eight,
and though I have no use

for that lounging ceramic woman, her dress
flared out in a sultry seashell cradling

the filters and ashes of long gone Reds, I've made space
for that arched body
in half-sleep, shoved her
next to a stack of my aunt's self-help

books I'll never read, ghosts nestled
beside Marilyn Monroe stamped on a handbag,

her gaze hazy and stretched over pockets
of Aldi receipts, half-used red lipsticks, a nail polish bottle
labeled *Aphrodite's Pink Nighty,* fleshy paint

spilled over currents of black silk lining rippling
unto frayed corners that rest grey and bare
like the wintry lake

my classmate tumbled into when he slipped
over the pier on Thanksgiving break. His face

wallpapered the news. Later on, the Coast Guard pinned
his portrait to the life preserver racks in Grand Haven,
but what his brief biography there won't tell you

is that he spoke German and was friendly,
handsome, raised his hand
in the second row. In the pink spring,
when the snow fences still cast their zebra shadows
over the shore, his foot turned up
in his tennis shoe in the aftermath of dredging for oil,
and what can one do with that?

His mother, his father had already said
their farewells, knowing the depths
of the lake, stygian,
never giving up its dead.

Memory Is Full of Artifacts

Lauren Plitkins

Blindfold

Inside the Plexiglas box, a thin strip of black cloth. Had the hands that cut the swath from a bolt of fabric known what dark device the rectangle would become? Or did the hands believe the cloth was merely cloth? And inside the display case, the cloth itself—innocent until it wasn't—pleads that it had only followed orders, concealing and distorting the world on command.

Grease Gun

Nickname, codename, cover up: eliminate anything identifiable. The CIA worries about six grease guns loose in Santiago. Forty-five-caliber submachine guns sent in a care package from DC. Six guns to kill one Chilean. US military attaché Colonel Wimert promises to *take special care in hiding hardware, to remove telltale indicators of origin.* But a gun, like any other object, keeps a record of its own. A memory of where it came from and evidence of who it harmed.

Rust

Like a toy left to the rain, the metal bed frame rusts. Its iron slats and knobs and joists—naked and flaky as desert bone. In the presence of water and oxygen, iron dissolves into rust. And if salted, with seawater or sweat, the process quickens. It's a simple formula: a bed frame plus a body's sweat plus electricity equals rust.

Video Recording

The movie screen loops one scene: in a metal chair an old man talks about his nightmares. It's clear he hasn't translated the memory into language lately—interrogates his palms for every word. His voice sounds overgrown, unused, like a shovel lost in the dirt of a half-filled hole.

But he remembers one grueling day of electrocution. His body stretched across an iron bed frame. The guard didn't ask for confessions, didn't care what he knew about communists in Santiago. Though names and addresses were bargaining chips in the detention centers, this guard was a government employee through and through. He performed his duties with perfunctory indifference: twisted the voltage knob, called for more water. At

day's end the old man asked him: *What's next for you? Will you go home to your wife and children? Will you sleep in your own bed tonight?*

Sweat Box

What I could have done was rest both hands on the human-sized box meant to stand for a country's pain. My fingertips could have caressed the stained door of this device, could have tried even to pry it open, just enough to slip inside, to stand in a box built for punishment. A box where prisoners stood amid what they couldn't stand: summer heat, malnourished muscles, darkness where the mind digs a hole for the body.

Blindfold

At twenty-one, Mom who is not yet Mom, lying in the backseat of Peter's black TrailBlazer,

covers her eyes with a washcloth. She is not thinking of an unborn me. She is not thinking of anything but the silent prayer she makes for her stomach while the truck skids on a dirt road and saguaro cacti thicken the night.

From flu or food poisoning or morning sickness, the darkness behind her covered eyelids tilts and bucks like a circus ride. Peter, the father of her first three children, drives into the desert for a

camping trip, a forced march. Her body blooms pink with fever and surrenders its acids. My father, who never wanted to be a father, wears waxed shit-kickers and a bolo tie and commands her like to a dog to lie still in the backseat.

Grease Gun

Wildflowers one morning where no house was yet, just a lot Uncle Andy purchased on Whidbey Island. No house, just a lot of wildflowers falling off into the ocean.

In an open meadow, wildflowers bend their heads in breezy afternoon-sunshine cold. Dark dirt clumps furrow under my feet. *Fuck-fuck-fuck*. I didn't hear it like that then**,** but I hear it like that now. In my father's hands the gun curses *fuck* with each trigger squeeze. Into the distant trees he shoots a gun big as a broomstick.

Rust

There's something in me sick and human that wants the bed frame on display to be the bed frame the old man was tethered to. I want to know it was here that his body beaded sweat against iron. Here, the rust carries the molecules of the man in the video. Here, he asked about the torturer's other life and in asking

acknowledged how the pulse of wanting beats in every single temple.

Television Recording

How does a dictatorship end? Is it a virus, attacking the body until the immune system takes over? Or is tyranny's end akin to the death of a star? Unimaginative flame exhausting its fuel and splintering apart.

A television plays an advertisement from the *No!* campaign. Rainbows and dancing. Smiling people wear thick 1980s sweaters. In Chile the people ousted a dictator with a ballot box and a marketing campaign whose slogan was *La alegría ya viene*. Joy is coming.

Joy. Like those who have lived a long time underground, the people blinked their eyes at the word.

Sweat Box

I should have entered the box, let my body sweat liquid heat, let the doors of my eyes open as entrances for the unseen past. Then afterward I could have gone home to have dinner with a friend on a patio. In the intricate dusk I could have ordered a

pitcher of crisp beer and recognized the clouds congregating for a storm. I could have tried to understand that survivors continue living, that they leave the sweat box to reenter the self in a world more or less the same as before. From a distance I studied the wooden box, then walked my feet beyond the museum walls.

Ghost of a Tree | Christopher Woods

My Father, Who Abandoned Me, Works with Wood

Gary Charles Wilkens

He finds fallen limbs in old forests,
salvages forsaken church seats, saves
window frames from crumbling houses,
carries home rotted logs from woods.

He works them smooth, his hard hands
holding them under the saw, the sander,
dust flying. He forms oak and walnut,
cherry and dogwood. He finds the form

that wants to be there, my father feels.
Firewood gets new life after burning:
with railroad ties it becomes wine racks.
Sassafras he shapes into sculpture.

When he let me go for the last time,
unable to care for another son, my father
walked into the woods and wrapped
his hands around a thorn bush.

A Trail in the Rockies

John Stupp

Nothing
bothers
Old Paint
not the sun
stabbed pines
or the snow
spring hasn't reached—
if my daughter sleeps
in the saddle
he will find
his way
balancing
cold air
like a blanket
so nothing needs
to be said—
and if shyness
is a virtue
invented by nature
so what if he is
a little rough
and rocking
over the miles
from where
we come
to where we go

his breath bent
like a brush fire
like warm coffee
coloring our sky
written
broken
and rode

Birth Control

Demetri Raftopoulos

"I'm late," C tells me over the phone.

We have plans tonight.

"Big surprise," I say. One hand holds an iPhone to my ear. The other pokes a keyboard. I sit in front of my computer and check out the scores and standings from the night before. The Knicks are on a seven game win-streak, their hottest start to a season in what feels like since I learned to carry the one.

"No, D." She pauses. "I'm *late*."

They beat the Heat yesterday. The NBA's defending champions from Miami. Maybe Carmelo and company will get down like they do in South Beach.

"I understand that you're running *late*," I say, scrolling through some statistics. 'Melo and Lebron are tied for the league lead in points per game. "You're acting like I wasn't expecting this. What is it this time? The dog? Your hair? Your…"

"I'm *LATE*," she shouts, as I hear what I think are the hinges to her desk chair shooting upwards. "Late! Late! Late!"

I take my hand off the keyboard, my eyes away from NBA.com.

And then it hits me like an elbow to the head on the basketball court. That confused and hazy moment followed by *holy-fucking-shit*.

"What happened to birth control?" I ask, gripping my phone tighter.

We haven't used a condom once, by the way.

"I've been taking it but not at the same time every day, and you know that can mess with it. We've been hanging out so late every night. And we're usually sleeping when my alarm…"

"*You* are sleeping," I interrupt.

"*Not* the point."

"Have you taken a test yet?" I ask, rubbing the back of my neck with my free hand.

"Not yet. I'm too scared. What do we do? I have a boyfriend, and you have a girlfriend."

"*She's* not my girlfriend," I announce, like I need to defend my perfect record of no-girlfriends.

"*Not* the point…*again*."

"Sorry," I pause, thinking of the right thing to say. "Do *you* want to be my girlfriend?"

I hear a heavy sigh. I already know her eyes are rolling, her head is shaking, and her patience is slipping like someone in line at the DMV. Definitely not the right thing to say.

"D. I'm scared. Stop joking."

"How do we know it's definitely mine?"

I have to ask.

"He's away at school," C says in that *really, asshole?* tone. "I haven't seen him in two months. I've been having sex with you," she pauses, "for two months."

Silence.

I don't respond. *How* do I respond?

"What do we do?" she asks, sounding more fearful from one word to the next.

"I'll pick you up in ten minutes."

*

"I want to be a father," you tell people. You want a son, especially. Though it's not like you'd shout "send it back!" in the delivery room if you had a daughter. You would love her as much as him. But you want a boy. You see the way your father raised you. The way he walks around and announces "my boy!" every time he is proud. You think about how he introduced you to

Greek music. How he showed you how to parallel park when you were ten, and taught you to drive when you were fifteen. ("Because that's when I learned to drive," he told you. "Stick-shift. On a forklift. As soon as I came to this country.") How he let you cross the street without holding his hand. You remember the first time he gave you advice about *koritsakia*. "The beauty is in the booty," you now tell people because of him. "Don't kiss their asses but treat them right," you remember him saying.

You think about the tiny Air Maxes or the all-black Converses you're going to buy. How much of a stud he'll be. You see his first steps, his drunk-like, clapping-of-feet-against-the-floor steps. Just like Daffy Duck and all the other cartoons and Disney movies you'll introduce him to. The same ones you grew up with, not this new shit that doesn't compare.

Yes, you've told people you want to be a father but now you are knee-deep in fear and worry. It scares you because saying you want a child is one thing. Actually having one is another. Even though she is the one you suddenly envision having a family with. She's the one because she reminds you of your mother and sister—the way she'd try and catch a falling meteor or swing from the torch of the Statue of Liberty or piggy-back Yokozuna across the Verrazano for her family. She's the one, even though she wants a girl. And the thought of having a girl, despite really

wanting a boy, comforts you more than you ever envisioned, especially if she's going to be anything like her mother.

If your daughter gives someone a chance one day, like her mother did when she looked past your past, past everything you told her about all the girls you've been with before her and how you've never been in a serious relationship, how she doesn't try to change you and accepts every last drop of you and doesn't pressure you into anything. Although you're scared to have a daughter because of all the assholes out there. You don't consider yourself an asshole, you just know the stupid choices you've made, hoping that no guy would ever make those choices with her, understanding the one stupid thing you didn't do was letting go of her mother. You're just hoping that if you do have a daughter, she meets a man who wants her as much as her father wants her mother.

You want the mother of your child next to you, arguing with you at Roosevelt Field Mall, picking out clothes for your son-to-be. "He already has plenty of Nike," she'll say to you, dragging you by the arm past Foot Locker. "Yeah and he already has plenty from Baby Gap," you'll say back. You will argue some more because that's what couples do. You'll argue about what color to paint his room: "How are we going to paint the baby's room

black, D?" Because black is your favorite color and she knows that. She knows everything about you.

"You put this thing in me!" she'll scream at you. "Now get me my damn mint chocolate chip ice cream." She's funny like that, so you'll jet to Waldbaum's and buy her her ice cream. A big fucking tub of it. You'll tell her how great her hair looks even if it hasn't been done in a week. How her smile could light up all of Yankee Stadium. That her green and brown eyes, even though now accompanied by large, dark circles, distract you for days. That you're still always hard around her, that you would fool around—if she was down, of course. You're horny as all hell but she's the one who's hormonal and wants to Pelé-kick you in the balls. The one who's body is changing. The one who's carrying your son. You love her for it, and you love him even more because *she* is the one who's going to give him to the both of you.

Her hand will latch onto yours in the delivery room because you'll be there during the birth of your son, wearing that same thing on your head that the lunch-lady at Denton Ave. Elementary wore. Unlike your father, who paced back and forth in the waiting area, nervous, anxious and hopeful for the "It's a boy!" announcement.

You'll take turns changing the diapers that make you wish you had no sense of smell. She will hold your hand as you watch your

son attempt his first steps, watching him stumble and fall, stumble and fall, stumble and fall. And one day wait in the carpool line, watching the black JanSport bounce off his back with each nervous step. A nervous walk by a nervous student on his first day of school. You'll teach him Greek and Italian. "Gonna be the smartest kid," you both tell people. Like his parents. *Well*, maybe his mother. You'll bring him to his *yiayia* and *nona*. They'll give mommy and *baba* some much needed alone time, which will consist only of sleeping.

She's the one who will defend your son when you're being too hard on him, like your father was with you at times. "This is nothing," you'll tell her. "One time my father wouldn't talk to me for weeks because I wore my hat backwards." But you won't be that way. You'll never ignore your son. Or her. Even when you do fight and argue and bicker and yell and scream and disagree. Because you love her. And you love him.

You'll tell him stories of your days at the Herricks carnival. She will be right there, listening, rolling her eyes when you tell him, "You're going to have a way with the ladies, like your old man." She'll caress his hair and yours. She'll never forget how soft your hair is, what's left of it. You'll sit in your mother's rocking chair, the one *papou* built. In your son's room. That isn't painted black. Because while you don't kiss her ass, you still treat her right like

your *baba* taught you. She wanted it blue, so you painted it blue. She helped too, even seven months pregnant. She's tough like that. You take breaks to splash paint on each other and sneak in kisses every time her lips face yours.

When the paint dries and the room airs and the crib becomes a part of the room and your son is old enough, it becomes his. A room that'll one day resemble the one in which you grew up. Because he will like everything you like. And maybe he'll live in his room until he's in his mid-twenties, like you. Or maybe he'll leave. Either way, his parents will give him a home. And when he falls asleep to the sound of your voice, you'll put him in his crib, in his sky-blue room. And you'll sit in the rocking chair, with your girl on your lap, arms around her waist, watching your son sleep while telling her she's the only lady you'll ever want.

You wish it'll be that easy. You wish you could blink and *poof*! That's how it'll all go down. But you're hit in the jaw with an uppercut of reality. You're too young to be a *baba*. She's too young to be a mother. You just met her. She just met you. You want to turn the car around and peel out and screech tires and go all *Need for Speed* through the streets you grew up on. But you don't. Because even after only two months, you know she is the one that all this could be possible with. The one who has made you contemplate retiring permanently from the single life. The

one who gives your life inexplicable purpose. The one who could potentially drag you away from the house you have never left on Edgewood Drive.

*

I arrive at her corner house, like I did the December night we first kissed. Nervous. Unsure of what would happen. Every night for the past two months, we snuck down to my parents' basement, had sex, and lay naked under the covers, her bare body wrapped around mine, my fingers reading the braille of goosebumps on her outer thigh. Talking. Learning. Tonight was the first night we'd break that pattern. The thought of that scared me straight out of my Nikes.

Even on a night of *I-might-be-a-parent*, C still makes me wait. The girl was straight up bugging ten minutes ago, but now we probably have to check if our hair looks okay.

I text her again. "I'm here."

As I tap send, one Burberry rain boot follows the next to my car. A trail of uncertain footsteps follows behind her in the light coat of late-January snow.

"Impatient much?" she says, yanking open my car door. Her chameleon-like eyes change from brown in the nighttime's darkness to green under the light in my car.

The cold seeps in. I crank up the heat and drive.

"What should we do, D?"

"Have sex?" I propose.

"I hate you right now."

"Sorry."

"I don't think I've ever been this scared in my life."

"That makes two of us."

"I'm over two weeks late. Maybe I should have said something to you?"

"It's okay."

Just because I already think that I love her doesn't make this whole debacle less scary. We agree to buy some pregnancy tests before *really* freaking the fuck out.

*

"Maybe we should have made this trip to buy condoms," C says as I pull into a CVS parking spot.

"*I hate condoms*, you said. *They feel terrible*, you said," I say as I shut the engine off, and we both step outside.

"It's not like you ever suggested buying them. You kept thanking me because I was *saving you so much fucking money*. Dick."

I don't think we've ever fought before. Then again, I'm not sure if this *is* a fight because *we've never fought before*.

The automatic doors *swoosh* open as we approach the entrance to CVS. C and I fight over who should go in first, flinching and hesitating towards the bright lights and idle ceiling fans. Our indecision triggers a *vroom* and the doors shut swiftly. A snowplow rumbles by behind us on Jericho, pushing the remnants of the light snowfall from earlier in the night onto the concrete sidewalks. I let out a sigh of visible breath and place my hand on the cotton of C's jacket, guiding her closer to the initial stage of our fate. The doors *swoosh* open again and I follow her inside.

"Yeah, but you told me you were on birth control," I continue, heading straight for the pregnancy-test aisle. "I'm a dude. And a big idiot for constantly thinking *with* my dick."

"*Oh*…so you're an *idiot* for having sex with me?" C shouts at my back. It's like I've removed the wrong piece in Jenga and the whole game is about to come crashing down on me. "Did you realize this the first…or…two hundred and eighth time you came inside me?"

C has never really cared where we are or who is around. If she is pissed about something, everyone else and their mothers are going to hear about it also.

I turn to face her.

"That's not what I meant," I admit, wishing I could take back this most recent Dumb-Shit-Guys-Say moment.

I say a couple more things, trying to convince her that this isn't just about the sex, pleading with her to calm her beautiful ass but she's not hearing any of it. She grabs a two-count of tests and storms to the register. A trail of angry-soon-to-be-your-baby-mama dust follows.

"I got this," I say, catching up to her, swiping the tests out of her hands, her long brown hair covering part of her rosy cheek and slightly upward-pointing nose.

"D. I can pay for my own pregnancy tests," she says, pushing strands off of her fair skin.

"C. You saved me money on condoms. I can afford these. Don't worry."

I don't know if I mean for that to stop our fight or make it a hell of a lot worse but she doesn't say anything. I pay. We leave.

*

"Should I pull over somewhere dark for you to pee?" I ask, making a right onto Jericho Turnpike.

"I'm not going to pee on a damn pregnancy test in the middle of a damn street."

Her big marshmallow-white teeth jump out at me in the darkness of my car.

"Right. I'll find a bathroom."

I head towards the Dunkin' on the corner of Jericho and Herricks. I know the bathrooms are pretty quaint there. C and I actually fucked in one of them. Let's just hope the place we possibly conceived our child isn't the same place we find out that we have, in fact, *conceived a child.*

"If it's positive, D, what do we do?"

"What do *you* want to do?"

"I'm too young to have a child." A wave of relief drowns my worry. "But," she continues, "I don't want to look back on this and regret it. I'm not crazy conservative or pro-life or any of that, I just want to do what's right. And part of me would have this baby. If there even is a baby. And based on your completely obvious sigh of relief just now, I know that's not what you want, but I've thought a lot about this and…"

I don't remember what else she said.

*

The smell of coffee immediately sticks to our clothes when we walk into Dunkin'. We sneak off to the bathroom like we did that drunken night when we left the bar together, walked down the block, and pulled each other's pants down. I lifted her up, slammed her up against the wall, and probably knocked a couple donuts off the shelves.

This time, C goes in alone.

A bell jingles as a coffee-drinker enters Dunkin' and a quiet whisper echoes through the door.

"I can't pee."

"*You* can't pee? *You*?"

This girl always has to pee.

"Just announce it to the whole place. Shut up. Here I go."

I imagine the Boston cream donuts, the jelly-filled munchkins, and the blueberry muffins. I imagine the process of their extremely tasty coming-of-age. How there needs to be a specific amount of Boston cream, of jelly, and little blueberries. How they were once nothing and evolved into something. How they are waiting for their moment, on the shelf, in Dunkin' Donuts, waiting for someone to want them.

I want to have the kid. At least, I think I do. I think this is what I want. I could tell her this right now. I think I feel the same way she does.

The stubble of my beard presses against the bathroom door.

We can make my basement baby friendly, hide all the bottles of booze, put a crib right next to the bed, bring down the rocking chair, transform the entire basement into an apartment, and build a kitchen and a bathroom. My father and papou would help. I'm going to tell her.

My hand palms the door, searching for hers through the wood.

*But we haven't met each other's families yet. What are her parents going to think about this older guy knocking up their daughter? Oh boy. "You didn't wear a condom? Jackass! How are you going to raise a kid?" And my parents. Forget it. My father wouldn't even have to say anything. His stern look of are-you-a-fucking-*malaka *would be enough for me to piss myself. Hopefully my mother is her usual everything-happens-for-a-reason self and understands why I didn't use a condom, ever. I just felt comfortable enough with C not to.*

I hear water flowing from the faucet. The sink's handle turns and the water stops. A paper towel is dispensed and crumpled by nervous hands.

What the hell do we do? Just break up with the others? Would she regret it and resent me and look back and wonder if she should have played it safe?

My entire body touches the door, hands running up and down the edges like I'm looking for a secret way in.

Would we wind up hating each other in general? This should bring us closer, not drive us further apart. What would I be taking away from her if we had the kid? Her future? Her youth? She should be chugging from bottles, not filling them with milk. She should be visiting her friends at college, not an obstetrician. She should be listening to the heavy bass of speakers in a club, not the gurgling of an ultrasound. Shit, what about my future? My youth?

Maybe I won't tell her.

A man walks past holding a box of munchkins, staring at me as he should. The bell jingles again as he leaves. My fingers wrap around the metal handle of the door, grasping it tight, but I let go without opening it.

But I'm good with kids. C practically raised her sisters. We could make this work. Wait, wait, wait. So what if I'm good with kids? I still am a kid. My mother still packs my lunch. Is there a Parenting for Dummies I could buy because I am a dummy and definitely not a parent? What's going to happen to my life? I mean, working for my mother pays for the bills I don't have. It's a decent job but is that what I'm going to be stuck doing if I become a father? What if I had other plans and goals? And no more nights out with the boys, getting white-girled, stumbling up Marcus Ave., knocking garbage cans over, walking to 7-11 to go to town on beef jerky, Pop-Tarts, and the

Buffalo chicken taquitos that kill my stomach. No more sleeping around and getting numbers. That's for damn sure.

The skidding of a chair follows a *boom!* as a woman to my left smacks her knee on the underside of the table before throwing out her half eaten cream-cheese everything bagel.

Maybe I should wait to hear the results first.

I still hear nothing from C, as if *she* found the secret way out.

Would I really miss all that? Am I done being a twenty-something playboy who sneaks girls down to his basement because he's too scared to introduce any of them to his parents in fear that said girls might get the wrong idea and think he's actually trying to get serous with them? Although part of me wants to introduce C to my parents and the basement wouldn't be a bad place to live. Maybe I'm done with being single. I've never considered it before. That should mean something, right? I could tell her that. What if she is uncomfortable living with my parents, though?

I turn around, lean my back up against the door, and look out the opposite window at Jericho Turnpike and New Hyde Park and Long Island. My home. The place I have always lived. The place I haven't left yet.

I could leave. Move out and get a place for us and the baby. Yes. Me. Yiasou*, Edgewood Drive. See ya later. I'd work my ass off and save as much* lefta *as I possibly can. I could leave my house.*

My body does a one-eighty and I stare at the woman stick-figure glued to the center of the door, the gender indicator, and then at the man stick-figure on the neighboring one.

For C, I think I would. I think I would do all this for her. I think I would be a good father, like mine. If this is what she wants, I think I can want it too. The other koritsia *mean nothing, as much as the strangers that drive up and down Edgewood, lost, looking for somewhere else. I think I know what I'm looking for.*

I place both hands on the frame and lower my head.

"C," I begin, lifting my head, "I…"

I hear the rattling of metal and then an unhinging *click* as I take two steps backward. The door handle lowers and the door slowly opens. C stands in the opening, test in hand. A tear streaks down her cheek. A slight smile catches the tear.

"It's negative."

I never went to church so I learned faith in my own way

Julia Elizabeth Hogan

Let us say a prayer for the songbirds in Albania,
the ones who didn't see the trap. Orioles
picked apart for potency, *there's not a better way to die.*

Feathers floating into the Red Sea.

Let's bow our heads, honor one-night stands, girls who drip
golden down my back, long after they've disappeared,
and my lips curl inward, full of need.
Prayers for empty days of waiting and unread books,
forgotten photographs on refrigerator doors, left
there to find later,
when you're drunk and it's three am, and everyone you've
ever known is gone.
For the mothers who leave their children, pocket-sized,
in wastebaskets at Sunday church services,
for the gun my friend kept, tongue-in-cheek, until one night
it went off.

Let's pray for the way he kept laughing, never forgot his punch line,
so now as I remember him I see his smile, and not the fear in his eyes.

Why do we toast to beauty, but miss sunrises? Why do we never
pray for the devil?

He is the one who needs it most.

I want to tell a joke that will keep the world laughing for the next one hundred years,
to sustain us through the slow suicide dance
of *what are they calling it now?*— climate change.

The gun we keep pressed against our tongues. The pills I hid under my bed
when the doctor said, *you can't have anything dangerous.*
I am not to be trusted. I am a swirling dust
cloud from one side of the atlantic to another.

The last time I went to therapy was when Robin Williams killed himself,
because he couldn't hold the world together
with his laughter, so we went to therapy, Robin and I,
because my other choice was driving my car off a bridge,
and I didn't want to kiss goodbye.

The therapist told me it wasn't real, the constricting in my heart.

I give my blessing to that therapist.
I give my blessing to Robin Williams, who says,
maybe you'll do better, maybe you'll survive longer,
because this is a terminal illness and I know so many who have died.

Let's say a prayer for all these songbirds, the orioles
and red-winged blackbirds, the children who stopped laughing.

We've made it so far.

When I die, I want my body to become a map
to the fountain of youth, so hungry men in Albania won't poach songbirds, and you can fly to Africa, and try to make it home.

Waters

Chaun Ballard

I know the color of spew runoff, gasped-breath—stagnant
contaminates, capitulation inside the holds of fleeting material.

Our souls have grown
deep in that material.

Every night I bathe in the Flint without knowing—after every
graveyard shift, after every twenty-four hours on call.

We've given our sun-ripeness
over to its musty hands.

I don't speak waters no more. I never say: *Rain*. I say: *Too much New Orleans—too much hurricane and downpour—*

Hands which intoxicate
our landfilled bodies.

My grandfather's father was captive. He made sure to build our hut inland, safe from waters' reach and lull of its evening-gold.

The world gives us
too much material—

I am child of the minister who hastens to ask: *Father, when will God peer down from his view of cabin window to see our Nile—to hear the song our children sing*?

That makes us rise
in flood-like rage.

It's the same song Moses sang.

#racetogether

Kenan Ince

Starbucks launched a campaign that gave its baristas the option to write "Race Together" on customers' cups to start a conversation about racial issues.

I left it for you there,
scrawled across the logo
on your pumpkin spice:
a seal to be opened,
the smooth black body
of my felt-tip pen
pressed against your
coffee cup. Let's talk
about race, you beautiful
homie. Let's talk about
how race is a prism
that sections everything
that threatens us
into warring colors.
Let's talk about race,
your vanilla-cream face,
my patriarchal cheekbones.
I'm not fully white
but I pass sometimes.
Nice coffee you've got,
that silky almond milk
all alone in a dark sea
of espresso. I like to watch

the whiteness bloom
until the last pure swatch
of black is erased.
I like to race myself:
pour two creams at once
and see which can destroy
the darkness first.
I prefer my coffee swirled
with cream until
inscrutably brown.
That's how I like
my men: inscrutable,
like you, honey.
You look uncomfortable.
I guess that's kind of
the point.

Husband owns wife's hair in Michigan, they say

Linda Umans

Let's say I lived in Michigan.
Let's say I was married to you
in the eyes and guts of the law.

You would have dominion so to speak
over my hair and the question for me
would be which hair...

the ill-advised red (who knew that would happen)
when I first met you (how stoned were you
when that looked good) colored like
Miss Subways 1955. Where were you then.

Later on the *Loving Care* ash brown more
ash than brown washed out color of a starving
mouse. Where were you then with tough love
2 cents pinking shears whatever.

Where are you now.
All is almost lost.
Step up. We need you.

We Steal

Jonathan Crowl

We steal whatever: Oakleys, chewing gum, rolls of quarters from the cupholders. We lift balled-up cardigans from the back seats of Impalas, slip down sleepy streets and pull the handles on car doors. We hunt open garages in dark subdivisions, driving past houses that look like the houses that look like the houses we already passed. We never feel lost in that suburban hall of mirrors; the skies are milky and the air is asleep. Whatever bad happens, happens somewhere else.

We ride in Frankie's orange Hummer. It's discreet only here, on the rich side of Millard: big like the houses, big like the driveways. Even Frankie knows it's a silly thing to own, but his parents like to show off their money. His father owns a lawn care company: A shrewd venture at the western edge of Omaha, where front yards are how the men measure their dicks. Frankie's dad's got everything west of 168th on an annual rotation of aerating, fertilizing, cutting, and raking. Wash and repeat. You don't need a calendar if you hire Frankie's dad. His truck fleet hits the streets every day, moving from house to house and task to task, mini-

cycles within larger cycles that churn out the big bucks that pay for orange Hummers.

Frankie picks up me, Benny, and Tina, and winds us through the developments: Armbrust Acres, Bay Shore, Mission Park, Cinnamon Creek, each idyllic theme representing a long, serious list of guidelines. Earth-tone exteriors, mow once a week. Each subdivision chooses either asphalt or shaker singles, ensuring harmonious rooflines.

We're a strange group to be hanging out. All we have in common is that one night all of us had nothing to do. Frankie called me, I called Benny, Benny called Tina. We'd tried to score some vodka or weed and take it into the cornfields just west of the suburbs. When we couldn't find a seller, we settled for driving the streets. Benny spied a fridge in an unlit garage, and I dared Tina, the track star, to run in quick and grab whatever she found. Tina'd only come because Benny was trying to get laid. Benny and I were best friends but he'd reached a point where he had to bring a girl around, a bland rotation of sexual targets who were never a threat but always in the way. Just like the others, Tina was eager to show off. She came back swinging a handle of Maker's Mark, us guys staring out the side of the car at that pale, moonlight slice of beauty, fearless of larceny and charitable with hand jobs, Benny told us as she reached the truck.

Afterward we reflected on the ease of it all, robbery being comparable to finding loose change. We hit another garage, not caring what we found, just eager to prove the first time wasn't a mistake.

Now it's a regular thing for us. We're in it mostly for the thrill, but each of us is chasing a type of treasure. Benny's after booze. Tina likes to shop. Me and Frankie want the stuff that makes no sense. I ran six blocks swinging a three-foot inflatable dinosaur by its neck, outran the fat bastard who bought it in the first place and hid in a drainage ditch, squeezing the air out of the toy. I gave it to Frankie and he laughed until he cried. He was fully baked, but the dinosaur is still on display in his bedroom.

When the pickings are slim, we'll settle for garbage: CDs, hammers, folding chairs, clothes. One night we find a house party and scrape forty bucks in change from the cars parked outside, take a homeless man to a downtown diner and pay the bill in quarters and dimes. Tina sits next to him and makes a show of breathing through her mouth, but then she'll turn and flirt with him just to make sour faces to the side.

On the way home, Tina laughs and screams about it. "His beard was like pubes," she cackles. I look at Benny and he's smiling, but quiet. He's been hanging out with Tina more, satisfying her constant need for attention. I've been friends with

him for eight years so I know it isn't love or anything close. Soon enough he'll get bored, and she'll be gone, but right now he won't look me in the eyes. He doesn't come over anymore.

When we find a garage, Frankie drives past and stops a couple blocks down. We dismount our heated seats and dissolve into the night, snaking our way back along sidewalks and siding, curling into the unlit spaces—no breaking, just entering. We grab what we can carry, load up the trunk, and clear out.

Frankie asks if we want to try a new part of town, but we always say no: Stay out in the suburbs where we know we're safe. Where we know how things work. We steer clear of the Mexican and black neighborhoods. We don't cross 144th, it's too desperate over there. Rob a house around 120th street and some drunk might come around the front, corner you inside, and beat you shitless as the door comes down. Stay out by 180th, 192nd, where the gutsiest they get is flipping on the porch light—and where neighbors are too aloof to intervene.

Every now and then, though, we get a little bold. We hit Papillion one night because it's rich and white like our part of town. The kids are even paler than us, and the cars they drive are just as nice. We're filling the trunk nicely when Tina comes back with a wallet she pulled from a golf bag. "Stupid asshole," she

says, and reads the name on the driver's license. "Look at all the credit cards."

Her eyes glow in the night, but we plead with her: No, come on, it's too easy. You use one and then what? They've got you on security tape, and then they find the rest of us. She fights us a bit before relenting, cleaning out the seventy dollars in cash.

I'm about to drop the wallet on the side of the road when Benny says no: He wants one of those golf clubs. We let him go, wallet-in-hand. He's showing off for Tina and she eats it up. We get into the car and wait, and minutes later there's a hand slapped against the driver's side window. He opens the backdoor and jumps in. There's no club. He sticks his leg in the air between the front seats.

"They shot me," he pants. I look back and tears shine off his cheeks—he must have cried the whole run back to the car. "They've got guns!" I yell to Frankie, and duck, and Tina fills the car with a bloodcurdling scream and overdone sobbing, desperate to claim some measure of Benny's trauma for herself. Frankie hits the gas and I punch the overhead light, lift Benny's leg by the heel. Sure enough, he's been shot: a small, round hole shines from the middle of his calf, rimmed by a fast-rising welt. Blood pools in the tiny crater, but not enough to run down his leg.

"I think it's a BB gun pellet," I say.

We take Benny home, and for a few days I don't hear from him. Then he calls and says he told his parents he and I were shot at in an Albertson's parking lot. No mention of Frankie or Tina. His mom had called the store manager and threatened to sue. But she never called the police, didn't check with my parents or question his story. She took him to urgent care, and he was fine the next day.

I invite Benny over, but he has plans.

*

We take a break after Benny's close call. I talk to Frankie now and then, but Benny gets busy. I'll see him and Tina walking the halls, and when spring soccer starts up he gets back to hanging with that crowd. Soccer always pulls Benny out of my social orbit, the starts and ends to seasons washing him in and out like the tides. I catch him alone before classes one morning and ask him how he's doing. He's friendly, and I ask about Tina. Turns out she can't stop talking; Benny's going to end it.

"Any day now," he says.

But for the next few weeks, I still see them together. She's loud, and he smiles. Meanwhile, I'm alone. I've got other friends to hang out with, but it's sporadic: they're Benny's friends more

than mine. They seem to like me fine, but they never think of me when they plan to hang out. I'm harmless and plain—that's what they think, and they're right. I spend the spring playing Halo, eating Hot Pockets, and refusing to think about college. Benny and I already settled on the state school, where tuition is cheap and the bar is low. Everyone else's lives get busier, and I sink into my parents' couch, forget that while the world spins forward I'm only gathering dust.

Then May arrives, and suddenly the stars align. Benny calls: Soccer season's over, and Tina wants to go stealing again. I don't remind him of his promise to dump her months ago, I'm too lonely to be picky. I call Frankie, and he's in. He just turned eighteen, says he'll buy us all smokes. He drives us to BP, buys a pack to split. We snake through the winding subdivisions, and Frankie thinks the houses are more guarded now: doors closed, lights on, blinds cracked by skeptical eyes. I'm not so sure that anything's changed, except that we're all more nervous than before.

We go to Mission Park because it's easy to disappear in there. You've got parks and a school on three sides, plus a creek running through—plenty of options. Frankie drops us off at a playground behind a Lutheran church. I'm worried that people might recognize his car, but Benny and Tina are more relaxed: He's been

playing soccer for months, and she just won gold in the half-mile at the city championships. All I've got are nerves and Hot Pocket thighs, which I balance out by being the most cowardly. If something goes wrong, I need a good head start.

We walk up the street, scaling a long hill toward the middle school, checking car doors casually as we pass. I keep us off Paul Badowski's street because his dad owns a gun and grew up on Chicago's south side. That's the story, anyway. He's still living that hard-knock fantasy, too: I saw him try to fight a kid once, this big hairy-fisted Polack swinging a brass ring at an eighth-grader's head, just for pissing in his boxwoods. Another time he told me that a pussy was someone who wouldn't punch his best friend in the mouth. I'm no longer friends with the Badowski boys.

Benny and Tina drift under a tree with sprawling limbs that have swallowed up the streetlights. I follow, and they point across the street to an open, dark garage. Benny slips over to check it out. Tina and I keep walking.

"He's so crazy," she marvels. "If he gets caught he'll lose his scholarship."

"What scholarship?" I ask, and she gives me the name of a school I've never heard of.

"It's in North Carolina," she says. "He wants to get out of Nebraska."

She stops and points to an open garage ahead: One with its lights on. We walk up the opposite side of the street and pass by to make sure no one's inside. Tina asks me to keep watch, and I slide behind the trunk of a young cottonwood. She skitters across, her ponytail wagging as she looks both ways. She steps toward the back of the garage, scanning its high shelves and standing in such bright light that the tension plays my brain like a saw cutting a metal pipe. Down the street, Benny's nowhere to be found, and I wonder what's taking so long. Tina keeps looking around, but even from across the street I can tell there's not much to take: No tools, nothing of obvious value, just bins that need to be pulled from high shelves, opened and sifted through. It's not worth the risk. She slips a winter scarf off of a coatrack and stops in front of the door into the house. I almost yell as she sets down the scarf and grabs the door handle. She twists, pushes the door open. Yellow light floods through, and she walks inside.

Breathing becomes difficult. I duck down and grab the tree trunk with one hand. With the other, I grab my penis through my shorts. I don't know why I grab my dick, but the comfort is such that I can't let go. I hold on tight, like it's my only hope. Tina's beautiful and short and a girl, so she won't get her ass kicked, unless the Badowski's have relocated. More likely, someone's pervy dad will catch her and pinch himself, smile and offer her a

drink. Or she'll get caught, cornered until the police arrive, and they'll use her to find the rest of us. The door yawns open and Tina flashes from the left, moving across the house. All is quiet, and I watch the front windows for signs of where she's headed. All I can see is a pale blue glow from a back far corner, where I assume the TV isn't playing to an empty room.

There's a scream—not Tina's shrill, forced squawk but a full, crackling roar, the kind you can't fake—and Tina's sprinting through the door, flinging it shut behind her. She peels out of the garage and turns down the sidewalk, gold-medal legs vaulting her forward into the night, a silver purse sparkling as she shrinks away.

The click-and-wheeze of a storm door draws my attention back to the house, where a man dressed in khakis and a tucked-in polo hustles across his front lawn, watching Tina disappear.

"Come back here or I'm calling the police!" he shouts, but Tina doesn't flinch because she knows she's home free. All of this happens with me crouched under the tree, some thirty feet from the man looking Tina's way. I don't dare flinch or breathe or blink, but I do loosen the squeeze on my penis, prepare my hands to run. The man turns his back to me, shaking his head and trudging back to the front door. A woman is standing there waiting for him, clutching her shirt collar in her fist.

I run the second they both step inside, cutting through backyards to a neighboring street several blocks away. I adopt a casual stroll along the sidewalk, but I'm terrified: rustling leaves try to jump me, motion-sensor lights know I'm not to be trusted. I duck behind parked cars whenever I see headlights, and one of those times it's two cop cars headed in the opposite direction. Sweat is pouring out of me by the time I reach the Hummer at our meeting spot. I climb into the front seat and turn around to Tina, who is leaned back, smiling, arms crossed.

"You made it," she teases.

In my dreams tonight, I will drown Tina in a bubble bath. "What the hell was that?" I ask.

She shrugs. "I wanted something good."

Benny giggles and shakes his head. I look at Frankie: He's smiling like a lobotomy patient, his head rocking absently up and down, left and right. Frankie's world must be so bored that the smallest stimulus blows his circuits.

"She almost got caught," I tell the guys. "She almost got all of us in trouble."

"Sheeit. I'm just driving around," Frankie says.

"They wouldn't do anything," Benny shrugs, hoping to calm me down.

"Where'd you go?" I asked, turning back to Tina. "What were you doing in there?"

"People keep the good stuff inside," she said. "I almost got the cat."

Frankie spits purple slushie onto the driving wheel and into his lap. His lungs empty so fully that I pause to make sure he's able to breathe back in.

"What do you mean?" I finally ask, but we all know what she means. Benny cackles and stomps his feet. I feel a pinch of sadness watching him celebrate, wishing I felt the same way.

Instead, I ask, "What would we do with a cat?"

Tina pinches the corner of her eyes, tilts her head sideways. I can feel myself transforming into something unfamiliar, something undesirable—she is placing me into a new category. Or maybe she already has, and now I've only confirmed her suspicions.

She says, "How cool would it be to have a cat for a night?"

Benny is still grinning. I shake my head at him, all I can do, and his smile fades. It doesn't fade to neutral, something benign: It maintains its descent into something more decisive and disinterested, and he turns his gaze out the window, away.

"Grow a sack," he says. The fatigue in his voice is the sharp edge that wounds me.

Frankie leans over and shakes his head, keeping his eyes on the road. "Don't worry, man," he tells me. "Sometimes you gotta say 'Fuck the po-lease.'"

I say nothing because I agree with Frankie, or I'm supposed to, and did. I swallow my feelings. The farther we get from the robbery, time and space expanding between, the easier it is to laugh about what happened. We agonize over how close we'd come to having a cat. The Hummer must have one, we all decide. Next time, we say, we're going all out, we won't rest until we get our hands on someone's kitty. I push this the hardest, hoping Benny sees I've come around. He and Tina seem to make a point of ignoring me.

We end the night outside the Anderson Amoco. There are ninety dollars in the purse Tina stole; we blow it on two cartons of Airheads, a barbecue pizza, a twelve-pack of Powerade, and a grip of Omaha postcards. Frankie burns the rest on scratch lottos: we die a thousand deaths as he plays each one and comes up a loser. Benny thumbs the waist of Tina's shorts. Since I'd gotten back to the Hummer I've had to take a piss but I keep holding it, I don't want to walk away and come back to find that things have changed any more than they already have, or that while I was gone everybody decided to leave me. I rock in my seat, watching

everyone for a sign that we're okay, but finally I give in and go back into the convenience store.

Afterward I grab a chocolate milk and bring it up to the counter. That's when I see the flashing lights outside. A police car is pulled up behind the Hummer, forming a "T" to block it in. Frankie is slumped forward at the wheel, his hands at ten and two while a cop scribbles notes beside him. A second officer has pulled Tina outside where she's flushed red and bawling. I turn my back, face the counter where a Pakistani man is watching me, knowing who I'm here with. I slide my milk across the counter and reach for my wallet, but instead I turn and walk toward the door. It feels as if I'm floating, my body painted in nitroglycerin, and one false twitch will blow me apart. I go outside and turn, neck stiff, my back to my friends. Step toward the corner of the building, certain that someone is watching me by now, but if I look back it will blow my cover. I try to listen behind me but my heart is pounding too loud in my ears. All I can hear is what I'd said right before I went inside, tapping the stack of postcards with my knuckle. We were eating and drinking and plotting the next robbery, insisting on the certainty of next time, and someone asked what to do with the postcards. "We'll mail them to the houses we rob," I had said, and everyone agreed. I make it to the corner now and take off, sprinting past an empty car wash and up

a long, grassy hill leading to a darkened Catholic church, those last words still thrumming in my head: "We'll write thank-you notes and tell them don't worry, your cat is fine. Mail them to newspapers and make scrapbooks from the stories they print. They'll call us the Postcard Prowlers, and we'll never get caught."

The Snow Makes Itself at Home | Robert Gregory

Bios

Poet and photographer **Chaun Ballard** was raised in both St. Louis, Missouri, and San Bernardino, California. For six years now, he and his wife have been teaching in the Middle East and West Africa. He is currently a graduate student in the University of Alaska, Anchorage's MFA Program. He's had poems recently accepted by Apogee Journal, heART Online, The Caribbean Writer, Cactus Heart, Grist: The Journal for Writers, Sukoon, Orbis: Quarterly International Literary Journal, Off the Coast, Rattle, and other literary magazines. His photos can be seen in the latest issues of Gravel, heART Online, and The Silk Road Review.

Charlotte Covey is from St. Mary's County, Maryland, where nothing interesting ever happens. She is currently a senior studying Creative Writing and Psychology at Salisbury University. She has poetry published or forthcoming in Salamander Magazine, Slipstream, The MacGuffin, SLAB, and The Summerset Review, among others. In the fall, she plans to begin an MFA in Poetry. She is co-founder of Milk Journal.

Jonathan Crowl's fiction and nonfiction has appeared in Guernica, Day One, Midway Journal, Front Porch Journal, the Prairie Schooner blog, and other publications. Raised in Nebraska, he lives in Saint Paul, Minnesota.

Rachel Cruea is an undergraduate student at Ohio Northern University studying Creative Writing and Literature. Along with serving as the editor-in-chief of Polaris literary magazine, she has had her poetry previously published in editions of Collision, Prairie Margins, The Vehicle, and in forthcoming editions of BOXCAR poetry review, The Pinch, among a few others.

Mazzer D'Orazio is a fiction author living in the suburban wasteland outside DC, a place which both horrifies and inspires her. She is currently teaching high school and pursuing an MFA in fiction writing from George Mason University. Her current project is a set of linked short stories called Space to Settle. Occasionally, she likes to run without headphones on and think about the things she loves.

Jessica Dur Taylor teaches English at Santa Rosa Junior College and Sonoma State University. She's penned essays for Superstition Review, Prick of the Spindle, Recess Magazine, Gloom Cupboard, Brain, Child online, Fwriction Review, Fractured West, Mutha Magazine, and others. Her essay "Cuba Libre" received a Solas Award for Best Travel Writing from Travelers' Tales. She lives in Santa Rosa, California, with her husband and four-year-old daughter, Mallory.

Andra Emilia Fenton was born in Mexico City and moved to Minnesota when she was a teenager. She worked in human rights—lobbying on Capitol Hill, advocating at the United Nations on behalf of imprisoned journalists, and training health leaders in Brazil. In 2013, she completed a Fiction Fellowship at the Writers' Institute at the City University of New York's Graduate Center. She writes for a startup in Silicon Valley focused on changing behaviors around finances in developing countries. She also draws. Her illustrations have been featured on commercial products and literary publications. Andra Emilia lives in Brooklyn, New York.

Nicholas Finch studies creative writing at the University of Tampa. He's spent his life between Florida, England, and South Africa. Nicholas Finch has pieces published or forthcoming in Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine, The Florida Review, and elsewhere. Ernest Hemingway, John Keats, Edna O'Brien, Andy Plattner, Ben Lerner, and Rudy Wilson are some of his biggest influences.

Robert Gregory's collections of poems include *The Beautiful City of Weeds* (2005), *Change, The Skinny Man* (2003), *Boy Picked Up By The Wind* (1992), and *Interferences* (1987). Chapbooks include *You Won't Need That* (2013), *When It's Your Turn to be the Sky* (2004), and *Clouds & Green Police* (2001). He has also published short fiction and essays in a number of journals and has been awarded grants from the NEA, the New York State Council on the Arts, and the Florida Council on the Arts. He lives in Kentucky where he works as a grant writer.

Robyn Renee Hasty lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. Through photography, sculpture, and installation they disassemble codified systems of power and oppression by elevating the resiliency of the human spirit. In the past they have travelled down the Mississippi River on a handmade raft, driven across the US taking Tintype portraits of people living off-the-grid, and founded Stilt City, an artist residency rebuilt in a flooded bungalow in the

Rockaways. They have been profiled on NPR, in The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, VICE, and Hyperallergic among many other publications.

Julia Hogan is a third year marine science student at the University of South Carolina. She is recipient of the 2015 Lettered Olive's Editor's Choice Prize, and was a 2014 artist in residence at the South Carolina Honors College. Her work can be found in Cleaver, Winter Tangerine Review, Poetry Quarterly, and others.

Kenan Ince is a mathematician from Dallas currently living in Houston. His work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize by Permafrost, has appeared in Word Riot and HeART Online, and has been ranted at in the comments section of the Houston real estate blog Swamplot, among others. He has been a featured poet in Houston's Public Poetry and First Friday reading series.

Alyssa Jewell studies poetry at Western Michigan University where she served as assistant editor for New Issues Poetry and Prose and is currently an assistant poetry editor for Third Coast. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Blue Earth Review, Fifth Wednesday, and Grist. She lives and teaches in Grand Rapids.

Arielle Lipset is a writer, teacher, and amateur artist currently living and teaching English in Prague. Her poetry has most recently appeared in Third Point Press and Snapping Twig. You can contact her at lipset.arielle [at] gmail.com.

Lauren Plitkins lives in Seattle, WA, where she writes and teaches English to immigrants and refugees. In 2015, she completed an MFA in nonfiction and poetry at Pacific Lutheran University. Some of her work has been published in So to Speak, Meat for Tea, and Open to Interpretation.

Demetri Raftopoulos received an MFA in Creative Writing from The New School. His writing has appeared in Aftertastes, Critical Mass, The Inquisitive Eater, and more. He is a staff writer at RotoBaller, where he gets to combine his passion for sports and the written word, while he also curates and handles operations at Handwrittenwork.com, exploring the reputably extinct yet very much alive handwritten word. Demetri spent a month in Thassos last summer, taking part in Writing Workshops in Greece. He currently resides

on Long Island, still with his parents, but is eagerly plotting an extended move to Greece.

Marsha Rosenzweig Pincus, a post mid-life emerging artist, who after 35 years of teaching public high school is finding her way towards a personal aesthetic as a writer and visual artist. For her, creativity is an inquiry; it always begins with a question and the process itself suggests answers that are narrative and metaphysical. Her mosaics and mix media works have been shown in various Philadelphia galleries.

Tim Robbins has a BA in French and an MA in Applied Linguistics from Indiana University. He makes his living teaching English as a Second Language and doing freelance translations from French to English. He has been a regular contributor to Hanging Loose since 1978. His poems have also appeared in Three New Poets, Long Shot, The James White Review, Two Thirds North, Main Street Rag, and other literary reviews. He lives in Wisconsin with his partner of 18 years.

John Stupp is the author of the 2007 Main Street Rag chapbook *The Blue Pacific* and the 2015 full-length collection *Advice from the Bed of a Friend* (also by Main Street Rag). Recent poetry has appeared or will be appearing in Wraparound South, Houseguest, The Mackinac, The Timberline Review, The New Guard, Long Dumb Voices, and Fried Chicken and Coffee. John has lived and worked in various states as a jazz musician, university instructor, taxi driver, radio news writer, waiter, auto factory laborer, and paralegal. He currently lives near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Gary Charles Wilkens, Assistant Professor of English at Norfolk State University, was the winner of the 2006 Texas Review Breakthrough Poetry Prize for his first book, *The Red Light Was My Mind*. His poems have appeared in more than 60 online and print venues, among them The Texas Review, The Cortland Review, The Adirondack Review, The Prague Revue, and The Southern Poetry Anthology, Volume II: Mississippi.

Christopher Woods is a writer, teacher, and photographer who lives in Houston and Chappell Hill, Texas. He has published a novel, *The Dream Patch*, a prose collection, *Under a Riverbed Sky*, and a book of stage monologues for actors, *Heart Speak*. His work has appeared in The Southern Review, New England Review, New Orleans Review, Columbia, and Glimmer Train, among others. His photographs can be seen in his gallery

http://christopherwoods.zenfolio.com/ He is currently compiling a book of photography prompts for writers, From Vision to Text.

Linda Umans enjoyed a long teaching career in the public schools of New York City where she lives, studies, writes. Recent publications include poems in Terrain.org, The Broome Street Review, DIALOGIST, Switched-on Gutenberg, Spillway, Composite {Arts Magazine}, Spiral Orb, Ladowich, The Ghazal Page, Mom Egg, Truck, and pieces in Mr. Beller's Neighborhood.

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