

NELLE

issue nine | 2026

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University of Alabama at Birmingham

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NELLE is a literary journal focused on women and their experiences. The journal is an academic publication staffed by faculty, students, alumni, and community members. Writers of all backgrounds are welcome to submit. *NELLE* accepts original and unpublished poetry, fiction, and nonfiction between the January 1 and April 1 submission period. Complete submission guidelines are available on our online submission manager at <https://nelle.submittable.com/submit>. To subscribe and learn more visit <https://www.uab.edu/cas/englishpublications/nelle>. For any other correspondence, contact us at editors.nelle@gmail.com.

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Three Sisters Awards

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As a publication produced by a public institution—and with recent changes in the legal landscape in higher education prompting a comprehensive review of applicable state and federal law—*NELLE* is now open to submissions from all writers.

ANNOUNCING

the winners of the 2026

**THREE SISTERS
HONORARIUMS**

POETRY

D. Dina Friedman

FICTION

Kelly Pedro

NONFICTION

Kerry Madden-Lunsford

All submissions to NELLE are automatically
considered for this \$500 honorarium in each genre.

FEATURE FOLIO

Saara Myrene Raappana



Born and raised in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, Saara Myrene Raappana served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in southern China before moving to Southwest Minnesota. Her book, *Chamber After Chamber* won the 2023 Juniper Prize. She also wrote the chapbooks *A Story of America Goes Walking* (in collaboration with artist Rebekah Wilkins-Pepiton, Shechem Press, 2016) and *Milk Tooth, Levee, Fever* (Dancing Girl Press, 2015). She received grants and scholarships from the Minnesota State Arts Board, the Southwest Minnesota Arts Council, and the Sewanee Writers' Conference. A gym owner and personal trainer with an emphasis on trauma-informed weightlifting, she loved snow, Lake Superior, swearing, coffee, and animals.

Letter from the Folio Editor

Friends, with this folio I invite you to get to know the words of Saara Myrene Raappana as she embodies this issue of NELLE's topic call: She Persisted.

I first encountered Saara at the 2016 Sewanee Writers' Conference. I say encountered because one never met Saara, one experienced her and never forgot it. Saara and I crossed paths as hall-mates on the same floor of the conference dorms and formed a friendship over hikes, waterfall swims, and a love for life's whimsey.

A collision of punk rock and unicorn sparkles—a pink/blue/purple-haired, cat-eye-glasses badass—she was quick to love and loved fiercely. Quick also to anger, her temper flared in the face of those who would harm or oppress others. Saara had a very strong sense of justice and was a huge advocate for the LGBTQIA+ and indigenous communities. She loved to celebrate others and cheer them on. She was the sort of person who when she was convinced there was a book you needed to read, she'd have it waiting in a box on your door step a day later. She did this to me multiple times, but never was she more right than when she made me read one of her favorite books, a novella called *Mapping the Interior* by Stephen Graham Jones. Once you've finished this issue of NELLE you, too, must also run out and grab it.

Saara got her MFA in poetry from the University of Florida where she met and married the love of her life, Eric Dosie. I can be skeptical of marriages sometimes, but anyone who witnessed Saara and Eric knew if any couple were meant to be, it was them. To witness their love was an honor. Not long after graduation, the two took off to south China with the Peace Corps where they lived and worked for years before settling down in Minnesota.

She brought many people's poems to life as the Communications Director for Motionpoems—an initiative that turned poems into short films. And yet, her road to a full

collection was a long one. After over 80 rejections of various iterations of her manuscript, she grew weary of submitting. Her husband, ever the believer in her work, asked if it would be okay if he took over sending out to contests. She said fine so long as she didn't have to know about the rejections. Over 70 rejections later, Eric was able to give her the news that she had won the 2023 Juniper Prize from the University of Massachusetts Press.

When I needed to share life's joys and disappointments, I called Saara. Always the advocate for self-acceptance, our mutual neurodivergence was a path we walked together. She shared with me books and research to help us navigate a world not built for our kinds of brains. In her 40s, she found a love for fitness and became a trainer and co-owner of a gym where she made a community space dedicated to trauma informed weightlifting. Her passion stemmed from empowerment—the idea that bodies come in all sorts of shapes and that to have a strong body helps give yourself a capable container for your life.

Her fitness journey led her to be more in tune with her body. So, when she noticed things starting to feel off, headaches and balance issues, she paid attention. Numerous times she advocated for herself to her doctor—something felt wrong and she wanted a deeper look. But her doctor brushed her off. It wasn't until a year after the onset of her symptoms that she was finally able to get the medical system to relent and provide her with imaging. One week after celebrating the news of her forthcoming book, her MRI scans came back: glioblastoma, the most aggressive form of brain tumor.

At first, we had hope. They were going to do surgery. She had been dedicated to a fitness regime that left her body strong and able to tackle more intense treatment. But surgery came and they were able to get most, but not all, of the tumor. She qualified for chemo and ground-breaking research that included a head contraption she called the "magic hat." But while she outlived her initial prognosis, her body slipped away: slowly at first, then all at once.

In her final months, I flew from Birmingham to go visit her and Eric at their home in Minnesota. The season was turning cold, and cold was her favorite. During my visit, Saara expressed her sadness at the thought that she wouldn't be able to see herself and Eric grow old together. She knew aging was a privilege—one I won't forget. A little under a year after her initial diagnosis, she was gone. Saara passed away on March 27, 2024 at the age of 48 just five days shy of the official launch of her book.

It is impossible to play the what-if game. What if her medical providers had listened to her a year earlier? What if the surgery had gotten everything? What if the Magic Hat really was magic? All I know is that the world is less vibrant without her in it. What you find in these following pages is a selection of some of Saara's still unpublished works carefully curated. She would have been so irritated to have something sent out into the world that wasn't ready for eyes. I got to see several of these works in their draft stages and am confident they are ready for your readership.

I want you to know Saara's work, not just because it is unique and fresh and weird, but because in reading her words—she lives on. You take parts of her with you. I have no doubt in the pages of this folio you'll find an image, a phrase, a sentence that sticks with you. Because that's what Saara was like in life—she was always the most interesting person in the room. If you would like to encounter more of Saara, consider purchasing her collection, *Chamber after Chamber*, through UMASS press. Additionally, her two chapbooks, *Milk, Tooth, Levee, Fever* (Dancing Girl Press, 2015) and *A Story of America Goes Walking* (in collaboration with artist Rebekah Wilkins-Pepiton, Shechem Press, 2016) remain available.

Enjoy and savor the time you spend with Saara and her work. Because of her words and those who read them, she persists.

—Halley Cotton

DANTE ATTENDS A BASEMENT SHOW

I should've guessed: in Hell, we swim in sweat.
Its body-surfing scent is armpit stink
and discontent. Camilla, lip-ringed reject

sits, chain-smokes the fire of Parliaments. Ink-
wet jeans cling to groins like bodies sin. Crust
punks chew mud, piss into the crowd. One slithers

through loose change, picking air guitar. He sucks.
This band is damned to offer sulking devils
eternities of covers. The closing act just

pomades their hair that way—the *haute coiffure*
of leather-jacket blasphemy. Like votives in church,
poseurs crawl up steps to balconies where

hoodie-haloed kids, blasé as thawing perch
fillets, take naps in rings of bistro chairs.
They never mosh or pump their fists. Hey, Virgil,

thank God you pushed me down those stairs.
Purgatory's boring. Heaven's full of squares.

**PRECAUTIONS NOT MENTIONED BY THE
NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE**

Lying in a bathtub fully clothed
renames it.

The Atlantic sheds
red rivulets of seaweed.
The wind grows dense
with lawn umbrellas and salt.

Having packed Chex mix
and Gatorade in case of apocalypse,
I become the mattress we drag
to the bathroom, stripped

of sleep's moody charms
by the whine of the storm.
A lid for jarred people,
I vacuum-seal chalk-ready

sidewalks and sock-folding,
but nothing happens.
Over hands of Canasta,
we argue about mortality.

My husband says it's like Arizona
—hill over plateau of clay,
cholla wealthy with chainfruit,
an empty bungalow, vacuumed

NELLE

for company and restless
as a thirsty dog who smells
flooding in Utah.
But I say it's the moment when

a hurricane-tub looks
down at itself and remembers
how it always meant to become
a fountain, not this womb.

**POEM FOR A HUSBAND AND OTHER
CRYPTOZOOLOGICAL BEASTS**

He asks if I ever saw
a Thesaurasaurus and I say
of course not—they died out
with the last Synonymous Tree
and, watching him chew salad,
I silently count every word
that can mean *incredible*.

ALCHEMY AT THE EMPIRE MINE

A miner knows how deep he's gone by soot:
how thick, how black. He'd trade his only boots
for overtime, takes only what he's paid to want:
raw hematite, the stretch that ends a yawn.
For lunch, a tear of bread, half-pack of smokes.
He chuckles toward his chest and sips on Coke,
not thinking much on what it means to dig.
He borrows prongs to sift the shards of slag,
and casts those mirrored rocks into the lake.
His truant children, fishing, will mistake
their side-cast hooks for hope lassoing stones
and, cranking slag in, assume a miracle
turned minnows into algaed gems. They'll yell
like hill cranes fleeing south and dredge the sand
—with glee their dad couldn't afford to rent
—for every treasure sinking in the silt.

ALF

I watch the shrinking fire of an exploded world
 on TV, dream the wheezing face of a planet
 where Melmacians bent gravity to avoid
 our telescopes. NASA wishes it knew half

of TV's dreams: the wheezing faces of planets,
 their starry orbits. Mom's rum blooms red as Mars
 through our telescope. NASA wishes it knew half
 of what's up in this living room: a pratfallen alien,

our sorry orbits, Mom's rum, blooms red as Mars.
 I read by the glow of ALF chasing Lucky the cat.
 What's up in this living room? A pratfallen alien
 charts wormholes to a sunnier fold of spacetime;

I read. By the glow of Dad chasing luck with Pabst, our cat
 paw-washes his ear like nothing's amiss. Denial
 charts wormholes to a sunnier fold of spacetime
 where Willie hides an alien in the kitchen,

white-washes the UFO like nothing's amiss, denies
 laser lights to Mrs. Ochmonek, dustpans evidence
 that Willie hides an alien in the kitchen.
 A Black Hole is ALF's favorite drink: spirits shaken

in laser lights to rock music. Dustpan of evidence,
 this house bends under its own gravity. To avoid
 black holes, we favor drink. Spirits shaken,
 I watch the shrinking fire of an exploded world.

**ENCYCLOPEDIA OF WHAT TO EXPECT FROM
UNEMPLOYMENT, CONCISE EDITION**

Craving. It will bite holes through your pockets. Everything will fall out, except a spyglass for staring through lit windows.

Desperation. When a ditch is your only river, the lightest rain will wake you. Heart tied up in streamer flies, you'll wait in the yard chair. Another crumpled Schlitz can might nip at your bait.

Endurance. Staggering from a bar, you will think your legs are pinwheels that spin forever home, but your knees will hit concrete: the whimper of an axe kissing stone.

Gnawing Suspicion that Every Decision You've Ever Made Was Wrong, The. It will be Tuesday again. Mid-morning. Your leaf pile will smolder but won't burn.

Homesickness. A stranger will steal your funnel cake.

Insomnia. In the purple hours, your brain will be a shovel uncovering a severed hand in a manicured garden.

Luck. Girdled in utility bills, you'll feel ugly. Ed McMahon will ring the doorbell, call your face a heads-up penny. He'll leave when he sees a mirror slipping from your hands.

Nervous Disorders. You'll stay awake all night lining books along a shelf: a book on canoes sunk in the Great Salt Lake goes after wishes that bind your limbs like drowning.

Nostalgia. You will toss a down comforter on your old nail bed.

What Your Husband Will Say To You While Cleaning Trout. Please keep still. You quiver like guts on a knife: glands twirl bucketward, spleen shimmies. Love, the samba can't make gills inhale dry air.

TUTORIAL FOR THE LOVELORN

1.

Inhale the spores of traffic cones
night-blossoming under floodlights,
of tar, of hard hats wiggling
like bees in the dark, heady for pollen,
or the path to and from it.

2.

Take the sweaty galloper of the subway.
Gum-studded, it unmask
commuters with the light of each passing hub:
an eyelash; a crown-bit lip;
the halted ankle procession, itchy to go.
At your stop, you trip:
a stranger's grocery basket,
a carpet of satsumas.

3.

Stoplights bottleneck the best of us.
Bumpers jolt against touch,
and car horns have the quickest teeth.
But you are a red bicycle, spoke-blinking.
You echolocate.
SUV fences have nothing on you.

4.

Note: Opposing climates warm the same geese.

5.

True, a barge-stuffed harbor will shudder
under oil drums and saffron casks.

Mizzenmasts dagger in, dagger out,
wrestle for breath, but that doesn't mean shipwreck.
It means kick your tired propeller.

Believe in stevedores who rope and heave
until your iron flanks weep, abuzz in the sun.

MARRIAGE

1.

Kaisa checks the gravel for antifreeze green
as henbane and razory sprays of bottle glass.
Her Husky's tail whispers the catchweed. For him,
she's usually a Secret Service agent, scanning
the ridge for privet berries, but today, the sky
is exhausted with blue. Her snuffling dog can't smell
the bear trap, but Kaisa hears it crack.
She crumples with him. She looks and looks,
finds nothing in his face but a desert of years,
the echo of empty bowls.

2.

I bask in dinner plates, in flatware chiming daily,
til death, on zucchini boats and linguine, in candlesticks
that soften toward each other. But *do-us-part*
tap-tap-taps its monkey paw—long-thumbed,
disembodied—on the back of my neck. I
throw it out for the third time this month, snap
at Eric about the stink glistening on the trash.
I watch him begrudge it down the path in rain, and
I'm sorry: that bag like a deboned corpse, his skin
albumen-sheer between lightning's fire-teeth.

3.

Fishhooks wound the pond near its last two
mergansers, late migrators, one with sleeping head
tucked in his black wing-blanket,
but the female—storm-shuttered to him
—is all pistol-quick eyes that say,

Try me, just try.

A HERO SAVES A DAMSEL

Years ago, Netta and Ig would sneak out-fence every night once Ig smelled sunset coming—Netta would follow with her crossbow while Ig, ahead in his muffle-clothes, sniffed for antlers. They'd dash to the old elm, which was at least six doe-leaps east, and climb in a frenzy of hushed giggles. They'd squeeze onto the bench in the narrow deer blind Brit had built before either of them were even born; and Ig would whisper scent drills to Netta while the eagle, who still had all her talons then, snatched bats from the purpling sky.

Now, Netta is sitting still and alone—but no, don't think of Ig—in the blind. She inhales through her uncovered nose, then exhales into the handkerchief tied over her mouth. She'll smell anything coming, but the handkerchief hides track of her breath.

They still call this *keeping watch*, which Brit says is left over from when people sensed most with their eyes. Once, Ig tried to call it *keeping smell*. Brit tucked the quilt tight under his chin and that made it sound like he was trying not to shit his pants. And then Netta said that was about accurate anyway, and though they all laughed—even Ig, sheepishly—Netta had felt guilty for saying it out loud. Or maybe the guilt is new now that Ig's gone, even though Brit says guilt smells like humans, and smelling human leaves you starving or eaten.

Netta shifts her boot to let her mom's Sig Sauer settle. The Sig, like Ig's Ruger and Brit's bullpup, is impractical for its noise and acrid smoke, only good for warning others when there's no chance for yourself. But the gun makes a good show for travelers, especially men who came up in the old world and still think of safety as power and power as detonation. Even

when Brit explains that a gunshot might save them from one antler but bring ten more, those men prefer to hunker deeper into what they know.

That kind refuse to believe a woman has it in her DNA to survive what makes a man literally lose bits of himself until he's nothing but a head muttering in the mud; the kind who sit rifle-straight on their bedrolls, monitoring Netta and Brit while other travelers sleep; who whisper to each other that wild feminists made the Chronic in a lab to rid the world of human males. These rumors sound crazy; problem being, they're so crazy that lesser rumors—forest women who kill travelers to steal and stockpile gold for when the old markets return—seem too plausible by comparison.

When the weather's clear enough for a signal, Brit listens to conspiracy streams with a mug of apple whiskey, chuckling at her imaginary piles of gold. "Yeah," she mutters, "Nothing I love more than soft, impractical metal."

Today, the blind is humid. A mosquito wanders across Netta's bowhand. The eagle looks in Netta's direction and, Netta feels, makes eye contact, as if she wants Netta to know she disapproves of her sitting in the safety of the treetop while Brit is exposed on the ground and Ig—well, Ig is wherever Ig is.

When Ig and Netta were kids—young enough to still share the same small bedroom—each would crawl into their own bunk, and Brit would sit on the knotty rag rug and tell them movies.

Movies were from the old world; people traded paper money to sit in padded chairs and watch stories in large, dark rooms full of strangers. Brit said she'd hire something called a babysitter almost every week and go to a movie. She'd hold her husband's hand—the most Brit ever said of a husband—while they drank sugar water and ate puffed corn, pretending the moving pictures made of light and sound were real, which made her husband's cool hand and the salted corn in her mouth feel all the more real.

Brit told Netta and Ig a dozen movies and retold the ones they asked to hear again and again. Brit's movies all ended the same: A hero saved a damsel. A villain fell.

Netta's forehead tickles with sweat. She dabs it with a muffle-scented handkerchief to keep the tang of her worry from the air.

To still her mind, Netta will often tell herself movies. Whatever's waiting in the forest—antlers drooling Chronic ooze but also Ig, also Netta's shame at sending him there—has nothing to do with whether the Pretty Woman manages to buy a dress from those boutique bitches, nothing to do with how beautiful the Pretty Woman looks eating dinner with Richardgear indoors at a machine-made table.

Netta shifts her weight as much as the bench will tolerate without creaking, squeezes the familiar soreness of her back muscles. She's noticed that in Brit's movies, women usually get themselves into danger and then go limp until it's time to be rescued. She once said as much to Ig, who agreed—but with an eager lilt in his voice that Netta found grating.

Before the Chronic, men died, but almost never from a deer attack; and they certainly never came back as mumbling, flesh-starved versions of themselves. Back then, if you felled a buck, he didn't rise back up to spear you with his antlers. Back then people would sit in blinds, not to avoid deer, but to shoot and eat them. Deer were easy kills if you could catch them standing still, but they could smell as easy as wildfire spreads. If they caught even a whiff of soap, they'd bolt, and you'd have to make do with something called hot dogs.

A branch shifts at the eastern edge of the clearing. With her right hand, Netta squeezes her binoc until the spot comes into focus but sees nothing, smells no new creatures. Brit should be back already. So far this morning, Netta has smelled a few rabbits (grass breath and pellet shit); plus a hawk (feather musk, mouse-blood breath); even a doe (mud-and-shit-laced hooves, dew-wet hide) who inched toward the clearing, nose lifted, then backed away.

No antlers, though, which makes Netta's hands itch. By now, she should have smelled at least one. The smell of antlers—black Chronic ooze, plus whatever's left of who they've eaten—tells her which direction to face. Now Netta finds herself remembering antler smell to clear her mind and settle her belly. Better than remembering how soft and safe she felt listening to Ig tell his own versions of Brit's movies in the flannel-scented darkness of their room.

She catches a whiff of mint and fat and lye. If Netta stood up, she could see the soap pile to the south; but even sitting, she finds its wintergreen-and-cream scent: hundreds of soap bars heaped and melted over years into a swirl of graying pinks and greens; plus whole bars where Brit scatters new ones to keep the track strong. She and Netta's mother made the soap pile to draw antlers away from the home fence and toward the humans they thought soap signified. Brit, ever strategically pessimistic, cut underbranches from a large cottonwood to create climbing lattices in case any woman was nearby when a full herd arrived; and Netta's mother, ever believing in whatever Brit found impossible, dug a pit three-foot deep for the antlers to fall into.

When Netta was small, she would nestle high in the cottonwood and watch her mother lure antlers into the pit and burn them on the spot, tidy as tea cakes (whatever those were). But this many generations of deer later, it seems bucks and the antlers they become have begun to learn that soap is more likely decoy than person.

Still, the rule remains: men steer clear of the soap pile without female protection. The only place men roam unescorted is inside the fence that rings Brit's property.

Netta loves sitting inside the fence—the fence that means she can relax her watch, that keeps the house and garden and shed and all three of them safe but also makes—made—Ig furious. Netta can't remember the house she lived in with her parents before the city wall fell, but she was old enough to sense

the structure of this fence as it was being built, her mother's reluctant resignation rubbing up against Brit's eager resolve over it. Netta remembers clearly Ig's angry bewilderment when Brit told him not to leave the fence without a woman. Netta and Ig still snuck out to the blind for a time after that. After Netta's mother died, though, Netta refused to go with Ig; and Ig, whether for fear or loyalty, stayed in-fence too. From then on, Ig fixated on the fence—testing the steel of the girders, replacing split slats, mixing muffle for its scent capsules. He'd spend hours breathing deep and staring at the light-dappled surface of the fence as if it was a window to everything happening in the forest.

Netta touches the Sig, finger-counts the arrows in her quiver, and tries to picture Pretty Woman strutting down Rodeo Drive Baby in a new dress and wide-brimmed hat, but the movie won't stick. Richardgear's smile melts into a rotting version of the pained expression on Ig's face the last time Netta saw him whole.

Netta notices a muted waft of sandalwood. She clicks the binoc into focus.

Brit emerges at the northeast end of the clearing. Netta exhales relief even as she feels her heart quiver.

Two men stumble after Brit—the balding one is pink-faced, the other has all but his chin shaded by a brimmed cap. The pinkish man is elder—more years even than Brit—and wears an old-timey, button-down shirt under a ragged suit jacket. This is the kind of clothing Brit says Richardgear wore in the movies—the kind men all wore—with a deep V to show the sheen of the tapered, knotted cloth that hung from their necks; and deep pockets to hold pens and thick folds of paper money, which was the old-world version of the gold his type think Netta and Brit and forest women like them will kill him for.

The suited man surveys the clearing with an appraising squint. The younger man—Netta decides to call him the Hat—tilts his head to look at the sky, and Netta sees that he

is younger than her. Ig's age, maybe: done growing but still slender, like a new pine. Strips of sweaty hair run palely down the Hat's cheeks. Brit is squinting in Netta's direction, waiting.

Netta holds her palm up—all clear—and Brit, nodding once with her chin, steps into the clearing.

Netta nocks an arrow. Antlers are trigger-quick. No scent doesn't prove none nearby.

Trotting ahead of the Hat and the Suit, Brit sweeps the bullpup at her shoulder left, right. Brit and the Hat cross swiftly despite their bulging packs; the Suit lumbers behind. Netta can see a dusky stain of muffle scent—moss mud, wood ash, pulped leaves and grass, plus a touch of whatever stink Brit finds handy (a smear of rot-dead squirrel, maybe bear scat)—darkening everyone's backs, necks and armpits. It takes time for city people to get used to the smell; Brit no doubt had to get stern for them to go along with it.

Ig took to scent early and was always better at it than Netta. Even as her sense of smell got stronger with each antler bite, Ig remained better at the nuance of it. Ig mixed his own muffle, experimenting with ingredients, aging techniques, and application methods. He begged Netta to wear his muffle on the walk and watch and asked her detailed questions when she returned, scribbling notes with a pencil nib in an ancient, pink diary he scavenged from Brit's trunk. Netta seldom managed to hide her annoyance at his questions. It was enough to spend days chopping antlers into bits and burning their heads to save clumsy men one end of the forest to the other—she didn't want to come home and linger in it.

When Brit and the men cross the clearing's three-quarter mark, Netta stows her arrow, shoulders her bow, and slides down the exit rope. She lands carefully, toes-first and silent on the grass. She inhales—and smells an antler's rot-hot, wet breath. She whirls, machete out.

Brit has told her about slow-motion movie shots, when the camera slows and what should take but a second expands across the screen in lithe detail. That's how Netta sees the

antler now: The deer he was is still apparent in his silhouette, but the smell of him, the blackened edges of his torn hide, reveal a new creature: Strips of flesh and tendon swing like lazy ribbons from his rack. He has one nostril left, and it flares. His teeth, blunt and yellow, sneer where his upper lip used to be. He lurches forward, snapping. Netta stabs her machete as he thrashes his head. His pupils lock on her, roll back, lock again. The antler's eye-whites are embroidered with blood, but his oblong pupils are huge and black.

When Netta and Ig were young and she woke from nightmares too shaken to go back to sleep, Ig would tie a cord around his neck in something called a half-windsor and act out his own version of *Pretty Woman* in the gray light of their bedroom. Netta watched him sign imaginary papers with his short pencil and then, with a magnanimous sweep of his arm, offer *Pretty Woman* (a birch branch Ig draped fashionably in a curtain) a new dress. In her slumbery stupor, Netta almost forgot the forest was full of gurgling antlers and muttering, infected men. Ig's voice was a crackling whisper as he grabbed birch-branch *Pretty Woman* around the waist. His eye in the dark had been mostly pupil. When Ig ran away from Netta into the forest last week, it was the same.

But now, she must stop thinking of Ig because she's beneath the blind's maple with Brit, and no matter how her stomach flips at how Brit refuses to meet her eye, it's Netta's job to convey these two men safely to the big lake.

The antler, pinned by his neck to the maple, wheezes and gnaws what's left of his lower lip. Netta's machete is dark with tar-thick Chronic ooze. The Hat is on his knees, hand clamped over his wrist, blood bubbling between his fingers. Netta looks him in the eye and sets her face in a smile light as mercy.

Richardgear worked with his evil lawyer to buy other men's businesses, chop them apart, and sell them to still more men's businesses. But the *Pretty Woman* was a business of one. When the lawyer tried to break her into pieces, Richardgear became a hero by firing him before he could cut her into pieces. Netta

imagined the hole in lawyer's neck and his blood seeping tarry, thick, and slow.

The blood between the Hat's fingers now is pouring out its red scent, fast and hot. The Hat looks confused. "It couldn't've bit me. We paid for protection." It's not a question, but he sounds like he's asking.

Netta's grateful she won't have time to answer. From behind, Brit grips the Hat, chin in one palm and temple in the other, and snaps his neck. She tilts her head toward Netta, which means she wants Netta to see to the Suit. Travelers never react well when Brit takes an infected man out. One or two travelers go crazy with gold-lust or paranoia—sometimes both—every season, threaten Netta with a stolen knife or foraged arrow. Brit has a scar under her ear from a decade back when one tried to slit her throat while she was taking a shit.

The Suit, hands on his knees, reeks of fear-sweat. If he vomits, he'll attract every antler in the forest before they lift their packs. Netta hands him her canteen. "Just one swallow." She whispers it: No voices outside the fence. She rubs his shoulder—"You're fine, man"—and feels the wet heat of his thin cotton shirt.

So that's what attracted the antler. The Suit got winded and hot carrying nothing, peeled off his jacket—and with it, Brit's muffle scent. Netta yanks the jacket from his fist. She drapes it across his shoulders.

A week ago—could it be only a week?—Netta returned from the watch. She'd sustained four bites killing two antlers. It was daybreak by the time she got in-fence. She dropped her bow and quiver in the dirt and sat down in the garden with a squirrel she'd found in her snare trap. While Netta pierced the dead squirrel at his groin with her knife-tip, Ig emerged from his shed. He'd mounted an antler rack to a hat that strapped under his chin—a 10-pointer marbled with Chronic ooze and dirt. He scraped the tines against the columns of the fence—a better layer of muffle, he'd said. Netta would have to do the outside, he'd said. Only once a month or so, he'd said. And

she'd told him she'd cut him like the squirrel if he tried to make her put on that stupid hat, and though she knew she should regret it, the Chronic was new in her blood—it had to be the Chronic—so the words felt right.

Ig kept at her, voice rising, and she grabbed a spent shell casing from the ground and lobbed it at the rack. It was a casual throw, something she'd done in a teasing, almost friendly way a thousand times. But the shell missed, ricocheted off the fence, sped up and hit Ig square in the eye.

He didn't yell. He covered the eye with the flat of his palm, stared at her with his other eye for a long, lip-twitching breath. And then he ran—through the gate, still in his antler hat, pausing only to call her a name Brit would have clocked him for but Netta now feels certain she deserved. Netta took a second to get up—it couldn't have been more than that, could it?—but she did chase after him. She did.

Ig was gone by the time she got out-fence. She left the gate swinging and hadn't realized she had no weapon but the Sig in her boot until she saw an antler not four doe-leaps up the trail. Rather than summon every antler in the forest, she'd turned her back even as the antler trained his rack in the direction Ig must have run. By the time she returned with her bow, he was gone. She found Ig an hour later near the soap pile, high in the cottonwood tree. The bite on his leg was already purpling.

The antler Netta's pinned to the tree is shrieking, thundering his hooves futilely against the ground. Brit shoots an arrow through his red eye into his brain, and his legs go still. His gnashing slows but doesn't stop. She ties a strip of cloth tight around his snout for good measure. The Suit is still doubled over, but at least he's breathing through his nose.

Netta inhales deep. It's been three full days since she cut Ig's ropes while Brit was in back sharpening her machete, and yet the world still smells of ooze and mud and sweat with a trace of soap; the eagle is still in her elm. When Netta glances up at her, she flies away.

The movies Brit tells are all self-contained worlds, each

with its own rules: No kissing on the mouth. Don't fall asleep. Don't cross the streams. Don't feed them after midnight. The rules are clear. The hero breaks them.

Brit has rules of her own: Don't wash with soap. Don't go out-fence in clothes that are too clean or too dirty. Don't mix anything an antler might hunger for in your muffle. Brit says rules are the reason she survived when all but a few cities crumpled.

It isn't until Netta feels the strip of soft cotton Brit wraps around her arm that she realizes The Hat wasn't the only one bitten. Netta winces as Brit tightens a knot right over the wound. When Brit pulls a can from her pack and scoops muffle across the bandage, she doesn't check Netta's expression for pain as she usually would. She hasn't forgiven Netta yet. Netta doesn't want her to.

Netta tries to not remember the days after Ig got bitten—still, the memories come like slow motion: Roast rabbit and stewed apples sprinkled with the last of Brit's cinnamon; Ig's face purpling. Netta hadn't been able to bring herself to speak, even to say she was sorry. Ig, like all infected men, started forgetting words within the day—soon after, nothing but a few of his most-spoken phrases were left. When Netta brought him a bowl of apple mush, Ig mumbled “Look, Brit – Look, Brit – Look, Brit” and hand-scooped the sticky mess into his mouth. At least Ig still smelled like the constructed world, so Netta sat close to him and kept the Sig in pieces, cleaning it more thoroughly than even her mother had. She tilted her head toward Ig but didn't touch him. She inhaled.

Brit, for her part, mostly shrunk from them. When she did come close, she touched Ig more than she had since he and Netta were kids, ruffled his hair or touched his shoulder when she walked by—then drew her hand away as from a fire. She kept his leg clean and salved, ignoring his repetitive cursing as she wrapped and rewrapped his leg as if it had a chance of healing.

Brit hasn't said more than three words to Netta since. Now,

she only stares for a beat into Netta's eyes, brows raised, which means they have to hurry now because more antlers will come leaping for this smelly townie.

Brit swings her machete through the antler's neck below Netta's blade. His body drops free, and when Netta retrieves her machete, his head falls. She cleans her blade on the grass and sheathes it. The antler works his mouth against the tape, pokes a moon-silver of tongue between rotting teeth but manages only a muted growl. Brit loops a cord around the antler's rack and holds it toward Netta, but Netta instead drops to her knees beside the Hat—or the lump of silent meat that used to be the Hat. She ties a muffle cloth over his hands and another around his face, then hoists his body across her shoulders and stands up. He's heavy.

Netta, taking the rear flank, studies the back of the Suit's pink head. Her limbs, alight with the antler's Chronic, twitch: she could unsheathe her machete and slice the Suit to his spinal cord without so much as upsetting the Hat from her shoulders. But Netta's been bitten enough that with a single bite's-worth of Chronic fresh in her blood, she'll take more than her share at supper, sure, and if Ig were there to tease, her teasing would twist a bit mean, but she has a trick to hold the full-on frenzy still: She imagines herself as the Pretty Woman near the end of the movie, after Richardgear offered her apartments, dresses, pancakes with butter and fruit. The Pretty Woman ached to say yes. Who wouldn't? (If Netta closes her eyes and holds very still, she thinks she can remember the taste of pineapple.) Brit said that Pretty Woman's hair was the color of maple leaves before they fall to winter, that she wore shiny boots that went over her knees. Netta's pictures the Pretty Woman swinging a pack full of carefully wrapped pineapples and machine-stitched dresses over her shoulder and walking weaponless in the open air toward whatever the hell she wants.

Netta feels the rage in her limbs soften some. She focuses on the wind. She skips over Brit's scent—trail muffle hiding doe jerky and the sandalwood soap Brit refuses to give up—to

concentrate on the Suit: sweat and morels and something high-pitched and bitter. If Ig were there, he'd know what. But it's just Netta and Brit, which feels, now, like being alone. The Hat's dead hands bounce against Netta's butt. She inhales again. The Suit has bread in his pocket; he's pissed himself.

Netta has always been best at catching smells that can scent her position to an antler: shoe rubber, sawdust, soap. Anything blade-cut or cooked. Ig, inside the fence, is best at anything that gives track of antlers approaching—rotting muscle; thickened blood; exposed bone. But in truth Ig can identify just about anything, even scents from before: toothpaste, deodorant, coins. Glue and machined sugar and something called vinyl—a leather that melts in fire, what *Pretty Woman's* boots were made of. Ig can even smell things a human shouldn't, like the difference between fear and yearning so old it hurts. At least that's what he says. Ig is also good at making bullshit sound real. Or he used to be.

The Suit inhales, Netta can tell, just for the air of it. Brit inhales too, and Netta sees by her frown that she's also noticed the Suit's bread-and-piss-and-fear scent bellowing their location to anything sniffing. Brit stops the Suit with a raised hand and motions for Netta to go on without them. She'll probably make the Suit eat the bread and slap mud over the wet of his pants.

The soap pile, and the burn pit next to it, sits ten doe-leaps north-northeast. When Netta arrives, three vultures are kettling overhead. Netta's shoulders relax at the sight of them teetering up the thermal winds, their beaks clever enough to discern from a great height which of the dead are likely to rise back up biting. They favor the soap pile, full as it is of the dead that are dead enough to be eaten.

Squatting as low as she can, Netta releases the Hat's body into the burn pit, which is laced with carbon-black ash and fallen leaves. The burst corpse of a fox lolls on its side, one eye gone, the other trailing out on a tangle of nerve and muscle.

When Brit arrives, they'll add the antler head and set fire to all three bodies, then walk The Suit the fifty-odd miles to the boatwoman who'll ferry him across Superior. With a good wind and no bandits, he'll be inside Toronto in two days. As usual, Netta wonders briefly what it's like to live inside thick walls with no antlers, where men walk unescorted, where even cows are protected from infection—but Brit says there's no use wondering when they couldn't afford a pass to enter—much less to live inside—unless they actually did kill travelers for their nonexistent gold.

Netta shuts her eyes and inhales, searching for what's keeping three vultures from a true-dead fox. She tracks the fox's blood and bile first, and beyond it she finds the same cedar and yellow birch. Then doe droppings and something made but use-worn: shoe rubber. And then her eyes snap open: Chronic ooze. She reaches for the Sig in her boot—stupid, but the Chronic will leave you stupid—and finds it missing. She pulls her bow. Trying to nock an arrow, her hands threaten tremble, so she does as Brit taught her: a breath for a fear and then one step forward. Inhale: An antler, rack dripping with blood and torn flesh. Exhale and nock. Inhale: Her father, oozing and purpled, repeating *Hey beautiful—Hey beautiful—Hey beautiful* as he snatched their dog by the rough. Exhale and rise, slowly, back against a house-thick maple. Inhale: Her mother, dish soap dripping down her hair as she runs toward three antlers, yelling, *Netta, climb!* Exhale and draw the bowstring back. Inhale: Ig when she last saw him, cut ropes falling from his wrists, cheek torn and flapping near his nose, one eye sunk into his skull.

Netta smells a musky, wood-split scent. She knows she shouldn't lean on anything unreliable as hearing; still, she listens around her own, speedy heart, and catches a short, lung-wet wheeze followed by a jangling scrape. It's coming from the other side of the maple. Wheeze/scrape. Wheeze/scrape. Closer.

Netta rounds the maple in one swift motion, bow up.

It's Ig.

Or an Ig-shaped thing, its arm twisted in a string of cans that long-ago Ig wound around the maple both to entangle and to warn of approaching antlers. The Ig-thing is facing Netta. His jaw splays to the side in what could be a lopsided grin. Netta shuffles toward him until she could touch the space where his nose used to be with the tip of her arrow. She feels the bowstring brush her lip.

The Ig-thing is whispering. They all keep talking after they change, keep talking right up until the fire crumbles them into ash: phrases they used most when they were still men. The whisper is a surprise, though, Brit's rules so rutted into Ig's brain that even this Ig-thing can't speak with his full voice outfence. Netta remembers that last thing Ig said to her before he ran off, and she's glad she can't make out what the Ig-thing is saying now.

Ig-thing swipes his free hand toward her breasts, but she hollows back. The wire holds him. He yanks against it. Something in his shoulder snaps. His face registers no pain. But the eye he has left is still Ig's: the green-brown of a duckweed-burdened pond.

Under the ooze, he still smells like dried apples and sawdust and flannel.

"Igs." It isn't even a whisper. Calling the Ig-thing by Ig's name feels off, like trying to aim an arrow in a nightmare.

Netta dreamed once that the damsel Pretty Woman wanted to buy a crossbow from the Rodeo Drive Baby bitches, but when she tried to pay with Richardgear's credit card, her hands turned into machetes. Everything she touched, she chopped in two. She tried to caress Richardgear's heroic jaw but instead sawed him into two children with knives for hands. When they tried to hug Pretty Woman, they sliced through her flimsy dress, her flimsy skin. Netta had woken grateful to return to the real world what to kill and what to keep was always clear.

The Ig-thing continues to whisper. Netta lets the bowstring go slack but keeps her bow raised, holding the arrow in place

with her bow hand. She uses her free hand to pull her machete and leans toward him, afraid of what she'll hear when she gets close enough to understand his whispers. Netta cuts the mangled arm from The Ig-thing's body. He lurches toward, then away from Netta's bow. She lets the bow drop to her side. No blood in the Ig-Thing's wound, only a trail of black ooze that creeps down his torso. The Ig-Thing inhales wetly, takes a step toward the arm dangling from the can trap.

Netta inhales slow. She smells ooze like rotting fruit and burnt tar. She closes her eyes, lifts her head and inhales again: Ig's apples and wood-dust and flannel mixed with vegetation and antler ooze. Plus soap: lye and tallow in mint and lavender; acrid, antique chemicals. She tilts her nose a quarter-inch higher and finds bark, live leaves—and clouds growing heavy with snow. Netta stands very still, chin up, neck stretched and exposed.

The Ig-thing crushes scrub-bush and ferns with its rickety step. The Chronic-ooze Ig scent moves closer. The Chronic won't kill Netta, but nothing alive can survive an artery bite. She can hear the Ig-thing's ragged breath. "Good shot, Net—Good shot, Net" Ig whispers. Netta barely lets her lungs expand on the inhale; she centers on the apples-and-cloth Ig scent. She waits to feel the Ig-thing's teeth on her skin.

Ground leaves crackle. A dry twig splints. Netta stiffens her legs against their instinct to break for the safety of a treetop; she takes a longer breath in. The Ig scent, and the Ig-thing scent too, is fainter. She opens her eyes. Ferns close around the Ig-thing as he shambles away.

Netta could probably explain, if she let herself think about Ig's last day as himself, why she took him outside when she was supposed to stay locked in the shed with him. Brit was off sharpening her machete, gathering herself for the goodbye, and Netta was tasked with riling the monster in Ig enough that it would be as much as possible like killing any Chronic-addled antler.

Every night since, when Netta closes her eyes, she sees her

own hands repeating what they did then: opening the fence gate, spearing an arrow through a bloody rabbit carcass. Even when she dreams of it, Netta focuses only on her hands, her blood-darkened nailbeds, the antler tooth-shaped scabs on her knuckles—anything to avoid seeing how the Ig-thing didn't even look at her before lumbering after that rabbit flying like a ragged bird into the forest.

Here at the burn pit, the smell of death-ash is getting stronger as the day heats. Still, Netta catches a new, muffled whiff of sandalwood followed by mud, piss and mildewing wool.

Brit and the Suit step into the clearing. The Suit is carrying the antler head, which still growls through its bound teeth.

Brit closes the space between her and Netta in two long strides, one hand flared toward the Ig-thing's abandoned arm still twitching against the maple trunk. Brit's whisper quivers in the wind: "You let him run again." It isn't a question. Her mouth is no more than a pistol-length from Netta's face.

The Suit, at the edge of the burn pit, drops the antler head next to the Hat and the fox. He wrinkles his nose at the smell of them.

Brit has her flint poised to spark when Netta realizes the Suit is tapping her mother's Sig against his thigh. He shakes his head like he's trying to get water out of his ear but speaks with a casual lilt. Netta hates it when the crazy ones get calm.

"He was a good kid," The Suit says and lifts the Sig to Brit's temple. "You're not going to burn him." His index finger is shaking on the trigger. Brit lifts both hands toward her ears, still holding her flint and tinder.

The Suit juts his chin toward Netta and says "The bow if you please, young lady."

Netta bends at the hip, eyes locked on Brit, and lets her bow drop into the burn pit. She couldn't draw fast enough against the Sig anyway. The main thing is to keep the Suit from firing. Netta could climb fast enough to escape the swarm of antlers a gunshot would bring, but Brit would likely get shot or

bit—not that she'd admit it. Netta takes two steps back. Brit's face is calm, but sweat glistens her upper lip.

"He'll wake up any second," Netta whispers, gesturing at the faceless Hat, "and we'll have to take him out again."

The Suit doesn't look at her, and his voice is quiet: "Murder him again, you mean." He coughs a little laugh. "Double homicide."

He kicks a mound of dirt. "You killed my boy. You owe me." His stance is loose, but the knuckles gripping the Sig are white. "I know about the gold," he says, "so dig."

Netta squints a question at Brit—to the Suit, she hopes, it looks like she's trying not to cry. Brit smiles her customer service smile. "Go ahead, Net. Dig it up." Kneeling, Netta plunges her fingers into dirt that covers nothing but burnt rabbit bones, maybe some old soap slivers. She hopes this particular spot hasn't been a latrine.

The Suit grabs Brit by the chin and pushes the Sig's muzzle into her cheek. He doesn't look angry. His eyelids are relaxed, and he's smirking.

In another of Netta's dreams, after Richardgear cut the lawyer out of his business, the damsel Pretty Woman threw her crossbow at Richardgear's head. She threw her arrows, threatened him with fire on a stick. Leave me alone, she said. But Richardgear had a duty to save the damsel, so he kept saving her and saving her. Even when she begged him to stop he saved her because that's how movies were supposed to end.

Netta pulls handful after handful of dirt and dead leaves and bone fragments from the ground. She checks the Suit from the corner of her eye. At some point, he'll loosen his grip. They most always do.

The quicks of her fingernails ache from being pierced by seeds and sticks. She sits back into her heels and risks a full-on look at the Suit. He's still holding Brit by the chin when Netta smells a new, familiar smell.

What happens next, Netta feels she's watching from outside of her body, like a movie. She hears a growl.

Tearing.

In slow motion, Brit bites the Suit's gun hand, and the Sig spins a leisurely, tight circle through the air until it thunks into a tumble of soap. The Suit's eyes bulge, his mouth yelps. Brit falls to the ground between Netta and the Suit; Netta's own hand grabs the Sig. Why doesn't the Suit dive for the pistol? Why won't he stop caterwauling? Why can she hear the Ig-thing's voice, louder now—"Good shot, Net – Good shot, Net, – Good Shot, Net."—so clear it's like he's standing in the clearing with them. Netta watches herself aim the Sig at the Suit's head. Then she sees what's got the Suit screaming.

Ig.

Netta closes her eyes.

She forces herself to think only of one winter when she and Ig were barely teenagers when it had been so cold the antlers froze where they stood, which allowed Netta and Brit and even Ig to walk freely, beheading each one like trees that shrieked against the ax. Netta remembers Ig in the snow, leaps and leaps away but still safe. He looked, she thought, like a strong little bird: body taut and eyes alert, taking long breaths of cold sky.

Netta opens her eyes. The Ig-thing has latched itself onto the Suit's back, clamped its remaining arm around the Suit's chest, wrapped both legs around the Suit's waist. One fleshless kneecap glows through torn trousers. The Ig-thing is gnawing on the Suit's neck. Blood spurts around its head, puddles in the grass. The Suit has seconds.

Netta checks the Sig chamber: bullet. She looks to Brit. A pale line of dried tears stripes each of her cheeks. Brit moves only her eyes to look at the Ig-thing, then to the gun, then to the cottonwood swaying it's high, safe branches just seconds to the left. Brit nods the smallest nod. She thinks they'll be able to make it. She thinks Ig is worth the risk of the gun.

Netta grabs Brit's hand, and Brit squeezes back. The Suit crumples at the knees, eyes open and motionless. Netta lifts the Sig shoulder-high and centers it on Ig's face. She leans into Brit's grip and crouches, gun arm steady. She can hold this

position until Ig finishes the Suit and looks up. She ignores all other scents and inhales only apples and flannel and sawdust. She waits for Ig to smell her.

A Box of Rocks

All lunch hour, Maddie S. has been sitting in the back parking lot, feet dangling into the crater. She has been staring through her blackest-black sunglasses at the sun, which is embedded in the middle of the sky like a boulder lit and left to burn.

Maddie S. removes her sunglasses and looks past her boots into the crater: it's twice as big as a car and at least as deep, a pocket of air topping chunks of broken asphalt and dirt that's been tamped flat. Wilting memorial wreaths lace the crater's jagged edges.

Al, reclining on a tilting slab of blacktop in his father's huge, paint-spattered Anthrax t-shirt, shoves the last corner of a turkey sandwich into his mouth. He was talking about something—music again, probably?—but now he's stopped. Maddie S. thinks she feels his eyes on her. Floppy-haired, chuckling Al. He's always watching her, right? His focus is like a scratchy blanket or the buzz of an old refrigerator—not the best, but it always fades into the background eventually.

Maddie S. turns further away from Al to look at the back wall of the school. The fire exit door, which leads into reference section of the library, is propped open, but the alarm hasn't gone off. Maddie S. and Al disabled it long ago with Band-Aids. They're a neon pink that jolts against the institutional taupe of the school library but has somehow never been noticed by the janitor. During lunch hours, Maddie S. and Al keep the fire door propped open with whatever's around: hunks of concrete, encyclopedias—today, a flattened pop can.

Maddie S. doesn't look at Al as she folds her sunglasses into her pocket, stands, and clomps back to the fire exit—doesn't so much as lean in Al's direction, lest he try to walk with her. She

needs to be alone when she leaves the rock for Maddie K.

Slipping through the fire exit door, Maddie S. walks quietly through the reference section, the biographies, and the historical fiction stacks to the circulation desk. She will place the rock behind the code scanner. This way, the first time Maddie K. moves to scan a book the rock is the first thing she'll see; and surely, Maddie K. will immediately understand Maddie S.'s rock message. She'll comprehend it faster even than a barcode can register. Maddie K. will then pocket the rock, smiling a smile subtle enough that the student checking out the book, staring right at her, won't notice that the world has shifted.

"Mads. Mads! Where'd you go?" Al is whisper-yelling.

Maddie S. hears a muted can-clatter before the door clicks locked behind him. Across the library, Maddie S. sees and then ignores her mother walking breezily with her arms full of folders. Maddie S. ignores the toothy smile her mother shoots at the librarians and other teachers. Most of all Maddie S. ignores her mother's eyes, the way they shine like polished pebbles.

Maddie S. drops the rock beside the code scanner. She pulls a pink feather-topped pencil from the pen cup and tosses it to Al as he emerges from the historical fiction.

"Getting you a present," she says. Al shrugs and pockets the pencil.

She's told him about the rocks. She has not told him she's giving them to Maddie K.

Maddie S. thinks about Maddie K a lot. Not about her high boobs or new Jeep or straight-backed, sharp-eyed mother. Not about the magazine spreads or news spots about her, or the banner with her name in glitter that the pep squad made when she finally came back to school.

No, Maddie S. thinks about who Maddie K. was before the meteorite, and who she is now. About how, sure, Maddie K. might lie awake at night wondering why she, of all people, survived; and, yes, Maddie K. probably can't go outside without

hearing a whistle and sonic boom in her head; and of course no one would wish for a teenaged girl to need to go to a real therapist, not just a school counselor, to have to go through months of breathing and medications and practice runs just to get up the courage to get into a car again—but even with all that suck in her life, at least Maddie K. has the solid, documented fact of the meteorite. Everyone saw it, or saw a picture of it, or heard the story or saw a stream about it. Everyone knew what happened with the meteorite. Everyone knew to treat Maddie K. differently after.

*

The school counselor has been calling Maddie S. to her office every week since early October. The school counselor tells Maddie S. that teachers say she's different: unfocused, maybe even angry. They say her grades have dropped, her attitude has shifted toward meanness.

Maddie S. lies that she isn't angry. She lies that's just how her face looks. Or she lies the reasons: college applications; the stuck-up bitches in gym class; the last, skinny polar bear on the last, shrinking ice shoal. The school counselor tilts her head, writes on a yellow pad.

Maddie S. does not tell the counselor that she hasn't slept in her own bed since September. She does not tell the counselor that Maddie S. has been sleeping on the couch downstairs where she can see her parents' bedroom door (closed) and the guest room door (closed) and the bathroom door (open). She does not say that sleeping on the couch means reclining, wakeful, as she watches classic crime shows through the cracked screen of her father's tablet. She does not tell the school counselor that while watching classic crime shows on her father's tablet, she is alert to which doors are closed (parents' bedroom, the guest room where her mother has been sleeping since last August) or open (bathroom, thank god) throughout the darkened house. She definitely does not tell the school counselor that sometimes she reclines in the bathtub fully clothed, marveling at the smooth, unreadable hollow of it.

She does say to the school counselor that she sometimes lets herself think of the chip in the bathtub's porcelain finish that appeared last summer as foreshadowing. When the counselor asks her to elaborate, Maddie S. changes the subject to the meteorite.

Maddie S. loves talking about the meteorite. Or meteorites in general. Maddie S.'s father's roommate from college went down under one of the first while walking home from a basketball game. Maddie S. never met him, but she's seen one picture from the '00s. She imagines the roommate in his sporty short-shorts and a striped headband, twirling a basketball on his finger, sunshine dappling his hair the way sunshine does when it wants to trick you into thinking nothing is about to go horribly wrong. Then, quick as darkness from a light switch, the roommate is irretrievable: Replaced by a giant rock inside a deep hole.

It's a more and more common occurrence. There used to be international meteorite coverage, special bulletins about hunks of iron or glass obliterating half a school bus, a barn with three brothers inside, an entire driver's ed car. But now there's less interest. Stories that used to get mined for a month or more barely last a full week now—unless there's a survivor.

Maddie S. spends lunch periods sitting on the crater's edge with Al, eyes hidden behind sunglasses, memorizing the edges of the meteorite by memorizing the edges of the crater: cause verified by effect. A lot of kids used to squeeze out the fire door at lunch to talk to Al—Al, unlike Maddie S., gets along with everyone—but since the meteorite, Maddie S. and Al are the only ones. It's been seven months. The banners (*We Love You Forever, Mr. F. / Never Forget / We Miss You, Jake and Brian*) have wrinkled and faded to pastels. Teddy bears, strung to rubbles of asphalt, droop their heads onto dirt-stippled bellies.

Maddie S. and Al have talked about how the bears make no fucking sense. Jake and Brian, the other driver's ed kids, weren't the assholes of the school or anything, but they for sure would have ripped the heads off of those bears and turned

them into bong. Al says that Mr. Fahrenkrug, the instructor, was probably more whiskey-and-porn than stuffed animals—maybe Jesus statues, if you asked his Sunday friends.

Al and Maddie S. have been friends since she let him copy her tests in seventh grade Atmospheric Mineralogy. Al drags her to the DineRite and grill-outs at Red Arrow Beach so that, he says, she doesn't turn into a total shut-in. When one of the jock girls asked what the fuck happened with Maddie S.'s family anyway, Al dropped a lit match into the homeroom wastebasket and snickered while the girl shrieked and the back-of-the-room kids whooped, applauding. The room smelled like burnt banana peels and melted plastic for three days. Maddie S. wanted to hug the shit out of Al. Instead, she slid a piece of gum under his tablet case. She thinks he loves her and hopes that he never says it out loud.

After the meteorite, everyone pitched in. The contracting company where Al's dad works cancelled all their jobs to fix the eight-block radius of shattered windows. The asphalt plant sealed the crack in the I-75 onramp for free. The town took up a collection to pay a tree surgeon to examine the Liberty Park Oak—which now looks, with its roots crushed into a heap of soil on one side and exposed palely on the other, frozen in the act of launching itself away. The tree surgeon inspected the roots and took soil samples and measured and splinted what she could—but ultimately declared the tree unsaveable.

Moving the meteorite, though, was a more expensive proposition. Pocked, half-rounded, and flinty as the clawed foot of a bathtub, it was one of the largest recorded landings in America. They estimated it was at least 11 tons. Two universities wanted to study it, but Al's mom said that no one should stand out in the weather while they waited for funding. Lawyers who said they represented a private interest arrived a month later and contracted a salvage company from the city to cart it away. People still speculate—it was a rock star who bought it, they say, or a movie producer. The CEO of Taco Bell. The DoD. Whoever, they took it at night and cleared out

everything underneath. The crater remains, though: a perfect, evidentiary negative image.

Having positioned the rock where Maddie K. will find it, Maddie S. puts her books down on a table removed from the circulation desk. She can see the top edge of the code scanner, upright as a commanded dog. Al kicks her chair. "Hurry much? You almost locked me out."

She nudges him in the leg with the side of her boot—"Slow much?"—and opens her Intermediate Meteoritics book. She points her face toward a random page while corner-eyeing Maddie K., who has sat down behind the library desk.

Maddie S. sees Maddie K. rubs her forehead. Maddie K.'s fingernails are bitten down. There's a green ribbon tied where her bangs begin; her dark hair is shiny and sleek, as if she isn't yet the driver's ed girl in the newspaper. The picture that they reprint most shows Maddie K., bangs sticking straight up, dirt smudging her cheek. She is saucer-eyed and gape-mouthed. She points at the meteorite—or just the edge of it, which is all that's visible. In the picture, Maddie K. looks like she's about to run backwards out of the frame, but a uniformed arm is reaching into the picture, holding her by one elbow. An EMT took the photo. He went on talk shows afterward, a consolation guest after Maddie K. refused. He hadn't seen any of the big stuff happen, but the hosts asked him to speculate, and he did.

"You ignoring my question or what?" Al is staring at her again.

Maddie S. doesn't remember Al asking a question. She runs through the questions he probably asked her—did she listen to the album he airdropped her, is she going to DineRite later, does she think Mrs. Fahrenkrug will be pissed if he hands in his homework late. Maddie S. smiles apologetically at Al, who is rolling his eyes that she wasn't listening again. Maddie S. sneaks a glance at Maddie K., who is playing a game on her phone.

Maddie K. plays a game on her phone. Sunlight falls through venetian blinds and crosses Maddie K.'s body like

glowing prison-uniform stripes. Maddie S. is desperate for Maddie K. to look at the barcode scanner. Maddie S. has been watching for months: People come to check out books more often when Maddie K. is working. When they do, Maddie K. stiffens, closes her eyes, exhales hard and locks her phone. With a blank expression, she answers every question they ask—even the mean ones, even the personal ones—in detail, with the flattest facial expression and in the flattest tone—as if she’s reciting a script she’s practiced over and over again. Sometimes the askers look uncomfortable or confused, but they keep asking. They want to know what happened. They want to know what it’s like now.

Al doesn’t re-ask his question. Maddie S. drums her fingers against the library table, waiting for Maddie K. to look up and see her.

*

At home, Maddie S. chews scrambled eggs and watches her father study the ceiling fan in a way that does not hide the fact that he’s actually watching her mother. Maddie S.’s mother, on her own side of the table, watches nothing. Away from the overbright fluorescent bulbs at school, the circles under Maddie S.’s mother’s eyes seem to have deepened.

Maddie S. is imagining what it would be like to touch the meteorite. To kick it. Break bottles on its face. Lie across and kiss it like a vampire kissing a soft-haired girl in a romantic horror movie.

The day after the meteorite, Maddie S. noticed that the sharpest thing in their kitchen was a silicone spatula. She scrounged around the basement until she found the knives and forks and pizza cutter in her dad’s footlocker under a scratchy blanket in a box marked *CHRISTMAS CANDLES*. She has not said a word about this. She runs her thumb along the edge of a new rock in her pocket, the forty-ninth one. She pries a bagel apart with a spoon.

Maddie S. noticed the first rock while sitting on her front porch a week after the meteorite fell. She had left the table

because her father was trying to start a quiet fight with her mother, who was gazing into space while ping-ponging a napkin ring back and forth between her index fingers. Maddie S. carried the rock in her jeans pocket for days. It looked like a miniature reproduction of the meteorite: Oblong. Pitted. As gray as a bank of heavy storm clouds. The next rock was, sure, less precise, but close enough to the meteorite shape to recreate that anchoring lump in her pocket. She's gathered a shoebox-worth of rocks. Each one looks enough like the last one that looks like the last one that if you count back to that first, flawless rock, you see how each one is the meteorite. Maddie S. likes that you can follow something back and see where it started, even if that doesn't let you do a damn thing about it.

Before the meteorite, Maddie S. didn't think much about Madison King. She was the girl who brought her flute to school every day, then home again to practice. B+ grades, long enough hair. She read old romance books—the kind with cover pictures of surprised-looking women being lifted off the ground by stoic men—behind the circulation desk only after her homework was done. She got invited to parties. No one talked shit about her afterward.

After the meteorite, Maddie K. stayed home for three weeks. When she returned to school, the hallway hushed. Because she answers all those questions so clearly, in so much detail, even when those details are scary or gross or horrible, some kids have started calling Maddie K. some variation of “Mad” behind her back—Mad Maddie, Mad Girl Interrupted, Maddie Hatter.

Maddie S. isn't a boat-rocker; she does it too. But secretly, she means “mad” like angry, because who wouldn't be fucking *pissed* if the village board president expected you to stand by while adults gave inspirational speeches at memorial services and gas station openings like you were the captain/only member of Team Survivor? Like you gave a shit about any of it?

Over Dominoes pizza one night, Maddie S.'s father says Maddie K. is the luckiest girl in their class, luckier even than those who'd faked a migraine to get let out of school on Meteorite Day—he makes a big production here of looking at Maddie S.—because Maddie K. now understands how precious life is. He taps the table with his fist once for each of the last three words, staring at his wife. Maddie S.'s mother doesn't look up. She lifts her plate and walks into the patio, vibrating with refusal. Maddie S. doesn't finish her pizza. She waits on the couch, pretending to do homework, until her mom comes inside hours later and goes upstairs to bed without even her footsteps making a sound.

*

Maddie S. has been leaving a rock every day or so for almost the entire semester. When she sees Maddie K. in the halls, Maddie S. looks Maddie K. in the eyes. Maddie K. looks back, her expression gray and immobile. Maddie S. is not sure if Maddie K. sees her.

Maddie S.'s shoebox of rocks is now half-empty. Each rock that she leaves for Maddie K. is a bit less like the first. Maddie K. says nothing, but each rock is gone when Maddie S. walks past the circulation desk. Maddie K. must be collecting the rocks. The two of them definitely have an understanding. Maddie S. thumbs the next rock in her sweatshirt pocket. She pictures a shoebox in Maddie K.'s room, half-filled with rocks.

Al has to leave right after lunch for a dentist appointment. As the library door closes he waves at Maddie S., his jacket cuff flopped over his hand. Maddie S.'s mother is talking to the school librarian. They're both leaning over the librarian's tablet, and Maddie S.'s mother is nodding, she smiles warmly at the librarian, and when she turns to leave, she sees Maddie S. and the smile slips just a little, her eyes turn pebbly for a second, and then Maddie S.'s mother pulls the warm smile back on and waves to Maddie S. Maddie S. turns her head back to Al and nods goodbye.

Maddie S. is about to get up to drop the rock onto the

circulation desk when Maddie K. sits down next to her, a smile stiff as hard candy spread across her face. Her voice is low, but it is not a whisper: “Madeline fucking Smith, you useless bitch, quit leaving me stalker rocks.” The chair arm squeaks under her grip. “I see where you sit for lunch, you pathetic fucking fan girl.” She leans close to Maddie S.’s nose. “How would you like it if I sat my ass down on the single worst moment of your life once a fucking day?”

Maddie S. feels tingle-sweat under her arms, at the top of her butt. How does Maddie K. not realize that they’re the same? She wants to say something cool like, “Actually, you do,” but she can’t because Maddie K. eats lunch alone in the library lounge, which is at least ten blocks away from the bathroom at Maddie S.’s house.

*

When Al gets back from the dentist, Maddie S. is sitting, straight-backed, on the crater’s edge. He shuffles to his usual spot, sits down. “Why aren’t you in Algebra?” he asks.

The tingle-sweat cools Maddie S.’s back. She’s been crying silent, tidy tears. Al’s brow creases. “Did something happen?” He touches her shoulder with his fingertips. The malice of Maddie K.’s smile is still quivering like a beached fish in the pit of Maddie S.’s stomach, and at Al’s touch, Maddie S. feels it rise defensively. She shoves Al’s hand away. “It’s never going to happen, okay? I don’t want to be your fucking girlfriend!” By the end of the sentence, she is leaning forward, nostrils flared. She sees the way that Al’s face slackens and then sets, icy, long after he’s gone, but she doesn’t move, even when he stomps back into the library, kicking the big rock away so the door locks behind him.

*

It’s been a week, or it’s been two. Maddie S. has lost track of the number of lunches she’s eaten alone, or she’s avoided keeping track. She’d been marching past Maddie K. to the fire exit with her sandwich out, but three days ago, she noticed that the alarm was live again: someone has removed the Band-Aids.

Since then she's been eating her sandwich in the bathroom and then walking the halls alone. Al doesn't arrive at her side. He takes a new route to the gym, sits on the other side of study hall. He doesn't answer her texts.

Today, on her way to the library, Maddie S. is wearing the hoodie she had on the day that Maddie K. confronted her. The rock is still in its pocket, and she's squeezing it between her thumb and index fingernail. She sees Al eating lunch on the front steps with a guy from their history class. Al and the guy lean over a video pod, shoulders touching. The guy laughs, and they high-five, and Al links his fingers through history guy's for a second before letting go. They are all eye contact and toothy smiles. Al doesn't look up when Maddie S. says hey.

Maddie S. walks up to the circulation desk where Maddie K. is sitting. She looks into Maddie K.'s eyes as if the force of her gaze can press Maddie K.'s eyeballs backward into her head. She speaks quietly, over-enunciating—"Here you go, Mad Maddie"—and holds the last rock in front of Maddie K.'s face before, stiff-armed, she places it next to the code scanner. She walks outside through the fire exit, letting the door slam shut behind her. She sits on the crater's edge, legs dangling. Through the closed door, the fire exit alarm sounds like someone small yelling for help from the bottom of a well.

When it landed, the meteorite covered the entire driver's ed car. In the weeks until the workers took the meteorite away and cleared the debris—they called it debris—everyone knew what was under there, but it had been easier to avoid thinking about than Maddie S. expected, with not even a rearview mirror to remind her. She didn't forget, but she also never thought for long about Mr. Fahrenkrug, flattened with his Winstons and his eagle-embossed leather keychain. And Jake and Brian and their backpacks. And the condom Jake carried to show off to his friends (which Al said didn't make sense because if he could show it off that meant he wasn't using it, but Maddie thought Al just didn't get things sometimes). And probably Brian had his one-hitter on him, so that was flat too.

But Maddie never actually pictured any of that. Maddie S. did picture Maddie K. getting out of the car, though: That when she slammed the passenger door, at first, the air was fresh. Then the air was loud. The impact knocked her to the ground. She was crumpled behind the A/C unit, unconscious, when they found her. A miracle, they said. Al heard that the reason Maddie K. didn't get crushed that day is that she got out as soon as the Miata was in park because she was sick of the guys telling jokes about a girl from Chem Lab and a bratwurst, and she was even more sick of Mr. Fahrenkrug pretending not to hear. There's been speculation, especially now that everyone thinks Maddie K. is nuts, that she saw the meteorite coming and didn't say a word, just picked up her backpack and high-tailed it to the fire exit door, which would have been propped open if Maddie S. had been in school so she and Al could go out back for lunch that day like usual.

Maddie S. felt the impact, or maybe she didn't; she's not sure. She'd faked a headache after fourth period, walked the ten blocks home. Now she thinks maybe she somehow knew something was about to happen, but who can really say what she'd been thinking? Except that she thought she'd be alone in the house, so when she heard water running and then the squelch of her feet on the wet hall carpet, she wondered how a pipe could burst when it wasn't freezing out. She tried to open the bathroom door, but it was locked. Then the world shook.

*

Maddie S.'s boots were slick the second she stepped into the hall. She slid, caught herself on the wall, and high-stepped toward the shard of light coming from the base of the bathroom door. Bathwater, overflowing, had turned the blood pink and quick. It darkened the carpet. After, time seemed to move in flashes: a limp arm, a white leg, men in uniforms thick as fire blankets, shoes shrill with wetness on the carpet, the gurgling pit of the draining bathtub. The swaying, clear bags of the ambulance; hospital water cups with accordions straws. Her father went home to tidy up, he said. Maddie S. knows that he, a man who

lines his socks by color in the drawer, would have folded his trousers over the top of the door while scrubbing the bathroom to its grout. His pale, bare legs would have looked like young birch trees lit by the fire as he burned the shower curtain and the towels in a barrel in the backyard. When Maddie S. got home from her mother's hospital room, she sank her fingers into the plush of new-smelling towels, marveling at how, just hours later, the room could reveal nothing of what had happened there. Maddie S. searched the entire bathroom, even under the hamper, even behind the toilet, but she didn't find a single spot of blood.

When Maddie S. returned to school the next day, students and teachers were huddled in wet-eyed groups of two or three, whispering and hugging. Mr. Fahrenkrug's desk was covered in flowers. Jake and Brian's lockers swelled with balloons, teddy bears, notes folded into star and heart shapes. Al found Maddie S. looking at Maddie K.'s locker, which had been decorated the same as Jake and Brian's. Al flicked a carnation that was threaded through the loop of Maddie K.'s padlock. He said, "Jesus, they should have at least decorated her shit, like, more survivory or something." He pulled a sheet of paper out of his binder, wrote *FUCK SPACE ROCKS* on it with a black marker, and ripped a piece of tape from a banner to affix it to Maddie K.'s locker. Maddie S. didn't say anything.

To this day, no one in Maddie S.'s family has talked about what was happening in their bathroom when the meteorite landed. When her father has to refer to it, he calls it the time that Mom wouldn't get out of the tub. When her mother has to refer to it, she walks out of the room.

*

Sunlight lands goldenly on chunks of asphalt, and Maddie S. kicks gravel into the crater. The fire door clicks open; the alarm gets louder. She hopes it's Al, come to apologize, but she will not give him the satisfaction of turning around to look.

When something cold glances across her forehead, at first, she thinks it's raining. Then—ow—she thinks it's hailing. Then

she wonders how it can be hailing sideways. Then she hears Maddie K's voice, harsh and throaty, each word punctuated by a ping—"thanks"—or a sharp pain on her shoulder—"for the"—arm—"rocks"—or cheek—"bitch." Ducking behind a pile of dead flowers and sashed bears, Maddie S. presses her sleeve against her forehead. It comes away bloody. She'll leave it there. She'll let it stain.

Maddie S. climbs out from behind the memorial debris. She stands exposed in the center of the crater. She sees the school counselor and the principal, necks craned, stepping through the fire exit, their faces widening with shock. She sees her own mother staring with deep-set eyes from just inside the fire door. She sees Maddie K's shouting mouth and unlidded Tupperware, barer and barer. She sees the entire succession of rocks repeating back at her.

NELLE

NELLE

POETRY

NELLE

Melisa Cahnmann

PARTS OF THE BODY THAT CAN OUTLAST FIRE

The translator
sifts English words
for sweet bean paste

in the mouth. Sorting
clutters of synonyms,
the Mandarin can remain

so foreign. How
does one communicate
the sand *loess*

at Gaochang ruins
as anything but its
homonym, *loss*?

The workers
in hazmat suits
had just cleared

a congested path
down a suburban
stairwell to remove

the dead mother's
body. The translator
could replace a Dao

reference with a snowy
jingle, find a mountain
to rhyme with Qinling,

but struggle to translate
diseases of accumulation.
Perched over a carpet

inset with shimmering insects
and rodent droppings,
the cleaning crew found,

beneath pounds of paper,
a small skeleton by a closed door.
Either “gou” (狗) or “quan” (犬)

in Chinese describes
that which must, at first
have barked. Buddhists

have a term, *sarira*, for
“the unburnt bits of teeth
or gallbladder” that survive

a venerated saint’s
cremation fire.
“Hoarding,”

didn’t seem enough.
Long hours in little rooms
overfull with junk, more

precise diction: *rescue*.
What her mother, incapable
to host or hug or throw

any chunk
of colored stone away,
called, “saving.”

Jocelyn Casey-Whiteman

MOONFLOWERS

Come out of nowhere.
Full, pintucked moons, cream petals creased
like a fist just opened to a palm.
 An offering, not perfect. Their circumference

 frills then droops into an umbrella
for marble-eyed frogs.
They unfurl at dusk.
 Some stay spiraled shut in a sea of leaves

 that engulf the garden's iron gate, scale the lamppost.
Vines reach into dirt, leaves spread
like dark green hoofprints of deer. What a relief
 to bloom in your own time, away

 from the ruckus of noon, children
plucking petals, hornworms gnawing tender vines.
To open when the world has hushed
 and fireflies flash in the deepening sky.

 Their faces reflect moonlight, draw down
the rapid flight of the hummingbird moth.
Sweet, lemony, the flowers persist,
 lanterns in the autumn night.

Ha Kiet Chau

CIRCA 1969, CHÔNG:

Don't you dare go, no, not mid-war, no, not when
bombs are shooting daggers and dioxin from the sky.

Don't you dare snatch my sons, deserting me on the road,
no, not after bridges and villages have been blown.

Don't you dare gamble away the jewelry, leaving me penniless,
no, not after we suffered hungry nights, riceless.

Don't you dare pack a suitcase, sneak off, no, not when
you swore on your father's grave you'd love me to *infinity, infinity*.

Don't you dare gaslight, no, no you won't return, no, not when
dead bodies are rotting along the bloody districts of Haiphong.

Don't you dare go, no, not now, not mid-war, no, not when
bombs are shooting daggers and dioxin from the sky.

Ha Kiet Chau

FRAGMENTATION OF RAIN

I give her tenderness, too much:
paper marigolds, a sestina, three pianos, and soft jazz,
cup the enormity of her hurt with my small hands.
Mama.
I love her to an ache.
I love her from a bridge.
I love her as if she were my daughter.
Her voice is chorus composed of river and lullaby,
chanting my name, birthing each syllable
as flowers fragment in rain.
I sit proper, baby doll. She cuts my hair.
Asymmetrical bangs. I talk back.
Scissor mouth. We clash.
She loves me, loves me not.
Nothing. No one. Not even rain can rescue us.

Nancy Christopherson

CYNTHIA

At 10, I remember her
trying to teach me things
like *mortal* and *venal*—
our breaths leaving us
in small puffs
of pleasure—
things I would never
understand on my own—.

Rosary beads—I remember
they were black onyx—
and *Hail Marys*—the way she
would finger them on
the way home from school.
She in her plaid skirt
and starched white blouse,
knee-high socks pulled
up to her knee caps,
books in arms crossed
over her budding chest
in concealment—day after
day from the school bus.

I never understood why
she threw rocks—hard—
at me from behind
the fence as I swung on the
swing set in my back yard—
after we touched each other—
and liked it—very much—

lying atop our sleeping bags
in her family's back yard
during that summer when we
wandered the night sky
with our eyes and asked
and asked in hushed voices
in silence for more.

Lisa Fay Coutley

NOSTOPHOBIA

Every still windmill lining the highway
reminds me one man coughing blood

is every man. Your grandfather hacks
from his recliner & I hear my dead dad

cry my name from his bed, so I rise
to cut fresh blood from his white beard.

I drive through night's ice hoping love
will finally behave like love. Instead, home

wants me to buy it a new car, to invest
in its wooded commune, to recognize

misunderstanding from gaslighting, to choose
once, for all, if I'm *dumb or just fucking stupid*.

For a long time, love sang such verses
through the burning leaves reflected

in mudpuddles, as I stared at the *Love*
M— at the end of a 10-paragraph

Facebook message my cousin began
by explaining why his father's hand

up my nine year old thigh before listing
all my faults as facts. You were cut

from rough autumn water, I assure her,
counting how long I've been holding her

underwaves by her ponytail, keeping her
quiet & still in her own time. Hurt

early is why our body panics packing
for home. Dear Love—I never said

sorry because I didn't know I should
be. This highway is black-ice long.

Its shoulders narrower than fear.
Every still windmill is terrifying.

Melissa Crowe

HOME TRAINING

My mother didn't teach me to refuse a ride
on the back of a motorcycle or warn me off
the candy from any open palm, didn't say

I shouldn't stretch myself, top to toes, along
the body of another girl, didn't teach me
not to pass through the house of the neighbor

with the shabby above-ground pool, not to pay
the toll to swim in his backyard, and that toll
took its toll, but also I swam. She was nineteen

when I was born. The lover who made her
pregnant—married, middle-aged—liked to
drink in the bar where she served shots of Jack

in sheer harem pants over satin knickers,
and that's all I know about that. He was gone,
and what did *gone* give me? Fatherless rooms,

handful of formative years without the hairy
belly and bass voice and clipped commands
of a man trying to make me good. We lived

on a dead-end street near the old airport, vast,
cracked macadam where weeds grew waist high
and in winter skidoos revved their whining

engines so loud we heard them while we ate
our fried potatoes or watched *Three's Company*
on TV. Eventually I'd take sweethearts there

and press them into snow or flatten the tall
grass, kissing their mouths under the throbbing
sun. Come August, past chain-link my uncles

showed me how to break through, men set up
the fair with its Ferris wheel and Flying Bobs
and carnies who'd flirt with eighth graders,

give us free tickets, endless rides. The air
through my open window smelled like spun
sugar and axle grease, and evenings it lured me

to the fence for my fill of heavy metal music,
the Gravitron pressing me against its slanted
walls, my arms turned alien, pinned to my chest.

In the absence of the hovering love some kids
endured, I got up to things—in the woods,
by the railroad tracks, in backseats—I wouldn't

like to unlive. I'm not so wild anymore. Even
untutored, I learned how a woman's meant
to temper her hungers, cross her legs

and shut her mouth. But I taught myself to
feel good. Can't unlearn. My grown hand knows
its way to treasure. Tongue finds honey just fine.

Carol Dorf

SOMEHOW I HAVE FOUND MYSELF

a speaker for the laundry—its inevitable accumulation
exacerbated by an only partially functional drier leaving us

with chairs draped in damp sheets, jeans hanging from door frames
a rack of underwear drying in the kitchen

Once I was the woman packing lunches at midnight
which sounds romantic (perhaps) in retrospect

She could talk about the joy after illness—a gift
that has been transformed into managing the moment

Once I lifted the stumbling block—moved it into the garage
which now crumbles beneath the weight of climbing roses

Carol Dorf

INVISIBLE: LIGHT DRIFTS

As a teen all I wanted was to be invisible. Well that wasn't all I wanted but it would have been a good start. I didn't want anyone to notice my jeans had a J on them instead of a W. I really didn't want that boy behind me in French class to call me Toots, and banging my chair into his dangling arm was of limited use. I didn't want anyone to call me fat. I didn't want my geometry teacher to notice all my missing assignments, or the band leader—anyway you get the idea. And before that, in childhood, I didn't want to be the one in trouble when my father started roaring. So in middle age, I was reasonably well prepared to keep my disability invisible, though when people asked directly I couldn't stop talking. Later, when my walking faltered, my disability became more visible, though its attribution remained slippery. I wanted to inscribe, *fat is the least of my problems*, in my medical record. This morning, at the pool, the early waterwalkers and I paced each other. Invisible to anyone outside the water we moved through that forgiving medium.

Light shifts in small waves / steam rises / one dramatic splash.

Leila Farjami

A HALF TOOTH

یک

A cavity in a baby tooth. Tiny hole in a budding heart.
That's how it begins—Father pilfers the pink toothbrush

I love. Born into war, the price of toothpaste
equals five loaves of bread, rationed, *Koponi* in Persian.

Anyone would pay for survival over hygiene. For *sangak*¹
sizzling on pebbles, for a fed belly under air raids.

I watch my father bend to kiss my mother's lips.
Your mouth stinks like a cadaver! Mother's head droops.

Dead silent. Her teeth grind it down, to the marrow,
burying it like worms in a love cemetery.

Grandmother's teeth are not muted like my mother's.
They chatter, jut out, rattle around, wound her gums.

She soaks them in water at night. Cheeks sinking like gills.
Dentures gleaming ivory, grinning in my nightmares.

دو

At fourteen, I am a new immigrant with crooked *Teet*.
A half-broken tooth from an accident. My jaw, shrunken.

1 *traditional Iranian bread baked over heated pebbles*

Four teeth extracted to make room for a smile.
No *Aakh* but *Ouch*. Then come the tight wires,

brackets glued to enamel like dead stars—
a teenage Medusa , a maw of rusted silver.

So what if I have a mouth full of ache and metal?
A homesick body? A half-tooth in my pocket?

Leila Farjami

PERSIAN ALPHABET: A RESCUE

My grandmothers could not read
until late adulthood. They asked others
to read for them—street signs, medication
labels, daily newsprints, a book of prayers.
What if they wanted a life beyond sheep butter,
goat tallow, salted fish, brined cauliflowers?

One grandmother said she wore a bridal headdress
of wire and tiny bulbs that flickered green and white.
Her *hejleh*¹ strewn with red petals.
The only night she was not slapped in the mouth.
Her blood-stained panty, proudly handed
to the groom's family—a proof of virginity.

She night-schooled at fifty, learned to hold
pencils, use smudgy erasers, write from right
to left. She practiced my name in crooked lines.
Her dense dots, like landmarks on an old map.
Her *Aleph*, א, a watchtower. Her *Laam*, ل, a
deep plunge. Each *Ye*, ی, a life raft.

1 *Bridal Chamber in Persian*

D. Dina Friedman

SURVEILLANCE

Again, our makeshift arbor is sagging.
I've been looking for the missing string

and for trees who are willing to talk
to me, a lesser being, even if their tone

might be the tone I use with my grandchild,
on the verge of a tantrum. "You can choose

to kick, choose to cry, or we can go
outside and I'll show you the moss."

"What's that?" He asks, pointing to every plant,
the door knob, the plastic chair. He knows all these words,

just wants reassurance of his budding lexicon,
a small hint that the world might work

in ways he expects: hydrangea, gladiola,
daisy, not yet differentiated

into echinacea, brown-eyed Susan;
and earlier, tulip; iris—all gone by.

I tell him the flowers will hurt
if he pulls off their petals. He grins

yanks, throws—wild and happy.
Yesterday, a daddy long-legs swam

in the rainy remnants of his sandbox pail.
He studied each limb,

before spilling it on the hot concrete.
So far, he's shown no interest in dinosaurs

or the threat of extinction. With chalk, he marks
the porch, the Subaru, his Ninja Turtles shirt

stained with black raspberries
picked through the bittersweet vines.

Maybe this year the grapes will finally fruit.
They're climbing our lattice contraption

despite the lopsided angle,
the hanging threads.

Ellen Kombiyil

THE **B**AYONET **B**ECOMES (A **D**ANCE OF)
THE **B**ATTERED **W**IFE

—an erasure from *Guidebook for Marines*, 1954

Chapter 14

The Battered Wife

The spirit of
the battered wife springs from

vigorous rain.

o night
o secrecy
o oft- dislodged threat
of
this
i
weap.

Basic Dance Positions

Lead with the

hips
(Fig 14.2)

At the same time

with

movement swift
and sure
grasp the palm

with
the left arm slightly bent
and

in-
cant.

Move in any di-
rection

as
if

moving through dense woods.

The Basic Movements

A. **Whirl.** To execute the whirl
(Fig. 14.6)

the ball of the pivot on
(leading) foot and

lunge for-
ward

as

if gripped by
the throat.

B. **Left Foot Jerk.**

If necessary, maintain balance
by shifting suddenly
in a manner
invariably ill
logical.

C. **Stroke and Slash.**

in a crouched position
offer
the neck and shoulder,
or the head, throat, or arms.

D. **Horizontal Butt Stroke.**

The battered wife
from
rear swing
to the
back-
ward
body
will with
momen-
tary

quickness
 verging on
 a sharp strike advance
 forward at a run.
 E. **Contact.** the battered wife
 as in
 the maneuver
 of
 mak-
 ing an
 encounter
 in-to
 art turns
 no—
 by moving quickly
 is
 able to concentrate
 time.

Angie Macri

IN REEDS

The old pier hovers
over water, a heaven
of lumber threaded
with knots as mouths
and eyes, wood planed
and cut with care.

Say sweet, not splinter.
Call the pond a color
like the child's eyes,
neither brown nor blue,
not gray nor green
but all and neither.

She stands on the pier
to drop a leaf
on its mirror. That body
turns with currents
she never knew existed,
balanced on the surface.

Beth McDermott

I STOOD WHERE I PAINTED FOR A FEW HOURS

after scrolling through photos
you take of unsuspecting

people in rumpled clothes
roused by the flight

attendant's voice to lift
the shade, soft cloud

light making it feel less
intrusive. Then I sprinted

between math lessons,
trading an oversized

teddy bear for a specimen
cabinet before settling

on papier mâché animals.
My painting will travel

house to house when I move
once more in old jeans,

jealous of those who write
down thoughts the way

I used to, thinking no one
would ever know me

except me, my splatter
technique unlike the edge

of a table where a friend's legs
dangle, crossed at the ankle.

Emily Mohn-Slate

"ARE ALL YOUR POEMS ABOUT YOUR KIDS?"

Sometimes I lie down on the floor with my phone and hug my knees to my chest and imagine I'm invisible. Sometimes, driving my minivan down Fifth Avenue, I'm Thelma or Louise and I floor it—past the twenty-somethings waiting for the bus with their perfect bangs and miniscule waists, over the secret hill that lifts me up then brings me down hard. What was your question again? I try to remember that I will die to feel more alive, but I end up thinking about waffles, what my next snack will be. I believe most people have good intentions—my moon in Scorpio knows otherwise, but she tires easily, likes naps. Even when I'm not writing about my kids, my body lugs their weight. My ears crane for their calls. What was it you wanted again? Even when I write about technology or anxiety, my kids still need to be fed. And their soccer socks scrunched up over their shin guards, which is so much harder than it looks.

Emily Mohn-Slate

**NOBODY HERE KNOWS PITTSBURGH
IS BEAUTIFUL**

—after Ada Limón

My bedroom window in Pittsburgh looked
onto Elysian Street from such a height.

Mornings, while everyone in my house
was yelling about shoes or hairbrushes—

I'd swish the thin curtain aside
and stand in my bra, watching

the concrete steps stack a path
to each house, to neighbors we'd known

for years, kids flitting between houses
as we did in the eighties.

Like a sea captain, I'd discern the weather
from subtle shades of greys and blues.

On our new street in Los Angeles,
nobody knows that Pittsburgh is beautiful.

Stately houses tower above
our small rental, and there's no one to watch

our kids on short notice. No neighbor kids
knock for cups of water. I read about the world

while I wait for my daughter to finally brush her teeth.
I don't think the fires will come this far south.

My sufferings are thin: we're not
injured or evacuating, we have lemons

falling from branches in our backyard, we
don't go looking for children we know are dead.

I love the way the light sweeps across
the yard, gathering up the brown grass

and the green, the double red hibiscus.
I take endless photos of golden sun.

I can ignore for a whole day the despair
searing other families, houses, cities,

keep watering my own patch of homesick.
I look out onto the hazy outline

of the Santa Monica mountains. Such easy grace
and this quiet for beholding it.

Though, the sun also keeps its loneliness.
And I remember thickly

standing on that nubby carpet
at the window, belonging there, the sun struggling

to break through over the roofs.

Danika Paige Myers

**VIII. ALBERTON ROAD HIKE TO RUINS OF
OELLA MILL AND ST. STANISLAS CHURCH**

it's twenty
twenty three
and when I
finally go back
to that particular path
after Atropos
unclipped my little
dog's lead I hear her
ghost scruffing around
in the underbrush

*Consider straightening out the fibers of a cotton ball to make a
long continuous stream.*

a heron
on a stone
in the river
leaps into the air

*Return from the church
down the white gravel road
and turn right
sunlight hatched*

on the graves flat
in the moss tuft

What remains
of the dead you knew
and the dead you never knew

*Bald Ward Feete
Reed Beard Means*

in the sunlight caught
on the sides of trees

she'd bound up
the steep path to the ruins
*a ghost community
a dead cemetery*

what could be clearer
proof of life
than goose shit on the banks
the little holes
deer made with their hooves
*This is the point at which hikers
must look carefully*

*along the hike visitors will see
an abandoned road
nobody could see
that road but
the little dog sniffed it out
and showed it to me
in a light snow
several abandoned vehicles
two abandoned churches*

stones in place less than two
hundred years and it's already
a ruin

Brunt Mace
Flint Bass

I memorized the split
 of a dead tree across
 from the split
 where the old road
 spit-spliced into the new and
 after that we often picked up
 a short row
 out and back

please do not touch or damage the remaining gravestones

trailhead near enough
 to my daughter's school
 we could steal time
 stop by to unwind
 or spool out a little of
 the little dog's one wild and precious life

*How tedious would this be to make a shirt, or even a sock, by
 slowly making each string by hand then weaving them together
 into a cloth. Unless you took your time, how consistent would
 the thickness of your shirt be?*

at five years old
 my daughter makes
 joke salads: *why*
did the pig become a firefighter?
Because you have a pickle on your head!

it's twenty twenty one
 we drive past Druid
 Ridge *what game*
do you play when

you are sleeping she asked,
looking out at the
hills covered in graves
I don't know I said
dead!
I can't help it
I laugh

Olden Guard
Levy Ford

at home
the little dog
flopped on her back
paws in the air

Foster Ray
Potter Quail

it's a memory of one
cemetery nested inside
a memory of another

old quilts may have been made
into batting
for a new quilt

Rachel Neve-Midbar

ROWING

There is no escape from the time you were born:
city hospital, upstairs bedroom, a field near where
the corn grows tallest, a maze you'll never escape. Not
who raised you or the food you ate together, fries or
fried chicken or that glutenous spaghetti straight
from the can, each piece of pasta shaped like a mouth
open in surprise. Escape bike rides to the beach
under a summer sun that burned till eight or bonfires blazed
beneath the stars, parties you were never invited to. What
did Sexton say? 'that awful rowing toward God.' You think
someday a page will turn in a book that weighs in kilos
where the writing is miniscule, square. Ancient. Escape
the mistakes. The embarrassments. This whole human
body you drag along as you spiral through each endless day.

Rachel Neve-Midbar

I DON'T BLAME YOU

Why do we always need to place
 blame? Long COVID cause you didn't
 mask enough; cancer from bad air or bad
 genes or both. My mother calls
 to say the nurse is there for the third time
 to take blood, the flesh of her arms gauze-like,
 the skin so thin. She thinks she knows
 she has arthritis, but the results are clear.
 I can see the nurse's needle enter yet again and
 I know my mother's pain is mine, is my daughter's,
 isn't arthritis and will never show on a blood
 test. But for my mother, who happily is still watching
I Love Lucy reruns and doing crossword puzzles
 with a WWII theme—she never heard of fibromyalgia—
 even when it dropped out from COVID
 like an egg from the hen. My mother smiles—
 a doll, so sweet but how do I tell her
 that she unknowingly bequeathed me days
 where the vice of my body freezes
 sometimes for months when I can't
 parallel park cause I can't turn my head, can't
 carry a baby, can't walk up a flight of stairs. How
 do I tell her my daughter sometimes uses crutches,
 that she lives on pot smoke and antidepressants
 and I on a cocktail of Optalgin and wine. Mommy
 I don't blame you; I just want to heal you, feel
 you as something other than neglect. *Mom,*
I say, you can't take aspirin. It will kill you.
Try Advil. Take two. I set them on the table

next to her chair. The TV loud in the room,
she stares into it like a lover across the way,
like an evening she might step into out
of her recliner and rise, a waltz, a partner
so strong he can spin her around and around
the floor. If only it was so easy, to cast
off this body, our bodies, and dance.

Kate Northrop

**BEYOND OPTIMIST PARK RISES
THE FERRIS WHEEL**

It has a ghostly look,
a flying fish look.

Yesterday, before dawn,
I saw my neighbor step off
into the dark of her yard.

In the middle of a round
didn't everyone on the Ferris Wheel
dread swaying, stopped

in a little cart up there,
sold off, tilting like a light
through the corners of a house?

At the beginning of her life with my father,
my mom had few things
in the apartment on Clinton
and they all belonged: four pans, a chair.

Now she makes dog-talk, cat-talk,
talk talk, *Hmm* out-loud to air,
who knew? and the ending comes on

like the shadow of a cloud. Now
when I stand around,
Come down! I say, standing inside,

standing outside, Rearrange me
dear streets, dear starlings,
dear butts of cigarettes ground out

and electric pulses lighting through aspen leaves.

Rachel Marie Patterson

PUMPKIN

A mother's hour: I wake up in the dark
to grind coffee, scrub out plastic bowls,
zip a cartoon backpack. Then I wander
heavy-lidded, room to room. Ash leaves
litter wooden thresholds and rest in blankets
on the lawn. The dog barks at thin air

then stops, her opaque eyes adrift. The air
is tinged with toast she can't detect. In the dark
hall, my daughter shuffles, drags her blanket
like a train. The dog harrumphs beside her bowl,
scraggly muzzle damp and full of leaves.
I race to brush teeth and tie shoes, mind wandering

from task to frantic task. My daughter wonders
at shafts of light and dust motes in the air.
I hold my breath until the school bus leaves
with her inside. Then back to stone dark
counters smeared with milk from dirty bowls.
Forgotten dog splayed on a crusty blanket

in the den, her breath a rattle, big eyes blank.
For weeks last spring, she wouldn't eat. I wondered
if she'd live or die, dry kibble in a metal bowl.
Thirteen years of squirrels and trash, fresh air,
snuffling up beside me in the dark.
But she survived. I was selfish, but relieved.

How will I explain it when she leaves?
No tip-tapping floors, no fur on the blankets.
No stepping on her squeakers in the dark.
Unkempt and blind, she still finds strength to wander
through the yard and sniff the frozen air
in vain. Abandoned bones, lost tennis balls.

Sometimes, she can't find her water bowl.
I break her pills in half, then tuck what's left
in peanut butter spoons. Trim the hair
beneath her tail and wash throw blankets
soaked with pee or puke. I wonder
if she knows our new house in the dark.

Loyal terrier replaced by baby blankets,
reduced to wandering unfamiliar rooms—
Who will be waiting for you in the dark?

Ivy Raff

**TO THE ELECTRIC BURNER MY BOYRIEND BOUGHT
IN COLLEGE**

He carried you from Monterrey, industrial north of his birth & yours.
City of electric coils.

You rust, he shines silver at the sides—sparkle of fresh-mint age.
He chops our nightshades,

you soften them. I sneak primal bloom of blue flame when he's not
home to lecture

on inefficiencies of gas. I want alliums caramel, corn cakes crisp.
He drops lids on pans, insists

it cooks. You crust with meals' remnants: he shaves you with open
scissors held at tender

angle: trusted barber. He knows your nuance. Since we met
he's promised

to replace you—bites a lip: *I'm not sure it works*, and then, an atheist, prays
by the curve

of white-counter kitchen cathedral you'll burst our kernels, boil our soups. You won't,
you incontinent dog, you

slow-rumble '28 Ford. Who can explain why angels love damage, kneel
at destruction's pews.

Before your house became mine we sat on the edge of his mattress. He asked—
how do you keep

going? I said I accept my circuits will always break.
He kissed the metal coil of my face.

Ivy Raff

ALLEGIANCE

Your allegiance is to the line, Bruce Smith said, so I'm ruthless,
bicep ready, hand at machete, cords taut.

Toward the end of hunger I stalk poems' lines. Once I taught

a man to slow rivers in himself, quiet the milk in his veins.

I myself never stuck this lesson's landing. My generation's ethical
sex & clean speech never did it for me. I need

Christmas, glitz. Pinprick crimson lights. What is the point
without eye roll of ecstasy, nor voyeur for my body?

Somebody to skim the top. Because baby I can't contain all this alone—

I'm five-two and fine-boned. Ravenous.

I want it all: highs, him, food, waves

lapping at my toes every day. I want poems

g?d gives me, fictions He doesn't.

Toward the end of hunger I break bread.

I am bread. I break bread.

Andrea Scarpino

MEDITATION ON FUTURE LOSS

The most beautiful girl.
Slim, red hair, freckled skin.
Girl I wanted most to be like
in the world. You should've seen
her smile, her 90s body suits
and the way everyone turned
when she walked into class, late,
holding her books to her waist.
She chose me to share her secrets,
box of cigarettes she dropped
in the car and I claimed until
her mother believed, man
much too old to be her boyfriend.
How lucky I felt. Girl of my heart.
Girl of my adolescence.

Blackout drunk
she finally tells me after years
of mysterious illness, weeping
phone calls. Her liver fat,
her hands won't stop shaking.
She finally tells me she'll die
if she keeps drinking.
Another slip, seizure, hospital stay.
Another bottle of vodka hidden
in her closet, under the car seat.
I tell her I'm scared. I tell her
how devastated I'll be. Another
slip. Her beautiful red hair
grown thin, her freckled skin, waxy.
Girl of my adolescent heart. How badly
I want her to grow old with me.

Andrea Scarpino

PRAYER FOR AN ALCOHOLIC

Let there be a good morning,
sunlight through the shades,
sound of horses running outside.
Let her body feel rested, quiet,
no nausea or shaking hands,
no sweaty sheets. Let the dog
lean his weight on her legs.
Let the cat come running to eat.
Let there be cold water to drink,
buttery eggs, steaming coffee.
No calculations of *how* and *when*.
No riffling through her pockets
for change. Let her lungs fill fully.
Let my friend rise again to meet the day.

ire'ne lara silva

"EL CUERPO ES PARA USARLO"

—*What Octavio said*

el cuerpo es para usarlo he said *delicious directive* i thought
 my body an activated archive my mother said i danced before i
 walked and what joy there was in running as close to flying as i
 could come until my chest said *soccer is not your destiny* and the
 brilliance of moving through saltwater and freshwater and all water
 body become all weightlessness all power what it was to dance
 my bare feet on bare earth and everything a drumming and
 everything a spiraling and the joy of laying on the earth as the
 thunderstorm raged every particle of me humming in welcome and still
 the joy of waking stretching every liquid limb against soft sheets
 the joy of breathing deep and grateful the prickling memory
 of hot breath on my skin the animal comfort of one body moving against
 another with another to another and also the animal contentment of
 the body alone in its burrow all the freedoms of
 solitude

el cuerpo es para usarlo he said and i thought my father would have said the
 body was for working like hands were for working like
 backs were meant for burdens eyes meant for eagle awareness
 feet for forcing beyond the weakness of flesh step after step
 hour after hour that the body was for toil and sweat and struggle
 that the body was for hunger and its denial pain and its
 denial suffering and its denial power and power's dominion over
 everything it could force i wonder what my mother would have said
 my mother whose body was labeled *motherbody* and
wifebody and so i think sometimes that's why she went away
 somewhere deep inside where no one could touch her
 where she didn't belong to anyone

el cuerpo es para usarlo he said and i thought *how innocent that sounds* it assumes the body is not in pain assumes the body is able assumes the body is strong assumes the body is beautiful seems to say the body is made wholly for pleasure made me think i have reveled in my body and i have longed to have no body at all there are so many ways in which we are not taught that girlbodies are our own so many ways we are shown that womanbodies are not our own how very few women i know who are not carrying stories of violation abuse violence who have not made all their choices in that knowing who are not aware of each word each touch and the threat of danger there are grey spaces in my mind memories that are lost that i lost that i never need to recover i know i can't make the body forget

el cuerpo es para usarlo he said and i think of what other bodies carry my body carries songs and stories my body loves the wind more than anything sometimes i think what different lives different bodies must live and who would i be in a different body and perhaps it takes fifty years of life to finally say i would not wish for a more beautiful body if it was a silent body a body that didn't hold stories and tell stories and birth stories if it didn't love the wind and find the thunder glorious if it lived some other life without the love this body has lived if it was a body whose every cell didn't sing *live live live* and *fight fight fight* and i think it takes fifty years of life to say i wouldn't choose anything else fifty years to give thanks for a body that would never name itself *fear* or *ingratitude*

el cuerpo es para usarlo he said and i think of how so many people seem to not live in their bodies at all they hardly even seem to know they are bodies they live and they walk in sleeping bodies and in bodies they choose to numb choose to silence bodies they never allow to fall or fly bodies that never set them free and i think of my body this humble body for whom each sense and the ceaseless intertwining of all the senses is a doorway

is a prayer is a portal to transcendances small and large
passing and eternal that can and can't be put into words

el cuerpo es para usarlo he said

Suzanne Swanson

5 AM 5/13/2021

That tinge of brackish red
shining through the Slick

Bullhead Body, gills
their usual sickly

yellow. The Actual Head
a salamander's, held high

off the body, barely turned
toward me, bored Rabbity Red

Eyes catching mine. Head held
high to hold up a Tree

of Antlers. Stubby Legs—four—
picking their way -- *this creature*

the cancer—across my dream's
gravel road.

Suzanne Swanson

WAVING IS HER PLAN

She has been living
with death, harboring it. Simplest
way to put it.

Multiplying cells
now removed. They made
of her a home,

wandering inside
her womb, and beyond.
They like to

move, take up
residence. How
could she refuse?

As many of the usual
treatments as bearable.
The killing route:

poisons, toxins, scalpels.
Also Life! tiny needles,
hands hovering, hands

heavy with love. Her plan:
open her own heavy
arms to every shocked

card, meal, good wish.
Her plan: Blue stars, exploding
rogues to smithereens, blue

slightly-larger-than-
cell-sized flowers blanketing, ruthless,
every stubborn

serous nucleus. Her plan: waving
to death: *Good-bye. Good-bye.*
Close, but not your time.

Jane Zwart

THE MIDDLE PART

People will ask about the ill, and for this
we cannot blame them, or should not,
though it is hard to tell the importunate

about ambiguity or the inopportune
about time. I tell my mom's well-wishers
we're in the middle part. I don't explain

how whatever the doctor says, we revise
accordingly. How if she says *aggressive*,
we convince ourselves the cliff in our yard

must've been there all along. How if she says
more time, a low fence appears just this side
of the world's dropping impossibly off.

I don't tell people that more time is a boon
without dimensions, that gratitude is a shoe-in
but the imposition of ashes still holds,

the imposition of an asterisk holds,
that hope is the tiger I'm raising from a cub—
no middle: it's recklessness or it's the cage.

Jane Zwart

LIKE A BEAR, LIKE A PRINCESS

For my mother's sickness, everyone comes home:
the brokenhearted—they have been touring
as back-up singers; the little boy, roused from bed

but pretending to sleep, stretched out, unbuckled,
in the backseat of a car we no longer own.
For my mother's cancer, the stage manager returns

to *Our Town*, he is a lady lawyer on family leave,
he is the fifth-grade teacher of the girl
who calls the roll of farewells, affecting, maudlin.

From the bus station, I pick up the one who reads
the flicker, or imagines it, in the inquiries
of those who expect her to cry, and one night

the one who has been on the lam flies home,
her pockets full of magic beans I never buy in day
but inter under my bed like mandrake,

like kimchi, they are the germ of guilt and bargains.
So many of these selves I expected; I expected
their coats, too many for the hooks in the front hall;

more than guests, they are boarders; more than ghosts,
bad pennies. The only one I did not expect
is the one who has grown strong, who survived

and then, for years, slowed her heart and closed her eyes,
like a bear, like a princess, like a tardigrade
thawed from a millennium of ice only to be called back

to the awful world where people die; she is the shock,
the one who, with one devastating exception,
will see to it that all of us also survive.

NELLE

NELLE

FICTION

NELLE

L. M. Davenport

SHARK T.V.

There is a room in the television. There is almost always a room in the television; today, it is AUTUMN WITCH COTTAGE AMBIENCE. A woodstove, potbellied, warm light behind its barred grate; a pile of gourds spilling over the wood floor; the air thick with sparkling motes; a tome laying open on the farm-style table, next to a mortar and pestle that are slightly too big for the scale of the rest of the scene. There is movement: the light in the woodstove flickers, the motes fall and are replaced, the richly hued leaves outside the window flutter in an unceasing wind, moving like shoals of fish. The motion is on a loop, but there are many kinds of motion and the loops for each kind are of different speeds—at least, they are in the higher-quality rooms that you prefer, such as AUTUMN WITCH COTTAGE AMBIENCE—and most of the time you do not sit and watch the room continuously for longer than a minute, so it is easy to decide that the repetition is unnoticeable, which is for all practical purposes the same as its not existing in the first place.

There is also music. The music is your least favorite part of these rooms, and most of the time you mute the television and play something else on your headphones when a room is on; it's inevitably a generic looping track of soothing piano and strings and low percussion, filler music, a type of sound that draws attention to the filler-nature of the room itself, which you dislike and work hard to overlook. You cannot overlook this when the music is on, and the illusion is better, more complete, with your preferred music, even if it does not tonally match the room. It used to be that other people would tell you that your choices of music were strange, or sad, or ridiculous. (It used to be that each person with whom you could conceivably

discuss music had one, at most two safe genres or artists that overlapped with yours, and you carefully matched the genre to the person. When you drove people to locations, you had a car playlist for each individual.) Your headphones make a second room, a room the size of your skull, which overlaps with the room in the television. Today, it is the soundtrack for a film about a beheaded knight and a rash promise. The score is at once jagged and trancelike, with a deep echo to it, menacing and plaintive. Its long stretches of instrumentals are intercut with medieval carols, performed on lute, recorder, and hand drum. It makes you feel like a lightless forest is growing in your chest. You used to listen to this soundtrack frequently, and it always brings with it a shadow of that time, though not quite enough to make you believe that you could recover it. (You were not as you are now. The explanation for this change is dreary.)

You are at the center of the Venn diagram, the overlap of three simultaneous rooms: the room in the television, the room in your skull, and the room in the house. You think about this while you pilot your body through the house, chewing on the knowledge that what you are really doing is attempting to curate your way aesthetically to a transcendent psychological state. Repair yourself with the correct aesthetic environment. Was this not, you ask yourself, essentially the premise behind those rest cures that the wealthily disturbed or tubercular were so fond of in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? The altitude of sanatoria, you imagine, served more of an aesthetic purpose than a practical one, but surely some people went and looked at the mountains for long enough that they got better.

You are unconvinced that such a thing is possible for you—you can barely even name the impulse—but still you continue to attempt it. You wash a round of dishes; while they are drying in the rack, you take the recycling out. It is autumn outside the house, just as it is in the television, though of course it is night; you stop to look at the row of large trees on the hill behind the house, after you pour the recycling into the curb bin. They too

move in patterns that would perhaps repeat if you tracked a sufficient number of motions. You do not do this; you go back inside and move a load of laundry from the washing machine into the dryer. The night is long.

You are aware, naturally, that the television watches you back, that the headphones are listening to you in return. It is discomfiting, this awareness, but you can do nothing about the watching and the listening—by using the television and the headphones in the first place, you have consented to them—and since this is something you cannot alter, you have accustomed yourself to it. You cannot revoke that consent now. So the television and the headphones suggest things to you: things they have determined that you are likely to enjoy, or at least to consume. And who are you, when you stop and break this down, to say that you will not enjoy? That you will not, at least, consume?

Today the headphones offer you ROSARY VAMPIRE FRIDAY NIGHT. There's a jolt when you see the title, that do-they-know panic with which you have grown so familiar over the past months, but when the adrenaline spike fades and you scroll through the playlist, this turns out to be mostly songs that were popular with alternative teens when you were a teen yourself but not yet alternative. You reject the television's offerings, which today are uniformly pumpkin-themed and even in the thumbnails contain assets of grotesquely mismatched size, and search for *cyberpunk ambient*; the third result, RAINY BLADE RUNNER BALCONY, looks promising, and you select it. Low candles, neon twilight blurred through condensation-fogged glass, a chaise in that gritty, weathered style that signals an eighties vision of the future. The rightness of this combination is immediately apparent to you.

Today is one of the vacuuming days, so you shove a dirty towel into the gap under the bedroom door to muffle the noise. (She needs her sleep.) It is also a litter-box day, which means it is also a take-out-the-garbage day. You steer yourself

in the direction of the bag of bags, pull two out of the tangle and stuff one inside the other. You flap the bag-inside-a-bag construction in the air so they balloon out together; if there are holes in one bag it will not matter now, as long as the two layers of holes do not align, allowing a trail of soiled cat litter from the interior of the first bag to seep out into the interior of your home. It is satisfying to you, this layering. In all the time you have been ferrying litter from box to trash can, this technique has yet to fail.

The two of you are together—a weekend, blackout curtains in the living room, one of you up early and the other preparing to stay up late—and you watch the sharks. The two of you have watched every shark movie, show, and special that the television can offer; said offerings have decreased substantially now that it is no longer summer. At one time, shark season lasted only a week; then it became a month, spliced between the end of July and the beginning of August; now it is a *season*, replete with one-episode specials, their title cards screaming in the same three typefaces. You've seen them all: the silly sharks (THE MEG 2), the kid-oriented sharks (THE CROC THAT ATE JAWS), the dramatic sharks (HAMMERHEAD RECKONING), the conservation sharks (IN SEARCH OF THE ANGELSHARK). You have come to appreciate sharks; they were not an arena of the world in which you had previously invested much time. You started out by watching her, watching the sharks; now you watch the sharks together.

Today, you click through all of your saved shark programming, but none of it is right; you (her) do not want a silly shark, and you (just you) do not feel up to a dramatic shark, or to the level of mental shut-off that is required for a kid-friendly shark. You (the two of you) cannot agree, and in anxious frustration resort to the *you may also like* tab. You (just you) see that your breath is moving shallow, high-up in your chest. It occurs to you that the television may or may not know that there are two of you watching it today. Which *you* is

the one that *may also like*? Or has it amalgamated you together, the way that your headphones sometimes feed you her music, pushing your rooms together even when you are apart? Your chest is moving as if you were afraid.

There is a new shark, buried halfway down the *you may also like*. It is not the season; the presence of a new shark startles the breath higher in your chest, so that it floats just under your collarbones. It seems to be a conservation shark; it is narrated by Sir David Attenborough. You pause, enlarge the thumbnail: a leopard shark caught from a low angle, appearing to smile. It's backlit, almost haloed. HAVEN OF THE LEOPARD SHARK.

David Attenborough! she says. *That one.*

You agree. You liked David Attenborough long before you began watching the sharks. You have always liked casually learning about animals or fungi or rocks or brains or dinosaurs or outer space; when you were a child, this was mistaken for genuine preprofessional interest, and as a consequence you received many science-related books on birthdays and Christmases, and were frequently taken to museums. Your mother always set the science insert in the newspaper aside for you on Tuesdays; there were kits about fossils and rock hardness and basic chemistry; one year, you competed in the Central Ohio Brain Bee and somehow came in third, despite writing *killer neurons* on your whiteboard in response to a question when you knew you did not know the answer. The fact that you were completely lacking in genuine scientific curiosity, and also did not care about math enough to forge through the thickets of woe that surrounded it, did not deter anyone, and if you're completely honest, you still feel guilty for not having been smart enough, or even just having cared enough and in the right ways, to follow through on what the child-you appeared to promise. David Attenborough narrated your sick days, and a lot of your ordinary days as well; you found (and find) his documentaries comforting in the same way that articles about cryptocurrency scams or the guts of search algorithms are comforting. You can learn about

something in which you have no personal stake, and on which you will not later be tested; you can, for a brief period of time, feel as though you are doing exactly what you are supposed to be doing, and that you have no reason to feel guilty or ashamed for doing it. You may even learn something that, at a later time, you may wish to tell another person. Something you can offer them. (Offer her.)

The two of you watch HAVEN OF THE LEOPARD SHARK. The television shows you rooms on a boat, in a lab, in a submersible. It shows the ocean, as if it were a room: the house and the ocean become joined parts of that diagram you sit in and walk through, and David Attenborough tells you about it. Your house, the haven of the leopard shark. Your body cannot act as if it were afraid, in the combined presence of David Attenborough and this shark. It should not have acted afraid in the first place, and you remind yourself that tomorrow is the day of laundering the towels.

The room the television suggests to you today is not a room at all. It is a deciduous forest, shot in the early morning; it's lush, summery, but toned down from the faint sun. A trail of broken stems suggests that someone else has passed this way, but no creature now disturbs the scene. It is called, unfortunately, EARLY MIRKWOOD PEACEFUL ADVENTURER WOODS, but you can't argue with the image quality. You stand and watch it for a long time, waiting in vain to catch a loop restarting. The mist hovers gently, never quite dissipating.

You used to love mornings. You weren't a *morning person* in the way that term is usually (angrily, defensively, cheerily) used, but it felt virtuous to be awake in the mornings, even though you rarely did anything special with that time. You liked feeling that there *was* time, that there remained a chance that the rest of the day would not fail your expectations. If the coffee didn't turn out right the first time, you could make it again.

The couch cushion is rough against your face, but clean. (You know because you lint-rolled it yesterday.) When you open your mouth, the fabric rubs against your teeth; it makes a sound, which you can hear because you have not yet put on your headphones. It is only ten-thirty; you have been awake for an hour and a half, but she went to bed ten minutes ago, so the longest part of your day has barely started. You have to be quiet. You stifle the cries before they make it to your teeth. The cushion, wet now, itches your lips and the skin of your forehead. Your back twitches and shudders, bowing in and out with the heaving of your chest against the couch. Green bursts flare on the backs of your closed eyelids as you press your face harder into the cushion and emit a subvocal howl. One of the questions you had at the beginning was *will I still be able to cry*, a question that was answered almost immediately: yes, and the tears will be almost exactly the same as those you shed before. Their texture is light and somewhat crystalline, as if a jarful of them would turn kaleidoscopic, but they are still clear and salted. You had been irrationally afraid that you would cry blood; this had made you cry; it was not blood; you cried harder.

You don't want her to wake up to this. You are already so full of guilt that you cannot live with feeling bad for one more thing, even a relatively small thing such as disturbing her sleep early in the night by crying too loudly. You want her to be awake for some other, entirely benign, reason, and to happen upon you weeping on the couch and not be distressed herself by this discovery.

She doesn't wake up; or, if she does, she doesn't open the bedroom door. When you finish crying, you make a list of tasks. Your headphones, perhaps in cahoots with the television, offer you the film scores of Howard Shore. You decline.

There are a number of possible explanations for what has become of you:

You decided to do this to yourself, knowing what the consequences would be and accepting them.

You decided to do this to yourself, not knowing the consequences. Or not *fully* knowing them, which comes to the same thing. In other words, you made a mistake.

You had an accident.

Someone else had an accident, and you experienced consequences.

Someone else made a mistake.

Someone else did this to you.

This was always going to happen, because it was in your genetic code or the shape your brain took on, during an earlier part of childhood than you can remember or the somewhat later part in which you learned about David Attenborough, or at the even later time when you were busy competing in the Central Ohio Brain Bee and being treated poorly by alternative teens.

You know which of these explanations is the correct one—or, you think you do—and so does she. None of them are acceptable to you, but you believe that the correct explanation is also the worst, by a metric which you cannot define, and also that she shares your belief. (She denies this.) She says *it doesn't matter how this happened, all that matters is that it did and we're here now, but at least we're together*. She says *please baby I can't talk about this anymore right now*. She says *please it's late I work tomorrow you know I work tomorrow please. I know it's not late for you but I have to go stand in front of the public for eight hours and they don't care how late I was up last night or why. I know you can't really understand because you're not working a job like that but if you did understand you wouldn't do this. Please*.

There was a period, in the beginning, when the two of you seriously discussed the idea of telling everyone who had known you before that you had died. In the end it was decided that this would be more painful for everyone than the alternatives you had also discussed. So instead your approach has been to

do nothing, for as long as that remains possible. Job: left, no explanation. Parents: too difficult, no action yet; you still have another month before they'll ask about Christmas and you'll be forced to answer. Friends: online anyway. Therapist: you lied and said that you were moving to a state where they didn't have a license.

You suppose it is still the beginning. For you, now, isn't everything the beginning? If there is no immediately evident end? You could read the Lord of the Rings books every day for the next two hundred years, and it would still be the beginning. You can't bear it.

The television offers you DARK ACADEMIA CASTLE WITH SOOTHING PIANO TO RELAX WORK OR STUDY. You accept. The ensuing room has a fireplace, the contents burning low; wingback chairs in deep shadow; lashing rain against the windows. The music is mostly strings and organ. You leave it on, this time, and do not add headphones; you are going out. If she wakes up in the night, as she sometimes does for reasons nightmare or digestive, you hope that this room will not offend her.

There is only one reason that you go out.

In the lore, people like you almost always have teachers: the person whose fault their state is takes pity on them and shows them the ropes. You have not had a teacher; you are making the whole thing up as you go. It's not as simple as sneaking up on someone and biting them, or even getting them to let you into their home so you can bite them there. You still don't understand the mechanics by which your thefts are performed. By which you perform them. It's not blood, or it's not *always* blood, or maybe it's not *only* blood.

The point is that something is wrong with you. It has a name.

Before you go out, you make a list for when you come home: *scrub out bathtub, put clean dishes away, dust ceiling fans and flip switches for winter.*

The two of you are looking for old action movies when the television suggests another shark. Actually, two other sharks, both apparently involving David Attenborough. The first, *STALKING THE BOTTOM: THE GOBLIN SHARK*, has a thumbnail featuring a shark whose mouth reminds you of a xenomorph's; the second, *BRIGHT LIGHTS, LITTLE SHARKS*, presents a size comparison between the smallest shark you've ever seen and a human hand.

That's a dwarf lantern shark, she says. It's the smallest shark in the world.

Does it glow? you ask. You imagine that it does, given the name, but you can't think of anything else to say. In your chest, your breath has gone strange again, and you don't want her to see.

Yeah. It has photophores. She's smiling. It almost makes you smile, too, but the impulse is fragile and you don't want to break it by actually attempting to make it happen. *How does he have the energy for all this? He's what, ninety-seven? And it looks like this one was just released last week.*

Ninety-three, I think. Still.

I'm not even thirty yet and I get tired just thinking about going to put gas in the car. D-A has fifty-three species named after him. She clicks the thumbnail, and it unfolds into the beginning of the documentary.

I miss being able to do this all the time, you say sometime in the first five minutes, while the television is showing you a room in someone's shark laboratory. It bubbles out of you when you take a wrong breath.

I miss it, too, she says, keeping her eyes on the room. *But I'm trying to enjoy the time we do have together. We get so little of it.*

She doesn't mean it the way you think she means it. You know that. You've talked it to death. But your chest doesn't know that, and the next breath is worse than the one before. *I'm sorry,* you say, a combination of sounds that you have said so many times in your life, and for so many reasons, that it's

become compressed into reflex, feels like one syllable leaving your mouth instead of three.

It's fine. Just, let's try and relax. There's a pleading note in her voice. You would set yourself on fire on the spot, if you could. You try and fix on David Attenborough's voice, let it tell you about the smallest of sharks and their ever-smaller population. It keeps slipping away from you. She's watching it, but slackly, and you watch her instead for a minute: the unconscious posture of her hands, the television light caught as faint sparks in her pupils, the twist of hair that rests, sculptural, over the rim of her ear.

How would you feel about... you hear yourself say. But, you know, no pressure, it's fine if you—

I'd like that. She's looking fully at you now, smiling again. *The sharks will still be here later.*

Okay. A silent moment from both of you, in which the television makes the sound of the ocean. *I'd like that, too. Are you sure it's okay that...*

Her eyes glitter in the dim, wavelight and lablight and sharklight fractured across them. *I'm sure. If it could happen that way, don't you think it would have already?* A dry smile there, and you laugh a dwarf-lantern-shark-size laugh in response. *Anyway, that's not how you got—*

You're right. You kiss her forehead and stand up. *Let me wash first. I'll meet you in there?* She tilts her face up; you bend down and kiss her mouth.

CAVE CAMPING FIREPIT AESTHETIC
 COZY SKELETON GROVE
 SHARK AQUARIUM TOUCH POOL FIELD TRIP VIBES
 GREEN ROOM BACKSTAGE AMBIENCE
 YOUR GOTH FRIEND'S LIVING ROOM
 PEACEFUL BOHO HOUSEBOAT
 SNOWY CLASSIC LITERATURE MOUNTAIN RETREAT
 SUPERVILLAIN NAP NOOK
 YELLOW WALLPAPER DOWNTIME IRONIC

NIGHTTIME BATHYSPHERE
TIDE POOL AT DAWN

You are scrubbing the stubborn dark slicks in the refrigerator when your phone shudders in your pocket; it is one in the morning.

Didn't know if you'd seen this, the text from your mother says. *I missed the obit when it first came out, so maybe you did too. What a life!* There's a link: *Sir David Attenborough, who narrated the natural world to three generations of future scientists, dead at ninety-three*. You sit down in front of the open refrigerator and click through to the article. It's dated almost a year ago. The refrigerator beeps angrily as you scroll.

How did we miss this? you text back. *This should have been a front-page obit.*

No idea.

You don't reply. The refrigerator light has turned off; it's emitting a sustained buzz now.

While I'm thinking about it, she texts a moment later, *have you guys decided if you're coming for Thanksgiving yet? No pressure, I'm just trying to get a sense of how many people will be there.*

You close the room that has been playing on the television since your day started—VICTORIAN CAPTAIN'S CABIN ANTARCTIC EXPEDITION NORTHERN LIGHTS—and search for *david attenborough*. The screen fills. Every title in the top three rows has a release date that's later than his death. Your chest tightens up. When you ask your phone to elaborate on what you're seeing—surely David Attenborough did not leave this much material for posthumous release?—you discover that he has been licensed. There are hours upon hours of his speech recorded; it was not difficult, evidently, to synthesize his rhythms, his patterns, his intonations.

As much as you want to imagine that it was done for purer reasons, that the world was simply suffering too much

in the absence of David Attenborough, you still recognize a cash grab when you see one. It occurs to you that some of the sharks, too, may be generated rather than truly alive; even the rooms in submersibles and laboratories and aquariums could be spawned from the existing footage. You put on HAVEN OF THE LEOPARD SHARK and sit in front of the television. You can't quite bring yourself to think of it as fake David Attenborough, manufactured David Attenborough, though certainly that is what it is.

You've moved on to ENIGMATIC GUARDIAN: THE NURSE SHARK, when the bedroom door opens. There are footsteps, and then the sound of something closing. *Honey*, she says, coming to sit beside you, *is there a reason why the refrigerator door was open? It woke me up*. She is forcing her tone into gentleness.

David Attenborough died. You gesture at the screen.

Honey, she says, fully awake. *I'm sorry*.

He was dead when they made this. He's been dead for months.

Oh. Shit. She leans forward, gazing intently at the screen.

The two of you sit there with the sharklight moving over your faces. Neither of you speaks.

When the sun starts to come up, you go into the bedroom and pull the blackout curtains down. She dresses by the lamp and kisses your forehead, which is the only part of you that sticks out above the comforter. At least, you tell yourself, you don't have to sleep in a coffin. (This had been another thing you worried about, at first.) You're asleep by the time the front door closes behind her.

I don't think I can turn you, you had said in the beginning. You were crying, and too sad to be relieved that you weren't crying blood, after all.

I didn't ask you to. I don't want to live forever. I would make a terrible—

Please don't say it.

It's real whether I say it or not, love. She was finished crying; her face looked worn, already older than it had an hour before, and you couldn't stop thinking about how she would always look older than you from now on, no matter how much time passed. How it would only get worse. This made you cry harder. *I'm sorry. I didn't mean to...* her voice trailed off, and you never did find out what it was that she hadn't meant to do.

I can't do this.

She looked at you levelly. *You're going to.*

Neither of you said anything for a while after that. You kept trying to imagine what she was thinking, and spinning off into strands of thought that were too terrible to voice.

It's late, she finally said.

I can't go to sleep. You started crying again, just when you thought you physically couldn't cry any more. *It's too much.*

Shh, she said, holding your hand. *Let me put something on for you.*

It won't help.

Just try it. For me? You nodded, your face pressed into your other hand. A room blossomed on the television: TEATIME IN THE GREENHOUSE RELAXING MOOD. You laid down on the couch and she put a blanket over you, from the neck down. *I'll come back before sunrise,* she said, *and we can get you situated. Okay?*

You nodded again. In the greenhouse, rain dripped on the glass. There was a chair, a table, a steaming teacup. It looked as though the chair's occupant had only just stepped away, and would return at any moment. While she slept, you watched long enough to catch the rain's repeat.

There are never any people in the rooms. The sun does not ever breach the horizon; the train chugs endlessly toward its alpine station; the tea never cools. They unfold the same ceaseless moment. The point is not to imagine someone else's life; nor is it, quite, to imagine yourself in the rooms, to build them larger and larger in your mind until they overtake the rooms

your body walks in. The headphones, on the other hand, aspire to mirrorhood, refracting your own taste back at you in recombinant microaesthetics. They recommend you, remade every six hours, to yourself. They know what you are.

You are curled at the center of the diagram, looking through the window that is the television, the window that half-promises itself a membrane. Time is always almost moving forward, in those rooms; you are eternally on the point of entering them. And David Attenborough, the licensed version, is in these rooms, too; like you, he is eternal now, unchanging and undying. You can practically hear him in the walls: he's tapping on the glass of the greenhouse, scuttling just under the paneling in the manor's library. And he's brought the sharks with him; you feel them moving like currents while you put away the dishes, brush the cats, wash the empty jars so they may be recycled. You're holding her hand. You're watching the sharks.

Jolene McIlwain

THE COOP

Nel studied the boy's hand, puncture wounds from what could have been a stick, claw, or knife—was it the penknife? Damn it, I told your father you were too young, she didn't say. But what she came to quickly was that the culprit had been a bird's beak because that was what Kelton was hitching now, saying, "one of the hens did it." Sobbing. So unlike him. Such a happy boy. *All our boys are so happy. You are an amazing mother.* And Kelton was wanting something, something from her that she couldn't understand because all she saw was that the flesh on his little hand was pierced here and there and there.

She pulled him closer.

Deep blood. Coming up out of those wounds in tiny puddles. That smell.

And her other three boys flanked him to see the blood, chirping along with Kelton.

Quiet, she didn't say. She scanned. Kelton's face, his arm, neck. She lifted his shirt. Another of her boys staring at the one single drop of blood on the white floor. Another saying, "Gotta clean it out quick, Mom."

Get back, she didn't say but moved them away.

The littlest boy's nose running—needing blown, needing a tissue. Always needing a tissue, and she'd always made sure, kept one tucked in the cuff of her sleeve, said, "Blow, honey. Blow it all out. Good boy." And Kelton needed a tissue, too, his whole face covered with tears and fear and a wanting. Wanting something. What did he want her to do? Get something to clean it, no, but what did she want, need, to do? Right now. What? She needed to see the chicken, and didn't she believe him? She still thought it might be the knife, but she'd remembered how the boy's father had told them about how broody ones could

flog, peck deep, slice deeper with those talons. Kelton was saying again, “it was one of the hens,” and she could see that his pen knife had been on the counter all this time. He was telling her that. “It’s right here, Mom.” And. “Why yes. Sure, honey, I believe you. I just need to see which one did it.” And so, the boy, her oldest boy, Kelton, who was growing taller, but seemed so small right now, led her to the coop.

The wind blowing. Hard. Kelton’s hair blowing.

Her hair unknotted, moved across her eyes and she re-clipped it.

Charles wasn’t home and he’d once warned, *Don’t turn your back on the hens. You might have to flip one, it gets rowdy.* He’d made a gesture, but didn’t actually do it. *Only if they’re threatening, you know, ‘cause otherwise, it can hurt them, their lungs, you know.* But she’d never imagined one could do this kind of damage to a nine-year-old’s hand, his fingers. Those fingers she had counted long ago, had kissed many times when she didn’t care that Kelton was not the baby girl she had imagined, but a baby boy since she’d have time to have many more—many, many more is what the doctor said. She had done so well—out in just a few pushes and she never needed any drugs, no help. No. It all felt so natural like laying an egg quietly just as the hens did and then when it was ready to hatch, it did. Kelton hatched fine. And the next three boys had, too, but the other baby didn’t. The girl.

Why was that?

And what was making Nel’s fists clench and her jaw and why were the little ones coming along to the coop with them. “Get back to the house right *now*.” She did say that. Out loud. Very loud. Echoing in the trees, along the hill side, sending starlings screaming into flight, sending trout into the redds of the Sidle Creek. The sun, glaring. Not a cloud. Not one cloud of relief. “Don’t you believe me, Mom? It wasn’t my pen knife, honest to God,” and she wanted to say I believe you again, but her mind was somewhere else.

“Mom? Mom.”

On the door of the coop now, and the latch, and the blood from his palm and finger left behind on the latch. Her poor little boy's blood. Her little boy, oldest boy, Kelton, who still remembered to latch that door even though he had been very hurt and bleeding. And he had never yelled out. She would have heard. Since the night of the baby girl, unbreathing, unmoving, Nel's hearing had become hyper-focused, near perfect.

Kelton had just tapped her on the waist while she was scrubbing dishes. He didn't want to bother her, but he needed something. Damn it, what *is* it now? she did not say. They all needed something every second, the boys. And she did her best and it was so much, and she was so proud she could handle most anything, but there were a few nights when, because her husband, Charles, wasn't home yet—should have been home—she'd asked the hills, asked the weeds in the turn where the truck should have been bumping past and toward her, “How much longer ‘til he gets here?” She needed him here now. To help her. Like that night. He was in there when she pushed and no crying, no sound, and he heard no crying, too.

Charles would have to do something about this latch. It was always sticking.

And then the door. Open.

Powder from the chop, the straw, the hens' bodies, rises and settles in the beam of light.

And in that beam, she sees her son's finger—the one not injured on the other hand—reaching up to point to the chicken on the second to the top row and she asks, “This one?” “Yes, Mom.” And, so, the neck of this bird feels warm, and she can hear the clucking from other slots, and she can hardly stomach the ammonia odor, so she moves quickly. She holds the chicken by the neck while she points to another, asks, “What about this one?” “No.” “This one?” “No mom. No, no, Mom. What are

you going to do with her?” Because the one she’s holding is one of Kelton’s favorites and that’s why he says he couldn’t figure out why she’d done it, the hen. He’d never been pecked before. Not even a little, he’s saying now. And “It’s okay, Mom. Really, she didn’t mean to, Mom.” And, “No, Mom.” But Nel is just seeingfeelinghearing the blood, all that blood on her legs in that birthing room, and her baby isn’t moving, making sounds. She can’t reach it, can’t protect it. And since she lost that girl, she can not abide the risks to her children, the harms that wait, lurking everywhere.

And she can’t seem to break its neck, so she moves quickly out past the feeder, out of the coop, and the other birds are trying to get out, “Getbackgetbackgetback.” She swings the door shut and Kelton is following close beside her. “Damn it,” she says. “Mom, it’s okay, shedidn’tmeanto.” And she swings her arm and smashes the bird’s body into the post againandagainandagain.

Screaming, seeming far off, but close to her.

Kelton’s screaming.

Merging with the wind, the tops of the trees, fading into somewhere else.

And there now.

There is nothing to hurt his other hand, any of him, and she has taken care of it, and now she can make the time to hug him. That’s what he wanted, she thinks, when he first showed her his finger, his palm. Just to hug him. Just wipe that blood away and clean and bandage his wounds.

That is simply all she had to do.

Yes. But she did more.

And she doesn’t need the bird now. Down. She sets it down on the ground and the wind lifts some lost feathers into the air and they float high into the oak, and beyond into the clouds, and beyond all that blue sky. Beyond.

She can’t seem to rub the down from her hands. Just wait a minute, honey, and I’ll give you a hug, she doesn’t say. And

then a new panic comes to her. Now she realizes how that burn's always been there, just inside her chest, in her jaw, her ears, eyes. So aching. All the time.

"Where are your brothers?" she yells. She heads back toward the coop but Kelton screams, "No!" pointing to the house where she sees the other boys peering out the window and their mouths gaped like little birds in a nest, waiting. But everything is okay now, boys, she doesn't say. Mommy took care of it, she doesn't say.

And when she goes to Kelton, who's backing up, he runs from her.

He keeps looking back, running faster to make sure she won't catch him and that is not. Right. No.

The little ones aren't at the window anymore and she can't think about this look on Kelton's face. Has she ever put it there before? Is it the same—it *is* the same—face Charles wore when the doctor told them their baby girl they'd kept trying for, that had lived and moved in her for months, was born dead.

What had she done wrong? *Nothing. Nothing.*

This past year since that awful night, she's asked and answered this question, and she's made favorite cookies, created crafts from pinecones and creek pebbles and oak leaves with the boys. She's kept the sheets laundered and crisp, the floors scrubbed; she's gathered berries, apples, peaches with the boys, taught them to climb trees, steady and sure, and she's read stories to them, with myriad voices, in the quiet lamplight until their eyelids heaved. The boys have thrived.

And.

Life went on.

She had adopted a stray dog who'd been dumped off, who'd growled and shook at first and now slept in her bed nestled between her and Charles. She had nursed two barn kittens barely weaned when their mother had, a half mile away, caught in the wheel-well of a mail Jeep while she snuck across the tarred-and-chipped road, "likely chasing a vole," Charles had guessed. "Maybe running from a coyote," Nel had said.

Yes, Nel had laughed and danced and she'd come back to herself almost entirely, except for this one crevice cut deep into her brain tissue that could not cope with the scent of blood, could not unsee the quietness of the baby, that could not unsmell the dangerous spilling out of her own womb. It had been a gift that her doctor had put her on the birth control pill, continuously, to deal with the endometriosis they'd found in the baby girl's nest made by Nel's body, so Nel hadn't bled every month. She hadn't seen any blood in a year, avoiding days they'd slaughter. Charles had been the one to place meat in the crockpot before he left for work, or grill when he got home because maybe she had an inkling blood could shove her back there.

Somehow it had crept around the long line of her gaze.

Her hands sticky with a stippling of blood, she wipes something off her face, and it is more of the blood, and on her jeans there is a spray of the blood, and for a moment, she thinks it is maybe the baby's girl's blood, again, somehow, but it is the chicken's.

Where is the chicken?

The chicken is on the ground.

It looks like it's Pepper, Kelton's Rhode Island Red that he raised.

They delivered them—the tiny chicks—in a box.

Some died within a week, but Pepper was strong.

Pepper's feathers, Pepper's down, on Nel's hand.

She will use the soapy dishwater she's left warm in the kitchen sink where she had been just minutes ago to get this down off her, and she'll let Charles find Kelton when he gets home. Kelton's likely at that bend in the Sidle Creek where he finds comfort, where they all have.

First, she should return to the coop, latch that door.

Latch that door and don't let anything else out.

Kelly Pedro

THESE THINGS ARE NOT ALWAYS UP TO US

I slip into the water and shit is it ever cold. The pool is usually comfortable, unless Jean is leading the class, then it's like a hot tub because she thinks the more we sweat the more calories we burn. I grow even colder when Emily walks to the side of the pool where she stands when she leads our class. Emily who's just finished her third year in kinesiology. Whose limbs are longer than a giraffe's neck. Whose skin looks like she's just lathered cocoa butter all over it. Not like my pockmarked thighs.

Fuck.

"Luísa!" My cousin Connie spins her seven-month pregnant belly around, and crap, I must've said that out loud.

"What?" I ask loudly to block all the *fucks* echoing off the glass walls. "It's freaking freezing in this pool. I signed up for aquafit, not a polar plunge."

"I think it's perfect in here." Connie's half floating on her back, her belly rising from the water like Mount Etna, that always-erupting Italian volcano.

"You would," I say as Emily fiddles with her phone and Lorde's "Royals" thumps through the wireless speakers.

Connie is pregnant with her second child. During warm up she tells me this is her last. When I ask her what that means—is she getting her tubes tied? Is Jeremy getting snipped?—she brushes me off and says the details don't matter. What matters, she says, is that she's decided. Hearing her say that—so easy, so free—makes the water feel five degrees colder.

We are like sisters, Connie and me. A month apart, the only children in our respective families until Connie's parents had surprise twins when she was six. Having siblings is the

first thing Connie did without me, and she's never looked back. I try not to blame her, but it's hard not to feel left behind even now as Connie's belly surfaces from the water like a rising phoenix.

My son Carlos is eight. When I look at Carlos with his hair like frothy sawdust spume, I think about being a new mom again: the sleepless nights, the constant crying, the never-ending laundry, the dirty bottles and mastitis, the stretch marks that all the vitamin E in the world couldn't fix despite the late-night commercials preying on a new mother's insecurity, and *damn*, I think, *I'd do it all again in a second*. But these things are not always up to us.

Fifteen years ago, I thought I'd be popping out babies so fast, Graham and I would have to upgrade our six-bedroom house on Chestnut Park. But back then ten percent of women my age had trouble getting and staying pregnant—a statistic I looked up once to make myself feel better. Graham always said he was happy with our little family. But every sound in our six-bedroom house echoed before I put up the grass cloth wallpaper. Graham won't sell the place. He grew up there so asking him to move is like asking him to fly coach—neither is ever going to happen. I make the best of the six bedrooms. One is a home office, one a home gym, another a guest room, then there's our large suite and Carlos' room. There's still one room that's empty, that has a window that was long ago painted shut that Graham and I tried to pry open with a butter knife, but couldn't, that Graham said we could replace if we ever had to, with walls covered in white wallpaper with black-printed elephants that in one corner look like they're melting because of a small roof leak where the flashing pulled away from the chimney that's now been patched, or so Graham tells me. But none of the duct work leads there, so I keep the door closed so it doesn't suck up the heat from the rest of the place.

"All right! Now that we're warmed up, let's move into our big ski arms." Emily is doing scissor jumps on the pool deck and

I badly want her to slip. Does she even know what it's like to land hard on your ass?

"Big ski arms, Luísa! Work that core!" Emily's voice throbs through her headset mic.

I've been coming to this class with Connie for six months. Connie wouldn't do spin classes anymore when she got pregnant so here I am, too young for a water aerobics class, but my body too broken to have any more children. I hate everything about being here, hate pretending like I'm cross-country skiing in water, hate Elaine in front of me. Elaine, who is of the generation of women who wears makeup everywhere—even the pool—pushes her upper body out of the water like a synchronous swimmer, and I want to tell her to settle down, this isn't a televised event.

Connie ski jumps over. "Jeremy and I are going to the Elora Mill for our anniversary next weekend. Do you guys want to join us? This is a big one right? Fifteen years?"

"Yep." I swing my arms higher, dig my knees lower to thrust out of the water and damn if I don't look like Elaine right now, save for the Miami pink lipstick. "But Connie—"

"Great. I'll change the reservation to four."

I stretch my arms like I'm reaching for the straps of Elaine's red flowered bathing suit. There's no way Graham and I are going to dinner with them, but Connie won't listen. I'll try to tell her later maybe, after I've ordered a mimosa at brunch and Connie's giving me a lecture about day drinking. For now, I jump and thrust, my body shaking and unsteady every time I land.

"Yes Luísa, great job! I don't think I've ever seen you go that high!" Emily bellows. She's been jumping with us from the pool deck the whole time and her breath is easy and effortless. Maybe I'll start swimming to have Emily's limitless energy, so my body will feel capable and strong. Useful.

Emily moves onto another exercise. She hunches and runs on the spot, tucks her elbows and jabs at the air in front of her flat stomach. *Finally*, I think, *one I can easily do*, because

I've been running on the spot ever since Graham and I were married.

A month after I turned 21, Graham and I married under a canopy of white lilies (his mother's favourite) on his family's country estate in King City, north of Toronto. My gown had been worn by every McNaughton bride for three generations. I didn't complain. My Portuguese immigrant parents could barely afford the five hundred dollars they insisted on giving me as a wedding gift. At 31, Graham was the last of his siblings to get married, so the menu had long been set: caviar canapes, lobster bisque, rare Kobe beef, and a croquembouche filled with three different pastry creams wrapped in caramel as voluminous as the crinoline under my dress. I had pictured baked Alaska with sparklers for dessert and Boney M's "Rasputin" playing as the servers brought it out, but Graham's mother tucked her silver hair behind her ear and smiled.

"That's very nice dear. It sounds more appropriate for your first anniversary." She spun a pearl earring Graham told me a former Prime Minister's wife had gifted his mother for her fortieth wedding anniversary the previous year.

Graham had pushed for the baked Alaska, but his mother wouldn't back down from tradition. But later that night, when it was just us, he stepped out of our hotel bathroom holding a plate of baked Alaska, a sparkler fizzing little shooting stars that landed on his palm while a waterfall drumbeat and clapping from Boney M's Rasputin thumped through his phone. Graham's mother had her traditions but so did Graham, and that was one he kept for nearly fifteen years.

I am so tired of this and, finally, Emily tells us to rest.

"Well that one's getting easier," says Connie. "I think I did twice as many as you."

I want to throttle her but opt for pettiness instead. "You're really breaking out this time, eh?"

She blinks at me. "What's gotten into you today?"

Before I answer, Emily moves on to jumping side twists and I hear a familiar waterfall drumbeat. Boney M's "Rasputin" throbs through the speakers and I want to sink to the bottom of the pool, fill my ears with water instead of the beat, even if it means the water will be sloshing in my ears for days, leaving me dizzy and unsteady until it leaks out. But I don't because Connie would dive down and her Mount Etna belly would lift us until we erupt through the surface. Then I'd have to explain myself.

Connie is chronically optimistic, always telling me to be grateful I had a son, a strong marriage, the house on Chestnut Park, like I don't have a right to grieve. It's exhausting listening to her, feeling like I have to keep up appearances, like I should be fine with the shifting tectonic plates of my life when I thought everything had been settled. Shouldn't I at least get to rage about the life I wanted? Shouldn't I at least get to mourn the loss of the children I never had?

I can't get into it with Connie right now. Connie, who gets to decide when she's done having kids, who's never had to lie about why she didn't have more children, whose husband is always home for dinner. And so I jump and twist, twist and jump, splash water onto my face, flick it toward my ears, hoping some will get trapped in my canals and the world will fade away and it'll just be my ragged breath pounding through my body and not Boney M.

Carlos was a colicky baby. Some days I left him in his crib, his hands tight little fists next to his ears, while I stood in the shower and let the hot water run over me to block out those cries. My stomach was a searing mess back then. It got so bad I stopped travelling with Graham for work. Before Carlos, I went with him everywhere—Aruba, Belgium, France—but after Carlos we couldn't put a wailing baby on a flight. My mother came by every day, but I was mostly alone with Carlos and his tightly screwed face and wrinkled skin, whose nub of a head flushed so red when he screeched it looked like a ripe

plum picked fresh from one of the trees on our property. If I wasn't humming softly to him while he nursed, if I didn't rock him while I snacked on baby carrots, he'd fill like a balloon then release all that air in hot noisy gasps that went on long after I expected him deflate.

I tried to stick it out, I tried. But I moved in with my parents for the rest of Graham's trip.

"I feel like a failure," I moaned to my mother the first night as she put cooled fennel tea into a dropper.

"Why?" She was playing peek-a-boo with Carlos and when he opened his mouth to laugh, she squirted the tea from the dropper on the inside of his cheek.

"I should be able to do this on my own."

"Says who? Listen Luísa, the day your baby is born you become a mother. But you become a parent over time, with experience, with each decision."

I've had to make many decisions since then and they weren't always the right ones. I decided my stomach pain was only stress, not fibroids, decided to ignore my own body when Graham's doctor said it was nothing. I'm still deciding what to do next, deciding who I am now. What does life look like when someone else gets to decide whether you're still a woman?

"Okay!" Emily says. "Let's get that core working with some forty-five-degree kicks!"

I decide that I hate Emily as she flips her legs like she's a can-can girl.

"Keep the core tight for this one, ladies. We'll keep this up for thirty seconds, but if your core is burning and you need a break, take a two-second rest!"

Two seconds? Elaine and Connie mirror Emily's movements, but I just can't. I feel like the chest deep water is rising past my shoulders and to my chin. I imagine that soon I'll drown. I wade to the side and slide up onto the edge of the pool deck.

"I need a minute," I tell Emily before she chides me for taking a longer break.

Emily frowns but Connie calls, "Take all the time you need, I'll do extra for you!" and Elaine laughs. My chest knocks with Connie's betrayal. We argue like sisters, but we've always been each other's life preservers.

On my wedding day I almost bailed. Graham's family thought I was marrying his money, and his mother wasn't quiet about the fact that she didn't think my Portuguese family quite fit with hers. I was drowning in self-doubt, but it was Connie who settled me.

"Hey." She squeezed my hand. "They're lucky to be getting you."

Then she walked down the aisle ahead of me, leading the way.

I got pregnant again soon after Carlos was born. But I found blood in the toilet one morning. When I told Graham, he rubbed his thumb across my cheek.

"It's okay," he said, "we'll try again."

I remember his thumb had a blister that felt cool and smooth but also smelled faintly of tobacco even though I'd never seen him smoke.

I had three more miscarriages, and each time Graham ran me a bath and made my favourite herbal tea spiked with a shot of Dalmore, the twelve-year-old single malt he always kept on hand.

One night after he arrived home late from a work trip, Graham slept in the guest room so he wouldn't disturb me. The next morning, I had tea instead of coffee so I wouldn't wake him grinding beans. He got up around noon, scratching his stubbled face, asking the time, and offered to spend a few days in the guest room.

"Jet lag. Don't want to disturb you." He kissed the top of my head.

By then, we were both used to sleeping alone.

Emily is sitting on a chair bringing her heels toward her bum. Frog kicks. My least favourite exercise in the pool, partly because I can't do them without losing my balance and partly because these are Emily's favourite, so we do them in one-minute bursts.

My stomach is still a simmering mess, but I lift my heels off the pool floor.

"Touch your butt Luísa," Emily calls.

"I am," I say, huffing.

"I can see through the water Luísa and you're not doing it right. Heels to bum, heels to bum."

For a second I think she says, *I can see right through you Luísa*, and I wonder what my barren body looks like, if Emily sees my scarred uterus, my faulty ovaries, my cracked and leaking heart.

Over the past year, the house on Chestnut Park has gotten colder. Graham had always kept it at twenty-three degrees Celsius because I had poor circulation, but a few months ago he dropped the thermostat to seventeen because he found it too stuffy, so I walked around the house draped in knit shawls and sipping hot teas spiked with Dalmore that I fixed myself.

I wasn't surprised last week when Graham told me he wanted a divorce, but I was when he told me he'd met someone, and she was pregnant.

It made me remember the time I bought Carlos a high-end laptop to play Minecraft. The first time, everything booted up smoothly and Carlos happily played all day. But the next morning, the laptop wouldn't start with the same easy chime. It was just a black screen no matter which combination of buttons tech support told me to press.

"Looks like you got a dud," the tech support worker said after an hour. "Bring it back and we'll set you up with a new one."

The store made the trade just like that. When Carlos booted up the new laptop, his face settled with such relief when

the machine chimed turning on. He logged into his Minecraft account and found everything there just the way he'd left it, this world he had worked so hard to create still intact, and I wonder if that's how Graham felt when he traded me in for someone else.

Emily is tossing us pool noodles as we wade into the deep end. She's never had us out here before and I worry whether Connie can handle it because she's never been much of a swimmer.

"We've gone through a series of movements and now we're going to put everything together," Emily says.

"Here?" My voice is tinny.

"Yes, of course here." Emily rolls her eyes. "Use the pool noodles for support if you have to."

"You know Connie's pregnant right?"

"It's fine, I don't mind," Connie says.

"You're the only one not trying Luísa," Emily says. "Your body can do a lot if you just push yourself a little."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I shout. I front crawl to the edge, climb out and face Emily. Her mouth is partly open, and she keeps looking over my shoulder. I wonder if someone is coming up behind me, if I'll be sucker-punched again.

"Luísa!" Connie splashes behind me. I ignore her. If she's drowning, she'll have to save herself.

"You know what?" I jab the pool noodle into Emily's chest, and she backs up. "There are things my body can do and a whole hell of a lot it can't. And guess what? That's normal. I'm not some twenty-year-old university student with a tight ass. I'm a woman who's constipated if she doesn't drink Metamucil every day. Oh, don't make that face. We all shit Emily, so you can take your long limbs and your sure feet and ski arm your way to hell."

I throw the pool noodle into the water, grab my towel from the bench and head to the changeroom.

"Luísa, wait!" Connie calls after me.

I strip off my bathing suit and stand in the shower. The

cold water turns my skin numb. I rub shampoo in my hair, scrub so hard I expect my scalp to bleed. I let the shampoo run in my eyes, let it sting, then let my tears rinse everything away. I howl into the shower head, clutch my aching stomach.

The shower curtain pulls back and Connie is there. She turns off the water, wraps me in a towel and leads me to a bench.

"I'm never coming back here again," I say.

"Well, that's good because Emily told me not to bring you back here again," Connie says, and for a moment, we laugh.

"What's going on?" Connie whispers, pulling wet strands of hair from my face.

"Graham's leaving me. He's having a baby with someone else." I clutch Connie's enormous belly. I feel her baby moving, something I haven't felt since I was pregnant with Carlos, and the loss of each miscarriage hits me all over again. Connie doesn't say anything, just rubs my wet back as I press my head to her belly. I'm relieved she doesn't tell me to be grateful that I have Carlos, that she just lets me cry while I suck in the bitter scent of chlorine. My sobs echo in the changeroom and I feel like I'm being haunted by all the children I never had.

"Who am I now?" I whisper into Connie's belly.

Connie's pruned hand rubs my clammy back. "You're a mother, a daughter, and my very best friend. Whatever you do, whoever you are, it's enough."

I pull away and she sits next to me, anchoring me under her shoulder.

"We'll sort everything out together, we always have," she whispers. And I nod because I know that's true.

Connie fishes her tear-free conditioner from her pool bag, squirts some into her palms and rubs them together. She runs the vanilla-scented cream through my hair. She starts gently, separating each knot with her fingers before sliding the comb through, going section by section, working first her fingers through my hair, then the comb. Over and over, until all the knots are gone.

NELLE

NELLE

NONFICTION

NELLE

Telaina Morse Eriksen

AN ANNOTATED GUIDE TO LAUNDRY

“That’s when I learned how to do laundry . . . just after my mother told me the facts of life . . . ”

—Maureen Stanton, *Laundry*

- 1) Gather the dirty clothes from all the bedrooms and the single bathroom of the one-room schoolhouse that has been “renovated” (renovated means now habitable) so that seven children and two adults can “live” in it (live means survive).
- 2) Place smelly clothes in a huge heap on the Pledge-waxed red linoleum “dining room” floor (dining room means small space adjacent to the kitchen where the party-line phone and your sister Tina’s morning glory, spider, and *aloe vera* plants reside). Try not to resent your oldest sister Terese for hiding in the bathroom and reading a book so she won’t have to help sort the clothes. Try not to resent your brother Trent for not having to help at all because he is a boy and this is girls’ work, except your brother Tracy has to do dishes all the time which is also girls’ work so basically Trent gets to sleep while you sort through disgusting threadbare underwear because he is your mother’s favorite. (Your father will tell you much later in life that he suspects Trent is not his child, and is instead the result of an affair, but you doubt that this is true. You think your father is just trying to make sense of why your mother was capable of loving one son and no one else.)
- 3) Gather as many clothes baskets as you can find (extra points if baskets are broken so the sharp plastic will

squeeze and/or cut your fingers) and place them in a circle around the mound of grimy clothes. Drag chairs from the kitchen table so you have somewhere to sit while you sort your father's greasy farm and factory clothes, your school clothes, the towels and washcloths, your bras and underwear, the darks and lights, all from each other. Alternatively, you could just sit on the floor and toss stuff from floor to basket.

- 4) Bicker with your sisters while you sort. Pound on the door and yell at Terese to come out and help. Tell her you have to pee. Check upstairs to see if there are any more clothes in any room. Since you don't own a washing machine, there won't be any more loads of laundry until next Saturday.
- 5) Ask who is going to the laundromat with you. You can't drive yet, so at least one, if not two sisters will have to come with you. If Terese isn't hiding in the bathroom, she is at work or college. Tonya might be at home, or babysitting, or working, depending what year it is. Once Tara turns 16, it is frequently Tara, you, and Tina, who has just turned 14. You are around 10 at this time. When you were younger sometimes it was Terese, Tonya, Tara, Tina, and you. Or Tonya, Tara, Tina, and you. You always go to the laundromat. Your mother doesn't want to deal with you. The more opportunities to get the maximum number of kids out of the house, the better.
- 6) Carry the laundry out to the car. What car it is depends on what year it is. These are interchangeable ancient cars in various stages of disrepair and decay that your father keeps together with unmatched skill and cunning using parts from the junkyard and supplies like wire coat hangers, duct tape, and Bondo. You have been a passenger in a car that has broken down at the side of various roads and highways more times than you can count. There would be even more dire emergencies,

but your father has made sure all the children in the family know how to wire a dragging muffler with a coat hanger. You all know how to change a tire. You know how to check the water in the radiator (let it cool first, never take a hot radiator cap off!), look for a loose alternator belt, check the oil, put water or antifreeze in, clean corrosion off old battery cables, put transmission fluid in, put oil in. You all know how to bend a coat hanger and unlock the car through a cracked window if you accidentally lock the keys in. You rarely lock cars though. You have nothing to steal. Your father changes the oil in the cars when he can afford to, the old oil flowing into dirty pans and then he throws the used oil on your dirt driveway to stop the dust from flying up in warm, dry weather.

You always carry jumper cables with you. You are used to windshield wipers, headlights, and brake lights that do not work. These things must wait until someone gets paid and Dad can buy parts. Terese and Tonya frequently and wordlessly hand their paychecks and babysitting money over to your mother.

- 7) Stand in front of your mother as she painstakingly counts out quarters and ones, the budget for the chore to come. A load of laundry in a small washer costs 75 cents. Sometimes you have a working dryer at home, sometimes you don't. Sometimes it is nice enough outside to hang up the clothes on the clothesline to dry. Sometimes it's not. (There is nothing better than fresh air-dried sheets and nothing worse than air-dried towels.) If you do have a working dryer at home or the weather is good to line dry (there are never, ever enough clothes pins), you will wash the clothes at the laundromat and then bring the sodden, heavy baskets home to dry the clothes in an ancient hand-me-down dryer that resides in what you call your "back room."

The back room is also where your pet pig Oinky sleeps until he reaches an untenable size for a pet. At that time, your parents will take away your Duroc pig that you bottle fed, and pushed around in your doll buggy, the pig who answers to his name, who comes when he is called, who never strays from your property, who trots after you when you ride your bike, and your parents will sell him for slaughter. They lie to you and tell you he is at a bigger farm, siring little Oinkys but your sister Tonya tells you the truth when you are older. They were broke and needed money and Oinky was an asset.

You remember Oinky would suck your index and middle fingers. You remember you fed Oinky bruised or blighted garden tomatoes from your hand and he would take them, being so careful not to bite you. You are so traumatized by Oinky's fate that years later when you read *Charlotte's Web* to your children, you do not even recognize at first that your story of Oinky and the story of Wilbur are the same story but with very different endings.

You are inconsolable when Oinky is gone, crying and screaming in a way that will not be tolerated for much longer until your father brings home a mixed collie pup tucked inside his winter coat. He hands the puppy to you and tells you a dog is a better pet for a little girl than a boar pig. In the continued spirit of the most unoriginal names ever, you name this puppy Lassie. Lassie will sleep in the back room. When she dies, her son Hampton will sleep in the back room. Hampton has three legs and mange. Has never had a rabies shot in his life. You are 16 years old when Hampton dies. Your father shoots Hampton after the neighbors call animal control to complain about him.

As you stand in front of your mother with your hand out for the laundry money, you know you will

shove all the clothes into as few washers and dryers as possible and spend the rest of the quarters on video games (Galaga and Pac Man, you have now entered the 1980s BTW) and snacks from the supermarket next door to the laundromat. This, and gossiping with your sisters, are the only good parts of doing laundry.

- 8) Arrive at the laundromat and carry all the clothes inside. Sometimes you will see other people you know. Your people. You have a nicer house and better life than some of these people who stop by your house for food. Your people sometimes stay the night if their mothers or fathers kick them out, or they just don't want to be touched, or bothered, or hear the arguments about money, car problems, unemployment, drinking, drugs, or illness. Your mother and father never tell anyone who needs a meal or a place to stay for a night or two no. You catch up on gossip, or make future plans as the laundry spins round and round.

Sometimes there are other people at the laundromat who sit and look at you and they have tight, downward-turned mouths. These are women who flip through *Good Housekeeping* while their quilts, comforters, bedspreads, and sleeping bags toss and turn in the oversized machines. Their husbands work at GM, or own small businesses, or drive to Toledo or Adrian for professional jobs. Their clothes are from nice department stores like J.C. Penney's or Sears or even Elder-Beerman's. They have washer and dryers at home and are just at the laundromat among the white trash to wash things that won't fit in their brand-new Kenmore washers. They own same-decade Buicks, Chevys, Oldsmobiles. They own snowmobiles and four-wheelers and campers. Their houses have wall-to-wall carpet, with straight lines from where they just vacuumed. They have color TVs and own matching dishes, and have a dishwasher to put them in. Their

sons play football and their daughters are cheerleaders. Their sons won't be seen with you in public but you are plenty good enough to kiss and feel up in the dark. Their daughters mean-girl you, and tell everyone you have scabies and lice.

- 9) Don't fold the dry clothes at the laundromat. It's way too complicated. You are washing nine people's clothes. It's always a mess. Instead come home and throw all the clothes on the couch (your mother calls it a davenport, like you live in a late 20th century redneck version of *Downton Abbey*). All the socks will be gathered up and put in the "sock basket" which you will sift through each school morning in futile hope of finding two socks, your size, that match. No one can be bothered to pair socks. It's too much work. You're just trying to make it until tomorrow.
- 10) Complain bitterly as you fold the clothes and sort them into pile by person. You have already spent hours and hours of your Saturday on laundry. On a good day your mother will tell you to stop whining and finish up. That she has a gallon of vanilla ice cream and some Spanish peanuts and Hershey's syrup in the kitchen, and you can all have ice cream and watch *Love Boat* and *Fantasy Island* on the TV that Dad fixed by getting a "new" picture tube at the dump.

On a bad day, she will be passed out on the other couch, an empty bottle of Valium resting on top of her wallet in her open purse.

- 11) Do laundry at different laundromats and see the world. In 1984, the house and land where you have lived since you were born will be in foreclosure. The animals you have fed and nurtured will be sold, given away, or killed. Your father gives permission for you to go to visit Terese and Tonya in Houston, Texas, where they now live, while he cleans out your old house and finds a new place for you to live.

Terese is a social worker at a domestic violence shelter. Tonya works full-time as a parole officer and attends the University of Houston Law Center. You fly in an airplane for the first time ever. There are washers and dryers right there in your sisters' apartment complex. You don't need to drive anywhere to do laundry. And you're responsible only for your own laundry, no one else's. You watch MTV and HBO. Learn to use your sisters' VCR. You are overwhelmed by Houston and miss your animals, the woods, the crops, the fields. But the anonymity is the best feeling in the world. No one knows who you are, where you live, or who your parents are.

The next laundromat is in Ohio. When you come home from Texas, your father has rented the first floor of a house in Waldron, Michigan, less than a mile from the Ohio border. Your mother is working for and living with an old World War II veteran named Walter who has had a severe stroke. She takes care of him Monday through Friday, and gets the weekends off. Your father works second shift and is sleeping when you go to school, gone when you come home from school, and not back from work yet when you go to bed. All of your siblings are gone, living on their own in various places. When you take three or four loads of laundry to the laundromat in Ohio, it is a quiet experience. There are no sisters. There is generally no one you know—it's a different town and you didn't grow up with these people. You buy a Mountain Dew and a Snickers bar and fold the laundry on the tables provided at the laundromat.

- 12) Know that you will never escape laundry. In 1986, you believe that no one will ever love you. You believe your whole life will be nothing but pain and rejection. Nothing will ever be better. You will never be skinny and pretty. You will never have nice clothes or nice

things. You will never be accepted for who you are. You don't know exactly who you are. You just know you are pretending a lot of the time. You think about killing yourself. Honestly, you've thought about killing yourself since you were 12, when you would scratch your wrists with your brother's hunting knife. But you cut yourself pretty deep this time, in April, about six weeks before you graduate from high school. This is called a *suicidal gesture*. You have stitches, and a bandage. And you still have to go to the laundromat on Saturday if you want clean clothes. Neither one of your parents will do it. They are both working, and when they are not working they are stoned (mother) or drunk (father). So you press the laundry baskets against the right side of your body as you're carrying them, so as not to put pressure on your left wrist, which is still throbbing from being stitched up on Tuesday. It's really kind of funny, doing laundry when you're so depressed.

- 13) Share your laundry knowledge. A lot of college students at your university don't know how to do laundry, or they aren't familiar with coin-operated machines. Freshman year, in the basement of your residence hall, you help more than one struggling freshman who puts the quarters in but doesn't know you have to pull the little tray back out. You help others who don't know they can open the dryer to check and then restart without putting more money in. You show another freshman how to work the change machine on the wall and another one how to select the kind of laundry detergent they want out of the laundry soap vending machine.

While you have lots of real-life skills, you're uncomfortable in college because it is comprised of the sons and daughters of the women who read *Good Housekeeping* at the laundromat. Later in college you

realize that those sons and daughters feel uncomfortable around the sons and daughters from Rochester Hills, Grosse Pointe, Bloomfield Hills, Novi, and Beverly Hills. These students have breathtaking amounts of money you cannot even begin to visualize. You hear them talking about vacations, trips abroad, skiing, golf, tennis, an entire world which you have only seen in movies and on TV. You cannot imagine being supported by your parents. You are responsible for all your expenses, even though your parents still claim you as a dependent because you won't have health insurance if they don't.

You go to therapy for the first time. Your therapist is a graduate student named Eva—she is short and sweet and has dark hair. She always records your conversations so she can go over them with her supervisor. You tell her about your father's drinking, your mother's prescription drug habit, the abuse you've experienced (verbal, physical, sexual), your poverty, the jobs you've worked and are working, your scholarship, your suicidal gesture when you were 18. Her eyes grow wider and wider. She says at the end of one session that she doesn't know if she is supposed to say it or not, but she is amazed that you have managed to make it to college and complete two years of it successfully. This makes you feel good. Seen. Heard. You knew college was harder for you than it was for so many of your lighter, brighter, more optimistic peers. You see Eva for over two years as she can fit you in with her graduate coursework. You suspect (know) she forges paperwork so that she can continue to see you for a few months even after you graduate in 1990. You are still grateful to her for doing that to this day.

- 14) Rewards, bribery, whatever works to motivate you to do this godawful unrelenting chore, is okay. Your future husband will sit across from you and say, "If we go to

the laundromat and get the laundry done, we can go out for ice cream afterward.” You sit in companionable silence in the laundromat with him. You both read books as the laundry agitates nearby. This laundromat is a mix of people—young professionals, college students, moms doing the semi-annual washing of comforters, people whose washers and dryers have broken.

- 15) Teach your children how to do laundry ASAP. You will teach your daughter in sixth grade, your son when he is in fourth grade. Your children will have such different childhoods than you had. They will only be in laundromats maybe three or four times with you—when the power at your house has gone out, or you have to wash bulky items. Your washer and dryer are right downstairs in your basement. If your washer or dryer break, you or your husband call a repair person. If the washer or dryer is beyond repair, you buy a new one.
- 16) First floor laundry is the end game. You met your husband when he was a graduate student and you were an undergraduate student. Then he worked in the liquor department at Meijer while he looked for a professional job after he graduated. You were still poor as you had been your whole life. But your husband was not used to being poor.

You and your husband work hard, but not nearly as hard as the people in poverty that you’ve left behind. Their bodies are broken from years of hard physical labor, emotional stress, and little medical, dental, or mental health care. You and your husband work hunched over computers, or around meeting tables, or in “collaboration” cubicles.

You don’t really know how to spend money because you’ve never had money to spend. You shop for clothes at Kohl’s and vacation in northern Michigan, taking your children to many of the lighthouses in the state

and on hikes across sand dunes, and beaches on Lake Michigan. You stay in hotels with two queen beds and eat the included breakfasts. Both of your children know how to pour hotel batter into hotel waffle makers and make their own waffles, and this was something that seemed so intimidating and... rich to you well into your 30s. You're so happy and proud that your children will have these experiences and not poverty and mismatched socks and back rooms and addiction and laundromats.

You are middle-aged now. Your children are 20 and 23. Your parents are dead. Your father of cancer at 74, your mother from complications of diabetes at 85. Your sister Tonya committed suicide just weeks before her 49th birthday. Your husband's parents are dead—his father of a staph infection, his mother of cancer.

Your natural inclination is to still buy Scott's toilet paper even though you could buy Quilted Northern Plush. You still buy Meijer brand dental floss but you also buy expensive Seventh Generation laundry detergent and eco-scent-free dryer sheets. You realize one day that you haven't totaled up the groceries in your head before checking out. You have enough. You have more than enough. Both of your children will graduate from college debt free. You know how lucky, how privileged, this makes you in a world that values money the way ours does. You don't know how you got so lucky when other people who were born in the exact same circumstances are still living in them.

You remember food stamps. You remember government cheese. You remember powdered milk. Your father being laid off. Fried mush. Hot dogs. A squirrel being cooked in the crockpot. Foreclosure. Running out of gas. Pell grants. Student loans. Jobs where grease burned you and men grabbed your ass. You remember hand-me-down-ill-fitting clothing.

But you are learning to spend money with less guilt. You buy nice winter coats and shoes that fit well. You pay to have your hair professionally colored. You buy tickets to plays, operas, musicals, concerts. You give money to universities. To libraries. Art centers. You give money to family members and friends in need. To music programs. The local symphony. The Sierra Club. The Nature Conservancy. To political candidates who know and will act on the urgency of climate change. Some of these are small donations, some larger.

You buy a second house after your first house is paid off. This second home isn't large, but it's in the woods, a few miles from Lake Michigan. There are hardwood floors, granite countertops, a fireplace, a deck where you can sit and read (sit and remember), a first-floor master bedroom and, three or four steps from it, a first floor laundry—a state-of-the-art washer with a state-of-the-art dryer stacked on top of it.

You place your hand on the washer and the dryer which should mean nothing. You have never washed clothes in a river, beating them against a rock, or rubbing them against a washboard. But it means something. Something you cannot articulate, even though you have spent the last decade trying to describe to someone, anyone this strange economic whiplash you have experienced in your lifetime. You don't know what to do with these two halves of yourself. The privileged, professional middle-aged white woman and the frightened, overwhelmed, impoverished child somehow converge in this domestic chore, leaving you wondering who you are, and how to live morally with money while knowing what poverty feels like.

The first load of laundry in the new house is so easy. The clothes basket in your hands is clean and new. The clothes inside do not have single tear or worn spot.

You close the door of the washing machine and it makes a gentle chirp at you to remind you to select a cycle and begin.

Laurie Granieri

NOTHING LEFT TO LOSE

ONE: Talking of Michelangelo

My mother is on the phone. She is eager to talk about Michelangelo.

The long-dead artist is the only way she can articulate what life has been like inside her chronically obese body these past 83 years. This is the body I love, with the soft folds that will always say “Mother” to me, the body I’ve tried and failed to protect from snide remarks and the endless indignities of everyday life as a big woman with big opinions. More than once, my mother has been dismissed as a “Fat Bitch.”

While living abroad studying Italian renaissance art history three decades ago, I took my parents to see Michelangelo’s David, because that’s what you do with tourists in Florence: fill up on gelato, then traipse to the Accademia to pay homage to David, a biblical figure famous for bringing down the giant with just a sling and a rock.

But the Michelangelo sculptures tugging at my mother’s imagination all these years later are four smaller male nudes that are easy to miss, given their placement in a hallway leading up to a 17-foot-tall Carrara marble rock star like the David. Known variously as “The Prisoners,” “The Captives,” or “The Slaves,” the men’s bodies appear to writhe as they struggle for liberation from the coarse stone that cleaves to them.

“That’s me,” Mom confides. “I’m trapped in the stone.”

The sculptures are considered *non finito*, unfinished, by some; others insist that the raw marble represents a different aesthetic choice—Michelangelo’s version of the messy bun. Certain portions of the larger-than-life forms are rough-hewn, while other areas are meticulously defined.

Finished or unfinished, we are bearing witness to a transition. And like so many of the body’s transitions—birth, adolescence, surgery, death—the process suggests agony. These people want out.

My mother is saying: *My body is not a temple; it’s a prison.* But I cannot release her.

TWO: A Kind of Sweetness

All the pink in my mother’s kitchen as I was growing up: the pastel Sweet’N Low packets stacked beside the sugar bowl, the plastic cups of low-fat yogurt, and the glossy aluminum cans of Tab cola standing at attention in the fridge, proffering zero-calorie refreshment.

Even now, saccharine is the sweetness her body recognizes, even prefers—a coal tar derivative accidentally discovered in a 19th-century lab: not sweetness itself, but a guilt-free approximation of sweetness. Saccharine promises a bite of the apple without issuing a one-way ticket from Eden.

What is it like to fear—to deny yourself—a certain kind of sweetness? Deny: from the Latin *negāre* “to deny, say no.” My mother has said no to herself for nearly eight decades, all as the world has scolded her for doing it poorly.

THREE: The Weight

She blames the tonsils.

Before her tonsillectomy at age 5, scallop-edged photographs of my mother in 1940s West Philadelphia show a skinny girl with blond braids—a scrappy beauty, knobby knees, eyes squinting into the sun; then, ever after, fighting to keep the weight off, tall for her age, big-boned, big smile, and yes—a beauty. Tonsils, though unlikely culprits, are integral to the legend that is My Mother's Weight Problem.

Sometime in the early 1950s, Grandma and Mom boarded a city bus to visit a doctor who administered shots intended to control her weight. My mother's size presented a problem for my perpetually insecure grandmother to solve, my grandmother, the oldest in a sprawling immigrant family of short people; my "What will the neighbors say?" grandmother; my deeply generous and sweet—not saccharine—grandmother, making a science project of her daughter's body.

Another kind of needling came from certain women in the family, the aunts who smoked cigarettes dangling like a sixth finger from their hands, beat porch cushions, scrubbed stoops, and prepared food for the men, who were generally butchers and locksmiths, tailors, cooks, and maître d's from The Old Country, who never failed to eat their fill.

And on the morning of my parents' June wedding, Grandma greeted her luminous 20-year-old daughter at the foot of the stairs with this question: *Dear, don't you think that gown is a little tight?*

Fifty-nine Junes later, at my own wedding reception, Mom glanced down at my feet and, as if talking to herself, observed: *Your ankles are holding water.*

FOUR: The Wait

Now, numbers are everything. My mother's orthopedist refuses to recommend her for knee surgery that could alleviate her pain and expand her mobility until she meets a certain Body Mass Index (BMI). In other words: Her independence depends on this surgery. She's dieting but can't appreciably decrease her BMI—an early-19th-century mathematician's invention meant to determine obesity, but which has been problematically employed as a diagnostic tool, as well—unless she has access to GLP-1 weight-loss injectable medications. These are the medications that Mom can no longer afford now that the Trump administration has refused to finalize the Biden administration's initiative to force Medicare and Medicaid to cover anti-obesity drugs.

She watches as Oprah exits Weight Watchers, a now-bankrupt corporation that for decades offered what amounted to a second church service for my mother. Each week, she lined up and weighed in, then gathered with other women—mostly, they were women—to listen to the Gospel According to WW Founder Jean Nidetch, disseminated by group leaders in community centers, synagogues, and church halls across the globe.

Oprah, winnowing down her waist, while Rosie O'Donnell's sweet, slack face appears in Instagram reels from Ireland: As their bodies shrink, their heads appear to blossom. With the help of injectables, they carve themselves down like bars of soap. And why shouldn't they? It's not enough that these women are smart and talented—trailblazers, even: They've been pilloried over so many decades for failing to cut themselves down to size. The media seemed to be saying: If you won't do it, we will.

But my mother remains here, in her 400-square-foot assisted living apartment, parsing out her food and her compounded generic GLP-1; the latter is set to run out by the end of the summer. If she opts to renew the prescription, the price will jump to more than \$1,000 a month. She does not suffer from Type II diabetes, and her blood pressure is 126/60. Her echocardiogram? Perfect—no threat of heart disease. This should not be a sorrow. And still: My mother’s healthier indicators serve as roadblocks as she seeks, one last time, to mitigate the unhealthy ones. The body, a puzzle, the body, an unsolvable problem.

“This is my last chance,” she tells me.

I want my mother to play bridge, to finally read one of her book club selections, maybe even drop by movie night at the assisted-living complex’s cinema. But she worries she’ll have problems getting up from her seat, worries she’ll make a scene. I can feel those long-dead aunts smoking and judging her.

So, instead of watching classic films, she sits in her room and writes to her congressman. He responds a few weeks later with a carefully researched memo that fails to tell her anything she doesn’t already know.

It’s becoming clear that the body positivity movement arrived too late. My mother seems doomed to live inside a disobedient body. I am weary of this ancient struggle of the weight we fail to lift.

After viewing a news segment on GLP-1 injectables, she emails the local CBS-TV affiliate about her predicament: “I am a victim of the situation he describes in his piece,” she writes. “There is a lot more I would like to share. . . . I would be willing

to share my story and be able to encourage the drug companies . . . to rethink their pricing.”

She posts on Threads. She’s on *Threads*?

“I am between a rock and a hard place, and Congress and [the] President have the ability to change [this],” she writes. “I am in great pain and desperately need the surgery. I do not have any risk factors to get the meds for \$22 per month.”

Between a rock and a hard place. Her soft body, captive to the stone.

Mom’s post yields a heart reaction and two comments—one from a woman hawking “anti-aging peptide therapies,” another from a bot who coos: “Hello beautiful, would you want to be friends?”

FIVE: Shapeshifting

She labels herself “a victim of the situation.” I admit, I chafe at Mom’s use of the word victim, maybe because a small part of me continues to cling to the notion that if she just buckled down, she’d shed the necessary weight.

I urge her to write about it. I dust off my reportorial skills and draft a list of questions to get her started, including, “When do you last recall feeling pleased with your appearance?” I wrap up a pretty blue journal for Mother’s Day.

The message: *Be more like me; write to understand how you feel.* Journal writing—expository without exposure.

My mother thanks me for sending the questions, but she neglects to answer a single one. When I visit her next, I notice the journal on her kitchen table, and I can bet she hasn’t written a word. Mom is set on doing things her way, even as I warn that the internet is a cesspool.

The CBS reporter sends an email seeking additional information. If she's forced to show herself in a TV news segment, will the world unload on her? My anxiety ramps up. Will the bots deploy to devour an old woman before they turn back to feast on Oprah, Rosie, Hillary, Kamala, the Sarahs (Palin and Huckabee Sanders), and Michelle? I am here on my couch, Rumination Central, sipping tea, scrolling, trying to figure out how to curb my mother's obsession without shutting her down altogether.

But the truth is, my mom isn't interested in laying out her story in a pretty blue journal or even on an Op-Ed page, distilling a lifetime of frustration into neat paragraphs. Rather, she seems bent on unpacking the conundrum with anyone who will listen—me, my husband, my best friend, her doctor, politicians, reporters, and yes, the perpetually snarled World Wide Web.

For my mother, alchemy lies in the throat, in the telling, and she seems heedless as she loosens her tongue and unfurls the story like a flag, plunging forward into the scrum. She is emboldened, daring to embody that old Kris Kristofferson line: *Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose.*

And, really, what *does* she have to lose? It's late, and she wants to be free. Mom is determined to shed the weight of her despair. She's not gonna play it sweet 'n low, shrinking from a fight with a Goliath like Big Pharma. Perhaps telling anyone who will listen is her way of grabbing her slingshot and declaring, "I'm going in. Hold my Tab."

Because she's a woman who for 78 years has been told, in one way or another, that her body is lazy and wrong, that she is simultaneously too much and not enough. Now, in my mother's final act, a plausible resolution from the world of

science enters like a *deus ex machina*: It's likely that she has been walking around all this time with a condition, and now that this condition could be remedied, she wants in. While GLP-1's may not offer a panacea, her essential wrongness has been disproved.

Who knows? Perhaps my mother has the Michelangelo analogy just right: She's deep in transition, emerging from the stone, summoning the new shape of things to come.

She has lost 55 pounds and must lose 20 more; *non finito*. She believes nothing is set in stone.

Kerry Madden-Lunsford

THE FAMILY PLAN

My son, who is thirty-six, has had forty-five phone numbers or thereabouts. My husband doesn't name/save his numbers, but I save each one. His siblings' numbers have stayed reliably, blessedly the same all these years from when we first got them cell phones. I honestly don't know why I save all his numbers. Somehow, I think that giving each new phone a name will be proof that our boy is trying to join the world again, but by the world, I mean—our world.

See, he's getting better. He wants a phone. He got a phone. Next, it will be a job. Oh wait, he should get sober first. He should go back into rehab. Show he's serious. But hey, a phone is a good start. Maybe, we've turned a corner.

He's had forty-five phone numbers since 2013 when we took him off the Family Plan after the intervention that didn't take. I've got all his phone numbers stored on my phone under different incarnations of his name. I name them hoping one will finally stick.

Joan Didion wrote, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live," but my husband and I tell each other stories so our son will live. We want to him to live. We want him to turn that corner, but we've turned so many corners ourselves we always go right back where we started.

Last night he called from an unknown number. We always answer unknown numbers in case it might be him. It was him and the accompanying sweet relief—he's still alive—he's still here. Our son also calls my husband more than he calls me because my husband is a softie and says yes more than I do.

"Hey, it's me, Pops."

"Hey son, how are you? How's it going? It's great to hear your voice."

"Yeah, yeah, Dad, you too! Hey Pops, can you get me an Uber to a concert over on Lincoln for me and my friend right now."

"Where are you? Where do you want to go exactly?"

"Let's see, where are we? What's the address here?"

I'm sitting next to my husband, but I don't say anything. I'm glad to hear our boy's voice. The disappointment of his asking for a favor stings a little but nothing like it used to in the olden days when we only traded in hope. This is typical—our son wants an Uber, or he wants money to buy a phone, which we will only send to the company selling the phone. It's usually a storefront in downtown LA that has a deal. New Phone. New Watch. Jewelry. We never send money directly to him, because our boy hasn't had a bank account in years. The phones he gets are called "Obama Phones" and they don't hold much memory for things like photographs or VENMO.

Sending money is also enabling, and we were both experts at that. To our son's requests, my husband often says yes, and sometimes, I say yes. Sometimes, we are a united front, and we say, "NO! NOT THIS TIME, MISTER!" like that will teach him a lesson. But the time for learning lessons is long gone, and we all know it.

So last night, because we are tired and because it is such a relief to hear his voice, we both say yes, and then we can we hear talking in the background. Words and more words. Clearly, the friend our son has invited to some random concert isn't interested in these random parents in Alabama ordering some random Uber for them.

"Hold on, Pops. Be right back."

We've paused the Netflix comedy that is John Mullaney's new show, the comedian who famously got sober. Our son has remained fixedly and unceremoniously unsobber. He has something called anosognosia, which is a condition where your brain can't recognize one or more health conditions you have. In other words, I am pretty sure he thinks we're the crazy ones.

NAMI—The National Alliance for Mental Illness told us about “Anosognosia” when we called the hotline one day after he smeared himself in peanut oil and turmeric. I had to practice learning all six syllables. We also hired a therapist through NAMI who tried to help from afar. He was one of many. I have created a whole chronology of our boy’s life, trying to find the clues. It has been delivered to therapists, judges, counselors, doctors, and parole officers by email, regular mail, and by hand.

***Anosognosia** is a neurological condition that prevents people from recognizing or accurately perceiving their own health conditions or problems. It's also known as "denial of deficit" or "lack of insight".*

***Anosognosia** can affect a person's awareness of deficits in judgment, emotions, memory, executive function, language skills, and motor ability.*

***Anosognosia** is a common symptom of mental illnesses like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. It's also associated with dementia and structural brain lesions. Anosognosia is the most common reason why people with severe mental illness don't seek or maintain treatment.*

*The term **anosognosia** comes from Greek words meaning "to not know a disease"*

When our boy was in high school, we called it “senioritis.” We also called it “shitty behavior.” I got poetic one Christmas crying in the closet and called him “The Thief of Joy.” Then things got real, and we diagnosed the “shitty behavior” as “alcoholism” and “addiction.” Sometimes, it was still just “asshole.” You’re supposed to be drug-free for a year to get a real diagnosis. That’s what a drug counselor told us in 2013. He also said, “Heroin kills you fast, and meth kills you slow.”

Over a decade later, another drug counselor from a treatment unit suggested over the phone it was schizoaffective disorder, but he couldn’t divulge more because our son was, by then, a man in his thirties newly released from six months

in LA County Men's Jail and then almost immediately he was put on a 5250-psych hold in a local hospital, which meant he got to stay a week. I begged the psych unit and the judge to commit him, but they didn't listen. I dropped off thick files to the court reporter to give to the judge. It had all the evidence that I thought surely the judge would understand. She did not.

The judge said, "Someone is raising their hand in my courtroom! I don't allow that."

Or as in the old folk song—*Git along little dogie.*

Or as in the old fairy tale—*Off with her head!*

It's too much, isn't it? I think it's too much. When it's too much I go to the movies, or I read a good book or write something, or I put Post-it notes to my son in the old cookie jar.

Or I hold his bear, Teddy.

Or I just take a walk and look at trees.

This is a story I never wanted to be mine. Will our son ever get sober? I don't dwell on those questions like I used to in the olden days.

Our son gets back on the line. "Hold up, Pops! Call you back. Keep ordering the Uber." But our son doesn't call back, and my husband cancels the Uber, and we start watching John Mullaney again, another Saturday night. I take my husband's phone, and I see that my son is "active" on Instagram because of the green light on his profile. So, I send him five or six pictures of his nephew who looks like him and who just celebrated his third birthday in Chicago. My son has never met his nephew. I remember standing long ago on a street corner with him, saying, "Your sister is pregnant. She's going to have a baby. You're going to be an uncle, the best uncle." His face lit up with joy and confusion, and I thought that might be a game changer.

It wasn't.

Still, I send these pictures and say, "Your nephew is three years old! We love you." He will think the pictures are from my husband, or he won't think that. I don't know what he will think, but I send him pictures regularly to remind him that he is missed, tethered, and loved.

Anyway, we've bought him phones. We've given him our old phones. We want to wipe him clean the way we've wiped the phones clean. His old numbers sometimes pop up on text chains.

MESSENGER CHAT

ME: *You okay? Did you mean to call? Love you love you.*

SON: *I love u I am in silverlake waiting on an imaginary bus*

ME: *Do you need a ride? Just let us know where you are if you need a ride.*

SON: *Ok. I am by the silverlake blvd exit on the 101*

Another time when we are visiting our old home of Los Angeles, our son calls me to say, "I'm over here on Central, selling four-leaf clover bracelets." He calls on his latest phone. "This is my new number."

"Do you make the bracelets?" I imagine the clover bracelets of childhood on days of sunshine in the South or Midwest, teaching my younger siblings to split the stems with a thumbnail to poke the flower-headed stems through to make bracelets or necklace chains. Then I think of how easy it is for my husband to spot four-leaf clovers, and how I can never find them. Our three kids inherited his gift of finding four-leaf clovers too.

"No, this lady makes them and gives them to me to sell."

"Oh, that's great."

"Yeah, now is my busy time, Mom."

"Okay, we can talk later."

"No, I can talk now."

I try to think of what to say. "So, you give her a cut of the proceeds, or she gives you a cut?" Why am I asking this question? It's none of my business.

"No, she just makes them and gives them to me to sell. She said I needed to sell them. It would be good for me to do."

"Oh. That's great."

"What?"

"Nothing. It's great. I'm glad you're working."

"Of course, I'm working. You don't know my life."

"That's right I don't."

"I'm just kidding. You're so serious. Geez, Mama."

"I'm sorry. I love you."

"Love you too."

The conversation ends. I still can't picture the bracelets or the lady who makes them. Are they clover chains? I get distracted as I always do in our conversations, trying to land on an image, trying to keep it light and bright. He is always twenty steps ahead of me. Clover bracelets? Is this what he's talking about? I wish I could thank this woman who makes bracelets for our son to peddle on the streets of LA. Who is she? What do the bracelets look like? What does he sell them for? Where does he sell them? Oh yes, on Central Ave. Where on Central? Why does it matter? Another message.

MESSENGER CHAT

ME: *Do you know where you're going to be on Saturday?*

SON: *Yes, I have to be aware of constant planning for whole teams assembled to counter every good plan I have started. On Saturday morning, I will most likely be on Central Ave. If you cruise up Central from the Central Market u you should find me between there and 45th Street. Mostly on 25th. Lol. Or 14th. Or King.*

A few days later, his father and I will meet him, and we'll spend the day together. It's mid-January 2024. We have made it to 2024 with him. Nothing short of a miracle. That day, we will drive him back to a street off Central Ave where he is staying with a man named Peanut. I will have forgotten about the four-leaf clover bracelets by then because we've been together six hours, and I'm tired, and we must get to a play in the Valley to see our friend, Tina, perform.

We are trying to do too much, but it's how I operate sometimes. Sometimes, I'm afraid to slow down. Sometimes, I must keep moving or else. Sometimes . . .

We accomplished a lot that day we were together. Breakfast. Walk. Lunch. Walk. Filipino bakery in Silver Lake, our old neighborhood. Purple Cake. It has a name. What is the name? "Ube." It's a lovely royal purple and used for special occasions. But the baker is not a kind man or maybe he's just afraid of us. He doesn't smile or make any conversation as he wraps up the cake even though our son keeps talking and chatting to him. I don't want to be there. I don't want this purple cake. I'm sure it's good, but I don't want it.

Still, it's a special occasion getting to see our boy since he lives in LA, and we now live in Birmingham after thirty-five years on the West Coast. We had moved to LA pregnant with our son and wound up raising three kids in Los Angeles. Now two are in Chicago, so our son is alone on the West Coast. We'd kept two households going for fifteen years, my husband holding out for his California public employee pension, as I traveled back and forth for summers and holidays from Alabama for my teaching job. As the addiction took hold, we hoped having a homebase in LA would give our son a chance to land and heal. He landed occasionally but not for long and never to heal.

We pay for the bright purple Ube cake and decide to give the cake to Peanut to thank him for housing our son, but the cake box keeps popping open, which is mildly enraging. Can't something work right? As we walk through the streets of our old neighborhood, our son steps over a man sleeping on the sidewalk and says, "Last man standing, right?"

The guy sits up and they talk for twenty minutes. Our son sees all the people that I typically walk by. I take pictures of him and try to capture the day. He then befriends another man, a man with one eye from Atlanta, and then our son insists we give this gentleman a ride to the place that offers resources to the unhoused. Our boy won't get in the car unless we give his

newfound friend a ride. It's only a few blocks away, but the man gets in and sits in the backseat smoking a joint, asking us, "How far is it?"

I assure him it's not far as we drive along Griffith Park Boulevard near Marshall High School, the old carpool route. We've been encouraging our son to get services at a church nearby, a lifeline, a connection, a something. When we arrive, I watch our son and the one-eyed man from Atlanta together walk toward the tables. I hear our boy tell the man, "This church is where they have Al-Anon meetings. They call people 'qualifiers.' I'm their 'qualifier.'" He points to us. "It's somebody who makes a family crazy with drinking and drugging. Total bullshit. Al-Anon tears families apart, brainwashing them."

Then he asks the guy, "Who's your qualifier?"

"Don't got one."

Our son says, "Me neither."

In the yard of the church, I take a breath and allow myself to realize I am standing in Silver Lake, our former neighborhood. I can look at the sky and imagine one of our homes is still waiting for us. From 1989 to 2023, we rented four different homes in Silver Lake and Echo Park. We could never afford to buy a home, but we lived in a neighborhood we loved with dear friends, and this is our first visit back home to check on our boy because we miss him. How can Silver Lake and Echo Park no longer be our home? It's the place I go to in dreams, and I can give you directions anywhere you need to go. The wintry California sun can crack your heart open if you let it and make you remember, but I'm indifferent, standing there, waiting, and watching him make his way through the crowd of folks offering different services.

The one-eyed man disappears, and I don't see him again.

At one point, I approach our son to see how it's going, and a volunteer with bright pink hair eyeballs me as if to ask, "What are you doing here?"

I explain, "This is my son." I want her to see he has people.

"Your son?" She scowls. "He looks a lot older than you!"

I shrug. "He's had a harder life." What else is there to say? I walk away from her and wait for him. I need to back off. Then our son spends over an hour in the bathroom. I get so tired. We get folding chairs and wait. So much of our lives with him, ever since this journey began, is waiting. Waiting at the Benefits Office. Waiting in ER rooms. Waiting in Goodwill for him to pick something. There is this meddlesome voice inside me that says, "It could be the last time, so shut up already."

It's the reality of having an adult child on the streets. The voice inside me is mean, making me think about all the missed clues of his childhood where I could have righted this ship years ago. Sometimes, I tell it to shut up. Sometimes, I pour myself a glass of wine to drown it out. Sometimes . . .

After a few hours, we leave the church in that is helping the unhoused, and I stop to insist we take a selfie. Then I drive slowly toward Central Ave in rush hour traffic because that is where our son wants to go. I encourage him to keep accepting the help offered at the church. He says he likes the people, and he'll go back. I hope he does. Now he wants us to drive him to Peanut's place on Central. That's right, we are taking the bright purple Ube cake to Peanut to thank him and drop off our boy.

My husband sits in the passenger seat. He usually drives, and he tells me to get over to the right lane before I'm too deep into downtown, but I hate changing lanes of packed traffic when I'm distracted, so I say, "Soon. If I mess up, it'll redirect me."

I think back to the ancient GPS that shouted at me "Recalculating" whenever I made a wrong turn. The GPS spoke in a such disappointed tone that it made my then-eight-year-old child collapse with laughter. That child would beg me to make a wrong turn so the lady would snarl "Recalculating" at us again.

Recalculating.

There are so many things that need recalculating. Sunset Boulevard into Cesar Chavez Boulevard is crowded, the

red sun sinking fast into the winter sky of California. I was teaching ESL to adults in East LA when Cesar Chavez died, and in honor of him, the city changed part of Sunset Boulevard to Cesar Chavez. I remember so many things.

By the time we reach our destination, it's dusk on Central Ave near Peanut's place, and our son says, "Wait, I have Christmas presents for you. I'll drop this stuff at Peanut's, and I'll get your presents." He jumps out of the car and gathers things from the backseat and trunk. I get out and help him.

"We can't forget the cake for Peanut!" I try again to shut the cakebox that keeps popping open as I follow my son who walks fast.

My husband naps in the passenger seat. Napping is essential in the chaos. In addition to the cake, I also carry some of the groceries he got from the food bank at the church like oatmeal, apples, and dried cherries. A man in a yard calls out something sharp to our boy as we pass by him. He doesn't look happy, and I feel uneasy. Our son ignores him, and this is not like him. He talks to everyone but not this man. He keeps going.

"Here," I say. "Give Peanut the cake and wish him a happy new year." But I don't wait around to meet Peanut even though I know I should if only to say thank you.

I watch from down the street as my son knocks on Peanut's door and goes inside. I look at the address above Peanut's apartment to memorize it and go back to the car. My husband is alone in the car, and I need to get back to him. I walk back past the man who said something sharp, and he begins to follow me, but then he passes me, which is a relief. I get back into the car and lock it. I hate being afraid on this street, which is a whole lot better than many of the streets where we've dropped off our boy before. This street has houses and families, not just vans, campers, and tents beneath bypasses and bridges. I can't remember Peanut's address even though I just memorized it.

I don't like that our son depends on the generosity of a man named Peanut. It's not a sustainable situation. But I'm also relieved, because California winters get cold on the streets at night, and I'm grateful to Peanut.

On the way to Peanut's, our boy had explained how he came to stay with him. Peanut was his playground supervisor at Hillcrest School, our son's school in first grade for a short time and Peanut's first job out of high school. Our son remembered Peanut because of his prominent teeth, even though he only attended this school for a week or two, and yet somehow, he remembered this man, who also remembered him as a little boy. He said Peanut also remembered my husband's long brown braids. My husband used to raffle off his braids every few years at school arts festivals. Kids who drew the winning ticket got to cut off his braids, and those braids became part of our kids' art projects. Now his hair is short and gray. How?

Recalculating.

Decades ago, my husband taught at Hillcrest, an elementary school nicknamed "Hellcrest." The principal held notoriously short Monday morning assemblies by offering these words, "I don't have anything to say. Go on back to class now."

She was described as "ethically challenged" in an article about bad principals in the district. This was an especially bleak LAUSD tenure for my husband who had allowed himself to be displaced from his first school as a teacher in South Central when his ancient car was stripped of its new tires after breaking down in the school parking lot on a Friday and by Monday, no more tires. The car sat on cinderblocks.

Recalculating.

It wasn't worth fixing a 1972 Toyota Corolla from Marvin's Used Cars in Tullahoma, Tennessee, so we gave up the car. We naively thought by his displacing himself in South Central, he would get sent to a school closer to our neighborhood in Silver Lake as he requested.

Recalculating.

But LAUSD sent him to a school even farther away in Baldwin Hills. For a year, he took three city buses to Hillcrest, and then our friends sold us their used car at the same time our son was old enough for first grade.

Recalculating.

This school had a music magnet, so we decided to let our son try Hillcrest since he would attend the school with his father. We were counting our pennies then, trying to stay afloat. Maybe the school could work. It did not.

Recalculating.

At an assembly at Hillcrest School toward the end of the second week, the principal told the students not to bring guns in their backpacks. My son came home from school and said, "No guns in our backpacks." We sent our son back to Montessori in Eagle Rock that went to third grade. His little sister was there in the preschool, but we could not afford two tuitions, so I bartered to teach a weekly drama and creative writing class for the older students, so my kids could go two-for-one. The Montessori director agreed. She was so generous to do this. She didn't have to do it.

Do these memories flood my mind waiting for our son? Yes, because Peanut used to work at Hillcrest, aka Hellcrest, and I try to connect the dots of where things went so wrong, and yet, he and Flannery remembered each other, and now Peanut was allowing him shelter.

Recalculating.

I hope Peanut likes the bright purple Ube cake. I hope my son is respectful to Peanut. I wonder how long it will be before Peanut kicks him out.

After a long twenty minutes of waiting and waiting, our son gets back into the car and says, "Here are your Christmas presents."

They are the four-leaf clover bracelets. I'd forgotten all about them. Tiny four-leaf clovers pressed into clear plastic shapes of hearts on woven green nylon string, not clover bracelets at all. They are beautiful. I cry at the generosity of this gift, but only a little. I have a friend who cries hysterically, head tossing from side-to-side howling, keening, teeth-gnashing, the complete waterworks. It's hard to watch. I cry easily too, but my heart hardens at spectacular displays of grief, and I feel mean and small inside admitting to this.

I put on my bracelet. My husband puts on his bracelet. He wears a clover-shaped one, and I wear a heart-shaped one. I will give my mother the cross-shaped one. One sibling in Chicago will get a diamond shape and one sibling in Chicago will get the other heart-shaped one. I think of how they probably won't cry when I give them their bracelets from their brother, but what do I know? But from experience, his siblings don't cry over him much. They love him, but sometimes it feels like there are no tears left.

"They are so beautiful, honey," I tell him.

"Thanks, Mama."

"Everybody is going to love them."

"Thanks. Hey, can you guys drive me to meet Herbie?"

"You're not staying with Peanut?" Foolishly, I want him tucked in safe for the night, which is ridiculous I know.

"Na. Herbie plays the piano on Wednesday nights on 5th Street. I'll get back to Peanut's later. I want to go to Herbie. He's 91. He doesn't like me telling people he's 91. He said, 'Quit telling people that.' Where are you going again?"

"To Tina's play."

"Why wasn't I invited?"

I don't answer, and he doesn't push it. My husband, a bit more rested from his nap, takes the wheel, and we drive to meet Herbie. When we arrive, our son jumps out and says,

“Happy Friday” to the woman security guard out front.

She glares at him and says, “It’s not Friday.”

“What day is it?” He appears baffled.

“Wednesday. And you ought to know what day it is.”

I silently agree with her - but I introduce myself as the mom when he says, “These are my parents. Hey, is Herbie here?”

“I sent him home. He showed up too early. I told him not to show up so early. He’ll be back later.”

I see a grand piano in the empty lobby of the King Edward. I wish I could hear Herbie play, but it’s getting late, and we need to say goodbye. We’ll never make it to Tina’s play if we don’t go. Tina was our neighbor for years and is a wonderful actor. I tell our boy we must go, and we make plans to gather again soon in a few days.

I hug him hard, and he hugs me back.

“Stay safe, okay, and warm. Go back to Peanut’s.”

“I will.”

We punch in the address of the theatre and stop to buy flowers for Tina on the way. Our son used to babysit Tina’s kid. Our son used to be an actor in indie theatres in the Valley and other places too. I try not to leap into the past or the future of the used-to-be or could-have-been as we make our way out of downtown.

Recalculating.

Watch the traffic lights.

Find the moon in the sky.

Notice Griffith Park and Travel Town.

Wait, don’t think of Travel Town and don’t remember the time our boy, age ten, jumped off the little train as it was moving,

and it terrified the gentle conductor who yelled at him and then at me.

*Hey you! Hey you, kid. What do you think you're doing?
Watch your son, lady!*

My son had been sitting behind me. I was holding our youngest, a baby, a few seats in front of him so I couldn't see what he was about to do and stop him. It had been a warm day of California sunshine, and I was taking all three kids to ride the Travel Town Train with a friend from out of town. I can't even remember what friend, but I was showing this friend an LA landmark that traveled past sweet old western settings of deer, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, a stagecoach, a faux mining town, bunny rabbits, gnomes, and cacti. It was meditative to ride this train, to pause in the chaos of the city and parenting and become a passenger on this open-air train without a roof, and then the train screeched to a stop.

*A kid jumped off! A kid jumped off!
Hey you! Hey you, kid. What do you think you're doing?
Watch your son, lady!*

I looked. It was my kid, looking triumphant and sheepish. I wanted to kill him. I wanted to snatch back the moment. I made him apologize to the conductor. "You scared him! You scared everyone. Why? Go tell him you're sorry now. Now. I'm so mad at you." I'm holding my baby, and our middle child is shaking her head in disgust at her brother, mimicking me.

Recalculating.

I want to knock the memory out of my mind. I want to find the moon. I want to jump off something too.

Recalculating.

Sometimes, I'm afraid to slow down. Sometimes, I must keep moving or else. Sometimes . . .

We find the freeway out of downtown, and my husband joins the traffic heading north like fish swimming upstream toward Tina's play. After the play, we will stay at a different friend's house in Silver Lake because we no longer live in Los Angeles. I find the moon in the sky and tell myself it's enough. Soon, I will add another new number to the growing list and name it.

NAMING THE PHONE NUMBERS

1. *Son-the original phone number.*
2. *Son-Flip Phone 7-14-Desert Rehab*
3. *Son-Borrowed Phone*
4. *Son-Dec*
5. *Son-Friend*
6. *Son-New phone*
7. *Son-Newnewphone 12/16*
8. *Son-Summer 2017*
9. *Son-for now*
10. *Son-Phone Spring 2018*
11. *Son-August 2019*
12. *Son-October 2019*
13. *Son-New December 2019 phone*
14. *Son-Quarantine 2020*
15. *Son-2020 Phone*
16. *Son-Fall 2020*
17. *Son-Nov 2020*
18. *Son-Now*
19. *Son-Jan 2021*

20. *Son-New#3*
21. *Son-2021*
22. *Son-3/22*
23. *Son-friend 4/2022*
24. *Son-New June 2022*
26. *Son-July 2022*
27. *Son-Millionth Phone Summer*
28. *Son-May 2023*
29. *Son-June 2023*
30. *Son-July 2023*
31. *Son-Now Scott*
32. *Son- (whatever number)*
33. *Son-October 2023*
34. *Son-(Andrew's Phone) December 2023*
35. *Son-Spring 2024*
36. *Son-June 2024*
37. *Son-Instagram Messenger*
38. *Son-On His Birthday*
39. *Son-Time Traveler*
40. *Son Calling Sister-10/1*
41. *Maybe Son Maybe*
42. *Son London License Text*
43. *Son Keyboard*
44. *Son December 2024*
45. *IG Number 2025*
46. *Son Spring 2025*

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Carol Dorf has received fellowships from the Hawthornden Foundation, Zoeglossia, and the Napa Valley Writers' Conference, as well as "Best of the Net" and "Best Microfiction" nominations. Their writing appears on the Poetry Foundation website, in several chapbooks, and in journals that include *Pleiades*, *About Place*, *Cutthroat*, *Five South*, and *Scientific American*. Founding poetry editor of *Talking Writing*, and they taught math in Berkeley USD.

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Kerry Madden-Lunsford is the author of the new children's novel, *Werewolf Hamlet*, a Junior Library Guild Gold Standard Selection, which received a Starred Booklist Review. *Werewolf Hamlet*, published by Charlesbridge Moves in 2025, has gone into a second printing and is going to be a paperback and an audiobook. Her picture book, *Ernestine's Milky Way* was the Alabama State Book of 2019. She also wrote the *Maggie Valley* Trilogy, which includes *Gentle's Holler*, *Louisiana's Song*, *Jessie's Mountain*, and *Gentle's Holler* received a Starred Kirkus and PW Review and was the State Book of North Carolina in 2007. Her biography, *Up Close Harper Lee*, was one of Booklist's Ten Top Biographies for Youth in 2009. Her first novel, *Offsides*, was a New York Public Library Pick for the Teen Age in 1997, and was optioned for a series by Diane Keaton and Jim Henson Productions. Her plays have been produced in Los Angeles and Tennessee, and she has published fiction in *Shenandoah*, *Amaryllis*, *Belle Lettres*, *Carve Magazine*, *Scholastic Storyworks*, and nonfiction in the *North Carolina Literary Review*, *Global South*, *LA Weekly*, *NELLE*, *American Girl*, and *The Washington Post*, among others. She has been a regular contributor to the *LA Times* Op-Ed page. For several years, she directed the creative writing program at UAB, where she is still a professor, and she taught in Antioch University's MFA program in Los Angeles for a decade. Her children's novel, *Millie G and Vulcan* is currently under submission, and she is at work on a memoir, *The Family Plan – Unstable Connections*. Kerry is the mother of three adult children and a grandmother, and she now lives full-time in Birmingham, Alabama, with her husband Kiffen, and beloved dachshunds, Olive and Wilbur. Visit her at kerrymadden.com.

Beth McDermott is the author of *Figure 1* (Pine Row Press), a 2022 finalist for the Foreword Indies and a 2023 finalist for the da Vinci Eye/Eric Hoffer Award; and a chapbook titled *How to Leave a Farmhouse* (Porkbelly Press). Her poetry appears in journals such as *Pine Row*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Terrain.org*, and *Memorious*. Reviews appear in *American Book Review*, *After the Art*, *Kenyon Review Online*, and *RHINO Reviews*. She's the recipient of a Distinguished Teaching Award from the University of St. Francis in Joliet, IL., an Illinois Speaks Micro-Grant, and first place in the Regional Mississippi Valley Poetry Contest. She has been an editor at *Kudzu House Quarterly*, *RHINO*, and *Cider Press Review*.

Jolene McIlwain is the author of *Sidle Creek*, named a Best Book of the Year by NPR and *Library Journal*, and selected as Pennsylvania's 2025 Great Reads title by the Library of Congress Center for the Book. Her fiction appears in *West Branch*, *The Florida Review*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, and others. A Pushcart Prize nominee, she has also been recognized by *Best Small Fictions* and *Best of the Net*. McIlwain holds degrees in literature and art and has taught literary theory and composition at Duquesne and Chatham Universities.

Emily Mohn-Slate is the author of *The Falls*, winner of the 2019 New American Poetry Prize (New American Press), and *Feed*, winner of the 2018 Keystone Chapbook Prize (Seven Kitchens Press). Her poems and essays can be found in *AGNI*, *CALYX*, *New Ohio Review*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *The Adroit Journal*, and elsewhere. She teaches writing workshops for *The Madwomen in the Attic* at Carlow University, writes the *Be Where You Are* newsletter on writing and mindfulness, and co-hosts The Ass in Chair Collective with Erinn Batykefer. www.emilymohnslate.com.

Danika Paige Myers is the author of the poetry collection *Her Names, Her Wits*, forthcoming from Finishing Line Press (2026). She was a finalist for the Ruth Lilly Poetry Fellowship and a winner of the Editor's Prize for Poetry from *Meridian*. Her work has appeared in journals such as *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Nimrod*, and *Harlot: A Journal of the Arts of Persuasion*. Danika earned an MFA in Creative Writing—Poetry from George Mason University and is an Assistant Professor of Writing (Teaching) at The George Washington University in Washington, DC.

Poet, essayist, translator, and Fulbright Scholar, **Rachel Neve-Midbar**'s collection *Salaam of Birds* (Tebot Bach 2020) was chosen by Dorothy Barresi for the Patricia Bibby First Book Prize. She is also the author of the chapbook, *What the Light Reveals* (Tebot Bach, 2014, winner of The Clockwork Prize). Her poems and essays have been published widely in journals and anthologies. She is the co-editor of *Stained: An Anthology of Writing About Menstruation* (Querencia Press, July 2023) and the Editor-in-Chief of *Calul Journal*. More at rachelnevemidbar.com

Kate Northrop's recent poetry collections are *Homewrecker* (*New Letters*, vol. 88, 2022) and *cuntstruck* (C&R Press, 2017). Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *AGNI*, *American Poetry Review*, *Glacier*, *Plume*, *Revel*, *SWWIM*, and *Terrain*. She is the recipient of the Jeanette Haein Ballard Writers Award, the Paumanok Poetry Award, the Wick Poetry Award, a New York Times Book Review Editors' Choice, and fellowships from Yaddo and MacDowell. She teaches at the University of Wyoming.

Rachel Marie Patterson is the co-founder and editor of *Radar Poetry*. She holds an MFA in Poetry from UNC Greensboro. Her poems have appeared in *Cumberland River Review*, *Harpur Palate*, *National Poetry Review*, *Smartish Pace*, *Thrush*,

Tinderbox, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, and other journals. Her work has been nominated for *Best of the Net*, *Best New Poets*, and the Pushcart Prize. She is the author of *Tall Grass with Violence* (FutureCycle Press, 2022). Learn more at rachelmariepatterson.com.

Kelly Pedro (she/her) is a Canadian writer and recipient of the 2024 CRAFT Literary Flash Prose Prize. Her fiction has been published in CRAFT, PRISM International, *The New Quarterly*, *Cleaver*, *Flash Frog*, *New Flash Fiction Review*, *JMWW Journal*, *Tahoma Literary Review*, and elsewhere. She was shortlisted for the 2025 *SmokeLong Quarterly* Award for Flash Fiction and *Room Magazine*'s 2022 Fiction Prize. She was a 2024 *SmokeLong Quarterly* Emerging Writer Fellow and is completing an MFA at the University of Guelph, where she's writing a novel. She lives on the Haldimand Tract, on land that was promised to the Six Nations of the Grand River. Find her at kellypedro.ca.

Ivy Raff is the author of *What Remains* (Editorial DALYA, forthcoming 2026), a bilingual English/Spanish poetry collection that won the Alberola International Poetry Prize and *Rooted and Reduced to Dust* (Finishing Line Press, 2024). Poems and translations appear in *Ninth Letter*, *International Poetry Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Electric Literature*, and *West Trade Review*, among numerous others, as well as in the anthologies *London Independent Story Prize Anthology* (LISP, 2023) and *Aesthetica Creative Writing Prize Annual* (*Aesthetica*, 2023). Her Best of the Net-nominated work has garnered support from the Colgate Writers' Conference, Hudson Valley Writers Center, Atlantic Center for the Arts, the New York Mills Cultural Center, and Under the Volcano. Ivy serves artist communities as MacDowell's Senior Systems Project Manager and, as a Jewish artist and a human, advocates for a free Palestine.

Andrea Scarpino published the poetry collections *Once Upon Wing Lake*, *What the Willow Said as it Fell*, and *Once, Then*, and co-edited the anthology *Undocumented: Great Lakes Poets Laureate on Social Justice*. She is also co-editor of *Nine Mile Magazine* and served as Poet Laureate of Michigan's Upper Peninsula 2015-2017. She teaches at St Louis University High School.

ire'ne lara silva, 2023 Texas State Poet Laureate, is the author of five poetry collections, *furia*, *Blood Sugar Canto*, *CUICACALLI/House of Song*, *FirstPoems*, and *the eaters of flowers*, two chapbooks, *Enduring Azucares and Hibiscus Tacos*, a comic book, *VENDAVAL*, and a short story collection, *flesh to bone*, which won the Premio Aztlán. Ire'ne is the recipient of a 2025 Storyknife Writers Residency, the 2021 Texas Institute of Letters Shrake Award for Best Short Nonfiction, a 2021 Tasajillo Writers Grant, a 2017 NALAC Fund for the Arts Grant, the final Alfredo Cisneros del Moral Award, and was the Fiction Finalist for AROHO's 2013 Gift of Freedom Award. Her second short story collection, *the light of your body*, will be published by Arte Publico Press in Spring 2026. <http://www.irenelarasilva.wordpress.com>

Suzanne Swanson is the author of *House of Music* and the chapbook *What Other Worlds: Postpartum Poems*. Suzanne is a winner of the Loft Mentor Series; she helped to found Laurel Poetry Collective. She co-edited the hybrid chapbook, *All You Need Is One Avocado*. Recent poems have appeared or will be seen soon in *EcoTheo Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Water~Stone Review*, and *The Iowa Review*. Her work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Suzanne is happiest near big water.

Jane Zwart teaches at Calvin University and co-edits book reviews for *Plume*. Her poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *The Southern Review*, *The Threepenny Review*, *HAD*, and *Ploughshares*, and her first collection of poems, *Oddest & Oldest & Saddest & Best* (Orison Books), came out in February 2026.

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