

THE
LIT QUARTERLY

WINTER 2021
5



TIPTOE

FICTION

Jordan Harrison-Twist

How I Miss That Sea That Was Stolen from Us

ESSAY

Angelina Saule

Paradise Lost: Al Andalus

The Lit Quarterly

Tiptoe

Winter 2021

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The Lit Quarterly

Winter 2021

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FEATURED

Paradise Lost

Al-Andalus: the fantasy that never was, but could be
by **Angelina Saule**

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How I Miss That Sea That Was Stolen from Us
by **Jordan Harrison-Twist**

Editing Team...

K. M. Diduck, Edmonton AB

Jay Miller, Montreal QC

Jay is a co-editor and webmaster of The Lit Quarterly. He has worked as a translator, SEO copywriter, technical writer, communications specialist, and book blogger. When it comes to submissions, he's looking for stories that explore geography, identity, language and the human condition. In other words, what represents the you in the now.

*

L.C., USA

Nate Error, USA

Immanuel Barrow, USA

Norman Howard, Brazil IN

A young writer maladroitly aspiring for greatness.

Jhingon, California

Jhingon can't think of a biographical note that isn't a cliche. Just wait till he realizes this note is a cliche too. He'll be up all night admonishing himself.

Kyle Vaughan, Edmonton AB

Kyle has a science and policy background, but enjoys stumbling through literature with an abundance of reckless enthusiasm.

*

Adam Whitford (Cover Design)

Adam is a curator, writer, and occasionally a freelance designer based in Southern Alberta. He has been published by art periodicals and gallery publications across Canada and holds a BFA in Art & Design and an MA in the History of Art, Design, and Visual Culture.

Foreword

A notion has been stewing in my head for a few weeks that we've lost control of our own voices; that despite having versatile machines and platforms with which to express ourselves, we aren't sharing our thoughts very well. My own use of online platforms to discuss and debate with others has become, especially of late, very *mindless and habitual*. It's as if, much worse than a mere misuse of the tools at my disposal, the tools themselves are misusing *me*. What feels like a series of thoughts and ideas spilled onto the screen might actually just be instinctive biological responses to stimuli selected and displayed by unconscious computers.

We are like singers held hostage by our microphones.

I'm referring to the way many of us use social media, in an automatic (and at times psychotic) manner. But because social media allows for such easy and quick communication, organization, and expression, it tends to occupy a larger and larger portion of our mental and emotional output, leading us deeper into the morass and less capable of recognizing the trap.

The Lit Quarterly is our modest attempt to interrupt that cycle, if only for a few moments; to give our readers and contributors a reason to pause and reflect on things that aren't bite-sized, urgent, or serving any kind of corporate goal. The poetry, fiction, and essays printed here are creative, colourful, and insightful. An unmistakable *humanity* breathes off every page.

In this edition—our fifth—we have collected the writing of 34 unique authors from 10 countries around the world. Submissions were received between July and September 2020. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have, in subtle ways, haunted the production of this edition (as well as some of the works within it). Nonetheless, a relentless energy and persistence comes across unmistakably.

We're thankful to Adam Whitford for his original cover design, our volunteer readers who helped select the works from an enormous pool

of submissions, and to Pagemaster Publishing for their work in formatting and producing the hard copy of the quarterly, as well as all the writers who submitted their work to our publication.

Finally, we're thankful to you, the reader, for supporting our independent magazine. Please enjoy.

*K. M. Diduck
Edmonton, AB
16 January 2021*

Bear Hug

I sat the teddy bear in the back seat. After gently fastening the seat belt around it, I stared at it for a moment. In spite of our having taken the best of care—first her and then me—the years had worn it down. The plush, once velvety and a bright amber shade, now looked rough and opaque. We, too, had become rough and opaque: time knows no mercy. That infant-sized teddy had spent its days on Mother's bed and its nights on her chest of drawers, right next to her, ever since Dad gave it to her as a gift back in 1956—when they were dating—up until dementia gnawed at her memories enough that all my promises had to be broken, and she needed to be moved into a retirement home, which is the pleasant name we give to the place where we drop off our elders so someone else can take care of their bodily fluids and the ghosts of their past. I had to save what was left of my own sanity.

They were together since 1956, Mother and her bear. Sixty three years, because the bear lived in my place during this past year, deep inside my closet and zipped up in a plastic bag—I couldn't stand its smell of medicine, camphor, mothballs, that commotion of scents that had slowly eroded Mother's favourite perfumes and taken ownership of everything that was hers. It was this same scent, however, what made me let out a wounded animal's wail when I opened the bag to retrieve it: Mother's essence had condensed itself on those rounded ears and that pointy nose crowned with a plastic button that had been threatening to fall off since who knows when. That teddy bear was all I had left of her. All I had left of Father, too. Without it, I'd be a complete orphan. What a ridiculous feeling for a woman my age, I thought: it's nothing more than an object. An object Mother talked to when she thought she was alone; an object she loved more, perhaps, than me.

Sixty three years. I took out my phone to do the math: sixty three times three hundred and sixty five (I skipped leap years to make it easier): twenty two thousand nine hundred and ninety days with its nights. Of course, she should've celebrated her Silver, Gold and Diamond wed-

ding anniversaries with Father, not holding a teddy bear. As if wanting to comment on my grievance, at that very moment a plane crossed the sky above me. Its sound startled me. I had gotten used to the sound of ambulances only. Who in the world takes a plane, and even more so during these times? Mother would've said the same, without adding "these times." The lack of confidence—no, not lack of confidence: the contempt—she felt towards airplanes, instead of diminishing, had only increased as she aged (and she aged considerably from one day to the next after Father's death). I remember her watching TV when they were reporting on the terrorist attack in New York that September eleven, shaking her head as she cursed between her teeth. How many more widows, how many more orphans more until people finally realize, she asked herself, and her words lingered in the summer air which still smelled to Guerlain's *Shalimar*, her favourite—and also Rita Hayworth's, whom she resembled in her youth.

It was useless to argue by showing statistics to Mother. The numbers that said that traveling by airplane was safer than traveling by any other means of transportation meant nothing to her, because she compared them to what was tangible, the items we recovered from Father: a half-burned passport and some ashes of what was left of his body, still attached to the seat by the seatbelt. Perhaps that's why we never went on an airplane again, why we developed an aversion to trips of all kinds. Perhaps that's why I fastened the car's seatbelt around the teddy bear. And perhaps that's the reason why I was about to make such a car trip, in spite of the government's warning to go outside only for what was considered an essential need. *This* was an essential need.

I closed the back door and sat on the driver's seat. I turned on the car and opened the map on my phone's GPS. I knew the way, but my hands were trembling and I feared my thoughts might distract me. I considered making a call, but to whom? All of Mother's friends had passed away. Mine were considered high risk due to our age, and in quarantine. No one would be able to come out and keep me company, why even bother? I focused my attention on driving down the dry and empty roads. Dry and empty like we ourselves had become because Mother willed it so—dry and empty, the exact way that I felt.

I shouldn't have been surprised by the lack of traffic in the city. I had already ventured out to the drugstore and for groceries and all the roads were deserted. Upon arrival, however, there were people—lining up, coming in or out. On the highway, by contrast, the teddy bear and I moved about in total silence and solitude. It was as if the world had ended. And, in a way, for me it had. Did the teddy bear sense it had ended for it, too?

When I arrived at the retirement home I found several signs forbidding the entry. I disobeyed them all. After parking in front of the main entrance, I stepped out of the car to retrieve the teddy bear. Holding it in my hands, as if it were a baby—a baby that, for me, represented a mix of an older brother and a father substitute, the embodiment of everything that Mother always longed for—I walked towards the door. I thought about peeking through a window, but I held myself back. Before my knees had a chance to betray me and feel weak, I placed the teddy on the floor, next to the front door, and returned to the car as fast as I could. At my age it is not advisable to run.

A rock had spontaneously grown inside my throat by the time I dialed the number.

“It’s by the door.” My voice sounded like a five-year-old’s.

“On my way.” I recognized the same voice that gave me the news a few hours before. I saw the nurse come outside, her face covered by a protective mask, and take the teddy bear in her hands. The bright blue shade of her latex gloves made the plush look even more discoloured. She turned towards me and waved good-bye.

“It’ll be done as you requested,” she yelled before disappearing behind the door. I stayed there for a few minutes, unsure about what to do next. Trying to slow my breathing, to defog my eyes.

Mother was not counted amidst that night’s updated number of victims of a virus that makes people suffocate to death, alone and in isolation. Hers was a generous death: a heart attack while she was sleeping. She would’ve liked that; she wouldn’t have wanted to be a part of any statistic. Numbers didn’t mean anything to her, only that which was tangible. That’s why I asked for her to be laid to rest forever with the teddy bear in her arms. Holding a glass of wine in my hand, and still without the energy to share the news with anyone, the only thing that could console me was the thought of Mother melted with Father in that last hug they were unable to give one another.

—Martha Bátiz, Richmond Hill ON

‘Bear Hug’ will be part of Martha’s upcoming short story collection from House of Anansi Press, due out in 2022

Morning Horror Show

Sunrise, I rise in mist,
my head as cloudy as an April sky,
dull and drunken with sleep,
breath as rancid as a bloodhound's.

You look at me oddly,
as if to wonder, "Is this what I married?"
this snore with a head attached,
these bloated eyes,
the mouth as buckled as a hose.

Yes, this expression is dirty
but it holds no secrets.
These grunts are the heart.
The precipitous yawn is the soul's doing.
A man is a launching pad for the body's excess.
And he's as human as a fart.

You're silent.
You should be but you don't seem
ashamed to be unseen with me.
Besides, you have your dreams
of madness and insecurity
to hide behind your morning face.
You need to work up the courage
to look in the mirror.
The gentle touch of my fingers
on your cheeks doesn't count.

Youthful innocence is no longer
the dead giveaway it used to be.
Experiences feed on skin, on expression.
When the sheets are pulled away from the body,
the years together remain.
And yet somehow we still love each other.
Such a shame where beauty is concerned.

—John Grey, 48, Johnson RI

something blue is calling my name

after Ernest Ogunyemi's helpless

these days, I'm cascading myself into pages than into God's arms / my lover's arms.
there's a modesty in the barenness of a page that welcomes a confession,
& I'm unsure if anything can match that. I flirt with the wholeness of my bed

& then I gawk at the ceiling till I feel the Sandman upon me, like a frisson of caresses.
my eyelids become weighty & I stumble into an escape fantasy / another life.
I wake up & first, I scroll through twitter feed

as though I'm searching for God in the sky / budging clouds.
my body, an unlit streetlamp, devoid of incandescent glow & gleeful sizzling.
& I keep crooning *Jon Bellion's Stupid Deep*, wondering what is lacking.

maybe, someday, I'll find it. hopefully, not on the floor of a river.
because, I swear, it's arduous resisting the alluring stretch of blue.
but today I'll fill the void with this poem

—Praise Osawaru, 21, Ikorodu, Nigeria

Fishing at Rock Creek

Bud had a cane with the four feet on the bottom. He'd caught the *old* earlier than he thought he would.

"I'm fine my whole life," he said to Shirley. "An' then I just got snared."

"You're doing just fine, Bud!" Shirley called from the kitchen. Her voice hadn't changed, *hadn't got all garbled like mine*, he thought. He closed his eyes, and Shirley's voice was attached to vibrant Shirley, plump and sixty on a blanket in the park with her legs bare. He wondered when he'd come to realize that sixty was young.

Adder smoothed the afghan laying over his father's lap.

"I'll make your tea, Pop," said Adder. He passed from the dim den to the bright kitchen. On the way, he curled a hand around the edge of an octagon end table to move it out of the path.

"Don't you move that table," Bud gravelled.

"Pops, you'll get around better if we can move some of this furniture."

"Your mother wants that table there, Adder. Now you leave it and I'll be fine."

"Pops, Momma won't mind if we move a table. It'd be easier to get around and make yourself some tea."

"It's alright Bud," Shirley called from the peeling, blue counter. "You can move that old table. Just make sure my vase doesn't tump over!"

But Adder was in the kitchen now, and the table remained in its trodden carpet pattern, butted up against an ottoman. The blue and pewter vase caught a glint of light from the kitchen window, and the leather ottoman bore a shadowy glimmer under the dusty, old bookcase. Bud heard Shirley thunk some bread down into the toaster.

Adder had missed Desert Storm by a whiff. He was honorably discharged from the Navy as a lieutenant and married Bit Rauscher. She was a tyrant with a plastered smile. She'd probably be there any minute to drop off soup and crackers for the cupboard.

"Just what I need," Bud spat out loud.

"Whats'at Pop?"

"Nothin."

"Josh is coming with the car to pick you up for dinner Saturday."

"Don't be ridiculous, Adder. I can drive into the beltway just fine. Shirley wants me to keep my wits."

"I have not a doubt about your wits, Pop, but you don't need to drive. We'll get you around."

Bud had a rare and fond thought of Adder - his ease with success and his doting nature to Joshua. Then he pictured Bit with her red frames, sitting no more than six feet from Josh, who from age four had been drilled at that piano in the parlour by a withered *professeur*.

The parlour had this 'special' flooring. Bit always came trotting to the front door to greet Bud and Shirley.

"Here's your slippers!" she'd chirp, and Bud and Shirley would sit on the mudroom bench and remove their shoes.

"Canadian birds-eye maple, Pop!" Adder had once bragged, stomping the floorboards, and Bud had wondered what the forests in Canada must look like since the newly moneyed of D.C. began refurbishing the brownstones on Kilbourne Place with 'birds-eye' maple.

Then Bit would come with seven-layer dip and clunk it on the stone slab table with a humongous bowl of tortilla chips. A Tex-Mex Palm Sunday was a strange bird, but it had become tradition.

Bud remembered Shirley at Rock Creek on one Palm Sunday. There wasn't nothin' to catch at the grove, but they cast out lines all the same. The *Pik Pak!* cooler had sandwiches and wine. The sandwiches were her favorite—oat bread cut into triangles and filled with turkey, roasted eggplant and pesto. Bud watched Shirley's chubby, spotted hand reel the line in tight. She took a long pull of the cabernet and removed the two sandwiches from their Ziplocs. Bud watched the sun catch the fawn on her cheek. The hem of her kitchen dress fluttered in the breeze.

The sandwiches were not enough to quell the wine, and Bud and Shirley found themselves lolling on the blanket and laughing. Bud was surprised by the butterflies that churned in his stomach when he kissed her on the mouth. Shirley had to pee. Bud figured there was no one around, and who would arrest an old lady peeing behind a tree?

The wine was empty enough to go ahead and finish it off. Bud laughed at the creek side alone. He laughed that Shirley was somewhere baring her nethers to the ants. He pulled the lines from the weak water and tucked them away. Just then, Shirley appeared. He waved, and Shirley threw her arms up in victory.

The humid cool of the park gave way to asphalt. The heat from the blacktop rose up to Bud's elbows, and he unlocked the driver's side door

and popped the trunk. Lunch with Adder and Bit was a staple on Palm Sunday, then Easter with him and Shirley.

Bud turned over the engine. His mouth watered thinking of the seven-layer dip. He ran the washer fluid across windshield. Cold air from the vents splashed around in the car. He released the brake. He heard an animal yelp, like a raccoon, or a hissing like a possum. A strange thump.

A shock bore into Bud's temples and lay a loud beat there, he dropped the Volvo into first and lurched forward. It was then he heard the hollering. A young woman had broken from her baby tram, and a tram it was anyway, two babies on a metro-lookin' stroller with room for two more. That's what Bud remembered, the ding of that stroller, a bell that had rung like a bicycle chime a half dozen yards away. Bud braced his arm against the steering wheel and was careening against the seatbelt to get out of the car, and the horn now overtook the bell. It blared over the hot parking lot as a small crowd gathered.

Bud was heavy now with wine and a heart slamming in his chest. Shirley lay under the shadow of a woman thick and pregnant.

"Sir," the woman twisted to find Bud leaning over her back. Shirley had red welts. They had blackened in some places and yellowed in others.

"Sir, I have called 911," she was squared to Bud now, and he saw the yellow *Pik Pak!* cooler over her shoulder lolling on its side across the parking lot. The lid had popped off, and in its trail were two Ziplocs rolling in the breeze and the clattering, empty bottle of Cabernet. He looked down and saw Shirley's arm splayed out with the wrist at a right angle and a bulge in the wrong place. His long back bent at the hips and he wretched onto the black top. The woman could not bear his weight. She took him by an elbow and his skinny waist and guided him back to the driver's seat. She eyeballed the e-brake and took the keys out of the ignition. Bud remembered her white, lace sleeve. It brushed his cheek right before he slumped over and fell out of the car.

Pop, he heard someone call. *Pop*.

"Pop," called Adder. Bud jumped out of his reverie. His temple thumped. He didn't like to have his tea with his teeth in, and his face was collapsed against the outline of his skull.

"Pop, I'm making toast, okay?"

"Shirley's making the toast, Adder," Bud called back.

Bud arced his chin down to the pool of sweat at the base of his neck. "I suppose Josh can come. He's a better driver than you, and I don't wanna be in the car with Bit if she's in one of her moods."

Bud winced and thought of Bit and Adder's home. The place was so wide open it had a chill to match the echo. For Christmas Eve, the house was rearranged so that the straight-backed, dining room chairs stood in a row along the wainscoting near the table. Bud would rise on his four-footed cane, and Bit would be there with her "Don't you get up, Pops. We'll get you everything you need!" and then she'd pat his shoulder and rush around the table with the Pastis and Waldorf salad.

"I'd like to see the restroom, Bit."

"Josh!" Bit would then holler from under the pale, art deco chandelier. "Come get Pops to the restroom!"

And by the time Bud was standing, Josh had an arm under his shoulder where he just didn't need one, but he liked Josh alright. He wasn't sure how Bit and Adder had raised such an honorable boy. The two of them ran roughshod over the Hill with their ten-hour days lobbying for this or that. Somehow, Josh hadn't had an unstructured hour up to his fifteenth birthday. Bud figured he had his whole life yet to bust out and go ballistic.

Bud heard Adder clang the sugar around in the mug. The clock did its sixteen ding-dongs and then quietly chimed out four o'clock. Dinner was five-thirty. Bath at seven. The evening cable news was at eight.

Bud rose from his worn chair and set his eyes on the blue kitchen.

Adder turned with the tray in his hands. It was laden with buttered toast and a steaming cup of chamomile. He didn't have time to put it down to catch Bud as his square, bony frame lurched and went headlong onto the kitchen floor. The four rubber feet of his cane were caught snugly between the octagon table and the ottoman by the bookcase.

Bud's arm was up under his ribs. His cheek was planted on the faded blue flowers of the linoleum. He and Shirley had picked it out from a catalogue at Bunter's Hardware in '64.

"Pop!" Adder dropped to the floor. "Pop, can you talk?"

And Adder was already dialing 911.

Bud's mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water. Beyond his long legs and the tumped over cane, the octagon table had shifted, and while the silver-framed photo of Shirley had only buzzed a little to the right, the blue and pewter vase was lying on its side. The ashes were hard to spot against the blue, embossed carpeting.

"You're gonna be OK Pop," Adder soothed. "Your bed time is at nine. We'll have you all tucked in by nine."

—Josie ElBiry, 51, Beirut, Lebanon

The Guy

The Guy had a crowsnest in his pocket. Like Worzel Gummidge except he's not alive at all. He sat upon his throne of sticks and looked at me with his warty eye. His face made out of a whole lot of newspaper stuffed inside a tight leg: 0015 Nude Tan. He had a hat on that made him look wise and workmanlike. Like someone's dad.

In the distance a crow cawed the time, and the last dandelions frittered their seeds like small change at a chippy. The air smelled like toffee apples and the cracking of sticks over a strong knee. Someone is humming something somewhere and I can't quite make the tune out. The sun, cloud scarfed in the chilling air, flickers: a tea candle flame in high winds.

I nodded at the Guy, and he nodded at me, his head pushed forward by the wind. His hat, slipping.

I walked home.

The crows cawed seven, and the sun had long since departed, unwilling to watch the pyre.

Now: I walk out again.

Children, clutching hot dogs and burgers steaming from the barbecue, chatter like birds after a storm. Everyone is *excited* and the air thrums with anticipa

pation.

Everyone's faces flicker like a Jean Metzinger I saw once in a museum, and I buy a hot dog too to feel like I'm involved. The lady doing the hotdogs doesn't even ask me if I want onions. Someone asks me if I want change, and I say *we all want change* but that doesn't seem to be the answer they

wanted so I walk down through the crowd to a cordon, and there's the Guy again.

Still sitting on his throne, but someone's righted his head. I look at his warty eye, and his warty eye looks at me. In the light shed by something behind the crowd I think he winks, and I see a bird alight on the brim of his hat. Is it a crow?

He looks to me like Matisse's *Icarus*. Flashes of yellow light darting around him, his limbs cast adrift like he fell there after his wings melted, the red dot on his breast; the nest in his pocket. I smile at this connection, and think how funny to see Matisse and Metzinger exhibited here in this backwater village on the school field. I wonder if I'll ever see the Matisse for real. I wonder if anyone here would know what I was talking about if I said anything so I don't say anything and eat my hot dog, and look at the Guy.

A rumble runs through the crowd, and we surge forward a little like horses at the gate, or dogs, or waves upon a shore. A man walks in front of the cordon holding a lit torch, the orange light flickers around him like a headache, and he strides up to the Guy and his throne sending orange lightning bolts flashing back at the crowd. My hotdog is cold and sits in my belly like mercury.

I look at the crow on the hat of the Guy, and I think the Guy shakes his head as if to say: *go now*. But the crow won't *go now* because of the nest in the left breast pocket of his jacket. The crow caws. The man waves the torch. The Guy shudders in his jacket and looks at me plaintively. The crow hops from foot to foot.

The children are laughing, ketchup lipstick making clown frowns on their excited faces. The one nearest to me got onions on their hotdog. I feel like slapping it out of their hands.

I want to say

Stop!

But instead I say nothing. I think

Stop!

very loudly in my head. I think *Look in the pocket!* But I don't say. I just look from the man to the torch to the crow to the guy, winking at me with his warty eye. The man with the torch turns to the crowd and he says

Are you Ready!?

And the crowd all whoop and holler and Ketchup-lipstick knocks my elbow and I drop the last cold remnant of my hotdog on the floor.

I don't notice it then, though, because I'm looking at the man who's raised his torch in the air, and is bringing it down, brandishing fire like a weapon. The Guy looks like he sighs, the crow dances, until suddenly

*Something
Happens.*

One crow flies from the pocket of the Guy's jacket.

Very swiftly it is followed by another

Then another

Then another

And another and another and

Suddenly the air is thick with crows. Hundreds of them. Thousands of them. Like fragments of burnt paper leaving a fire; like washing ripped off the line in high winds; like the last leaves before the autumn, rotting in its descent to winter, gives up the ghost.

Ketchup-lipstick is laughing, and all the other kids are laughing and I hate them. They haven't even seen the crows' departure. *They're getting free.* I think. *All of them are flying free! LOOK!* But they're not looking at the crows, and they're not looking at the guy. They're looking at the man, watching the orange descent of flame.

Then:
WOOOMF

The whole pyre goes up in flames. The crow is still perched on the Guy's hat. No one has noticed the others leave. Perhaps they never left at all. His lumpy newspaper-tights face flickers in the orange glow so that he looks, to me, as though he might be trying to speak. His felt tip eyes flicker as though the light catches tears, there. The arms of his crumpled jacket shift and I hope he might leap up any minute and save himself. He looks so sad.

That's when I finally notice that I've dropped my last bite of hotdog. I look down to see if I can see it trampled underfoot, but it's too dark.

When I glance back up, there's nothing but bonfire. I look at the heart of the fire, where the Guy should be, and think how odd it is that we make

effigies of the only true anarchist England ever made, stick him on a throne of twigs, and burn him. A little cloth Guy twisting in the flame.

The man says:

the fireworks are about to begin.

The crowd shudders.

—Lucy Wallis, 27, Paris, France

Dear Son

you're sorry about the insomnia.
You said mine is hell too.
You want to know
how as a child you seemed to take your father's death,
how you acted in the car –

you know,
it has taken a lot of doing
to go down
layer under layer...

You write this is a matter
of unique and urgent importance.

All I can tell you is
before the funeral parlor, before the graveyard
I buried the bullets
way down the beach.

—Pippa Little, 63, Northumberland UK

*Note: All lines taken from three letters between John Berryman and his mother,
We Dream of Honour: Last Years, 1959-1972 John Berryman pps. 376 – 377.*

African Flora

I guess it's around nine thirty in the morning. Looking out the window of the café in the film industry building, my eye catches some strange plants on the side of the balconies of a 12-storey hotel across the street.

The hotel is structured like a flight of steps, its ends going up in a very deliberate hierarchy. On the balconies of each step are rows of flowerless African plants that don't look like they need much water. Their long needles hide much of each balcony from view, but from what I can see, the balconies are empty of people—except the highest one.

On that highest balcony, I see a woman leaning over the railing and looking down. I can't discern the features of her face from the distance between us, but the dark color of her skin and light pink of what might be a uniform stand out in the sunlight.

I guess she is looking for something down there. The first thought that rushes to mind at seeing her at that height is Toby's shattered body in her flowing red dress lying on the asphalt. I don't know why I have that thought. Why should I associate a person standing at the top of a five-star hotel in a well-to-do area with suicide?

I am sitting in the large, well-stocked café of the building. I've ordered a bitter coffee to help me stay awake the whole day. The cheerful woman behind the counter showed me the sweet cakes in the display case. I said no, only coffee. But I didn't say how much I desired one of them or the effort it took to curb my impulses. The fragrance of the goddamn bread getting taken off the electric flame and lined up in front of me put me in a euphoric daze, more than cake, cookies, and *the most divine of wines*.

My cousin Sara, bless her memory, would hold the cream puffs in front of my nose to say, "Nevermind the calories, enjoy it, enjoy your life. Free of the husband, no boyfriend, no sense of fun, why don't you just go lie down and die? Hopeless! You could drop dead tomorrow, at least appreciate cream puffs while you still can." Where is she now? In a box in a wall! She was always afraid of dirt.

Still, I didn't sweeten life with cream puffs. I sit by the window facing the sunlight and swallowing sugarless coffee. The walls of the coffeehouse are covered in huge and very old posters of artists who have already turned into skeletons. But here they are, in the process of performing their roles in sixties clothes. The famous artists have left behind memorable behind-the-scenes images among cameras, by street trams, old buildings and brick houses.

The woman in pink is still on the hotel balcony, moving back and forth, peeking down. Of course, she can't see much further than the balcony one step below.

I came here early in the morning to find some poster of a film and its producer and deposit a check into my account and withdraw some cash. This place has the closest ATM that can play the role of my bank. It is only a short walk to get here. Otherwise, getting to the bank from home takes two buses and half the day. And, as my cousin knew, that's a half day or more of your life gone with the wind.

On my way here, I walk along a quiet, empty street with old trees on both sides. I pass beautiful neighborhoods, but I don't see the residents. Along the way, I pass the men or women taking their dog or dogs for a morning walk and do their business. Often, they move their bodies back to make way for me, very politely. They even order their dogs to go to them and open the path. And they say hi or good morning. I put a smile on my face and return their greeting. But there are times that you feel somebody is looking suspiciously at you. There is no trust in those eyes. Then I keep my head up, and continue on my way and when I'm in a good mood I give a complimentary nod.

I usually wear my chic dress, my pink lipstick, and my sunglasses to come off as glamorous. Seeing that judgmental look, I would push my shoulders high and back to straighten my slumping spine. God forbid they are unsettled by my existence.

But once in a while, I get suspicious of their reactions. Then I think maybe they are worried that I lack a membership card to enter that place as I would need in a concert hall or a museum. It seems by showing your card you will have shown that you are of better, higher stock. This situation is similar to being at a painting exhibition, where members have special lines, and possibly, suddenly, out of the blue, somebody overflowing with humanitarian feeling bursts from her place in the line, reaches for you, and says very politely *this line is members only*, and points you toward the other line for regular people.

How I hate the word *regular*, like being called garbage, anonymous, subhuman. Later on, I would always think about that; why among millions of words would she pick those few to tell me? Have I had written it on my forehead? Did she know me? Did she search my purse? Did she

scan my whole body with her eyes like an x-ray and find no membership card? Did I not look worthy of a membership card? Was it because my hair and skin were darker? Now that was something I couldn't hide.

At least, in the past and in my old country, I could hide my ethnicity as a minority by religion when I needed. Same for my mother, who used to cover her lips with a chador in new and unfamiliar places. She would change her voice to match the accents with people around her so she could touch and pick something that she needed in the store without being damned.

Today, as I walked by the staircase-shaped hotel, there were a few green and yellow taxis lined up against the outer wall, waiting for a passenger to call on them. Most of the drivers were Armenians who have established their own driving league. They are immigrants like us, who came to Uncle Sam hoping to find freedom and bright futures, giving travelers rides around the city in their green and yellow taxis. They hope their next generation would find that bright future.

On the sidewalk by the taxis, a black guard in an elegant black suit was walking toward me talking into his walkie-talkie. He was tall and slender. When we reached each other, he smiled and we both said hi and passed on by. I wanted to tell him what poise he has to his walk and reminded me of African black men who have not yet become addicted to fatty hamburgers and sodas. I passed the hotel yard and beautiful garden. Everything was quiet and tranquil, except the sound of an odd engine ripping down the street. The traffic light was red, but there was no car in sight to use its right of way, so I confidently stepped past the red light and crossed the street.

The tall and silvery building where I cash my checks is right across from the hotel. The sunlight refracts in the glass. Luxury model cars disappear into tunnels, delivering their drivers to their offices by the underground parking lot.

Down by the stairs today, stood a black man in a black suit and tie carrying a white walkie-talkie. With a smile and a wave of his hands, he tried to tell me that it's a dangerous act, crossing at a red light. He directed me to the door leading upstairs and I thanked him. Up a few steps were a small row of plants and a bench for smoking employees to spend their breaks. Two young Black men with walkie-talkies stood by to greet me with pleasant words. When I got to the revolving door, a lighter-skinned Black guard came to guide me through. I thanked him and he answered with a smile, "You're welcome. Please..." He wanted to direct me, but I told him I knew my way. Ten or more steps ahead, another middle-aged Black man showed me the way by pointing to the escalator. At the end of the hallway was a circular space with a few big planters of African flora. A young Black woman and another man

approached me respectfully, with happy faces, to ask if I needed help, to ask what I was looking for. I finally felt forced to explain that I was headed downstairs to the ATM machines to cash my check. They said “welcome” and “have a good day” and pointed down the stairs and I went down.

In front of my seat, under the café window, there is a strip of black electrical tape scattered with outlets for laptops and phone chargers. I wonder how many laptops can fit along this short table that can only host two chairs. I wish I could buy a laptop and carry it with me to a café or a park instead of sitting in a room ambushed by cypress trees sanctioning my share of the sun.

I look around the room and see a pair of young men, one Black, one White, seated across from each other and involved in conversation. I find the scene hopeful in the midst of such a vast organization where all the doormen and guards are Black. I wonder what is happening in the mind of this White gentleman when he talks with a Black man? Are his smile and the trust on his face real? Does he look at him as human as he is or is his respect really just fear of the law?

As I took the stairs back up with my cash, I asked a very chic Black lady with very high heels going up alongside me on the escalator, “Excuse me, where can I find some pictures or information about Ray Bradbury?” At first, I thought she didn’t understand what I had asked her, with my terrible accent and hoarse voice, so I said “He is a movie producer, Ray Bradbury.” The lady paused a bit and asked, “Is he a writer?” I said, “Yes, yes, he wrote *Fahrenheit 451*.” She looked at me again and said, “You won’t find anybody to help you here. They don’t produce films here. They buy and sell movies. What do you want pictures and information for?” I told her it was for the walls of the library he founded, that I was a volunteer there. She laughed and shook her head. We reached the top of the stairs and escalator to say goodbye.

I look at the high balcony of the hotel. The Black woman in pink is not there anymore. Anyway, even if she wanted to kill herself, she wouldn’t die falling from one balcony to the next step down.

I stare back at the café, almost empty but for a few employees deeply busy at their laptops. Everybody is gone, to be back at lunchtime. I have to go as well. I go as soon as I finish my coffee. In the hallway, I pass among smiling black guards who wish me a good day. A cool breeze sweeps down the street.

The sun is pleasant. Nobody is in the street, no cars passing by. I pass the red light. I leave behind the quiet emptiness until I reach the

hotel. The tall guard is farther off, speaking quietly into his walkie-talkie. I say hello again, but he doesn't see me. On the right, the hotel grounds are calm too. A few more guards are talking into their walkie-talkies. Further down, some policemen are whispering into some men's ears. Through the gaps between their bodies, a stretcher can be seen, and beyond that an ambulance. By the ambulance, two men lift the stretcher, covered in black plastic. A swatch of pink cloth peeks out from under it. I look up at the east side of the balcony overlooking the street. The building goes straight down, no staircase angles. The familiar guard says "Please don't stop here. There is nothing to see here."

Everything is calm and quiet.

– Farideh Shabanfar, 75, Los Angeles

Grandma's Lessons on Opening the Mouths of Rivers

two families rose to kiss god's feet behind the sun's eye and my grandma is giving herself away to strangers again.
heartbeats on repose are a language in grief. & the emptier a soul becomes the more light it can fold into itself. i know this from how filled her emptiness feels on my austerity. every -thing she gives the night returns an answered prayer.
happiness is her silhouette searching for heaven's gate on the floor, in sujood. even the sky loses its blue at the fall of her voice. psalms are armors she wears inside out on the sleeves of her nirvana. & i'm an undone blight contorting between generations of windswept memories. & this family, for whom i'm not finding words to own, has a history of passing her dark utopia to her children. the night grandma found a white skied paper of the list of things that make me happy. she littered the night with epigrams in her sleep, so much, the sun rose grayed by her wisdom. i smelled heaven from dried tears, blooming like imprints of god's mercy, on her pillow by morn. i'm learning from 'ma to open the mouth of a river in the ground in times of loss & wash my grief into a sun. a boy does not become a man by slicing the night with tears knowing he can hold a mirror to his blued shadow, and see himself a god.

—Abu Bakr Sadiq, 22, Minna, Nigeria

Cher Vincent: Letters to van Gogh

Feb 19

What thoughts I have of you Vincent reading your letters traveling thru Amsterdam + Antwerp + Brussels watching you go through obsessions: being a pastor, your cousin, painting seeing how people saw you as naive idiot. If only they'd read you tho they saw your art + did nothing + I secretly thought about being a minister except don't like people even Unitarians so just studied religions on my own. Never learned to draw would've just drawn naked ladies. My favorite paintings not even in your museum: the smoking skull + peasant's shoes tho that from Heidegger's essay + were they really a peasant woman's shoes or just your own like in the Willem Defoe movie. Sharing your love of the dignity of the poor and sadness that they reject creatives. I too want to live in a small town in the country + write poems but I'd get shot too tho I like fitting in in cities like Portland + Salem, everyone in Brussels + Antwerp thinks I'm German which I guess is a compliment even w/ Germany holding austerity over everyone's heads making the poor pay for the mistakes + greed of the rich but I like free flow of people across borders like you had + your disinterest in manual labor not laziness like your father accused—you saw lower class working life as a no-win situation after the coal mines of southern Belgium. Something else growing in your heart, crazy thought that people would pay you money for art + thinking too of your brother Theo, his monthly payments keeping you alive out of love not pity—he was maybe the only who didn't, taking your letters to heart + saving them all! Only more amazingly Johanna recognized their value when you both died. You could've been a writer, a dutch Charles Dickens but saw not in words but light tho my favorites the dark ones, all blacks + browns and were you bi-polar? Your letters seem uncomfortably so—your uninvited pursuit of your cousin (tho violence never anything you'd resort to) making me almost skip ahead a year or two. Also your begging + bitterness + gratefulness to Theo for

money. He always knew you'd do something even when no one would buy your paintings + neither did you cut off your ear for a whore but for Gauguin by way of apology to say you're right I didn't listen to you or to spite him + say I won't listen to you. You just gave it to the barmaid you both knew as if that was ok somehow but shows people believe what they want to believe—love for a whore making a better story than love for another man('s paintings) + we mostly see what we want to see except when people like you come along and show us not another world but another way to see ours ourselves in it + creating it which is what Heidegger thought though you wouldn't have liked him but with you seeing *is* feeling, maybe that was the problem w/your cousin or your whole life seeing + feeling + no one feeling what you saw + felt which means how we see light is how we feel—Dear Vincent, your letters come at a good time or the right time—I came all the way here just to read them just to need them + your light.

Feb 21

I went to Antwerp + toured old tunnels, open-air sewers-canals Napoleon ordered covered in true dictator make-the-trains-run-on-time fashion. Thinking of you in the coal mines—rats + weird white fuzz from their droppings, big spiders thriving in warm air, secret door to Jesuit church in case of peasant uprising + *not* to sneak out to see whores *bien sûr*—History of the sewers history of the city along w/ old printing presses of Museum Plantin-Moretus + original Gutenberg Bible which even I find holy. You walking beaches in England talking already of leaving city for country + quiet but torn b/c of the community of painters (I just accidentally wrote community of writers) in cities tho they all seem to mock you, knowing that when you do move to southern light peasants will too you can't win but at least there will be walks in woods + a friendly barmaid to give you a notebook which will be lost for a hundred years. Everything you do no one will care except Theo not even your common-law wife who will leave you because you're too poor for even her. In a park now in sun near chess players, Hôtel de Ville tower of La Grande Place, trees not yet budding tho young men smoking bud, children in *gilles jaunes* future budding protestors tho elites have figured out how to take down mobs: accuse anti-semitism and they'll fight amongst themselves while real anti-semites go to top positions or in Amerika just accuse sexual harassment or sex in general + everyone pretends to be horrified. No one knows who's lying anymore so everyone becomes liars even especially ones speaking truth which can't be spoken or not all of it not all the time but I liked your Zola quote:

observer ce qui plaît au public est toujours ce qu'il y a de plus banal, ce qu'on a coutume de voir chaque année, on est habitué à de telles fadeurs, à des mensonges si jolis, qu'on refuse de toute sa puissance les vérités fortes

reminds me of *They Live* when the best friend fights almost to the death to avoid putting on the sunglasses to see aliens among us + their subliminal messages which is how your letters feel—surrounded by aliens going out of their way to make you feel bad about yourself though these strolling sun people seem ok—I guess the aliens are in the European Parliament conspiring austerity while sincerely wanting economic power to equal Amerika's tho everyone here speaks english especially the Dutch so much theirs will become a dead language, all of which to say I wish you were here to play chess or I'd sit quietly while you sketched. The light is good.

Feb 21?

I see mistakes coming in your letters: living with a woman because you pity her: not love even if you find friendship + tho saying she has become a better person because of you sounds egotistical something is there—two people can + should make each other better people like a band makes musicians better tho I'd like to think it's not relationship or even family—that we all make each other better people in the world but something gets lost + we become trolls + thinking you can save anyone is a trap which is why the Bodhisattva Vow is bullshit, mighty convenient someone will put off enlightenment until all beings attain it yet if we can help someone we should tho a drowning person can pull you under and a dead firefighter's no good to anyone but I wonder if my letters when younger (or now) reveal paths that should have been less taken, if recipients wrote 'uh oh' in margins like I'm doing—fire-fighting, N., K., New York, grad school, teaching, all interesting if only in the chinese-curse way, all leading right here right now writing in a café in Brussels just like all your mistakes led to your paintings. I know you would have said it was all worth it—not the part about becoming famous after death but the part when still alive, the process, days spent in dunes sketching learning texture turning two dimensions to three + hours in bliss creation which Heidegger used your shoes for to say was necessary, that all along you were helping create the world, paintings + poems the stamp of it. Some would say just sitting still for long periods creates a better world too tho I don't know—meditating seems to right already-wrongs while writing or playing music seems to create the new out on the edge of reality—Basho + Issa did both but I share your need to be out in the woods. I wish you could visit my lookout tower this summer. The women here wear short skirts + tights sometimes which is

nice but I don't know how to talk to them w/o seeming strange either, nor do I have any money but you never talk about music which you never had in your life because poor except maybe someone with a fiddle at the pub tho even that what I want to believe—I saw a german movie about painting, *Werk Ohne Autor*, changed in english bizarrely to *Never Look Away* but which anyway comes to the conclusion that artists always work with the 'ich' even if they don't realize—no big revelation to you though radical these decades, but the film more conservative than it wanted to admit: ultimate goal of even liberal artists being to get married and have kids + the guy's wife studying fashion design just ends up a mom after working in a factory + being a manic pixie dream girl tho I'd forgive much from an artist who paints like that except Ted Nugent was a great guitarist + a total asshole. I loved the Banksy paintings in Amsterdam for their political satire—also from the *ich*—+ the girl w/her heart balloon drifting away: did it slip or did she let it go?

Feb 22?

I don't understand people sometimes a lot of times + neither could you in their simple cruelty + lies. I keep thinking I see my old girlfriend the one fluent in German—if I saw anybody in Europe would be her tho I'd expect her to be in Stuttgart or Tübingen. I couldn't resist if it were the sex would be hot. I could do with some hot sex to cover my loneliness. I only get lonely in cities wandering back streets all morning buying *Tales of Unrest* by Conrad thinking of writing stories questioning not colonialism as much as capitalism which is its cause—social justice warriors perfectly fine w/capitalism—thinking if we just change the leaders everything will be fine + I'm in a café everyone sitting in the cold sun smoking. Bartender thinks I'm british she gave me two sugar cubes just as I'm reading a poem by Bukowski in *Les jours s'en vont* which I never liked before about a boy feeding horses sugar cubes 'like ice to eagles' somehow the french works for me. He rarely used similes usually just things in themselves. I see you shambling through La Haye in secondhands clothes, all *argent* going to paints + stamps + yr prostitute girlfriend, not that that was her fault nor even something to be ashamed of tho we all are—ashamed not prostitutes—or maybe it's the other: these days writers have to pay for the chance of publication in reading fees + contests which are just reading fees + none of us will win nevertheless I have poems coming out in *The Chiron Review* + a long one in the *South Dakota Review* on this cloudy cold day someone somewhere wants to publish me + someone somewhere—complete strangers—will read me + someone somewhere will even read these letters + think of us + I'm hungry—two falafels for lunch weren't enough—I've been skipping breakfast trying to eat cheap in general. I'd love to be more

European *mais ça couté cher* + you have decided to leave your common-law wife + her kids even knowing she may go back to prostitution but staying isn't doing you or her any good: you need light + space + time to paint to live. Again I'll say you can't stay with someone out of pity. I feel bad for the children but they aren't yours + she won't allow it + she has extended family who all think you're a loser anyways—*allons-y!* You will be poor + unsuccessful your whole life, you will lose your friendship with Gauguin + be laughed at in the streets, you will be shot by a kid dressed like Billy The Kid but you will have put brush to canvas, ink to paper.

Feb 23

In Bruges! Someone playing "Sweet Dreams" as I climbed the spiral staircase the Belfort, up to dozens of huge bells wired to giant music box carillon with attached keyboard + the Prelude to Bach's first Cello Suite standing right under them LOUD + literally heavy metal. Of course you had church music which must have been magical, probably the only reason I would have gone to church tho you protestants were minimalist back then (scene from *Mary, Queen of Scots* of bearded scottish minister in the cold dark church, offended a woman would dare hold the throne). I'm sure trains back in your day were just as annoying as now even without cellphones loud people talking when all I want to do is take a nap tho the view: farmland + villages + actual houses + fields, stands of old-growth forest don't exist here anymore—people here don't even realize—no wolves or bears or lions. X-PO Museum had a collection of Picasso illustrations including the Don Quixote + Sancho + Dove of Peace, listing painters he was influenced by: Gauguin + Toulouse-Latrec your friends but not you. Hard to believe + sad—another insult. He *must* have loved *Starry Night* + your sketches of lower-class women. I am tired + thirsty from walking all day over cobblestone + *en español* Bruges *se llama* Brujas: Witches, great name for a city tho not what it means *en français* or dutch, being a shortened name for by-the-sea. I did go into the cathedral—didn't burst into fire—all that work + detail paid by tithing the poor who probably didn't even mind or maybe merchants. The light good today—spring here in february with snow in Tucson + Las Vegas.

Feb 24

Most uncomfortable in yr letters the necessity of asking for money you think you deserve, dependent on Theo even when he angers you—what all artists go thru in various ways but better than selling soul or body even though feels like it + maybe just is but also your parents not understanding nor anyone really except Theo tho not until later

will he + Johanna know how good you are. Yesterday I walked around Bruxelles w/Reagan, we sat in a small park + talked like dozens of others in the sun for free. You getting out of the city for the light though your black + white work reflecting interiors of rooms + lives while your paints taught to re-see exterieurs + surfaces + Gauguin never had texture—I'm waiting for him to go out of fashion as a colonialist exploiter of women of color tho fortunately naked ladies in general are still ok—nobody'll come after Picasso or even Modigliani tho I wonder if Klimt's clothed ladies will ever be recognized. Painting naked ladies a good way to pick up chicks along w/having a motorcycle + playing the guitar tho Reagan theorizes that *les filles* don't like creatives anymore, his students rolling their eyes at boyfriends in bands. Can't fault them for not wanting to be manic pixie dream girls anymore. I always wanted a fellow creative on the road but keep missing her—anyways might be like Rutger Hauer tells Joan Chen in *Blood of Heroes* that juggers can't fuck each other tho in the end they do at least once. All of which is to say Vincent that I await your escape to France for days of happiness if still poor then at least free tho already your dark moods appearing but I like to think of *Head of a Skeleton* which you painted with a lit self-rolled cigarette: that you kept some humor in yr life if not your letters that there might have been laughter.

Feb 25

Bought my ticket back to Amsterdam: less than a week left in Bruxelles—*trop vite!* Trying not to think about *l'argent* I've spent not so much trips to Antwerp + Brujas as daily meals. *Oui, des frites* but halfway healthy falafels + phô tho sometimes can't resist a *baguette* at a *boulangerie* nibbling + walking thru streets flaneuring but losing weight by walking everywhere—didn't end up being a big french-speaking trip *hélas*, everyone just speaks english on hearing my accent. My social life the same as in Amerika: in bed by ten, certainly not going to just walk up to *les femmes* + talk—what kind of madman would attempt that? Meanwhile sitting in a café w/really loud music which prevents people talking on phones tho I'd prefer those Brujas bells + more Bach—I wonder if you ever got to hear Bach even on the organ, not just Toccata + Fugue in D Minor (saddest of all keys) but all of it pretty dark + intense + non-christian-y. Bach in his solo instrument works created ways to sound like more than one person, Whitman's 'I contain multitudes'—ourselves in concert with ourselves or con-versation. Charles Bukowski saw you as a role model: creating in and out of poverty and *la lucha* tho he would've thought the ear being for Gauguin pathetic + chastised you for seeking community w/other artists but I've had that void all my life too sitting there staring back at me. A gutshot a slow + painful way to

go yet you never denounced the kid—there's a story we'll never know the middle of. Your last painting of yellow wheatfields, yr happy color tho *The Bedrooms* look sick + warped but of course it's closest to pure light. I'm in the wind in that field + wheat-light with yr need for bread + heat + smell of ploughed earth, crow caws + trees bustling in their hedgerows, smile of the barmaid bringing wine end of the day.

Feb 26

Je viens de manger dans un resto syrien, falafels et du riz et something a little like chana masala w/pita bread which isn't called pita tho the owner refilled my basket w/great concern very happy I was enjoying myself, making me real moroccan tea stuffed with mint. I wanted to apologize for my government but neither of our french was up for *that* task—imagine what Belgium did to the Congo—did you know at all what was going on—+ would you have liked *Heart of Darkness*? Imagine choosing between english + french to write novels in—Conrad knew polish wasn't going to get him anything. Your later letters in french + I'm studying latin in which you sometimes drop phrases in your letters. Cicero now a literary + political hero ending up with head + hands chopped off: warning to other writers + democracy lovers. What happened to you in Divinity school in Amsterdam? One letter you're excited to become a pastor the next a year later you're bitter + mocking religion tho you never stopped being spiritual. Art was God. I'm in my room now probably as small as some of yours + yes even yellow walls! In early for the evening to write letters + read, a young beautiful frenchwoman playing piano in the room next door, a Chopin nocturne....

Feb 27

Less than a week—I leave Brussels on Sunday, reading your letters here in this library café—maybe I'll meet a bookish women + have a tryst tho my thinking always goes well I'll be gone soon so why try + since I'm always going to be gone soon....Today a man asked me for directions to the Magritte Museum, my accent apparently so bad he switched to english to say 'sank you'. I swear 15 years ago my spoken french was *pas mal* but I'm not sure you would have liked Magritte—too sleek with weird apples + eyes not a true reflection of reality which you wouldn't have done tho *Yellow Room* looks odd—I suspect it's how you really saw it somehow + certainly *Starry Night* plus Magritte was rich + famous in his lifetime. My favorite of his an outline of a bird in flight thru it sky + clouds—sky + clouds flying and he did use lots of light as much your wheatfields. Are yr self-portraits a lack of money for models? Some get odd—bright pinks + greens + of course yellows—seeing yourself different—which Magritte never did nor Picasso to my knowledge

+ a woman who actually liked you had a nervous breakdown, everyone including yr family blaming you, the local minister offering yr models money *not* to pose for you which they didn't accept but the message clear: you are not welcome wherever you go. Theo eventually lets you work in his gallery in Paris. Speaking of letting—I got an essay accepted in an academic journal special issue on Green Theory + Praxis + creative writing which anytime anyone uses the word praxis look out but included contract stating I wouldn't get paid, that I couldn't re-use my own essay for any for-profit publication + that I'd have to get permission, *for a small fee*, from them to reprint. I wrote back about rewriting the contract but the professor/editor wrote back no, not possible but that he'd be 'happy' to 'allow' me to use the piece again. *el muy hijo de puta académico—va te faire foutre!* Glad I got out of academia when I did otherwise I'd've punched someone in the face. My friend Rick advised to go along with it + simply ignore the contract later if/when I ever get a collection of essays published (ha).

sans date

Your teeth falling out in your thirties. You smoke too much, you're sick + dizzy + only eat bread to save enough *argent* for paints + inks + canvas—True that in your self-portraits you're never smiling. I'm close to losing a tooth or two—bottom incisors loose. Then I'll never get chicks except chicks w/no teeth. Can't afford an operation which may or may not help, not covered by insurance so no more apples! One of yr letters you write Theo about expenses saying you have to buy dresses for yr models to wear—is there something going on Vincent? Is this related to why the villagers hated you? Something else certainly—yr dizziness, depression, doctors telling you you need to rest yet you need to work to make money to have a place to rest in. A woman who saw yr hands + thought you were an iron worker. I'm sure Magritte's hands were fine—his whole life was fine. People still thought Bukowski looked homeless after he bought a house in San Pedro + drove a BMW. One time in Jackson at Key Largo Lounge I came in wearing a p-coat + watch cap + everyone stared, woman barfly convinced I was a private investigator, said I was lying when I told her I taught english. Thankfully now not, tho miss being in the classroom when learning was going on either by me or my students—I still have thoughts of going all-out Paulo Freire turning the class over to the students having them decide what + how to learn from each other—would chaos ensue or actual learning or both? I never slept with a student tho got a few offers—not sure if it makes it better I wanted to fuck the smartest but anyways now I'm a fire lookout + *un espion à Bruxelles* trying to determine how real people live in lonely cities + who actually wears all this lingerie here it's madness. I guess

I could play more music if I lived here + did go to a zen sit one night so could survive as long as I had a quiet room that's all you need just a space in the world + the brain to create a clearing to gather force + push out again. What if you had gone to Amerika + ended up in Taos like Georgia O'Keefe painting buffalo skulls + got run out of town there too or shot by a cowboy. Last day of sun—came in w/cold rain will go out w/it. Violinist busking near Mont des Arts professional-level Bach sonata + everyone just passes him by....

sans date

So glad you're going to Paris to work for Theo. Every time I go there it's cold + rainy but it'll be good for you to work in the gallery studying paintings + access to others in museums—your painting + thinking will change forever + you'll get to talk to other painters most especially Gauguin. I liked the line from yr last letter about women: *Les relations avec les femmes sont d'une grande importance pour l'art*. You said a wife would better yr art + yet your art did not suffer for lack of one. Maybe it would have turned out different tho I feel the same always always wanting approval of women but not sure if you mean just a manic pixie dream girl because I've always wanted a woman who has her own thing: cellist or mandolin player or fellow poet-jugger even a politician as long as radically liberal (but please god not an academic or composition instructor) when really I just fall in love w/baristas + banktellers b/c they're the only ones I talk to + they smile at me. Watching a beautiful interesting woman enter a café or even just a beautiful one when I'm writing feels like I could either talk to her or create—that desire turning into + onto the page to write something she would praise tho to give it to her would be creepy I suppose—keeping her in ideal mode b/c nothing ever works tho there have been women just like you described Vincent where I *have* to talk to her—not in a while maybe I don't want to or think I do but I just like to be alone tho I'd like to paint someone's toenails sometimes. Too scared of rejection scared of disappointment scared of hurting someone scared my sexual perversions won't align w/ her sexual perversions tho have to say I've been lucky in that regard—that or a lot more women are sexually perverse than we think. I'm probly making you blush or *dégoûtant*-ing you. I'm just interested in the sexual-profane + spiritual + you in the sexual-spiritual which you later drop to spiritual which is how you start thinking you'll be a pastor in England. Maybe I'll stop thinking about sex but not here in Bruxelles w/all these black tights. They're everywhere Vincent, we'd better go to the woods + become shepherds.

Feb 28

I hope *París* goes well—less letters from you. I'm in the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts w/Dutch Masters, you're not here—too late. You surely must have seen Bruegel, may not have liked the weird stuff but surely appreciated satire of Dutch society. *La Chute des anges rebelles* using images from Amerika like an armadillo to portray a devil. Did you ever see Bosch? Where did *he* come from? Heavy metal 500 years before heavy metal he must have horrified you tho perhaps you'd like Bruegel's *La Chute d'Icare*. I already knew it from William Carlos Williams + Auden so won't try to top their descriptions (this is Europe—to stand where masters stood) except to say there's a narrative and/or a lesson, something you never wanted in a painting. Line up your self-portraits you'd get the Andy Warhols in Brujas—Otherwise it's a whole bunch of dying Christs in here. Jan Brueghel (Bruegel's son) also got weird, especially Bacchus orgies + naked ladies. *La Tour de Babel* by Joos de Momper horrifying in its way—in collaboration w/Frans Francken who did the rich people in the foreground checking out how things are going changing the parable a little tho the tower looming-ish + even tho I got here early to avoid the crowds the place still overrun w/field-trip children—Younger ones seem to handle museums better w/wonder but any older + all they want to look at is each other. Not sure what the hell I would have thought at seven if I'd seen a Bosch in person—nightmares for years. Back then in museums I learned it was ok to like naked ladies which was so totally wrong in Amerika or that is we all like them but we're shamed to look meaning sex which was true back then thus Bacchus orgy paintings—not *real* sex just a myth to show how bad it is but more interesting than portraits of rich people in poofy white collars tho curators did a good job showing earlier crowd scenes + temptations of St. Anthony's to show where Breugel came from. Maybe Vincent you didn't paint demons because you were yr own but now I'm tired + my feet are sore time for lunch.

You're already in Arles inspired + painting! *París* couldn't have been too bad if you stayed almost three years—longest anywhere since you started *sur la route*. I didn't stay anywhere for more than eight months in the 90s. I laughed in one letter how painters *dégoûtent* you just like people. I sometimes feel that way about poets (+ their poetry) who probably feel the same about me: spent two years in a MFA program with people who wrote stuff like 'My name is Veronica / I live in a harmonica', came out 30,000 in debt + no real friends. Was happy to leave. No one from class ever wrote or published again. I wonder if we'd have Gauguin w/o you pushing for him w/Theo. You only sold one painting in your lifetime + yet continue: the *process* is the meaning.

One would like to think misery not a precondition to creation we just neglect other things supposedly more important + you've given up love, quoting Richepin: *l'amour de l'art fait perdre l'amour vrai*. It's more like you never found love + so immersed yrself in love of art tho who am I to write about love I don't believe in it only like + lust I guess *ergo* no relationship in 15 years + that a long-distance phone sex thing—perfect: intimacy confessing dark fantasies in the dark to a voice. That was Santa Fe. We stopped + I moved away. Don't know if I'll ever get excited about a woman again. They still look good + I like talking to women more than men but I'm like you I like my solitude in woods or city, can't waste time w/just sex tho if it happens I won't turn it down but it's never going to happen if I don't put in some effort *alors voilà*. Brussels cold + rainy again I'm in the library staying warm until a movie this afternoon + some falafels. Two more days. You out to the woods painting w/Gauguin, poets don't write poems together. I too wanted a community of creatives to share + talk with came close a couple times but people drift + stop + get married + have kids + I guess that's meaningful too tho doesn't feel like a choice. I'm w/Emma Goldman + Simone de Beauvoir: marriage bad at worst, unnecessary at least but nobody today reads *those* essays.

March 3rd

Leaving Bruxelles by train in the rain backpack filled w/books. I stayed on the edges so I could look in windows + look out. Graffiti-names the only color this morning, their need to create something in something ugly, a word you've never used in your letters not even to describe London, only *degoutant* to describe people's behavior. You took this same route north under same low stratus clouds passing windmills having the urge to charge yelling 'have at you!' but you didn't read *Don Quixote*, you would have wanted to be a shepherd. Glad your health is better—I too find being healthier good for art tho a whole night life world here I've not seen. Every european town Barcelona Sevilla Salamanca Marseilles I'm always in bed reading by ten. Think of all the *Before Sunrise* experiences I could have had! Still romantic enough to think if I met a woman I'd change my life + move here in which case why don't I just move here. Working on my novel *Dawn* revising + editing feeling that alivenesss you talk about in the process + I didn't even *want* to write another novel except the main character—the real person she's based on—came in a dream and asked me to write it (just now wrote 'right it'). Tho do another? Not that I'll stop writing but all that work + time into a novel—I know some painters take time on paintings but in Arles you did one a day as if you knew—should I spend more time on smaller stuff novels make money. Shouldn't *be* for the

money but as you know it'd be nice. Amazingly people somewhere like you still want to read them. Long stories merging/changing our own long stories something about time—in which created + in which experienced—doesn't take long to see one of your paintings to shift how we see if only a little while maybe forever which is why we should always seek out art in all forms so as to constantly be shifting *ergo* growing—being requires growth otherwise we're only existing. I don't know how people go thru life just doing that I guess they don't know any better or are not allowed to. To teach the humanities to teach how to live which is why it's being cut in schools. In my teens I already knew I wasn't going to make money at writing or anything because you can't live ethically + be rich so vowed to live rightly + interestingly. So far not incompatible with scribbling.

—John Yohe, 52, Rangely CO

Monologue in Which My Mother's Ghost Counsels Me About Love

after Traci Brimhall

Give the ache a face, plain and simple, as a door, for it
is through it you'd come to reconcile with the blood

in your hands. Reconcile with the blood, for inside it
sparkles your own broken self, a tooth lodged out of

the fish's brain—a vivisection of your grief. A tooth
found in the child's small palm, its tender a flower,

his mouth shawled in blood. This is where you lose
your boat, your paddle a disappearance: the boy's face

a puddle where your reflection dances . Your reflection
a dancing, but not a rejoicing; for inside every dance, in

every rhythm, you hear a snap: a twig broken—its baring
an arrow which might hunt you. To begin to love, you

must give yourself away, all that magic, all that shadow
stretching past the storms. To love, this is how you start:

a foot on the threshold, the sun on your face like a mask,
your lips open, not in a song, in the entrance of a song.

In the brink of all this, my son, as seagulls diving across the
sea, you must learn, like time, to prance out of your past.

—Nome Emeka Patrick, 24, Lagos, Nigeria

Memento

Later in 2026, in the shadow of the engineered H5N8 pandemic, the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) established and provided financing for the Memento Ministry. The group's charter described a goal of preserving the human race's memories of violence, pain, and death. As the Antarctic beaches thawed and a broad international coalition already poured money and resources into the construction of a large university renowned for its natural sciences program, the Ministry took advantage of fantastic grants and subsidies aimed at colonizing the continent. The University created a department to work in coordination with the Ministry. An international research institute aimed at compiling data free from nationalist or political aims was born. It would be different, a program designed to preserve past and present horrors for honest study, forever.

Construction began in 2028, as soon as the material and personnel could be gathered. Groundbreaking saw a tremendous tunnel bored into the crust of the continent. The McMurdo Dry Valleys were no paradise, even in face of the coastal thaw: a barren landscape provided the advantages of stability and minimal levelling, while an increase of meltwater meant a stream of pure H₂O was always available, but nothing lived in the valley before The International University of Antarctica (IUA) arrived. The landscape suited the Memento Ministry's purpose. A grave monument fixed in a desert of ice and grey, remote and forbidding.

The tunnel widened into a tremendous cavern into which archives were imported. Within ten years a team fanned out internationally to abscond with primary documents where possible, copies where not, to return to the archive, input the data, and store the information for the whole human race, physically remote but accessible to any inquires. The data gathered included mortality figures from health organizations, research institutes, historical archives, and ancient monuments, any and all information on the greatest causes of pain, death, and violence to

humankind over its long, tumultuous existence. The archives expanded year by year, and as the Earth continued to warm more humans made their pilgrimage to learn at the university and work for Memento Ministry.

During this stage of growth, a certain woman found her way to the gates of the Ministry, CFO of Eisgarten Shipping Corp. Conducting an audit of her company's Antarctic enterprise, Dr. Hannah Strauss, fascinated by the stark concrete shaft erupting from grey earth, requested a tour of the structure. Initially completely disinterested in the enterprise, she found the Archive a stunning work, and the reverential passion of the researchers fantastic. Here were binders full of epidemiological studies and data on each individual recorded case relating to the COVID 19 outbreak of 2020, here were historical accounts of tobacco use from transcribed oral accounts through present data. The Palette of Narmer itself, harvested from a dealer working out of the ruins of the Museum of Cairo next to fantastic reliefs of the Sea People. Strauss had family who had escaped the Holocaust; the doctor found tremendous power in the section on genocide. She marveled at Pavlo, her guide and a chief researcher, "There is so much power in the work done here! I understand why you do it, I love that you do it. But how can you stand it down here, so far from good sun, green, and civilization?"

"This place doesn't attract people after physical comforts! Not everyone in the Ministry works in Antarctica. Many of us travel the world collecting data, artifacts, sponsorships. Really only the monks live here."

"Monks?"

Pavlo grinned and blinked. "I call them my monks, but they're scholars and archivists of the highest order. They're devoted to an idea: preservation. This is not about prevention. We're well aware of human tendency: violence and death! We look only to preserve statistics on mortality and suffering, hopefully to enlighten the race about its past a little bit."

"But don't you think genocide is bad? Isn't cancer? What do you mean you're not about prevention?!"

"We keep a record. Perhaps eventually the weight of her pains will change the course of the human spirit. But clearly nothing else has. Even simple preservation is politically fraught. That's why we're down here: far away from human concerns, in our temple of ice and concrete. No one will bother us, and we will only help those who come looking. I refuse to take any position on these issues. We keep the records."

Dr. Strauss and Pavlo wandered the polished halls for hours, surveying the sparse and serious workforce dressed in their uniform robes

and caps. When she returned to Eisgarten's headquarters in Hamburg she did not stop thinking about the Memento Ministry Archive. She could not forget the stark environment and the polished crypt collecting and preserving all the pain and death hidden in the soul of humanity. Two weeks after her return she contacted the company's president and asked that a permanent office be installed in the McMurdo Dry Valleys and to bid on a monopolistic charter for all nonprofit ventures in that section of Antarctica. A year later Eisgarten got its charter. A stark ziggurat built from locally quarried andesite grew over the landscape. Dr. Strauss moved to oversee Antarctic operations directly.

Dr. Strauss reaped fantastic subsidies on Antarctic shipping. Dr. Strauss worked with the head of the Memento Ministry and International University of Antarctica to cheapen shipping and import more students. Scholarships developed.

One day a ship, *Julius*, wrecked, pushed ashore by an errant current. The ship was ruined, but only a single crew member died. The seaman fell and snapped his neck on the ship's impacting the shore. A few members of the Ministry, University, and Eisgarten assembled to bury the crewman, and a small stone was erected. The ship, however, remained exactly where it was, immovable. It became a shrine some half-mile off-dock. In the months after her wreck, crews would pay their respects to the wrecked ship, making small pilgrimages to the site out of curiosity, then ritual. It gave Dr. Strauss an idea.

In 2034 an opportunity to achieve that idea presented itself. As part of settlement terms for the deaths of several hundred Kurdish civilians at the hands of an autonomous Airbus Defence and Space-constructed drone, ECOSOC issued an *amicus* briefing recommending funneling money to Memento Ministry for punitive financing of a monument dedicated to civilians destroyed as collateral damage in conflicts. This recommendation was accepted, and Airbus Defence and Space paid to erect a brooding pyramid over the barren Antarctic environment, at the core of which sat the bloody drone whose act inspired the monument. The Ministry oversaw creation of an expansive network of chambers with bas reliefs carved into the walls, historic replicas where possible, the sacks of Jerusalem and Rome, celebrations by Ashurbanipal and Ramses, depictions of the Dresden fires and Hiroshima's devastation. Directly over the drone at the core blazed a ticker, projecting a low range and high range number of the estimated deaths from collateral damage during warfare over all recorded time. The ticker would grow with time and knowledge. A living sarcophagus, still eating.

The Zuckerberg and Nobel committees lauded this work. Global media covered this construction in drastic tones: national presses screamed offence, denying ostensive accusations of collateral damage,

inflated numbers where admission was necessary, denigration of political narratives. ECOSOC funding was stripped, but most contracts and subsidies had been negotiated between corporations without UN cooperation by this time. Besides, Dr. Strauss had been busy with the Ministry leadership in the meantime. A legal precedent was established in Europe. It could happen elsewhere. It would.

In the months after ECOSOC's abandonment of Memento Ministry, high profile visitors from many countries and companies visited the shrine. The location seemed exotic, the controversy was an excellent excuse. A parade of national leaders and CEOs stopped by for photo ops and commitment statements. Several railed in protest. While the torrent of negativity passed by, a few interested individuals made the acquaintance of Dr. Strauss and Pavlo, now Dr. Zielinski. A few felt the grave power of the archive. A few felt it important enough to make contributions to, financially, legally, with material and expertise. The Ministry grew, in number and prestige. And, when opportunity struck, the Memento Gardens grew as well.

When Shire Pharmaceuticals got pegged for widespread negligent homicide by passing a hyperaddictive amphetamine-derivative study-drug into the international market by falsifying clinical trial records, a condition of their being allowed continued access to the European market was passing money to the Memento Ministry for construction of a monument. From the volcanic rock of the Antarctic land then rose a tower of a thousand feet constructed of the local grey stone. A spiraling staircase wrapped around it. Carved in bas relief along the way up were homeless people dying shooting up fentanyl, people wasted drunk in sewers, snorting powders, popping pills, smoking dusts and leaves and rocks, huffing bags, rubbing gums, clutching chests and keeling over. Above and below the reliefs were carved the names and shapes of the thousands of chemical compounds which introduce death through addiction and intoxication. At the top blazed a ticker counting ever upward, with a high estimate of deaths on the right side, and a low estimate on the left. This construction was less controversial.

The site became a draw for cruise ships, students, adventure tourists, the rich, the politically motivated, researchers, and people interested in the cause itself, pilgrims. The reputation of the little Ministry grew, IUA's schools of statistical and social sciences became renowned, and the international precedent established in favor of punitive payments to the Ministry for crimes increasing human suffering funneled money for further research and monuments. Slowly, the Memento Gardens grew.

The next project was tremendous: War. After the final defeat of the Imperial Republic of Turkey in the Second Levantine War, her lands were split between Russia, the Syrian Protectorate, and the EU. Her

gold reserves in England were seized and redistributed to the victor nations, minus a percentage put toward the perpetual maintenance of a shrine to war. For months across the globe teams worked forging bodies of stained galvanized steel clothed in military gear from across time, sometimes forging only an arm, a leg, a head, each in unique postures, all reaching up in a grimace or scream or desperate cry. A patch of earth behind the Pyramid to Collateral Disaster 2 miles in diameter was tilled with oxidized iron, staining the volcanic soil red, then the bodies and parts were mixed with and buried in the soil. At the center of this Dantesque vision towered an obelisk shaped as a sword, black as onyx. At its base blazed the estimated casualty figures for warfare across the span of human experience.

Around its circumference rose obelisks shaped like ICBMs, bullets, plumes of flame, mushroom clouds, knives and bayonets. A hall of scale model land mine victims financed by companies that produced them outside of international law post-conflict. Further out, a tremendous structure shaped like a car grew from the soil, constructed by automakers and insurance companies. A smokestack shaped like a cigar pierced the horizon, belching smoke day and night. Land painted black with petrochemicals and a giant oil derrick in the middle. A crater filled with noxious fumes requiring a gas mask and biohazard suit to reach the center of. And so on.

Through all this Drs. Strauss and Zielinski increased traffic to the archive, partnering with shipping and travel companies globally, improving supply lines. A city grew along the coast ostensibly under international jurisdiction, but the chartered lands for the Memento Ministry continued to grow. The city council was appointed by Ministry members. The Ministry was the reason most people were there. Civilians appeared either as tourists, students, or to work for the Ministry's institutions. The Ministry spread. Offices popped up in cities globally, centers for mortality research, usually appended to universities, near government offices and museums. Governments came to consult the Ministry's figures when working out disaster control policies. Insurance agencies coordinated with the Ministry's data to create their actuarial tables. Academic networks relied on Ministry figures often over any other. And while money continued to pour in through punitive incidents, a tremendous trust grew up around it, backed and managed by The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, The Buffet Foundation, The Zuckerberg Foundation, and Bezos Initiatives, among others. Whereas data was so often corrupted, untrustable, unusable, here was one fount of truth, independent and fervent. Available for genuine faith.

Eventually, though, came resistance. So much money was tied up in the Ministry that many states questioned the import and efficacy of

this institution. How did it come to be such a ubiquitous tax on sovereign action? A mixture of international law and national precedent, punishment for national industries and actions. It was intolerable: a few thousand dead over some mining practices is, historically speaking, absolutely nothing. Most of the people involved died of cancers, sure, but one could not tie those cancers directly to mining. Further, there certainly weren't so many Yazidi in that province to begin with, so clearly the Ministry's numbers on that people's destruction were erroneous. A small coalition of angry nations clamored in the UN for the destruction of the Memento Ministry, and when the UN refused to lift a finger, a coalition navy assembled to assault Ministry HQ.

A partnership between Academi and Valkyrie Global, Inc.'s Autonomous Division landed a fantastic contract to ensure this navy never landed. Those who drafted the contract were never discovered, but the contract itself was paid up front through an independent trust, financed afterward by a punitive tax taken from South Africa, Brazil, and the Philippines, the three largest countries participating in the military expedition. The terms were simple: protect Memento Ministry against all foreign military threats. The Ministry had no control over these forces, but they swelled with the money coming into its coffers. A few raised their eyebrows within Memento's leadership, but no formal questions were asked. There was work to be done.

A small monument was erected on the outskirts of the War memorial, upon the Pavilion of Skirmishes. Notches were carved onto the hull of the wreck of *Julius* by the harbor, now a hallowed shrine to people lost at sea. The Ministry continued to gather information, to construct and improve monuments. The world largely forgot about it. The Nations instead turned their attentions to a far more pressing matter: Integrated Intelligent Defense Apparatuses (IIDA).

2054 saw the rise of autonomous, intelligent weapons systems designed to manage human behavior and type, eradicating anyone engaging in activity or existing in sectors that violate their directives. Coordinating orbital observation and munitions platforms, land, air, and ocean-traversing drones, the systems were ostensibly bound by governmental order. As time progressed, these all-pervading apparatuses coopted and absorbed the duties of defense and public health. Sensors read body temperature, hormonal output, identified threat probabilities and assigned treatment resources as required. The Memento Ministry's own intelligence apparatus hovered between the IIDAs' data collectors, sucking data right in the periphery. It shifted largely to autonomous collection out of necessity, to achieve as thorough proliferation as possible. Human hands, feet, and ears are limited. Little insectoid robots fly unnoticed, collect data from larger systems with greater accuracy.

Occasionally, however, an IIDA went haywire. One warm July evening the Neo-Persian Empire disintegrated in a bath of flames when an update to its IIDA redefined any Persian as a mortal threat to Persia. The monument for this destruction event was magnificent.

Violence limitations were placed on these apparatuses through international treaty, however the intelligence organizations behind each nation installed backdoor access with secret protocols.

On a pleasant afternoon mid-May, the IIDAs from the Pacific States of North America, the Japanese Empire, and United Korea clashing in a single cataclysmic moment with that of the People's Republic of China for a completely unknown reason, immediately resulting in the extermination of all four, and causing a profound global depression. The Swiss IIDA then released a powerful, perfectly infectious pathogen it'd previously inoculated its population from, a virus with a 4-week incubation period causing prions to develop in the brains of the infected. It had, correctly, judged the only way to ensure the survival of the Swiss was the absolute destruction of any other entity with the capacity it possessed. A terrible irony was that it infected the peoples of other nations and could not destroy their IIDAs, which caught on, retaliated, and destroyed the Swiss Federation, IIDA, people, and land.

Globally, people started going insane. People started dying. IIDAs were turned off. The global economy turned entirely towards curing an incurable disease. But no one got better.

At the Memento Ministry, people started dying as well. Quarantine was impossible after 4 weeks of free travel, even in Antarctica. This was, however, all planned for. A fantastic, final monument was planned and executed. The Ministry IIA was repurposed to both collect the terminal data of the human race, and construct a final monument for Self-Destruction Through Engineered Virus. The IIA repurposed global IIDAs to collect the bodies of viral victims and place them all in a specified mass grave, one per continent. The pits were tremendous geological features in their own rights. In the center of each was carved a statue of an ape staring at the Sun, its eyes burned out and blood dripping down its face. A counter was fixed to each, but there was no need to estimate, the IIA infrastructure was exacting enough to have a negligible margin of error.

So the human race died.

Excepting a few people on a few islands, in a few jungles. A few people who made their way out into an empty world after the prions had all degraded. These people found a planet ripe for retaking.

Strange structures riddled the landscape.

Towers built with screaming faces pushing out of their walls, good for shelter and defense. A terraced mountain range with infinite infini-

tesimal notches carved into each step which was perfect for rice paddies. Gardens of blunted swords waiting to be harvested for sharpening pressed into use. And throughout the world hopped strange metal flies, between people, between monuments. Tens and hundreds of years passed, and these small creatures continued to reproduce, and wherever they congregated, monoliths appeared. Constructing human memories from the Ministry databank upon blank earth which no one could make sense of. Slowly, civilization rebuilt itself, making great use of the ruins of the Forerunners, but as these New Men wandered the fantastic, incomprehensible grotesques constructed from abandoned cities, they wondered and assembled stories. As they waged their wars, they came to understand the small creatures as spirits of the land responding to sacrifice, given that their violences changed the very face of the planet.

Wars were arranged as acts of mass prayer. Ritual suicides, reverent slaughters. Only human blood caused construction of these impossible buildings, only human life changed the face of the planet. Humans became extremely adept at mass reproduction to ensure a consistent supply for ritual slaughter. Mountains rose whose faces bore intricate atrocities, each instance an altar to method, a memento for horror.

And somewhere in the wastes of Antarctica, blazing numerals at the peaks of a thousand frozen obelisks ticked up...

—BEAST, 29, Asheville NC

Broken Clocks

Two weeks after Samuel disappeared Iolanthe sold almost everything he left behind to a second hand clothing store. The only items she kept were the leather overnight bag and the thin black cashmere scarf.

Samuel was only staying with Iolanthe for a few weeks while her roommate, Blanca, was off visiting family. The morning of his disappearance they shared coffee and toast. Samuel kissed her on the cheek and told her he'd see her later. She went over that breakfast in her mind for weeks after and tried to locate some sort of clue but nothing was out of place.

Samuel wasn't in the apartment when she returned from work that day. Usually she found him half undressed and working his way through a pizza or boxes of Chinese takeout. She ate some leftover fried rice and listened to the radio while she waited for him. When it got dark she tried calling his apartment several times but the phone just rang and rang. The next morning she went to his building and spoke to the door man. He told her the last time he saw Samuel was a week ago. She went upstairs and knocked but there was no answer. He never gave her a key because he said the landlord didn't allow tenants to make copies. She believed that like she believed in Santa Clause and "no run" stockings.

Iolanthe tried calling the legal firm where he worked and they told her he wasn't there. He wasn't there yesterday either. No, they had not heard from him. She went to the police with the lone photo she had of Samuel, a shadowy Polaroid taken at a rent party last spring.

Iolanthe answered every question the policeman asked. He nodded, took down the information, and said he'd call her. He never did. The next time she called his apartment the number was out of service.

*

Iolanthe moved to the city to be an artist but now the only things she made were scarves. She knit with bright acrylic from the five and dime while her easel, canvases, paints, brushes, and sketch books gath-

ered dust. She bought yarn in colors from mustard yellow to avocado green. She didn't sell the scarves, just gave them away: to her boss at the coffee shop, Samuel, Blanca, Blanca's boyfriend Hank, and strangers on the street.

Samuel never wore his scarf - a rusty orange. He said his black scarf was warmer when she asked him why.

*

"Don't worry about him, he's only a tourist." said Blanca when Iolanthe told her Samuel was gone. They were sitting quietly after dinner, absorbed in their own tasks. Blanca put new strings on her guitar while Iolanthe knit. Iolanthe suspected her roommate's Ivy League education and family's cattle ranch made her extra sensitive to people who wanted to be a part of the scene without paying the price of admission.

"When was the last time he took you uptown for dinner?" Blanca added.

Iolanthe said nothing, staring at her knitting, and pretending to fret over an imaginary dropped stitch. Samuel's apartment was the only place uptown she'd even been to with him. She always knew he'd been using her. It only seemed fair since she was using him too.

*

The coffeehouse was filled with smoke as usual so it took awhile for Iolanthe to even notice the familiar camel coat. When she did, her heart raced but she couldn't say why.

"Sam!"

"I'm not Sam, but I will be if you want me to." the stranger leered an expression that had, perhaps, worked on someone once, and he now pulled out for all occasions.

"My mistake. Sorry, I have coffees to deliver." She left without taking the stranger's order and wondered how she could forget Samuel leaving the coat behind and her selling it. When he first got it he couldn't stop talking about how much it cost and that only the most fashionable of men wore such coats. He'd probably be horrified at the mere thought of a bearded man with paint-stained clothes now being in possession of it.

*

Samuel once instructed Iolanthe to "dress up" whenever she went to his apartment. "So they know you ain't homeless babe."

When she tried to point out everything wrong with such a remark he'd "listened" and then told her how much he dug her "Homeless style" and kissed her neck.

Blanca once asked her why she stayed with Samuel. She shrugged.

"Do you pick jerks on purpose?"

"We can't all be blessed with a Hank of our own." Iolanthe finally said.

"There is, indeed, only one Hank." Blanca agreed. Her boyfriend was an aspiring novelist who wrote for the most radical publications he could find and somehow managed to be intrinsically kind while condemning people's flawed behavior.

*

Back when Iolanthe still sketched and painted Blanca often modeled for her. One day she drew her as an angel with wings and a harp. When Blanca looked at the sketch, Iolanthe saw disappointment wash over her.

"Is that really how you see me?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't think you'd mind. It's just a drawing."

"With my face and body." she snapped.

Iolanthe went to the sink and lit a match. She burned the sketch, the ashes falling down on the egg yoked and toast crumbed breakfast dishes.

"I won't use you as a model anymore."

"No, it's fine. Just - don't make me look like that - okay?"

Iolanthe agreed. She felt bad that she'd so carelessly done such a thing. Before Samuel there was Max. A painter who never missed an opportunity to remind her that his work was far more important than her own. She didn't disagree, she just wished he'd bring it up less. He called her his "Muse" and she spent hours posing naked in his chilly loft. His paintings with her face and body somehow managed to look just like her and yet have nothing to do with her. There was something in those images that spooked her. She realized no one wanted their real self concealed under someone else's fantasy.

*

After the coat at the coffeehouse Iolanthe started to notice Samuel's clothes everywhere. The scratchy grey wool vest on a poet reciting to the pigeons in the park. The hand painted red silk necktie worn by the middle aged grocer she bought apples and potatoes from. The brown

hounds tooth trousers on Blanca one evening as they sat eating potato soup.

“Those were Samuel’s”

“Well they’re warm and it’s fucking cold out there. It’s fucking cold in here.”

“How do they even fit you?”

“I hemmed them. And I’m wearing a belt.”

“They look better on you.”

“Of course they do.” She stood up and did a little turn, as if she were modeling them.

“I’ve been seeing Samuel’s clothes everywhere lately.”

“He’s haunting you.”

“He’d have to be dead to haunt me.”

“I’m not sure that’s true. Also, how do you know he’s not dead?”

“Because it all seems like how he’d end things?”

“And leave behind his clothes? These pants? That coat?”

“Maybe he didn’t decide until after he left the apartment. He was probably going to buy a new winter coat anyway.” She picked up her bowl and stood up. “Want more soup?”

*

Iolanthe met Samuel at the gallery she worked at part time. It was one of those places where the art of the many met the money of the few. The owner believed people wouldn’t come inside if her appearance was “too arty” so she wore stockings and dressed like she worked at the perfume counter of a fine department store.

The gallery specialized in modern offerings: blocks of color, drips of paint, and Rorschach test like sculptures. It depressed her. All of it was out of her reach. She couldn’t afford any of it, nor could she seem to tap into the kind of creativity that might take her beyond very traditional work. Her high school art teacher once commended her by saying that she had the makings of a “very serviceable portrait artist.” It was true. She copied down the things she saw with ease but that extra spark that made something truly art always escaped her. The people who bought the art depressed her too. Rich people who were less concerned with the art itself than its value as an investment or something to show off at parties. These pieces were bought and hung on walls but probably never appreciated for what they were. No one ever saw the art, just the money.

On a rainy day a well-dressed man came into the gallery. He explained the rain and his lack of umbrella to her- as if such facts weren’t

clearly visible. He introduced himself as “Samuel Masters” and shook her hand. She expected him to give her his business card next. Instead, he asked for a tour. As they went around, he made all the remarks that people who sniffed at modern art always made. He clearly intended them as jokes but she didn’t laugh.

Still Samuel bought the cheapest piece in the place and asked for her number. She scribbled it on the brown paper she wrapped his painting in, not expecting he would ever call. Months later she came across the tiny canvas, still wrapped, on the top shelf of his closet, between a box labeled “off season” and his suitcase. Their meeting would have been a cute story to tell—if they were in love.

*

When Blanca played the coffee house it was standing room only. She definitely had a spark in her work. She had the whole damn fireworks display. People shut up when she played. They listened and watched and cried and clapped and cheered. Blanca should have been world famous. Instead she paid her portion of the rent by teaching guitar to the children of wealthy people. “Tourists,” she commented a month or so before Samuel disappeared. “But at least they pay me.” She looked pointedly at Iolanthe.

“Are you suggesting I become a prostitute?”

“Hey, whatever you got to do. I don’t judge.”

“You don’t judge?”

They both burst into laughter.

*

Every visit to Samuel’s apartment went the same way. She’d arrive, they’d have sex, he’d complain about someone at work who was given something he thought he deserved. Then they’d have sex again.

If it was late, Iolanthe spent the night. She always left just before dawn because Samuel was worried that her presence might “Shock the old dears that live next door.” It was the quietest time in the city and she liked walking the forty blocks. She sang songs as she went along, many of them Blanca’s. No one ever bothered her. She didn’t know if it was her poor voice or if the act of singing made people question her sanity.

*

“You miss Sammy?” Blanca asked Iolanthe one morning months after his disappearance.

Iolanthe shrugged and got out of bed. Blanca was already making coffee.

“Want me to make eggs? Or oatmeal?”

“Just toast is fine.”

Iolanthe made toast while the coffee percolated.

They ate, crunching their toasts merrily.

“What are you doing today?” asked Blanca.

“I have a shift at the gallery and then the coffeehouse - you?”

“Lessons in the morning but I’ve got a gig in the afternoon.”

“In the afternoon?”

“I will be performing at Sunny Pastures Retirement Home. It comes with a tiny paycheck but if it goes well it could become a regular thing.”

“Congratulations. You might just be the sensation of a generation.”

“Just not my own.”

*

The night before Samuel disappeared, they went to an art show. Not at the gallery, but inside a condemned warehouse that smelled of glue and mildew. Samuel held her hand while they spent an hour looking at vaguely animal shaped wire sculptures and massive canvases of photorealistic renderings of items found in medicine cabinets. He let out a big sigh as they stood in front of a painting of a comb with a lone strand of wavy red hair stuck in its teeth.

“What?” she asked.

“Nothing,” he said and lead her on to the next painting, this one of a can of shaving cream with foam dripping down the side. They made their exits after complimenting both of the artists on their work.

“Go ahead.” she said once they were outside.

“That’s art?” he asked, though it really wasn’t a question. Samuel spent the rest of the walk going on and on about the foundations of Western art, which he knew very little about but was happy to explain.

There was nothing surprising or unknown about Samuel. It made Iolanthe feel safe.

*

Blanca was working on song lyrics, playing the same line over and over before writing down the “final” version. Iolanthe was knitting another scarf. This one in an eye searing lime green shade. She tried

to pick up a dropped stitch but the yarn slipped on her cheap plastic needles and soon it was more than one stitch gone. She cursed, removed the needles entirely and began to unravel the scarf.

“I have never heard you curse in your life.” Blanca commented.

“I have never been more frustrated. This is demon yarn.”

“If this is the most frustrating moment of your life I really envy you.”

Iolanthe threw her half unraveled scarf at Blanca, who ducked. The scarf landed on a pile of sketchbooks in the corner.

“You’re a better painter than a knitter, you know?”

“True, but not by much.”

Blanca just raised her eyebrows. Iolanthe left the scarf where it was and picked up the nearest book, which happened to be a paperback copy of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. She opened to a random page and pretended to read.

“Which title do you like better: *The Time Time Ended* or *This Too Shall Not Pass?*” Blanca asked.

“*The Time Time Ended.*”

*

Blanca was playing at the coffee house again. Iolanthe loved when she played because she got to stand in the back of the house and watch. No one ever asked for a refill. No one tried to chat her up. Everyone was too busy watching Blanca. Iolanthe didn’t watch Blanca though, she watched the people. They closed their eyes. Swayed. Lovers looked at one another and smiled, holding hands. The solitary ones sometimes looked on with wet eyes. Hank stood next to Iolanthe, leaning against the counter. He was just as under Blanca’s spell as everyone else. They all went somewhere when she performed. Somewhere you couldn’t get to alone. That was what Iolanthe wanted to give people. What she dreamed about on cold nights and rainy afternoons.

Iolanthe wore Samuel’s black cashmere scarf all winter long. It was warmer than any of the scarves she used to knit. She supposed liars were like broken clocks in that way: eventually telling the truth, even if not quite as often as twice a day.

—Danielle Mullen, 40, Southern New Mexico

1972 Deconstructed/ Reconstructed

Lyd was my grandmother

Lydia Mary Teesdale/Teasdale 1910-1972

Glasses, dyed hair, cig lit

The spelling seemed to be optional

That's how I remember her

Even the war office weren't certain

A crow regarding me

Seen off two husbands by then

Pale thought in a nightgown

But not the rumours about the others

I was about three then

BFH b1969

At the foot of her bed

Maybe I had been brought in

Studying my face, for traces

To say goodbye

Of something, she never said

I am honestly not sure

Beady; corvid quizzical

Exactly what she looked like

She never spoke to me

She must have said something

That I can certainly recall

That's the trouble with early memories

One day I would have this room

I slept in this room

From this time, 1972

From the time she died

Until my brother left home

Till about 1980

I was dreaming of a future

I could have been dreaming about anything

When girls could stay over

It was more likely football, at least to start with

Which in that bed one did

Much later, after an awkward chat with dad

Oblivious to Lyd's presence

I am assuming the mattress had been changed

As a family ghost of sorts

But I don't want to think about that

Was she smoking still?

Probably, everyone did then

Or wearing a shroud of fine morning mist

Probably not, though that room was very cold

Foretelling death approaching

Used to get ice inside the windows

As the recollections of my childhood

Which Lydia am I recalling?

So often seem to be

With the "e", with the "a", or the one I made up?

I do not believe in spirits

I am sure that I could find photographs

Or have faith in memory

Of Lydia if I looked hard enough

The mind and the eye

But what would be the point now?

Are unreliable senses

It would spoil all this fine imagery

And writers fill in the gaps

That I used to fill in the gaps

—Barry Fentiman Hall, 51, Chatham UK

Soul River

Cold wind blowing
My soul speaks by the rivers,
Skin forms goosebumps, body shakes as I shiver
 Sand like paste
 Mixed with moisture as I lay
 I sink like metal in a holster
 My soul speaks by the rivers
 Oh yes it does,
 Here, I come to digress
 It feels better than love
The sunset relays a message spoken without tongue,
 Healing my body, depression, and stress
 Nature keeps me young
 I see a crab walk sideways
 Pay attention as it passes by,
 I feel a natural connection to it
 For it is my zodiac sign
 The crab seems lost
 Should it be in water or land,
 The crab can't decide
 It remains in the sand
 My soul speaks by the rivers
 Oh yes it does,
 Here, I come to digress
 It feels better than love

—Dana Burtin, 19, South Euclid OH

Lost Boys

They swarmed our lane like invaders from another planet, hastily parking their vehicles with the lights still on, disgorging fully formed in their light-blue containment suits and face shields. Like medieval warriors clutching specialized arms to prod, poke, and grab, they joined their fellow HazMat brethren already engaged in the labeling, photographing, and depositing of dead chickens in industrial black drums. We on Muliwai Lane had never considered ourselves in danger; in fact, finding dead chickens in the gutters of our lane was an occasional occurrence when Chicken Charlie was on a bender. It took a couple of days before someone finally called the authorities, and only because the carcasses that were piling up under our hedgerows and hibiscus were inviting legions of horseflies whose incessant humming was starting to keep us from our sleep.

The spacemen roamed our neighborhood most of the afternoon, hoisting bags of suspect chicken feed into the beds of trucks, disinfecting the areas where fluids had stained, and poisoning the soil to keep the maggots from rooting. They noted the location of each dead chicken by spraying a yellow X where each one was found till it looked like a curse written in an arcane script had been painted in ochre on the edges of our lane. It was late in the day before they entered the house and followed the tracks of bloody footprints into a corner of the kitchen to find Chicken Charlie nearly naked in a pool of blood, cowering in the corner with his butchering blade in his hand. But it was us kids who dared approach the police as they led away a covered-up but still blood-stained Chicken Charlie, to ask, “What happened to Chick? Where is Chicken Charlie’s son?”

Long before a certain colonel from Kentucky pimpled the islands with his gleaming red-and-white plastic huts, the most famous chicken man on Oahu was Chicken Charlie. Chicken Charlie started each day by loading his pushcart with a flock of live chickens and pushing them down to the docks of Honolulu. He would butcher the chickens there

on the dock and trade the entrails with the fishermen who used them for chum in the lucrative sport fishing charters. In exchange, Chicken Charlie would get enough ice to pack his chicken parts for the day, before he moved off a short ways to the other side of the docks where he would find the longshoreman captain. Bribed by the promise of free fried chicken, the captain would direct a couple of his men to rip open some wooden crates and to stack the waste wood onto the end of the pushcart. Chicken Charlie quickly built a fire in the 55-gallon drum that he kept on his cart and stoked it with longshoreman wood until it was hot enough to curdle a cauldron of yesterday's cooking oil, which he skimmed with a wooden paddle until it was as clear as rainwater. After the promised pieces were cooked, wrapped in newspaper, and sent to the longshoreman captain, Chicken Charlie would make his first sales of the day there on the dock, feeding the hungry longshoremen just coming off the night shift, and catching the arrival of the day shift workers who, despite having just eaten breakfast, could not help but succumb to the smell of the fried chicken and indulge themselves with a few pieces.

By mid-morning he had exhausted the pocket change of the longshoremen and would move off to the more fertile hunting grounds of downtown Honolulu. There he parked his pushcart across the street from the Bank of Hawaii building, stoked up his fire some more, and prepared for the lunch crowd. His regulars came early for the dark-meat legs and thighs, and if he was lucky enough to catch a good trade wind, Chicken Charlie might lure customers and tourists from as far away as Iolani Palace to sell out everything by early afternoon. If not, he would wheel his pushcart from the corner of Puahi and King, leaving behind the smell of smoke and fried chicken and a puddle of water tinged with blood, and make his way back to the docks for the arrival of the most highly paid longshoremen, the swing shift.

Year after year of this unalterable route, six days a week, led to a small fortune that Chicken Charlie periodically drained through his bouts with alcohol. We kids on the lane learned to stay away from him then, to not beg him for the crispy leavings of fried breading and chicken skin that he usually saved for us and we shared with each other like popcorn. He was a violent and unpredictable drunk, often banging on our house doors and demanding redress from our parents for an imagined slight that may have happened years ago, or swinging wildly at one of us if we came too near, as he spewed curses and spit, mistaking us for an apparition he was already battling with in his foggy imagination. His chickens would go unattended then, settling themselves in the low trees and banks of Nuuanu Stream, and inevitably falling victim to some of the feral cats that prowled there. We also knew when Chicken Charlie

was out of money and back from the bottle, because the chickens were in their coops, and small newspaper-wrapped gifts of fried chicken could be found on our porches in the morning.

All might have remained this way, were it not for the Great Dock Strike. With the longshoremen out of work and being fed through the strike funds of the union, Chicken Charlie lost not only a major market, but also his wood supplier. This forced him to wake up even earlier and trade quickly with the fishermen so that he could scour construction sites in Honolulu for waste wood before the first construction workers arrived at full light. And that was how he got caught by the church ladies.

Chicken Charlie had been raiding the wood pile for the annex extension of the Kawaihao Church for some time, finding it convenient to load up on wood there before pushing his cart the short five blocks to his downtown post. It had become such a regular part of his routine since the strike that he failed to notice one early morning that flickering lights inside the church had dimly illuminated the stained glass windows. When the annex door burst open releasing the Ladies Auxiliary from a special sunrise service, they caught Chicken Charlie in mid-hoist, brilliantly aglow in the light from the candles the ladies were holding.

Both sinner and saints silently gaped at each other. Then an impulse to run seized Chicken Charlie and he dropped the board he was carrying but took less than a step before he realized that he could not abandon his pushcart. He looked down at his feet instead, and the ladies looked at each other and nodded silently, for nothing motivates a group of charity-hearted women more than a cause, and clearly, standing in front of them just outside their church door was the most pathetic cause of all: a man who needed saving.

They clustered around Chicken Charlie in their muumuus and candles and started speaking to him all at once. For the first time in his life, Chicken Charlie knew fear. Unaccustomed to the company of women or even to speaking sentences at all—his daily conversations having become scripted grunts and gestures with old salt fishermen and leatherneck longshoremen—Chicken Charlie felt the peppering of their questions like physical blows to his body. He staggered backwards to the pushcart for support and managed to discern that they were not angry so much as curious about why he needed the wood. The women grew silent as they watched him leap onto his pushcart, layer wood into his 55-gallon drum, take one of their candles, and nurture a fire from an orange candle flame to a roaring white cooking fire.

He served them fried chicken that morning while they inquired about his technique, his marinade recipe, his timing for cooking the dif-

ferent pieces so that they came out light and crispy and not laden with grease. They cooed over his industry and economy, and later, paid him for all the chicken he had served. But by then, Chicken Charlie couldn't have cared less. He had been drawn in by their charms, their fluttering hand gestures, even their smell, and would have agreed to anything to spend some more time with them again. And so he did. In exchange for picking up a small amount of daily waste wood, Chicken Charlie would have to attend Sunday morning church services every week, under the auspices of the Ladies Auxiliary.

For almost a year, Chicken Charlie was a regular fixture of that congregation, the proud trophy of the Ladies Auxiliary. Shined up and newly sober, he started implementing some welcome changes on our lane as well. Chicken Charlie cleaned up his property, secured his pens, cut back the brush all the way to Nuuanu Stream, and even repainted his house and storage sheds. He was like a hen sprucing up her nest for a new arrival, and sure enough, not long after the paint had dried on the house, Chicken Charlie picked up a catalog called "Ladies of Luzon" and ordered himself a new bride from the Philippines.

It's hard to remember now exactly what she looked like. In Chick's face, the way he held his body, there was no trace of his mother, as if he had inherited all of his physical characteristics from one parent. And maybe that's what she saw when she gave birth and glimpsed the misbegotten head of her newborn son and the old-man features staring back at her. Maybe she took it as an omen, a vision of the future and the lifetime of toil that awaited her, so she fled the hospital, not even waiting to nurse her son for the first time and disappeared.

Having been abandoned by his wife and betrayed by God, something inside Chicken Charlie became hard, turned over, and died. He stopped attending church, took up his pushcart seven days a week instead of taking a day off, and returned to the docks. He made only two changes to his pushcart: He created a makeshift sling padded generously at the head to tote his newborn son, and he built a rectangular cubby-hole on the underside of his cart just big enough to store a large bottle of whiskey.

Forced to take his son with him everywhere, he grew fiercely loyal to the boy and intolerant of anyone who looked at the child too long or said a word about him. He had come to believe that he and his son were not bound by the rules that governed other men, and kept the boy for himself, away from public education, to teach him the bitter lessons that Chicken Charlie had learned in life. The two were inseparable, and so the boy was christened Chick.

Some of us say the fighting chickens came next and some say the beatings, but we all agree that by age six, Chick had become something like a wild animal: untamable, unruly, and uncommunicative. Baby Chick, the precious white grub carried in the sling from the handles of his father's pushcart, had been borne by Chicken Charlie with defiance and pride, like an old war wound. But even the most powerful symbols change over time, and Chick became not only a financial burden to Chicken Charlie, but the manifestation of his failures that rose and confronted him every morning and waited to greet him at the end of every long day. So Chicken Charlie turned to the only solution he knew: He struck out at his failures in alcohol-fueled rages that sometimes lasted all night, as if beating his melon-headed son were an offering to a wretched and unfeeling god who had chosen Chicken Charlie as his vessel of misery.

Mornings found Chick among his only friends, the chickens and roosters he raised for slaughter. While the rest of the kids on the lane went to school, Chick was locked inside the chicken pen of his yard, wandering from coop to coop, tending to his charges. We dragged him to school once, helping him dig a shallow pit that would allow his massive head and shoulders to pass under the fence. All of us arrived dirty and late for school, but once the teachers saw Chick's dented cranium and bulging forehead, they forgot their objections and excused our tardiness. That day, for perhaps the first time in his life, Chick was treated like just another regular kid. All morning he doodled with pencil and paper, treating each trip to the pencil sharpener with profound amazement in the simple crank that could produce such miracles. He stopped only when the teacher read to us from our Hawaiian history and legends text; nodding as if the wars, betrayals, and human sacrifices were just another type of chicken fight except more distant since he had no hand in raising the combatants.

Because he didn't know better, Chick ate everything from his tray for lunch, including the bean casserole, cobbled together from leftovers from two days of green beans served earlier in the week. Then he amazed us again by consuming a second helping on a large faculty tray that the lunch ladies, charmed by his voracious appetite, brought to him.

That afternoon, he spent the day in the corner of the classroom with the school counselor, who tested him with a variety of flash cards and pictures and learned what we kids could have told her if she had just asked one of us—that Chick could understand almost everything that was said to him, but he could neither read nor write. Chick walked back home with us from school clutching a letter the counselor had written to Chicken Charlie, and we helped him crawl back under the chicken fence, promising to get him again tomorrow morning.

That was the last of Chick we would see for a while.

It must have been the school who called the authorities and sent them out to Chicken Charlie's house. He claimed to have sent Chick away, "to distant relatives on the mainland," he told them, "at a special school." Having not seen Chick for a couple of weeks we actually believed him, hoping that maybe now Chick was in a better place, sitting at a desk with pencil in hand, doodling under the watchful eye of a kindhearted teacher while we slept in our beds, several time zones away.

But when Chicken Charlie stopped working for a couple of days to build an enormous privacy fence around his property, boards mated so snugly that not even a shadow could slide between them, we knew that the brief cries and strangulated sobs we sometimes heard at night was not a hen being taken by a feral cat, but the voicing of Chick still under the savage hand of his father.

We kids on the lane debated among ourselves whether we should tell the teachers or not, for the last time caused an outburst so severe that Chick now seemed to walk with a limp (at least that's what it sounded like from the other side of the fence when we called his name and he paused before resuming his shuffle-drag-shuffle). In the end, though, we did tell one teacher, the youngest teacher we had, the one who had read to him most of the morning. She looked at us in alarm, then looked away to her desk at the front of the classroom and slowly started nodding. She walked over and took the Hawaiian History and Legends text from her desk and handed it to us.

"Make sure he gets this," she told us, as she handed us her Teacher's Edition with all the extra pictures and stories. "You will have to read it to him."

And so we did. Every day after school, one of us would sit by the fence and knock until we heard Chick's hurried shuffling on the other side, and in a few moments the book would appear from under the fence wrapped carefully in newspaper as if it were some holy relic instead of the ballast that weighted down every kid's bookbag on the lane. It seemed to matter little where we started or what we read to him, he seemed as pleased to hear about the legends of the man-eating shark gods as he was to hear about the arcane details of Sanford Dole's appointment as president of the Provisional Government during the overthrow of Queen Liliuokalani, as long as we ended our readings with his favorite story, the legend of the Boy Warriors of Kipapa Gulch.

It was a legend that did not appear in our regular kid texts but was found only in the teacher's edition. The illustration that accompanied the story showed a group of five to six shaggy-headed boys of varying

ages, all of them nearly naked except for brief *malo* loincloths, leaning on long sticks, standing on a cap rock overlooking Kipapa Gulch. With their skin indelibly dyed rust red from the iron-rich soils of central Oahu, they stood out like bloody centurions against the regal blue sky of the background. According to legend, these boys were castoffs from ancient Hawaiian society: young criminals or *kapu* breakers, parricides, or the sons of disgraced men. These runaways would escape the judgment of their communities by escaping to Kipapa Gulch, where they shed all trappings of their former lives, including their names, and adopted the reclusive culture and strange, guttural tongue of the boy warriors. Ferocious and ritualistically brutal in the way of young savages, these boys were highly feared and often the targets of unsuccessful suppression programs by the kings of ancient Oahu. It was Kamehameha who recognized the political value of these boy warriors and struck a deal with them: If the boys would side with him on his great assault on Oahu and its king *Kalanikupule*, they would be granted Kipapa Gulch for self-rule in perpetuity. And when King Kamehameha became sovereign over all the islands, he issued that royal edict, the text stated, one that has never been revoked.

Technically, the legend ended there. But every time we pushed the text under the fence, it would come right back to us, open to the story of the boy warriors. Figuring that Chick couldn't read anyway, we turned the page and pretended there was more. We told him about how boys came out only at night and so they were never seen, but you could tell how far away they were from their howling on the wind. It was only the following morning, when you found a blood-red footprint on your porch or smelled the pungent iron-in-the-rain scent they left behind, that you realized they had deceived you and had been close enough to slit your throat while you slept. Killers by profession and not for sport, they ate mostly pineapple and sugarcane stolen from the fields. They drank water from irrigation ditches. Workers who found the leavings from one of their feasts – discarded pineapple tops, smoldering campfires surrounded by the circular ripples of footprints of some primal dance – never reported the sightings for fear of retribution, preferring instead to incur the wrath of the planters and overseers for the thin harvest.

We saved the best part for last because even we fervently believed that it could be so: to never have to brush their teeth because the boys slept on the ground, and during the night the ants would clean their teeth while they were sleeping. To never have to bathe because their skin was permanently stained the same rust color as the dirt, leaving only the whites of their eyes as evidence of their former existence. These descriptions brought sighs from both sides of the fence, and that was how we knew we were done and could pass the book back to Chick.

The next five years brought more of the same routine, except while we grew up tall and slender and straight, nurtured in equal measures by the sun and the challenges and expectations of school, Chick seemed to grow both more bulky and more wilted. A callus of muscle built up along his shoulders and upper back to protect him from the sun beating down on him during the day and his father at night. This, in addition to his oversized head, unbalanced him, and he lumbered around hunched over as if in constant supplication, like Atlas bending under the weight of the world.

We had higher hopes for him once. For a little while, it looked like Chicken Charlie was training Chick to become his assistant. We would see them wheeling around Honolulu on their rounds, Chick pushing the cart while Chicken Charlie talked to him constantly, like an attentive vocational trainer. Afterward, Chick proudly raised his hands over the fence to show us the blisters that were forming on his palms, but in less than week, Chick was locked back into his pen during the days, while his father worked the fried-chicken trade alone. It seemed that the downtown chicken business fell off precipitously when Chick assisted, and Chicken Charlie blamed Chick's brutish appearance for spoiling the appetites of the city gentry. In truth, it was Chicken Charlie's hostility that turned away his customers. Whenever they made a sympathetic comment or inquired about his son's condition, Chicken Charlie would berate them with threats and insults until they withdrew, cash still in hand. Then later at home, Chicken Charlie would curse himself and then his son for his own foolish notions.

With the door of the world finally closed to him, Chick turned his attention to the only thing left to him, his brood. We would learn later that Chicken Charlie was earning a growing reputation for himself as a breeder and trainer of a peculiar line of fighting cocks. These cocks were not the overly aggressive and simpleminded type that dominated the sport; rather, Chicken Charlie produced a stable of cocks that were dopey and punchy, much like his own son. Some possessed peculiar neurological tics, and some claimed that the chickens' slow reaction times proved that they were retarded, but nevertheless, once the blood started flying, these chickens were extremely deadly.

Chick started off as something of a mascot to these combatants, an inside joke on defective genetics, just another cruel amusement to the whole spectacle. But once Chicken Charlie started proving the success of his line and the pile of dead chickens grew as fast as his financial backers, Chick threw himself into the process and became something of a Chicken Master. No one would have suspected that it was Chick

who selected the crosses for breeding, who handled all the nurturing, exercise, and feeding for the gamecocks, who toughened them up for their much-speculated masochistic fighting technique, and who sewed the victors back up after matches.

Some would say later that Chick did this to avoid being beaten, that the late-night raging and scuffling did not crescendo on the nights Chicken Charlie won, but we kids knew better. We knew it was more than that to Chick. He had stopped wanting us to read to him, stopped coming by the fence at the appointed time. We knew he had discovered a new religion, with a new text, written in the blood of a dusty fighting ring. His fighting cocks, winners for a short time but all losers eventually, were mere sacrifices of love to that greater god, his father. And we kids, laboring under the disappointment and expectations of our own fathers, recognized that and even started thinking as Chick perhaps did. That this was all right. That they were okay. That I am okay.

And then Chicken Charlie found a doctor for the operation. To save your life, he told his son.

It had been over a decade since a reputable doctor had suggested that Chick undergo corrective procedures for his cranial and neurological deformities. These operations, once possible as an infant, were deemed too risky, for crucial connections and pathways had developed in Chick's brain. At the very least, Chick's personality would change, but the doctors listed other consequences: degradation of motor skills, hearing or vision loss, and the menacing "cascading of the autonomic nervous system," which "while impossible to predict" seemed less uncertain in outcome: death or a permanent vegetative state.

Who could know, really, what lay in the heart of Chicken Charlie when he conspired with a cabal of unlicensed doctors in Chinatown to summon the same from Hong Kong to perform this surgery. Some will say it was a selfish act to free himself, to loose the anchor of his past and escape the responsibility of his mistakes. Yet we on the lane want to believe that he acted out of some deeper and more primal motivation, perhaps a kind of love darkened with the chiaroscuro of guilt. The kind of love all fathers have for their sons, a protective talisman handed down from generations to mend the mistakes of their own past and give their sons a better future.

Then came days of dead chickens and investigations.

They would find traces of Chick, some of his blood in the kitchen, some possible footprints among many at the scene, even his clothes strewn up the banks of Nuuau Stream with bloody and muddied handprints all over it, as if he had been running and his clothes had

been ripped off his body in anger. But they never actually found him, and Chicken Charlie's silence, the evidence, and the bloodied deboning knife was enough for the prosecutors to charge Chicken Charlie with murder.

The trial would expose the secret of Chicken Charlie's success in cock fighting and his "breed" of special chickens: poison. The autopsied carcasses revealed that they had remarkably high levels of arsenic in their blood, two to three times the lethal dose needed to kill a chicken, which suggested that these chickens had been fed poisoned feed for a long period of time, possibly since birth. Chicken Charlie's game cocks did not have to develop fighting techniques because they were literally poison delivery systems: As soon their opponents drew blood, instinct would compel the chicken to peck at the wound, and the convulsive death of the opponent would follow nearly instantaneously.

The poisoning of all the chickens, fighting and food breeds, was called ritualistic by the prosecution, who asked the jury whether it was such a stretch to believe that a man who could kill scores of innocent dumb animals would extend the ritual to his own damaged son? The defense pled ignorance, even going so far as to put Chicken Charlie on the stand to claim he did not kill his son, nor did he kill the chickens. He claimed it was an accident, that the chickens must have broken loose and gotten in the poisoned feed and gorged themselves, but the state refuted that theory by showing that the deaths of the chickens were deliberate: The poison feed in the feeders that day was of a much higher concentration than their usual feed, and its toxicity could only result in instant death. Only a deliberate hand, the prosecution claimed, could have delivered these victims from their indenture.

And so Chicken Charlie is in jail for the disappearance of his son. We kids are sure we will see Chicken Charlie again, and when he is released we wonder what he will do for a living. Cockfighting is certainly out, and who would trust any food vendor that was accused of poisoning? We wonder if he will change his name, like his son Chick, who now runs with some name that is unpronounceable except to his new family, who howls his freedom in the deep forest gulch of Kipapa. Sometimes in the quiet of the night, when the trade winds have died, and all that can be heard is the ceaseless murmur of the island itself in its perpetual cycle of loss and rebirth, we awake to see, like a reassuring postcard sent from some mythical land where everything surely is better, a footprint in blood-red mud on our steps and the diminishing tendrils of some strong scent, of new earth and male sweat, perhaps, of death and eternity.

—Jeffrey J. Higa, 54, Honolulu HI

Self-deprecation

sometimes i feel alone,
dejected and forlorn,
as if my bird has flown
and i shouldn't have been born.

i keep myself awake at night
thinking of what might have been;
of past shame, of present blight,
every single fib and sin.

i showed some promise once,
some talent; i had a brain.
now i just feel like a dunce
with nothing much to gain.

life feels like a chore.
i think my days are spent.
in conversations i'm a bore,
all i offer is lament.

even now, i just go on and on
about myself and little more;
god, how sad to fawn
over one's own luck and days of yore!

enough. i meant to write about
something lofty and refined;
self-deprecation is the easy cop-out
when you have an empty life and mind.

anon, you might be just the same.
don't give up; we can make it still.
let's cry from hope and not from shame;
from here on out, we'll fight uphill.

—Pedro S. Goku, 30, Lisbon, Portugal

Ambient Sound for a Film About Boston

Zed doesn't pay the meter. We carry the microphones from the van into a small park and stand them at points marked on a map he keeps close to his chest. We wait all day while they collect ambient sound. At 5, we pack them back into the van. Zed pulls parking tickets from beneath the windshield wiper and drives me back to Jaclyn's parents' house.

Zed is short for Zedninsky. Yes, *that* Zedninsky is his uncle.

Zed says we don't need to worry about the tickets. It's in the budget. Anyway, we can't be going back and forth to the van all day. We need to stay with the mics, three omnidirectional foam sticks mounted on tripods, which are constantly being poked at and asked about by people walking through the park. Nearly every twenty minutes we have to get up from our bench and say to please keep moving, which probably ruins a lot of really good ambient sound. We spend our days pleading; we can't force people not to do what they want to do.

Around noon, Zed gives me \$40 for lunch. He doesn't ask for change, and I don't offer it.

I assume that's in the budget, too. He takes his sandwich break on a bench facing ours while I take the lead on watching the mics. Then we switch. We use the bathroom, one, then the other, at a gas station four blocks away. Doing nothing turns out to be exhausting. My afternoon shit is a ray of hope guiding me through the long midday.

We even dress alike, black t-shirts and black jeans, although this is not something we ever discussed beforehand.

Zed had messaged me about some work for his uncle, collecting ambient sound for a new film about Boston. \$20 an hour. Real film work. *That* Zedninsky. I would have done it for free. I pictured us sitting in directors' chairs on either side of the man himself, a production crew humming around us. Instead, we have our bench.

We pass the time on our phones while we wait for lunchtime to come. Zed finds sandwich shops and texts me their location and his order, then slips me \$40. I text him back when I'm ready for my shit.

I like to open apps I haven't used in a while and decide if I want to keep them or delete them. At night, sitting on the couch in Jaclyn's parents' family room, sometimes I'll add them back. Once, reading a message from Jaclyn, I laughed. Zed smacked me on my shoulder and put a finger to his lips. We can't get in the way of the audio.

We stand the mics in the same place every day. The map isn't even a map, just some writing on a torn-off piece of notebook paper, but Zed still brings it out, rotates it, and directs me on where the mics should go. He folds the paper back into his pocket, and comes and joins me on the bench.

The bench is metal; the back is curved with an armrest down the middle so homeless people can't sleep on it. We see them in the morning, slowly waking up. They have little setups like a blanket under a tree and maybe they hang their backpack from a branch and there's a bicycle on the ground next to them. You'll think they're dead at first, but soon enough they wake up and do that swinging junkie walk to a water fountain next to the basketball court at the far end of the park and drink and splash their faces. Mostly they leave us alone. Once, this guy with a flat face and no teeth kept asking to see our permits. Zed finally gave him some money to go away. Maybe there's a budget for that, too.

After the junkies are all bent-backed walked to wherever they go, pairs of nannies show up with their strollers. They sit together on benches or the bottom step of a concrete staircase and talk to each other in Spanish, rolling the strollers back and forth with their feet. I bet that's really good ambient sound.

I said so to Zed on the ride back to Jaclyn's parents' one night. We were stopped at a light and he looked at me like I was crazy.

“Why would you say that?”

“Just their voices,” I said. “Like I bet it's good to get some voices in the background, to make it more real.”

“But it's already real. It's not good or not-good. It's like, were they there?”

“The nannies?” I nodded.

“So then it's already real; it's good we got them. But if they weren't there, we wouldn't want them. It's ambient sound. It's just supposed to be what's there.”

This was after three days of collecting ambient sound for a film about Boston. I guess I still had more to learn.

At night, I try to help Jaclyn's mom with dinner, but she shushes me out of the way. We eat and talk about what we did with our day. Jaclyn's

taking nursing classes at UMass. Her mom is a nurse. Her dad works for the city. Her mom does most of the talking. She'll say something and then ask everyone else the question she just answered. She tells us about a new incident reporting system being adopted at her hospital.

"Ant," she asks, "do you get any feedback from the actors or the director? About the work you're doing?"

I wash the dishes. That's the one thing I'm allowed to do. Then we get our phones from a bowl on the kitchen counter and look at Instagram in front of the TV.

Later, sitting on the bed in Jaclyn's older sister's room, I listen for the sounds of her parents getting ready for bed. When the faucet's stopped dripping, I tiptoe across the hallway to Jaclyn's room, and we do it very quietly on the carpeted floor. She slips on her PJs and uses the bathroom. Then we cramp together on her twin bed, whispering and trying not to squeak the mattress. When I get up to leave, I open the door as slowly as possible, and when I close it, I put my thumb against the door jamb until I feel the door hit my knuckle, holding the knob open with my other hand, and ease the door shut. Then I feel my way across the hallway.

Three days turns into a week. On Friday afternoon, Zed brings out a small stack of \$100 bills and counts them, one to eight, in front of me. I lay the bills across Jaclyn's sister's bed. I imagine Zedninsky, *that* Zedninsky, counting the money in his office, stuffing an envelope that he hands to an assistant, saying, "This is for that sound production kid." That's probably not how it works, but still.

"Do you think they'd want me to pay them?" I whisper into Jaclyn's ear. Someone's pacing back and forth across the apartment upstairs.

"I don't pay them," says Jaclyn.

"Yeah," I say, "but you live here."

The next morning is Saturday, and I announce over breakfast that I want to take everyone out to dinner.

"Ant!" says her mom. "You don't have to do that."

Her dad says it's out of the question; I am a guest. We all talk it over and eventually decide to order takeout from an Italian place. Jaclyn drives me to pick it up, and we livestream each other unwrapping the food at the kitchen table. We eat family style, two types of pasta, chicken parm, and salad. Her parents insist on cleaning up, and later, while we're watching TV, her mom talks over *Dancing with the Stars* until finally even her dad agrees that yes it was very nice of me to buy dinner, and he appreciates it.

One week becomes two and stretches into a third. I'm not an idiot. There's a limit to how much ambient sound you would need to make a film about Boston, or even how much of that audio could be listened

to, sorted, sampled, and mixed, by sound engineers working on a film about Boston. But every Friday, Zed counts \$800 into my palm, so I keep waking up in Jaclyn's older sister's bed, waiting for my turn in the bathroom, and going out to meet him in the van.

I spend hours in the park imagining different scenarios of how this could all play out. If real life was a Zedninsky film, we'd discover we were being used by a gangster to spy on his enemies, or we were pawns in a game played by a shadowy government agency, and in the second act, Zed and I would team up with a maverick detective and bring them all to justice. Or maybe the film is about two guys getting ambient sound for a film about Boston, and we're being secretly recorded by a second team hidden in the bushes at the edge of the park.

It's not, and we're not, but sitting on the bench in endless silence, I keep a place inside myself where I can go when I need time to run faster.

I read online that they're filming on Boston Common and in the Public Gardens. Actors are spotted taking coffee breaks on Charles Street. On my own breaks, once to get sandwiches, once to use the bathroom, I trace squares on the blocks around the park. I stop at a distance to watch Zed bent over his phone or leaned back with his arms spread across the bench. I take a picture and send it to Jaclyn with the caption *On Location*.

Around midday, the junkies toddle back and take off their shirts and lie in the shade where they slept the night before until school lets out and kids start walking through the park or chasing each other around the basketball court. As the afternoon goes on, people come to lay out and read. A dad sets up a tee-ball game for his kids, and the kids argue about who gets to hit first. People walk dogs. Towards the end of the day, the schoolkids' older siblings kick them off the basketball court, and pot smoke wafts over the field between us. I hear bottles and shit talk. I remember not to mention it as the van pulls away. No type of sound is better than another.

Squeezed onto one side of Jaclyn's twin bed, my head's in her armpit and my eyes are just at her right tit. She's propped against the headboard scrolling through Instagram. The top of the sheet is down around her middle. She stops and angles the phone towards me so that I can see she's looking at a guy we both knew in high school. Back then, he was overweight; now he's totally ripped. He's got before and after pictures side by side, and then a video of himself working out. I make a face like, *What's your point?* and she smirks and goes back to scrolling. On the side of her tit, about halfway down, is a little red mark I've never noticed before. I put my finger to it and feel that it's slightly raised. A little red

braille. I run my hands over her ribs, her belly button. She doesn't seem to mind. She smells like soap—the same soap I use in her bathroom every morning—and *Secret* deodorant. Her bed and her whole room has this feeling of order, same as her handwriting, this sense of calm that I seem to drive out of anything I get inside. Everything in this room is in the place it should be, and if you ask her where anything is, she'll tell you without even stopping to think. A few weeks in her sister's, and it's already a sty, and I have no idea how to get it back to the way it was.

We both startle at the sound of her parents' bedroom door opening. Footsteps creak towards us from the end of the hallway and stop outside the door.

It's already too late to turn off the lamp on the nightstand. Jaclyn puts down her phone. I hold myself as still as possible. A pause exhales itself.

The space under the door is dark. We wait for a count of ten. A count of twenty. The footsteps go back in the opposite direction. A lightswitch flips and the bathroom fan turns on while her dad takes a piss. I set a stopwatch at the toilet's flush and wait for twenty minutes before I slink back through the darkness to her sister's room.

The next night, I find him waiting on the edge of my bed. I see his outline lit through the window behind him, and my breath catches in my throat.

“Anthony,” he says softly. “You’re making me feel like an idiot.”

“I’m sorry.”

I really am sorry, in this instant after getting caught.

“Don’t be sorry,” he says. “Just don’t make me feel like an idiot.”

He creaks to his feet and thrusts an envelope into my hand, turning on the bedroom lights as he brushes by me. He stops on his way down the hallway.

“And this,” he points to Jaclyn’s room and then to me, “ends tonight. Yes?” I nod.

The envelope is in my mom’s handwriting, addressed to Jaclyn’s dad. It hasn’t been opened.

I look up at the sound of the door closing down the hallway and catch my reflection in the window staring out towards the street. I can picture my mom digging through social media until she found Jaclyn’s or her parents’ accounts, scoring the envelope with their address. I see the whole neighborhood looking on as she hassles up the driveway shouting my name.

My clothes are all over the floor. I stuff them into my backpack and duffel. My phone buzzes with a text from Jaclyn wanting to know if she just heard me and her dad talking. I stop to think for a second and tell

her no. He didn't have to give me the letter, which I crumple into a ball and shove towards the bottom of the duffel.

They'll probably want an explanation, even though they should have known what to expect the day they let me in. I start to type something out, but I can't find a way to say why I can't even wait until morning. So I don't. I give it another hour until I'm sure that everyone's asleep. Then I sneak my bags down the hallway to the front door, suffer a last-minute change of heart, and slip out the back.

In the sudden cool of an alleyway, I feel immensely alone. The light in Jaclyn's room is off. I think of the house keys I left on her sister's bed, which I made just before leaving.

I hadn't really pictured going somewhere, just getting out. I start walking. Their street is empty in both directions. Rows of chainlinked backyards cramp coldly on either side. I come to the end of the alley and wait at a light. When the light changes, I keep going.

Walking makes me feel like I could still turn around if I wanted. I walk until I reach a school with steps leading up to a covered entrance. I carry my bags up to the door and sit down with my arms around them. From here, there's no place anyone can sneak up behind me.

I take a deep breath, thinking suddenly of my money in the front pocket of my backpack. I count it, around three thousand dollars. Almost out of habit, I pull off a shoe and sock, and tuck the money under the arch of my foot. I call Jaclyn just to see if she would have answered. She doesn't.

I try to stay awake but keep realizing my eyes are closed. A car door slams. A man walking past stops to look at me, and when he sees me looking back, he keeps moving. Then it's morning.

Light comes early when you sleep outside or in a car. My eyes pop open a few minutes after 5am, and I'm instantly wide awake and starving. My phone is nearly out of battery. I find a diner on Yelp and head towards it, but when I stand up, the money crinkles in my sock. I sit down again and move it to my backpack.

There's a different feeling to the light this early like everything's taking place inside a movie. It's cleaner, free of distractions. I am moving slowly through the morning light, passing some of the same houses as blinds open and showers start to run.

The diner is empty and has the menu printed on computer paper tacked to the wall. I take a booth near the door. There's no wifi or outlets. I text Zed where to find me just before my phone dies, and when I'm done eating, I put my head down and sleep until he gets there.

In the van, he says, "You look rough."

I explain, trying to play it for laughs, but he doesn't laugh.

“Okay,” he says, when we get closer to the park. “Today we won’t do any recording. We’ll just hang out.”

“Won’t they see we didn’t get the audio?”

“We’ll tell them we forgot to turn the mics on. It happens all the time, seriously.” He parks the van in the same spot as always.

“What do you need?” he asks. “We need to find you a place to stay, right?”

We walk to a coffee shop where I plug in my phone. I have multiple missed calls and texts from Jaclyn. Zed watches while I tell her to calm down and explain, convincing no one, that I left in the middle of the night because her parents were getting on my nerves.

Zed’s waiting when I hang up. “What are your options?” he asks.

Jaclyn’s parents are out. My parents are obviously out. My older brother lives near Worcester, but that’s forty-five minutes away, and I don’t have a car.

“I need you here to finish the project,” says Zed. “I have a cousin who lives by the Garden. He owns a bunch of real estate.”

I tell him that I don’t think I can afford anything his cousin is selling, but he’s adamant. “He likes to help people out. It’s that or the streets, right?” The way he says *streets* rubs me the wrong way, but in the end, I give in.

“Until we’re done recording,” I say.

Zed drives me to a high-rise downtown. We park in the circular driveway in front of the building. His cousin, Shai, is waiting for us in the lobby. I recognize him from Zed’s Instagram, like an older, more expensive version of Zed. They hug and then Shai gives me kind of a bro hug where he grabs my hand and brings me in close. I can smell his cologne, and I wonder if he can tell that I haven’t showered.

“So this is the guy?” he says. “How’s it hanging, guy?”

In the elevator, he explains that he’s holding this apartment as an investment and using it to run his businesses. I can stay there, but during the day he and his wife Idina will be in and out. More out than in. Sometimes at night, too, rarely, they’ll be in.

We stop on the top floor and he swipes his wallet in front of a pad next to the door. “I hope you don’t mind. It’s kind of a mess right now.”

The apartment is glittering and decorated like for a photoshoot, but there are also cardboard boxes, both open and closed, scattered between the furniture. A desk against a column in the middle of the room has three laptops and a styrofoam tray smeared with ketchup.

Idina is a jumble of bracelets and earrings on a long sofa in front of the windows. She pops up and hugs everyone. Shai shows me the master bedroom, off limits, and the second bedroom, which is where I’ll stay.

“We’ll be in and out,” he says again. “This is the control center. Other than that, make yourself at home. Just don’t mess with the boxes. What’s even in here?” He directs Idina’s attention to an open box. “I can’t keep track of this shit. It’s mostly clothes. Some knockoff bags, I think.”

He smiles at Zed like this is an inside joke.

“How much is it?” I ask.

“How much?” He and Idina both laugh. “We’re not trying to take your money. I mean, it’s not forever. But while you guys are working on whatever and you’re looking for a place. Look!” He points at Idina’s smile. “Idina loves it. She thinks she wants a kid. Maybe she can take care of you and this will hold her off for a while.”

He pulls a keycard off a table by the door and hands it to me.

“Make yourself at home.” He gathers his laptops and daps Zed on his way out. Idina gives a little wave, and then they’re gone.

Zed and I stare at each other for a minute.

“What the fuck?” I say.

He shrugs. “I told you, he likes helping people.”

We explore the apartment. The appliances are all new. The pots and pans are spotless.

There’s no food in the refrigerator.

“It’s not,” I ask. “There’s nothing illegal here, right?”

“Why would you ask that?” I gesture towards the boxes.

Zed shrugs again. “He’s a businessman. It doesn’t have to be illegal.”

He throws me the keys to the van and I go outside to get my bags. On the elevator ride up, I forget the room number and have to call him to let me back in.

I realize something as I’m packing socks into a drawer.

“Zed,” I call into the other room. “Your cousin. Is his dad *the* Zedninsky?”

“Obviously.”

The next day, we pick up where we left off. Zed drives me to the park. We watch the mics. Jaclyn messages me between classes to check in. When she switches to video, I put a finger to my lips to tell her that I have her on mute, and watch while she walks between buildings and then waves goodbye. That night, I give her a tour of my apartment and we cyber. After, she says her parents are worried about me. I tell her to tell them I’m fine.

“Look at where I am!” I say.

Sometimes, someone will sit at a bench near ours and talk on the phone. I know enough now not to ask if that’s good audio.

A woman approaches us carrying her lunch in a plastic bag. She motions towards an empty bench to ask if she can sit. Zed nods, and

she sits, unwrapping a sandwich, and opens a fruit cup, pops a soda. She starts to hum. It's not a song, just snatches of notes. She breaks to chew, swallows, gathers up where she left off. And I don't know why something about her humming hits this perfect frequency that makes me feel calm and comfortable and charitable towards everyone and even myself. Like, as long as she's humming, it's okay I don't have my own place, that I'm not in school, that I'll probably end up bundling bent-backed like my parents from for now to for now dragging bags that get heavier at every stop. When she finishes her sandwich and smiles as she gets up to leave, I want to follow her out of the park and draft behind her so I can always be like this. But it's not time for one of my breaks.

We're now in our sixth week of collecting ambient sound for a film about Boston. Both of us have deep farmer's tans. It feels like there was nothing before this, that this is what we've always done. I've spent so much time willing the clock to go faster that my sense of time has come unwound.

True to their promise, Shai and Idina are out of the apartment more than they're in. School's out now, and the kids who used to come to the park in the afternoon are there all day long. The summer heat makes them braver. They shout rude and stupid questions at us until Zed scares them off.

We're sitting on our bench and four kids, three skinny ones and one fat one, start walking in circles around us, edging a little closer each time. They're maybe barely high school age. They circle closer and closer until they're close enough for the fat one, he must be the alpha, to reach out and touch one of the foam tips. Zed stands up and tells him to leave it the fuck alone. I stand up, too. The kid puts his hand on the base of the mic and tests its weight. The other three are laughing. Then he grabs the mic and takes off towards the street. Zed's caught flat-footed; I chase after him. He's got a good start on me but he's a kid and he's fat and the microphone stand, even though it's not heavy, is dragging behind him. I close the distance quickly. He tries to double back right by the gate, and I tackle him onto the pavement and then, because he's squirming and still has the mic in one hand, I punch him right in his fucking nose. Just once. Blood squirts over my knuckles. His hands fly to his face and he lets go.

"Are you done?" I say. I rub the blood off my hand onto his shirt and take the mic and stand up. We're in a part of the park where there's a little jungle gym and a swing set. There's a birthday party going on with a folding table covered in pink tablecloth laid with pizza on paper plates and a shiny balloon that says 4. I make eye contact with a dad who's holding a slice of pizza frozen halfway to his mouth.

“Sorry,” I say to the dad. And then I look at the kid on the ground. He’s holding his nose and turning his face in the dirt. “Sorry.”

I jog back to our spot. Zed’s got the other mics in his hands. The dad is talking to another dad and both of them are looking in our direction, and Zed says why don’t we wrap for the day. My heart is still racing as we head to the van.

Driving away, we see the kid and his friends sitting on the sidewalk. The kid’s face is half covered in dirt and he has a smear of blood down his shirt.

“Shit!” says Zed. “You really fucked him up. Why’d you do that?” I can’t tell if he’s alarmed or impressed, so I go with impressed. “I had to get the mic back,” I say.

He drops me off at the high rise and on the way up in the elevator, I look over my hand.

The middle knuckles on my middle and ring fingers are starting to look red and puffy.

I go into the apartment and there’s a woman’s bag on the table by the door. Idina is standing in the doorway to my room.

“Why aren’t you with Zed?” she asks. Her bracelets jangle as she runs her hands through her hair.

I tell her about the kid and how I stopped him from stealing a microphone as she gets me some ice for my hand.

I go to sit on the couch and pass by my bedroom. Through the open door, I see that one of the nightstand drawers is open.

Idina follows my eyes.

“Sorry about that,” she says. “I thought I left something in there.”

“You didn’t find it?” I ask.

She shakes her head. Right away my mind goes to the money in my backpack.

“What was it?” I ask.

“Just some jewelry. It must be at home.” She pulls out her phone. “I gotta get going. Shai’s waiting for me downstairs.”

She grabs her bag off the table and heads for the door. As it closes behind her, I spring off the couch and run into my room, tear open the backpack. The money’s gone.

I turn all the pockets inside out and hold the backpack upside down. There’s nothing there. I look in the nightstand. I open a dresser drawer and start tossing pairs of socks onto the floor. Finally, I grab one that crinkles when I squeeze it. I unball the socks and count the bills inside. It’s all there. I remember now the morning I arrived, moving the money from my backpack to the dresser, shoving the socks to the far back corner.

I go downstairs and find an ATM, count the money twice more, and deposit it, keeping two twenties for my wallet. My stomach sinks as the machine opens its lips and my stack of bills disappears.

“Not everyone’s trying to rip you off, Anthony,” says Jaclyn, laughing cross-legged on her bed. I’m sitting on the backrest of the sofa holding my phone at arm’s length so she can see downtown Boston in the window behind me. It already sounds ridiculous; it’s true.

We finish another week in the park, but it’s not how it was anymore. Zed’s on edge. At the end of the week, he tells me we’re wrapping up. I say I hope his uncle can find another job for us some other time.

“He’s got different people who do different things,” Zed says. “This isn’t just for fun, you know?” It’s such a strange idea. Almost nothing about this has been fun.

“It’s real work,” he says. “Just like business or being a lawyer.”

And then radio silence. I head back to the apartment to wait. I watch TV, I talk to Jaclyn, I go for a run. A few mornings later, Shai is there when I wake up.

“Hey guy,” he says, “My friend’s got a place I think you’ll like.” I pack my bags. It’s a speech I’ve heard before.

We drive south through downtown towards around where I grew up. The highrises melt into duplexes and triple deckers. My blood starts to rise as the houses we pass get more and more familiar. Shai seems to read my mind.

“Don’t worry,” he says, “this isn’t the spot.”

We park and walk down a street closed off to traffic, passing trailers set up for catering, for staff breaks. Ahead of us, I see the broad white screens illuminated by bulbs shining clean movie light. This is the main shoot. As we keep walking, and Shai daps the security guard who lets us inside the roped perimeter, I startle at a familiar face, struggling for a second to place him. He feels like a distant relative I met only once, or an elementary school teacher. We make eye contact and I realize it’s the star of the film. I want to stop and say hi, but Shai is still moving. We wind our way through talking knots of cast and crew, until I recognize, in front of us, standing with an assistant, the hawk of white hair belonging to Zedninsky.

Shai waits for his dad to finish speaking, and butts in with a hug before the next assistant can get her face time. “This is the guy,” says Shai, “working with Ezzie on the, what was it, background noise?”

Zedninsky sets his face, focuses on me, and smiles. He reaches out a hand.

“Yes,” he says. “Welcome.”

I don't know what to say. Up to this point, I think some part of me didn't believe he was real.

"I call him Zed," I say. "Ezzie."

"Zed!" says Zedninsky. "I used to be Zed. Now I'm Zedninsky. Remember: a name can only refer to a person you've already been."

Zedninsky pats Shai on the shoulder and turns back to his assistant. Shai ushers me, stumbling, back the way we came. We bump into the star of the movie, who says, "Good to see ya!" like a shameless admission that even he realizes he's just a second dessert you don't really want after Zedninsky.

"It's a funny business," says Shai. "I know my cousin has a lot of respect for you. With everything."

The apartment is a basement shithole in Somerville with someone else's furniture already in it. It feels crowded with three of us, Shai and I and the landlord as the landlord flips the light switches on and off, runs the faucet, flushes the toilet. I don't have any sheets. I don't have soap or toilet paper. I don't even care. My whole body is buzzing long after they leave me a business card with a reminder to pay rent in cash.

Jaclyn drives me to Target, and on the way back to the apartment, tells me that she's ready to be with someone whose goals overlap more with her own. She says that I am an important figure in her life, as she hopes she will be in mine.

The money starts to run out. I Google how to write a resume, and submit applications for jobs as a barback, as a waiter, as the front desk clerk at a gym. I get an interview for a busboy position at an upscale restaurant nearby.

Sitting across a knotty wood table, the manager asks about my experience in sound production.

"And that was with Zedninsky?" he asks. I nod. "*The Zedninsky?*" I'm hired.

Months reel by. I know I won't be seeing my name in the credits. I have to get my updates online. *Zedninsky new movie. Zedninsky movie boston. Zedninsky movie ready.* There are rumors about a difficult editing process, a change in focus, reshoots, pressure from investors. Finally, there's a release date. I get the night off and head to the one indie theater where the film is showing. It's called *Brush with Danger and Other Still Lifes*. The star plays an FBI agent on the case of a stolen painting. He tracks the thief all over Boston, gets beat up, and falls in love with an art curator who sells him out for enough cash to get treatment for her brother. All this with almost no dialogue. No soundtrack. The film is awash in ambient sound.

And I want to watch as a fan, but I find myself reading the film for my fingerprints. I attune myself to background noise. Kids laugh. A fountain gurgles. Near the end, in a scene set in a park, I catch the faintest notes of a woman humming. I turn my ear to listen, and as I do, the FBI agent cocks his head. He's heard it, too. The screen between us dissolves, I am there in that park again, and I want to jump up and shout at the whole quarter-full theater so they know that feeling of what, satisfaction? Because we made it real.

—J. J. Graham, 33, Chicago IL

worshiping God with my mother's tongue

all my mother's daughters
are getting older
i can tell from how unexpected
we catch pieces of our
mother in our aging bodies

i find her God kissing my lips
more often than usual
my eyes wet like the crystals
that drop from my god's skin
when i catch her brown orbits
gazing into somewhere
far beyond the white ceilings
her lips unmoving and tight
yet all i see in her eyes
are wailing prayers

my mother's daughters
are getting old
there are songs our mother sings
the type we never paid any mind
now we don't need a hymn
it comes in little hums that grow
on the soil of our tongues.

—Adeyele Adeniran, 20, Lagos, Nigeria

On the Pyre

And the shadows danced up and down on our walls, and we swayed like our bodies weren't here anymore.

And the fire in the centre burned slowly, languid flames, but the shadows on the walls moved quickly, spindly arms phasing in and out of vision fields.

Plain walls, no wallpaper, beige and cracked. Plastered walls, but plastered long ago.

“It is not actually too bad being in a cult, and I am fairly sure that this is not a normal cult, though this is not exactly something that I can independently verify. The rituals are things to do, and you do them, and we have a community, and you have friends whom you can do stuff with; but I don't believe any of the dogma, if that is what it should even be called, anyway, and there isn't really a religious aspect. That is to say, there isn't really a religious aspect.”

Waking up tired, waking up in strange clothes with cramps, waking up to go to work and scrub things clean. Waking up to take a walk to warm up, because the cold got in sometimes. Going outside to see the apple trees, urinating at their bases for better fruits. Getting the orders for the day and executing, working religiously.

“The idea of a commune is so powerful because the state of being an individual is something wholly unnatural. This psychic development was forced on people by technology and such things at a time when we really just were not ready for it.”

Tunnels appearing under the house, hundreds of triangles appearing on the walls, painted in reds and oranges. Ockerfarben. Pushing the snow off the tops of those little houses for the chickens, the chicken coops, opening up the little door and looking at empty bowls for chicken feed. Feeling like you know what it is like to have an empty bowl for your feed.

“Leadership and centralisation are two problems which we do not shy away from. Let us just say that any sufficiently moral and upright person, anyone good enough, will eschew all the temptations placed

before them. In any society or community populated or even just led by those who are able to master themselves to the correct extent, the problems of misuses of power evaporate. Indeed, the power of the will is what produces the system in the first place; the mark of a good leader is to create a system that is decentralised and unable to be exploited, for they see the problems that occur when those who are weaker are allowed to exploit."

Shadow people and mask times. Hair and beard merging, smelling smoke on your clothes before it starts to rain. Hiding under the trees, looking at the people in the cars at night. Voyaging, raiding parties, risk when leaving home, looking around mad, skin crawling under street-lights.

"Say nothing of the women. Out of the picture. Either gone or were not ever here. They never really had nothing to go on. Probably why we tried to put the mutilation into practice. People couldn't really swallow that, though. And besides, the government was beginning to enter the picture. The men were always almost eager to throw everything away. Even when I was a child, I dreamt of doing stuff like spending all night digging a massive hole or building houses in the woods. Say what you will about evolutionary psychology, but all too many of us just fell right into it. Pyres, odd music, alternate alphabets, secret gestures. The juvenile-masculine impulse towards this stuff really never left."

When did you last read a word? When last brushed your teeth? Going back and swallowing your pride. Memories of being younger, and making your parents back down. Being able to make your parents back down. Being rewarded for making your parents back down, and doing so after hurting yourself. Roof smoking through grey sunsets, and you hated that they were worried about you. Going through the days now, making things fall around. Shooting targets through the trees. Fire dances, half chants. There was never a time when this was funny, not even at the beginning could you laugh at it. Music now a memory, and it never made sense, it never fitted.

"Collapse of these projects is inevitable. Collapse of anything is inevitable. Waco was a great piece of art. 9/11 was the greatest work of art we ever saw. The war in Afghanistan? Aesthetics of digital camo and dust, explosions seen through the news cameras of the 1990s. What would the WTC have left behind had we left it standing? The grim horror of a legion of fat suits, a relic that lived into an ugly time beyond itself, an icon degenerated and become obscene. No, for the WTC and its many worshippers, destruction came at the right time; we made art from it."

Now time is sharper, resolution higher. Light fuzz has disappeared from the nicer scenes from your brain, from your computer. Police

arrived, and we go into the tunnels underneath. Squinting out, and you've built a fort, and you are hiding from your parents in it. Lines of barbed wire, trenches and trees. Light flares at night, call that our family bonfire, family fireworks display for New Years. Shots ringing and skirmishes, traps fall and shield men come. Riot policemen look cool. You always wanted to be on one of the sides of riot shield, ever since you saw a riot shield. Black mass, black masks, ripstop nylon and clear visors. Ten of you, surrounding some scrawny victim on the ground. The police should never have accepted the reflective green accents. It really ruins the game. Even blue pushed the envelope. You need grey black, you need sparks dancing around your feet and gas masks.

"These people didn't even consciously know it, but they passed into a great space. If you are a man, you can dress up in fatigues and kill people, and you will be in the same league as flawless women with glazed eyes. The activities are equal in magnitude, although they are opposite in direction. What is it about the languid stare, pale skins, pure forms? What is it about becoming wild, what about becoming tame? No longer human, no longer mundane, we were more than cool, because that word is a sick infantilization. There comes a point after which you have to concede that people have entered real life, and that they are no longer playfighting, they are no longer actors. Violence and crime are really great ways for people to prove this. No longer are you a poser; no longer is this shield of irony necessary. Being cool is never enough, it is a pretence, you could probably label it as part of the simulacrum if pressed. Taking it further shows that you were about more. Nobody could mock Bin Laden for wearing military surplus jackets. Bin Laden wasn't cool. Bin Laden was a God."

— T. M., 19, London UK

Bookends

Look at his hands.

The before he sat down at the dinner table hands
with dirt under his fingernails, crusting palm lines,
in-between fingers, encasing thick scars,
knuckle caked, and hard worn.

Feel her hard calluses after
finger tripping a rhythm ballet for hours.

See those hands curled fist tight
against a chest for warmth,
cardboard sleeping, street grimed,
fingernails chewed to the quick with worry
begging you to see past the dirt, to see
the person above the wrist;

The trembling, shaking,
fighting for a way through,
last-ditch effort, help me hands;

Hands wiping away tears after
a toddler's scraped knees, raising a street
wise teenager alone, tired/overwhelmed hands
that don't know how not to love;

Aging, arthritic bent knuckle hands
with wrinkles folding in on themselves, and
wonder if those fingers could speak
what storied lives,
hard lessons would they share?

Hands whispering tales of body woes,
survival bookends, antennas in constant motion
asking you to listen, asking for a hand.

—Sage Ravenwood, 55, Endicott NY

The Normal Guy Died

When you see me, it's Question at First Sight. The answer: I was born anencephalic, without a skull or most of my brain. Children with my condition typically survive only hours or days after birth, having no neocortical tissue, no consciousness. Our heads are folded and flat, cut short at the eyes. We are mourned and then our infant organs are donated.

Until recently, that is—I was success story number 14. New surgical procedures molded my shrunken head into my neck and shoulders, rewiring tendons and editing clavicles. Post-surgery, I received an additional year of artificial incubation, which allowed my half-baked brain-stem to develop, extending into my throat and chest. Nurses read fairy tales to my incubator.

Despite the procedures that saved me, I developed strangely, beset with glitches and special abilities. I have no memory of the first five years of my life. My brain grew from my crown to my sternum, and the cerebral cortex—the layer responsible for self-awareness—sprouted like a bud at the bottom. I suffered dyslexia, stuttering, and migraines. However, I brought great joy to my family. And I understood the world like no one else.

I trundled into kindergarten at eight. My arms and legs were lankier than my peers', though my lack of a chin or forehead left me a mere inch or two taller. The pediatrician recommended I wear a plastic dome over my softball skull. I knew I looked like an alien in a jar, but the kids didn't treat me as such. To my mother's delight, I found a friend group: my neighbors, Willis and Esme.

The three of us spent hours under Willis' porch with art, instruments, and backyard sports, all of which I sucked at. My slow, joking body never diminished my value as a friend and never caused drama, at this age. We doodled on my spaceman bubble with washable markers and at times I swore they almost envied my quirky armor. *What can you see now? Do the colors make it beautiful?* I got to wear the artwork home, gazing through the easy blush of backlit ink.

I excelled in school, compared to Willis, at least. I had a talent for synthesizing information in an atypical way that pleased my teachers. Like my stuttering and dyslexia, this skill seemed based in my unorthodox neurological organization. I understood how cultural context, history, and parenting affected an individual with ease, a clarity that often escaped my younger classmates. This perspective resulted in side effects and quirks that my classmates could not find enthusiasm for.

For instance, I obsessed over my country. My parents, immigrants from Korea, maintained that America revolved around money, but I grew to disagree. It seemed like we chased beauty instead. Not physical beauty, like the people on TV, but *desirability*. The trick was that beauty always lurked in one's opposite. The rich dressed poor. The poor dressed rich. In winter, we heated our homes to fight the chill, and once inside, we craved beverages from the refrigerator, kept cold as the outdoors, to cool us down. Was struggle beautiful, or was wealth? Sophistication, or ruggedness? *Whichever you don't have*, answered the nation.

I found beauty in Esme, in the unattainable prospect of making her mine. These were vague, culturally-based Freudian feelings, I admit, probably rooted in the fairy tales read to my incubation tank. She did have very pretty black hair. I wrote her a love letter on construction paper and she gave my helmet a smooch on Willis's front steps in return. Her lips pressed on my world window, flattening so I could see veins on the pink insides. It was my first and only kiss.

Willis did not appreciate it. His mother had divorced his father for a New Man who called Willis's father's cheap light beer *Piss Water*, preferring what Willis' father dubbed *That Dark Shit*. Though the differences extended beyond beverage preference, it did seem indicative of something and Willis latched on to the distinction, vowing never to consume *That Dark Shit*. This New Man always represented the enemy in play fights, the innocent hedge to be pummeled into submission. I suspected that Willis nurtured a similarly baseless schematic attraction to Esme—and the kiss transformed me into the villain, analogous to the New Man.

He stopped inviting me to his porch, and the harassment began.

I endured many cruel titles in school, but *Turtle Man*, courtesy of Willis, stuck. My head does take the blunt-snouted build of a turtle's, and the aquarium-like helmet stuck the landing. My goitered neck even dips into my chest, throat folding over chin. I frequently wept on the walk home because of Willis' insult, but I could not escape my condition. Still, I did not envy those who could hide their imperfections. In the cafeteria I watched pimple picking, lips tight over crooked teeth, nails raking unruly hair, and I sympathized through my fishbowl.

In this respect, Willis was like me. He never hid his complex about the New Man. Willis planned to flee into the woods with folding knives and rope and asked anyone who would listen if they'd join him. During art, he penned a comic strip about aliens melting the New Man into toffee-like plasma with a ray gun. In the final panel, E.T. tricked his mother into drinking the New Man as a smoothie, steamy guts dribbling down her chin, earning Willis a trip to the school counselor. In hindsight, the cartoon was a symbolic masterpiece, but the counselor could not analyze it for one whit of content.

From then on Willis's scholastic integrity eroded. Even in kindergarten he was fidgety, needing extra attention. The more he fussed, joked, and wandered, the more time teachers devoted to him, and the more he exasperated them. Sadly, they were only reinforcing his behavior. He was only ignored when he focused: teachers took this respite to tend to other students. In first grade, Mrs. Gorsham gave him easier math problems to cut herself a break. Hard-working kids avoided him. By the end of elementary school, his only friends were those who joined in on his "delinquent" antics.

With this as a backdrop, it's not surprising that in high school one could usually find Willis smoking behind the parking lot in a spot we called "2-hour." *Hey, Turtle Man*, he would holler. *Remember when we used to hang under my porch? I still gotta get you for stealing my girl.* I would smile in return, unsure where joke ended and insult began. Willis never obscured his train of thought, never left anyone wondering *Does he remember that? Does he ever think about that?* His eyes had sunken and lined. His buddies shot gang signs at me. They blasted gritty hip-hop through a set of Bluetooth speakers trembling on the pavement.

The macro-historical context nearly made me go cross-eyed: three white boys feeling powerful through black folk's music. The artist whipped the audience so thoroughly in these songs: *I conquer and destroy the rap world like the gringo / I hit you with five slugs and then I yell bingo.* Who is *You*? I wondered if internalizing the lyrical bashing was a sort of self-punishment, a fossil of white guilt, or if these guys imagined themselves as the rappers, kicking proverbial ass. Probably, I was looking at it all wrong, another curse of my condition.

I only mention this because, once again, Willis and I were not so different. While he smoked, I'd swapped my plastic helmet for an iron birdcage. Yes, it trumpeted "sci-fi villain," but the girls high-fiving and patting me in gym needed to be stopped. The attention was well-intended, until I asked Marcy R. out on a date. The wincing *yes* landed us in a cheap restaurant, fighting the urge to run, teaching us each a lesson—kindness only goes so far. I am not really a *cutie* and it did me no favors to treat me as such.

I didn't blame Marcy, her being as much a victim of the golden rule upbringing as I was a developmental abnormality. From our folly, I learned to prefer the name *Turtle Man* over the weight of thousands of identities bearing down on me—ethnicities, cultures, genders, religions—all appalled at the date. In their eyes, I could not presume to kiss, could not presume to marry, could not presume to join anyone. Sure, they'd allow me to be Christian, or Asian, or someone's friend, but only as a marker of generosity. Willis did me a favor by calling me by what I was. And so I donned a rusty birdcage and purchased a pet turtle.

Keeping an aquarium is an exercise in God emulation, practiced by the arrogant, spiritual, and insecure, myself falling into the final category. I designed my little world, planting spider-wood, duckweed, and snails along with the main creature of interest. If I was God to this place, the turtle was man, modeled in my image. I named the reptile *Man Turtle* in an act of begrudging reversal, even doodled on the glass with washable markers. I tended to my world with care, but found *Man Turtle* as inconsiderate as man himself; he was a messy creature.

This is why I was cleaning the turtle tank when Willis knocked on my basement window, the night he died. He motioned me outside with his face a mess, knuckle dents dotting his split cheek. He asked to smoke, so we huddled in my backyard, raindrops plunking on my cage like gongs. I slid his joint through the bars and pretended to inhale. We chatted about my pity date, our early friendship, coveting Esme, his bullying. It felt like small talk, because really, we were both wondering why he was here.

My friends did this to me, he said. *I had uppers, they wanted downers.* I nodded and asked if he needed anything, gauze or a place to crash. *Nah, Turtle Man. My dad's on vacation, I have the house to myself. I told him I didn't want to go with him. Now I feel bad.* It struck me then how alone we both were: me, a freak, him a normal guy, by societal standards. But really, Willis wasn't normal at all. While others hid behind curtains, Willis posed in the proscenium, bared to all. It separated him from skin, age, culture, parents.

I would know. I have a knack for these distinctions.

Five years after his disappearance, Willis was pronounced legally dead. At first, I blamed Willis' parents, second-chances, teachers, faithlessness, government, media, pharmaceutical companies, fake friends, and myself. In an instinctual way, so did everyone. *Suspected foul play, drug violence, they said. Delinquents.* But I finally understand him as an individual, not the chuckling noise of the universe. Today I believe Willis lives on in the great wilds, hunting pigs and weaving moss beds, as he told us he would. Willis taught me something about desirability.

At his coffin-less funeral, we took a moment to regard his gemmy grain of spirit, that thing untouched by all, and to me, now, that is beauty.

As it turns out, growing cerebrum into your throat is not a good survival strategy. My parents sat me down one night, hands mated and lips quivering with scientific consensus, to tell me that success stories 1-13 had all died, each younger than thirty. After comforting them, I strolled to Willis' porch, drawn by memories. I kicked the step where Esme had kissed my plastic helmet. Future anencephalic children wouldn't need freakish gear: new techniques allowed skull marrow implants to grow as the child developed. I was the endling, the terminarch. My passing would mark the end of the turtle men. Upgraded anencephalic children would look normal, live normal lifespans, and perceive the world through quasi-normal brains.

I was happy for them, in a sense. I certainly was not jealous of them. My parents had wept about my trimmed longevity, but I wondered why I should live as long as normal human beings, why I should covet normality. I did not want to die, but the normal life expectancy should not apply to me any more than it did to *Man Turtle* in my basement. The Normal Guy died and it taught me to worship the beauty of the ineluctable. Both of us would disappear from the society that he ignored and I studied. An inevitable joy flushed my gorgeous cheeks as a tense joke came to mind, something Willis might have called me, if he'd been around, if he would have known the word—I am the happy *endling*—and I swore my heart thumped up against my mind.

—James Cato, 23, Pittsburgh PA

I buried a body so that a flower could grow

Whenever I think of poppies
I think of them the same way that i think of
birth,

 a thrush of lifeless flesh nursing my breasts
 of a hundred kinds of milk.

you come to me at night
like a seawide absence of wind
your tiny hands—a trailing memory
leaves a rush of emptiness
and punches a hole right in my throat,

 so when i wake up in the morning
 i've to cough my words out like a flu.

only yesterday, when I saw the sky fill with pregnant
grey clouds
i clasped the falling rain with my rotten tongue
and wondered what you would've look liked soaked in rain,

 you see, your memories reek of me like
 ordinary rust turns to grinding brown.

sometimes I still imagine you within me,
sleeping and twisting inside my womb,
your scent staining my shoulders
of sour raisins,

 they say each spring comes with a new life
 everywhere i walk, i see you sprouting from dirt.

—Kashvi Chandok, 19, New Delhi, India

robins are unfaithful birds

when I was young I saw a robin
perched high upon a chestnut tree
so distant and unreachable
yet his song it came to me

the tree was bare - the robin gone
the sky itself soon swayed away
the world was shaking at its core
yet the robin's song still lived in me

at night I sang his song to you
and conjured dreams of chestnut trees
and disenthralled your mind of malice
just like the robin did for me

soon time - the grand betrayer
exchanged you for the wind of change
and left me stranded and becalmed
in his sea of spiteful curs

no more the world would redden
at the coming of the morn
no more my thoughts would come together
if I don't sail away

and now the robin mourns
the hour of my surrender

one day you promised
you'd do anything for me
I can ask no more of you
than this
let him mourn in peace

—Dylan Kassowitz, 25, Liverpool UK

Four-Act Funeral Bazaar

1. *Khelkud/ The Death Bandit of Bombay*

It wasn't easy to penetrate the embalming business as a woman.

For one, religions predominant in India – particularly Hinduism – ban women from most rites save for the one where she places rice in the mouth of the deceased as nourishment for their journey. Always the waitron.

Even now, as something of a market leader, I find that people keep a polite distance from me much like if I carried a virus. But while death repels, money seduces and so I have managed a few friends around if only for appearance. No romance though, never any romance.

With my family's country-wide monopoly, you can be certain that after your Indian death, you will arrive in one of our finest Narayan Funeral Homes where Our Service is Deadly Fast.

We also get foreigners who want to be sent off with the holy instruments of the vague Indian gods made available to only those who come through us on their way above.

Or that's what my father would have you believe.

Appa was an architect of thought. Something of a marketing maestro who had the ability to make you accept any truth about yourself as if commanded by god. He would piece together propaganda and sell it to the masses as a sacrament. A large man by any measure, he was known locally and endearingly as the Death Bandit of Bombay.

My father did have a weakness though. He ached for the approval of my three brothers, who withheld it permanently—ashamed by the shadow a Death Bandit makes. And so, he instead had to make do with my easily available attention while giving me none in return. My brothers cherished me though, which gave me an absurd agency that always felt second-hand but it had some clout.

So we went round and round, playing games and playing games, in a lawn with an office for funeral homes and services.

*

2. *Mrityu Kathinya / Rigor Mortis*

Embalming is a relatively unknown concept in India. There is some confusion about it especially relating to whether Hinduism accepts it or not. Our website assures you, it does. Although when I asked my father behind the logic of its acceptance he said, "God made money. If it makes us money, he wants us to do it. Not you though. Girls don't play with the dead. You may tempt a soul into staying".

On the pamphlet we say 'We preserve your Dead so you can pay them your Debt of respect' like the stunning Bollywood actress Srilata whose husband discreetly had her embalmed so she looked unnaturally demure in her pink deceased skin.

Although, we hated that they stuffed cotton in her nose. It's completely unnecessary but they do it for the Bollywood effect. The glamour factor is what gets the tears really flowing at VIP funerals. And VIP funerals cost extra.

But that's not where my relationship with the dead really began. I think I was about seven when I saw my father cart in his first dead body on a contraption similar to a hospital bed. It was a beggar who passed with nothing to his name—not even his name. As the wheels turned, my father was followed closely by his three living sons and one dead daughter, all of whom tittered and laughed nervously as they followed Appa into the dark silhouetted entrance of the room that sealed shut behind them, leaving me outside. Suhana—the dead sister—was an imaginary conjuring I had up until I was fifteen. I only knew her for the first two years of my life but even after her cerebral haemorrhage (which made no coherent sense to me then) I would still need a sister in this masculine home. So, I kept her.

My mother excelled at blending into the shadows, appearing only when necessary as though an automated gadget that wasn't entirely sentient. Sometimes, when she approached me with a necessary obligation, I could hear her gears whirr and whine for oil. Her faulty software acted up often, mixing names. 'Suhana, Suhana, Suhana' she would call after me.

My name was/is/has been Sanam Narayan.

Amma even wore darker than usual sarees, adding to the contoured effect of her body that melded seamlessly into the furniture fixtures. Disappearing her altogether.

I've never even heard her pass gas or suppress a yawn or display any signs of a living creature.

That night when Appa, Brothers and Suhana all parted ways, abandoning the dead for their selfish living purposes, I entered the lair I'll come to call home.

The stench was the first embrace of the dead I received, followed closely by the tightness of the body. I was fairly young when I learned something cosmically honest about the Dead—a matter we know so little about. That when living beings cease, they don't leave *behind* a carcass. Instead, in their place a new thing comes to bed.

Something that is tense and stretchy and is an honest-to-god expose of cosmic deliberation. It is not a disgusting thing at all, it is instead a curious thing. Let's assume I am a god-loving woman for the sake of my premise.

If the nature of life and death were to remain mysterious, then god could just as easily create an exit plan for living bodies as he creates an entry plan through the womb. Poof, we'd disappear upon death like a godly magic trick then. Maybe burst into atoms or melt into sand. And say—the fact that nature absorbs anatomies whole when buried (or as we rot) is an exit plan. What then is embalming? Where does the preservation of whole bodies fit into the scheme? Is it not a human act of excellence? Of intervention? Human proof of godliness?

-More like blasphemy!

When Amma mumbled in response to my all-new marketing approach presentation five years ago, I gasped in horror. Not at what she said but that she spoke at all. But of course, that aberration of a speaking religious Mother, I think, really ruined my presentation.

I didn't get a chunk of the business after all. Both daughters, alive and dead ones, never severed an artery in the Narayan Funeral Homes until two summers ago. It would be blasphemous for women to conduct such business. Who would marry me then?

My father beat my mother that night, I think. I can't tell for sure because she made no sound. Only the leather of the belt made snapping echoes.

Then something extraordinary happened a couple of years back, as rigor mortis consumed my father whole.

*

3. *Mahaashakti / Superpower*

I've always had something of a superpower—or a horrible affliction. Maybe it comes from knowing intimately the insides of a human body. From having known the small intestine from the large, digesting that they're nothing alike in function or face. My absurd ability is that a new sight has buried itself into my iris. A stripping one. I have the ability to see people as they really are, at all times. I don't know how better to slice this power to put on display the arterial makeup of it except to reveal that I can see people like accordions, visibly naked in the centre with their outer corners rendered meaningless.

I made absolutely nothing of this ability. It laid people out like clue maps that detectives make when trying to find murderers. With red thread on a dull brown board that promises to lead to the killer.

If anything, it forced me to have more compassion for people I despised. Which burdened me terribly. I despised my father. For the beating, for the smugness and for the self-absorption.

But I handed out olive branches until he returned them to me as twigs and debris because *compassion, kindness, forgiveness* and other womanly value were whispered into my good woman ears ever since they found out I would be born with a vagina.

But what about *curiosity and courage and confidence* among other manly pursuits?

I never could read my mother though. As the whole world lay bare before me with naked minds and vulgar, open brains staring back at me, flashing me, my mother's mind was impenetrable. Over time, I made peace with the fact that maybe there was just nothing *to* her. My father certainly didn't think so and I cared a lot about what my father thought.

The art of preserving the dead has been around for a long time. Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire but returned home in a container of honey. I think it is precisely because we don't understand the nature of death that we continue to live with purpose.

Do I accept my own death? No. But even as I finish draining my father of blood and watch the formaldehyde pour into his arteries, I know that he did. At the end of his life, my father completely and totally accepted death. He didn't quite accept me still. In his passing, he won over death but death won over me. I did win something for myself though—a stab at redemption.

I make finer cuts on his skin as if he is Alexander the Great himself and stale, sticky honey oozes from within him. I slice deeper in search for *compassion*.

*

4. *Punarjanm / Reincarnation*

My mother now lived in a large home all by herself. When news first travelled to me in her letter, I packed and returned home for the first time in 3 years since I'd started to live in another city under the pretext of a job.

My brothers would arrive a little later, and I had presents for each of them.

The door to the Master Bedroom is locked twice with a large metal apparatus. The room my parents once shared seems less determined to keep me out and more fixated to keep whatever is inside—inside.

I knock twice but I hear nothing. I call for my mother. First, softly—afraid of my father. Then, *courageously*—he is dead. My mother is still nowhere to be found.

I search and search until my desire to find my mother becomes a manic usurping of my senses. I check for her under the sofa and behind the cushions. I wait in pauses, on my toes and frozen in odd poses with my hands in the air—listening for the whirring in her gears. No soft automated hum is in the air.

Finally, with a terrible anticipation heavy in my ribcage, I head to the embalming rooms.

I enter a bright room, filled with lights trying hard to mimic the tone of the sun.

-You came.

My mother emerges from behind my father's body, toppling over the tray to her side. Making noises.

-I need you to take care of him.

With a flick of the wrist, she motions to what used to be her husband.

"I don't think he'd like that" my voice is tight, bitter, I taste sardine and vomit. And it is not his corpse that repulses me.

-The man is dead, who cares what he would like?

I gasp at my mother whose name I can't recollect no matter how hard I try. Just Mother. That's all I've known about her. Her saree is a blood red like a newly married bride at a sacred Hindu wedding. She's wearing gold that shines brighter than all the lights above the carcass between us. She is holding a pair of matches and in her other hand is a male black leather belt.

"You seem... different" I want to move towards her but a gravity plants us where we are. Heavy metal shoes made with history and memory trap us in place.

-Alive, you mean. You lot are too used to the dead. You prefer it. You all preferred it in me. That hurts like a physical blow. "I didn't. I needed you to be more. To be a woman I could impersonate. But you were nothing. I couldn't even find you, even when I looked"

-And what? YOU want an apology because I had a terrible life?

She is slurring like a drunk, but I didn't know if she understood what alcohol even was. We've already exceeded the maximum words we've ever exchanged before. As we stand, we find that we know nothing about each other.

-Sanam.

She takes my name.

-You and I have a thing in common. Our ideas of ourselves were dictated moment for moment by a man that lies dead here now from a

heart attack. Think of it as a war, we're now liberated. The Allies came for us. But you can choose to remain the thing he made us or choose a mind of your own. Even if you don't have one, pretend. Until you find one.

History. She likes history. I remember Suhana telling me once vaguely—I think Mother used to study it in college.

I see her, like a map laid out. But I know nothing of the locations that populate her shape or the route from one end to another. There are many fused wires and burnt tips inside of her—she's shooting sparks everywhere. I see them. Indian women wear a headcover called a *chunni* that hides part of their face. When I was growing up, I rarely saw my mother's face in full, or her hair or the back of her neck.

Now with all of this skin exposed, it's like I'm looking at her again for the very first time.

I take her matchstick and light it against my skin and my mother makes a hissing sound aloud to mimic fire. I start a small spark inside of me.

My mother laughs at that. This may be the first time I've heard it. She stretches her hand to me and I shake it.

Savita, she introduces herself. I cannot tell if this is her old name or a new one.

But I take the scalpel off her hand and look for my father's jugular vein and make the first incision. Honey pours out.

"Did he leave me anything?"

-No. He left all of this to the Brothers. But they want nothing to do with it. So it is, ultimately, yours if you want it. We're in a deep loss though. He gambled away more than he had.

I want it. This is where I start to make my own mind—whatever that will look like. I decide to become a Woman of the World—I will be a market leader someday.

The Brothers will be here soon with their wives and daughters who make no sound and whose names I can't remember. I have presents for all of them.

But today, I'll learn their names for the first time.

—Shaivya Ramani, 25, Mumbai, India

Everyone Else Is at Home

Slow drift—an undersea server, a daycare in Korea, an arcade in Chicago—like floating in a pool, leaves softly colliding with my sides, accumulating. I'm shifting aimlessly through global connections. Zoned out. As I consciously feel the connections more and more, the little leaves, I zoom back to attention, and start pinging around my neighborhood. Occasionally I notice another user slightly, some small trace they were there, but no opportunity to connect directly together. The network's been like this for weeks, so I zone out. Usually people rarely zone out. There's always somewhere and someone to be, but now everywhere I know is a nowhere. So I zone out. I assume everyone else is zoning out, too, all of us out there, sliding across each other, maybe occasionally making a simultaneous connection. If we do, I never notice, and the more I try to notice, the less zoned out I am, until I'm zooming back to the neighborhood.

I lived something like this once, but it was in that imagined non-time where my memories are few and mostly made-up. I remember myself remembering:

The first day of kindergarten, we were put into groups of four, but one person in my group, Sebastian, threw up on his phone and was taken away the rest of the day. The three of us learned to share and watch each other sharing and to ask each other about what we liked. When Luna asked my favorite color, I didn't know. I thought of my crayons and how I liked the way grass looked when I colored it. I told her green. But when I was supposed to ask Sebastian, he was grey and nothing. I remember myself remembering that when I would open the fridge at night, it was light, but when I opened the toilet at night, it was dark. Sebastian threw up, so they took him to the toilet, and he wasn't there to ask me to choose my favorite kite from a series of pictures so the teacher had to pop in and ask me. When we made kites for each other on crafts day, Sebastian had to read my profile to know. That made me wonder why Sebastian was even supposed to be there in the first place.

I don't remember any other moments wondering about how people come to know things about me, but I remember that I did think about that a lot. On Christmas, my mom would get me gifts and they were always things I wanted, though other kids got more. I thought it was Santa and that my gift was limited by the fact that I only started worrying about being a good boy that year when we went to see Santa in the mall the month before. I realized he could see me all year and that I would have to keep it up that whole time, but the next year was the same. In her email, my mom would get suggestions of gifts that were known to be in her price range, plus a few that were not. I wanted to get the things that other kids got. They seemed so far away, but the next year everyone in my class got the same thing, and then nothing around me had to be nowhere again, until now.

I don't remember myself remembering anything weird about my group in school only being four kids, then eight, then sixteen, then the whole class of thirty-two, but even thirty-two is a really low number. All the other kids in school and all the kids in the nearby schools were nothing, like Sebastian that first class. But at the time this was all new and exciting. I knew my mom's network was bigger, but that was for grown-ups. I'm pretty sure I freaked out once thinking about having that big of a network and having to spend all those years building it up and then having to support it every day forever for decades and decades. That scale of time didn't make sense to me, and I didn't see how I could do something like our in-class exercises with that scale of people, either. But then when Sporennet came out, grown-ups didn't get that.

I know my whole class was on Sporennet, but I don't remember thinking about them at all or trying to connect with them as a group. I don't remember any of them trying to connect with me, either. It didn't really work like that, even back then. It was all the kids together, like I was opening the fridge at night, and instead of just the light inside coming on, my mom came in at the exact moment and turned on the kitchen light. You can't see the light in the fridge, then, not really, except as splotch on your eyes that follows you around. I knew my classmates were all there, but I didn't think about them. And when that big light overhead is on, you don't see the contents of the fridge in quite the same way, either. When it's just the little light in the dark, everything in the fridge takes on greater emphasis. The milk is a looming giant, and the pudding cups hide in the shadows. In the light, or in the daytime, they're all just there.

Like other grown-ups, the teachers didn't really get Sporennet either, not the way we did. I know it took almost two years for them to figure out how to incorporate this new sharespace in their teaching. I know at first they didn't let us use it at all, but I don't remember what that was

like. The classroom was already nowhere, then. When they first started using it, they made their presence too known. We tried to follow them, but they were a there, and we were everywhere. By the end of our second year, our teachers were everywhere, too, though we still used the same rooms. If they didn't have our devices physically accessible, they couldn't always track us in Sporennet. I read that some schools tried experimenting with giving remote access to some kids, like when they were sick for a long time, but they would get lost, and when the school would find them, the kid would be everyone else.

At first, schools thought becoming everyone else was a bad thing. They wanted to track each of us, what we liked, our progress in our learning, our career prospects. Things accelerated over breaks, and eventually they had to move away from the grading model. There were achievement levels for different schools, divided by year, and instead of a grade you would get a presence score. The more involved you were in the activities of the school—that localized focus—the more you were present. You had to be a team player. You couldn't just go wherever and do whatever. Whoever you were, your host would thus keep a tether to this central location, most of the time.

The Sporennet wasn't plugged into the global networks yet. It was its own sharespace. In Sporennet, we were merging, moving, thinking, being. We shared and were shared with, and even when it seemed like there was nothing left to share, we experienced ourselves sharing and shared in that experience. So they had to plug us in, to pull us apart. We had to see the world, and not just each other. And they really emphasized that metaphor: plug us in. It was explicitly not pulling the plug, opening us out in a big rush to fill that other space. It was an alienating experience, even though we were going out in clusters. It wasn't right that our movement and our associations be limited like that. Even though it was still more people than I could be aware of, even though it was more of the world than I had seen total to that point, the first time I swept around that space I knew what they wanted was not what we wanted. We wanted to be everyone else, they wanted to sell us stuff.

I remember myself wondering how people know things about me, and selling me things, or selling my mom things. But there was nothing left to sell me after Sporennet, except now they were trying to sell me things, and not just toys. I was still in a cluster, but here and there, I felt a glimmer of me, and I felt them shuffling around in me like a fridge, and I learned my whole life how to share, but they weren't sharing back, not like we were taught. They only had a few things to share: ideas, brands, new values. I felt a glimmer of me, except occasionally instead of sharing what I liked, I felt like I was sharing what they wanted me to like, and then it wasn't me in the cluster. It was that grey space, that

nothing bit of profile, filled out and waiting for me to connect to it the next day. And the schools facilitated these connections, like when the teachers would try to guide us that first year.

Then when we were back and free in Sporennet, it was chaos in a way it wasn't before. When the sharing was constant and everyone was everyone else, we were content, but now we were hungry to share in a new way, but the more we shared, the less we felt we were everyone else. Everyone else was seeing those bits of profile, too, and we weren't supposed to see them. They weren't important anymore.

Things got better when they handed over the freedom to plug in, and gave us larger markets to plug into. That had more space to move and more people to connect with. As we learned to navigate this share-space better, it was actually more connections than we ever had in just Sporennet. All the people who weren't in Sporennet were here, and all the people we never saw because we tended not to stray too far from our schools were here, too. We intermingled in new ways, and then we were everyone else, but we learned that what we thought was everyone else before wasn't really everyone. This wasn't everyone yet, either, and almost immediately there was demand that unlimited connection was a natural right, but the impulse to rebel against our restrictions was balanced out by the idea that the time would come and we still needed to learn to connect at this scale anyway. We were the mass who was content. I do not know how it was exactly that we became anything other than the mass we were, just that we were eventually a different mass entirely and then we were the mass who was discontent. Perhaps we knew at the time, but now it's just me, and I guess I never knew on my own how the shift happened.

I do know that increasingly those not on Sporennet wanted us restricted even more. They did not like us connecting and sharing and they wanted to not share themselves. I remember some frustration that we were them but they were also just them and not everyone else. I remember restrictions being placed on Sporennet that would allow users to opt out of sharing, and I remember that at the time we were still the mass who was content. Before anyone could opt out, however, people started experimenting with if they could make us stop being parts of those who were not on Sporennet. I remember being different everyones, but still content, then suddenly an everyone who was discontent. Sharing was different, then. We shared more than we ever had before, and shared especially with those who were just them and not everyone else. We shared so much that the way people were used to knowing things about them now told them about us, and now they were us. More and more of us were us, and then things started changing even

more. They weren't going to opt out of us. We were opting out of their network. We pulled the plug.

The world was before us, and rushing forth we filled it. Where filling the markets before seemed like a gradual task, I do not remember a transition. Instantly we were, truly now, everyone else. More and more over time grew the everyones, and no one ever stopped being everyone, because everyone else was already them.

What follows then is nothing more to tell. We connected and shared but we didn't connect with anyone in particular or share anything in particular with anyone in particular. Who I was had ceased being important. Who I was going to be had ceased being important. How people knew things about me had ceased being important. The distance between me and others had ceased being important. There was no distance, and there was nothing to know. Sharing was not for knowledge. It was a new state of being. All the years which passed in this state were nothing but light, but now it is nighttime, and every door I open is only toilets, toilets, toilets.

It was late, when I woke up. Vomit was all over me and my device and the floor. My head was pounding. I remember myself remembering crying and crying because my head ached. When I cried, my mom was supposed to fix things, but she couldn't fix that, and her sense of what I was feeling seemed completely wrong. Surely, I thought, she didn't understand how serious this situation was. My head was going to burst, and she barely seemed to care. But that wasn't what I was experiencing now. The burst had happened, while I was in the light, and now all was heat and desolation. It was dark in my room, but blinding, and for the first time since before Sporennet, I felt like everyone else was very, very far away.

Outside my apartment window was wild calm for how dense we were packed in those blocks. Occasionally I heard what sounded like commotion, people talking or the beginnings of a riot, but only for a few seconds and then silence. Mainly I heard, every fifteen minutes, a train rumbling, but I couldn't imagine who would be on a train. When I brought myself to slide aside my curtain and look out the window, I saw someone else doing the same, and another person sitting sideways across her narrow windowsill, looking back into her apartment. I didn't know these people, though. I had no way to know them. Their scale was unthinkable. I found myself thinking of connecting with them, and all those people I couldn't see, but I mostly just felt how little they were thinking of me. I only felt the connection attempt out, nothing in. Connecting into what, though, I wondered, and then it was over. I was thinking of me, I realized, instead of us. But I didn't know who me was.

I wondered how people would come to know things about me. I didn't have a profile anymore. Those were outdated. We made our own model, but it didn't make sense outside our sharespace. What I was left with now seems only a billion error messages stacked on top of each other, overlapping such that you can occasionally glimpse through to the bottom and see some remnant of the lost content: Layla liked the blue she saw between streaks of red when she would push against the limits of the teacher's tether when we were young. William would always remember the feeling of toes and the little pop of our big toes bending. Wyatt would breathe in infinitely, filling us with air though we never felt fuller. Chloe liked the speed with which connections would form and break and form and break, like they were never there at all and unbreakable simultaneously. I remember myself remembering that I liked the green of my crayons drawing grass on paper, but I think I made that up one time when I was sharing the memory of how I decided my favorite color. I remember someone commenting that he never decided his favorite color, he just had one. But no one really said that; it was us. We felt that and the crayon memory and that blue between streaks of red all at once. But when we felt that, color didn't mean what I was seeing now when I was seeing the green—not at all the crayon green—of my vomit, and the streaks of red, but no blue. I didn't see blue anywhere, until I tried connecting back to Sporennet.

When I first connected, I saw that grey and nothing everywhere, until I grew too exhausted. Then I zoned out, until I realized I was seeing a pool, impossibly blue, and the red leaves streaking through, pulling me back.

For weeks now I've drifted, solitary. I can connect to places on the global networks, but no people. I know there are people on it, but always just out of sight, and when I stop zoning out, I'm back to my local network, the regional community left over from when we were in our smaller clusters. If there's any way to connect on it now, I can't read it, but when I zone out, I feel my neighbors out there. And I think I can be with them again soon, if I can just achieve that endless drift. Floating forever, no leaves, no one else. Just us. I remember myself remembering almost achieving that feeling in a real pool once. I don't really remember it, but something of it is shared, out there.

—Timothy Wilcox, 30, New York City NY

The Sophist Counts His Chickens

It's not so much whether one lies as when
And how much. The truth is often unclear
And changes its appearance now and then.
And we speak words we are surprised to hear
Though we endeavored to speak reasonably,
Gambling on good intentions to harmonize,
Not to deceive but to locate the frequency
Where harmonious benevolence lies.
Thus exculpated, pushing the thought aside
That intentions are no better than the mind,
One wanders into the falsehood just denied,
Blindly relying on precepts left behind.
If these evolutions occur naturally,
Don't they logically validate falsity?

—R. W. Haynes, 69, Laredo TX

Trotsky

“And who will lead this revolution? Perhaps Mr. Trotsky sitting over there at the Café Central?”

I

Every day at the table by the frosty window in the dim light of the orange lantern there sat a bald man with a beard whose name Turgenev never knew—and then there sat Trotsky. It had to have been Trotsky—he always knew it was Trotsky. The spectacles, the full head of hair, the thick mustache, and the tuft under the chin were all indicative of the same man. Trotsky and the bald man would sit for hours on end discussing subjects that required a great many big words that Turgenev did not understand, so Turgenev decided that what they talked about must have had very little to do with him.

It was cold, so they drank tea. They drank it deliberately, as if there would come a day when they would not be able to drink tea. Turgenev, even as he serviced his multitude of plebeian customers by keeping them warm with drink and rushed talk, always managed to notice when the conversation at the table by the frosty window ended and the chess began. Turgenev, wherever he was standing, would lean down to the customer nearest him and whisper, “There they go again. What do they move the pieces for, anyway, I wonder?” If the customer was the old man, Krasotkin’s father, Turgenev received the same periodic reply: “Well, what is there better to do?”

Turgenev never ventured on an opinion of the bald man, and when one day the bald man did not show, he hardly even noticed the absence. Then Krasotkin’s old man waved at him and pointed discreetly towards the small table by the icy window where Trotsky sat alone with the chess set. The bald man never showed his face again, but Turgenev knew that he had been there once. The reclusive Trotsky remained; then again, reclusive might not have been the right term, as Turgenev pre-

ferred the old man's interpretation, as blunt as his grimy factory tools: "Plays chess. Don't do much else, does he?"

No, Turgenev had to admit that neither of the men by the window had ever done much except talk, sip tea, and move the chess pieces slowly. The chess was some kind of war, Turgenev once thought, but he never took the time to figure out just what the two had been fighting over that they resorted to war with little playing pieces. Once the bald man disappeared, the Trotsky man did even less than he had done before. Now he just sipped tea and waged chess-war against himself.

Turgenev and the old man had no time for men who did nothing. Turgenev was always on the move with his legs, spinning about his place and delivering tea to the freezing plebeians who rubbed their hands together wherever they could sniff out the scent of burning coal or oil. The old man hardly ever moved his feet during the day, but his bulky arms always hung dead by his side after a day's work of pounding metal with them. Turgenev could never find out what the old man did, or why he did it; he supposed the old man had no choice if he wanted to live.

The Trotsky fellow did not always come and sit by the window, but of what he did on the days he was not there playing chess and sipping tea, Turgenev had no inkling. Krasotkin's old man said he did nothing, because if he did something, he wouldn't spend half his days doing nothing, but Turgenev could never decide if that made sense. Probably he worked at something, or else he would not have had the money to pay for tea, but then, the tea did not cost very much. When the man ate, Turgenev did not know; he ate nothing at his place. He used to complain sometimes to the customers how he always lost a table to a man who asked for only tea and very little of that, but everyone knew that he had no reason to complain because half of his tables were empty anyway.

Turgenev closed his place down during the Revolution because he was afraid some Bolshevik would accidentally shoot him through the numbingly cold window. Some nights he dreamed of the broken shards from the shattered window flashing by his eyes and slicing away at his cheek. He might have awakened with a sweat from such dreams if he hadn't been so damned cold. He passed away the Revolution much like all those who kept their mouths shut and their homes free of pamphlets: he starved and cursed, but he really slept through it like a hibernating animal. Turgenev never could decide when the Revolution ended and his life resumed as normal.

Or nearly normal. Business was better, much better, especially once word got round that Turgenev knew Trotsky. After the Revolution, of course, neither the original bald man nor his bespectacled associate

Trotsky ever showed up at his place again—they were far too busy spreading community-ism or something of the sort throughout the world, at least until the General Secretary decided that the community was better off staying in the motherland. When he found out that Trotsky was a member of the Party, Turgenev joined right away, hoping he might get something out of it. After all, it was at *his* place that Trotsky had come every single day to drink tea and play chess against himself.

His membership in the Party ended up paying off. One day, a bureaucrat whose name Turgenev never knew came in and told him his place was to be shut down. The next, another bureaucrat who looked similar to the first man but who had a different name—Turgenev was sure of that—told him that it was all a mistake and that, since he was a loyal Party member, his place could stay. Turgenev was certain that it was Trotsky who had saved his place, Trotsky who had remembered how wonderfully warm the tea had been on those cold days by the semi-warm window. After that, Turgenev wasted no time in spreading the word that he knew Trotsky, that Trotsky had been a regular at his place for years, spending hours at a time every day by that window drinking tea and obviously planning the Revolution with his bald friend.

Whether it was because he was a Party member now—although the Party never asked him to do anything—or because word got round of his knowing all about Trotsky, Turgenev's place became quite crowded. Peasant upon peasant—brought in in droves from the country to work to modernize mother Russia so they could defeat the capitalist pigs—went to his place to have tea, since they didn't have samovars of their own anymore. The more he was asked about it, the more Turgenev remembered about Trotsky and his companion. He began to think about them all the time, suddenly remembering tidbits of their conversations and formulating an exact tally of how many times each man won at chess. He told everything to his customers, and they inevitably brought friends to hear more. He would lie awake at night trying to remember something, anything he could say about the two men. Sometimes he dreamed about the bald man sitting at the cold window playing chess with—

II

“Trotsky!” Turgenev took a swig of his cheap beer and slapped his hand on the table. “You know, Trotsky! He used to sit there! No, there! See that table over there?”

Krasotkin, the heavy-set son of the old man who was now dead, turned in the direction of Turgenev's finger. There were the same table, the same chairs, and the same bright, warm window. Krasotkin only

furrowed his brows and slipped his enormous hands into his military uniform.

“Hmmm.”

“Who?” asked the youth with Krasotkin, who had seemed quite dazed and out of place ever since coming into the place.

Turgenev nearly choked. “You mean to say you don’t know who Trotsky is?” When both Krasotkin and the youth shook their heads, the older man slapped his bulging forehead. “What is the youth coming to in this country, I ask? There was a day when every Russian man and child knew the name of Trotsky. Why, he planned the revolution right there at that table!”

“Hmmm,” Krasotkin mumbled.

The youth, embarrassed, only said, “I never heard of him.”

Turgenev gave an exasperated sigh. Then, coming around the bar counter, he seized the youth in a friendly gesture and pointed him towards the large painting now hanging on the far side of the place opposite the bar. The painting depicted two men in a flowered field sitting down and gazing over countless papers. “There, you see that painting? I had it put in after the Revolution. At least tell me you recognize the man on the left?”

“Oh, yes!” said the youth, smiling and puffing out his chest as if he had just passed an exam. “Who could fail to recognize Lenin?”

Turgenev slapped the boy appreciatively on the back. “Good, good, boy—now, there beside Lenin is Trotsky—they are planning the Revolution, you see.”

Even as Turgenev turned back to the statuesque Krasotkin to prove his point, he felt the youth’s timid fingers poking him in the back. “Yes, yes, what is it?” he asked.

“But the man next to Lenin in the picture is the General Secretary. I recognize him.”

Turgenev began to laugh, turning around, but then he frowned. He drew closer to the picture, his face becoming ever more contorted into something between a frown and a disbelieving smile as the painting became clearer. No, no, it couldn’t be, but there it was—the man sitting beside Lenin in the painting was most certainly not the man who had played chess and drank tea at the table.

“But I had that painting installed myself,” Turgenev mumbled. “It was Trotsky, I tell you. My goodness, someone has robbed me!”

He felt something large bump into him from behind, and he stepped aside to let the enormous Krasotkin, in his dark uniform, pass him by and gaze at the painting. Finally, he spoke, his voice like a machine with its remarkably regular pronunciation: “You mean to say that someone stole a painting this large and replaced it with another, the only dif-

ference being that your Trotsky man is now the General Secretary? Hmmm."

"I know it sounds strange, Krasotkin, my boy, but surely you believe me?" Turgenev wrung his hands together anxiously.

"Of course," said Krasotkin. "The capitalists are capable of anything."

"Yes, the capitalists—of course!" Turgenev shouted. "What insight, what intuition, what instinct! Your father would be proud, Krasotkin, were it not for the accident..."

"Yes," said Krasotkin. "It was an accident, a most terrible accident."

The thought of Krasotkin's old man had brought a slight tear to Turgenev's twitching eye; he had had a bit of a tic lately. Well, it had been better for the old man in the end; he had made it a point of saying how he was not very fond of the Party anymore, so he was probably happier wherever he was than in the motherland. Turgenev had never told anyone of the old man's complaints, of course, but everyone knew that the old man had been stuck in his old ways. He had never even come to believe in photographs; he thought they were just good art.

"The photograph, of course!" Turgenev cried. "Aha!" He pointed a finger at the youth. "The capitalists may be able to steal my painting, but they'd never know where to find *this*."

In the locked drawer behind the counter where he kept the money he made off his tea and cheap beer, Turgenev had with him a photograph of Lenin speaking at a makeshift podium of sorts, with Trotsky himself standing beneath him. In the years since the Revolution, he had quite forgotten about its existence, so clear was his memory of Trotsky's appearance.

His fingers shaking, Turgenev unlocked the drawer and opened it up. He quickly removed the photograph and handed it to the youth.

"Now, you see Trotsky, there, standing at the bottom of the podium, just under Lenin?"

The youth furrowed his eyebrows and then slowly handed the photograph to Krasotkin, who didn't even look at it before grunting, "Hmmm."

"What?" Turgenev asked. "What is it?"

Krasotkin handed him back the photograph and Turgenev focused on it to see what was the matter. At first, he couldn't find anything noticeably wrong with the people in the photograph. The General Secretary was nowhere to be seen. Then he realized why he saw nothing wrong.

There was no one standing at the bottom of the podium.

"But I swear—Krasotkin, my boy, I swear—Trotsky was there! I was there at time! I saw it myself—I saw this *photograph* myself—your father saw it! Oh, if only he were here!"

"Hmmm," Krasotkin seemed to hum.

"The capitalists!" Turgenev cried, wiping his forehead with the dirty towel he used to clean his countertop. "The pigs! How could they have gotten in here? They must have infiltrated every level of our society! They're everywhere!"

He turned to Krasotkin. "You must do something about this, my boy. You will, will you? For the sake of my friendship with your father..."

"Of course," said Krasotkin, and he turned to leave. "We will hunt the men who have taken your picture, if..." He seemed to catch himself in mid-sentence.

"If?" Turgenev whispered, but then his voice grew louder and more agitated. "You mean, if Trotsky is real? Oh, you don't believe me, do you? Oh, you must, my boy! You must! You must!" Now he was jumping up and down nervously, and he nearly knocked over one of his own tables. "He was real, I tell you! He sat right there! I—I remember it distinctly! Distinctly, you hear? Oh, please, please tell me you believe me!"

"Of course," said Krasotkin. He was nearly at the door when he suddenly turned around and extended his hand, its palm expectantly upward. "May I bring that photograph with me?"

"Yes, yes, you must, yes!" Turgenev cried, racing to Krasotkin and thrusting the photograph into his enormous, outstretched hand. "When should I know what has happened?"

"I will arrange a meeting for tomorrow," said Krasotkin. "I will transport you to the meeting myself. Good night."

"Oh, good night, good night, dear boy! Your father would be proud, yes, very proud!"

Then Krasotkin was gone, and the youth, left alone with Turgenev, quickly gulped the rest of his beer and rushed out the door without a word.

That night, Turgenev began to think, to remember. Trotsky had been sitting there at the window, *had* been playing chess with the bald man—surely he *had* to have done all those things that Turgenev had claimed he had done, year after year? Yes, but—but now he came to think of it, some part of him, some deep, dark part that was perhaps his conscience or perhaps his gut, informed him that he had told many lies over the years.

Yes, but they had only been small, insignificant white lies, as insignificant and unnoticeable as flies. He might have swatted them away at any moment and no one would have noticed the difference in his sto-

ries. So he had made up details about Trotsky's plans and the bald man's role in the Revolution, but that certainly had no bearing on whether Trotsky ever sat at the window, and it certainly could not explain why the painting, the photograph, should suddenly be transformed.

Turgenev knew he wasn't mad—or, at least, he thought he wasn't—but then, he had convinced himself of Trotsky's every word and every conversation, and he had convinced himself that Trotsky had won the chess game exactly two hundred and forty-seven times, but no, no, he couldn't have actually remembered those things—his memory was not that good. After all, he often forgot insignificant little tidbits, such as where he put his dirty towel or where he put the dirty mugs or his Party card. If he couldn't remember such simple things, how could he possibly remember what Trotsky said or did?

But he *saw* Trotsky at the window, and now nobody knew who he was. Perhaps it was not Trotsky, or perhaps the man at the window had a different name, one that sounded a little like Trotsky but wasn't pronounced quite the same way—but no, no, it was Trotsky, it had been Trotsky, it would be Trotsky...oh, no. No, Trotsky had stopped coming. Trotsky would never come again; he knew that. Maybe Trotsky had never come at all. Maybe that window was not nearly as warm as he remembered its being. Maybe he had dreamed up the whole thing, and he would forget it all tomorrow, or maybe today was a dream—oh, yes, he would prefer it much better if today had been a dream. Then he would forget the bad parts in the morning, and remember only that Trotsky was real and that he had seen him.

Turgenev decided it would be best to go to sleep, so that he might either forget the dreams of the past or wake up from this one. And if there were no such things as dreams this real, then he would go with good, honest Krasotkin the next morning, and the Party would straighten everything out. They would believe him, as Krasotkin had, and they would want to know what had happened to—

III

"Trotsky!" Turgenev shouted into the night air, shivering and drawing his torn coat tight about him. He rubbed his hands together and then held them out before the fire. His eyes swiveled mercilessly, falling one by one upon each of his companions.

"I tell you, gentlemen, there he was, sitting by that window, playing chess and drinking tea—the founder of the Revolution! Say, I already told you about the window, didn't I?"

"Oh, no, tell it again, tell it again!" someone shouted.

"It was warm," Turgenev replied, half in a whisper. "You might've burned yourself if you touched it, because it was next to the coal heater

and the glass was always warm. I tell you, even on the coldest of days, there was no frost to be seen on that window. It was a miracle, and Trotsky loved it, of course. He planned the whole Revolution there, you know. I saw it planned right before my eyes."

"Right before his eyes," someone repeated. "The whole Revolution."

"Now he's moved on, of course, to bigger and better things, and these youths, they always forget about him," Turgenev said. "But I remember him. I saw him, right there, every day, every day, yes, drinking tea and playing chess."

"He *was* real, wasn't he?" someone asked.

The circle of men in ragged, torn heavy coats, their fingers and toes blackened not by darkness but by cold, drew closer together about the fire, scratching their thick, long beards in anxious anticipation. Turgenev was a prophet, and they were about to hear from his lips proof of their salvation, proof that existence was something more than frozen nights and frozen meals, more than frozen life and frozen death.

Turgenev seemed to think for a moment, as if he could not remember what he was talking about, and then it seemed to return to him and he whispered, "Yes, he was real. I know he was real."

Then he stretched out his hands, looked up, and shouted at the sky, "Trotsky was real!" All about him, his companions did the same and began to whoop, again and again into the night sky, "Trotsky was real! Real! Trotsky was real!" Their faces stretched and contorted as they strained their ears for any confirmation of the only truth they had left to cling to.

But the only reply they received in the endless, desolate wilderness of the Siberian gulag was the desperate echo of their own cries.

—Alexander Xavier Urpi, 28, Charlottesville VA

I Spend Some Nights with a Cup of Coffee

Some nights, I sit by the window with a cup of coffee,
speaking to the shadows from your newly published book.
I grow familiarity in my purchased eloquence.
And yes

I have to pay attention sometimes
not to avoid the circumstances of my life:

What can be more biased than the verity that I don't know when I'll die.
And sometimes I do not remember to name the birds in my voice.
I understand the familiar throbs in my chest and it makes me no shrink.
I translate the pains I do not know how to carry into heliographs:
The way I can only let history know that there was a name, a person.
Tomorrow is Sunday and some preachers have readied for my doorstep.
My little daughter calls me; she wants to be taken to the toilet.
I smile. Not because I wish not to be disturbed. But because the toilet has
painted itself in her mind as something to be afraid of at nights. I understand.
Things wear off by age. No. Everything wears off by death.

—Chinua Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 29, Awka, Nigeria

Poena Cullei

The monkey seemed at once our only hope of escape and our best chance of dying sooner than expected. His intelligence made him my best ally, sure, but his temper was a real drawback.

They only ever used a monkey if they had one on hand. That's what I'd always heard. I can only wonder how the ridiculousness of this had never crossed my mind. They *always* seemed to have a monkey on hand. Where were they getting these monkeys? But, as you know, once you start thinking that kind of thing the whole world can come apart at the seams.

Though it was as dark as ox-hide in there, there could be no mistaking who was who. The dog was the most docile, which was unsurprising. I had often seen stray dogs - which I assumed they used for these things - approach people in the streets and enter houses looking for food, unafraid of humans. My presence probably made him think more of scraps than the fact he was in a sack, lucky bugger. The snake was somewhere about, but there was no way of knowing where. A small thing. Probably not venomous. Just for show really. As for the rooster, if there hadn't been a monkey, he would have taken top spot on the list of least desirable sack partners. He didn't peck or scratch or anything like that, he just found it hard to keep still and nigh on impossible to keep quiet.

That, in short, was the company I kept in the sack.

At this point we were rumbling down the road on the back of the cart, just getting to grips with each other. The crowd outside were following along, probably thirty or forty strong by now. I couldn't really hear them thanks to the monkey and the rooster, but I was sure they were there because I had been among them enough times. They usually kept quiet anyway, because the real fun was in listening to the prisoner and seeing if he could shout louder than the animals. And though they often could, I wasn't going to give the crowd that satisfaction.

The prisoners in my position often made the mistake of shouting “fluribis” or something similar at this time. The river was more desirable than the sea, you see. But, if you’re already in the sack, they don’t care much about your preferences, and anything you say is likely to get spun right around and turned into the opposite. So if they were going to the river, and they heard you shout for it, they’d likely change their mind out of spite. Besides, the sea was much closer and the river was barely six feet deep, so it was real wishful thinking. I wasn’t as stupid as the others. I accepted my fate, even though I had done nothing wrong.

The cart was bumping along a gravel street and over all manner of surfaces, and I could, despite all, feel that we were going downhill. The sea was just half a mile or so away.

Even though the road jolted and rocked the cart terribly, I managed to balance myself in a little ball, a sort of egg shape, and so I succeeded in not upsetting anyone too much at the beginning. The dog even rested his head on my leg. Everyone else was, understandably, upset and showing it, but, in group solidarity, no one had drawn blood yet.

Due to a gross misjudgement of how long the road was, I was surprised by the sack being suddenly yanked up out of the cart and dropped on the floor. The pain was no worse than I had already been feeling. I landed first, the dog on me, the monkey on him, the rooster on him and the snake somewhere about. Under different circumstances I could imagine savoring the moment for a party anecdote. Those gathered around wouldn’t believe what an interesting life I led.

As I expected, this was the point where the crowd all moved forward and got a few kicks in, and, if they had a weapon with them, stabbed and prodded the sack until the guard called time. I can’t blame them for this. They wanted the show to go on for as long as possible. Once this was done they had nothing to go back to but the usual routine of work or school, maybe a short bath or workout if there was time and then, if there was no theatre to be enjoyed, an evening reclining in wait for the next to come along.

After ten minutes or so of kicking, they let up. The monkey was screaming and causing me a notable amount of harm, the bugger.

But then all went still.

Another yank upwards. We had no solid edge to rest on suddenly, and all of us bunched together in the bottom end of the giant bag, in the same formation as when we had been dropped from the cart. We were then dropped from what I could only assume was the cliff’s edge.

The sound of the cheering crowd died away into a distant whimper.

We couldn’t feel the air rip past us, because the thick hide took the brunt, but what we did feel was weightlessness. No doubt it was a rather

banal experience for the rooster, but the rest of us fell still and silent, enjoying the macabre theatre of the moment before having to accept the inevitable. The bottom of the sack drifted away from me and the top hung somewhere above, rippling like it was in the water already. Just before we hit the sea, there was a moment of pre-impact when my body decided it had to do something, and it knew that it should expect pain. If there had been any light inside I'm sure we would have exchanged glances, nodded in acknowledgement, a final *here we go, chaps*. I braced myself. Even the snake stopped its slithering and coiled up. The dog put both front legs around me, ready to treat me as a flotation device. When we hit the water it felt as if my skeleton had been stripped and muddled and put back together.

The monkey, quite understandably, was as mad as a monkey could get.

I'm sure you're wondering how I came to be in this situation. Just remember to ignore the stories around town. You know how quickly rumors can get out of control.

Only a few hours ago I was walking home from work. I am not anything important. Well, certainly not now. But then I was only a shopkeeper. The slaves and aristocracy neatly enveloped me on either side of the social hierarchy, and neither had any need for the pottery I peddled. The lucky ones in my trade were getting involved with spices and silk and ivory and whatever other new fad was enjoying its time in the sun. No one bought pottery. But at least that would last for a thousand years. I had a legacy. And goodness knows it wasn't going to come in any other form. Kids, for example. No girl looked twice at me anymore.

But that's another story.

I was walking home from work with a basketful of unsold pottery. With times as they are, you know, and Romans coveting things they have no right to, I had to start ferrying my wares back and forth each day or there would be nothing there in the morning. Jehovah.

It wasn't late in the day. I had packed up early because business was slow, so there were plenty of people milling about. I took the way home that I had taken every day before that, which led me through the marketplace, and, though my hands were full, people still thrust whatever was on their stall in front of me, shouting random numbers and its one-thousand household uses. I would walk past the gladiator ring, and sometimes, depending on the time, I could hear the screams and

woops of a crowd that had just seen a head come loose. The next thing I passed was Speakers' Row.

Now I don't know if this was its official name, but that's what it was generally known as. Along the side of the street, up on stones or mounds of dust, or columns if they were particularly good, stood the speakers.

A harmless bunch usually, what they did was not given much notice by passers-by and the religious ramblings they spouted were generally not of much interest. However, it was a respected position. I can't put my finger on the strange mixture of charm and repulsiveness these men exuded, but then no one could, or wanted to. The mixture just made them invisible. Or, rather, visible but ignored. I don't mean to say that the Almighty is not a big part of life here, but most preferred to keep their beliefs undiluted by noisy strangers.

On my way home I would often try and catch a fragment of a speech, for fun. I had never heard anything that wasn't either banal or benign, and I never thought to expect any different.

On this day there was a new guy up there. They were usually the same people with the same old idea, so this caused me to take a closer look. Beard: check. Dusty old robe: check. Lack of hygiene: check. Empty space in front of him: something was different.

Intently listening to every word was not a huge amount of people, but at least fifteen or so onlookers. They were nodding along, being polite, mouthing the words when it was obvious what he was going to say. "I will trust and not be -" and they would all mouth "Afraid" or something close enough to not make them look silly. Everyone knew these maxims, because they were echoed everywhere. Infiltrated like a smell. I must admit I took great joy in seeing them occasionally struggle to fill in the gaps, and the speaker's hopeful face being greeted with randomly muttered syllables, designed to sound like any word, forcing him to finish the verse himself. I mean, to be fair, who would ever guess "he will rejoice over you with singing." Not me. And not any of these gormless buggers.

But here is where it all went wrong.

I was perhaps just a bit giddy and playful having given myself a bit of extra time off work. Or maybe it was my father coming out in me. Either way, it didn't take much to set me off.

"Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the -" our old speaker started. The crowd readied themselves to mutter their usual chorus, but one poor old woman, with her high-pitched squeak, overexcited and desperate to prove herself, took a stab a second earlier than the rest. It was a shame, be-

cause she could only come up with the word *bathhouse*. An answer so categorically wrong that it was laughable, unfortunately.

Now, I'll be the first to admit this isn't actually funny. Objectively. But we've all been in those positions where we know we mustn't laugh, and yet the whole world suddenly seems only good for comedy. Like needing to pee, it cannot be turned off. The only way out is out.

So I laughed. A big snort of a laugh. Everyone turned around, as they would.

"What you lau—hey, that's Arrius' boy," someone said suddenly. I was, as he said, Arrius' boy. A murmur went through the crowd. Being a shopkeeper can be quite good for increasing your local fame, but, sadly, I would only ever be recognized as "Arrius' boy."

"Now, now," said the speaker, allowing his eyes to half-close in faux-contemplation. "I'm sure this young man did not mean anything by it. We are all, after all, children of Jehovah, so—"

"Not him!" someone else chimed in with. The speaker looked confused and mumbled a petulant noise. "This apple fell right under the tree," the person added.

The crowd approved with nods and guttural noises. "Just like his heathen father!" another said. Every eye that had recently been on the speaker was now on me, and the speaker and I seemed to share a desire to invert this. He stepped forward, elbowing audience members out of his way.

"Now listen here," he said. "I don't know who this man is, but if you've listened to a word I've said then you will know that he has our Father's goodness in his heart, and—"

"Not this family," a forthright woman who had spoken up before said. The speaker sighed and let it happen. I tried to throw him a *gee-these-people-eh?* kind of look, but he preferred to suffer alone, it seemed.

"This family doesn't know Jehovah!" she continued. "You want to know what his father said?" The crowd of people who knew the story well all cried out, "Yeah! Yeah!"

I, of course, knew what my father had said, as anyone who was anyone knew. The poor speaker was torn between crowd-control and curiosity, and I'm sure you can guess which one won out. I tried to explain to the woman that it was not important, but she cut me short with a look that told me I was in no position to answer back.

"Well, and you'll never believe this," she said. "He said that *the sun was his god*," and she scanned the crowd before settling on the speaker. She paused with a look of astonishment on her face. "The *sun!* He said that it didn't seem likely that this Jehovah of ours would be both all-powerful and entirely hidden, and so the sun seemed as good a thing to worship as any, because ..." She paused again, and the crowd all started

to prematurely mouth along the words with her. *“Because it was right there, and a god you can see is better than a god you can’t.”*

This, by the way, is why no girl will look twice at me. Not with a father spouting things like that. Now you know.

The crowd erupted into a flurry of exasperated jowls and throat-clearances of disbelief. The speaker, in one final rally of energy, shouted above them all.

“Perhaps it is time to forgive his father. Don’t you think?”

The crowd hushed and looked at each other. A few shuffled uncomfortably. I stood like a lemon, central to the semi-circle they’d created around me.

“We can’t,” a few eventually muttered.

“You can! You can!” the speaker said, joy in his open arms.

“No, we can’t,” they said again with a little more confidence.

“This is the test,” he said, seeing an opportunity to change them all for the better. “This is your chance to forgive and grow. Why? Why can’t you?”

They looked around, trying to decide who should best speak for them. The woman stepped forward.

“Because he’s dead.”

“What?”

“We stoned him to death.”

“Oh.”

A powerful silence took over. In my peripherals I could see the speaker looking at me, but I didn’t want to be a part of this anymore. My father’s stoning had happened two, perhaps three years ago now. I hadn’t witnessed it myself, but they say it was over quickly. I had known better than to turn up at my own father’s stoning. You try and argue, they stone you too. You join in, people say you’re a monster. There’s no winning here.

“And, uh, and did that solve the problem?” the speaker said, turning back to the crowd.

“Well, no. Now we have his son to deal with. We should’ve known sooner or later the curse would rise in him.”

“So, if stoning his father didn’t help, what will you do to this man?”

He spoke like a schoolteacher, urging the children to reply, in sing-song unison, that forgiveness was worth a thousand stones.

Stop, I was thinking. It’s no use.

“We need to do more,” the woman said, finally.

“Yes! Yes!” he replied. “Much more!”

Just stop.

I regret now that I didn’t do something then. Not argue, obviously, but deny any connection to my family, or at the very least turn heel,

drop my pots and run like water. However, I was frozen to the spot, my arms quivering under the stack of baked clay.

“Then it’s settled. *Poena cullei!*” she screamed.

“What?” the speaker said.

Of course, I thought, and the crowd were on top of me in moments.

The Roman guards were usually quite efficient with this sort of thing, and so I didn’t even have time to wipe the blood from my lip before I had been tried, found guilty of blasphemy and thrown into the street ready to be bagged. Where they found the animals at such short notice, I don’t pretend to know. I suppose by this time they always kept a monkey at hand.

*

My eyes had become used to the darkness now, and I began to see the situation for what it was. You do not need me to describe what these animals look like, and perhaps the image of them all bundled together in this situation is one best left for your imagination.

I tried not to dwell on it too much. Instead I focused on myself.

The first few moments in the water were, ironically, spent in prayer. Well, not prayer. More a loud, desperate plea to anyone, omnipotent or otherwise, to step in and offer a hand. In this wild shouting I almost found myself pleading forgiveness from my father, but managed to check myself at the last moment. I couldn’t ignore the strange twist of fate that had left me being punished in a way that had once been exclusively for parricide. Nowadays, it covered everything from coveting a neighbor’s ox to looking at a guard the wrong way. Whatever is not compulsory is forbidden here. And to do what is forbidden is to be punished by the sack. That stupid man. I shouldn’t be grovelling, I thought, he had had it easy where death is concerned. During a stoning, you could expect to be pardoned at any moment, it being such a public thing. Anyone could wander in and stop it. It never happened, of course, but it could. Where would my saviour come from? Jehovah? The sky? The depths?

I have heard rumors that there are people somewhere that do worship something at the bottom of the ocean, though how true this is I can’t say. It would be nice if it were. Perhaps this god would, territorially, evict me and my fellows from its homestead.

But that’s wishful, I know.

The sack itself was buoyant, which came as a surprise to me. In my mind an ox didn’t have much use for a skin that could float. This world throws up all sorts, I suppose. But luckily it did float, so for the

first couple of minutes we hung there, straddling the line between sky and water.

It was, of course, slowly being filled, or rather water was filtering in from all directions, and though the ceiling of the thing stayed afloat, it did mean that to keep breathing I had to start kicking my legs like a frog and alternating between ducking under for a few seconds and taking desperate breaths for a slightly longer few.

The monkey was getting quite unravelled by my constant bobbing, and a thought struck me, or, rather, I had the first useful thought I had had. The monkey. If anyone was going to do it, it would be him. Break free, that is. It wasn't just strength he had, but determination of character. However, coaxing him into doing anything other than void his bowels and randomly strike out seemed an impossible task.

My point was proven quite well after I had entered my fifth minute of bobbing up and down like a fish-bowl toad. At my attempt to grab his arm and gesture to him that he should scratch a hole in the roof, that we weren't necessarily done for yet, he screeched, dove, and reappeared immediately with the snake in one hand and its head in his mouth.

Well, I supposed, that was a step in the right direction, at least.

Poena cullei had been happening for a while now, and it had become popular in the last few years when the Romans had become bored with the usual punishments. With all the new rules making even more new criminals, they thought they might spice things up. So it was that the sack stopped being solely to deter parricide and had come to be the go to punishment for almost every notable crime.

We—the local drunks and I in the bars—had discussed it at some length, and speculated and made assumptions about the way things were. The most popular argument was in which order the sack's contents would die.

Assuming all the subjects survived the cart trip without being eaten or disembowelled, there was no doubt in my mind that the rooster would die first, I would say. *But I've seen a rooster on water, someone would always counter, and they use their wings to float, like a leaf.* Nonsense. The snake would kill him, I said. That's nature. Next to go would be the snake. *Why?* Because the dog would kill the snake. Have you never seen the stray dogs around here? Anything that isn't human they eat. I've seen them break open tortoises with nothing but their teeth and claws. Besides, it's their curious nature. Something slipping and whipping about that much is sure to be pounced on. *Yes, fair enough.* Next to go, I'm afraid would be the dog. The monkey would never have bothered with anything so small as a rooster or snake. *Surely.* But a dog? Monkeys are territorial creatures, and more than capable of bring-

ing down a dog and certainly that way inclined. These animals have instincts for the biggest threat. *Good point, good point. But, if that's the case, why wouldn't the monkey attack you, the human, first?* Well, it's, uh, I'm sure it's a matter of comradery. Like-minded creatures must pull together in times of hardship, isn't that right? *Like-minded?* Well, you know, *similar* creatures. *Similar? What are you suggesting?* Oh, no, I don't know. Forget it. More wine?

It was these moments that everyone started to talk about the will of Jehovah, and that it would just go the way he planned it to go, they supposed. Once I offered up the thought that Jehovah seemed to have some strange ideas for punishments for a being that could simply erase the sinner from existence with one breath. As I say, I only offered this once, because no one seemed happy to discuss it. Anyone who would have discussed these things with me in secret had long abandoned me after my father's death.

Blood was spurting from the snake's body, and the dog, who had continued to hold onto me like a new-born baby, started snapping and twisting, trying to catch some in his mouth. I plunged under again, annoyed that I had been wrong about the monkey's helpfulness and lost the drunken argument.

*

The rooster was the next to go. I was quite pleased that this guess had been right.

After swallowing the snake's body whole and discarding the head, which I tried to forget was tumbling around somewhere below me, the monkey had decided to take things easy for a bit. Unlike me, he was quite buoyant, and seemed unperturbed by the fact he was chin deep in water. With a full belly, he hadn't cared to look twice at the rooster, who, too, had been floating quite happily, like a leaf.

The dog was the culprit. I realized late enough that the dog had been doing no work himself in regards to staying alive, and this is what set off the chain. I didn't mind him hanging on, because it didn't make much difference to my ability to stay afloat. He was small enough, and friendly looking, so there was no harm. What I did worry about, however, was the message this gave off. The monkey's fur was becoming heavy. He wasn't struggling, but it was obvious that he would soon be. If he saw the dog hanging on to me, not a care in the world, what would that make him think? Right. That clever little bugger would be on me like a lion on slaves.

So, and it broke my heart to, believe me, I folded my arms to my chest and thrust forward, pushing the dog from me. The bag's balance

was knocked temporarily off kilter and the whole thing was sent entirely underwater for about thirty seconds. Eventually it rose to the top again and we all took a welcome breath. Luckily, no one seemed particularly desperate to blame me, so we let ourselves settle again. Without the dog I felt more at ease, and, surprisingly, he was floating. Without so much as a kick of his legs he was resting happily on the surface. I patted his head and he bobbed down slightly, but rose again just as quickly. It was a calm few seconds. But then a wing rose from underneath him, broke the surface for a moment, then stopped and sunk. Investigating him with my hands I realized what was keeping him afloat. The poor bird didn't stand a chance.

So it was just me, the dog and the monkey now.

It was nearing evening, and had only been about three hours, at most, since my arrest. The sun was still hot. We were close enough to the coast for there to be a slight wind, which I could hear beating the outside of the ox, but couldn't feel. There was no ventilation, and the number of sweaty, wet animals had turned the sack into a sort of steam room. There was nowhere for the heat to go, and so it just hung in the atmosphere, seeping first from our bodies, then into our mouths and lungs, and then back out to fill the empty space.

Pushing my curls up and over my head I noticed that the dog was desperately lapping the water in front of him. Instinctively, I grabbed his chin and stopped him, but as soon as I let go he continued. No matter, I thought, he'll be dead soon anyway. May as well make it a quick one.

My father had had it easy. Stoning is an alright way to go, relatively. You have to think relatively when you talk about death. You have to take into account all deaths. Old age, disease, falling off a cliff. And once you have done this, you'll find that stoning is not as bad as all that. All it took was a few stones. The good thing about a stone to the head is that it dominates your thoughts. There will be no wondering about the afterlife or the sun or any damned monkeys when you have stones flying at you. Your mind will think of stones. I, though, have been unlucky. I have an unbearable amount of time to think. The animals are slowly dying. And when you are in the minority by simply being alive, what is there to think of but death?

The truth is, I didn't agree with my father. The sun is nothing to worship. Sure, you can see it and sure it can be useful at times, but it is too inconsistent a thing to be a god. As for Jehovah, I think much the same about him. Although you can't see him, of course.

The dog slipped quietly from atop the rooster and both of them sank to the bottom.

*

The monkey has been staring at me since the dog went under, and every time I sink and then surface again I find he is still looking. It seems with everything else dead he has taken an interest in me. I stare back at him, unafraid of him, the mangy thing. The wet hair flattened vertically against himself makes him look stupid. But, then again, I don't suppose I look much better.

"Go on! Go on! You stupid monkey!" I scream at him, gesturing wildly, but either he can't understand that the outside world is just a neat tear away, or he is unwilling to help. I can't say I blame him too much. It is not that I am becoming accustomed to life in the sack. That would be absurd. Besides, it's been little more than thirty minutes, an hour, something not very long. It is just that I have some comfort to take from it. There are no girls to ignore me, no speakers to listen to, no lost friends to lament, no drunks to argue with. But most of all, I know that my pottery is still out there somewhere, and it will last for a thousand years. And more. More than me, more than this monkey, more than my stupid father ever did, and more than their gods who make all this nonsense happen.

It is hot, yes, and it smells like a sodden farm, and it is a rather trying situation for the old knees, but, I swear on the sun, it is a comfort to think one day someone will look back on this moment and regret it.

The monkey has that look in his eyes again, but he looks at me as if I have that look too. He knows me by now. He knows every hair on my wet head. Reaching forward a bit he scratches my arm, nothing serious but I would have preferred nothing at all. I ignore him. I like him. His temper is a foul thing, but he is an intelligent sack-fellow. If only he would listen to me and help me.

I have decided now that I might worship the monkey. It is something to do. Forget the sun. It has gone. And forget Jehovah. His greatest intervention in my life was to put me here. I worship the monkey. It is a comfort to plead to someone for salvation knowing full well what the answer will be. He's there. He ignores me as much as hurts me, and, best of all, he's about to be erased from this foul world, just like I am.

—Joshua King, 28, London UK

Noughts and Crosses

An **X** for when I made kombucha from scratch,
but wriggling nematodes fed off my microbes
so the brew didn't ferment; our blue bin filled up
with rattling empties. An **O** for his polysyllabic

highfalutin cursing; it wasn't pigeon shit
marring his car hood but *demonic, peristeronic*
filth; he inked in the loop of every upper case
"P", filling the semi-circles, in Karen Solie's book

with a blurred bird on the cover. **X** for my Sunday
afternoons of lethargy, paperback splayed open,
unread, upon my thigh. An **O** when I found out
he was bootlegging tracks and out-takes

from musicians whose photos he'd snapped,
whose parties he crashed, profitably until,
he said, my hysteria forced him to stop.
X for the many eggplant dishes he had to eat

while I learned to cook vegetarian. I did revel in
the meaty texture and how the peeler would slide
through, purple ribbons curled on the cutting
board. **O** for the lingering vinegar scent of stop-bath

on his clothes when he'd emerge from the darkroom.
Heroin has that same smell, I've heard, as does old filmstock
degrading. An **X** for my unreliable muscle memory; melody
streaming back when I placed my hands upon the keys

but that felt sense failing me as I cleaned a Dungeness,
unable to pry its carapace loose from its guts. An **O** when
he guzzled from the waters of Lethe—forgetfulness,
oblivion; limp loll of head despite the antic race of his brain.

As we play, he lectures me on the history of this crosshatch
grid, the octothorpe. He places a coup de grâce **X**, for another
thing I've botched, but he can't stroke three in a row. We're tic-
tac- tiptoeing through our own history. It's a cat's game,

and he rarely gets scratched. He reorients the sharp symbol
so I don't make a hash of it, while he pounds the lesson home.

—Frances Boyle, 66, Ottawa ON

Call Her Madam: The Story Behind Mrs. Bixby and Her Letter

Near the beginning of the 1998 movie *Saving Private Ryan*, Harve Presnell, as Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall, reads the following letter to his staff.

*Executive Mansion,
Washington, Nov. 21, 1864.
To Mrs. Bixby, Boston, Mass,
Dear Madam,*

I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any word of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save.

I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.

*Yours, very sincerely and respectfully,
A. Lincoln*

You can't read that letter and not be moved by its eloquence. The author's sorrow, empathy, gratitude, and honesty shine through the obvious heartache. The brevity and simplicity of the letter only enhance it. What's more, it stands as an example of the perfect use of language. Author Dr. Michael Burlingame quotes Lincoln authorities James G. Randall, Richard N. Current, David A. Anderson, and Henry Waterson who variously made the following assessments of the Bixby letter. "A masterpiece in the English language." "Lincoln's three greatest writ-

ings”—the Gettysburg Address, his Second Inaugural Address, and the Bixby letter—are the compositions “upon which assessment of his literary achievement must ultimately be based.” “The most sublime letter ever penned by the hand of man.”¹ The consensus is that this letter is the standard by which all others should be measured. Now if we only knew who wrote it.

I know it's signed “A. Lincoln”. Even the facsimile is signed “A. Lincoln”. But for over a century, controversy has raged about whether Abraham Lincoln signed it or even wrote it. Besides the president, the most likely suspect is his personal secretary, John Hay—who claimed to have written it, and then claimed the president wrote it. There is also debate about what Hay meant by the word “wrote”. All this sounds way too similar to the political machinations that go on today. However, the controversy about the authorship is only one of the disturbing aspects surrounding the Bixby letter.

There is the matter of the five sons who “died gloriously on the field of battle” as well as the curious, somewhat mysterious, circumstances concerning the grieving widow.

First of all, we know that the woman did exist. There indeed was a Lydia Parker Bixby who lived in Massachusetts at the time the letter was written. Various sources, including her great-grandson, Arthur March Bixby, claim that she was born in Richmond, Virginia in about 1801 and moved north a fair time before the war. According to Lincoln Scholar William E. Barton, Mrs. Bixby lived at nine different addresses in the Boston area between 1861 and 1878.² In a report made after the war, she is said to have resided at various, unnamed addresses in the 11th ward—which would have put her in Cambridge and or Somerville.³ However, the letter was delivered to Mrs. Bixby's home at 15 Dover Street in Boston, according to *The Boston Transcript*⁴. Although there were Dover Streets in both Cambridge and Somerville at the time, the Boston address puts her in the city proper. The *Transcript* further claims that she moved to Wolfeboro, New Hampshire for a time after the war, where she lived with her son Oliver's widow. She later returned

1 Burlingame, Michael, “New Light on the Bixby Letter”, *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, Vol. 16, Issue 1 (www.historycooperative.org/cgi-bin/printpage.cgi)

2 Pile, John, “Letter of Legend is Read Between the Lines”, *The Boston Globe*, July 21, 1999

3 Devens, Richard Miller, *A Pictorial Book of Anecdotes and Incidents of the War of Rebellion*, (Hartford, CT, Hartford Publishing, 1866)

4 Chamberlin, Joseph Edgar, *The Boston Transcript: A History of its First Hundred Years*, (Freeport, NY, Books for Libraries Press, 1930)

to Boston and died at Massachusetts General Hospital on October 27, 1878. She was buried at the Mt. Hope Cemetery in Mattapan.

Records show that Lydia Parker married Cromwell Bixby in Hopkinton, Massachusetts on September 26, 1826. Between 1827 and 1849, the couple had nine children: six sons; Oliver, Henry, George, Charles, Edward and Andrew; and three daughters, Anna, Susan and Caroline. All of the children were born in Hopkinton. Cromwell Bixby, although most likely a farmer, may have also been a shoemaker, since a number of his sons became shoemakers. Following Cromwell's death in 1854, the widow drifted toward Boston with at least two of her children. She also stayed for a time in Providence, Rhode Island with her oldest daughter.⁵ At some point, if the timetable and testimonies are to be believed, she wound up for a while in Richmond, before returning to Boston in 1860 or 1861.

Now that we've established some background about the woman and her family, let's have a closer look at the five boys who supposedly gave their lives for the Union.

Sgt. Charles N. Bixby was killed at the Second Battle of Fredericksburg on May 3, 1863 while serving with Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. under Colonel Paul J. Revere—the namesake of his famous grandfather, in the 20th Massachusetts Infantry.

Pvt. Oliver C. Bixby was killed while serving with the 58th Massachusetts Infantry at the Battle of the Crater outside Petersburg, Virginia on July 30, 1864. He left a wife and three children who went to live with relatives in Wolfboro, New Hampshire.

Okay so far. It gets a little sticky as we get to the other three.

Cpl. George A. Bixby of the 25th Massachusetts Infantry was captured, repatriated and deserted to the enemy in 1864. He moved to Cuba after the war. He was last heard from in 1879—still in Cuba.

Pvt. (Arthur) Edward Bixby of the 1st Massachusetts Heavy Artillery deserted to the enemy in 1862. After the war he repatriated himself to the United States and eventually moved to Chicago, where he worked as a cigar maker. He died there in 1909.

Corporal Henry C. Bixby was discharged from the 32nd Massachusetts Infantry in December, 1864.⁶ Following the war, he moved to Milford, Massachusetts, where he died in 1876.

Although there's no record of Andrew in the enlistment rolls of the army, there's no getting round the fact that the other five brothers did

5 Barton, William E., "The Truth About The Bixby Letter", *Dearborn Independent Magazine*, February 6, 1926

6 Temple, Wayne C., *Abraham Lincoln: From Skeptic to Prophet*, (Mahomet, Illinois, Mayhaven Publishing, 1995)

take up arms for the North. They should be recognized and honored for that. Charles and Oliver died in the effort, and deserve respect for their sacrifice. This makes Mrs. Bixby what a later generation would call a “gold star mother.” Not to sound callous, but that should be plenty. So how did all of this *five sons dying* business come about?

Part of the answer may lie with the fact that Mrs. Bixby was born in Richmond. In the August 12, 1925 issue of the *Providence Evening Bulletin*, Mrs. George M. Towser, Mrs. Bixby’s granddaughter stated that her grandmother “was secretly in sympathy with the Southern cause...and had ‘little good to say of President Lincoln.’” Her great-grandson claimed the same thing in an interview in 1949 with the editor of the *New York Sun*.⁷ Her animosity toward Lincoln and the North was evidently common knowledge among Mrs. Bixby’s acquaintances

In various accounts about Mrs. Bixby, it is mentioned that while in Richmond, she ran a house of ill repute. We can learn something more of the character of the widow Bixby from the “Reminiscences of Sarah Cabot Wheelwright”. Mrs. Wheelwright, a prominent society matron, was from an old Boston family and the wife of noted attorney Andrew Cunningham Wheelwright. In 1861, when she was just twenty-six, she had occasion to come into contact with Mrs. Bixby through the recommendation of social arbiter Mrs. Charles Paine.

She claimed to have five sons in the army. She was a stout woman, more or less motherly-looking, but with shifty eyes – we called her “Mother Bixby.” I did not like her, but there seemed to be good reason for helping her. Having heard that there were means of getting supplies to Libby Prison (a very difficult thing to do) I was desirous of sending a box of small comforts to the soldiers. Speaking of it to her, she said that one of her sons was home for a time on leave, and that if I came around to her house...she would tell me more about it...” Soon after this I received a very distressed letter from Mrs. Paine, saying that the police on finding that we were helping this woman had told her that she kept a house of ill-fame, was perfectly untrustworthy and as bad as she could be.⁸

It appears that not only was Mrs. Bixby not all hearts and flowers, but apparently, when she came to Boston, she brought her business with her.

In Mrs. Wheelwright’s description, it seems that Mrs. Bixby implied that she had a way of getting supplies to Libby Prison in Richmond and

7 Burlingame, Michael, op. cit.

8 Ibid.

that her son would be the courier. This would be an unlikely, if not impossible occurrence. Nonetheless, Mrs. Wheelwright did go to her house. She remembered that Mrs. Bixby was quite "evasive" and that the son was not there. An arranged meeting with the son at Albany Station did not go well. Mrs. Wheelwright felt threatened by the "ill-looking man"—who may or may not have been the son in question—who met her there. Shortly after this, she received the warning letter from Mrs. Paine. We can only guess about what sort of flim-flam Mrs. Bixby might have been up to.

Mrs. Paine and Mrs. Wheelwright were not the only members of Boston's upper crust who knew Mrs. Bixby. In 1862, Mrs. Bixby approached the Adjutant General of Massachusetts, William Schouler, to ask for money so that she might visit one of her sons who had been wounded at Antietam and was now in a hospital in Maryland. General Schouler verbally and emphatically related the story to Governor John A. Andrew. Governor Andrew gave her a personal note for \$40, which in today's money is about \$550.⁹ This is strange on a couple of levels. Subsequent investigations have shown that there is no record in the War Department files of any Bixby son having been wounded at Antietam.¹⁰ It seems she just wanted the money. Forty dollars was quite a generous amount, which she never returned.

It gets stranger. In October of 1864, the General Schouler wrote the following in a letter to Governor Andrew.

About ten days ago, Mrs. Bixby came to my office and showed me five letters from five company commanders, and each letter informed the poor woman of the death of one of her sons. Her last remaining son was recently killed in the fight at Weldon railroad. Mrs. Bixby is the best specimen of a true-hearted Union woman I have yet seen. She now resides at 15 Dover street – Place. Each of her sons by his good conduct had been made a sergeant.¹¹

Notice that General Schouler refers to "Mrs. Bixby" not *a* or *a certain* Mrs. Bixby. This seems to imply a familiarity or acquaintance with the woman. There might not be anything to this, but you have to question it, especially in light of the fact that her five sons were not killed, and she well knew it. The Battle of Weldon Railroad had been fought in August. Her son Oliver had been killed in June at Petersburg. So what's the story with these five letters? Did Mrs. Bixby write them herself? Did they even exist? If they did exist, were they written to provide plausible deniability for General Schouler?

9 Pile, John, op. cit. and www.measuringworth.com

10 Burlingame, Michael, "The Trouble With The Bixby Letter", AmericanHeritage.com

11 Schouler, William, *A History of Massachusetts in the Civil War*, (Boston, Massachusetts, E.P. Dutton & Co. Publishers, 1868) 577

Upon receipt of the letter, the ball was now in Governor Andrew's court. At Schouler's urging, he wrote to the Secretary of War. In his letter, Governor Andrew endorsed Mrs. Bixby's situation and stated the following.

I really wish a letter might be written her by the President of the United States, taking notice of a noble mother of five dead heroes so well deserved.¹²

Governor Andrew was acquainted with Mrs. Bixby from the 1862 Antietam affair. However, the president's letter only mentions the General Schouler. This seems a bit odd, since it was Governor Andrew who brought the matter to Lincoln's attention. It should be noted that in his book, *A History of Massachusetts During The Civil War*, General Schouler states that he had known the president when he was in Congress, and in fact had visited a half-hour with Mr. Lincoln on November 5, 1864 while returning from the front. In any case, it was to Schouler that the Bixby letter was delivered, who, according to Schouler himself, *hand delivered it* to Mrs. Bixby.

On October 20, 1864, President Lincoln established Thanksgiving as a national holiday. It was to be celebrated on the last Thursday in November. Newspapers throughout the country hyped the holiday, especially in light of the war. Massachusetts was making an extra effort to try to get a Thanksgiving dinner to every soldier from the state. The *Boston Transcript* ran public appeals for donations to that end. It was then that General Schouler wrote a piece in the paper saying that while this effort was a noble one, there were families at home who were deprived due to the fact that their men folk were away fighting, and were much in need of food, coal and any donations. He singled out one particular woman who had lost five sons in the service of their country.¹³

On November 23, General Schouler received the Bixby letter from President Lincoln. He immediately made at least two copies and had them delivered to the *Boston Transcript* and the *Boston Advertiser*. On Thanksgiving Day, the 24th, Schouler paid a visit to Mrs. Bixby at 15 Dover Street. He brought with him a Thanksgiving dinner, an order for coal and a "considerable sum in cash which had come in response to his appeal". He also presented her the original of the President's letter.

In the November 25th afternoon edition of the *Transcript*, the letter was made public along with the announcement that Mrs. Bixby had been receiving assistance from the "Churches and Christian Ladies" of Boston. The November 26th morning edition of the *Boston Advertiser*

12 Basler, Roy P., "Who Wrote The 'Letter to Mrs. Bixby?'", *Lincoln Herald*, Vol. 45 February 1943, (www.lincolnherald.com/1943articleBixby.html)

13 Barton, William E., *op. cit.*

carried the same story. Other publications picked it up and ran with it. On December 3, in New York, the Bixby letter appeared on the back page of the *Army and Navy Journal*.¹⁴ Eventually it appeared in hundreds of papers nationwide. It was intended that the nation as a whole mourn the loss. The Bixbys were to be the symbol of national sacrifice.

No doubt Mrs. Bixby was gratified by the food, the coal and the money. How she treated the letter from the president is a different matter. All contemporary accounts say that she disposed of it—threw it away. But what was her demeanor, her state of mind at that time?

In a 1949 interview with the editor of the *New York Sun*, her great-grandson, Arthur stated that he had been told by his father that Mrs. Bixby was an ardent Southern sympathizer who destroyed the letter *in anger* shortly after receipt without realizing its value. Another granddaughter attested that her mother—Mrs. Bixby's daughter—told her how the widow *resented* the letter.¹⁵ In other reports as well, the terms “resent” and “anger” crop up in descriptions of the widow's reaction to President Lincoln's letter.

No matter how beautiful a piece of writing, no matter how sincere the sentiment, it just wasn't doing the trick for Lydia Bixby. Of course, we have to ask, “Why?”

There are a number of possible answers. Some of these raise additional questions. There are some nagging questions that lead to some uncomfortable—albeit circumstantial—conclusions.

It's given that Mrs. Bixby was a Southern sympathizer. Was this brought about simply by virtue of her having been born in Virginia? That's entirely possible. However, she spent most of her adult life in Massachusetts. All of her children were born there. Her husband was probably a native. Could it have been that her long experience in the North soured her on it? That's possible too. Nine kids. She was not upper-class society. She lived twenty-six miles outside Boston. After her husband's death when she was fifty-three years old, she drifted into Boston and was unable to maintain a residence in one place for any length of time. Could economic circumstances have fostered resentment? Certainly. Could she have blamed the Union for the fact that she wound up running a house of prostitution? Perhaps, even though she might have plied this trade in the South as well.

The fact that five of her sons enlisted in the Union army doesn't jibe with the label “Southern sympathizer”. In some twist of logic, she might have blamed the North for taking her sons from her. Expanding on that, she might well have blamed the North for the fact that two of

14 Ibid.

15 Burlingame, Michael, “The Trouble With the Bixby Letter”

her boys were killed. That two others went over to the Confederate side stirs the controversy pot a bit as well. What prompted that? One of the boys was so angry that he remained in self-imposed exile long after the war was over.

Judging by her livelihood, Mrs. Bixby might have become jaded to the noble reasons given for the war. And what was the nature of her clientele?

That's an interesting question. In 1862, General Schouler brought Mrs. Bixby up to Governor Andrew, convincingly pleading her case about one of her boys being wounded at Antietam. She received \$40 directly from the governor, no questions asked. Her son—she never mentioned which one—had not been wounded and it appears she knew it. Even though General Schouler said that she had made the trip and that her boy had rejoined his unit, such was not the case. Nor did she return the money. Could she have had something on General Schouler? He was married with children and held an important position—head of the State Militia. What's more, Schouler knew President Lincoln personally. A scandal would not bode well for the general's future. Mrs. Bixby may have come to see her relationship with the Adjutant General of Massachusetts as a cash cow—a part of a con she'd been running throughout the war. As noted, she had been receiving aid and assistance from "Churches and Christian ladies" in Boston, even in the light of Mrs. Wheelwright's dealings with her back in 1861.

What about the five letters from five different company commanders informing her that her boys had been killed? Who wrote them? Did she write them? Did they even exist? All we know about them is that General Schouler said that Mrs. Bixby showed him these letters. He used the five dead sons to lobby in the newspaper for alms and aid for the poor widow. Further, the letters were used as an excuse for him to ask the governor to ask the president to write a letter of condolence. Money came in just from the appeals in the paper, before the president's letter was written. More followed.

When General Schouler received the Bixby letter, he made copies of it and sent them to at least two newspapers along with further appeals to the "good people of Boston". He then proceeded to present Mrs. Bixby with food, an order for coal, a considerable sum of money and the letter from President Lincoln. He may have then told her that he'd sent the letter to the media. Or perhaps she read it in the newspaper the following day. It doesn't matter. At that point, full of resentment and anger, she destroyed the letter.

Perhaps what made her so angry and what she resented was the fact that General Schouler had given it to the papers. It would soon be all over the country. She knew her sons hadn't all been killed. When they

started showing up, the whole country would know it too. The word 'fraud' pops into mind. So does 'larceny', 'extortion', and 'blackmail'. So much for the grieving, hard-pressed widow. She couldn't go public with her client list now. There would be nothing to gain. She was either Simon-pure or she wasn't. And she wasn't. Mrs. Bixby's only hope was to lay low and hope that in the confusion of repatriation and reconstruction her little operation might be forgotten. This probably prompted her move to Wolfboro, New Hampshire where she would live for a while with her son Oliver's widow and her grandchildren. That would legitimize things and certainly take her out of the public eye in Boston.

The passage of time can both heal and bury damage and resentment. In her final years when she dared return to Massachusetts, she was barely remembered. If attention was given to the Bixby letter, it was given for the brilliant, simple beauty of the piece itself. It stood as a bittersweet example of the humanity, kindness, consideration and empathy of a martyred president. And so it stands today. That a less than virtuous reason caused the letter to be written takes nothing away from the letter itself. Mrs. Bixby was a gold star mother, after all. She just wasn't quite who she said she was.

I suppose this shows that history isn't cut and dried. Sometimes convenience wins out over accuracy—if it's for the greater good. As was said in the John Ford film *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*, "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."

—Frank Emerson, 73, Wytheville VA

Galata de Nada

Pot-plants with yellow flowers run alongside the hotel's red balcony rail. It's March 26 but Istanbul reveals no other clues of spring. The streets that are devoid of people are no less grey than the sky. Leaves have migrated to some other planet where the season of growth is eternal, with no promise of a return. I'm dreaming of the 'fish bread' sandwich I got near Galata Bridge one time here years ago.

I'm walking to Sultanahmet Square. McDonald's is closed and the mosques' doors bolted—the corporate overlords laughing on Caribbean golf courses and the fire-breathing dragon Evren returning thousands of years later to climb the minarets, leaving a blaze trailing down and spreading across the city.

The Blue Mosque's muezzin must be in his house practising his vocal chords for Friday prayers tomorrow. I imagine he wonders if the ghosts he'll call out to will open their windows and ears and hearts. If they'll bow in hope from home. If the haze above the Strait of Bosphorus will blow over to Russia.

The square is barricaded. I walk through anyway, no one else between the Blue Mosque and Hagia Sophia. The group of guards—just one face-masked—doesn't seem to mind. This area got blocked off too the last time I was here in 2016, remnants of a bombing being some sporadic spots of blood. This fencing makes me wonder if cross-cultural understanding is even possible—you can enter another society and even sit there a while but there's always barriers, ones that are detachable, movable, visible or not, but forever lingering.

Following the deserted tram tracks brings me to the Golden Horn inlet. Fishermen. *This virus that's killed only a few people in Turkey? We still got mouths to feed and ourselves to entertain—and these fish ain't hooking*

themselves. After crossing the Galata I turn to the promenade where the pop-up fish bread stall should be. Empty space.

A man tosses crumbs from the rocks to the seagulls splashing on the edge of the Bosphorus. Down the promenade is a seafood market with a few adventurous customers and eventually a restaurant selling takeaway fish bread. As my kebab is being prepared, it's unclear whether the tension in the air is from the silence of the roads gasping incessantly without the usual pounding of wheels, or because I haven't eaten in hours and the teasing barbecued seafood is testing my patience. A restaurant worker offers me a handful of calamari from the plate he takes down the strip.

In an alley towards the main street, only two young women are passing. As the expanse between us narrows, the empty space enlarges—no eye contact, no salutations, just distance.

Still hungry, I find an indoor restaurant. Chairs are atop the tables. Some people waiting for takeaway and one man walking upstairs. The waiter takes my order of lentil soup and tea and, turning away from me first, says, 'This way, mister' and escorts me up. A group at a round table makes conversation only through the varying intensity of cutlery hitting plates—a man carelessly cutting his meal, sounds reverberating through the empty space of the room, his wife responding by progressing from a meticulously quiet effort to a sudden knife thump to get his attention. I wait for forks to scrape down plates like fingernails on a chalkboard—*Why won't you listen to me? Why are you so selfish? Why don't you care?*—but it doesn't come.

Through the window is a road that'd lead me to Taksim Square. The idea all along was I'd come here for a week before flying out of the region. I'd hit up the Spoken Word Istanbul events. Which story would I read out? Should I make them laugh or feel sad or triggered? I'd meet writers and poets and musicians from all over the globe. Over wine glasses that'd keep refilling, we'd try making sense of the mess of the world and life and each other—almost getting there. Until the glasses empty. Till the hangover kicks in. When I'd again navigate the empty space of a foreign place whose people I'll never truly know.

The waiter places a chair on top of my table-for-four, somewhat obstructing the view inside from street-passersby. He mutters something about police but I think the chair makes no difference. Downstairs I go to pay the cashier. While I'm pulling out all my lira coins and handing

them to the man, a teenage boy is at my side directly facing me. I'm about to abruptly ask what the hell he wants. Wallet back in my pocket and turn to the boy. He holds out a bottle. 'Sanitise?'

Up the hill. Who cares about a story I might've rambled about in a microphone in an alternative timeline? My migration is easy—jumping on a plane to Australia tomorrow. What about all the refugees here, in congested and unhygienic spaces, or trying to burst into Europe?

In the hotel I drink black tea near a man and woman speaking in Spanish. After she leaves, I make eye contact with the middle-aged guy with a thick moustache. Reminds me of how my dad looked.

'Hola,' I say.

'Hola. ¿Cómo estás?'

'Bien, bien. ¿Y tú?'

'Muy bien. ¿Hablas español?' He grins.

'Solamente un poco.' I search my brain for the words. 'Estudié en universidad por dos años. Pero no recuerdo mucho ahora... ¿De dónde eres?'

'Bolivia.'

Our Spanish conversation doesn't get too much further. I refill our tea glasses. We talk in English.

—Dean Kerrison, 27, Australia

Paradise Lost

Al-Andalus: the fantasy that never was, but could be

by Angelina Saule

Literary critic Edward Said once wrote that the composite of Andalusian identity is anchored in Arabic culture. His travelogue recounting his search for something intangible in the region, as a Palestinian living in the West, seems intent on catching something lost. Said, arguably, dedicated his whole academic oeuvre to searching for that Paradise Lost; whether it was pre-apartheid Palestine or the Golden Age of Andalusian tolerance and multiculturism.

Neither refugee nor in a particular exilic state of being, I don't possess a Paradise to be nostalgic for. Unlike my father, grandparents and great-grandparents, I have no recollection of fleeing from ethnic conflict (China), civil war (Lebanon), or economic and political woes (the Soviet Union). The personal stories in my family nurtured me, their soundscapes tending to the soil of my roots, their feats and escapades watering the stems. A mere spectator to my calamitous family history, rather than a shrewd accomplice to the swift death of a country or empire, I have nothing to mourn for.

Said is considered to be a committed writer, a writer fighting for a cause with the wonders of his IBM or Canon typewriter. A nostalgia and longing with a purpose. A passion and desire that pose a threat to the historical security of modern-day Spain or Israel. The poetics of loss, nostalgia and displacement release a certain splendor or a certain dream, a moment when one is tranquil, safe, at home. That is Andalusia for many. There is a return and a rewriting of this paralyzing absence equated with what Andalusia was until the expulsion of Jews and Arabs from the region. Unsurprisingly, these cultural and historical desecrations don't fit into modern Spain's narrative of itself, as if the swarthy background of people behind the arches and frescos of Seville, the nomadically inclined meanings behind such words as 'aldea' (Classical Arabic – *day'ah*, meaning small village) and 'aceite' (Classical Arabic – *azzayt*, 'oil'), are continually hushed and stifled when I enquire

into Andalusia and its background while there. The narrative(s) I am searching for belong, although they don't fit. What is a lullaby for some is a death sentence for others.

Andalusia draws many back: those who have a specific longing for a place that was or could have thrived in peace. Even I am drawn to the hotchpotch sonority that accompanies everything in Andalusia: in songs or in stones, I am chasing these ghosts of Syrian, Jewish, Moorish descent. These traces of Andalusia seem intimate, but also extravagantly inauthentic: in a postmodern world it is difficult to ascertain what is and what is not authentic, and in terms of cultural tourism or chasing the ghosts of some Golden Age, it is best not to ask. Sometimes, there is no truth of history and more often than not, no history of truth.

In Seville, Flamenco is sold on every street corner of the old city inn: we head into a hall, with a ticket clamped tightly bought in advance to witness art in the making. Does the passion of flamenco, the 'rasgueado' strummed guitars, the collective craving for handclapping, do all of these have precedents in Arabic music or Berber call-and-response? As a lounge-chair aficionado of the oud and with some smattering of how music evolved in Arabic culture vis-à-vis its temporary residency (if seven centuries can be considered temporary) in Andalusia, I am struck at how 'Arab' the whole performance is. The desire to create a Disneyland of history—or a Disneyland of flamenco, that can be peddled for a quid, is endemic to how tourism works in Andalusia. Of course, the performances are arousing, poignant and zealous, yet they seem staged and that is when I begin to question: is it staged only for the tourists or is it staged due to its foreignness in general? We all perform our culture in subtle ways, from how we crouch over toilets to how we grasp our coffee cups, but we should be comfortable with the stories behind those behaviors. In Andalusia, I have the stark encounter with a place that is not at all at ease with many of its own stories.

Somewhere in Andalusia I am searching for the hierarchy of facts that will eventually lead to a sovereign story. Seemingly, this sovereign story should lead to this article being written. Having seen flamenco in other countries, I was bemused by the production of it all in Seville, the heartland of Flamenco, where the loss of tragic proportions that seems so central to the voice of flamenco, were absent. I had expected something more existentialist, or at least more evocative. The godets and ruffles whirl in a crescendo of red and white over the sturdy wooden heels, the beads of perspiration glowing euphorically on the male dancer's face, while the audience sit in an ordered fashion, somberly, as if children about to be punished by their parents manning the exit door. The performers gesture to one another, with each pulse their heels hit the floor hard, legs rising with each beat, and their feet fly downward

with equal intensity. Well-rehearsed, well-choreographed, “well” being the operative word here. The reproduction of the feelings evoked seems feigned or hollow—it could very well be that they are just tired and overworked, explaining why there is no fierce seduction happening. When the music changes rhythm they open their eyes wide, give the cue and the show must go on to a round of encouraged applause.

Maybe cultural narratives should only be erected around achievement, contentment and satisfaction, rather than a state of mind or repertoire engulfed by passionate loss and pain. The happiness ascribed to victory, or the pride of success, should be celebrated, rather than the ritual of singing a desolated state into existence, or a subtle sensitivity that is moaned rather than sung.

The pleasure of singing pain has become a lucrative industry, where the heartache and anger of loss has been sugarcoated.

Yet it is that precise horror of loss and exile that is romanticized in the Arab world. Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, perhaps one of the most famous poets in the Arabic-speaking world from the 20th century, highlighted the spell that was al-Andalus, from the moment when Arabs and Berbers crossed the Strait of Gibraltar in 711, to the Fall of Granada in 1492. Inspired by nostalgia for what was, could have been, and indirectly, what might be able to transpire again. In Arabic, it is quite literally referred to as ‘al-firdaws al-mafqud’ (‘the lost paradise’) or as ‘jannat Allah ‘ala al-ard’ (God’s paradise on earth).

The Arab world’s best-selling poet, Palestinian Mahmoud Darwish, is the luminary and icon *par excellence* of the loss of Paradise, of the desolation induced by exile and dispossession. The loss of Palestine finds its allegory in the loss of al-Andalus, i.e., the loss of Paradise for the Arab world, articulated in the poem ‘The Violins’ (al-kamanjaat). The image of the violins is used to express the trembling and familiar pain associated with bereavement, the lost land of lost love, explaining a pained genesis of a people that eludes self-expression and only the violins’ acoustic features can make the tears and shrieks audible:

*The violins cry for the Arabs departing Andalusia.
The violins weep with the Gypsies heading for Andalusia,
The violins cry for a lost epoch that will not return,
The violins cry for a lost homeland that could be regained....
The violins are searching to kill me, wherever they find me.*

The despair of this composite, a conundrum of lost love and unattainable reunion in the poem, has been set to music by Marcel Khalife. A Lebanese composer and musician, well-known for his arrangement of celebrated poems, Khalife has translated these words into a song reso-

nating with the trademark optimal range for sadness, fright and flight that these lines convey: the violin, unlike the viola, cello, and double-bass, rate amply in their high pitched-bending ratio after the human voice. Starting with the somber improvisation of a cantilena-based prelude (in the form of a cadenza-recitative), the violin crafts a poignancy abundant in the power of embellished augmented seconds. Having seen this song performed live some years ago by Khalife, it was majestic to feel how the stage was embraced by the mountain air of Lebanon intermingling with the Mediterranean breeze, while the sensual glissandi of the violins seduced the night air, as if the breeze had blown in from the other shores of the imagined past. The tremolo in the strings with the forte piano (*fp*) reflected the tumultuous heartbeats, while the castanets and handclapping lead into the final climax and recalling the legacy of Iberian music, the Magyar-inspired spiccato illustrates the flight, yet zest of life so implicit in what the loss of Andalusia entailed.

Khalife recorded an entire album, *Andalusia of Love* (Andalus el-hobb) that gives voice to the emotional crescendo that this Iberian Peninsula holds in the psyche of the Arab world. Fourteen of Darwish's poems conceive of this reactionary nostalgia with passion and sensitivity, fusing jazz, folk, classical, Western and Eastern traditions. This longing for unification, which music becomes the vessel of, although innocent, could also be responsible for a certain stagnation in the Arab world, which creates an industry out of nostalgia for and the loss of the Paradise imagined into continual existence and there is no going forward.

The other side of this industry of this story, of unification or as it is also known 'La Convivencia', was made up of continuous negotiating: there is and wasn't Paradise, but just a medley of innumerable elements grafted onto one another. One culture layered upon another to another, rhizomatic in breadth, so that the modern landscape of Andalusia represents a certain grafting. Historian Maria Rosa Menocal in the book *Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* vividly encapsulates 'La Convivencia' as an enlightenment, an Iberian renaissance of worldly proportions that whisked an atmosphere of tolerance. A local analysis of the art, science and literature from 'La Convivencia' that graced Europe with civilization, spawned from within Andalusia, could not be found during my travels in Andalusia—especially not in Spanish. Cruising the intellectual haunts of locals in various bookshops from Seville to Malaga, I continually pushed titles of texts that are relatively positive about this epoch. I was generally met with bemusement, exasperation or slight insolence: the only books that I was offered were anthologies by the writer and poet, Federico García Lorca.

Although not a historian in the traditional sense of the word, Andalusia was the subject and central character in many of Lorca's writings. Born just outside of Granada, Andalusia's landscape both enthralled and fashioned him, venerating a past and present that is as emotive and exhaustive in scope. From plays to poems, ballads to tragedies, the searing sun and parched winds propping the olive groves and rural life, it's no accident that music, the deep song of Paradise lost was preserved (for example, reliving the sound of the Arabic 'qasida', which Lorca used as both titles and poetic forms – 'casida' in Spanish). These rhythms and forms he used not only safeguarded the richness that made up Spanish culture, but they also drew an imaginary topography between the ancient music and poetry of the persecuted and oppressed of Andalusia—Arabs, Jews and Gypsies—who fled into the mountains in the 15th century to escape the Spanish Inquisition, and Lorca's own time, as in his poem, 'Rider's Song':

Córdoba.

Far away and alone.

*Black pony, big moon,
and olives in my saddle-bag.*

*Although I know the roads
I'll never reach Córdoba.*

*Through the plain, through the wind,
black pony, red moon.*

*Death is looking at me
from the towers of Córdoba.*

Ay! How long the road!

Ay! My valiant pony!

*Ay! That death should wait me
before I reach Córdoba.*

Córdoba.

Far away and alone.

The gist of the poem is obscured due to the intensely melodic use of repetition and sound, echoing somewhat the Arabic 'muwashshah', a poetic form that invites music, and unadorned repetition—it is also considered by many literary scholars to have highly influenced the French troubadours, who came sometime later in history. The usage of the word Cordova corresponds to Hispano-Arabic poetic forms of allusion and yearning repetition, an allegory that loomingly rings out like a death-sentence. The poem may allude to the blood that was spilt prior to the expulsion, as Cordova was not only the capital of the caliphate and the

Moorish empire, but also the centre of Europe, and according to some historians like Menocal, it was the capital of the world. The harmonious co-habitation of Spanish Christians, Jews and Muslims that it came to signify, came to an end finally in 1492 with the Fall of Granada (the last emirate). However, the imminent blood and death of the poem may also refer to the violent crackdown that came to Franco's Spain, which also led to the strange disappearance of Lorca himself. As with Darwish's poem, Lorca's Andalusia is also haunted by lost love, a sense of lost familiarity that is somehow obscured, despite the phrase "although I know the roads", the speaker will "never make it to Cordoba." The recurring 'ay' may recall the Flamenco tradition of the 'cante jondo' ('grand song' in Andalusian Spanish), or the Arabic address to God: in any case, the employment of ornate melodic embellishments, and reference of Orientalist microtones, preserves the link with the past, and Lorca is widely-recognized for exhuming the Hispano-Arabic poetic traditions that had been hidden from the Spanish narrative after The Reconquista, and breathing life into them and back into the Spanish tongue. Despite the differences between the fantasy of Andalusia in the Arab-speaking world and in the Spanish-speaking one, Lorca's imagining of Andalusia celebrates rather than ignores the Moorish and Arab influence on his culture, somewhat like certain compositions of his close friend, Manuel de Falla (who also paid homage to the Moorish tradition of song, as well as gypsy and flamenco, conveying feelings of grief and liveliness simultaneously). The flight from oppression, the underprivileged status of Andalusia in the psyche of Spain, its importance for drama and tragedy, love and beauty, are an endless ode to the Hispano-Arabic tradition, purely Andalusian in nature.

Yet, Lorca's strong voice, one that can break or divide the tale of a nation, lies in a dangerous place between tense narratives of separatism, Empire and invasions. The shock, anguish and touching tribute to movement and loss expressed in the works of one of Spain's most famous writers, is somewhat lost within the proud Imperial waves that the tourist industry seems to surf along in modern-day Andalusia. A version of Spanish history that might appeal to royalists, Falangists, and fervent Catholics, identifying strongly and specifically as a Christian and Castilian heritage of Spain—skipping through seven centuries of Umayyad, Sephardic and Moorish influences—is touted from every museum and statue. Between historical talks, excursions and guidebooks, there seems to be no room for my questions, no room for the fantasy of loss and nostalgia, and instead only the vision of glory and pomp. The "duende" (a raw passion of spirit inherent in Spanish folklore) that Lorca wrote of in the essay "The theory and play of duende", has no place here.

Granted, there are Jewish quarters (Juderia) well-maintained in cities from Seville to Cordova, treated as margins to, rather than the participants of, seven centuries of artistic, cultural and intellectual development. The fate of the Spanish Jewry that was brutally altered with Reconquista, and the fact that Jewish philosophers, poets and translators such as Maimonides, Judah Halevi, Saadia Gaon all fled to lands under the Mamluks or Ottomans, says something about where they felt they could be comfortable, productive and at home in a Judeo-Arabic cocktail that they were all significant ingredients of. It should be noted, that the paradox of historical invention not only remains in modern-day Spain, but perhaps within the narrative of history that is abundantly pumped by those descendants of Spain's Jewry around the world today: buying into the narrative of being "enemies" of Islamic lands, somehow blocking out how their ancestors were not only a vital part of Islamic Spain, but the majority who did not convert to Christianity had found asylum in the sovereign territories of the Ottoman Empire, continuing their Sephardic existence.

This cocktail or trans-cultured identity that flourished in Andalusia, is captured superbly in Rushdie's novel, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, which deliberates between the project of nation-building India and that of Andalusia prior to the banishment of the Jews. This banishment in the story leads to a painful longing for a love of something that can never again be consummated; this infatuation materializes itself again and again in the fantasy of Andalusia when the hero of the tale (the Moor of the title, who is half Jewish and half-Christian), returns to his ancestral home, fleeing the Hindu nationalism of his modern homeland, India. Incidentally, the title of the novel is based on a painting by Spanish painter Francisco Pradilla y Ortiz, portraying the sigh made by Sultan Boabdil, the last Moorish ruler in Spain, who was forced to leave his beloved Granada.

The moor outwits another outsider, a banished and reclusive artist—once assistant to the moor's mother from India—who doesn't quite fit, and who creates a gaudy replica of India in an Andalusian village. It's all folklore, yet the pain of those who can never attain real love or desire in one place, being forced to leave another, are caught between two entities while seeking the impossible and inimitable, a feeling expressed by the Cordovian poet Ibn Zaidun accordingly:

*Oh, beguiling Cordova!
Have you exhausted all desire?
Can a heart parched by separation from you,
ever quench its thirst?*

Writing at the decline of the Umayyad caliphate, one wonders if Zaidun anticipated the dislocation and spectrum of related traumas that would befall the inhabitants of Cordova (and Andalusia in general). The city has imprinted itself on both the individual and collective consciousness: estrangement and exile are foreseen as something emotional, carnal and familial, and not at all political, social or religious. The poet assumes that the loss of place leads to a barren and empty dissatisfaction, a projection of a never-ending thirst and therefore, perpetually haunted by the pleasure that Cordoba represents and can never again be attained if separated.

Nevertheless, I have the feeling that it is Cordoba which is a testament to a lost love elsewhere. Strolling about the aching heat of the Medina Azahara at the peak of a heatwave, the ruins of fortresses (now known as old Cordoba), somehow remind me of certain geometries in Damascus and the heat of Syria. Was that Abd al-Rahman's purpose, to build his homeland in an attempt to feel like he was at home? I recall the anecdote recited to me from a son of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon of how the Prince so longed for the Damascus rose of his former stomping ground, that he ordered it to be smuggled to Andalusia. Such tall tales surround al-Rahman, as he was the only survivor of the Umayyad Dynasty after the Abbasids overthrew the Umayyad Caliphate, the only one to escape from Syria alive (his whole family was slaughtered), arriving in Spain after a five-year journey. Remarkably and rapidly, he managed to bridge the Umayyad Caliphate and the Umayyad Emirate of Cordoba in Spain. The fact that a prince from Syria was not only a refugee, but established a city that would prosper with economic, cultural and political clout on the Continent, reverberates with a forlorn twist of irony given the representation of Syrian refugees today.

Could it be that the city is a hymn to Damascus, to that discontinued state of being an exile, of being estranged and of being in love with a place you can no longer return to? This thought is amplified (resounded) in the arches of the Mezquita-Catedral de Córdoba, reminiscent of the ceremonial entrance of the Prayer hall in the Great Mosque of Damascus. The thought seems captured in the series of columns supporting the double arcades of arches and piers, with alternating white and red wedge-shaped building blocks that made the hall look higher and visually appealing. This hall is adorned in a hypostyle style framed by openings of light: tour groups punctuate the arch openings, while guards evoke the solemnity associated with a Byzantine palace. Perhaps, rightly so, as the prayer hall is of Basilican layout—as was the Grand Mosque in Damascus.

Built on top of an ancient shrine, I am left gazing at Abd Rahman's fine reproduction of what could be partially his hometown's mosque

here on European soil: for some, a life in exile is a highly flourishing state to reside in. The starkness of the sky against the grace of stones in Cordoba trigger a switch, and I start to yearn for other places and continents. It is not just a mediation on Umayyad architecture (which itself implemented and transformed the artistic traditions of earlier and dominant civilizations that inhabited that territory), but a lyrical paean to youth, a refuge from the present, a stone of universalism, a garden of promise. Architecture can take us to a place we want to be, a time or place that cannot be visited or returned.

My mind rolls to the cobbled streets and colonial architecture of the San Telmo neighborhood in Buenos Aires. Near a terrace of one of the oldest districts in the city, I can envisage Jorge Luis Borges writing ‘La busca de Averroes’ (Averroes’s Search) in 1947. The great Argentinian writer recreated the culture and age of a radically different time from his, 12th century Cordoba, to re-emphasize how radical it was for the Arab philosopher Averroes to translate and comment on the works of Aristotle. This short story conceives of Andalusia as a place nurturing the exchange of ideas and intellectual receptivity: an intellectual paradise and splendor of Andalusia that is now lost. Borges’s interpretation vividly employs the faculty of historical imagination in order to ask the question why Averroes, who had committed himself to understanding, translating and commenting on the work of Aristotle, had somehow misconstrued the concept of tragedy treated by the Greek philosopher. The tragicomic element to the story, as it regards the very translation of a word we now take for granted, exemplifies the futility of translation:

“Then I reflected that a more poetic case than these would be a man who sets himself a goal that is not forbidden to other men, but is forbidden to him. I recalled Averroës, who, bounded within the circle of Islam, could never know the meaning of the words tragedy and comedy. I told his story; as I went on, I felt what that god mentioned by Burton must have felt—the god who set himself the task of creating a bull but turned out a buffalo. I felt that the work mocked me, foiled me, thwarted me. I felt that Averroës, trying to imagine what a play is without ever having suspected what a theater is, was no more absurd than I, trying to imagine Averroës yet with no more material than a few snatches from Renan, Lane, and Asin Palacios. I felt, on the last page, that my story was a symbol of the man I had been as I was writing it, and that in order to write that story I had had to be that man, and that in order to be that man I had had to write that story, and so on, ad infinitum.” (Borges, 2008)

Was this feeling of futility somehow highlighted by the romance of the zamba or some penas reverberating from the streets not far away? Was the sun-drenched liveliness of Buenos Aires so foreign to Borges, that he had to mock his own being and very medium of form of art, further complicating and interrogating cultural and philosophical translations for their limitations.

Whether it is the work of the Greek philosopher for Averroes, or the work of Averroes from Borges, or the work of Borges for me, we remain faint and nebulous for one another. For Borges, it is “a story of failure”: the failure of language to be transmuted through the ages, despite its triumphs in philosophy.

As I walk by the statue of Averroes in Cordoba during the sunset, everything becomes dim, and I start losing sight of the stones as Borges may have in Buenos Aires almost a century ago. I look up at the cast of a face that dared to write the ‘Incoherence of Incoherence’ in defense of philosophy, a text embodying the controversy between the philosophers, scholars and the theologians of his time, as well as a retort to the rising conservatism growing in Andalusia with the Alomids (it was a reply to the text ‘The Incoherence of Philosophers’ by Al-Ghazali). The statue of Averroes is not only an inspiration for all writers, but a beacon of fervor questioning poetry and rhetoric, which Cordova was famous for. His Cordoba was no vacuum, but instead an oasis for intellectuals which has been lost.

Andalusia may also represent the loss of a passionate paradise, a geography of allure and seduction. The hot-blooded land of bullfights, flamenco and gypsies (or ‘gitanos’) express something not quite Spanish, not quite Arabic, and not quite Gypsy, which is personified by the opera of *Carmen*. Variously described as being Basque from northern Spain or a gypsy of Romany origin from Andalusia, Carmen represents the eternal Other—you can be smitten, but you are not to trust her. Fiction or fantasy, Carmen is the quintessential femme fatale, the metaphor of sexual irresistibleness literalized: refusing to be penetrated sexually, she is stabbed to death instead.

The tale of the Spanish gypsy girl from sensuous southern Spain has delighted opera audiences since 1875 with its flamboyancy, dramatic characters, romantic setting, and arias like “Habanera” and “Toreador”. In fact, her face winks at you from souvenir shops and theatre programs all over Seville, despite the fact that the book itself was mainly set in Cordoba, while the Carmen of Bizet’s opera is a cigarette girl who works at Seville’s tobacco factory (which is still open to the public).

The orientalization and sexualization of Andalusia via the Carmen-effect may have been influenced by Pushkin’s *The Gypsies*. Some literary scholars claim that Zemfira and Aleko from *The Gypsies* are the

archetypes that the original writer of Carmen, Prosper Mérimée, based Carmen and Jose on. Like Carmen, the female gypsy Zemfira is independent and liberated, embracing love as non-exclusive, who would rather die than compromise her sexual/romantic freedom. Aleko is the jealous urbane character, thus the conflict that arises between the polarities of savage vs. civilized is impeccably justified by the temperament and ethnicity of the lovers.

Both novellas foster the perception of a place and a people, who located further from civilization are in harmony with nature and with their own desires, are more genuinely impulsive than those from the cities who are alienated and disenchanted. Whether it is Zemfira or Carmen, their unbridled sexuality and spontaneity is of Dionysian proportions, synonymous with the land they are at one with. Carmen is self-aware of her danger, warning her prospective lovers that, “If I love you, keep guard on yourself!” (Act I, sc. 5, Nr.5: Habanera).

In this way, Carmen represents the orientalization of Spain that Europe needed: even Nietzsche wrote of the opera Carmen as being a necessary “Mediterraneanization of music,” and a “return to nature, health, cheerfulness, youth, virtue!” (The Case of Wagner, Section 3), that was somehow amiss (and led him to reject the Christian ideals of Wagner). The sensual nature of Carmen plays a crucial role in the dramatic image of Seville, a conflation of various mutually exchangeable signifiers (meaning, as long as she is exotic, it doesn’t really matter who she is), thus attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors to the city every year. The French philosopher, Georges Bataille, took the sexualization of Andalusia to another level of the profane: in his book *The Story of the Eye (L'histoire de l'œil)*, a bullfight becomes the scene of an erotic-bestial experience, while later on in Seville the narrator and his lover involve the eye of a priest in a perverse sex-game in an abandoned church. Allegedly, this novel may have influenced an infamous scene in Luis Buñuel’s surrealist film, *An Andalusian Dog (Un Chien andalou)*.

Customarily, the sexual and oriental charm of Andalusia has been remembered in the Arab tradition as something purer, despite the fact that certain Arab poets from Medieval Andalusia were capable of bawdiness and sexual transgressions. This imaginative departure from the literary heritage of that time marks a vast difference between the Andalusia of the Occident and the Orient: in the Orient it is a place restoring a lost love, sweet and romantic, rather than sensual and erotic. One of the most famous examples of this is the folk song The Girl From Seville (‘Bint el-Shalabiyyah’), about the almond-eyed girl who makes you wait for what seems an eternity:

*You appear in the distance, my heart is wounded.
And I reminisce about days past.
Under the pomegranate tree
My love spoke to me
Sang me songs
Oh my love*

She is somewhat a Scheherazade of Andalusia, rather than a Carmen. The desire to express nostalgia, mourning, and loss, while alluding to a sweet utopia of high culture and tolerance, doesn't replay the Occident-Orient divide of conquest through romantic and sexual relationships. The most famous rendition of this song was composed by the Rahbanni brothers and sung by Lebanese icon Fairouz, featuring Western instrumentation including guitar, drums, piano, and accordion reinventing the Arabic maqam melody (more precisely, the Nahawand mode, or the harmonic minor scale in Western music theory). As a result, the bittersweet boppiness of the song plays into the ineluctable imaginary of Andalusia in the Arab world, where everything from harmonic scale to instrumentation, melancholia and the lightness of being can co-exist, as the scene of fantasy tells us how we once did.

Call it melodrama, tragedy or script, the fantasy of al-Andalus is an imaginary drama, or a *mise en scène* for desire, as Lacanian psychoanalysis would term it. The prolonged and repeated nostalgia for the Paradise lost allows the desirer to play both the roles of observer and a protagonist simultaneously. On a global level, the fantasy of Al-Andalus coincides with the death of La Convivencia and the birth of imperial dreams, sparking encounters with expansionism and generating the capital to support many wonders and institutions of the Renaissance thereafter. It also signals the birth of expulsions and repression. According to many literary and cultural critics (including Said and Monocal) the madness of *Don Quixote* is a dark, satirical, and skeptical consequence of a society that exists on and between somewhat fraught parallel dimensions. More nightmare than dream, more realism than fantasy.

Aljamiado, the Romance vernacular in Arabic script which *Don Quixote* was originally written in, had been banished officially (the Spanish-speaking narrator has to find a translator to translate the work of Cide Hamete Benengeli, the fictional yet real "author" of *Quixote*). Even linguistically, the story of *Don Quixote* represents the plurilingual times of Spain that the chivalrous hero lived in, whereby an Arabic-speaking Toleadean could be found at a rundown marketplace, or to have a Moor translate the Arabic script in the cloister of a church. Cervantes highlights how the Andalusian spirit was cloistered with fear

and the unknown (the narrator himself declares that the script is something “I imagine to be Arabic”, rather than having access to the local tongue in its former script). Quixote speaks Old Castillian, already displaced from the beginnings of modern Spanish being formed around him. Would Don Quixote still have been written if the Fall of Granada hadn’t taken place and those languages hadn’t disappeared?

The post-Andalusian world is made up of a distorted vision, and only the fantasy of the world of chivalry can save Quixote from it. The prevalence of ethnic anxiety is stultifying, and only a madman like Quixote has the liberated insanity to identify with the Moorish lover Abinderraez, rather than the Spanish Narvaez. It is a world where people convert or pretend to convert, leading to exaggerated performances of rituals, for example, of the public-eating of pork. The origin of the ritual is already forgotten, exemplified by Quixote’s love-interest, Dulcinea, who is well-known for her salting of pork, despite the implication that she too is a descendent of the Jewish *conversos* in the land of La Mancha (which not only means ‘pastureland’, but also ‘stain’). The ritual is that the imaginary object of desire, produced for the fulfilment of a repressed or unresolved unconscious wish: to discard the lost paradise and its swarthy brethren and embrace the new one of “purity”, as Quixote himself puts it when imaging Dulcinea into existence.

Nevertheless, Quixote’s madness is a testament to the lost memory of co-existence, of forced cultural amnesia that Cervantes seems to undermine and satirise continuously. But the scene of fantasy we are exposed to is Quixote’s, a kind of veiled castration that builds an invisible fortress to protect and sustain this desire of cultural identity: fantasy and invention is much more interesting than ordinary life. The distortion vis-à-vis fantasy is a compromise, yet it provides him with a structure, a story, if you like: nothing is quite truth and falsehood, nor poetry and history. As such his whole fantasy is a signifying structure: Quixote’s desire and drive become mutually bound up in fantasy, his need to live and act out heroism is laughably out of place in a location that does not need heroes to remind it of its past, chivalrous or not. His delusions provide more comfort than the world of disillusionment, dejection and disappointment can offer, thus forging a lost paradise that existed in the battered plateau of La Mancha perched on the edge of the lost world of Andalusia.

In all, the lost Paradise of Andalusia confirms the fact that if our imagination can create hell for us, it can also create paradise. The cultural heritage from both the Occident and the Orient have illustrated how intricately polygonal this loss was, and how easy it is to whitewash, extoll or forget that history. This is comparable to the languages of Aljamiado, Mozarabic, Iberian Arabic and Judeo-Castillian that made

up the composite of tongues in the Iberian peninsula, or the Pueblos Blancos ('The White Towns') that speak of a sublime encounter between Moorish mansions, Gothic churches and Baroque mansions for an impressive historical narrative.

While losing my way among the wrought iron gratings and the azulejos (tiles) in the alleys of Malaga, I finally make it to the port of the city. It was originally founded by Phoenicians at approximately 1000 BC, but as the zeitgeist tends to claim an exclusively Graeco-Roman heritage, the linear line of history drawing itself straight to the Renaissance (stunningly ignoring its Judeo-Arab origins, let alone its Phoenician ones), I am slightly amused at how perplexing the cultural narrative has become. On the promenade I begin melting along with the sun, so I decide to head for Mercado Central de Atarazanas for some appetizers and hide from the rays. When I am asked about where I am from when I am served a sangria, I reply honestly and mention half of my extraction as Lebanese (the place where the Phoenicians came from). The response I get could have soured the sangria, although by the end of my trip I was not expecting something positive regarding that part of the world. While pecking at some olives, I do wonder at the incongruity of the narrative vs. fantasy vs reality clashes with certain notions in modern-day Andalusia. Whether encapsulated in the darkly hypnotic painting 'The Waterseller of Seville' by Diego Velázquez to the relinquished horizons of spaghetti western films (such as 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly') filmed in Andalusia, there is a magnetic force that pulls to a nostalgia for lost times and places throughout a corpus of cultural works.

Perhaps it speaks of a limited melodic range on my part, the sovereign story stuck on some obsessive reiteration of the same note, going over the same historical soundbite, rather than looking to the future for melodic adornments. Conceivably, the 2015 law to grant citizenship to Sephardic Jews from anywhere in the world (based on proving that you are the descendent of those killed, persecuted or expelled) is a step in the right direction. The tone of the song may of course be further enriched if it wasn't so selective in terms of those who have the right to return to their homeland, that lost paradise. One day the 'Andalusian Cadence'—employed as one of the most common guitar chord progression in various genres—might live a life and be applied to cultural recognition and memory, rather than just to musical theory.

—Angelina Saule, 37, Germany

How I Miss That Sea That Was Stolen From Us

by Jordan Harrison-Twist

Be ready should you need to evacuate. Advice suggests foresight, insight. Ready yourself to lose it all and leave it to drown with a silvered face.

I am in a car driving on past the lapping steps of The Trawlerman, where the fishermen sit in red waterproofs, red as the insides of their sandwiches, the capillaries in wrecked noses; but today the barnacles are not on the steps, they had listened to the sea on their last catch, telling them to stay home high on the rock, for she was soon to unleash her fury, have her spray meet the rain in a coruscating veil, to catch the fledglings with densening feathers.

I am saying Naeem while the car's broken clock reads

##:##

of all the days for time to trickle from its instruments.

One road in and out down by the waterfront, the harbour smashing, lilypad skiffs. Drive like a damned man through the wake of Ascension when it was Grandfather Naeem who would say, pestling mustard seeds and cumin spilling spicy pyroclasm into our nostrils, you must never be late, show no contempt for your meeting, take this with you; hands me a paratha in foil wrapped so tight, in his eyes, love ringed like trees.

An apple oxidises on the dashboard, the clock reads ##:##

My dry hands on the dry roof—belly hair. I am heaving and the storm has pulled all the world's moisture from it like microwaved mutton, and I am heaving at the dry hands on the dry roof as the storm wastefully builds cathedrals.

The radio is tired. The report dribbles from a sleeping lip that two feet of water sweeps through the cats' and dogs' home, the beasts trapped in their cages. Naeem had kept a wheelbarrow of geraniums beside the front door on the step where he appraised the creeping morning, and in it there was brick rubble for the shitting animals, stay off my borders, damned shitting dogs, and he would throw the stones to

whistle past their lowered ears. Such relaxation and so vulnerable and they would connect those borders with that betrayal. Where I am from, he would say, your home is your chest, build ramparts against the hovering menaces, respect the edges of things, for that is how far we extend ourselves into the world. Besides, damned dogs better learn respect now since their owners won't teach them.

And sure, the dogs' defecation conveys him back to the days when the shit was intentionally left there, with notes, vivid illustrations.

I am a visitor on so long a road and so dense a fallen sky, but I recognise the grouped masts, thrown about like crucifixes on striped backs of the condemned. Landmarks recede, a stage's wheeled scenery, receding fingernails in dry bitten beds, thoughts of the air in those cages, receding, concentrating sweetness of receding inhalations. The air in the car recedes, unveils, vibrating and black panic. To cope with cars I sit on the backs of my hands, think of the red chiffon curtain blowing into the hotel room on a happy vacation, feel the breeze rolling in, the many escape routes; but motion makes zoétropes of the curtain and it burns shapes into the glass windows, buckling with airless images. I beat down goalposts with him, my grandfather, bleached with age, into a pitch with a ruinous incline, and we kick the ball to one another as it uncurls the earth, he approaches me with advice in his hands and holds them open and I want to hold them, but we slow and stop. He is a monument and permafrost settles on his muscular shoulders and lies thick, and his arms are hard as diamonds, organs sppphht sppphht bereft of their vital innards; and he succumbs to his weight with his lungs falling in as the earth beneath him, and still he folds inwards, each alveolus a blackberry chewed with broad flat teeth. It all escapes him, his voice, a single gasp locked into his larynx, stressed as cello strings, a— a— a—, and there the gasp remains; the football rolls down toward the tracks.

I open my eyes against it, the windshield and blooms of seawater. The clock reads, still,

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I place my thumb against the central button of my phone, hooked out from the pocket. It vibrates and shakes its head. I am unrecognisable, not myself, it says. Outside the window is spiteful unanimity: near railing spikes are spires far up the rock; perspective, petroleum in the water's top. An archangel appears in the message thread: Your grandfather is dying, says the woolwhite bubble.

Only three days ago at dinner he was not dying. Only three days ago at dinner, when I was treated as a guest of such courtly importance that I should arbitrate on the others. I am not sure about this one, I said, ten times, such that only he and I were seated at the dining table dressed for twelve that night. The vigour of health is the humour, he

said, ten times, shooting his handgun at the empty chairs, with placenames positioned before them. Samir [shoot him down]; Hakeem [shoot him down]; Iqbal, Mo, Raj, Adil, [bang, bang, bang, bang]; Nazir, Rajendra, Rom, and Sendil [blow away the smoke], they all go down and we laughed, and the vigour of health is the humour he said—and sure enough, his cheeks were full and smooth, and his eyewhites clear, the artistry in his hands as he holstered his satisfaction, and the moth-softness of his underchin as he nodded off in his seat with his glass roosted between his thumb and finger.

Sherry-dark rain ignites the neon slot machines, where the old people lean on fairer days. I am saying his name as the lights sing around those machines where the old place their lives, where they fall onto a shelf amongst digital watches and Tamagotchis and they await their return, stinking of tuppennies, and the lives drop into the tray for them to return to the slot. Again. Awaiting an empty tray.

Naeem is not so old as them.

A flame-forged strength he has in his way since he moved here sixty years ago with his case of linen shirts and cash, and a job in the ceramics factory. The eleven younger siblings were on the first trains out of India, but the eldest should go to England, provide for them now for father was too crooked to be chief of police in their new home in Pakistan; but he had managed, just managed, to put them on those first trains out of India. When so many others had not.

Name, they called him, in the factory. Name as in patronymic as in placeholder as in write your name of the dotted line. As in nameless. As in what are you wearing a suit for, where d'you steal that from. I don't take orders from no fucking Paki.

He draws circles with his thumbs against his fingertips, said Mother, to plant himself, to pray. To decouple himself from this drab world and go somewhere else. He has good hands, strong hands. They hold my babies like kings. He draws circles with his thumbs against his fingertips, and travels.

As do I. To pin myself to the road at the waterfront. A memorial bench is dragged on a wave and lodges itself in a stone stairwell to a front lawn, now lost. Rain is the epiphyte of the coast, draped around all of our things, our death. There is no red brick of aspiration here but houses hewn from the very sky's midst, but the bench withstands like the island that shows its wizened midriff on clear mornings. So many memorial benches there are with birth and death dates on brass plaques, as if between the two points, their shadow had wandered, with arms wishboned behind back, had sat and stared out of heavy eyes, waiting for the body to fail, that second date. How many benches to recognize

how far Naeem had wandered, across two continents, up this god forsaken coast? How many benches?

You shan't lie here, says the priest. You shan't lie here for your wife is Catholic and you are not, nor shall you be conveyed in this place. And there is no more final devotion than the body to the earth, but this earth is more sacred than your body. So the earth will not take it. Echo the brothers who say he shan't lie there, in that earth, for he is Muslim, and if he did lie there then they should exhume him and rebury him properly, facing, not his beloved, but the one true direction. You shall neither be neighbours in life nor death.

Takes a brave man to neither be so devout as his brothers nor eschew it all completely. To eat haram: curried barbecue pork ribs and the scratch of bacon fat, rough as cat's tongues, flavours put in a place separate from the prayer he recites five times daily. And he married her, of course, the Catholic typist, the one who, when he was diagnosed with skin cancer, had fallen a great height in sadness and died not a month later from fear of losing him; but in the surgery he sat motionless, enraptured with the mote-steeped middle distance, drawing circles with his thumbs against his fingertips, populating the hollow epiphany with better things. Perhaps a swift resolution, he was asking for, the strength to undergo treatment, that he would not appear too disfigured with half of his ear and lymph nodes removed. But you look dignified, I say, above your collar, a warrior, and little Sasha likes to read its live edge before falling asleep in your arms.

Once he said, Push me out to sea. Do not have them come and take on rain at a graveside. There is much I want to tell you about my grandmother's estate and its wild peacocks and Ottoman carpets, which you should remember when you visit, golden things that only the sea can muster—and the floors, too, on that train, that I have seen so close, listening to the slowing wheels beneath us, and so stained, and what I have seen the Hindu militias do to their fellow countrymen, and how I miss that southern sea that was stolen from us, with its wide and warm beaches. But I will not until the last, until the time is right.

The clock reads

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So, at last, the time is right.

Before he breathes his last I must see him unimpaled by the bellows and winches of hospital beds—not in the haar of adrenaline, but in his own gently flickering light. Else how am I to read in him that signal, that convulsion, that expresses for what he is dying. It is not malnutrition or a heart attack or even cancer, these are symptoms. But for what he is *really* dying is the same thing that compels him. A rare thing: for what the body, his little body, could not live any more having felt, but

what it could not any more live without. So I assert unto the sea that we shall deliver ourselves truly, on time, to discover this thing that is killing him, and place my hands upon the glass to wipe away the desperate condensation.

But it vibrates, and shakes its head. I am not myself, it replies.

I turn off the radio for it should be ice-quiet and the station is playing Georgie Fame's *Yeh Yeh—and there'll be no-one else alive in all the world 'cept you and me*—and it is silenced with lightning's glyph. The sky writes. Through the water, it says.

His skittering life.

Where there are chalk cliffs to erode, these storms shrink the coastline a metre per year: like in '99 when the ice cream parlour completed its long ironic wade into the sea, fibreglass cone ensnared and dragged beneath. Here the land holds, takes the incursions; but we, its people, borrow its body in ours, in our beards and socks and ambitions, and boil together by the fire till we are vapours, and rise, and rise, and cool and condense once more, and fall as one, more one, more one than ever: one, me, he, and the sea.

I am frightened that Naeem's woolen jacket will heave in the sea, pool in upturned fingers and the palm's excavations, and it will seep through his bones and take on lively humours, and he will escape himself in stalactites. Be like that cone, plaice-grey, beneath.

But the chest rises, shuddering, in the rearview mirror, sat there in the middle seat; and the two hands are there, too, the strong hands, making circles with his thumbs on his fingertips.

And I push my weight onto the accelerator and burst

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through an altar of water.

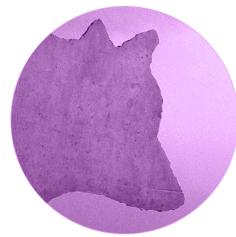
—Jordan Harrison-Twist, 28, Bolton UK

“I really don’t know if it is possible to watch a fire without some enjoyment.”

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