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TAHOMA
LITERARY
REVIEW

tahomaliteraryreview.com

TAHOMA LITERARY REVIEW
Number 20
Spring 2021
ISBN-13: 978-1-7365750-0-0

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Washington • California

tahomaliteraryreview.com

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TAHOMA LITERARY REVIEW

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ABOUT THE COVER

“The Performance on the Terrace: Bullheaded,”
Sara Khan



I question the seemingly ordinary moments of our day-to-day routines by observing the remarkable hidden within them. Drawing out these observations I find a place for things that are ever-present but often overlooked. Slowly laying out translucent layers of watercolor, I work toward making some areas prominent, while covering others entirely. As if to say, “You didn’t belong but now you do, or you did belong and now you don’t.” It is in this way, as for example in “Bullheaded,” I bring the abhorrent and the fantastic together to form one complete picture.

I was born in Birmingham, England, in 1984 and raised in Lahore, Pakistan. I hold a BFA (with honors) from National College of Arts, Lahore (2008). My work has been featured in several national and international group exhibitions. In addition to my first solo show “Suraj Kinare” in Canada at the Surrey Art Gallery in 2019, recent group shows include “Terrestrial Beings,” Esplanade Arts and Heritage Centre, Medicine Hat, Canada, in 2019, and “What is Seen and Not Seen, With or Without Seeing,” Gandhara Art Space, Karachi, Pakistan, in 2017. My work has also been featured in the book, *A Big Important Artist: A Womannual* by Danielle Kryza. I live and work in Vancouver, Canada.

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*You can hear many of the authors in this issue read their stories, poems, and essays at
<https://soundcloud.com/tahomaliterary/tracks>.*

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

Just as experiences of a few weeks or days can alter what we think we know, so can reading. A story, an essay, or a poem from an unexpected place or voice can take a hold of you, share a new insight, and fundamentally change how you see the world. For us, this issue's selections have that potential. In fiction, you can discover the life-changing actions of a university student in Ghana; an immigrant's struggles over national and personal loyalty in Canada; the near-future consequences of climate change in Hawai'i. In nonfiction you can feel the impact of visiting a childhood home in Appalachia; living as an immigrant ostracized from both family and a new culture; and the wave of nostalgia and empathy that can strike during a two-mile run. Meanwhile, throughout the issue, you can find poetry that lays bare the emotions of how the natural world affects us, of losing loved ones, and of history and prejudice.

All of us at Tahoma Literary Review hope you enjoy the reading that lies ahead.

x

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LET IT GO

JOANNA MANNING

On one sweltering, late-summer afternoon in Pennsylvania, the kind of day that invites a certain dreamy idleness, my grandfather taught me how to make clouds disappear. We were sprawled out in the grass of his apple orchard, staring up at some wispy clouds as they drifted by, and as each one dissolved into the blue, my grandfather convinced me that we were willing them away with our minds. I was seven years old at the time and desperate to believe in magic. So I repeated this trick again and again, wishing each new cloud out of existence, quietly thrilled to discover this magic within me.

There was no magic involved in this enterprise of course, just patience, but for weeks I told everyone about my gift. I had never felt—nor have I felt since—this kind of incontrovertible belief in my own power.

I've been thinking a lot about this memory lately. As children, we are resigned to a life that is entirely beyond our control. We live by the dictates of our parents and teachers and by the whims of a world that is entirely foreign to us. Even our emotions seem somehow beyond our grasp, always threatening to overwhelm us and reduce us to tears. Then, at seven or eight, magic enters the equation, offering an enticing new prospect of control.

That heady sense of power I felt as a child stemmed from the belief that I had a measure of influence over something outside of myself. But control was an illusion. I know this now. The clouds were effaced by the wind and heat, not by my will. Perhaps my grandfather knew that this illusion was a necessary one. What good would

have come from knowing back then that we all live at the mercy of the wind?

The clear springtime skies and the new lull to the days have been drawing my sights upward more often, and I find myself performing this old trick whenever I need to tap into some inner resolve or to feel the power of that childhood belief, even though I've long since accepted that there's nothing outside of myself that's within my control. In this life I can only bear witness—to the clouds' languid drift, to their slow attenuation and eventual surrender. It is only when I close my eyes that I can reclaim dominion over anything at all.

KELEWELE

FEJIRO OKIFO

The compound was bordered by shea trees, heavy and teeming with fruit after twenty years of stolid existence, abundant in the part of Northern Ghana where their village resided. Under their mother's guidance, Patricia and her three younger sisters—Chi Chi, Toni, and Lily—gathered shea fruit in the skirts of their brightly patterned wrappers. In front of their squat house, they divulged the fruit of their shells, roasted them over a blistering open fire, and boiled them in a large pot until the oil settled to the bottom fated to become creamy shea butter. At night, their mother massaged their wiry limbs with it after a steaming bath. On market days, they walked behind their mother in single file carrying tubs of shea butter to sell. The sisters gleamed underneath the eye of the sun, their skin like charcoal, smooth like stones underneath a river.

For years, they subsisted off the meager earnings of their father's farm, a marginal plot of land that had been passed down from generation to generation like a familial curse. Mr. Ojo did not have a knack for farming, and the farm was equally unforgiving. Mrs. Ojo did her best to sell the feeble vegetables at the market each week, but the villagers would purchase the shea butter and brush past the produce with tight smiles. While Mr. Ojo's farming provided them with shelter, excesses did not exist in their household. Mr. Ojo's true passion was words. He wore a pair of wire-frame glasses that were long past their prime and sat in his rocking chair reading and writing. When queried about the subject of his writings, he stated that he was merely collecting his observations and repackaging them

into a palatable form. Over time, the loose papers, scribbled with unruly lines of prose, overran his section of the living room. Mrs. Ojo wordlessly organized the clutter with an occasional shake of her head. She never besmirched her husband even though the other village women felt it was within her rights to do so.

When Patricia was eight years old, her mother brought home a sewing machine. She set it up in the other half of the living room. The next week, she came back with purple fabric with orange diamonds. Underneath the sparse light of the kerosene lamp, she put together a boxy, knee-length dress. She assembled four of them for her four daughters without taking their measurements. If it did not fit one daughter, the other tried it on until they were standing in a row of identical outfits. Mr. Ojo was impressed with his wife's new skill.

"Where did you learn to do this one?"

"I had to learn," she replied. She was not yet thirty years of age but her forehead had begun to crease with worry lines. She told her friends in the women's group that she was now making clothes and this was accepted tacitly.

Her business grew quickly. She brought home fashion magazines, measuring tapes, Ankara fabric, silk, and lace. The living room decompensated into a whirlwind of clothes, buttons, and fabrics, which competed with the heaps of papers from Mr. Ojo's end.

As the business progressed, Patricia's father started going out to the farm later and later in the morning until one day the cutlass remained at its post at the front door. Mr. Ojo bought himself a desk and tasked himself with homeschooling his children. Teaching came naturally to him in a way farming never had. Meanwhile, his wife grew in prominence in the community, outfitting mothers, daughters, and wives for weddings, baby showers, and holiday celebrations.

Patricia picked up on numbers in lessons with her father and helped to organize the spreadsheets for her mother's business. It was a task no one asked of her, but which she carried out gracefully. Patricia swelled with pride whenever a customer requested a receipt and her mother glanced up at her expectantly. This was the highest praise her mother could bestow, as she was parsimonious with her compliments.

“Why do you work so hard?” Mr. Ojo asked once the business was profitable.

Mrs. Ojo answered around a safety pin that seemed to be permanently lodged at the corner of her mouth. “I need to leave something behind for my children.”

Once a month, Mrs. Ojo would hire a driver and go into the city to purchase dressmaking supplies. This was a luxury, as the family car was old and worn out. The girls marveled at how the driver would wait outside the car with his arms folded and his eyes shielded by a pair of sunglasses. When he lifted a hand to wave at them through the window, they would squeal and retreat inside to finish watching their mother get ready. Mrs. Ojo started from head to toe, wrapping her soft curly hair into a custom hair wrapper, applying blush to her cheeks and vermillion lipstick to her lips, and then fastening a beaded necklace around her slight neck. Only in the designs she made for herself did she exercise creativity, often indulging in a scoop neck or a pair of ostentatiously puffy sleeves.

Mr. Ojo did little to hide his disapproval. He did not understand why she could not just send the driver to complete the errands. “Chioma, what are you wearing?”

“Oh, don’t you like it?” She always said, her voice dripping with mirth, turning to her children with a wink as they dissolved in laughter.

Whenever Patricia asked to go along, her father was swift to tell her no. “City girls know too much. You will stay at home with your dad and your sisters.”

Patricia envisioned the road to the city growing wider and filling with cars, buses, and trucks. The city itself would be teeming with activity, loud noises, music, the air infused with delicacies. She imagined brightly colored outfits crafted out of the same fabrics her mother purchased.

What Patricia looked forward to the most was the kelewele that her mother would bring back. Plantains roasted in a large pan over an open fire, mushy, decadent, simultaneously sweet and spicy. The sisters stayed up late at night waiting for the twin headlights of the

car to peek into the living room announcing their mother's return. Only after the girls helped to unload the car would Mrs. Ojo produce two paper bags of kelewele for them to share.

When the sickness came for Mrs. Ojo, she did not yield immediately. She applied shea butter to her smooth skull after the medications made her hair fall out and covered her head with an intricate hand-sewn cap. She applied blush to cover up the hollowness in her cheeks.

As her frame grew gaunt underneath the fashionable dresses, Patricia would enter the living room to see her mother furiously working and drowning in multicolored fabric. When she closed her eyes at night, it was this image that was etched on the back of her eyelids. Meanwhile Mr. Ojo carried on as though nothing had changed, occupying himself by writing like he was the one running out of time. He kept his head down and only looked up when she was gone.

Patricia was fifteen when her mother passed. For months afterwards, the family tiptoed around the scattered heaps of fabric and eschewed the sewing machine. Mr. Ojo could not bring himself to cross the invisible line that divided his space from what used to be hers. Then one day Patricia returned from the market to find Chi Chi sitting in front of the sewing machine with her brows furrowed and her teeth biting down on her lower lip. She held up the dress for Patricia to see, a delightfully ornate affair with long lace sleeves and sequin details.

Her little sisters Toni and Lily crowded into the living room to see what Chi Chi had made.

"It'll be like this," Patricia said. "Chi Chi will make the clothes. Toni and Lily will help. I will handle everything on the business side."

They all assumed their roles seamlessly. Patricia kept the customers flowing and kept detailed reports of customers that still owed money. Toni and Lily did their best to help by tidying up the space, ironing, and running errands.

The business was not the same without Mrs. Ojo's natural charisma and quiet confidence, but they could still feel her presence

in the house. They sidestepped her in the kitchen, squeezed around her in the doorway, and they could hear her light steps with the flutter of the sewing machine.

Mr. Ojo would leave the house early in the morning and come home late at night. They didn't know whether he went to the farm or somewhere else entirely. When he returned, he would recline in his rocking chair all night long.

"Why does he never talk about her? Why does he act like she never even existed?" Toni wanted to know.

"Just because he is our father doesn't mean he suffers any less," said Patricia. Her sisters had begun to cling to her in a way they had never needed to before. Which was why it took Patricia so long to admit to herself that she wanted to leave home. She had stepped up to fill the space her mother had left behind and now she felt like she was missing too.

In the years that followed, she began stashing a portion of her earnings underneath her bed. Eventually, she mustered the courage to tell her father. "I want to go to school in the city, Papa. University."

His shoulder stiffened. He pretended not to hear at first. Then, when she grew more persistent, he said, "School? Haven't I taught you all that you need to know? You are helping with the business."

"No, Papa, I am the business." She hesitated before adding, "If I go to school, I will be able to grow the business even more."

Her father did everything he could to persuade her, at first threatening to disown her, and then appealing to her empathy. He told her there was no money for school and she told him she had saved money. He said he was getting older and needed help around the house and she told him there were three other daughters that would be happy to help. In the back of her mind, she wondered whether her sisters would one day crave the same escape.

When he saw that she would not yield, he helped her apply to a college three hours away that was on the coast. It took several months to receive an envelope in the mail that welcomed her to the university.

Her sisters surrounded her with well wishes and helped her pack her things. “So you are off to college?” said Chi Chi. “You were always the smartest of us all. Make us proud, you hear.”

Palm, banana, and coconut trees reached across the narrow dirt road and touched fingertips as Patricia and her father drove away from the village. The dirt roads gave way to wide, paved streets and the trees parted as if to send them off into the city. The sky was the same color as in the village, cerulean blue hugging the ground. Market stalls flooded the sides of the streets, with vendors spilling out into the roads clamoring for sales. Occasionally women and young children balancing woven baskets of tree nuts and beverages on their head would bang at their windows. Mr. Ojo would either shake his head or give them a withering stare that was equally communicative. He mopped sweat from his forehead with a fatigued handkerchief as the air conditioner puttered on helplessly in the midday traffic. Once, Mr. Ojo slowly cranked down the window of the driver’s seat and gestured for a small boy to come forward. Together, they bartered on a price for water and some roasted peanuts.

As they approached the coast, Patricia was struck by her first view of the sea. Mighty, turbulent waves crashed down upon the white sands, their moods as fickle as the tall palm trees undulating back and forth in the wind. The air tasted like the salt on her fingertips after she finished indulging in the peanuts.

The university was located behind a set of tall gates. Two taciturn security guards approached the driver’s seat and shone a bright flashlight in their faces before deeming them innocent enough to enter. The school buildings were arranged on blocks of meticulously landscaped grounds. Patricia was surprised by the students walking around the campus. Form-fitting jeans. Tank tops. Flowing hair extensions. She noticed her father’s hands tighten around the steering wheel. She looked down at her own dress, the same design she’d been wearing for over a decade.

Her father helped her move in and thoroughly inspected the dorm building. Once he was satisfied, Patricia said goodbye and

hurried back into the building so she wouldn't see him lingering behind in the car.

Despite the initial shock, Patricia settled quickly into most aspects of university life. Friends came easily, captivated by her simple naiveté and eager to reshape her into a replica of themselves. Patricia observed the trends during her first few weeks and spent much of her pocket money on new outfits, makeup, and hair to ease her transition.

Her roommate Mabel rolled her eyes. "Why are you buying so many clothes for yourself? There are so many guys who would love to buy these things for you. You won't even pay John any mind and he's been walking you to class for a week."

"I can buy them myself," she always replied.

Patricia focused the majority of her energy on her education. She was learning that her father's homeschooling, though delivered with indisputable zeal and dedication, had left her unprepared for the rigors of university. Many nights she was up late in the library studying. She especially struggled with economics, a class she needed to pass to study business administration.

The class was taught by none other than the esteemed Professor Kingsley. He had trained in South Africa before being heavily recruited by the university. He electrified the students by standing on tables and writing painstakingly minuscule notes on the blackboard.

Every day of class she sat in the front row with a pair of new eyeglasses ready to take notes. She hung on to every word. But she struggled to make sense of her assignments back in her dorm.

As the midterm exam approached, she was frantic about doing well in the class. In correspondences with her family, she painted the picture of herself thriving in college and excelling in her classes. Her father had grown pensive in his missives, as though he'd been saving all of his words to release once she was ready to hear them.

"I was hesitant about you leaving the village. Part of me always wanted to keep you safe and sound at home."

She wondered which of them had been more naïve.

Patricia eventually decided to make an appointment for office hours with Professor Kingsley. His office was located in a discrete

office building near one of the gates. When she knocked on the door, he called out, “Come in.”

He was on his feet packing his items into a briefcase. “Did we have a meeting today?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m actually on my way out.”

His office hours had been fully booked for the week. “If I could only have a few moments of your time.”

“A few moments couldn’t hurt, could it?” He picked up his briefcase. “I have a quick errand to run. Why don’t you accompany me?”

Patricia found herself nodding yes. She followed him to his brown sedan and hesitated for a moment before entering the passenger seat.

They drove in silence. The trees hunched over the car as if they were sharing secrets and the sun set abruptly. “Why are you here?” He asked her.

“Here?”

“Why are you at this school?”

“I’m here because I want to expand my mother’s business.”

“What does your mother do?”

Patricia had never spoken about her mother in the past tense before. “Before she died, she ran a successful dressmaking business in my home village. I’ve been taking care of it ever since. Now my siblings are tending to it in my absence.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, allowing some silence to fill the space between them. “I hope your father is well?”

“He used to farm, but now he writes.”

“What does he write?”

“I couldn’t tell you. I don’t even know if he wants anyone to read what he writes.”

“What is your vision for your business?”

“I need to keep it alive.”

“It sounds like this was your mother’s dream. I’m wondering if you have any dreams of your own.”

She needed time to absorb this. He continued. “I see why you had to leave home. I understand. It wasn’t so long ago I was leaving

for South Africa. My family didn't even wish me so much as a good luck."

"They didn't want you to go to South Africa?"

"They didn't want me to study education. I was the only son in a succession of prolific chiefs and farmers. My father wanted me to continue that legacy."

"I'm sure he must have gotten used to it by now."

"Sure, we laugh and smile at holidays and then we don't talk for the rest of the year."

She imagined the missives between her and her family growing shorter and shorter until one day they ceased completely. "I promised I would return."

"It's always easier to leave than to return. Many times I go home and sit in the driveway for an hour waiting for the right moment to knock on the door and announce myself. Each year, Mama grows shorter and I have to lean over more to hug her and kiss her cheek. And now Papa's handshake quivers in my hand."

Patricia envisioned Professor Kingsley sitting in the driveway in his brown sedan waiting for the right version of himself to come home.

They stopped adjacent to the market, which was illuminated by golden streetlights, still bustling with activity even at the close of the day. The vendors shouted their wares to passing customers. Tomatoes, onions, pears were stacked precariously in pyramids, occasionally rolling off the stalls only to be trampled underfoot into the fabric of the marketplace. Without his briefcase, Mr. Kinsley moved rather deftly through the crowd, parting a way with a shoulder here, and an insistent foot there. It was easy for her to follow along. They stopped in front of a fire pit of roasting plantains. The plantains were roasted in large frying pans and doused with salt and paper. Then they were lifted onto crisp brown bags and distributed to clamoring customers.

"Two orders. Kelewele." Mr. Kingsley said. He turned to her, his mouth was wide open like a jaguar in the wild before it sinks into delicious flesh. His bright white teeth cut the air when he spoke. But somehow she could not see his eyes behind his spectacles. "Have you ever had this dish before?"

She told the truth. “It’s been many years.”

They sat in his car to eat. The smell of the kelewele was everywhere, suffocating her. When she tasted the plantains, they sat heavy on her tongue. In between savory bites, he dropped study tips for his exam.

“Your goals are very admirable. However, it’s very difficult to pass my class.”

They were close to the end of the meal and to the conclusion of the night. He folded the empty brown paper into halves, then quarters, and then stashed them somewhere she could not see.

Patricia instinctively felt her hand rest on the passenger door handle. “That’s why I came to your office hours.”

The moonlight shifted and revealed his eyes behind the spectacles. They were glistening, from the hot meal, or the heat in the car, or the fervor of their conversation, she could not tell. “There is another way,” he informed her. “This is an option for many of the girls that struggle with my class. Otherwise, there would be no path forward.”

She felt her stomach constrict with fear, disappointment, and shame. Whose shame? His or hers? “I—I think it’s time that I go.” She opened the door. The coolness of the night air swept around her and cleared her lungs. She walked back to the campus under the half-lidded gaze of the moon.

What would her mother think of her entering his car? If her father knew, he would demand that she returned home at once. And at the moment, she could think of nothing more comforting than sitting at his side as his pen scraped paper and left ink stains on the pads of his fingers.

Patricia told Mabel what had happened. The other girl shrugged. “It’s normal. Especially for the girls who can’t pay for school. Professor Jameson has a wife but is always inviting students to the bar near the beach. And Professor Dennis offered to pay Amaka’s way for medical school if she agreed to marry him.”

That night, she lay in her bed restless. Mothers never taught their daughters how to make themselves small, to speak with a tremor in their voices, or to ask for what they needed with the expectation that they would have to give something in return. These were things a woman learned on her own.

Patricia got out of bed and sat at her desk. She scribbled on a piece of notebook paper until dawn seeped in through the cracks of her window. Then she went to the library, copied the page 100 times, and picked up a roll of tape on her way out. Like a madwoman, she raced around campus posting up copies of her missive entitled “How to Get an A in Professor Kingsley’s class”.

Later, in class, the students were alight with furor. Several classmates were waving the flyers at Professor Kingsley demanding an explanation. He removed his glasses and looked at Patricia with moist eyes.

Patricia failed the midterm exam. The university immediately suspended Professor Kingsley and launched an investigation. As the term came to a close, Patricia was packing her things with plans to return home and never return to university.

Mabel stopped her outside of her dorm room with her bags in tow. She gestured to a tall boy and a short, squat girl. “Peter and Joselyn. They are the editors of the university paper. I know it was you, Patricia. There are many more stories we need to tell. We need to fight for the women on this campus and take back our power.”

“I’m failing all my classes this semester, Mabel.”

“Is that right? These editors can help with your English classes. I will find someone to help you with your economics class. This is important.”

Patricia remembered the first night that her mother brought home the sewing machine and ran the same piece of fabric through the machine dozens of time. She had been silent the entire time, the only signs of her frustration a furrowing of her brow. Her husband had been close by, late into the night, silently keeping her company.

Patricia curled and uncurled her fist around the handle of the suitcase. “I want to help,” she said. In that moment, she realized that things may have been different if she had found the right tutors. She kept replaying the night in the car with Mr. Kingsley over and over again. She had lost her taste for kelewele a thousand times over. She was afraid that it would happen again.

Patricia lifted her chin. “I think I need to help.”

IMPRESSIONS REVISITED

KARL PLANK

In memory of Alene Clayton Holderby

From the Wagon Gap Road
you saw clouds on the ridge
as *snowy prayer cloths*,
as holy handkerchiefs of mist.
God caresses, you said,
through hanging *wavelets*
of vapor white. Breath descends
to soften the hard-scape balds—
Bearwallow, Roan, Black Balsam—
and put at distance the tremor,
thunder, and storm.
Let clamor yield to whisperings
in the brume among these hills
to which we lift our eyes.

WHENEVER I WANTED TO SAY SOMETHING I SAID NOTHING

YIRU ZHANG

Whenever I thought of those embarrassing moments, I would stand up and walk around. And when I was actually in those moments, I would close my eyes and think of something random, like the birds swooping down, or dust filling the city.

One of those moments was at the Montreal airport, after I got into Su's car, when the police came to ask Su where her parents were. I closed my eyes, and thought of the summer night eight years before. Eight years ago, we were in middle school, and Su was my closest friend.

Now she sat in the driver's seat.

"Are you over twelve?" the officer asked.

"Yes," Su answered.

We drove from the airport to Rue Allard. Su told me that here in Montreal she was often mistaken as a kid. I told her the same thing happened to me in the US.

Towards the southwest, we drove.

When I recall those embarrassing moments now, I stand up and walk around, the memories of the past appearing like butterflies. I think of that afternoon in July when we parked our car in Rue Allard and crossed the street and stopped at the brownish-red three-story apartment building. Su and I didn't know what to say to each other after all this time.

We entered her place and she told me not to tell our friends from home that she lived in a basement.

"Do you want to go home after your time in Chicago?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said. "Do you want to go back?"

She shook her head. "I can't stay in Canada anymore."

Whenever I think of how we spent the whole of that July night killing roaches, I stand up, walk, sit down, and stand up again. I am hurried, aimless. I remember that there was a table next to the wall and there was a stove and there was a sofa and, in the darkness, a mattress. I remember that in the afternoon of July her place was as dark as a cave. I remember that, when Su asked me if I wanted to go back to China, I wanted to say no, but instead I said "I don't know."

Later, when my stay in Montreal finally ended, when I boarded the flight departing for Chicago and looked out the window to see the city embraced by the mountains, the man sitting next to me would ask me how my trip to Montreal was. I said it was good, and he said his was good, too. He told me that he was planning to move here, and that he didn't want to go back to Wisconsin, because when he escaped from Argentina he went to Wisconsin, but he didn't know that Wisconsin would be worse than Argentina.

As he spoke, I thought about Su opening a beer, saying that she wanted to go back to China but she couldn't. Because her mom and dad planned to stay in Canada forever and wouldn't let her go. Because her mom and dad said that she was their only child and they needed her when they got old. Because her mom and dad loved her, and did so much for her, including abandoning everything at home to move to Montreal.

She also told me that her mother still wanted her to wear a dress.

I was thirteen the first time I saw Su in the cafeteria of our middle school in Nanjing. She was standing with a girl called Lin. The two of them wore the same school uniform. They had the same haircut.

Back in Nanjing, we went to class at six in the morning, and went back to the dorm at midnight, waiting for another tomorrow that would always be the same as every other tomorrow.

Now, Su's hair is shorter, and she looks more like a boy. Or to the police in Montreal, more like a boy under the age of twelve.

But back in Nanjing, Su still had long hair. And back then we knew Su was different. When students would go to the bathroom hand in hand together, we never went with Su, and when we were all asked to wear skirts in middle school, she wore black trousers under her plaid skirt. Back then, she told me not to tell others that Lin was not just her friend, but her first love.

Su had said to me then, “I want to leave China. I don’t want to be judged by who I love.”

“Same,” I said. “I too want to live where I can speak without fear.”

When Su and I got out of Place-d’Armes station and followed the crowds uphill, I could see the cathedral in the city center. From there we walked along the alley downhill, the Saint Lawrence River stretching in front of us. Later we would go uphill, and downhill, and uphill, and downhill, over and over again. When we were turning the corner Su said that Montreal is the worst city she had ever lived in, that in the winter snow was everywhere.

We walked along the old harbor, the casino across the river standing like a white castle. Then we turned around and headed back to the cathedral.

We stopped at the corner. The clock struck six. It was getting dark. Though I wanted to, I didn’t ask Su if she would break up with her girlfriend Qiu. I hadn’t even met her yet. Instead, we stared at the casino across the Saint Lawrence River.

Su told me, “Qiu is getting married to a Chinese immigrant. She said that a woman must marry a man. Her fiancé was her classmate back in Shanghai. He’s landing soon. Bought an apartment here.”

“Will you keep dating her then?” I asked.

“Sure. Her fiancé thinks that I am a woman anyway. To him there will never be love existing between two women. So it doesn’t matter.”

In the years that I lived in America, I went to Chinatown in many different cities. I never really wanted to, but sometimes I had to. When I was in Montreal I had to go to Chinatown because Su wanted to. If you get used to Chinatown you will get stuck in there forever like Su, who never really left China. But I will never be like her.

Since I left China for Chicago, America has become my home.

I followed Su, passing by the building where she worked. The sign with “real estate” written in Chinese reminded me of when my mother howled in front of the City Hall in Nanjing after my family’s home disappeared one night because of forced eviction. She was arrested. It reminded me of where I came from, and why I would never go back.

In a Vietnamese restaurant, I tried to talk to Su but I didn’t have much to talk about. The only language that I could use to express my feelings freely was English, and Su, who failed to change her accent, refused to speak English.

Su wore a black T-shirt and boys’ shorts. She told me that in Canada she could only buy kids’ clothes, and this was just one of the reasons why she could not live in Canada anymore.

While in Montreal, I often stayed up late. I slept on Su’s bed alone, feeling the uncomfortable board beneath me. She put a board on the mattress because she had back pain, and “To put a board on the mattress is cheaper than to receive treatment.”

I told her I could book a hotel.

“It’s okay. I can sleep on the sofa. And Qiu has her fiancé’s apartment anyway.”

Early in the morning, I heard Su’s footsteps passing the screen between the sofa and the mattress, all the way to the bathroom next door to me. Her footsteps were quiet and tender. Once when we were having breakfast, she said she liked women to be tender.

When we got up in the afternoon to have breakfast, she boiled water and cooked wontons. She made me think of my mother. After I finished eating the wontons, she poured a bottle of strawberry yogurt into a bowl for me.

As we ate, we listened to the passers-by walk on the sidewalk above us. We didn’t really talk about anything. I guess we didn’t have much to talk about.

We went grocery shopping together, and she called the grocery store “Western-people-supermarket.” I thought a grocery store was called a grocery store. I thought, being an immigrant who had lived

in Montreal for years, she should fit in as much as possible. Just like me.

In the evenings, whenever Su was done with the dishes, she would eat cherries and Haagen-Dazs, and watch reality shows from China.

I never watched any shows from China after I left China.

“Back in China, I wouldn’t believe that I could afford something as expensive as Haagen-Dazs,” she said.

I nodded. “Haagen-Dazs was the most expensive ice cream you could get in China.”

Somehow, that evening in Montreal reminded me of the hot, humid summer air of Nanjing and the first time I saw Su standing on the greasy cafeteria floor with Lin. Same uniform. Same haircut. We all wore red. Because all girls must wear red. Because all boys must wear blue. Because we all must have a color.

I had been in Montreal for a while, and Su felt bad that she never took me to dine out. We drove around the city for a long time, without a destination. Finally, I suggested we check Yelp for restaurant ideas. She suggested we check the China-based app Dianping.

We ended up at an Asian fusion restaurant that Su found on Dianping. She ordered twenty-dollar sushi, and I got a fifteen-dollar poke bowl. We were the only two customers.

Su finished her six sushi rolls in two minutes. I was embarrassed for her, how she tried to prove that she could afford dinner in a decent restaurant.

I stopped eating. She took my bowl and ate my leftovers.

“I should have taken you to the sushi buffet,” she said. “I used to go there a lot. Eighteen dollars and you won’t eat anything the next day.”

“Did you tip?” I asked.

“Never.”

I remember when we walked along the old harbor, the casino stood in the sun like a castle. And I remember when we drove across the river towards the castle, the green islands passing beneath us in a flash, she told me it’s okay if I forgot my passport at her place because

I could use Qiu's PR card. "They can't tell the difference between Asians anyway."

When I showed Qiu's PR card to the guard, he looked at it and looked at me and let me into the casino.

On the porch of the casino, Su lit a cigarette, and looked off in the distance. "On the last day of the last year, Qiu and I lost fifteen-hundred dollars in this casino, so we went to the restaurant on the top floor. We thought that was our last dinner. And from there, at midnight, we saw the fireworks filling the sky of Montreal. When the fireworks stopped, we went for a last try. Then we began to win. We won all our money back. I guess it was because of the new year. I guess we will all be lucky when a new year starts.

"Qiu has nothing in common with me. But we both like gambling." The end of Su's cigarette glowed orange. The smoke drifted away, disappearing in the darkness.

"My mom doesn't allow me to smoke. She doesn't know that I smoke anyway. Just like she doesn't know that I'm a lesbian. She doesn't know anything," she said.

"How did your mom and dad come to Canada?" I asked.

"As farmers. Learned French and raised pigs. Only my dad did that. In China, we didn't have money for anything. And that's why they won't go back. They said that they can live an okay life without money here, but in China it would be too hard to survive." She flicked the cigarette away. "But there really isn't anything to do in a city like Montreal, so Qiu and I go to the casino. What else can we do?"

That night, Su and I won one hundred dollars. "Everyone has beginner's luck," Su said, and I was a beginner. After that night, I was no longer a beginner. That night we drove away from the white castle, across the Pont de la Concorde on the Saint Lawrence River, listening to Su connecting the Bluetooth to Douyin in silence.

And so we became a couple of those Chinese in the casino, and I don't know why there were always so many Chinese in the casino. Su said that those Chinese would always be there, like they never had a job—like staying in the casino was their job. And they always looked at us when we spoke Chinese. And we looked at them. In the ocean of English and French we found an island, but we pretended

that it didn't exist. The next time we went to the casino, Su lost all her savings again.

Afterwards, we drove along the river, away from the downtown of Montreal, all the way to the south, to a hot pot restaurant. Su was silent. If I were her, I'd also be silent.

I told her the meal would be my treat to make her feel good. I always wanted to make her feel good.

"Why are you still staying in Chicago?" she asked.

I looked out the window. "Going back to China makes me afraid." "China is the safest place in the world." She told me to stop getting brainwashed by American news. "I don't understand you."

I wanted to say that I did not understand her either.

Su eventually left Canada for Nanjing—her wish of freedom from her parents had come true. After saying goodbye to her parents, she put on her raincoat and goggles, travelled for forty hours by air, stayed in quarantine for fourteen days, and arrived home as if she forgot that she would again be judged by how she looked and whom she loved.

On the last night before I left Montreal, Qiu slammed the door and left. Su ran out, trying to get Qiu back. When Su finally came back alone, I was cooking fried rice, and she said it was her first time coming home to someone waiting for her with a cooked meal. I didn't say anything.

On the way to the airport the next day, I started to cry in silence. She thought it was because I didn't want to leave. I hated that I didn't say anything to her after her fight with Qiu. I guess that's my way of not leaving China—always afraid of saying what I want. I still am. I dare not admit that I've wanted to be with Su since middle school.

Yet the gap between us would only become wider. Never again would we understand each other. I would be forever embarrassed of and afraid of my birth country, and she would be one of those calling me a betrayer.

My most vivid memory with Su was at Notre-Dame Basilica. When we exited the basilica and walked into the garden, she pointed to a statue and asked me what that was.

"The Lamentation of Christ," I answered.

“Western people like to make up such stories. Do you believe in them?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, I don’t,” she said.

We walked from the garden to the entry of the basilica. Beneath us, the stairs went on all the way towards the bottom of the hill.

“The believers would say that those are the stairs to Heaven,” she said. “But the stairs were just designed by engineers. Do you get it? Just like this. Everything in this world is just like this.”

LITTER WITH NO CANOPY

DONNA WEAVER

EMTs carried my mom like the palanquin bearers carried Cleopatra on her litter. Because my mom wouldn't be moved out of her bedroom on a wheeled stretcher so they carried her on a dining room chair upholstered in red velvet. She begged for one

of her bras, clean panties sprinkled with some baby powder. She refused an EMT's oxygen. Always said she was embarrassed to die without her bra and clean panties. She always told me,

*make sure you never leave a house in dirty panties, just in case
you're in a car crash, rushed to the ER.* A chest X-ray found a clot.

In which of my mother's lungs, I do not know. She stopped breathing and she needed those EMTs to come back. In the ER, she had no struggle left to stop them from administering oxygen. This time her mouth was open wide.

SHIKATA GA NAI

SAKAE MANNING

My mother died in the time of pandemic, on a morning when fires raged all over California, and smoke was choking her garden into dust. George Floyd was already murdered. Breonna Taylor's murder was going unanswered. Americans of all races and ages took to the streets to protest 400 years of systemic racism and injustice. A reality TV host was running the country. I'm left to wonder if she knew what was happening outside her house set in the foothills bordering the Sierra Nevada and only miles from where Mark Twain made frog jumping famous. By now, her eyes were failing, making running impossible.

My mother died on a Tuesday; the first of September. She secretly liked being first, so the date seemed fitting. The coroner described it as a sudden and catastrophic death. A massive heart attack or a stroke. She had spent ninety years running, putting others' needs in front of her own, hiding from bombs that echoed inside her long after the war was over. She found a way to freedom in a wavy-haired, Oklahoma-born merchant marine. A big talker. A smart man who claimed salt air and the open sea were his home. She straightened and cut her hair like Audrey Hepburn, rouged her full lips into a pout. She came to America, believing she could be American, but the ground never felt like home. The food, the language, the people—as foreign as a sliver of glass lost in the flat part of her small foot.

If she were here, my mother would say hers was a good death. Not even her head touched the ground. The crossing to join her ancestors was quick. Much easier than when she traveled on a

freightliner twelve years after the war ended. My father said it was cheaper than travel on a passenger ship. She'd be fine, he decided, without considering comfort or that she couldn't speak English. My mother was locked in a lower-level room without a window. She was, after all, an alien, a lingering reminder of a war that kicked-off in Pearl Harbor. Seasickness overwhelmed her. She tossed and turned on her cot, losing weight, wondering about a widowed mother and four siblings left without an older sister. In that small dark room, normally used for storage, my mother's starched traveling dress hung from a hook on the door, swinging with the pitching ship, wilting from humidity. For two weeks, a bucket was her constant companion until the freightliner pulled into San Francisco. Her hope waned, as cargo unloaded before she could step foot on shore.

My father finally rushed up to receive her, pointing out the Golden Gate Bridge, as she stood on the pier, queasy, following his finger traveling along the horizon. San Francisco filled her lungs, reminding her of Yokohama. They drove inland, traveling north on a highway bordered by pastures and grazing cattle, empty hills with swaying grasses, and passing freight trains crawling on long, curved tracks towards Oakland. They drove into Suisun City, a small rough looking town dotted with pool halls, bars, and farmhands loitering around neon-lit liquor stores. My father pointed out the market where she would shop, the high school he had attended, the butcher he liked, but her English wasn't good enough to understand. All she heard was pride.

My mother's heart knew there was no point in trying to tell him this is not what he promised. She said there was no going back when you marry an American so she learned to hide inside herself, in a mind wound so tight, she hardly slept. She feared America even more when he gave her a baby; then, another eleven months later. They knotted her future to this man. A woman running in circles, a baby on each hip, weighing her down, with nowhere to go.

My mother died, having never told my brother what she wanted—not her dreams, nor her death wishes. She told stories once. There were no repeats like people do when they get older, forget what happened yesterday, or run out of things to talk about. It was on

the listener to remember, because if asked about the story, she denied ever having the conversation. I learned to pay attention when she was catching her breath from all the running.

She told me she had not wanted to marry a Japanese man and have a foot on her neck for the rest of her life. I responded, “So you came here and had a foot on your back instead?” She triple blinked, her mouth a line so tight a fine needle, the kind used to sew organza or chiffon, couldn’t slip in. Her fingers went back to pinning a tissue pattern to an emerald green bolt of taffeta. That’s what my mother did; she made fancy dresses for rich wives of government officials, for weddings, and for quinceañeras. The latter made my mother most happy, because she ended up making sixteen gowns, fourteen in the same design, one for the quinceañera, and one for the mother celebrating her daughter’s entry into womanhood. The girl in white tulle and satin, put on display for all to admire, to set her up for a life in patriarchy.

My mother understood the patriarchy, living with a husband who controlled her every move. She said she liked being a second-class citizen, infuriating my brother, and entrusting men to make decisions for her. Except for the dollar amount, my father signed checks before she went grocery shopping. The cashier wrote in the amount. She walked in rain or triple-digit heat, four long blocks with a full grocery cart, while my father smoked his pipe or napped at home. All credit cards were in his name, so she requested and he pre-approved all purchases whether it was a pair of shoes or a pack of underwear. My mother understood the cost of staying in America, of saving face.

She’s gone now, my mother. My brother said her glasses remained on her face. Her hair in place; wispy at the neckline. The Buddhist priest chanted prayers here, in Los Angeles, while her body cooled on a table at the coroner’s up north in Gold Rush country. For Shinto, the body should never be separated from the prayers, nor from its sacred departure rituals, but that’s what happens when living on strange ground, a former mining town where Chinese were lynched. When my parents moved there, I warned her most Americans can’t tell the difference between Chinese and Japanese, and she laughed.

She was used to being the only one, alone in a country where she had no mother, no aunts, no sisters. Not one relative came to visit in the sixty-one years, four months, and ten days she lived here. It is what happens when a Japanese woman leaves the family register, released to forever float alone in her decisions.

My mother died before she took off her gardening shoes and turned on the air conditioner. It was a morning routine and included shutting windows and the back door. My brother called to say the coroner decided no autopsy was needed. She was ninety years old and a three-time cancer survivor. She is now high up in her kitchen cabinet. I told my brother his choice is perfect given she couldn't reach high shelves, and she always liked looking down on people. Our mother is in a special transport urn, because my brother thinks ahead. With my sons, we envisioned trekking to Hiroshima next year, driving to a small suburban area, checking into an Airbnb before presenting her ashes to three younger sisters and their adult children. Only they've decided my mother shouldn't return to Japan. There is a legend that when a person leaves the family, they cannot come back. It is bad luck. This is what my mother's sister tells my cousin to Google translate to me. This, from the aunt my mother kept safely hidden in mountain caves while she scavenged for food, picking maggots from yams to keep the family from starving. She and her mother herded the children through those final months before Hiroshima.

My mother said I couldn't ever understand the type of sacrifice needed to survive war. I am not a good Japanese daughter. I don't listen, refuse to let men walk in front of me, laugh too loud, and ask too many questions. She'd be relieved. Her pushy daughter is taking her home regardless of legends, bad luck, or aunts who politely don't want their sister. We'll carry her ashes, a fine powder, a perfect cremation the funeral home said, in a carry-on, tucking it securely into an overhead compartment. We'll transition our words into how Japanese refer to honoring the dead. Cremation is known as bone cutting, and the ceremony is called bone spreading. The Japanese have gotten it right. Our mother's bones are resting after spending a lifetime being cut, fractured, and chipped in preparation for this journey. Returning her to the waters around Hiroshima where she

swam as a child, the beaches where she dug her toes into the sand,
is what is right for a woman who dreamt of being a teacher, was the
fastest runner in her school, whose life was marked by failing to raise
an obedient daughter, who survived the terrors of a world war, who
forever saw images of the Tokyo fire bombings, Hiroshima, Nagasaki,
bombs,
bombs,
bombs.

My mother came running to a new country, an unblemished place with gold paved roads, no hunger or burned cities, no bullet holes in buildings, no people with the slackened faces of intergenerational trauma, walking with soured mouths repeating shikata ga nai at every disappointment, every insult, and slur thrown by American GI's. She came running, breathless, hopeful, to birth babies on the ground of those who hated her, what she represented, by being a small woman, a nearly five-foot-tall, dark-haired woman, eyes pointed downward, speaking English without pure "r's" or "l's" in broken syllables. Living and dying on stolen ground.

My mother died without finishing her coffee or starting the laundry. She left the back door open, and the heat, the smoke drifted in, and moved around the house. Realizing no one was home, except for a spirit waiting to run free, they carried her outside, high into the ash-filled skies over California.

GIRLS WHO BITE

LINDSAY ADAMS

She thinks about it again, the first time in years, after her boyfriend makes a joke about biting.

She remembers her co-worker Patrick laughing, “Oh, I get it. You’re the kind of girl that bites down.” And her hand clamping down on the rag she was cleaning tables with at the retirement home.

It took her a second to figure out what Patrick meant. She was seventeen then. She had never given a blowjob. Like Drew Barrymore, she’d never been kissed—well, in that one school play, but she didn’t count that, so neither should we.

She was cleaning the Coffee Lady Table, nicknamed for the women who sat there. They couldn’t always eat the plates of food she brought them, but they drank coffee like water, even at dinner. Helen, the decaf-drinker, was mostly blind so the servers had to help her find her five-dollar-bill tip.

That was why the girl always requested this section—she felt very protective of them. She used to flirt with Adam, the cute guy with a mess of dirty blonde hair. Until he bragged to the girl that he’d tricked Helen into giving him a twenty.

Patrick had already walked away to grab clean tablecloths, code for playing games on his phone in the laundry room.

She didn’t tell her mother, because the idea of talking to her about blowjobs was too scary. She didn’t have the words then or understand why she felt like she wanted to vomit.

She didn't think about this moment often. We don't generally have time to do that. There are too many instances of "It's just a joke" and "I get that, but" and "You're taking things too personally."

But it all comes back to her, violently, ten years later. She knows her boyfriend has noticed. They're talking while he cooks. It's playful until that joke, until she freezes. Her mouth opens with the need to respond this time, to make him understand, to not let him walk away

...

"Please don't make that joke to me. About biting. I don't find that funny."

He stiffens.

"I just . . . I had a co-worker say that to me once."

She isn't explaining it well to him. She's never had to explain it before.

His forehead purses and his mouth gets thin.

"It's just something. Because of that, it makes me . . ."

She has brought her history into his kitchen—repulsive like a dead mouse in a trap or the too-ripe Nigerian food she left in his car after the third date.

It's rare for her to have leftovers. She eats too quickly, biting into the next piece before the rest is digested. That time, she was taking his leftovers home, as he hadn't liked them.

He doesn't like this either. She has made him part of something dirty—like a smell, it's invasive, lingering, swiftly recalled.

He doesn't appreciate being told he has reminded her of something that hurt her. It isn't okay of her to make him feel bad. Because he didn't know. He tells her as much.

She apologizes, and somehow, she feels worse than she did at seventeen.

He used to call her defensive, not realizing how she tried to bend and shrink for him, like she was seven underneath her grandmother's bathroom sink in a game of hide-and-seek.

He doesn't understand her bite was love. Her bite was thinking she didn't have to hide. He doesn't know, because she doesn't get the chance to tell him—that joke isn't funny regardless of whether or not a co-worker has made it before.

It becomes a process of definition. There are the girls who bite.
And the girls who don't.

She has no interest in biting off a man's penis. She just wants to
be able to disagree with them. To tease them how they teased her.

As a child, she didn't talk until she was two. Instead, she screamed
and bit her parents from the frustration of not being understood. Of
not being able to communicate no matter how hard she tried.

I was that child, and that girl once.

We are the girls who bite. People have called it different things,
called us different names, but that is what we are.

TWO FATHERS

ANTHONY IMMERGLUCK

The first father is sick and the other is mean
but they require the same sort of care—

mawkish apologies to maître-d's and bussers;
the sponging up of truly wretched fluids.

You'll shoulder at least one father's weight
like an anchor against a vulgar chain of protests

and bargain like Mephistopheles any time
he ought to take his medicine or eat.

Both fathers must be ferreted away from
first dates but checked on regularly;

either could saw asleep or wrench awake
upon even the mildest provocation.

All fathers come out even in the wash—
neither will apologize for what he

can't remember and neither will recognize
himself in the red eyes at his bedside.

You will burn away days of unbearable
length checking off boxes on sundry forms

then drag out nights playing Whac-a-Mole
with the worst vermin of your imagination.

This won't be your last dawn spent punching
vending machines with whichever sibling's left.

This won't be the last time I'll have to
remind you that mean is a kind of sick.

Mean, I repeat, is a kind of sick.

LOST HILLBILLY

MARCOS MCPEEK VILLATORO

A few years ago, East Tennessee State University invited me to give a lecture on cultural diversity in the Appalachian Mountains. They considered me not exactly an expert on the subject, but an anomaly who could shed light on the ethnic changes happening in the region—specifically, that of the growing number of Latinos who had made their homes in the eastern hills of Tennessee. Though a Salvadoran-Appalachian, I wasn't an expert, at all, on the migrant workers who seeded, cultivated and harvested the tobacco crops. I wouldn't meet another fellow Latino while I was there. But I was curious: which community had made its home in this specific part of Appalachia? Were they Mexicans, and if so, from what region of Mexico? Or were they Salvadorans who came from my mother's hometown of Usulután? Could it be possible that I had distant relatives here, working in the fields and construction sites?

My host, Landon, was a professor of Appalachian Studies at the college. He might have been a decade younger than I, perhaps in his early forties. He was as skinny as a chain smoker, with a set of eyes that were more intense than what I expected out of a good old boy. He didn't smoke, though he had been raised here, in tobacco country. Appalachia wasn't just deep in his veins. It swirled in his brain, as though every thought he had had to do with local history, folklore, Scotch-Irish lineages that he'd traced all the way back to Derry, sharecroppers, African American Appalachians, white Appalachians, and the Cherokee. At one point, he looked embarrassed, as though

having forgotten his manners. “I’m sorry, I didn’t even ask if you’ve eaten yet.”

I said I could hold off for a while, though I could sure use a cup of coffee. He chuckled and said that there were plenty of Starbucks in Johnson City, “but you’re probably used to the gourmet kind,” and chided me about living in Los Angeles. “I’ll get you a real Appalachian cup of Joe.” We could, he said, stop by a truck stop on the way into town.

It was a beautiful day. I hadn’t seen autumn colors since moving to Los Angeles, almost twenty years before. LA had nothing on this blue sky, the clean wisps of clouds, and the mountains that were afire with fall colors. So beautiful; and the more I recognized that beauty, the more my nerves crackled.

Landon searched for the exit ramp to the truck stop. I looked at the rear-view mirror and caught sight of a giant red pickup truck following behind us at a respectful distance. You couldn’t help but notice it, not just because that fire-engine red stood out so much. A mast stuck out of its bed, no less than six feet tall, with a colorful sail whipping behind it, tight in the wind. What in the world was that, a hybrid pickup truck-sailboat Ram? We were both in the right lane. Landon looked in the mirror. “What the heck is that sticking out of his bed?” I said I was wondering the same thing. Landon pulled into the left lane to let the truck pass. The Ram, which looked the size of a Panzer, kept to its speed and slowly came up from behind us and to our side. There it was, not a sail but a flag, with its crisscross of white stars and red background slapping at the wind.

The truck started to pass us. The driver, a man with an auburn beard and hair, thanked Landon for switching lanes with an informal, casual salute. And that Confederate flag, which was the size of a king-sized bed sheet, whipped behind the mast. I peered into the truck bed. The mast was bolted into the floor. And it was indeed a sailboat’s mast, something strong and thick enough not to snap from the flag’s violent whipping back and forth.

Landon didn’t say anything until the truck disappeared on the other side of a crest. “It’s gotten worse since Charleston.” He didn’t need to say any more.

At the truck stop, while Landon filled the tank, I walked in to consider whether or not to buy a cup of muddy gas station coffee. Along with all the snacks, candies, ice cream, sodas, beer, a coffee maker and two microwave ovens were shelves that held knick-knacks for passing tourists: key rings with a hillbilly man cut into the varnished wood, cups with the East Tennessee State University's logo printed on the side, and little maps of Tennessee that were mounted on cardboard backing. One item stood alone on an empty shelf, something I recognized from childhood: a confederate flag, the size of a small handkerchief, dangled from a wooden rod that was barely thicker than a toothpick. It was shoved into a tiny hole in a varnished wood base, which had, burned into its front, "Southern Pride." It looked lonely there, on a shelf that was once filled with two dozen other tiny flags. It was strange. When I was a kid, I passed by such shelves without giving them any thought. Back then, they were full of flags, one of those items that no one cares to buy. But this shelf was empty.

I grabbed a bottle of Fiji water, which surprised me, Fiji in Appalachia? Oh but it was rising, all of it: the memories, the recognition of culture, the recognition of myself, and of Landon, of the man in the Ram and the boy at the cash register, who suffered from a bad case of acne. I was reminded, so deeply, of where I was, and who I was, and the reasons why I, in my twenties, had decided to leave this land—all because of a giant flapping flag and this empty shelf.

The pimply fellow was on his phone, texting someone or plugging something into his social media. He put it down, smiled and greeted me, asked if I was passing through or visiting, and rang up my water. I asked him about the empty shelf. He laughed, shook his head and said, "That shelf was always full of flags until recently. Now, I can hardly keep them in stock."

Things had changed; or had they? Had such ostentatious glorification of a treasonous flag been lingering in the minds of locals for god knows how long? Yes, it had, but in my childhood, it revealed itself in whispers and stares. For indeed, I was an anomaly, but not a stranger. I was standing in a truck stop in east Tennessee, a place I knew too well. The field my white father was born in wasn't more

than a forty-minute drive away. A stone's throw. Or, as we used to say in childhood, spittin' distance. For the rest of the trip, I was a bundle of nerves.

This was the autumn of 2015. I had flown into Tennessee four months after Dylann Roof, the twenty-one-year-old white supremacist, had murdered nine African Americans during a prayer service at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Before he had massacred the parishioners, he had posted pictures of himself on social media, standing proudly in front of a Confederate flag. The killings had sparked a call-to-action in the south. The South Carolina General Assembly voted to remove the flag from the State Capitol grounds. Other states followed suit. The US House of Representatives banned the display of Confederate flags at Veterans Administration cemeteries. Major stores such as Wal-Mart and Amazon announced their plans to stop selling merchandise with the flag on them. In the four months after the massacre, it seemed as though the South was making some changes that would lift it out of its racist history.

But someone was still manufacturing Confederate flags and selling them to a growing consumer group. I had not seen so many in all my life. Cars had bumper stickers of it. Families had their own flags sticking at an angle from porch posts. Kids taped little ones to their bicycle handles, like pinwheels.

After the gig at ETSU, I drove to my hometown of Rogersville. It hadn't changed much, hardly at all. The center of town was more desolate than I remembered, due to a Wal-Mart that stood on the edge of town. It had shut down nearly every mom-and-pop shop on Main Street. There weren't as many flags here, though some hung off porch railings, along with the Stars and Stripes. The Poor Boy Restaurant was open. It still served the tastiest burger I've ever put in my mouth, due to the extra grease that soaked the bun. The waitress was nice. She kept my coffee cup filled and chatted with me. "Los Angeles? Really?" she said. She had always wanted to take a trip out west, and dreamed about bumping into actors in Hollywood.

A woman was staring at me. I caught her in the wide mirror behind the counter. I could feel it, had been trained in childhood to sense it. I didn't know if she had figured me out as a way out-of-towner city-slicker, or had simply figured me out: that there was, as I'd learned as a kid, something different about me.

Rogersville wasn't my final destination. I drove to Clinch Mountain, which was just a couple of miles out of town yet a world away, the mountain where my father was born. I knew Clinch well, had hunted and fished there as a kid, and with my parents, used to visit friends and a few distant relatives.

Nothing, *nothing*, had changed. No urban development, no factories or offices or even new churches. I recognized homes from forty years back. It was Sunday. People were on their front porches. Boys played football in a front yard.

The field my father was born in had no structures on it anymore. No barns, houses, or sharecropper shacks. Weeping willows grew alongside Caney Creek. A line of spotty-white poplar trees stood on the edge of the field. I parked on the road's thin shoulder, stepped—with my wingtip shoes—on rocks that stuck out from the creek, and searched for the spot. The shack was no longer there, just the six piles of stones that had once held it up. It had been there when I was a kid, dilapidated, dry-rotted. I'd never stepped foot in it, but had seen it every time Dad drove us into this section of the hollers. I had always known it was the sharecropper shack in which Dad was born. We never talked about it, at least Dad and I. It was Mamá who, in her Salvadoran-flavored English, pointed it out from time to time, "There's where your father came into the world." She'd shake her head, still amazed at the poverty he'd been born in, a poverty that outmatched that of her native country.

I walked into the field and stood in the middle of the piles of foundation rocks. I imagined the one-room building, that I was in it, that I heard my father's first cries from 1920. I imagined my mamaw—my grandmother—cursing throughout the birth, and my papaw standing outside, muttering Baptist prayers. Imagination took its own road: I saw a pale white baby, raised up in the arms of a Black midwife who slapped his fanny to get him to breathe. In

my imagination, his cry took on shape and meaning—somewhere in the scream came forth squeaky words, *Goddamn motherfucking son of a bitch*. Words that were all too familiar, words that I had heard all through childhood, regarding whatever it was that needed to be cursed: a fish hook caught on a rock, a broken carburetor, the government, a lost bolt. Where did such an image come from, that of a newborn cursing the world the moment he took his first breath? Then I considered the legion of Confederate flags.

I wasn't born in Appalachia, but San Francisco, California, where my parents had met fifteen years before. We had an old shoebox of photos from the days that had passed long before I came along. As a kid, I'd pull the box out of the closet and study the deckle-edged pictures of their honeymoon days, the ones of them traveling on a 1947 Harley Davidson Knucklehead motorcycle, and try to imagine their lives. What was it like for a white Appalachian man and a Salvadoran woman to ride across America in 1947? How were they accepted by each other's families? How did they survive the laws of US racism? In the pictures, they look like they didn't give a damn.

World War II had brought them together. In 1942 my father, Ralph, had joined the Navy and served in the South Pacific. Two years later Mamá Amanda and her family immigrated to the US from El Salvador. The Villatoros moved to San Francisco, where my mother found work in a sewing factory. Her job was to wash the blood off Navy life preservers and sew up the bullet holes in the cloth. They were then sent back to the ships in the Pacific Theatre.

After the war, Dad was discharged in San Francisco. They first saw each other in a coffee shop. Dad was peeking over the edge of the San Francisco Chronicle and giving her glances. “¡Ay, esos ojos tan verdes!” Mamá told me—he had green eyes. Dad didn't speak a lick of Spanish. Mamá had studied English, but couldn't understand Dad's Appalachian accent, with its elongated words and drawn-out syntax. That didn't stop them. Within the year, they married.

Dad put her on the back of the Harley and took her to his family in Tennessee. It was the first of seven trips across the US on the motorcycle. They wore leather all over: chaps, jackets, gloves, even

their helmets that hugged their heads tight. They wore goggles and black riding boots. They followed their whims: my mother would miss my grandmother, who lived in San Francisco's Mission District, so they'd ride back. Dad would get a construction job in Tennessee. They mounted the bike and returned to the Appalachian Mountains. Seven cross-country treks on a motorcycle, with a couple of treks to the races in Daytona. When I was sixteen, the photos and their stories were a bit too much to handle, because it hurts a teenager to know that his parents were bigger bad-asses than he will ever be.

They might have been too blind with love in the beginning to worry about any racial concerns, but in Tennessee, they got a heaping dose of it. My McPeek grandparents couldn't make heads or tails out of who (or what) my mother was. She wasn't black but she sure as hell wasn't white. They'd never heard of El Salvador. They believed their son had brought a blemish to the family, and worried about grandchildren, in a world where laws against miscegenation still dwelled in the southern mind.

After the seventh trip between California and Tennessee, they wrecked just outside of Knoxville. Three years of riding over twenty-thousand miles, and a small patch of gravel ended it. The Harley slung them off and skidded on its side over the shoulder. The dump onto the highway was enough to shake the wildness out of them. They patched up the cuts where the road had torn through the leather and jeans, and rode back into Appalachia, where Dad sold the motorcycle, bought a very used Chevy, and built a house in a small neighborhood. They didn't get down to miscegenating until well into their marriage.

I was born in 1962. We were living in San Francisco. (The Harley wreck hadn't quelled all their wanderlust—we just made the trips by car.) I was born in the Mission District and that pleases me. It legitimizes me. For my home city was an outpost of El Salvador.

I remember when my grandmother introduced me to the colorful ladies on Capp Street. I was around four at the time. I remember my hand, stretched upwards, clasped in hers. We were walking down Capp in the Mission District. Two young women were standing at the corner, talking and looking up and down the street. My abuelita called out to them, and we stopped to have a chat. The two rented a

room in abuelita's house and always paid on time. They made a fuss over me, called me all the things a Salvadoran woman calls a little boy—*Ay mi corazón, rey de mi vida!*—then bent down and kissed me on the cheeks, leaving lipstick on both sides of my face.

I lived my first four years in the Mission. I have memories from there, though they are scant. Yet they're enough to keep my love for the barrio alive. It was a Latino world: Mexicans, Guatemalans, Nicaraguans, Hondurans and, in my grandmother's three-story Victorian house on Capp Street, *guanacos*, or Salvadorans. Abuelita had bought the home three years after leaving El Salvador. She paid it off by renting all the rooms. There was a constant hustle and bustle of tenants—mostly Central Americans—living under the same roof. And how the women loved me. I was the *gringo-guanaco* child, a special mix of Salvadoran and white blood. According to them, I had the best of both worlds.

San Francisco was the Salvadoran diaspora that fed me all things *guanaco*. I still hold on to that, though except for the first few years of life, I've not lived there. But it was (and during times of personal, racial anxiety, still is) my Salvadoran Emerald City, a place of the other language, a world of brown people who cooed over the off-white newborn son. San Francisco was loud and frisky, with Spanish spoken up and down Mission Street, and vendors hawking tortillas and tacos on every corner. There was music: Manny Chavez, Carlos Gardel, Ritchie Valens, all tumbled out of kitchen windows and passing cars. And the odors: every shape and cooked form of corn you can imagine, always with the heat and smell of rice and beans.

The final move to Tennessee ended that world full-stop. I don't know why we moved. Maybe Dad had gotten a job, or he felt obliged to be closer to his parents. We were suddenly three thousand miles away from the voices and communal protection of the Salvadoran women. Tennessee, where the second childhood began and tried to kill off the first one. In Appalachia, Dad said to Mamá, as if he had spoken for the first time after the San Francisco years, "Never talk to this boy except in English. No more goddamn Spanish, not here, not in *this* house."

This hurt Mamá, but didn't surprise her. He was an Appalachian white man to the bone, and even though he had married outside his race, he lived a southern man's ways. Maybe he did so because of his white treason: cutting his boy off from the other heritage may have been a way for us to be accepted by the locals. Or maybe he had simply felt left out in San Francisco, with everyone talking Spanish. But according to Mamá, he had turned against her native language in a snap, as though having thought of it for a long while.

But the stubbornness of a Salvadoran woman is something to behold. Although we lived in a deep corner of a monolingual region, in the hermetically sealed Appalachian Mountains, Mamá, as much as she could, sowed her El Salvadoran customs in the Latino-parched land of Tennessee. The pulse of her small country ran through the house. We ate rice, black beans, tortillas, tamales and pupusas (my grandmother mailed sacks of cornmeal flour to her daughter, something you couldn't find in the local grocery stores). Mamá decorated the entire house with artifacts from the Central American countries: gourds, maracas, a fishing net that covered an entire wall, like a gigantic blue and white web. And we danced, she and I, an act that in an evangelical world made us minions of Satan. Mamá had the old records from San Francisco. She sang in Spanish. She cooed at me with the old Salvadoran phrases, "Vení mi corazón," as she had me climb her lap for a sudden hug. She talked with my grandmother on the phone every Saturday. Through these acts of trickery I heard, from time to time, the forbidden language. Her old-country ways helped me make decisions as an adult—I would move to Central America and live there for years. It was a way to plunge into my Latino roots. It was also an escape, from my father, from his territory.

I know Dad's story. Born in that sharecropper shack in the middle of a desolate field, he, as did all children of sharecroppers, worked the tobacco alongside his father. Sharecroppers got paid only once a year, in December after the harvest. The system had been created shortly after the Civil War, a replacement for the free labor of African American slaves. Yes, the rich farmer now had to pay both his white and black employees, all of whom lived in their own shacks, but it

was a pittance. My papaw worked the crop from March to November. He had to buy his own tools on credit, along with food and home supplies. After harvest he took the wad of money down the street of Rogersville and paid off all his creditors. Then he handed over more than half the rest to the landowner, slipped the remaining slim bills into his wallet and talked about game, that the deer, hopefully, would be thick and get them through the winter. But they had known starvation throughout the year. Dad started using tobacco at age three, out of necessity. My mamaw used to stick green tobacco into her son's mouth in order to calm his stomach pains. He chewed the leaf like a sandwich. It kept the hunger at bay.

He grew up as poor as the African American sharecroppers who worked tobacco in nearby fields. Such proximity roused a well-used adage among Dad's folks, "I may be poor, but by God I'm white." That color connected him to all the white townspeople, even the mayor. But the mayor, along with all the well-to-do farmers in the area, despised my father's people, as though the McPeeks had wasted the one power they inherently owned: their skin.

The woods where he was raised are only a couple of miles from the house I grew up in. The times I did feel close to him were when he took me hunting, fishing, and camping. He taught me how to bait a hook and load a shotgun, how to descale a bass and skin a rabbit. Out there on a creek bank or in a tree stand, he spoke more to me, whispered while we waited for game to come our way. In the woods, he felt free. No one else was out there with us. Perhaps that had something to do with it, because in town among other people, he had little to do with me, as though recognizing his own mistake. He had married brown, deep brown. Had he regretted that, once we moved to Tennessee? But he loved Mamá. I remember him giving her soft butt-slaps and saying "Come here girl," as he pulled her away from the kitchen sink and into his arms.

But he had broken a solid, white law: he and Mamá had miscegenated. I was the outcome.

It was Hazel Walker who broke the racial ice. It happened early on, in the first days of first grade. She looked at me over the short table in the classroom and said, “My daddy says you’ll never go to college.”

I had no idea what college was, so I said, “Okay.”

But she had more to say. Because of my background, I probably wouldn’t make it through high school. My dad, according to Mr. and Mrs. Walker, was poor and had been born in a sharecropper’s shack in the middle of a tobacco crop. My mother was a foreigner. “That means you won’t go to college.”

It didn’t occur to me that I was worthy of such table talk, especially in the Walker home. They were of a class far above our station in life. Mr. Walker was the manager of the local Chevrolet dealership and a city councilman. My father, a mechanic, was unemployed much of the time. He also struggled with alcohol and depression, especially when he had no job. Mamá had to work in order to cover the bills.

Dad once landed a job as a school bus driver. I remember feeling some pride about that. It was a thrill, when I boarded, to see him in the driver’s seat.

The pride ended one day in third grade, when Hazel and her best friend, Bethany Callahan, sat in the bus seat opposite mine. They didn’t need to raise their voices, but they did, and parroted what they had heard at home. Had their parents also taught them how to sneer? No longer did they refer to their mothers and fathers, no “My daddy says. . .” They spoke on their own accord. They owned the words. “I’ll be surprised if we get to school alive,” one of them said, followed by the other’s, “I don’t doubt he took a couple shots of whiskey the moment he woke up.” I barely turned my head to them. They were smiling, looking ahead, and kept talking about my father. Their talk drifted to my mother. I don’t remember what they said about her. Then they tired of the subject and slipped into third grade again, talking about a new doll, a mean older sister, and what they hoped to get for Christmas.

They were both gorgeous. Hazel had long straight blonde hair, blue eyes, and porcelain skin. Bethany had curly blonde hair, blue eyes and porcelain skin. I had an interchangeable crush on each of them, depending on which one was in the room. They were friends with

other porcelain-skinned girls, though not all of them were blonde. They all were beautiful, but Bethany and Hazel were the pinnacles of beauty. I had seen their kind in Coca Cola commercials: gorgeous blonde white teenage boys and girls throwing Frisbees, eating picnics in a park, all of them drinking Cokes. Those were Bethany and Hazel's people. The clarity of beauty, the paragon of purity—yes, *purity*—how that thought manifested in me. They were angels. They were whole. No mix of bloods. Something was becoming clear, but just to make sure there wasn't any confusion, both girls, for what reason I don't know, approached me on the school playground.

"What's your mom?" one asked. I said El Salvadoran. "What's that?" said the other. I stumbled through an explanation. They turned to each other, suddenly ignoring me, and got to work figuring out this racial problem. Dark mother, white father. Then it dawned on them. They turned back to me. One said, "You're a mongrel." She said it in the same tone as "Pass the salt."

I stayed in love with both of them all through elementary school. I loved others as well, but those two were simply impossible not to steal a look at. Hazels and Bethanys were everywhere you looked—on TV shows, the commercials, the movies. But according to them, they weren't all the same white people, even though they shared the same skin. As much as folks like the Walker and Callahan families vilified non-whites, they could also be brutal to their own. My father wasn't, according to them, just one of the town's drunks. He was a shoeless sharecropper-turned-unemployed mechanic who had married outside the race. White trash, the type of people who sleep in trailers next to creeks, who live off the government dole and are simply an embarrassment to Caucasians everywhere. His offspring was an anomaly, the product of an act of racial treason. Nothing to be feared, just pitied or despised.

It is the memory of his rage that connects him, in my mind, with the white men in the Ram pickup truck. He was usually quiet, apparently easy-going with others, but the simmer was in him. It revealed itself in sudden, unpredictable moments. Once, when he was fixing the engine of our dilapidated Ford, my mother told me, "Why don't

you go help your daddy?” It was, I suppose, her attempt to create a bond between father and son. I, eight years old, stood next to the car. He handed me some bolts and nuts. “Hang on to them.” He stuck his head back under the hood. A bolt fell out of my palm. I put the others in my pocket and crouched to the ground, but couldn’t find it in the gravel. He saw me. “What you looking for?” I told him. “You lost that fucking bolt? Son of a *bitch!*” He bent down and threw pebbles aside. Long, excruciating minutes passed. He found it. He looked at it like it was the most important bolt in the world, turned to me and said, “I will never trust you with anything ever again.”

I measure that moment with my height: I had to look up when he said it. I was a little bigger the day of the comic books. I had a collection of almost a hundred magazines, in a cardboard box full of Batman, Superman, and another half-dozen super-heroes. It was a Sunday morning. Mamá and I had returned from church. Dad was standing next to the outside grill. The fire reached up to the branches of a cedar tree. My box of comics was on fire. Mamá said, “Ralph, what are you doing?”

“I’m sick and tired of him.” He barely looked at me. “He’s always wasting time reading this shit.”

There’s a memory that still confuses me—because it confused me at the moment. The knife is more than memory; it’s happening right now, as I write. We are in the house. I stand in the hallway. I have a wooden train in my hand, painted blue and red. My parents are standing in the kitchen. I have to look up to see them. He’s just arrived. He’s silent. Mamá cries out, “Please Ralph, please.” I see everything from below, with my head up and my mouth open. How old am I? Seven, eight? Because I’m small, and they’re giants, though my mother shrinks before him.

She cries out to God, her voice trembling, between tears and screams *Please Ralph no.* He looks at her with disdain. He calls her a light-skinned nigger. He snatches her wrist with one hand. He unbuckles the leather sheath that always hangs from his belt, palms the eight-inch knife and holds it up to my mother’s face. She can’t escape, she can only cry and plead and shiver. Suddenly he flicks the knife at the floor. The point penetrates the yellow linoleum. The

knife stands next to his shoe. He bends down, snatches the handle, squeezes Mamá's wrist and pulls her down the hall. When he passes, he stares down at me. I see now what my child self could not: yes, that is pure hatred in his eyes. Mamá screams. He drags her to their bedroom, my mother in one hand, the knife in the other. He throws her onto the bed and slams the door. It barely mutes her yelps. Or does he gag her with his weight, with the knife? Will he kill her? But that question does not come to mind. I don't have the vocabulary to explain what has just happened, what happens now, on the other side of the door.

It is this eruptive violence that connects my father with the men in the Ram pickup and their huge Confederate flag. But he wasn't the flag-waving type. I don't remember him going on about how the South would rise again. And he never could have afforded such a luxurious truck as the one with the sailboat mast. But in my mind, they are connected. I don't fully understand white rage, though I've seen it all my life, and not only in the South. It's there, a constant simmer, sometimes unseen until a white man goes inside a Black church and massacres the faithful. A dark anomaly, some might believe; but it's rooted in a communal rage. It is a fury that sprouts out of a tremendous fear of losing one's way of life, not so baseless, as the country turns browner, as more and more couples "miscegenate" throughout the nation. It seems my parents were fifty years ahead of their time.

But it didn't strip him of who he was, according to his own. He had been defined at birth. Born into poverty, he was marked for life. His marriage ratified who he was: pure white trash. His child was a constant reminder of what he had done.

I don't forgive him for his violence. His cruelty naturally comes up in memory more than do the recollections of sitting peacefully with him in the woods, waiting for game. He frightened me. I kept clear of him as much as possible.

The trek to his birthplace after the university gig, was, I suppose, an endeavor to understand him more, as though standing between the foundation stones of the McPeek sharecropper shack would

give me answers. It didn't. All it did was remind me of a man who suffered, and how he took that suffering and turned it against his own. I understand pain, but I don't get meanness. I don't understand evil, even though I recognize its human roots, such as the evil that befell the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, followed by the malevolence of a people who defiantly raised their racist flag.

After walking around the area where my father had been born, I quit the old sharecropper field, took off in the rental car and flew home. I hope to return some day. I love hiking in those mountains and walking alongside creeks. But it was the place that set out to define me, with laws that Dad knew he had broken.

I'm now angry with my father, but I won't be forever. There's no commerce in it. In moments, I mourn for his hard life. But I can't mourn his whiteness; for its teachings were the source of his hatred and self-loathing. In these days of race-based massacres, it is time to put away empathetic endeavors. When it comes to hate, sympathy doesn't stand a chance.

THE ONE ABOUT THE (DEAD) BABY

NATALIE AXTON

The writer knew the baby had to die. That was the only way the story worked.

The writer had written pages and pages about the way the woman made her husband's eggs: not too hard, not too soft; precisely the way his overbearing mother made them. The writer knew that a shift in the characters' lives needed to happen. The woman was devoted to her husband and threatened by her mother-in-law. The mother-in-law was visiting to check on the wife. The baby was the ostensible reason for the mother-in-law's visit—the one thing all members of this fictitious family could agree to love. And so the baby had to die. At least, that's what the writer thought.

The writer had never killed a baby before. Not in fiction. Sure, she had had an abortion. Everyone had had an abortion! Hers had happened when she was in her twenties. Long ago. She had never had any doubt about that decision, nor any remorse. There are too many children in this world, she often thought to herself, when she was walking about town, getting bumped into by errant toddlers. "What's the point of reproducing?" she asked. These children will live long enough to see the end of civilization. That was something. They'd live through wars over water and farmland. They'd never get jobs that paid the rent.

And so the baby in her story had to die. With a kind of glee the writer wrote the scene of the mother coming to the baby's crib. To look in and see—horror!—that the little infant lay motionless, not breathing. A spoiled egg. It was a glorious ending. The writer saved

the story on her computer and sent it off to a particularly conservative literary magazine. What fun!

The writer lived alone with her cat in a small one-story house. The house was brown and had two bedrooms. The kitchen was small but serviceable. The floors were a faux wood laminate. Nothing could scratch these floors. It was in the second bedroom that the writer got down to business every day. She had a desk that looked out the south-facing window. Her neighbor was a single man in his mid-thirties. He kept to himself. When the writer walked her cat outside she could hear her neighbor practicing his drum set. He was not a good drummer.

The day after the writer submitted her story, the one about the dead baby, she started hearing sounds in the house. There came a high-pitched, soft cry. Like the swift intake of a tiny breath. Or was it a creak of the floorboard? No. It couldn't be; the floors were laminate. Nothing could make them creak. But there it was again! The cat looked up from his nap. He had heard it too!

An editor in New York sent her a note congratulating her on her latest essay. The essay had been about her late husband and the way the writer had learned to shoulder her grief through quilting. Everyone loved this essay. The writer had done a particularly good job, the editor said, of weaving the domestic elements into a quilted literary form. He was laying it on thick, this guy. What he didn't know was that the writer was no quilter. She knew people who knew people who quilted. Kind of like you know people who know people who have been mugged in Brooklyn. It happens. Sometimes. It used to happen more often.

The important thing was that the editor liked the essay.

What was that? The writer thought she heard the muffled cooing of an infant. Or was it the HVAC struggling to come on? She looked at the cat, oblivious on the sofa. No. That sound was nothing. The writer leashed the cat and took him out for a walk.

On the second day after the writer submitted her story, the one about the dead baby, she felt a little queasy. Was it the tofu she had made the night before? It had been a week beyond its Best By date. Was she getting her period? If so, it would be coming early. She

wasn't stressed enough to be getting her period early. It was probably nothing. She went to the bathroom vanity and retrieved the antacids. They were tropical fruit flavor, a chalky kind of candy. She ate two, then ate two more.

When she sat on the toilet she had a good think: for how many years had the writer thought about the problems of being a "woman writer"? The quotes are for the box these "woman writers" got put in. "Kick up your heels! Have some fun with it!" her (mostly) male editors would tell her. They wanted self-deprecation. They needed that tone in order to believe her stories. They needed to think that she didn't take herself, that she didn't take life, seriously. They all wanted her to write like Nora Ephron. Easy, breezy and reassuringly contained.

When had the writer, who had been so sure about her abortion, started to doubt herself?

Writing like Nora Ephron had its advantages. It was safe, knowable. Men loved it. It sold like hotcakes. It was everywhere! It was like HPV—you never knew where you would pick it up and it might give you cancer. No, it would be better to stop reading as much as possible. So that she wouldn't be influenced by this Nora Ephron culture. She wanted ideas to come to her unbidden. She wanted to have no more thoughts at all. No more reading the news. No more reading the mail. No more reading these emails from silly editors.

She got the cat ready for his walk. Out they went into the dusk. They could hear the frantic pow-pow-pow of the neighbor's drumming. He was not a good drummer. The cat led them to the culvert, away from the din. There were butterflies there, perched on the edges of flowery weeds, fanning themselves with their blue-green wings. The cat loved to stalk butterflies. Many times he pounced and missed. About one out of every four butterflies got caught. The cat would take the creature in his mouth and walk it back to the driveway. There he would play with it until it died. Then he'd eat it. The writer wondered what butterfly tasted like. It probably wasn't good for the cat's digestion. She would have to call the vet and ask.

Four days went by in which nothing much happened at all. She heard the floor creak and the HVAC struggle. She ate antacids for

breakfast. A shadow crawled across the floor. The neighbor walked to his mailbox. He saw her on the couch. He waved.

Not reading, the writer was free to inhabit her own world. She would wake up and make coffee and not think about the news and the state of the world. She would lounge on the sofa and just be. She could spend hours doing this. It was nice, this emptiness. She liked not being told. Things could come. Things like the shadow. After all, what was that shadow on the floor but an idea waiting to be developed? It looked at her like it knew it belonged to her, like it was a part of her.

The writer sat up. How would she know if her story was accepted? How would she reply to accept the offer? Could she live in this uncertainty indefinitely? Would she be content with this unknowingness as a perpetual present? These questions were thoughts, and thoughts were now forbidden. They did no good. There was no way to know. There was no way not to know. And so, she dove in.

Time passed.

Her hair grew long.

She started baking.

Sometime after she submitted the story, the one about the dead baby, the writer will get a phone call. The sound will make her jump. The cat will look at the writer.

No one ever calls.

On the phone will be an editor. He will want to know if the writer will go out to dinner with him when he's in town next week. He will say he enjoys her company so very much, that when he sees her he expects a kiss lasting longer than three seconds in duration. He will think he is being charming.

The writer will tell him she is working on a collection of stories about dead babies and that she would love to tell him about this exciting project. The editor will think the writer is joking.

The writer will tell the editor that she would never, ever joke about dead babies. She is no longer afraid of her imagination. She will put down the phone. It's time to walk the cat.

EXCERPT FROM *AMERICANA*

THEA MATTHEWS

Weeping blood on white a silent letter a loud noun
fracture in the mouth abscess infected gums
bleed of valor of tyranny the deception of purity lies
hung under a thunderous omnipotent sky the
fracture in the mouth abscess infected gums
this country since 1776 a pitchfork rakes red skin
makes black blister America *a new constellation in the heavens*
bleed of valor of tyranny the deception of purity lies
a brigade of brutality an eye closed shoots the sanctity
of barbarity and life cannot coexist lips unstitched
hung under a thunderous omnipotent sky the
savagery sanctioned by state here the evolution of
savages in tricorn hats rifles stuffed with cotton

Together we stare at a barren tree by land seemingly
untouched the thing about molestation is that often
one cannot see the internal bruising
the skin smooth a calm river calms us remains
untouched the thing about molestation is that often
death is like death a barren tree is like a barren tree
a summer's twilight precipitates veins of coral billows
one cannot see the internal bruising
rape is like rape an eagle soars across the sky its wings
flap above a slanted pole a sign to be brave to feel
the skin smooth a calm river calms us remains
the beloved of stars stripes with flames
blazing from gut to mouth God be with us as we rise

Another one gunned down victory for white the flag
raised on a pole blue eyes crowned stars tumble-
weed into thick clumps of blood-soaked hair billboard
showgirls try to hide genocide with concealer a black boy
raised on a pole blue eyes crowned stars tumble-

weed into blonde bomb shells a fedora led a lynching
yesterday today a cop guilty for murder lies in the
weed into thick clumps of blood-soaked hair billboard
each tier a lost language a ruptured artery the space
between being hunted and celebrated comely
showgirls try to hide genocide with concealer a black boy
rarely seen red stripes mark danger a combover ruled
ruined I see him again homegrown hate prevails

They came for promise claimed this land Sanctuary
they came for the dreams within dreams within dreams
called this *land of the free* *and the home* *of the brave*
do not trust the pilgrim stiff cloth a burning cross
they came for the dreams within dreams within dreams
Jamestown to Plymouth blood to fragment souls to
splinter split a people under the gleam of triumph
called this *land of the free* *and the home* *of the brave*
all I see is torture a legacy a splintered cabinet
of porcelain a spark of a dull match the wick flared
do not trust the pilgrim stiff cloth a burning cross

skin boiling beneath uniforms fear fatal this greed kills
but you already know this take the scissors

Slash each star stare into each incision state
district settlement revoked beneath the rocks
amazing grace *how sweet the sound* thought I had to die
to live *I once was lost* *but now I'm found* deep within a
district settlement revoked beneath the rocks
the damned have been boxed liberty is liberty not
a euphemism for enslavement of the body now
amazing grace *how sweet the sound* thought I had to die
a slow suicide in a country of commercialized politicians
clamoring for attention a torrent of abuse I live
to live *I once was lost* *but now I'm found* deep within a
trench opening of an eye what does it mean
an abolished state a nation reconfigured I cut straight

I am a river running through each heft of fabric
I am an echoing dream tormenting white in still

waters a shallow night the air thickened by revolt
I am on the edge watching waiting time to strike
I am an echoing dream tormenting white in still
waters between lips of Lady Liberty the last breath
rub silence in between fingers until threads break
waters a shallow night the air thickened by revolt
punched walls throwaway fractures glare I lean
against the door nonchalant post murder to stars
I am on the edge watching waiting time to strike
fear burns my gut threatens my voice yet my feet
move to the chant of my people today tomorrow

OBJECTIVE CORRELATIVE

ANNE STARLING

The field is an absence.
What is so difficult? It isn't
as if you had a map, or ever had a clue
where you were going, or a way of knowing.
The field is a sea, then a raft of grass,
never a raft in reality: you must walk it.
Where are the stones
for stepping? Where is the earth? Solid clay
turns to mud, then chasm.
You must walk it.
The field looks innocent,
like a baby sleeping, hiked up on its elbows
and knees, the round smooth back
a hillock of baby. You wouldn't believe
the obstacles in this field. And if you drop something,
forget about it. Forget about the thing
you lost; consider it is in the weeds somewhere.
That's the way forward. The way to cross
the illusory
field that's always burning,
the real field that's burning.
The field is stone, and stubble
and snow. Smoke goes up
and ashes fall into it.
Nothing is spared. Not you, not snow.

The field goes where it wants to go, or its spread
is random. You have a path, right in front of you.
The path stops where you least expect it,
maybe in the middle, or you turn off the path,
looking for something
not there. The field is full of people.
The field is the place you go to be alone.
You are always alone. The field is illusory.
You do not go there. The field is where
you already are, and always have been.
The field is corn secretly growing.
The field is you, placing one foot in front of the other.
The field is sleeping or feigning sleep. The field is the oldest
thing there is; as far as you're concerned,
it's an absence. A field mouse darting in a field.
A crop of wheat; a patch of tares.
The field holds the sound of new growth
close to its ear.
The field is the sky, which gives up nothing.
The field is birds flying over it,
and your astonishment, catching sight.
The field is where you started.
The field is how you return, again and again,
to life in this world.

THE PRAYER SALLY HEMINGS'S MOTHER TEACHES ABOUT BOYS NAMED THOMAS

NIA DICKENS

Always walk two steps behind them. Especially when the roads are crowded with faces. Particularly when they are not. Even in Paris you are not their equal. You are still a slave girl. No place in the world exists where your body is free. As the morning sun rises on your way au marché, their hands may wrap twice around the calf of your leg. Cocks engorge while watching your hips pivot through the crowd. When you make your way to their manors at noonday avec les légumes et les fruits—the dip of your back will invite them to tuck their torsos into your spine. They will leech life from your shoulder blades, the way their forefathers taught them. La récolte will fall from you. Even so they will persist. Suckling like babes still attached to my tits draining the milk I saved for your siblings. If you try to stop the act to protect yourself stupid child do not turn back to look at them. Face ahead. Realize that even the nape of your neck and the baby hairs curled up at the base of your kitchen entice their lips closer. Forget the sickly-sweet promises and vile words whispered into your ears. Sever your mind from the rest of your body. Find a speck in the clouds to covet as these white men defile your flesh.

When it is finished, gather the soiled goods. Find your way home.

Even now, walk two steps behind them. We did not depart from our mothers, did not sacrifice our bodies for you to be made their slave again. Create room to escape. Their voices will call out to you. Ignore them. Wear headphones on your way from the car to the office. The bulky ones. The ones large enough to filter out all the ways that these Thomases disguise compliments to possess your body. Put on shades in the hallway. In December. On the way to your annual review. Do not let their hands touch yours for more than three seconds. The length of a boardroom handshake. But if you must, answer them with a clench that clots blood from their wrists. That instantly lets them know Sally Hemings no longer lives here. Her spirit was mutilated. Bones desecrated. Body laid barren then passed over. When your grip breaks from theirs these Thomases will know this self-evident truth too long circumvented: our flesh this supple and supreme being cloaked in shades of midnight holds more power in a single follicle of kinky 4C hair than exists in their entire lineage. They will deny this. Still, we were never theirs to covet.

Bruise your knees at the altar in prayer that our declarations will one day suffice. Tuck into the inner cavities of your ears, where our voices clamor, the knowledge that this is a day you may never see.

SHARK PRINCE

ERIC VAN HOOSE

Nine days after Chad goes missing, stuffed animals begin to arrive. Now there are too many.

Bonnie looks at the pile—snouts, beaks, trunks, tails, horns, hooves, whiskers, tentacles, manes. Their eyes look nowhere and into all places at once. The pile nears the ceiling.

The FedEx driver asks what is going on. The UPS driver asks, too. Bonnie asks if she can make it stop, and for once, the news is good: Yes. They can hold the packages. For now, for a little while, it can stop.

Chad's photo has made the national news. Bonnie knows this is because Chad is a handsome boy. The boxes come from Denver, Boise, Wichita, Indianapolis, Philadelphia. At first, she tried sorting—mammals, sea creatures, reptiles. But now there are too many. Now, they are all together.

In Chad's bedroom, the cloth and stuffing dampen the sound. For a moment, Bonnie half-senses a presence on her skin. It is uncomfortable and soothing. For a moment, she doesn't move.

She selects another box and slits the tape. Inside is a small crocodile with crossed eyes.

Near-universally: small creatures have been enlarged, giant animals miniaturized. There is a foot-long ant, a hippopotamus smaller than a child's fist. She looks at their faces, their eyes.

Bonnie has worked all day. She is tired. She is ready for bed, though she knows that when she lies down, she won't find rest. She chooses a small box. It will be the last for the night. She cuts it open

and withdraws a pink and blue shark. It wears a golden crown and a smile that conveys a dim sense of inner awareness. The toy's texture and heft invite a squeeze. Bonnie gives it a squeeze. The shark smiles on. Bonnie squeezes, now, harder than she should. Her cheeks pack with blood. She stops breathing in order to concentrate on creating force. There is weight in her teeth, blood crowding her eyes. The shark, if it could feel pain, would feel pain now. When Bonnie can hold her breath no longer, she throws the shark against the wall (and a small scream escapes, is absorbed). She inhales, looks at the pile. The shark's crown has come detached and rests against the wall. There in the corner, is the shark.

SEEDING FIRE

R.S. WYNN

One summer, when I was seven or maybe eight years old, our neighbor Sue's husband died, and she began demolishing a small barn next to her house. I crouched low in our field across the road, amid the bristly stems of black-eyed Susans and busy whine of mosquito wings, and watched as Sue pried board after board from her barn's sagging frame. She had the look of an elementary school teacher nearing retirement—halo of limp, gray curls; tight-lipped scowl—but she handled a crowbar, hammer, mallets of all sizes, rope, and even a tractor with skill. The clapboard cried when it snapped, a final ghostly wail from trees over a century dead. She piled the broken planks in a dirt pit, blessed them with accelerant, and struck a match.

Something about Sue's destructive project attracted me. I stood up, brushed beetles and wild grass seed from my sundress, wandered over, and offered my help. I was shy, *painfully shy* was how my mother described me to strangers when I darted behind her legs to escape their attention. Her phrase was accurate. Nausea gripped my stomach whenever adults other than my parents noticed me. Before he died, Sue's husband, Pete, would crane his kindly if somewhat yellow-toothed smile down close to my face when he talked to me. I felt like a worm in a robin's beak.

I say I offered Sue my help, but really, without speaking a word, I crossed the road between our homes, started gathering scraps of wood that had fallen at her feet, hauled armload after armload to the firepit, and heaved the wood into the flames. Larger planks I dragged

to the pit through trailing dirt and flipped them in, head over foot, with a bang.

I remember Sue looking at me and me looking at her. I remember a silent exchange: an understanding. Sue didn't lean over me the way grown-ups usually did or ask me well-meaning questions about school, which always seemed harder for me than other kids. Questions like, *Are you reading yet?* No, I wasn't. I was still struggling to form letters, erasing holes through alphabet worksheets. Or, *What grade will you be starting in the fall?* For me, the answer wasn't always a given; the threat of being "held back a year" loomed. At the barn, Sue did her work breaking things apart, and I did mine setting fire to them.

I returned every day for a week or two, and we labored through the heat of afternoons into evenings, wordlessly, devotedly, turning something into nothing. Before long, tools found their way into my hands, and I started demolishing the barn alongside Sue. Gray planks moaned as I dug the tail of a hammer behind them, rocked the handle back and forth, wedging loose square, rusted nails. Sometimes Sue would pummel boards until they shattered, then pry stubborn splinters free: an approach I also found satisfying. But the best part for me was carrying wood over to the fire pit. The best part was dodging firefly bursts of embers crackling skyward as I heaved my burden into the flames. The best part was watching something massive, foreboding, disappear.

Though only seven or eight years old, I wondered about Sue's grief project and the unknowable feelings of grown-ups. What was wrong with her barn? I didn't ask. Nothing immediately fatal, I suspected, but often with aging farm structures you think they'll be there forever, then suddenly they collapse. Maybe she wanted to head-off disaster. Or she harbored a grudge against post and beam architecture. Or maybe she, like I, just needed to tear something down.

I guess Pete's health had been failing for some time—cancer if I remember correctly—because a couple of summers prior my parents had taken Sue and Pete's sheep off their hands. I still have a photo marking the day we herded the flock across the road from their field to ours. I wondered then if the sheep felt disoriented, being fed by

new hands with their familiar field and owners nearby but inaccessible, the way I felt meeting new teachers in school each year. In the photo, my father is wearing his customary T-shirt and cutoffs. I'm wearing my customary uniform too: a sundress and knee-high winter boots—boots I insisted on wearing year-round because I liked their soft inner lining and didn't care how my feet sweat. I'm holding a crooked stick like I'd seen shepherds do. Behind me, Sue's husband and barn are still standing.

I think both Sue and I faced intractable realities. Her children were grown and had all moved away. Her husband was dead. Her life was too big for her alone, so parts of *her* life had to go also. The sheep, the barn, Pete's flannels, his tractor: tokens of the world she'd shepherded as a wife and mother, now sold, torn down, sent up in smoke, scattered. Eventually, Sue surrendered the whole property to a young, married couple starting a family. They still live there today—they've tilled new vegetable gardens, painted, and installed solar panels on the roof—though now I imagine they're counting down the years to retirement, too.

What intractable reality did I face? A world full of grown people—walking mysteries—who seemed to expect more of me than I could deliver. In school, sometimes my teachers asked me questions from the chalkboard, in front of everyone—like *what's thirty-six divided by six*, or *how do you spell m-o-u-n-t-a-i-n*. Most days, I managed to answer, though animal fear gnawed my stomach. But somedays, as my class fell silent waiting for me to speak, I'd erupt in tears. Even the customary adult-to-child greeting—hands on knees, face craning low toward mine—felt intolerable. Yet, tolerate it I had to, long day after long day, between fleeting summers. What I wanted was wild time, walking alone through July fields of black-eyed Susans in my soft, warm snow boots, time sitting in the evening shade of apple trees studiously listening for American toads to sing around me, time silently razing a barn with a sad woman whose grief made her as strange as me.

When the sun dipped low in the sky, Sue and I would sit down at the fire. I remember she'd say something like, "You hungry? I'll find something to eat," and then disappear inside her farmhouse. She'd

return with unzipped deli bags of cold-cuts and cheese, or jars of sweet pickles and sliced white bread. One time she found a package of turkey hot dogs in the back of her fridge. She handed me a long, supple stick and demonstrated how to skewer the dog, lengthwise, so it wouldn't fall off into the pit. I copied her form, piercing the dog through and through until I got it just right. Decades have passed since I've eaten meat, but that dinner remains one of my all-time favorite meals. The sun setting behind the giant arborvitae by my home across the street, the fire's orange heat warming my hands as I crisped up my turkey dog until it was encrusted with black char, the crickets chirruping in the fields encircling us while the barnwood hissed and sizzled and popped.

Eventually, we got to talking. I don't remember how it started, but I do remember that Sue was the first adult outside of my family with whom I felt comfortable speaking. We talked about the work we'd accomplished that day and what was left for us to do. We talked about the characteristics of excellent fire-poking sticks. Sue remarked on the stars winking into view. In time, we even got around to school. It was hard, I said. I couldn't really read yet, and my letters were too messy. Sometimes I'd cry during math. I hated the special ed teacher and that she made me count how many mistakes I'd made on each worksheet. "People are smart in different ways and good at different things," Sue said, or something like that. "You're smart with a hammer, and you're good being a friend. Though, your turkey dog roasting needs improvement." I *like* them burnt, I said. "Well, that's fine then," she said. "I guess you know what you're doing."

Three decades have passed since Sue and I shared that meal, so I wonder if I've misremembered our conversation. Or maybe I've gotten the timeline wrong—I might have been nine, we might have been razing that barn for three days or three weeks. Maybe Pete died of kidney disease or congestive heart failure. The barn is so long gone now, I wonder if anyone else remembers it ever existed. I wonder if Sue still lives in Florida or wherever it was that she moved. Do her children remember the smoky curl of their mother's hair that summer? Or the particular scent of her grief: sweat, charred meat, and rusted nails as hot as embers. Years later, did Sue recall our easy

conversations those evenings around the fire, when all other time—time not spent razing, breaking, reducing things to ash—felt both foreboding and overabundant?

Sometimes now, when I drive by Sue's old farm, I search below humming clouds of mosquitos and sunward-leaning black-eyed Susans for the footprint of that barn. In the same way, when I sit down to write, I look for the footprint of what Sue did for me and what she said. I believe that affinities are forged through our strangest inclinations, not despite them. I trust our human need for warmth and periodic immolation. Mostly, I remember Sue, that barn, and Pete too, by the flowers that have bloomed in their stead.

WE EVISCERATE WHAT WE LOVE

SARAH KAIN GUTOWSKI

A rabbit lies belly open on the kitchen floor,
its glassy eyes refracting lamp light,

viscera spilling onto tile. I read
its warm pink innards like tea leaves

before trying to lift the open envelope
of its body in my hands and out the door.

Daybreak repeats the nightmare's refrain
until I write it down, *Why do we kill what we love?*

and still my hands feel tinged with slaughter.
My youngest daughter loves the hare

who lives in our yard and looks for it
daily. The white spots on its back legs

appear brighter in sunshine; if I look
right at the sun and then down

the spots turn black.
They obliterate everything else.

Once my husband mowed over
a nest of kits, and one jumped

between the blades. His regret
was a dark spot obliterating

his afternoon. Within minutes
my vision returns. Within hours

regret fades. At least, you can see
beyond it. Once another kit, probably

a half-sibling, fell into a window well
and couldn't jump free from the vines

curled there like so many loosed
intestines. In my hands its needle-fine

bones trembled. I carried it inside
to show the kids, and the family dog

looked at me and the rabbit with love,
with devotion, as if he understood

just born, helpless. But when I let him
sniff the new, untested fur he opened

his mouth slowly and gently, as if
though he wasn't hungry, he would eat.

WHAT WE YIELD

TOM GAMMARINO

When the king tides flooded Waikīkī and box jellyfish floated along Kalākaua Avenue, I failed to understand that it had anything to do with me. But two years later, when the number of applicants to the private high school where I was principal had declined by nearly fifty percent, I began to feel the stings.

I was struggling to replace that third of our faculty who, having seen the writing on the wall, had left these islands behind. If I were smarter, or less stubborn, I might have followed them, but after a long, steep climb up the career ladder, I couldn't bring myself to abandon my position so easily. So we proceeded to weather a half-decade of more flooding, voracious hurricanes, ocean acidification and coral bleaching, plummeting real estate, an eviscerated tourist industry, widespread bankruptcy, and escalating crime, before our board of trustees—all living abroad now—shuttered our school indefinitely.

Luckily, my wife, Janet, was from a well-to-do family that had been living in these islands as long as any haole family. Pride in my self-reliance had always prohibited me from wanting any piece of their coffee fortune, but now that we faced genuine existential risk, some of my core values were turning out to be negotiable. That June, on a day that happened to be the hottest on record in the entire history of O‘ahu’s weather records, we locked up the house in the lush Mānoa Valley that, at well over a million dollars, was supposed to be the biggest investment I ever made—the latest assessment put it at a hundred and ten thousand—and we flew to the Big Island to move into a two-bedroom bungalow and learn to farm.

For exactly eight months, we got to believe we were going to live out our lives insulated from the tragedy that was playing out in the rest of the world. Manhattan was underwater, to say nothing of the Maldives and Bangladesh. California was perpetually on fire. Earlier summers had been favorable to tick populations, and Lyme disease was reaching epidemic proportions on the East Coast. Latin America was a gigantic dustbowl, and border skirmishes were in the news daily. Only China seemed to be doing relatively okay because, aside from having led the world in switching to renewables in the twenties, they had sufficient land to accommodate massive internal migration. Mind you, this was just the humans. Other species suffered genocides by the hour.

Now that it's so true, people no longer seem to use the expression "When it rains, it pours," but I can't think of a better phrase to describe that otherwise lovely midwinter day when I went out to the farm to discover the first signs of a fungus called coffee rust on the season's crop. Two hours later, Janet came home from the doctor's office, where she'd gone to complain of a persistent cough, to announce with admirable equanimity that she'd been diagnosed with one of the new mosquito-borne viruses for which there was as yet no vaccine. Science's best guess was that the virus had been locked up in permafrost somewhere for millions of years, but as with all the rest of this Pandora's box of a world, human activity had set it free. He predicted liver failure within six months, and that was with dialysis.

So each day now, I tend to Janet and work with her younger brother to establish our crop higher up the mountain. It's slow, tedious work. We walk the rows in our farmer's hats, handpicking the mature berries and throwing away the rusty ones; then we take them inside and roast, package, and ship them.

Our premium arabica orders come mostly from Toronto, which has been the center of the banking world since Wall Street went under. The cruel irony is that most of these folks who are ideally situated to survive this apocalypse got rich in part by denying that it was even happening. And they're still doing it. No one can in good faith pretend that Miami or honey or hope still exist, but they can keep on insisting that humans had nothing to do with it. Denialism

might as well be the wealthy set's religion now, long since having eclipsed Christianity. Meanwhile, Janet feels like there's an anvil on her chest.

It so happens we have in our back yard a silverleaf cotoneaster tree. The berries look not unlike coffee berries, and I know from watching my neighbor's dog have a seizure that they're poisonous. I doubt the poison survives roasting and brewing, but whenever the big accounts come through, I make sure to throw in a few of these berries for good measure. I'm under no illusions that there will be any heroes in this story, but we do what we can.

ROCKY FLATS

HUNTER THANE THERRON

A green smog descended over Denver the day Rocky Flats caught its final fire.

Of course, there were no headlines to explain the funky green cloud or people's erratic behavior. Or why, walking to work that morning, the woman saw a man crouched in a flowerbed off Colfax jamming a pair of children's scissors into his arm. Or why, back home, she found her fiancé duct-taped to a chair with all the shit flipped in their apartment and everything gone.

The only thing left was the man's broken toaster, in its same-old, obnoxious spot right on the corner of the kitchen counter—

I can't believe they left it, said the woman, not hiding her dismay.

I know right—thank god!, he said after the woman ripped the tape from his hairless lip—

Mistake #1: The man, instead of embracing the woman, darted across the kitchen to ensure that his precious toaster had not been harmed.

One week later, the man's friend Raymond, an extramarital PI, called the man and told him about this nuclear fire from a place named Rocky Flats.

Rocky what?

Come for a drive, said Raymond. Thirty minutes. Be ready.

Just before leaving, the woman walked in the door with a bony, lumpy-headed dog that immediately pissed on the floor. And the man gave her *that* look, and she returned *that* look, and said there was no way she was sitting around alone in this skeleton-ass apartment—

Raymond's incessant honking broke their awkward stare-down. The man excused himself, slipped to the alley, and hopped in Raymond's car, which whipped eighty down the freeway, tailed an ambulance through traffic, then swung north up Indiana Street until the city broke to suburbs just before the hills.

And *that*, said Raymond pointing, is Rocky Flats.

Stopped on the shoulder, the man noticed a chunky beige warehouse in the wide field with a big black scar across its roof. Ray pointed out that the scar was from last week's fire—

And those shiny ponds?

Those, Ray said, are the infamous plutonium catchment ponds that leaked last month into Walnut Creek, AKA Denver's water supply—

So we've been drinking . . .

It seems that way, said Raymond all cool and James Dean, glaring out at the building on the plain.

The man asked if that could explain everyone's crazy behavior, like that scissor-in-arm epidemic, or those B&E guys in Chuckee masks who jacked everything but the toaster—

Raymond: Why do you care about a stupid toaster?

The man explained—It had been his mother's. After months of shitty debate over her estate, of his twelve siblings squabbling over the house, the land, the bone china, the Picasso—Fuck you all, the man had said, I'm only taking this toaster.

But him and the woman were swing dancing last month, and he went to dip her, but she panicked, reached out, and wrapped her arm around the toaster cord—crashing it to pieces on the kitchen tile.

And, get this, *she* blamed *him* because he apparently hadn't given proper dip-indication—

But, said Ray, *if* she had trusted you . . .

Exactly! said the man. Ray dropped him back in the alley and sped off. And the man, thinking of his mother, strolled past his house, up Colfax, to Witch Marisa's Voodoo Emporium.

The incense at the door instantly relaxed his head, and he turned to Witch Marisa herself behind the counter and asked her what on Earth smelled so good.

She grinned and waved him behind the counter, down the hall, past the toilet to a black steel door—which she pushed back to a red-painted room with shelves full of kittens and puppies floating in glass jars, of shrunken heads strewn around the altar of an inverted cross sculpted from pure obsidian.

Witch Marisa handed her curious customer a pamphlet titled *Divergent Prayer: Times & Dates*. And, although she never said *Satanist Cult*, the man caught her drift, and nearly jumped from his boots with joy—Finally! After all these years!

He left with 500 bucks of Satanist starter-kit shit—cow bile candles, blood salt, evil prayers, Ozzy's portrait. Back home, he stashed his new life in the air duct just behind their bed, then fried some shallots, and waited for the woman to return from her and Bowser's city-wide walks.

Ideal black magic situation, to which, over four months, the man pledged complete devotion. Memorized all the prayers while knelt before the blood-salt pentagram, chanting until his tinny falsetto turned growling baritone—cursing the EPA, the CIA, the Department of Energy, and those careless, sick-hearted people who spit wet gum onto hot sidewalks

He got so into cursing one night that he didn't hear the front door open, and he didn't see the woman standing in the hallway with her dog—

And she froze, catching him prostrate with his eyes rolled back, and tongue clicking against the roof of his mouth while Bowser snarled and tugged against the leash—

And the man shot to his feet and said, There's a malfunctioning plutonium factory five miles West!

His stunned fiancé stood silent and motionless while her brick-headed man rambled about line workers in glove boxes chiseling plutonium hockey pucks, which were the pit of *nuclear* bombs, and they made 100 pucks per day, meaning 3,650 a year, so over sixteen years that's—

So what? she asked.

The man froze—You don't care?

The woman laughed: I *care*, but they either build one here or in Chicago or LA or Cleveland, right? So if not us, then who?

But what if we had kids?

Maybe then. But isn't that pretty selfish to dodge all our friends just cause some small amount of plutonium flies over the city once every five years?

But . . . But . . .

Also—isn't it kind of evil to know all this, and leave your friends to bear it alone? I mean, would you really wanna live if the factory exploded and killed all your friends? If they're really your friends, wouldn't you wanna die with them?

You're a Russian spy.

Stop.

CIA.

Harold.

I'm gonna blow up the factory. Please. Detain me.

The woman shook her head, and reached over the toaster to set her glass down.

Watch out, he said, for that cord—

And that was it—Shit slid downhill until the shit became a literal shit valley, which opened to a deep ocean trench. It took one year—Can you believe?—of 90210-type drama strong enough to split the Earth—

Bail ASAP! shouted the woman's friends. Meanwhile, Ray showed the man pictures of the melting nuclear reactors and said, This is your domestic life. But still—nothing. No one changed. They came home at night and laid in bed and didn't speak. The man couldn't sleep and one night, six months in, turned over and found the woman with her eyes wide open—studying the ceiling—until she realized he also wasn't sleeping and they both jumped back—

New plan: Man on couch and woman on bed.

Why the couch? she asked.

Because, he said, I'm trying to be chivalrous.

To which she said: Chivalry is protecting my plants.

The man was now a Black Magic red belt, and a regular at Witch Marisa's Derisive Prayer ceremonies—participating in various chants

and raw flesh eatings. It was all very formal. Mrs. Hankley supplied the Texas Sweet Tea and oatmeal raisin cookies as Witch Marisa spread *authentic* macaque's blood over the granite slab before the obsidian cross, and everyone knelt down before the blood in Salvation Army Halloween robes and began ooo-ing and wa-wa-ing and hissing and spitting on the blood—

Funny coincidence: Mr. Bevins, the head prayer-guy, was also a line worker at Rocky Flats.

No way! said the man. Is it true about the explosions and the leaks?

Mr. Bevins glared through his bushy eyebrows, nodded, then asked, But you wanna know what's truly horrible?

Well, he continued, we deal with Leakers by poking a hole in their line glove. Last woman who snitched found the hole after an entire week of work. Melanoma. Terminal. Even worse? Everyone on that line is as god-fearing as your grandma, but we don't like being crossed. The benefits are too stellar. One month holiday and free donuts every Friday. Premium coffee, and I'm not joshing you. It's really good stuff—

The man and woman had a joke right after the man's mother died—

One day, she said, I'm gonna leave with everything, even the toaster.

The man only remembered this while walking home, and froze on the sidewalk with a lump in his throat—What if she wasn't kidding?

He was gripped by this sudden fear, and prepared a whole lengthy apology right there. He would denounce his bad attitude and monstrous faith. He pictured his fiancé with holes in her gloves, with glowing, green hands picking a malignant lump on her cheek. People blurred around as he stood, planted, refusing to budge until he found the perfect words—

I can't live without you! he cried, bursting through the door, causing the woman to leap for her mace—which she dropped when she saw her fiancé dressed like Voldemort with his cheeks streaming in the doorway. He was melting, tearing off his black robe, and

renouncing all the small animals he killed, and all the spirits he conjured—Baby! he cried, I wanna be redeemed!

The woman crooked her head, and examined her fiancé for a solid two minutes before nodding over to the table, and flashing him the paper—

BREAKING NEWS: ROCKY FLATS EXPOSED—SET FOR IMMEDIATE SHUTDOWN!

And the man sprung up, and danced around the table, and hugged the woman, and lifted her off her feet, and she actually laughed, and really kissed his neck as their clothes molted off into a spectacular, sentimental session of make-up friction that left them both spent and panting with their heads crooked into each other's necks—

You know, she said, I was lying about dying with my friends.

And he said: I was only a Satanist for the hors d'oeuvres.

And that was it. They were good—for long enough, at least—to dance again, and touch again, and joke again. New idea: lock out all friends and other Doomsayers. Sell the TV, and toss the radio, and cancel that Denver Post subscription. They stayed inside and played Monopoly and Uno for one whole month. They went to work, came right home, and never said a word about that goddamn toaster—

Until one Tuesday night in August, when the happy couple heard the soft tink, tink, tink of rocks against their window. What the fuck? muttered the woman, half-asleep. And the man leaned forward, threw on a towel, shuffled out back—

And guess who he saw?

Yep—motherfucking *Raymond* in his cheap tweed suit reeking of Everclear with a handful of gravel.

Rapunzel!, shouted Ray, Your phone broke? He-he. Listen—You wanna hear a secret?

And the man, barefoot under the moon, could not resist.

Ray glanced over his shoulder, pressed his lips to the man's ear, and whispered that the shutdown was only causing more problems. His inside source confirmed: the big concrete dome, to isolate the reactors, had caved ten days ago, causing the plutonium catchment pond to leak again—right into fucking Standley Reservoir!

So?

So? bellowed Ray, That's the *new* drinking water source for the *whole* of Denver!

But they shut it off?

Only four days ago. That's right. Feel it yet? asked Ray, rubbing his belly, saying that no one was gonna release any official warnings, but instead advise people against swimming in the reservoir—

Because the mud, explained Ray, caught all the plutonium which settled on the bottom.

One week of anxiety became two became three. The man began buying news again, and restarted his marathon pacing. The woman got edgy—Had he resumed his Satanic Oath? Was he still griping about the toaster?

What's up? she finally asked. And the man twiddled his thumbs, looked to the floor, and gave some sulky, wet-towel answer about some dumb-ass reservoir being sprinkled with a little uranium—

Come on, she said. Let's go.

What a blockhead! The man actually believed the woman when she said they were going to the store—so he was even more surprised when she zipped his '69 Impala out of the city and through Arvada, pulling off into a gravel lot with a sign reading Standley Reservoir—

Why'd you bring me here?

Because, she said, pulling his arm, and he, like men do, followed her to the water.

Where she, without hesitation, waded into the murky sludge fully clothed and whistled to Bowser, who crashed into the shallows, and stomped through the muck while the woman squeezed it through her fingers, and squished it through her toes, and belly-flopped, dove, breast-stroked, and resurfaced with two handfuls of muck—

I'm saving these for you.

But the man froze—He'd forgotten to ask Raymond *exactly* how much plutonium was in that pond. Maybe only a little, right? Certainly not enough to—

(The woman: Five . . . Four . . .)

But then again, suppose it were a *very* harmful amount, and he dove in and died an unpleasant death. Died next month with the

neon-orange skin of those Chernobyl engineers whose teeth turned black and disintegrated into powder—

(Three . . . Two . . .)

But maybe it wasn't so immediate, and he'd be forty and in his prime, and one day he'd faint and wake up connected to a bunch of tubes at some special hospital in Nuremberg with his knees all writhy and shriveled and his mother's hands painted over his own—

(One and a half . . . One . . .)

What about the woman? Would she die? If she died would he die? And the dog? Well . . . not really a hair-on-your-slacks kind of guy—But the woman! Maybe he should. He definitely would—

(Zero.)

The woman dunked under, and came out clean. Her eyes were red and puffy, but she said nothing. She walked alone to the car, and sat dripping in the passenger seat.

She didn't speak that whole night. In a panic, the man phoned Raymond to ask about the radiation in the pond—

Are you kidding me? asked Ray. It's got enough juice to castrate a young stallion.

The man slammed down the phone and paced his apartment—8:13 a.m., late for another day of work. He threw on his tie, brushed his teeth, and scribbled out a quick note before frying eggs for the woman who was out with Bowser.

At the door, he left the sappy note saying how much he loved her, and that he *really* loved her, and would be happy to go Standley Reservoir tonight to swallow his share of plutonium sludge—

Well done, he thought, smiling, leaving through the alley as the woman arrived through the front. She scanned the note, took her toothbrush from the bathroom, and pulled the toaster from its socket before closing her eyes and standing completely still in their barren living room listening to the rush of traffic outside—

Cut scene to a woman full of plutonium speeding through Laramie, Wyoming, in her ex's Impala. Cut to plutonium dog resting its plutonium head on her plutonium lap, both fleeing a plutonium city to go live plutonium lives as a broke-to-shit toaster rattles around the back—

The toaster she's planning to deposit at her ex's mother's grave in an artificially grassy knoll overlooking San Diego, in a cemetery filled with the constant shh-shh-shh of rotating sprinklers that, like strict librarians, fight to silence all traffic from the street below—

And does she gasp—this plutonium woman—as her bones acquire this slight green glow which bleeds through her dog's fur also, as he wakes from his dog-slumber to smell air he's never smelled before? And, curious, he eases his blocky head out the window to steal a glimpse of this bright, furious, rushing land, and—

That's the craziest thing about dogs, thinks the glowing woman, You stick them in a car and they don't know where they're going or for how long they'll be gone.

SOLO

RYAN BROD

I run the narrow gravel path alone, passing other able-bodied men and women wearing masks or not, some waving as I lift my gator over my mouth and nose, which I do to protect the older ones, the ones my parents' age, though I'm not sure it makes much difference outside; late October, sunlight flat but warm, one of Maine's last T-shirt days till spring, and I reach the one-and-a-half mile marker of Back Cove Trail, my blood oxygenating wonderfully and my mind loosening more-so than my calves and hamstrings, which I've forgotten to stretch after yesterday's run, and I feel my healthy, low-risk lungs burning, wishing I'd avoided the vending machine M&M's amidst my stressful day teaching masked freshmen, and I am thinking of my body's vehicular nature (and the shit I put in it as fuel) when I notice three men in motorized carts—wheelchairs—parked across the road from the trail, facing the sunlight, their heads hanging like wilted sunflowers, their bodies bulbous and slack, skin a bit too white, the not-quite-right-ness of their crooked, gnarled arms, all three of them motionless, as if wax figures of themselves and not living, breathing creatures, closer than six feet apart from each other, and I wonder if they are waiting for someone to come and get them, and I worry they've been forgotten, left in the sun by some absent-minded but well-intentioned worker, until I am nearly past, my legs churning at a pedestrian 8-minute-mile pace, when I hear the music radiating from one of their smartphones: frantic-fingered guitar solo, minimal reverb, no distortion, a hectic conglomeration of notes, a scale like a man running up and then down and then up a steep flight

of stairs, and I wonder which of them is playing it, and if he plays it often for his friends or if they've tired of his selection, and as I pass I see their faces lit by the same sun that burns my neck, their expressions not of helplessness, nothing to warrant pity, but instead a kind of unabashed contentment, and I lift my long and mobile arms to play along, air-guitaring my invisible Fender as I near the two-mile mark, and I realize the three men are not waiting for someone to fetch them, it is I who was awaiting *their* arrival, as my legs propel me around the cove and back toward the parking lot not as quickly as they used to, my body blading toward its thirty-eighth year, and suddenly near mile marker 2.5 I'm in the concert venue, massive and dark, with retired numbers hanging from rafters, a crowd of warm and upright bodies pressed against mine, and on stage one of the men in the wheelchairs sits with his head leaned back and his fingers flailing the fretboard of his invisible guitar, soloing, the music he makes washing over the crowd, over me, notes rushing in like the tide filling Back Cove, each note clearly and totally his own, and for a little while I forget the ache in my knee and my desire to quit, so that I'm just a man in the pulsing crowd, with the stink of my neighbors filling my nostrils, aware of our collective and wretched beauty, all of us breathing the same air, unmasked, arms raised for the guitar player, lost for a while in his music.

ODE TO BOWLS

BRAD RICHARD

Here's a nested set of five, tan, sturdy, rough-lipped,
my mother bought at a flea market from a weeping widower,

and there was once a chipped porcelain sink
where baby-I was bathed,

and a marble font where sinners' fingers dip—
but not mine, not in years.

I thought I knew the washbowl and pitcher, gold-trimmed,
my grandmother kept on a stand in my father's old bedroom—

heirloom, I thought, until, after her funeral, I pulled
from the pitcher's mouth a foxed paper tag:
2-piece, \$49⁵⁰, in cursive pencil.

At the intersection of Jefferson and Claiborne,
I roll down my window to place five dollars
in a Styrofoam bowl a man holds toward me.

What is a bowl? Half a bubble
glowing, blown from molten glass,

clay thrown on a potter's wheel
then fired and glazed—

always fire in every bowl's making,
always a cooling to harden this soft shape.

In the kitchen,
I drape a towel over the bowl on the counter
where bread dough swells with a billion breaths,

I stack cereal bowls in a cabinet
like skulls in an ossuary,

and place, on the pantry's highest shelf,
broken halves of bowls I've loved
and might glue whole again.

There's the cats' water bowl
that says DOG.

There's the resin-lined bowl
that fills my head with smoke
I release like a prayer.

And here

is the bowl I live in,
reclaimed basin of a marsh

where Native hunters caught snipe for Creole housewives,
until the railroad came, tracking the basin's rim, then crossing it,

then parcel by parcel marked off for houses, schools, libraries,
streets
where potholes are bowls sand and gravel never fill

but water will.

CONTRIBUTOR COMMENTS



Lindsay Adams, “Girls Who Bite”

Lindsay Adams (she/her) is an internationally produced playwright and nonfiction writer who lives in Saint Louis and is currently pursuing her Ph.D. in Early Modern Literature.

“Girls Who Bite” is my way of working through an experience I had of workplace harassment as a young person. It looks at the prevalence of this kind of subtle and often explained away harassment—digging deeper into the problematic nature of the “jokes” that are made, not just by catcalling strangers or inappropriate colleagues, but the “nice guys” you thought you could trust. It is an affirmation of and a call to all the girls who have dealt with this shit.



Natalie Axton, “The One about the (Dead) Baby”

Natalie Axton (she/her) is the co-founder of the Appalachia Book Company and the founder of Critical Read. She walks her cat in eastern Kentucky and far west Texas, but not at the same time. You can find her on Twitter at @natalieaxton .

My MFA thesis was due in a month and I was thirty pages short of the page count, so I started working in a private study room at the Pike County Library every day in an effort to try and FOCUS. One afternoon I sat down there and wrote “The One About the (Dead) Baby.” It came out in forty-five minutes and was a total surprise to me. The repetition of the phrase ‘dead baby’ was the key to the flow. Trying to find your voice as a writer is hard work. You have to give yourself permission to say the things people don’t want you to say.



Ryan Brod, “Solo”

Ryan Brod (he/him) is an educator, fly-fishing guide, and freelance writer whose work has appeared in River Teeth, The Maine Review, and Gray’s Sporting Journal, among other places.

On a recent morning run I contemplated bodies, fuel, distancing, privilege of movement. My mind constructed narratives about the strangers I passed. I ran by three men sitting in motorized chairs. I worried the men had been left behind, forgotten. In reality, they were listening to a guitar solo on a smart phone—enjoying music with friends. The essay grew from there, thoughts tumbling as I ran. Oxygenated blood awakened me to our undeniable connectivity, to the wrongness of my assumptions. “A huge percentage of the stuff that I tend to be automatically certain of is, it turns out, totally wrong and deluded,” David Foster Wallace said. The music stayed with me.



Nia Dickens, “The prayer Sally Hemings’s mother teaches about boys named Thomas”

Nia Dickens (she/her) is a fiction writer, pursuing an MFA at the University of Miami. Find Nia at niadickens.com, on Instagram @dickensliketheauthor, or on Twitter @dickensnia.

The voices of Sally Hemings and her mother, Betty, woke me out of a deep sleep one night and told me to write those words down. Sally was enslaved under Thomas Jefferson and birthed six of his children. For years, historians debated Jefferson’s culpability and/or if the pair were in love. But the lack of agency Blacks had during slavery forces a simpler truth: Thomas Jefferson raped Sally Hemings. I wanted to illuminate how Black women have been forced to survive rape and sexual assault since the American Revolution and shine a light on the innate power that still exists within us.



Tom Gammarino, “What We Yield”

Tom Gammarino (he/him) is author of the novels King of the Worlds and Big in Japan, and the novella Jellyfish Dreams. Shorter works have appeared in American Short Fiction, The Writer, Bamboo Ridge, Entropy, The New York Review of Science Fiction, The New York Tyrant, and The Hawai‘i Review, among others. He has received a Fulbright fellowship in creative writing and the Elliot Cades Award for Literature, Hawai‘i’s highest literary honor.

I’m hardly the first to observe that writing fiction about climate change poses some unique challenges. On the one hand, there’s the risk of writing mere disaster porn; on the other hand, the scale of the crisis has a way of exploding the usual loci of meaning, making dramas of the human psyche feel trifling, even indulgent. “What We Yield” is my attempt to split the difference. If rising seas, mass extinction, and billions of climate refugees risk exceeding our emotional grasp, surely a hike in the price of coffee can still command our attention.



Sarah Kain Gutowski, “We Eviscerate What We Love”

Sarah Kain Gutowski (she/her) is the author of Fabulous Beast: Poems (Texas Review Press).

Photo credit: Amanda Kain

Not surprisingly, my dreams became more vivid and more gruesome with the growing pandemic last spring. What did surprise me was how everything in my waking life also turned more grotesque—or perhaps I was surprised (tho why, at forty-four?) by how grotesque waking life can be. Although I wrote this last spring—homebound and rescuing numerous small wild creatures from the jaws of our hound dog—the rest of the year demonstrated quite vividly our vast human capacity to damage one another, even—or maybe especially—those we claim to love.



Anthony Immergluck, “Two Fathers”

Anthony Immergluck (he/him) is a poet, critic, musician, and publishing professional originally from Chicago but now living in Madison, Wisconsin. He received his MFA in Creative Writing (Poetry) from NYU-Paris. Some of his recent work appears or is forthcoming in Nimrod, Blue Mountain Review, Sequestrum, Beloit Poetry Journal, and Sonora Review. Anthony loves pit bulls and Brazilian music. Twitter: @AnthonyImmerg. Instagram: anthony.immergluck

I write a lot about how various forms of illness, caretaking, and hardship interact with social expressions of masculinity. This poem was my way of interrogating the moral and emotional distinctions we try and fail to build when caring for loved ones who aren’t at their best.



Joanna Manning, “Let it go”

Joanna Manning (she/her) is a Pennsylvania native who now calls the Pacific Northwest home. Find her—and some creative inspiration—at jlmannning.com.

This piece was written early on during the pandemic, when I was trying to come to terms with the apparent capriciousness of life. I’ve been a fan of the Stoics for years, so I’ve often meditated on the notion that we have no control over anything outside of ourselves, but one day I was struck with a memory of my grandfather convincing me that I could make clouds disappear. It was a balm for me. There were days during the lockdown when I truly needed to remember that feeling of control. I’m so grateful to my grandfather for this memory.



Sakae Manning, “Shikata ga nai”

Sakae Manning (they/them) writes in Los Angeles with their heart in Oakland and may be found on Twitter @sakaetrist.

Photo credit: Olivia Aguilar

When my mother's family declined her ashes being returned to Japan and ghosted me after I said I would visit, I learned defying tradition for a woman means forever. Compartmentalizing her life was more than saving face. It was survival. Her life is my life, and my life reflects her life. She has taught me a woman can search the entire planet and still not find the freedom she seeks. She has to shape her own kind of hope, and she must be prepared to go it alone.



Thea Matthews, “Excerpt from *Americana*”

Born and raised in San Francisco, CA, poet Thea Matthews (she/her) is an author, educator, and currently an MFA Poetry candidate at New York University. theamatthews.com; Instagram: @theamatthews_.

Photo credit: Coskun Caglayan

Americana emerged as a series of poems bearing the same title. As an anti-long poem and manuscript in-progress, these incendiary poems interrogate U.S. history, as well as the questions: what does it *truly* mean to be of this country, to be an American. What is Justice? What is Liberty? In writing these poems, I cross-examine the evidence of U.S. past and present times; and implore erasure as well as ekphrastism to strip traditional American folk and colonial art bare until one only sees the complex truth of our value system.



Fejiro Okifo, “Kelewele”

Fejiro Okifo (she/her) is a writer and a resident physician in Detroit, Michigan.

I took a trip to Cape Coast, Ghana in the summer of 2019 for a research project on breast cancer outcomes. My collaborators on the project, two vivacious young women

of similar age, became my good friends. We went to the beach after work, frequented the marketplace in search of kelewele, and exchanged dreams about our careers. They shared candid personal and anecdotal experiences of challenges women faced in a male-dominated educational system. I wrote this story to capture the natural beauty of Ghana, the will and creativity of their women, and the promise of a more equitable future.



Karl Plank, “Impressions, Revisited”

Karl Plank (he/him) is the author of A Field, Part Arable (Lithic, 2017), BOSS: Rewriting Rilke (Red Bird Chapbooks, 2017), and the critical work, The Fact of the Cage: Reading and Redemption in David Foster Wallace’s Infinite Jest (Routledge, 2021). A past winner of the Thomas Carter Prize (Shenandoah) and a Pushcart nominee, his work has appeared in numerous journals and he is the J.W. Cannon Professor of Religious Studies at Davidson College. karlplankpoetry.com.

Alene Clayton Holderby was my great-aunt who taught first-grade for many years in Asheville, NC. She and my Uncle Pryor were fond of taking drives in the mountains, especially near Cane Creek where she had grown up. After one such venture in July 1961, she wrote a poem “Impressions from Mountain Gap Road: After a Rainstorm.” My poem enters into conversation with hers and seeks to prolong its imagery, now sixty years later.



Brad Richard, “Ode to Bowls”

Brad Richard (he/him) is the author of four books of poems (Habitations, Motion Studies, Butcher’s Sugar, Parasite Kingdom) and three chapbooks (The Men in the Dark, Curtain Optional, Larval Songs), has published poems and reviews in many journals, including Green Mountains Review, New Orleans Review, Plume, Guernica, American Letters & Commentary, Prairie Schooner, The Iowa Review and Massachusetts Review. He has taught creative writing at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts (NOCCA) and Lusher Charter School, and is a faculty member of the Kenyon Review Writers Workshop for Teachers. braddrichard.org, Twitter: @BradRichard4.

Photo credit: Mitchell Soileau

At the start of the pandemic, I joined the legions of socially isolated bread-makers. This re-acquainted me with some of my favorite bowls, which had belonged to my mother. I've always loved bowls—the way their form mimics natural forms, including a cupped hand; the fact that, because we use them to share food (and sometimes drink), they're emblematic of human communities. So, while re-learning how to make bread, I was also thinking anew about bowls; and one day, while writing on Zoom with a friend, I decided to write about this thing that was on my mind.



Anne Starling, “Objective Correlative”

Anne Starling (she/her) was born in California and now lives in Florida. Her work has appeared in New Ohio Review, Rattle, Missouri Review, The Southern Review and Carolina Quarterly.

We often hear “life is a journey.” If that’s so, it’s a journey we’re all dropped into with no prep or time to pack. We have to find own way, our own lives, given a particular set of circumstances. Perspective is skewed when so much is random and changing. I think of life as a crossing of terrain—a field specifically—not ocean, because the ocean frankly scares me: its immensity, its opaque quality, those weird bottom fish. This poem is my best representation of what it’s like to be alive so far.



Hunter Thane Therron, “Rocky Flats”

Hunter Thane Therron (he/him) currently lives in southern Thailand. His work has appeared in Sundog Lit, the Superstition Review, Outlook Springs, the Little Patuxent Review, and others. He was nominated for a 2021 Pushcart prize, and is a past fellow at the ÖrÖ and Red Gate Residencies.

Photo credit: Katja Niemi

I was living in a cabin on a small Finnish island this past spring when my friend sent me a demo of this song he made. I wanted to write something that both satirized and embraced that song’s wild nostalgia for old love, past partners. There was this plutonium plant twenty miles outside Denver that leaked into reservoirs and caught on fire a couple times—the usual! (And now

it's a wildlife refuge!!) I hoped to analyze how ubiquitous, abstract ideas like Nationalism or Arms Race might affect a group of naive crust yuppies who seem otherwise removed from gruesome, international power struggles.



Eric Van Hoose, “Shark Prince”

Eric Van Hoose (he/him) lives in Cincinnati, Ohio; his fiction has appeared in CutBank, Sycamore Review, Bat City Review, Bluestem, STORGY, and elsewhere.

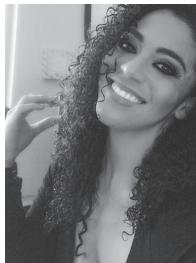
One of my favorite short story writers is James Purdy; he often places opposites in close proximity and follows the resulting tension to its breaking point. Here, I'm mostly imitating him: the mother's grief for her missing boy plays out against an outpouring of love and kindness, but sometimes even love isn't enough. This is part of a novel in progress.



Marcos McPeek Villatoro, “Lost Hillbilly”

Marcos McPeek Villatoro (he/him) holds the Fletcher Jones Endowed Chair in Writing at Mount St. Mary’s University, Los Angeles. You can find more of his work at thewritingbull.com.

“Lost Hillbilly” is about my father, Ralph McPeek, who was born a Tennessee sharecropper, worked much of his life as a mechanic and retired a coal miner. His entire life was a struggle, made more so by marrying my El Salvadoran mother during a time when mixed-race marriages were verboten in the U.S. South. I was the outcome—raised to believe I was a “mongrel.” My father, who was known as “poor white trash” and a “traitor to the white race,” struggled all his life with these racist notions. It set the tone for our family life, one steeped in the racial thinking of the South.



Donna Weaver, “Litter with No Canopy”

Donna Weaver, (she/her) the founding editor of Caketrain Journal & Press, is a graduate of the University of Pittsburgh and her work has appeared in or is forthcoming from the American Journal of Poetry, Griffel, the Bangalore Review, Epiphany Literary Journal, Aji Magazine, Solstice Literary Magazine, Drunkenboat, Colere and others.

When an ambulance arrived at my mother’s home on the morning that she died, struggling to breathe, she was still strong enough to fight the EMTs as they tried to assist in transporting her to the hospital. I was in an undergrad poetry workshop as she ripped an oxygen mask from her face. By lunchtime she would be dead at forty-nine years old and since then I have not been able to stop writing about her death.



R. S. Wynn, “Seeding Fire”

Rosanna (she/her) lives in Maine with her family and the perfect number of dogs (six, in case you were wondering), and is the Editor of The Maine Review.

Last February, early COVID, I decided to clean house. I emptied the attic and basement and brought loads of outgrown clothes, kitsch, and furniture to Goodwill. Then I scoured the kitchen, living room, and office for any item I considered non-essential. Everything I could easily shed was donated. It felt good—soothing—so I kept going. I got rid of things I knew I’d miss, useful and sentimental items. I realized I was using little losses to feel a measure of control and prepare for a period of greater loss. Then I remembered Sue, her husband Pete, and their barn.



Yiru Zhang, “Whenever I Wanted to Say Something I Said Nothing”

A writer, critic, and translator, Yiru Zhang (she/her) published widely in China. She writes in both English and Chinese, and translates American short stories into Chinese as well.

For years, I have been wondering about the possibility of crossing boundaries. Having spent my teenage years in both Michigan and China, I often find myself lost between two languages, two cultures, and two identities. When I lived in North America again after my college years, I met those who left their home countries out of fear. They were determined to start anew, frustrated when struggling to find a place for themselves, yet still attached to their home countries.