Gandy Dancer

A student-led literary magazine of the State University of New York

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We publish writing and visual art by current students and alumni of the State University of New York (SUNY) campuses only.

Our Post Script section features work by SUNY alumni. We welcome nominations from faculty and students as well as direct submissions from alumni themselves. Faculty can email Rachel Hall, faculty advisor, at hall@geneseo.edu with the name and email address for the alum they wish to nominate, and alums can submit through our website. Both nominations and direct submissions should indicate which SUNY the writer attended, provide a graduation date, and the name and email of a faculty member we can contact for confirmation.

We use Submittable.com to manage author submissions and the editorial process. Prospective authors can submit at gandydancer.submittable.com/submit. Please use your SUNY email address for your user account and all correspondence.

Gandy Dancer will accept up to three submissions from an author at a time.

Fiction: We accept submissions up to 25 pages. Stories must be double-spaced. We are unlikely to accept genre or fan-fiction, though stranger things have happened…

Creative Nonfiction: We accept submissions up to 25 pages. CNF must be double-spaced.

Poetry: Three to five poems equal one submission. Poems must be submitted as a single document. Format as you would like to see them in print. Our text columns are generally 4.5 inches wide, at 11pt font.

Visual Art: We accept submissions of art—especially photos, drawings, and paintings—in the most popular file formats, such as jpeg, tiff, and pdf. Submitted images should ideally be at least 4,000 pixels on the longest side. Art accepted by Gandy Dancer is generally published in color in our electronic journal; however, they may appear as gray-scale in our print publication. Please include work titles in your submissions!

Please visit us at www.gandydancer.org, or scan the QR code below.

Questions or comments? Send us an email at gandydancer@geneseo.edu

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Dearest Readers—

A few weeks ago, we attended the Forum for Undergraduate Student Editors (FUSE) annual conference at Bennington College in Vermont. It was invigorating to converse with so many other like-minded, literary-loving undergraduate students. On the first day of the conference, keynote speakers Susan Sgorbati and Danny Michaelson discussed, among other things, the discovery of the dye for the color mauve. Before globalization, the speakers continued, Westerners thought only white swans existed—any other color was unimaginable. Explorers, however, would eventually encounter the black swan, and our speakers challenged us: imagine the mauve swan, imagine the possibilities that seem decidedly impossible.

At *Gandy Dancer* we are always on the lookout for mauve swans—especially with our new additions to each issue of the journal, whether it's music (in our last edition) or Post Script (which we added a year ago). This year has been especially swan-filled. Our magazine welcomed a new team of all-women editors and readers, converted to Wordpress, switched to Submittable (Farewell, OJS!), added a flash fiction section, and included a translation for the first time. One of the most exciting additions, however, was our first-ever contest: The *Gandy Dancer* Award in Creative Nonfiction. As always, we were astounded by the level of talent displayed in our submissions, and creative nonfiction was no exception—although some hard decisions were made, a winner emerged: Chloe Forsell, a sophomore in the Creative Writing Track at SUNY Geneseo, for her essay "Water and Light." We were immediately struck by the emotional resonance of the second-person voice and the captivating and poignant imagery. Our issue opens with "Water and Light"—with the hope that you, dearest readers, will begin your journey with us here.

Gandy Dancer's reach is also expanding. Although only two years old, we've received submissions of art, prose, and poetry from over 30 schools in the SUNY system. This semester, we can add the Fashion Institute of Technology, Purchase, and Cortland to our archives. From the very beginning, *Gandy Dancer*'s goal has been to foster a community for the diverse talents of SUNY students, as well as provide a space for conversation between students with similar creative interests. And as we enter the spring semester and begin to look towards our post-graduation plans (as well as fantastically-colored birds in the other spectrum of our lives), we continue to be in awe of the breadth of talent we've seen from our fellow SUNY students.

This semester, when we stepped into the role of Managing Editors, neither of us quite knew what to expect. We didn't expect to debate proper

hyphen usage over bowls of butternut squash and apple soup; travel to Vermont and find the only train-themed restaurant in Bennington (with the most delectable eggplant parm we've ever had); or forge personal and professional connections with writers and editors across the country, in addition to New York State. And despite all of the ups and downs, last-minute panics, and moments of elation after setting our hands on a particularly enthralling submission, we will be so very sad to pass on the torch this December. We do, however, know that our more-than-capable successors will continue on this path of imagining the possibilites in the decidedly impossible.

Here's to more mauve swans!
Katie & Lucia
Managing Editors, Fall 2014

Table of Contents

THE *GANDY DANCER* AWARD IN CREATIVE NONFICTION

Chloe Forsell
Water and Light 1

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Erin Koehler
The Phototroph 24

Amanda Coffey
Half-Truths 37

Rose Fritzky-Randolph
I'll Pray for Him 48

Michael Cieply
Index of a Hypothetical Journal 68

Kathryn Bockino
The Most Feared Man in Italy 75

FICTION

Ethan Keeley
Straight Lines 12

Emmett Haq
It Begins with Two 61

Ess Gormley
Learning the Language 87

FLASH FICTION

Cassidy Carroll
Parkinson's 34

Leandra Griffith
The Divide 35

Ethan Keeley
Fledgling 36

POETRY

Ashley Olin

If Miley Cyrus Were a Country 8

Un-Objected 10

Joshua Kent

Disassembly 23

Chrissy Montelli

[Astrophilia: When We Cosmologize Seedlings in Root] 31

Instructions for Reconstructing a Phoenix Skeleton 32

Lore McSpadden

Movement of the Myth 43

Devin Stabley-Conde

[In the Cross-Countertop Silence] 47

Erin Koehler

More than Receipts & Hollow Pockets 57

The Charadriiform on Matters of State 58

Boats Anchored by Mycelium 59

Christina Mortellaro

An Efficient Remedy Is to Be Alone 67

Bianca Döring

Allein 72

Amy Elizabeth Bishop

Alone 73

Joseph O'Connor

On the Barber Pole 85

Savannah Skinner

On the Ovarian Nature of the Mouth 96

On the Places We Have Lived, with Children Not Quite Born 98

Simeon Youngmann

Our Farm House 101

FEATURED ARTIST

Denise Seidler
Self-Portrait 44
Alice in Wonderland 45
Demons 46

ART

Catherine McWilliams
Hannah 7
Ariana DiPreta
Nature Upon Nature 30
Emily Perina
Unsuspecting 33
Shareefah Pereira
Still Air 56
Rushing Stillness 74
Cielo Ornelas MacFarlane
Señor Mysterioso 60
James Mattson
The Ascension 86
Meghan Kearns
Threshold 95
Ariana Elmayan
Abandoned 100
Britina Cheng
Skinny and Fatty 102

BOOK REVIEW

Lucia LoTempio & Kathryn Waring
Documenting Desire: A Review of Erika Meitner's Copia 103

INTERVIEW

Lucia LoTempio & Kathryn Waring
An Interview with Erika Meitner 106

POSTSCRIPT

Nate Pritts

Wake Up Call 111

Alarms at Noon 112

Infinity's Kiss (Sunflowers) 114

ABOUT THE AUTHORS 116

Cover photo: Within Reach — Denise Seidler

Gandy Dancer

CHLOE FORSELL

Water and Light

Trying on her rings is the most frustrating thing in your world. They never fit. You slide the tarnished silver band, adorned with a single deep red stone, over each of your peanut-butter-sticky fingers. It falls off. You slide it over your tongue, close your mouth, and the ring can't escape. Its smooth surface, like her pale hands, glides over your tongue, your teeth, your fleshy cheeks; it glides so effortlessly in your mouth that it slips through the small space at the back of your tongue, down your throat, into your peanut-butter-sticky stomach. You half-smile: the ring is yours to keep.

You wish to swallow your mother. Her hair is as garnet red as the stone; translucent hands show lavender veins, pink cheeks, sapphire eyes. She is a rainbow. You are dirt, earth—brown, brown, and more brown. It's not a matter of beauty, though. It's distance. Impossible distance.

When you were too young to be left alone, you walked the streets of Buffalo together every day, hand in hand. Everything was simple and beautiful and shining. The streets were full of beautiful, shining people and you wanted to touch and meet them all. You ran from the curb of the sidewalk and just before your tiny foot touched the road, she grabbed your arm, spun you around, and enclosed you in a warmth that you would search for for the next fifteen years.

After the move, she starts working full-time. You decide to leave your new apartment and walk to Grandma's all by yourself. You put on your determination boots and slosh through puddles all the way there. You cross a street without a crosswalk, and as your tiny foot touches the road you wonder where her pale hand is, why you aren't being flung backwards into the safety

of her freckled arms. You walk on, and the distance between the two of you grows greater with every step.

In school, you're surrounded by rainbows. The teacher instructs you to draw your family portrait. You pick out four crayons: scarlet, apricot, cornflower, and sepia. Your classmate looks over at your picture and raises an eyebrow. He raises the same eyebrow when you walk in with your mother for open house. Everyone raises an eyebrow. "Were you adopted?" This question haunts your childhood, and you avoid it at all costs.

Your half-sister is born with amber hair, cobalt eyes, and coral lips. In the hospital, she is wrapped in distant yet familiar freckled arms, radiating on a spectrum you can never understand. The two of them are just out of reach; no matter how far you stretch your brown arms, you can't touch them. Your stepfather hovers in the background, a quivering, terrified cloud above the double rainbow. You hardly see him, though. An intense blinding kaleidoscope flows from the infant to your mother and straight past you.

The three of you go grocery shopping and you learn to walk a few paces ahead of them. You don't hold her hand. You don't look at shiny surfaces that reflect the differences between you and your blood mother.

On a rainy day in February, you and your mother look through an iris catalog and decide to draw imagined gardens that someday (with enough money, enough time) you might plant. You gravitate towards the deep pinks, deep purples. She circles and highlights the whites, the sunset reds, the summer oranges. You compare sketches when you're done. Her dreamy layout with swirling lines, bridges, pergolas, glass birdfeeders, and wild clumps of vibrant irises is enough to make you forget that it's a rainy day in February. Yours is simply rows of flowers, separated by thin paths. Unsteady lines that should have been straight prompt another question that will haunt you: "I really can't draw, can I?" She doesn't have to answer for you to understand that there is no way to reach the end of a rainbow.

At your sister's first grade open house, you get the same looks. She and your mother stand hand in hand, both round, dewed in freckles, glowing in ROYGBIV. "That's my big sister," she says, and she's so proud of you she doesn't seem to notice her classmates' confusion. You walk over to the display of handmade pictures hanging on the wall. Your sister's is beautiful, full of swirling crayon lines and steady strokes of color that your peanut-butter-sticky hands could never have made at that age. You feel ten thousand worlds away. She grabs at your hand, but you pull away.

You spend years pulling away. Teasing. Fighting. The damage becomes nearly irreparable, but wasn't that inevitable anyway? No matter how close you get, you'll never reach.

And meteorological phenomena sure do stick together. Everything is your fault. "You're older, you should know better!" You resent the way their colors fade into one unified gleaming crescent of disappointment—disappointment in you.

During these years, you put up with your stepfather because you have to. He has exploded from that quivering cloud into a dark, desperate rain. He stumbles up and down stairs and slurs his words and your mother pretends none of it is happening. You're afraid when she goes to work and leaves you with him, not because he will hurt you, but because you've never been surrounded by so much gray. "Why do you stay with him?" Your words pour as hard and unfaltering as a heavy storm.

Trying on her rings becomes something you don't care to do. You ask for your own rings. You ask for your own phone. Your own room. You ask for a lot. And you get it.

Your mother sings as she cleans, kind of a ritual (she loves to clean; you're so messy). Her voice is only ever half there; severed vocal chords mangle each note. "You're tone deaf," you mock over the buzz of the vacuum cleaner. You belt out a clearer version of "Moonshadow," though you've grown to hate Cat Stevens (and your mother's other favorites). She keeps singing, smiling. You roll your eyes, plug your ears, sing over her until her voice is crushed to nothing.

She tries to do some things for herself. Pilates is what sticks. She pops in Maury Winsor's twenty-minute tape and lies her round body onto a mat on the living room floor. You are young, a dancer, athletic, you keep up, no problem. You laugh at her efforts until one day, you make her cry. "I just want twenty minutes for myself," she sobs. You reach out your arms to hug her, but she slips right through. No matter how hard you try, she won't stop crying.

Years later, you're propped up on the corner of the kitchen counter while the heat from the oven warms your legs. You look around at your sixth and final home—the water stains on the ceiling, the puckering linoleum tiles. You ignore the impeccable design, the tireless hours of painting, the renovations that your mother could afford. You only see empty spaces, places that are lacking: her inability to cook a good meal, her hot temper, her shrill cracking voice, her favoritism, her lack of education, her poor choice in men, the ways she has failed you.

"Why don't you just quit?" You interrupt her as she complains about her third shift job at the nursing home. Her voice breaks a bit as she explains that she can't just quit. She wanted to go to art school. She wanted to move to Montana. She wanted, wanted, wanted. She wanted a lot. And she got none

of it. You can't help but carry a heavy question on your adolescent shoulders: Does she want you? Did she ever?

With each haunting question, you retreat a little farther into yourself. You build your wall a little higher—high enough to block the lighted arc that stretches its colors and (possibly) longs to be near you.

Trying on her rings begins to have a certain appeal again, but not because they are hers. Because she has nice jewelry. You've begun to define her by what she has. "Oooh, can I have this when you die?" You don't even flinch when you ask. Digging through her boxes of vintage jewelry, you're always attracted to the things that shine the most. A sterling silver band with a large colorful stone is what has caught your eye. "Yes," she assures you. "It's yours. You can have it now." You slide it onto your finger and ignore the hurt in her voice. Still digging, she picks up one of her favorite pieces. It contains no stone, no shine, just a gold band; engraved on it, the name 'Nancy.' "Who's Nancy?"

"I don't know. I got it in a lot of random jewelry on eBay." At this point, you don't even try to understand her. Her rings never fit. It's still so difficult, so frustrating. You know she hears your eyes rolling.

Adolescence is fading, and you are forgetting. Forgetting to tell your mother when you will be performing in school concerts. Forgetting to tell her that you've broken up with your boyfriend of four years, that your best friend is moving away. Forgetting to tell her about your pregnancy scare, about getting drunk for the first time—so drunk that you have only the memory of concrete and lips. Forgetting to tell her when you're going out, when you're coming home. Forgetting to tell her of your accomplishments, of your screw ups. She's almost evaporated into the sky, completely forgotten.

Your family from Georgia visits for the first time in years. You hate these things. People pile into cars to meet at the cousins' farmhouse and you join, of course. It's the same as always—beer and barbeque, the parents reminiscing about their pot-smoking days (as if they are over), playing pranks on Grandma, watching all the rainbows, some ugly and some beautiful, all in incredible prismatic layers of generational similarity. "Doesn't little Erin look just like her mother?" "Debbie sure has her father's eyes!" "Oh, Connor got that spunk from Aunt Sarah!" You spend the day in a mist and the distance is greater than you could ever imagine—they are just illusions, tricks of the eye. You are here. Where are they?

In the fading light, a drunken aunt approaches you and whispers in your ear: "You're so quiet and soft spoken, *just like your mother*." You brush it off. You're actually pretty loud, anyway. Certainly not soft spoken. Right? You're just quiet around them because they're practically strangers. You think. What

does she know anyway? But the words linger like a fine dew stuck to your skin. *Just like your mother. Just like your mother. Just like—.*

Your mother decides it's time to go and on the ride home, you let her sing uninterrupted.

When your stepfather gets too drunk for the last time, she tells him to leave. She's done and she means it. You sit alone in your room and listen to your mother and sister cry through the thin floors when he finally leaves. You wish you could cry, if only to be closer to them. But you can't. They love him. You can't help but think it. You can't help but hate yourself. After fourteen years of gray retreating in a single moment, you can't help but realize you love him, too. And all of a sudden, you can. You can cry.

All at once, you're almost an adult, and you're sickeningly nostalgic. The sky is changing and you need to ground yourself. After all, you're more made of earth than anyone you know. You pull out home videos from when your hands were still peanut-butter-sticky. As you sit on the floor, eyes locked on a world you've nearly forgotten, you don't notice the holes in the wall of your old apartment, the faded carpet, the lack of furniture, where she tried as hard as she could not to fail you. You notice her voice. It was beautiful—deep, clear, vibrant. It flooded the room with unimaginable hues. "Before the surgery, I could sing, too. Like you," she sits on the couch behind you and remarks. She can't see you overflowing onto the carpet, but she can sense your awe. *Like you.*

You desire to know more, to see the other half. Old pictures and stories occupy months. "You were such a rebel."

"I was just passionate, stood up for what I believed in." *Like me.*

"Why'd you end up going to nursing school? Your art is beautiful."

"I had no support from anyone. Your grandma and grandpa didn't help me."

"Did you go because of me?"

"No, not in that sense." *She sacrificed for me.*

You want to ask, you want to ask so badly. It's on the tip of your tongue. She touches your head with a gentleness that you recognize from a million times before and you know the answer.

One day, you hate that ring you picked out. It's gaudy, atrocious. You ask your mother if you can look through her boxes again. This time, you pick out a smaller silver band with a thin oval opal resting in its center. "That's my favorite, you know. Opal is my birthstone." As the words leave her mouth, you are overcome with a terrible sense of guilt. "Yes, you can have it when I die," she jokes. Except it's not even a little bit funny.

Trying on her rings becomes easier with time. You grow into them, into her. It only takes a few months to begin to fill in the gaps of whole years, the gaps where things can't touch because they're destined not to.

You stop searching for the end of the rainbow—it's just reflection, refraction, the perfectly angled combination of water and light.

Just water and light. Earth and blood and bone. Lavender veins; pink cheeks; brown, red, amber hair. Particles of matter that are just as much alike as they are impossibly distant. You turn your mother's ring over and over on your finger, and you're flooded with a familiar desire. You clench your teeth to keep from swallowing.

Hannah, Catherine McWilliams

ASHLEY OLIN

If Miley Cyrus Were a Country

If Miley's viewers were a country, they would be the fifth largest population in the world—just ahead of Brazil.
–Daily Dispatch

She licks me clean after I rowboat
her lime green fishnet arteries—
still hoarse

& sliming from the trek
under a tattooed tributary: reads *love*
never dies. She's a series of detailed lists—

I forefinger how many while performing
acupuncture on the shellacked skin
beneath her breasts, often

forgotten—. A giant matrix
of hiding places: take refuge
in the crevices of her hip-bones, swamps

of her cheeks for you will be
unfound; if her mouth floods I try
to pinch her so she swallows. Her earrings

are park swings, double
as captain chairs when we travel. I
think she loves

me—sees everything
as overstretched dreamcatchers, covers
what she doesn't like

with post-its. We are imperfect; I
patchwork her when she tears
using dampened skin fragments

from her lower lip insides.
We are an island—I, her only
inhabitant—. Her fingernails:

straws—thankfully I know
she will suckle me back in if
she sees I'm sliding out.

ASHLEY OLIN

Un-Objected

You are only allowed to chart your pressurized melancholy
for three episodes of Netflix at a time. You might be

alone: stop being harassed by your cuticles. Build up
an immunity to dandelions—parasitic, derogatory—pull them

from between patio bricks and if you so choose not
to press them in vodka, throw them in the sea. Collect

pieces of seashells in prescription bottles. Give everything away—
one-egg frying pan (a few eggs), cat slippers for sick days,

your eyelashes—. These are the things you may keep.
Barbecue on the porch: allow your friend and her husband's toddler

to cling to the side of your sundress. If in eleven years he
and his friends find you attractive (watch your legs

in Jimmy Choo)—don't let your face turn. Sing
alone in your kitchen once everyone leaves, soak delicates in the sink.

You wake: raindrops kamikaze into Monday. You will hate
the way you sign your name on the rent check—will want to scatter

your ex's floors with crescent finger nail clippings and watch him walk
barefoot. People will tell you to *breathe* and *just smile*

which will make you more furious than mold—if they ask you
your plans to *settle down,* say you have none: regardless

of how your knees might buckle
when you see him in a suit. Not a

ceiling—he is the sheetrock cut out of it
to make space for a chandelier.

ETHAN KEELEY

Straight Lines

The more I think about it, the more I realize that Pearl, Mississippi, the town itself, raised me as much as my mother did. It was no fault of hers; she did her best, and I understand that a nurse's duty is as much to her patients as to her children, even if it meant spending the majority of the day at the hospital instead of at home. Her work ethic set the precedent for mine, though I hardly had one to speak of at the time. So in the summer of my thirteenth year I begrudgingly went door-to-door around the neighborhood to offer up my lawn mowing services. She suggested I charge ten dollars per lawn, though I was vying for at least fifteen—after all, life was expensive, and I was trying to save up for life's necessities, which then included a guitar and some video games. I managed to snag a few customers and that was enough for my mother. There was Mr. Daley a few houses over, the Petersons across the street, and Mrs. Crowley at the end of it. One customer in particular, though, actually made me enthusiastic about my new job, and that was Ms. Crespo one street over, whose daughter Giana had been in my English class the previous year.

I was most definitely in love with Giana, and had been from the time she'd read Frost's "Nothing Gold Can Stay" aloud in class. I didn't find the poem terribly mind-blowing, but the way she read it—no mistakes, no speed-ups or slow-downs, just steady with a smooth and soft cadence—got to me. She had the darkest hair I had ever seen, and darker eyes. When I came to Ms. Crespo's house on my quest for employment, Giana came to the door. It was only a five-minute walk to her house, but before that summer I had no idea she and I lived so close to one another. I had always assumed people like her lived somewhere else—somewhere specifically not near me.

The Crespo house had light beige siding, a black roof, and a chipped-white front door. An army of grass and moss infiltrated the beat up driveway,

which led to a small garage with a rusty, netless basketball hoop nailed to the top of it.

"Hi, I'm Aaron," I squeaked when she opened the door.

"Yeah, I know. What's up?" Her blank stare made me feel twice as self-conscious as I already did.

"Are your parents home by any chance?" I didn't know yet that *parent* wasn't to be pluralized for her. Sometimes I forgot other people had split parents, too. She gave me a look I couldn't interpret—sideways frown and an up-and-down eye motion. I was oblivious to most things, I would later discover.

"I'll get my mom."

Ms. Crespo introduced herself and said that in this heat it was more than worth it to pay someone to mow the lawn, and that she was happy to help a young man earn his keep. She was a short, pretty woman, neither thin nor thick. Her teeth, almost always revealed, were very white and her hair, like Giana's, was straight and black, but other than that she didn't look much like her daughter. I assumed Giana's thin face and lean frame must have come from her father.

The first time that I worked for the Crespos, it was the last week of June and the beginning of a dreadful heat wave. It had reached ninety-five degrees by noon and I felt every single degree, not to mention the humidity that engulfed my pores and lungs, making any movement a slog through thick Jell-O. The furnace that was the air, coupled with my curiosity about Giana's location, inflicted all sorts of anxiety. Was she in her room watching me cut the grass? Were my lines straight? Was she in the living room, reading or watching TV, where I, all sweaty and disheveled, might run into her if I was invited inside? Was she not in the house at all? I considered asking Ms. Crespo when she came out with a glass of fresh-squeezed lemonade but couldn't figure out how to formulate the question without seeming too direct. I cut the engine and wiped my forehead.

"I really am a sadist, aren't I?" She widened her eyes and made a fanning motion with her free hand.

I didn't quite understand what she meant, but found the gesture appealing. "Thank you," I panted, graciously accepting the refreshment before absorbing all the liquid with one gulp.

She handed me a generous twenty. "A little extra for the heat."

"You don't have to do that." I knew the things you were supposed to say. She ignored my protest and asked if I could come back in a couple days to help with the garden. We settled on Friday, the last day of June.

I had thought she'd be waiting outside like the time before, possibly already starting her work on the garden, but I didn't see her. I knocked on the front door and waited, then heard a faint call in the distance.

"Aaron! Over here!" She was shouting from the side door, which took me a good ten seconds to figure out. Embarrassed, I scurried to the side where half of Ms. Crespo could be seen propping the door open.

"I probably should have let you know I might be inside."

"That's okay."

The side door opened into a narrow vestibule attached to the kitchen. I couldn't figure out the Crespo kitchen; it was such a strange combination of broken-in and state-of-the-art: slick hardwood floor, spotless black marble counters, an oven from what looked like the fifties, and scratched-up cupboards whose handles scuffed the walls when opened too wide.

Ms. Crespo offered me fettuccine alfredo with a side of roasted red potatoes—leftovers, I presumed, but still a much more elaborate lunch than I was accustomed to, and much tastier. It wasn't that my mom was an awful cook—she just worked so much that my lunch options were normally limited to microwaveable carbohydrates and cereal, and by nighttime she was so exhausted from dealing with the handicapped, injured, ill, and dying that she either resorted to take-out or settled for preparing something simple. But as good as the meal was, the thought of Giana entering the kitchen upset my appetite. For a moment I thought Ms. Crespo was telepathic because she suddenly brought up the subject most urgent in my mind.

"You know, I told Giana to come down for lunch five minutes ago but sometimes I wonder if she'll ever leave that room of hers. I'll go call her again." She got up to leave and the house creaked as she made her way upstairs. Suddenly I was sitting at the sleek kitchen counter alone, my plate a creamy war zone of potato chunks and white sauce.

She returned with Giana, who was wearing gray sweatpants and a baggy white T-shirt, her hair falling chaotically over her shoulders. Even this look suited her.

"Hey, Aaron," she said, her back turned to me as she reached into a cupboard for cereal. I loved the way my name sounded in her voice.

"Giana! What are you getting cereal out for? Lunch has been waiting here," Ms. Crespo said.

"I want cereal," Giana replied, nearly overflowing the bowl with generic brown oats, then drowning them in milk.

"Are you finished, Aaron?" Ms. Crespo asked, grabbing my battlefield of a plate.

"Yes. It was delicious."

Giana stood in profile, leaning on the counter and staring out the window while she ate her cereal. The sunlight landed on her hair, revealing the

auburn hidden beneath the black. With all my being I wanted to know what she was looking at and thinking about.

"Aaron's going to help me with the garden. We'll be outside," Ms. Crespo said to Giana, who remained in her picturesque pose, chewing but not blinking.

We started on the garden, which ran alongside the walkway leading to the front steps. I knew nothing of gardening, so I merely did what I was told. Ms. Crespo wore a flattering wide-brimmed sun hat that not everyone could pull off. She lent me some gloves far too big, giving me deflated Mickey Mouse hands. As I self-consciously dug some holes for her new azaleas, I worried that they were the wrong shape or size or depth and that Giana, from inside, would take notice and deem me an unworthy human being.

Between the two of us, it only took a half hour to put the plants in place, pull the weeds, and water the whole row. It looked vibrant, though a bit at odds with the neglected driveway and old basketball hoop in the background. I realized there was no car in the driveway or garage. I wondered what Ms. Crespo did for a living. Maybe she took the bus to work. Maybe she walked.

She handed me two fives and asked if I'd be willing to help her clean the house on Monday. Once again I refused the money, which, for thirty minutes of hole digging, I really hadn't earned. But she insisted, and I told her I'd be over again at noon.

"Have a great weekend, Aaron," she said, gliding back inside.

I wanted to say goodbye to Giana but saw no sign of her.

Sunday at ten in the morning was when I took care of Mr. Daley's lawn. He was an older man who lived alone, had a small, perfectly square front lawn, and always gave me a soda or a piece of candy as a tip.

"Morning, Mr. Daley."

"Morning, Aaron! My favorite lawn barber!"

This was his favorite line. He had me come every Sunday, so his lawn never really got to be long enough to justify being cut, but I think he appreciated the company. He would, without fail, be sitting on the front steps in his lawn chair reading the paper, glasses perched on his nose, white eyebrows elevated, pale forehead wrinkled.

"Now, get a load of this—they're postponing the launch of the space shuttle *Discovery* because of some bad weather!"

"That's interesting." This was my usual reply when I wasn't exactly sure which side of the fence he stood on, which was most of the time.

It was just as hot and humid as it had been all week, but I had begun to enjoy the therapeutic effect of mowing lawns, the way the consistent hum blocked out all other noise. I loved as well the up and down motion, the

clear objective: go straight, turn one-hundred-and-eighty degrees, go straight again, repeat. The rhythm cleansed my thoughts, until they too moved in unobstructed straight lines, simple and direct. My consciousness coasted and cut the excess, but now and then I got caught up in thoughts of Giana: Would I see her tomorrow? What did she think of my coming over to her house to help her mom? And why didn't Ms. Crespo have Giana do the tasks for which she enlisted me? If she needed a man, surely she could do better than a scrawny thirteen-year-old boy who still ate overly sugared cereal and watched cartoons most mornings. Giana was taller than me at the time, and I'd be willing to bet, equally as strong, if not stronger. Maybe she was occupied with other tasks. She could have been practicing an instrument, or writing poetry, or any number of endeavors more glamorous than yard and housework. And perhaps Ms. Crespo wanted to encourage me, a young man, to develop a good work ethic as my mother did. Moms were on the same wavelength that way. Single moms, especially.

After I finished Mr. Daley's lawn, which only took about twenty minutes, he handed me a ten and a generic orange soda and called my attention to the paper once more.

"Would you get a load of this? The Jews and Muslims won't stop blowin' each other up!"

"See you next week, Mr. Daley."

I didn't know any Jews or Muslims. All I knew at the time was my town, some of the people in it, and that I was part of Mississippi, which was part of the United States of America. The world was much bigger than I could have imagined, of course, but my world was Pearl, and more specifically my mother, my little jobs, and my school. There was also Madison, where my father lived, but I saw him so infrequently it hardly counted. So the Jews and Muslims may have been blowing each other up, but as long as it remained in a land far removed from me and my town it didn't concern me. Mr. Daley, however, seemed heavily invested in these matters, though I couldn't figure out why. Here was an aged man glued to his front steps, boxed in by his lawn, concerning himself with the world at large, as if one day his house might be the target of an air strike. I had to admire his engagement. The man knew more about the goings-on of the world than just about anyone else in town.

When I got back my mom was in her green bathrobe, a Sunday ritual, making a brunch of scrambled eggs, fruit salad, and wheat toast, her hair wrapped in a purple towel. Sundays were her only full days off, and even then she might be called in from time to time. "Being a nurse is more than a salary—it's a commitment to every human being who's rolled in those doors, good or evil, night or day," she would say.

She welcomed me with uncharacteristic vigor. "There he is, my working man. How's Mr. Daley?"

"Same as ever."

"Throw that soda in the fridge, Aaron! You'll ruin your appetite."

The eggs were overcooked, the cantaloupe and strawberry and kiwi juices congregated to create a discordant flavor, and the toast was slightly burnt.

"So, how was week one?" she asked, sitting down across from me.

I told her that Ms. Crespo wanted me back over tomorrow.

"Again? She sure is putting you to work." She didn't sound as delighted as I'd anticipated.

"It's not bad. I'm never there long."

"What does Ms. Crespo do?" she asked after a long intermission of chewing. "Her job, I mean."

I recalled the car-less driveway. I didn't know. Tomorrow was Monday and she would be home. Maybe she taught and had summers off. Tuesday was the Fourth of July, too, so she might have been on vacation.

"Why?" I asked, somewhat defensively, to my surprise.

She shrugged. "Just curious."

On Monday we began dusting the shelves in every room. I mostly just removed the items and set them elsewhere while Ms. Crespo dusted, then returned them to their proper arrangement. A wide array of trinkets lined the shelves in her living room—primarily little glass and ceramic figurines of sparrows and finches, some in repose, perched on a thin branch, and others in mid-flight; some transparent and others opaque. I only encountered two picture frames, one displaying a younger Ms. Crespo holding a miniature, beaming Giana above her head, both dressed in bright red sweaters. The other was a collage of Giana's class pictures from kindergarten to seventh grade; she was posed similarly in each so that one could easily see the gradual elongation of her face and neck, the lengthening of her hair, and the slight diminishment of her smile. There were no pictures of her father anywhere; it was as if the birds had conquered the space where those might have been.

As we finished with the living room I heard light footsteps, then the creaking of the house signaling someone's descent.

"Well, there she is," lilted Ms. Crespo. "Gee, and only half past noon. Say hi to Aaron—you remember him from the other day?"

Giana remained standing on the bottom step for a few seconds, wearing a navy blue polo and tan shorts, her hair tied up in a long ponytail.

"Hello," she said, impassively, her voice golden as ever. "We were in Mrs. Reynolds' class together last year, Mom." She sounded irritated.

I was elated that she remembered me so specifically.

"I see. I wish I would have known that. Aaron's been such a help around the house. You could learn something from him!" Ms. Crespo gradually

raised her voice as Giana walked around the corner to the kitchen. She was obviously trying to avoid conversation with her mother, who followed her. I could sense the tension between them and feared the onset of a dispute.

There was little I hated more than being caught in the crossfire of an argument. It reminded me too much of my parents' final weeks together. No wonder so few countries remained neutral; it was painfully awkward. At the age of seven the word *fuck* and its several uses entered my vocabulary, along with the minor curses. They were ammo in my parents' arsenal, tearing into one another and occasionally deflecting to hit me, the wide-eyed kid who had never before seen the veins in his father's neck and forehead. After a few months of verbal and psychological retaliation, the warring sides settled on a grudging truce, the terms of which forced my dad to move a half hour away and gave my mom primary custody. Father-son time was limited to the first weekend of every month, and I had mostly accepted this arrangement.

While the Crespos skirmished I counted the bird figurines—twenty-seven in total. I wondered where they all came from and when they were purchased. Any one of them might have held a history worth examining or abandoning on a dusty shelf, lifeless and ignored.

Ms. Crespo returned, ignoring the spat that had just taken place. Giana remained in the kitchen. "Well, we're almost done with this, Aaron. Follow me!"

We made our way upstairs, which I hadn't anticipated. We passed the closed door of what I presumed to be Giana's bedroom, adorned with a plain white calendar still stuck in June, and proceeded into Ms. Crespo's room. I felt more uncomfortable than I had moments earlier during their argument. I hated being in my own mother's bedroom—there was something private about it, forbidden—and being in Ms. Crespo's room felt even more like trespassing.

Her bed was unmade and dirty laundry was piled in the far corner—nightgowns and shorts, bras and other items in a tangle. I tried to avert my eyes; I couldn't help thinking I might come across something I shouldn't see. A large mirror hung over her dresser, harboring a small crack in the bottom left corner that branched out across half of the surface, as if it were the victim of a gunshot or some other projectile. An unfamiliar smell lingered in the air, a combination of various perfumes and womanly products that danced in my nostrils; I had just recently begun to notice the scent of women and was as drawn to it as I was repelled by it. It was unknown territory and I stumbled as I entered it.

"Sorry for the mess." She laughed warily. "Don't worry, all that's left is clearing off this dresser."

A few more photographs were on display, none of which included Giana's father, of course, though one in a small square frame showed a young

boy, maybe three or four years old, sitting on a wooden bench, wearing a Greenville Braves baseball cap much too large for his head. He held a melting vanilla ice cream cone with both hands and appeared to be laughing so hard his eyes were closed. In the mirror's reflection I noticed Ms. Crespo looking at me.

"I see you've met Angelo," she nearly whispered, her reflection somewhat contorted by the diverging lines in the broken mirror.

"He's cute," I said. But something felt off, like I was looking into a different time and place, a world that existed only in this photograph. There was no other one like it in the house that I could see.

"He's gone now," she said.

I didn't know what to say. I know now that no one, no matter how young or old, ever knows what to say about the loss of a child. I told myself maybe he was gone in a lighter sense, living elsewhere, with Giana's elusive father, perhaps. But I knew Angelo was dead. Deep down, I knew that much. I involuntarily stepped back and tripped over the bed right behind me.

"I'm sorry." I felt lightheaded and remained seated. The room appeared to vibrate and flash on and off, static encompassing my vision and hearing.

"Are you okay, Aaron?" She touched my shoulder and placed the back of her hand on my forehead. "My God, you're on fire! Here, lay down…"

I awoke on Ms. Crespo's queen-sized bed, everything fuzzy and oversaturated. She came into focus, sitting cross-legged on the other side, watching me. She gave me the concerned-mother look that I associated with the time I was eight and choked on a piece of hard candy. My mother placed her capable hands on my diaphragm and forced the air, and the deadly confection, up and out of me.

"Careful, Aaron. You passed out." Ms. Crespo reached for my head again.

"How long?" I held the back of my skull, as if this would solve things. Then I noticed Giana standing in the doorway, also watching me, her arms folded. I sat up and straightened my back, mortified.

"It's only been a few minutes," Ms. Crespo said. "Here, have some water." She handed me a glass. I took small sips.

"You scared me so much, Aaron." She placed her hand on her heart. "Let me call your mother. Does this happen to you a lot?" She began walking towards the phone on her dresser.

"No, it's just this heat. I'm fine. Really," I lied, taking another sip.

"I should call her."

"No. She's too busy. Don't worry." I got to my feet and my eyes caught Giana's for a moment. We both looked away, but I saw her face redden.

Ms. Crespo fed me again and walked me home. We didn't say a word to each other until we reached my house.

"Just take it easy, okay? If you need anything, give me a call. When does your mom come home?"

"In a few hours. When do you need me to come by again?"

"Don't worry about that. I'll let you know. Here." She reached into her pocket and held out another twenty. "Have a good Fourth of July. Have some fun."

My mom worked most holidays, so I walked to Town Hall alone on the Fourth. Most of my friends had gone out of town with their families to celebrate, and the rest were too cool for organized events such as these. But I enjoyed the atmosphere—the smell of fried anything, the little kids bouncing around, the world still so large to them and full of wonder. I saw the Petersons in the distance, Mr. Peterson holding his little girl on his shoulders to give her the best view of the local jazz band.

As I walked between the corndog and funnel cake stands I felt a poke on my shoulder. It was Giana. She was alone too, this time wearing a breezy yellow sundress. My heart nearly stopped.

"Hey," she said, laughing nervously and avoiding eye contact. "I didn't know you'd be here."

"Nothing better to do, I guess." I laughed back. I was just as surprised, not so much by her presence, but her approaching me.

"Feeling better?" she asked, finally looking at me.

"Yeah, I'm alright. I don't really know what happened." Then I asked, "Where's your mom?" Her face tightened. I immediately regretted that.

"She's with some guy, I don't know." She sounded frustrated.

"Oh."

"Are you staying for the fireworks?" she asked.

"I planned on it, yeah."

"Come with me. I know the perfect spot."

I followed her past the screaming and laughing children, past the tipsy adults, and up a steep hill away from everyone and everything. When we reached the top, I could see the whole town was nothing more than a simple grid—straight lines like the ones I carved in the grass. The sun had just buried itself behind us. The fireworks wouldn't start for another half hour.

"Guess we got here kind of early," she remarked, sitting down cross-legged.

"That's okay. I like the view." I squatted next to her.

An oddly comfortable silence overcame us.

"Whatever my mom did to you, I'm sorry," she said, picking the grass.

"What do you mean?" I surveyed her profile, trying not to stare at its fortunate dimensions.

"She's crazy."

"I think we all feel that way about our mothers."

"No, I mean she's actually crazy. She gets paid for it."

I had no idea what she meant, so I kind of grunted and joined in the grass decapitation.

"She hasn't worked in years," she continued. "When my brother died she blamed my dad for it. They fought all the time. It was just words at first but then they started hitting each other. I don't know why I'm telling you this." She bowed her head.

"It's okay." I wasn't sure if she wanted to say more, so I held up my end. "My parents fought too. They got divorced six years ago. Now my mom works so much I barely see her."

"What does she do?" she asked.

"She's a nurse."

"You're lucky. Your mom fixes people."

I had no reply. I'd never felt lucky about my family before.

"They arrested my dad for hitting my mom too much. I was seven, too," she said.

The world was full of coincidences.

"The whole time my mom had stopped going to work because she could barely do anything. I had to help her get dressed in the morning and I had to learn how to cook." Her soothing voice seemed ready to break. "The only money we had was from government checks. After a few months my mom started doing things herself again, but it wasn't easy for her. The checks kept coming and she got used to it. They have to cut her off soon, though, because she's able to work again. She hasn't for years, and I don't know what we're going to do."

I felt a riptide form in my chest, sucking out whatever delusions I had held just a week earlier. I had never heard of a government check before, or of people so broken that they couldn't dress themselves in the morning.

I asked her what happened to Angelo. He got sick. It started with the flu and quickly escalated to pneumonia. They did everything they could but nothing fixed him. He was young, fragile, and born with a weak immune system. She spoke clearly as she told me this, as if she was reading Frost, as if she had trained herself to recall this catastrophe without stammering or hesitation.

I understood then that Giana, this girl I had put on a towering pedestal, was far more broken than I was. She was so much more than the idealized figure I made her out to be in my head. She had strength and compassion and flaws, and I admired her more at that moment than I had before.

"I'm sorry." I hated saying that with all my being. It was so trite, so far removed from the depths of my sympathy. But the English language provided no more sufficient option.

I learned later from Mr. Daley that they finally launched *Discovery* that Independence Day. "It's just amazing what we humans can do, isn't it?" he said.

I continued to help Ms. Crespo the rest of that summer, mostly mowing her lawn and doing various other tasks she felt she needed me to do. I never told my mom about Angelo or my passing out in Ms. Crespo's bedroom—she dealt with others' pain enough in her own life, and I would have been selfish to add to it. Any money Ms. Crespo gave me I stored in an old cookie tin under my bed. There it remained, untouched, until I went off to Mississippi State. By that time, Giana had moved to New York to study fashion merchandising and Ms. Crespo had sold the house. I never found out where she went, though I imagined she took her birds and pictures with her.

As I gathered my things for the semester I came across the dusty tin and the money inside. I drove into Jackson and picked up some things for my mother: a bouquet of flowers, a new toaster, and the best chocolates in the city. I left them on the kitchen table where she would find them after her shift, and then I got in my car and left for school. We had said our goodbyes the night before and I wouldn't be far away.

I wish I could say Giana and I became lifelong friends, or more even, but after that summer we would merely smile at each other as we passed in the halls of Pearl Junior High. Too much had been said, too many truths revealed, so we said nothing.

I'll never forget that Fourth of July when we sat on the hill, overlooking the town that built and beat us. Darkness had taken over and the world had finally cooled for a bit. The fireworks were about to begin. But I had seen fireworks before, and I knew they were just explosions disguised as beautiful things.

JOSHUA KENT

Disassembly

DIY whitewash tires
& paint chips
& dremel dust
& high rise bikes
with handle bars that fell out.

Broken down bike sleuths
that could be stripped
to shining steel
& spray painted lime green
that never stuck. Hell,

we spent hours
inhaling paint fumes.
Our backs hunched
over bike frames
half-assembled.

Leaves began to change:
spray paint stains replaced
by rust.

ERIN KOEHLER

The Phototroph

My mother was the first person to teach me about plants when I was younger. She taught me to rotate plants on a windowsill, so the entirety could receive equal sunlight. It wasn't until I took AP Biology my senior year of high school that I learned when a plant isn't directly in the sun it leans towards the light—a phenomenon called phototropism. A year later, the summer my biology teacher died, the sun beat down like a fist. When I started working at Welch's Greenhouses in May, the weather was brutally hot and dry. By July the ground was parched, cracked like the face of an old woman.

I arrive at eight in the morning and my water bottle is already dripping with condensation. I unlock the old barn door with the key hidden under a cement block on a shelf holding a variety of flowerpots. The barn's small interior is illuminated, showing assorted plant fertilizers, antique gardening tools, and a plexiglass case holding collectable toy tractors. Grabbing a thin, white rope, I pull the main barn door open like a garage. After it's up, I switch the sign on the small door to open.

When I first walk in I can smell the musty garlic, and the dryness of the dirt that has become part of the barn like the walls. The dust is a permanent feature of the cold, cement floors; no amount of sweeping can loosen its grip on the pavement. I quickly find the light switch and flick it on, hoping no spiders have spread webs across the spaces where I need to walk. The barn is connected to a small greenhouse, longer than it is wide. I open the greenhouse doors to let some morning air circulate the humidity. I reach above my head to feel the dirt in the hanging plants. The soil is slightly damp but could use more water. The hanging plants are attached to a water system of tubes and PVC pipes that my boss, Bill, built. I turn the nozzle and soon the

rows of well-trimmed petunias, lobelia, million bells, verbena, fuchsia, and geraniums are dripping from a satisfying soak.

Pulling a garden hose out from under a wire bench by the wall, I water each row carefully and diligently. Trays of vibrant New Guinea impatiens and sweet potato vines beg for a drink from my hose, while clusters of pink and yellow lantana stand firm, pleading for their leaves to be stroked, releasing the odd citrus smell that they hold. I pass water quickly over the begonias, which tend to dry out more slowly, and give a little more attention to the gerbera daises and dahlias—their colorful faces spread open like decorative fans.

The summer heat is already causing my forehead to sweat. Wiping it away I wander back into the barn, which, despite the overhead lights, is cool and dark. I take a small drink from my water bottle, the condensation from the ice piled inside dripping down my arm. I glance at the clock on the barn cash register. It's almost nine; the first customers will most likely be coming soon. I walk outside towards the plants that are left out on the tables overnight.

My mother, an early riser, was always in the kitchen when I would come downstairs in the morning to be greeted with a fresh pot of black tea. Not being much of a morning person until I eat breakfast, we habitually greet each other and don't talk much, existing peacefully within a quiet morning lull. Although I can't be certain, I'm sure the morning I learned of my teacher's death was a similarly usual morning. I can see the sliding door in the kitchen pushed open wide—the stained glass my dad crafts in his basement workshop clanging familiarly to let in the morning air before the thick July heat comes in with the rising afternoon. I can see my mother's mug, steaming before her, despite it being the middle of summer. There is no doubt in my mind that July 29, 2012 was like any other shining Sunday, until my sister came down from her bedroom, her hair tousled from sleep, and her phone brightly lit in her hand.

I continue the process of watering plants in front of the greenhouse and barn, where more plants sit on long wide tables. I give the peppers, tomatoes, cabbage, and broccoli a good drink. When I reach the herb table I rub the soft, thin lavender leaves, smelling the sweet oil left on my fingertips. Next, I pinch the top leaves of the sweet basil to keep them from going to seed and to help them get bushier at the base of the plant. As I water, I pick a mint leaf and pop it in my mouth, tasting it bitter and fresh between my teeth.

As the summer progresses Welch's doesn't require more than a few employees a day, and I often work alone, but I don't feel lonely; I can see the life in each plant slowly bending stems and leaves in subtle movements. I feel responsible for them—a mother of thousands. Being by myself gives me time

to think and relax, even if the labor can be arduous: weeding, lifting heavy bags of mulch, moving full trays of flowers. After a few months of working at Welch's, I start to find that working in the greenhouse is therapeutic for me, giving me time to reflect on myself, a skill I need to focus more energy on. Only the sporadic customer, needing plant replacements or else starting their garden late, breaks my solitude.

This is one of those days where I am alone with the plants. Bill is out in the back fields harvesting corn, cucumbers, zucchini, and garlic to sell at the stand out front. Even this early in the morning I can feel my arms beginning to tan from the heat of the sun. I wipe the back of my neck; thankful I've had the insight to pull my thick, curly hair into a bun. In retaliation of my darkening t-shirt lines, I push my sleeves up to my shoulders.

My sister, Kara, has always been very thin and tall. Her height causes her to naturally slouch her posture often. She did this when she stood in the kitchen, leaning slightly in the doorway, her gray t-shirt baggy over pajama shorts.

"Kayla just texted me, and she said Mrs. Boyum's been in an accident."

My mother looked up from her Kindle, while I do the opposite and stare into the last dregs of my cereal floating in warm milk.

"How would Kayla know that?" My mother questioned Kayla's gossiping nature, thinking she would have heard through the parental grapevine sooner.

"They're really close neighbors," my sister continued. "They think she was hit by a drunk driver."

"What? How?" I asked in shock. "It's nine in the morning. Was that last night?"

Kara shook her head slightly and looked down to reference her phone again.

"No, Kayla said it was this morning. She had to go help watch the kids."

In my mind I couldn't put two and two together. *Why would someone be driving drunk in the morning?* My mother groaned, ran a hand through her short brown hair.

"From the night before?"

Her question was met with silence. I don't remember if my sister knew at that moment if Mrs. Boyum had died yet, or if I learned later that day. But I know that when I found out she was dead, I felt nothing but disbelief.

A single car rolls from the busy road into the gravel parking space as I finish watering. The entire community was shaken by Mrs. Boyum's death. My bosses told me they could see the sirens and police tape from their house located next door to Welch's. For weeks afterwards, people couldn't stop

talking about the tragic circumstances. As I turn off the hose I try to forget a customer who, a week or so earlier, had babbled on about the accident, as if the whole ordeal was idle gossip. *It's such a shame—she was so young—and a mother, too.* When she asked me, *did you hear about that?* I shook my head. I pretended not to know her—my own teacher. I couldn't tell this stranger about the grief that bounced around my thoughts like a hive of trapped wasps—the grief that I ignored for fear of what I would say or do if it escaped.

My throat tightens as I straighten a tray of marigolds. My mind shifts to the last time I saw her. We ran into each other at Wegman's. She was with her son and daughter, and she told me she was proud of my AP test results. I had worked hard in her class. Biology was not one of my strongest subjects, and I managed a 4—the second best score on the exam. I push a fat, wet slug from the underside of the black plastic tray as I remember the pride beaming from her round, kind face. Short blonde hair framed her smile—the golden glow I remember of her laugh, her being alive.

I push past the marigolds. I think of her love for her children, how she was absent for a few days of class when her six-year-old son accidently cut off the tip of his finger while moving a piece of equipment in his karate class. I can imagine her radiance, her enthusiasm shining as she tried her best to explain the complexities of the science of living things to a class of mostly uninterested high school students.

I find myself settling in with the pots that need deadheading—pulling off the caps of flowers where the petals are dying—to make room for new growth. I don't want to think of Mrs. Boyum's body being hit from behind; first by the man on his motorcycle, and a second time by the man's girlfriend in her car. They had both been out late the night before, and they were both still drunk. I fight the thought of how, because of their recklessness, her body was flung into the road—hit by motorcycle, run over by car—and how right after, both fled the scene. I don't want to think of how she was killed on this very street, not a half-mile from where I stand gently pinching away the wilting, sticky heads of petunias. And even as I fight back the haunting grasp of this knowledge in the blazing, burning sunlight, I cannot think of her as anything but whole.

As the dust from the car in the driveway settles, I wave hello to the small old woman who starts to amble slowly around, looking at the flowers. After about a half hour, the old woman comes into the barn, pulling one of Welch's worn teal wagons behind her. I smile politely as I start to fill a few discarded boxes with her plants for easier transport home. As I box them up, I can't stop myself from squeezing one of her snapdragon heads, imagining a toothy mouth opening wide. I note she has two trays of bright scarlet geraniums.

"These are one of my favorite colors that we have," I offer for conversation.

She nods. "They're much more beautiful than the ones I had before. The heat's already killed the ones I planted earlier this season."

"The weather's been all over the place this year," I say in reply.

"Yes," she agrees. "Like people."

I'm taken aback. I'm not sure why her response strikes me as so peculiar, but there is something of a cryptic truth to it that makes me feel uncomfortable but equally content, like dipping a foot into an undisturbed pool to break the glassy surface.

"These will look much better," I say, gesturing to the flowers I'm almost done boxing up.

"Thank you, they're for my husband's grave."

I give her a smile that I hope is sympathetic. This particular comment doesn't surprise me—many people come to the greenhouse to buy flowers for grave plots. I swallow, and think about how Mrs. Boyum's family will most likely be doing the same.

"We all age when we lose our mates—you know it breaks your heart and everything," the old woman continues. "I was in a crowded room but I was alone. I lost him three years ago and it still feels like yesterday."

"I'm sorry," I offer feebly. How can I console a woman I don't even know?

"This would have been our sixtieth year together. That's a long time; I still miss him everyday. I find myself falling asleep in the afternoons when I never did before."

I look at her and imagine she has the type of honesty that's really only found in the elderly. Perhaps she lives alone, spending the remainder of her days giving away parts of her life to strangers, like tart rhubarb pie, one slice at a time. This woman is probably more than four times my age, and yet she is telling me of her sorrows, perhaps trying to make something of them. Or maybe she tells this story to everyone and this moment only means something to one of us.

After I count her change we walk to her car, and I help her load the geraniums into the trunk. The petals are dark cherry red and as silken as thin velvet. I resist the urge to snap a wilted stem that I missed when I was boxing them earlier. I remember to thank her for stopping by and turn back towards the barn, still feeling the old woman's presence thick like the heat clinging to my sweaty arms, knocking at the buzzing wasp's nest inside me.

When her car rolls out of the driveway, the dry dust kicked up by the wheels settles in its wake.

After my sister told us what she knew of Mrs. Boyum's "accident," as I kept calling it to myself, the day passed as usual. I pushed Mrs. Boyum to the back of my mind where I could pretend to ignore it, but where it sat throb-

bing like the engine of a machine. I called one of my best friends who was two states away at her summer job as a camp counselor, and who had taken Mrs. Boyum's class with me. Our conversation was short and informational. She was shocked, and towards the end her words caught in her throat. I was still unable to let myself feel the weight of the morning's events and tried to carry on as usual. After I hung up the phone, I thought of the candlelit vigil my high school had promptly organized for grieving students and members of the community on a place called Angel Hill—dubbed so five years prior, when a tragic car accident killed five girls from my town who had just graduated from high school. I knew a few people who were going there to meet up and grieve together, but I couldn't stand the thought of sharing my shock and sadness in such a public way.

I was not at Welch's the day of Mrs. Boyum's accident, nor did I realize until later that the scene was only a few hundred feet away from my place of work. All I knew at first was that she had been riding her bicycle down Route 250 when she was hit—but that route is a main road, twisting and cutting through almost three towns. I suppose as human beings we view tragedy from a distance, far from our own personal connections and ourselves. So I never even imagined the possibility that she was killed so physically close to where I work, less than ten miles from my own home.

A week or so earlier, my family got the hardwood flooring in our house redone. We weren't allowed in the two rooms while the lacquer was drying, but the Sunday Mrs. Boyum died we were permitted to go into the rooms for the first time. Kara and I marveled at the new shine, the floors polished and open without the large woven rugs that had covered them since we were very young. The open space was too inviting and I think at that moment my sister and I felt like we were small children again. I lay down across the new wood, smelling the clean fresh tang of the gloss. My sister tottered above me and grabbed my bare ankles. Before I knew it, she was pulling me across the shiny surface.

Kara pulled me in circles on the floor until I was gasping with laughter. I was dizzy from the motion and the childish absurdity of it all. We fed each other's laughter until I couldn't breathe, my sides aching. Suddenly, mid-spin, I felt something slowly shift deep inside me, and I was too out of control to stop it.

In an instant, my laughter was distorted into deep, guttural sobs. The spinning came to a halt. Kara stood over me, unsure of what to do. And there was my moment of private grief, sprawled out across the freshly dried varnish of our new floors.

Nature upon Nature, Ariana DiPreta

CHRISSY MONTELLI

[Astrophilia: When We Cosmologize as Seedlings in Root,]

refract through me like photons speckled against dark

matter gardens, expand while atoms' lean electron-
muscles pulse into what we see:

floaters phosphened over lenses like telescoped dust,
tracking flight in spaces between stars—

through pollen-nebulae where we orbited parallel—
dandelion florets squalling against gravity.

What preceded the Big Bang?—Maybe we're epilogues, subatomic

reactions daisychained in fractals, splitting
like cells—infinity: unit for layers & layers of dermis

greenhoused into planetary bodies. Red
giants flare quickest so I drink rust-hot

watering cans & you miracle-gro, spiral-arm me easy
until we collide:—galaxies roped end to end

come into bloom: I supernova against your stringbean cilia, black
holes vacuum nerve endings in sunspots where we don't.

CHRISSY MONTELLI

Instructions for Reconstructing a Phoenix Skeleton

[1] Kindle the body, monkeywrench open ribs & [2]
invite beach-children to bucket together her gravel-

joints. Collect shells—[3]—stitch into bone [4] with shrapnel
sanded off at the vein. Knot [5] with matches—wait [6]

for the moment embers tremble through ventricle
into atrium: *a-gain, a-gain*—[7]—& when she becomes

aware of the beating, her bivalves will mollusk
the cage around it. [8] Let heart float exposed:

[9] tissue shoots back through her marrow
frame—once-beak coiling slow, into conch.

Unsuspecting, Emily Perina

CASSIDY CARROLL

Parkinson's

She doesn't realize she is gripping the armrests of her chair so tightly until she looks down to see her knuckles are white. Her arm twitches and a knot forms in her throat. The man next to her looks relaxed—already has his earbuds in.

"Excuse me, Ma'am," says the flight attendant beside her. "Could you just push your carry-on under the seat in front of you? We're going to take off in a minute."

She kicks her bag forward. It doesn't fit under the seat. When she bends down to make it fit, her arm flails and she hits the man beside her. He takes out his ear buds. He must think she's done it on purpose to get his attention.

"Oh, sorry," she says.

He leans back again and closes his eyes.

She takes a deep breath and keeps her arms stiff, hoping if they're rigid enough she won't tremble.

She imagines the plane going down, crashing into the ocean or a field in some remote town. She imagines a hijacker threatening the pilot with a knife, the passengers pleading with a God she used to believe in. She imagines going back to a time when she was healthy and content, before the tremors began.

And she believes that crashing with the plane would be less painful than dying the way she knows she will.

LEANDRA GRIFFITH

The Divide

"I really am sorry," Ryan whispers. The bed creaks as he leans toward Melissa. His lips brush above her shoulder blade. Melissa stares at the open closet; the divide where her clothes end and his begin is clearly defined by a yellow blouse. He had promised to be there, promised to see their daughter at her first recital, but work kept him until seven.

Melissa's fingers fumble for the lamp switch. Moving up the porcelain body, they trace the curve of its hip. Ryan reaches over her and switches off the light. When she feels his weight shift behind her and hears the swishing of sheets sliding against one another, Melissa lies down. Even in darkness, she sees the outline of his spine as it curves away from her.

Melissa hugs her arms to her chest, a boney substitute to Ryan's thick embrace. He *had* been apologizing since dinner. Their daughter hadn't even noticed his absence. He promised to be there next month.

She rests a hand around his hip bone and presses a cheek against his back. Ryan's hand falls on top of hers. Melissa rubs her nose into his shoulder, leeching the warmth from his body. There's a strange smell along his neck. It's fruity. She lifts her nose to his hair and breathes in.

Melissa rolls away from him, pulling herself up against the bed's edge. She sees that the yellow blouse, the dividing line, is just as visible in the dark.

ETHAN KEELEY

Fledgling

Jason felt alive. The intense winds tearing at his face brought the eight-year-old to a state of ecstasy. This was his first roller coaster ride. He sat toward the back with no one next to him and imagined he was in control of each movement—the track was mere illusion.

The first drop forced his head against the cushioned seat; one heavy bar held in his slight figure while the ride brought him to a left turn, then a right, jolting him to either side. Unanimous, joyous screams went up all around. Another ascension, then down again, then a flank, which caused the coaster to turn nearly sideways. Jason felt the sensation of floating; his body began separating from the bar's embrace. Adrenaline flooded his veins. It was all part of the fun—back to a straightaway—he was fine.

They were approaching the last leg of the journey. One final incline, one last push to the end. Jason could see the whole park now: a miniature display. He was utterly detached from the world. The coaster began its final descent. Jason felt himself slipping again as the bar shook looser with each bump. He held on with every ounce of strength he had, but gravity was a ruthless opponent. He was sucked upwards, then pulled downwards. He heard distant screams from above, then only the wind. *Fly,* it whispered.

Jason was free—weightless. He silently watched the unforgiving earth approach him.

AMANDA COFFEY

Half-Truths

I am sitting next to him at a desk in his darkened room, the blue light from his computer screen reflecting off both our faces. "Listen to this," he says. He recorded it last weekend after spending a few hours fooling around with the equipment. The guitar sounds lovely but his singing voice is only okay. Though I've never heard the song being covered before, I say it sounds better than the original. "It's getting there," he says. I do a small (and what I think looks like an interested) smile. He turns and looks at me thoughtfully, as if deciding on something. I look right back at him with equal intensity. Then he pauses the music and leans over towards me.

I am anticipating this, so when he kisses me I'm thinking more about how I won than the actual kiss itself. I don't remember if it was long or short or if he tasted like toothpaste or chapstick or if I was brave and put my hand on his neck or shoulders. I don't remember what I was wearing or what he was wearing. All I remember is that at that moment, I got exactly what I had been chasing after.

This is not a story I want to tell.

I guess the first reason would be because I am not sure what my point in telling it is. Every story should wrap around itself and create a cocoon of security for the reader. It should cave inward and break heavily on its own weight to reveal some truth. Ah, I see what you mean. I get it now. Epiphany.

I haven't had an epiphany yet. It's been six years, two months, and nine days since this story began and a different version plays out in my head every time the memory is brought back.

I guess my other point should be that I've never told this story aloud in a normal state of mind. Maybe in a vulnerable or drunken moment I've

mentioned certain details to my closest friends, but it never goes beyond that. Some defense mechanism inside me tells me to shut this part of myself off from the outside world. The words will start to come out but then my throat closes in and turns to sandpaper. They shrivel up inside my mouth and I swallow them back down, safe.

I have a vision sometimes about the day that I'll finally tell the truth. It goes something like this: I'm outside sitting on a grassy hill with someone I love—it's not a family member—a best friend, maybe someone I've slept with. It's midday, bright and sunny. The air is so clean that my city lungs feel like they're breathing oxygen for the first time. *Wow this air stuff is great,* he says. *We've been missing out.* Anyway, I'm sitting on this hill with a loved one getting high off the air and suddenly I realize he needs to know this thing about me. He has to know it or he won't know me. So I tell him. I maybe cry a little bit. He makes eye contact with me for the entire duration of the story, occasionally nodding his head and putting a consoling hand on my hand. When I'm finished he is silent for a while. Then he says something like…. Well, I haven't figured out that part of the story yet. But the most important thing is that once I tell the truth, it no longer plagues my thoughts. Like someone sucking the venom out of a snake bite, I'm healed.

Of course, I realize that this will probably never happen. This story has to come out in pieces for now. That's just the way it is.

It's like that feeling you have when you want something so bad that you think about it all the time. Every minute, every hour of the day, your mind is focused on that one thing. It goes beyond songs on the radio or lovers embracing on television. The act of brushing your teeth in the morning or taking out the trash brings the thing back into your mind and it stays there. Even though you don't have what you want, in that moment the memory is almost as good. It colors your days, heats up your face, makes you smile to yourself like a fool. "What are you smiling about?" Your mom asks. Nothing. Always nothing.

This is a story about getting what you want. You get it and it's in your hand and holy shit it's fucking great. It looks, feels, tastes, and smells beyond anything you've ever imagined. This is it, I've finally got it! You say. And in that moment it's wonderful. What comes next is up in the air.

I'm fourteen years and eight months old the day I first kiss a twenty-four-years-and-two months-old man who also happens to be my music teacher.

Something you should know about me is that I hate sad things. When I feel sad things I put them somewhere I don't have to look at them. I think it's partly because I hate when people confide in me about their problems. I feel as though I can't give them what they need from me as a friend. I try to ask all the right questions and give advice, but it all sounds wrong to me. My friends know this about me and keep away unless it's a last resort. Truthfully speaking, I think it's best to keep these things out of sight.

I'd come home on school nights with swollen lips and tousled hair and she never said a thing, only eyed me as I wordlessly entered my bedroom and shut the door. The next day she would ask about how my friend's house was. "Fine. We did homework and then watched *Teen Mom*. Nothing crazy. Can you pick me up from school at five? I have a late orchestra rehearsal."

I don't know if she knew what I was up to. Certainly she was suspicious of the idea that I was with a friend for all those hours. I didn't have any close friends back then. I had have-to friends in high school: our only time together was during free periods and bus rides home. After school, most of my free time until that winter was spent alone in my room, devouring books from the library and listening to music. I preferred time alone more than time spent with people.

Maybe she was just so overjoyed by the thought of me having a close friend that she couldn't see the truth. Or maybe she knew that I was lying, but about something more normal, like smoking cigarettes or having a junior boyfriend. The sort of things teenagers lie about in after-school specials and real life. The kind of lies that are easily forgiven with no gray area for what is right and what is wrong. The teenager accepts her mistake with some grumbling as the parent sighs in relief that it isn't a pregnancy or hard drugs.

My mother taught me to never take shit from anyone.

I'm ten years old and sitting at the vanity in my parents' master bathroom. The mirror across from me is warped and drips condensation from my shower. I wipe a space clean to see my face clearly. I'm waiting for my mom to finish whatever she's doing so she can brush my wet hair. It's a little ritual we have that started when I was old enough to have hair longer than a few inches. She brushed the snarls out of my hair carefully, something I never quite got the hang of. When I brushed my hair it sounded like a shovel scraping ice off asphalt. I'd do it in a rush, ripping out follicles in the process and littering the carpet with strands of the stuff. My mom took her time, starting at the bottom of the hair and then working her way up, effortlessly getting out all the knots. While she did this, I would tell her about everything going on in my preteen life.

On this day in particular, I am telling my mother about how a girl in my class, Kimberly, punched another girl, Theresa, because Theresa had stolen her prized Beanie Baby and hid it in a bush during recess. At this point, my mom stops brushing my hair. She looks me in the eye through the reflection of the mirror and says in a serious tone, "What would you have done if Kimberly hit you?" I am caught off guard and say, "I don't know." Still serious, my mother answers her own question. Picking up the brush, she says, "You hit her back harder."

I don't know what first attracted me to my guitar teacher. Well, no. That's not entirely true. He was funny and kind, qualities that I didn't see in myself back then but desperately wanted to. We shared a love for music. We both agreed that the Misfits with Glen Danzig was a waste, Lou Reed was underrated, and Morrissey, despite have a reputation for being an asexual asshole, was a wonder. He told me that he admired my desire to learn so many instruments. I was a violinist and a cellist up to that point, and I often complained that the two extra strings on the guitar were going to be my downfall. He taught me patiently—my fingers got callouses. He wrote music and made me listen to it before anyone else. I was flattered by his attention, and my own admiration towards him grew into a full-out crush within a few months. I thought about him constantly and wondered if he thought about me, too.

I can picture the line in my head, thick and white, and the day that we crossed it. Sitting side by side, our legs almost touching, he watched me play the opening notes for Radiohead's "Fake Plastic Trees." I was aware that his eyes were not on my fingers, but on my face. I knew he wasn't paying attention to the chords, or if my form was correct. My awareness made me mess up a chord, and I immediately looked up at him. He looked away quickly. "That was good," he said. "Really good." And right then, I knew I had him.

It didn't last the winter.

I am in the shower when my mom knocks on the door and tells me she needs to talk to me about something. Immediately. She says it in the tone of voice that used to scare me as a kid. It's the voice that made me beg for forgiveness for whatever I'd done, even if I wasn't sure what that was. Now that I'm older, the trigger word "immediately" doesn't scare me as much. "Immediately" to teenage me means whenever I've finished doing what I'm in the middle of.

In this case, it's conditioning my hair. When I'm done, I turn off the water and wrap myself in a towel. I open the bathroom door and she's not standing right outside like I thought. I walk to her bedroom and find her

sitting in near darkness with only the flickering blue light from the muted TV flashing across her face. She says nothing.

She is holding my cell phone.

The moment I see it, my heart doubles its pace. I know what has happened.

She's read my text messages from him. She knows everything.

The lie starts to come out of my mouth but she cuts me off before it can escape. She asks me how long this has been going on for. I say nothing. She asks again, this time with the don't-lie-to-me tone in her voice. I am mute. In this moment I am simultaneously humiliated, enraged, guilty and, most of all, terrified. I don't want him to get into any trouble. I don't want him to be angry with me. I don't want him to think that I did this on purpose.

My mother is still waiting for the truth.

I lie and say that nothing has been going on—that she doesn't know what she's talking about. I tell her that she shouldn't have been going through my text messages in the first place and that I will never be able to trust her again. As I continue to lie, my voice becomes louder and my throat constricts. By the time I finally stop yelling, I'm a crying mess.

The pain I feel in my chest is like running into a brick wall without stopping. I feel like my rib cage is collapsing in on itself as my lungs struggle for air.

My mother doesn't try to argue with me. She accepts my lies and puts them somewhere else to deal with another time. For now she just lets me stand before her, a crying child.

I don't know why my mother decided to snoop through my text messages that day. Maybe she heard my phone buzz while I was in the shower and couldn't help but take a look. All parents snoop, whether they'd like to admit it or not. It used to be diaries, cracked open silently during the night; now a concerned parent just has to swipe a screen to see what their child is really up to. I don't remember the exact details of the texts themselves, but I imagine that the content, combined with the name of the sender at the top, was enough to tell her all she needed to know.

Eventually, half-truths did come out. Call me selfish, but I think the whole truth belongs to me and me only. It doesn't belong to the therapist who I silently sat with for weekly forty-five minute sessions. It doesn't belong to the detective who condescendingly asked me if I knew what certain sex terms meant. It doesn't belong to my have-to friends, who didn't know how to act around me now that I was "that girl." I wasn't going to let anyone bully me into talking about my business. They pushed me and I pushed right back with more force.

I don't think the truth belongs to my mother either, despite her deserving it. She knows this. It made her crazy for a while. Then angry. Now, she's over it. Though sometimes we'll be together, driving in the car or eating at the dining room table, and I'll catch her looking at me with the saddest look on her face. She blames herself.

My mother's guilt haunts me. She thinks this was her fault. No, no, no, no. I want to shake her and yell it in her face. She wants so badly to take my problems and make them her own. It's like when I was little and had to go to the doctor to get a shot. She'd hold my hand as I squeezed my eyes shut and tried not to cry. The pain was never excruciating, but the anticipation of the needle always made me anxious. Give me all the hurt, she would say. You won't feel a thing. I nearly dislocated her fingers.

The guilt, in addition to the whole truth, is mine. I've claimed its rights.

LORE McSPADDEN

Movement of the Myth

Legends are the dangling legs of broken puppets.
Obsession quotes from tales of frayed extension cords.
Buoyant pseudonyms clutch the rusted lampposts,
point in the direction of stopped sinks
and rosy-roofed homes. The spells within the jukebox echo
between the silos. Dreams jitterbug the pleats and pockets
of the road to Roanoke. Ballads slow stitch a low hem
on a mud-dappled cloak. The translated opening lines are
crumbled flowers beneath paint-peeled porches, plots
are frowning landlords in faded boots. All of it,
leaping from the crevasses of the collapsed birch,
swinging up and out on tangled vines, shouting
the news into empty canyons.

Featured Artist

Self-Portrait, Denise Seidler

Alice in Wonderland, Denise Seidler

Demons, Denise Seidler

[In the Cross-Countertop Silence]

when 50-year-old men
grin like sharks, I want to crawl out

of my skin & into a suit
        of armor. I am
        nametag bold: Not Fucking
Around. I will graft
scales to skin: if I harden, maybe
sweethearts & *honeys* will

                ricochet. If blood could boil
I would fuel my steps
with red haze, diffuse it
through my pores & pigment myself—
let the predators know I am
        poisonous to the touch.

Please, stand in my
        how-can-you-be-a-size-six shoes
for eight hours. Listen to men
speak. Watch their hands
        come across the counter & weigh
        a paycheck against
my pride: a glass bottle: a hurricane
against their heads—the barrier to lives I wish
I could make men live.

ROSE FRITZKY-RANDOLPH

I'll Pray for Him

"Just a couple more. Take turns pretending to tell each other a secret," Aunt Karen says with her face hidden behind her digital Nikon, her red hair falling over her shoulders. We hear the shutter sound a few more times before she lowers the camera and walks over to the table behind us. She repositions a few unclaimed wildflower seed packets that we're using as seating cards and a canvas with a painted tree, its leaves stamped on by the thumbs of our guests.

We asked if she would take photos of the wedding instead of giving us a gift because she has a great eye, but also because she was invited to both parts of the wedding: the ceremony, held at an eco-friendly bed and breakfast in Ridgefield, Connecticut where same-sex marriage is legal, and the reception held the next day in the backyard of KiRa's childhood home in rural New Jersey. Aunt Karen was a ninja at the ceremony yesterday, ducking down the rows of chairs, finding space between people's heads and shoulders. KiRa and I told everyone we wanted a moment alone in our bridal suite before we walked down the aisle together, but Aunt Karen followed us into the room, clicking away. We had to ask her to leave.

Today, she catches us upstairs in KiRa's childhood bedroom, our bridal suite for the reception.

"Don't mind me," she announces when she opens the door, smiling. She snaps shots of my sisters as they stick bobby pins in our hair and accentuate our eyes with shades of midnight and sapphire. We decided against having any kind of bridal party, but friends, parents, KiRa's younger brother, and every one of my eleven siblings have all had specific assignments over the last few months. They've been there to cut burlap for the tablecloths, tie dried lavender into bunches, put candles in mason jars, repaint the entryway and kitchen, move furniture into the back room, set up the tables and chairs in the tent, and a myriad of other duties. Most of my family will be contribut-

ing to the mini-concert we're having during the reception, complete with an eclectic band made up of a couple friends, a cousin, and a former coworker.

Aunt Karen stays in the room until they finish our hair and makeup, then snaps shots of my sisters handling the elaborate lacing on the back of my dress. KiRa and I are both excited to wear our dresses again, but we add cotton shrugs to cover our shoulders, in case it gets too chilly. The tent's heated, but it's still November. When they finish and we're ready to make our way outside, Aunt Karen runs ahead so she can take shots of us coming down the stairs together. She pauses us at various steps, has us lean against the banister, look at each other, look in the same direction, put our foreheads together, close our eyes. We've been in the kitchen for ten minutes now. The room serves as the pathway to our reception and it's filled with white lights, candles, and tree wall décor. We don't have the heart to tell her to stop.

Within a minute, KiRa's dad, Steve, opens the sliding glass door and comes into the kitchen from the back deck. Behind him, I can see our chiminea warming station, gift table, and makeshift bar with Bota Box wine and multiple kegs of craft beer. The fire in the chiminea is blazing. "Ladies… it's time," he says, closing the door behind him. "You've got a tent full of people out there who can't wait to see you."

We nod and take deep breaths. Aunt Karen looks at Steve and responds, "Okay, they're coming. Last one."

KiRa looks at me, eyes wide. "You ready?"

I smile, then place my palms on either side of KiRa's face and kiss her. We're already married, but this moment—the moment before we enter a tent filled with 150 people—feels larger than I expected.

We step outside and I don't feel cold at all. The candlelight and warmth from the chiminea embraces me. I take a deep breath and give KiRa a three-pulse hand squeeze for "I love you." She does the same back. I know we're thinking the same thing. This is where it all started. Ten years ago, long before I would realize why my relationships with men always seemed one-sided, long before I would admit to myself that I was in love with her, long before our first kiss, this is where we spent our summer nights together. Every weekend, after the Friday night show at the Growing Stage, where KiRa and I met as camp counselors, a small group of us would gather here. We'd spend all night in the backyard, doing somersaults on a trampoline covered with balloons, eating skittles and zucchini bread, dying one another's hair obnoxious shades of red, blue, and purple.

Aunt Karen and Steve run ahead and we step off the deck together. The entrance to the tent is open and I can already see faces. Aunts, uncles, cousins, friends from all walks of life, KiRa's gammy, my great-aunt Dot. They're all standing. Even my aunt Kathy, who said she couldn't make it up from Florida, waves at us, smiling, from inside the tent. Later, she'll apologize for crash-

ing our wedding; she'll tell us she "just couldn't miss it" and ended up buying a last-minute ticket. We'll tell her, "We wouldn't have had it any other way."

Managing the guest list was my least favorite part of planning our wedding. By the time our "please respond by" date had passed, we were still waiting on at least thirty guests. A few people even messaged their replies on Facebook. A couple months ago, KiRa and I were going over our seating chart in the dining room of our Binghamton apartment.

"Only one today," I told her as I made my way to the kitchen to retrieve my coffee. I'm always leaving it in the microwave. I tossed the mail on the edge of the dining room table, careful not to disturb the seating chart circles she had scattered across its yellow surface.

When I returned and sat down in the chair next to KiRa, she said, "I still don't know if I should put my parents at separate tables." The rays from the sun passed through the window, hitting my eyes, so I moved my chair a few inches closer to her. She leaned over and pulled my legs onto her lap.

KiRa's parents' divorce isn't final yet, but their separation is. Her mother moved out of the house she had lived in for twenty years soon after KiRa and I began turning our ten-year friendship into something more. I exhaled and squeezed KiRa's shoulder.

"Don't even go there yet," I said. "We'll cross that one when we have to." KiRa pushed a handful of white paper circles across the table and stretched her arms above her head. I was about to reach for the familiar brown envelope sticking out of the pile, but instead started sorting through the rest of the day's batch. Our current NYSEG statement. The weekly Binghamton Price Chopper sales flyer. A couple credit card offers addressed to someone with a combination of our last names, Randolph R. Fritzky.

"More for Randy," I said, smirking as I passed the envelopes to KiRa.

She laughed and tossed them to the side. "That guy gets more mail than we do."

I glanced down at a combined David's Bridal and Men's Warehouse coupon offering 25% off bridesmaid dresses on one side and two-for-one tuxedos on the other. I held the men's side up for KiRa to see, and raised my eyebrows. "You sure you don't want to marry me in a suit?" I asked.

"Why do they keep sending us these things?" she said, shaking her head and snatching the flyer from my hands. She inspected it for a moment and then smiled at me, brushing a few strands of hair behind her ears. "You could totally pull off a tux, sweetie, but I think it's a bit late to return our dresses."

I took back the flyer, and then added it to Randy's discarded mail. "Agreed," I said. "No tuxes."

We went shopping for our wedding dresses together; our moms, KiRa's gammy, and a handful of my sisters tagged along. When we arrived at David's

Bridal for our appointment, a short girl with way too much sparkley blue eye makeup greeted us.

"Hi! I'm Courtney!" she said, standing so close to me that I could smell her vanilla-scented perfume. Her eyes darted around the room, never meeting mine. "Are you KiRa?"

"Nope," I said with a higher voice than I intended to use. I turned and gestured toward KiRa, who had her arm around Gammy. "I'm Rosie," I said to Courtney, placing my palm on my chest.

"Oh! I'm so sorry!" She looked at KiRa and then at me, shaking her head. "Janice told me you were the bride!" She smacked her right thigh and let out a short, awkward laugh. She took a couple steps toward KiRa and regrouped.

"Congratulations, Bride!" She gave her a quick hug. I couldn't help but wonder how many strangers she was obligated to embrace in a single day.

"This is your welcome bag." She handed KiRa a plastic bag, which held nothing but David's Bridal catalogs and a complimentary pen as she took in the size of our group. "Who do we have with you today?"

KiRa gave me a look. It was time for clarification.

I saw her catch Courtney's eyes. "We're both brides, actually."

Courtney looked like a robot running low on battery power. "Oh goodness. I'm sorry. This is a double appointment then? I didn't realize. You're both getting married?" She seemed to be short-circuiting.

"Yes," I said. "To each other."

Her eyes widened a bit before she caught herself. "Oh! Oh, wow!"

Courtney gave me my hug and then nearly shouted, "This is gonna be so much fun!"

I wouldn't say the experience was fun; Courtney seemed set on dressing KiRa like a mermaid, and me like I was about to receive my First Holy Communion. But we did end up leaving with two lovely, reasonably priced dresses that complimented each other: mine with capped sleeves, and KiRa's strapless.

After that appointment we were constantly bombarded with wedding ads geared toward heterosexual couples. We were getting used to it. I took a sip of my coffee and then picked up the small brown envelope.

"Who's that one from?" KiRa asked, lifting her chin and glancing toward my hands.

"Not sure," I replied. "It just has a return address. I can't remember who lives in New Milford." I broke the seal of the envelope and pulled out the card.

Next to the printed words "Wish we could be there," someone had written a checkmark. No sad face. No message for the brides at the bottom. Just a sloppy checkmark. I turned the card over to see if they chose a word for our

"In one word, what do you wish for the brides" wordle. But there was just an empty space.

"Well, it's definitely a no," I said to KiRa, handing her the card. I slid my legs off her lap and pushed my chair away from the table. "Who does that?"

I got up to retrieve my laptop from the bedroom so I could look up the address. But, as I sat down on my bed and opened the computer, I realized who the RSVP was from.

"I think it's Uncle Billy," I called to KiRa. I opened the address book on my desktop, typed *Bill* in the search bar, clicked enter, and proved myself right. By the time I closed my computer, KiRa was sitting next to me.

Sitting there with his "No" in my hand, I felt numb. I felt isolated in a way I hadn't before, not even when I first came out. I tossed it in the manila folder where we'd been keeping the rest, shrugged, and told KiRa I wasn't surprised. She took my hand and kissed it in response.

I knew Uncle Billy wasn't planning to come. My mom called me back when we sent out our save-the-dates, told me he'd driven the hour to my parents' house to tell my father—his big brother—that he wouldn't be attending my wedding. She said their conversation had been heated and that she'd stayed out of it because he was Dad's brother and she didn't want to say something she'd regret. It was the first time I fully grasped the difference between Uncle Billy's Assembly of God ideology and the Catholic faith I'd grown up with in my own household. I had witnessed Uncle Billy's unwavering belief system in the past, but this was the first time it really hit me. It was the first time I realized that for Uncle Billy, merely being Christian wasn't good enough.

In the weeks that passed between the day we received his R.S.V.P. and our wedding, I thought a lot about Uncle Billy and what an impact he'd had on my childhood. I thought about how at family gatherings he used to pull me aside and teach me songs like "Skidamarink—I Love You" and "In Moments Like These" before the rest of the cousins, so that I could show all of them how to do their parts better. He seemed to always have a guitar around his neck. I thought about how when we all camped at Lake George, we could always hear music coming from his campsite. He used to curl his whole body into the inner part of a big tire and roll into the lake. He used to be the first one off the cliff jumps and rope swings. But, somehow, even with all of his energy, he was the one who made me feel safe. He was the one who showed me the power of prayer. Even if I didn't believe deep down that it was going to work, it still felt nice to hope. I thought about the year I got terrible poison ivy while we were camping and he had everyone put their hands on the top of my head while he asked the Lord to "take away my discomfort." He drove me home and stayed until I was comfortable in bed watching *Anne of Green Gables*. Uncle Billy was the one who taught me all about God's lessons of

love and forgiveness. Even the license plate on Uncle Billy's van still reads, "FORGIVE."

But, most of all, I thought about Creation, a four-day Christian festival that occurs once a year at the Agape Campground in Mount Union, Pennsylvania. On average, 80,000 people attend Creation each year. They go to hear sermons and see fireworks and performances by the rock stars of Christian music, to find purpose and camp together in one large open field. They go to be saved. For eight weekends of my life, from the age of eleven until the summer after I turned nineteen, I went to Creation with a handful of siblings and cousins and members of Uncle Billy's ministry. I looked forward to it every year. My mind kept taking me to Creation, and I thought about one summer in particular. The summer Stephen, Uncle Billy's oldest son, told me that my friend John Patrick was going to Hell.

It was so hot that year and I remember wanting to get through breakfast as fast as possible so I could run to the lemonade stand. The heat was unbearable. Sometimes we hiked to the lookout just for the shade, or walked the main road down to the river, but those excursions were often not worth the effort. The lookout only provided a view of the festival grounds and the river was so cloudy that nothing beneath the water's surface was visible. I preferred the lemonade. Freshly squeezed with just the right amount of sugar and ice. We always drank it fast so the ice wouldn't melt and then we walked the path around the main stage and field, holding the leftover cubes against the backs of our necks as we checked out the stands of Jesus-centric merchandise: WWJD bracelets, tie-dyed T-shirts with various Bible quotes, some with "Creation Festival" printed on the front and "A Tribute To Our Creator" on the back. One of my brothers bought a green one that said "Liars Go To Hell. Revelations 21:8."

Breakfast was at 8:00 a.m. sharp so we would be on time for morning worship at the main stage. Uncle Billy was serious about the schedule. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner at the site were mandatory, as was morning worship and at least one sermon a day. Curfew was 10:00 p.m., unless the night's concert or candlelight vigil went later than that.

That day, while everyone else was getting ready to head over to morning worship, I was scraping eggs off the bottom of the pan with a plastic knife. Stephen was sitting at the table drinking orange juice with his feet propped up on the bench.

"You know what's too bad, Rosie?" he asked me.

"What?" I said.

"I think your friend John Patrick is such a great guy, so freakin' funny. But, I really hope he changes his ways in time."

I stopped scraping and looked up at him. "In time for what?" I asked.

"You know…in time for God to forgive him. For being gay. So he won't go to Hell." Stephen drank the last of his juice, and then flattened the paper cup with the palm of his hand. He tossed it toward the trash bag duct taped to the end of the table but missed by a few inches. He threw his head back and said, "Aw, man," then got up to retrieve the cup.

I went back to scraping, staring at the inside of the pan, my lips pressed together. My ears felt hot. I didn't understand. Why would John Patrick need to be forgiven? He went to church more than I did. We'd met in church choir. His mother taught CCD classes.

"But he believes in God," I told Stephen.

He yawned and stretched his arms above his head. "That's not enough, though."

I felt my heart beating faster and my throat went dry.

"Don't worry. I'll pray for him," Stephen assured me.

I hear Uncle Joey's voice over the sound system he arranged for the reception. "Ladies and Gentlemen, let's give a warm congratulations to the happy couple. Rosie and KiRa Fritzky-Randolph!"

We enter the tent and all I can see are smiles, all I can feel is warmth, all I can hear is applause set against the main riff to Pearl Jam's "Amongst the Waves." My brother stands on stage, waiting to sing. All the design ideas and notes we'd been jotting down in our wedding notebook for months comesalive as we make our way toward the dance floor. Thousands of white lights, hundreds of candles, mason jars filled with dried lavender and yellow roses, even the centerpieces made from the slices of two fallen trees—one from Ki-Ra's parents' yard and the other from mine. Everything is just as we imagined.

We're supposed to go right into our first dance, but we can't help but stop to hug those we pass. Things seem to be occurring in slow motion and I'm overwhelmed with all that is happening, all that has happened to get us here.

I didn't have to come out to most of my family. Once my mother and father knew, the "coming out" part was pretty much taken care of; what scared me was waiting to see how people would act when they saw me next, waiting to see if things would change. I remember walking up the hill of my parents' long driveway after parking on the street and seeing my younger brother standing at the top, about to get into his car. I held my hand up in a frozen wave and he smiled and shut his door without getting in. When I reached the top, he hugged me, lifting me off the ground, and held me there until I realized he knew. When I called my aunt and told her over the phone, she responded with, "Oh darling, I've known since you were in high school," which was as much a validation as it was a gut punch. Over a decade had passed since high school. It seemed unfair that she knew before I did.

I wasn't surprised by the support on my mother's side. They're an open-minded bunch and other than one older cousin who began using Facebook as a forum to preach the word of God, and who believed my "choice" was sinful, most on that end of the family accepted the news without hesitation. Still, it was the ones on my father's side, the devout Christians, the ones I thought would take it the hardest, who amazed me. No matter what they believed, I was shown nothing but love. My Aunt Joanie, a sixty-six-year-old woman who came close to becoming a nun in her younger years but had five children instead, called her youngest daughter and one of my closest friends, Mary Anne, to discuss what she'd heard. Mary Anne called me right after their conversation, excited to tell me her mother had said that "she knew Jesus loved me," and that "if God made me this way, he must be okay with it."

It's not until we pass by the table with my ninety-four-year-old Aunt Dot that I begin to tear up. She hugs me close and says, "God is good" before I let go. I wonder if she knows how much it means to have her here and I think about Uncle Billy. What is it that keeps him away but not her?

The reception is a whirlwind but KiRa and I make sure we keep finding each other. We let everyone know that we won't be walking around to say hello to our guests while they eat their dinner, but ask instead that they find us on the dance floor. I sing a song I wrote for KiRa and almost make it through without crying. Toasts are made, our fathers give speeches, and my three-year-old nephew steals the show by jumping up on stage to play bongos during the concert. But, John Patrick steals the show back with his unbelievable rendition of "Origin of Love."

Weeks later, we'll look through the album of over 2,000 photos that Aunt Karen sent us, trying to choose our favorites. We'll come across a photo of Uncle Billy's sister-in-law standing in the middle of his three boys and their significant others. They're all laughing and giving thumbs up to the camera. Everyone but their parents. We'll end up calling this the "Fritzky Represent!" photo, the one we'll go to when we're feeling sad that Uncle Billy wasn't there, because it will remind us that things do change.

I'll think about how Uncle Billy will feel if he ever sees the picture—whether he'll be disappointed in them for coming or feel regret for being absent. I wonder if he'll pray for me.

Still Air, Shareefah Pereira

ERIN KOEHLER

More than Receipts & Hollow Pockets

Mama: made of pollen—her body: contained
with anther & dull smudged eyes. She is the lift-bridge
of continents: I cannot find the edges of her, they sprout

daffodils in the woods behind our house. Bulbs drop
like secrets out of telephone calls: Mama

curls herself into cords—I stroke leaves & she strokes
wires. Daffodils keep pushing

up with poison ivy, quarantined from the garden.
Mama wants to play bumblebee—can only wasp

her way among them. I watch her
lift petals & hand them out like flyers—sending them further
than sundial shadows; further than continental crust.

When they finally settle it is the sigh
of a dial tone & scattered powder.

ERIN KOEHLER

The Charadriiform on Matters of State

I am milked out of answers And fossil
stiff An affair of seafoam and kelp,
my tongue to test the waters first
—this fire This fire (chewed through
rigging oil—) strong Dissonance here,
how to unravel and let drift, the isthmus
flat and pink Implosions are like that: taut
scars of lights broken and humming open
Open, then a raking through low tide,
carved faces: the horror of reflections: a
gull squawking; goes on squawking

ERIN KOEHLER

Boats Anchored by Mycelium

I peeled like citrus & found a crown
made of shark teeth in a place too deep
for sea divers. Here—
        we take our potions for breakfast & breakdown
        boxes for lunch.
                We search for seeds sown by clown fish, dropped
from the mouths of eel spit grins—we sift salt
through our toothed gills,
become fruiting bodies under mushroom caps.

We hop beehives, drip
ourselves in oil & honey—thrive anger into tumbleweeds.
We scrape against champagne
bottles; fear dying in a swarm
like a wasp: is it better or worse to be part of the excess?

My tongue is black licorice: a mechanism
made of traps, mice chasing
tails into my open mouth, cast ashore
by driftwood—

        we ambulance across ice. Asleep, I
record miles of roots on my arms.

Señor Misterioso, Cielo Ornelas MacFarlane

EMMETT HAQ

It Begins with Two

It begins with two women. It seems as though it has always been two women. There is something to them, something of note. Is it their faces? Reinforced corrugated-steel heart-shaped faces both, bristling with elegant defenses, armed to the flashing white teeth, beautiful and cold and weathered, *hardpretty*, *sensualsneering*, *lovelyvenomous*. It is not their faces. Is it their names? Are they possessors of themed appellations, are they Lily and Petunia (of course not—too botanical), are they Mercedes and Lexus (no, no, too adult-entertainment), are they Artemis and Athena (this is ridiculous, are we talking about two women or two plot points in Chick tracts from ancient Greece?), and in the end, they are only named May (born Mary to a pious parent and raised in a single-mother single-minded single-story household) and Trish (born in July of 1985 to H—and J— K—, names rescinded as American law requires; this woman is now in the United States Federal Witness Protection Program), and in the end, Mary and Patricia are the two most common female names of the last fucking century, so no, after one-hundred-and-eighty-odd words, we can conclude that it's not their names.

The suspense must be lifted before the narrative can progress any further. Their notability derives from their line of work and nothing else. There. It's out in the open and now we can deal with it as necessary. They are professional bandits, burglars, swashbucklers, crooks. They are stickup artists, kidnappers, killers, and a hundred other nouns in between. They are May and Trish, and they are walking up a starsplashed side street in a generic Rust Belt city at 2:00 a.m.

May hocks an irradiated loogie onto the cracked blacktop. "I just don't understand the appeal," she rasps. They are moving at a fast clip. No time to experience, only to act.

"Of truck nuts?" Trish answers, glancing over at her companion, an arched eyebrow implicit in her tone. May has the emaciated-yet-somehow-still-suggesting-a-semblance-of-muscle-tone body of a former track captain and current amphetamine user. She is lanky, white, bottle-blonde. That is May. "I don't think it's necessarily a matter of *appeal*. There are only so many stupid fuckin' things you can put on the bottom of your F-150, right?" Trish hoists her large brown knapsack farther up her back. She is curved, lush-haired, of indeterminate (to us, not to her) Latina origin. That is Trish.

"You don't get it," May says, narrowing her eyes at the reeling figure up ahead and to their right. "I don't understand the market as a whole. I don't understand those little family decals. I don't get fuzzy dice. Diamond plates. Even bumper stickers are so weird to me. Who cares? It's just a silly attempt at individuality"—the figure is revealed to be a man in a gray business suit, drunk, foolish, clutching a stop sign—"that doesn't actually *mean* anything"—the man jeers, catcalls, propositions, casts wildly-inappropriate-but-not-altogether-inaccurate aspersions on the sexualities of the two women, all in a moment's time—"from the eight-year-old city councilman sticker"—the women share a glance of mutual understanding—"to the 'Co-exist' one where you know the driver can't even name all the movements the symbols represent"—the drunkard is lifted by his ashen lapels, protesting in slurred slurs, Trish rifling through his wallet while May sticks her sidearm in his flabbergasted face, waggling its suppressor under his chin as he gasps out obscenities—"right down to the fuckin' Gandhi quotes about leaving the world blind and ripping out eyes"—and it is finished, and he crumples into a rapidly coalescing pool of crimson, and they pick up the pace a bit, for this was not the main attraction, only an unanticipated sideshow.

"I'd rather see an Idi Amin quote, or something by Kim Jong-Il, or a Reagan or Bush quote on one of those American-made fuckers," May says to herself, or Trish, it doesn't matter, rambling, on a jagged high and allowing her words to bounce out irrespective of forethought or coherence.

"It'd be something new, I guess," Trish concedes, looking over her shoulder, a bit shaky but more talkative the faster they trot.

"More than that. Dictators and authoritarians speak better than almost anyone else on the planet. Take Bush Junior. Worst president we've ever had, but the guy knew his constituency." May adopts an exaggerated hillbilly stutter: "'Ev-everywhere that freedom stirs, heh, let tyrants fear.' Now if that doesn't put the fear of God and country in you, I don't know what will."

They are at the place.

Trish breathes deeply. They do not need masks. Either no one will see them, or no one will be able to identify them. One way or another. "I wonder what he even does now. I wonder if—"

"Who cares?" May cuts her off. "He ain't boosting cars and wasting nobodies for their pocket change, is he? He knows where his next meal is coming from." She kicks in the window, an impossibly high kick, and they are inside.

George Walker Bush, former President of the United States of America, former Honorable Governor of the State of Texas, onetime chairperson of the G8 Summit, onetime First Lieutenant, 147th Recon, former President of Delta Kappa Epsilon, doesn't know where his next meal is coming from. Paula, the housekeeper and cook, is gone for the night. Hunger gnaws. Multiple Budweisers require companionship. You know how it is. He has begun drinking again after twenty-seven long years of staid sobriety. He does not know why. He worries about Dad. Dad is, in plain Texan terms, old as shit and ready to die, but his eldest son is not ready to see it happen. He cracks another Bud.

George (for us he is not Mr. President, he is George, he is our friend and colleague whose Uncle Will still half-affectionately calls him Georgie the fuckup, the little Georgie that couldn't, even now for Christ's sake, even after two presidential terms and God alone knows how many fundraiser dinners) rises at length and moves pensively to the atrium of his secluded North Dallas residence, his home-away-from-ranch, to where his easel and paints are illuminated in the soft lighting, waiting to be picked up (please permit this mediocre personification for the sake of an unsullied glimpse into George's thoughts). He hasn't been painting lately. He did some pretty nice dogs and cats, and all the nerdy hacker people on the Internet who got ahold of those love them, or maybe not—it's hard to tell sometimes—but they talk about them lots. But he's been stymied by this wretched soldier. His humans are still a bit misshapen, still make their homes somewhere in the uncanny valley, but they're mostly passable. But this soldier's goddamn mouth, well, the smile is ghastly, looks like the poor fella was born downwind from an outhouse, as folks are wont to say around these here parts. But the smile is very important. He tried to explain this to Laura once, but she didn't get it. Told him to try painting an eagle instead. Sometimes people don't get things that George tries to explain. He is used to it.

George thinks about himself for some time. Jeb said history would be kind to him. History is one thing, but regular folk haven't quite caught up to that yet. He gets his fair share of awestruck Tea Partiers and fawning Wal-Mart managers, not to mention the boys at the country club and the DKE meetings that still treat him with respect and camaraderie, but that all kind of pales in comparison to the rest of it. Venomous glances, mocking photographs, egg all over the brand new Silverado—and half the pavement besides—in the middle of the goddamn night. Pretty much anything you can

imagine, short of actual physical violence, and even that is probably only out of fear of his Secret Service detail. The neoliberals and the commies on the Internet, too, are—he stops himself here. He remembers what Don Evans told him. They call him stupid because they can't understand him. They call him a monster because they are ignorant. They call him unreasonable because they are lazy, intellectually and physically lazy. There is a whole table of *if you think that then you are this* and Cheney laid it out for him once, but George was thinking about parachuting into a canyon full of wild dogs who might be friendly and lick his face when he landed and help him stand up to the people who told him things as if he didn't understand them and the parachute was, well…was it blue or was it rainbow colored? Maybe neither. It might have been sunburst yellow and the landing would teach him something important about himself and it would teach him something about God, the Almighty, the Unknowable, the *Ineffable*, a word he had learned from a science fiction book Laura had left lying around. It means unknowable but he likes *ineffable* because God isn't Effable, he Effs you. He fucks you over again and again and suddenly you're in your sixties and hundreds of thousands, or maybe even millions, yes definitely millions, of people think that you—

Enough. We do not need this much of a window into his thoughts, do we? That is basic storytelling. This is a former American President and we all know everything there is to know about him thanks to the cults of personality that form around presidents and heads of state. Suffice it to say that George gets up with force to show himself that he means business, and he heads upstairs to bed.

Trish limps all the way home. She has not been injured in the line of duty. She and May are rarely injured in that way. She has only twisted her ankle after vaulting herself in through the jagged window, stray shards of glass puncturing her thick gloves. She sloughs off her knapsack, its interior spangled with jewelry, small electronics, candlesticks, whatever else might be in a successful thief's backpack after a night on the town. Use your imagination. It's not important. She arranges herself awkwardly on the creaking metal frame bed. The house is empty, save for May in the other room, and it feels perhaps even emptier with the knowledge of her presence. It has been empty for what seems like a long time. She thinks about the people tonight.

The people were…they were afraid and pleading and she had—May had told her—May said to—and she—The one man kept asking for God to help him and May said she would give him a whole minute to see if God would help him and the man cried during her countdown and then May—and then Trish yelled soundlessly and ran into the bedroom to get the jewelry and vomited out the window in a haze of shrieking fluorescent heat. The money

is there though and the money will help things. It will fix what Trish cannot and bring light to her dark and empty surroundings. Trish thinks that. There is a palpable disconnect between her thoughts and the reality of things, but of course you already knew that.

Trish fidgets for a few minutes but soon sinks into a dreamless and blanket-like sleep. She moves very little as her breathing slows and the noises from the next room recede.

George is also in bed. There is a strange ticking noise and he does not know whether it is in his head or coming from an external source in the house. He keeps a fifth of Evan Williams in the bedside table, next to a container of melatonin tablets and a small bottle of Ambien CR. He sleeps in a separate room from Laura now. They had a calm and smiling discussion about how it was the best thing for both of them because you know how you snore, George, and don't you want your own space anyways, all this room in the house? And George saying okay, all right, that's fine. He feels very little about this. He folds his hands and stares at the ceiling, letting the soothing tones of a nameless news anchor wash over him. His thoughts shuffle in orbital patterns and dark circles ring his eyes.

Trish is jarred awake by an unfamiliar voice, speaking in a very familiar tone. There are police at the door, and she is coldly aware of this in less time than it takes her to open her eyes. May is shouting. There is too much light and Trish is afraid, feeling as though her long-dead mother has just caught her smoking menthols on the back porch.

George cocks his head like a terrier, his attention briefly snagged by the anchor's use of the phrase "killing spree." Onscreen, a group of mutely shouting men in dark blue body armor surround a tumbledown home that resembles nothing so much as Dorothy's house from *The Wizard of Oz*, albeit the overall aesthetic is more Detroit than Kansas. The anchor is gravely intoning that the two targets of this raid are suspected of over a dozen instances of robbery and murder. "We here at the station hope only that the suspects can be taken in without any further violence," she says. Her eyes betray her.

There is smoke in Trish's eyes and in her mouth and in her brain. She hears the chattering of semiautomatic weaponry and the slower *pow, pow* of May's sidearm, and she understands numbly that she is about to die. (She is not, of course, which you'd know if you were paying attention, but she is so

thoroughly convinced of this that for days afterward she will awaken radiating heat from every extremity, certain she has finally emerged from a lingering coma into a netherworld of punishment and grief). Her eyes dart across the room and she lets out a low, awful moan. She is not cognizant of this.

George sighs, a dry, reedy sound, incongruous with the low hums of the settling house and the excited chatter of the news anchor. He thrusts the remote forward with one hand, presses the channel button without watching the screen, faster and faster until his thumb begins to tire, unconsciously groaning, mirroring Trish halfway across the country, mirroring all of us, searching unceasingly for some way out of this mess.

CHRISTINA MORTELLARO

An Efficient Remedy Is to Be Alone

A migraine: loose change jangling inside a balloon—muffled
copper flicks *I-I-I*: an attempt to speak. Across the forehead: flop
like a cat chasing traced feather-pressure. You can apply a soft vice,

two cold pillows, to block out sporadic pennies clanging—florescent,
light bulbs unscrewed, packed in cardboard & bubble-wrap
to reduce throbbing—etch-a-sketch it away. Draw empty

faucets to wash down tylenol & swallow, pills like rosaries—
beads sticking half-way, make goldfish gulps: rhythmic peristalsis,

push them down. Lay alone, ignore the knuckled morse taps—
Better yet? Tighten pillows, maybe carousel your summer, anything quiet

to induce sleep: butterflies inside picnic blankets, knitting your Christmas gifts
months in advance, reading science textbooks—lysosomes hammer-smashing cells.

MICHAEL CIEPLY

Index of a Hypothetical Journal

AMORPHOUS
The shape of the jam jar and its contents, shattered on the tile.

AROMA
Comforting. It clings to you relentlessly. Shared with my childhood blanket after its monthly bath.

BILE
The substance spewing from my throat. Someone laughs.

BREWERY OMMEGANG
Veggie burgers and frites. Where I saw you for the first time in months.

BRUSSEL SPROUTS
Embarrassment at Easter dinner. Retribution by Christmas.

CRY
What I do when you do.

DOG
[run play jump fun dig kick drool mope shit eat pant bark love]

DRESS
Our shared apparel: hand-me-down shirts with mangled necks; woolen socks traded in the February snow; faded mittens, dripping with nostalgia. I sustain these articles like my memories, wondering if they are still yours.

END
Of the night, of the film, of the blanket, of the tea, of the ride, of the walk, of the embrace, of the cone, of the visit, of the fight, of the wait, of the laughter, of the daylight, of the rain.

FEEL
Not the warmth of fresh blood billowing from split lips, not the witnessing of friends diminishing their potential, not the city smog. When your hand finds mine.

FIONA
The three-legged dog I see whenever I drive through that town.

GRAVEYARD
Where I want to walk with you. Where you do not want anything.

GUILT
The entrails of a raccoon staining my tires as I accelerate to reach you. Knowing the necessary words, but not saying them. Taking you for granted.

HARANGUE
Sexist politicians. Ignorant doctors. Wicked preachers.

HEAD
Your face your ears your hair your nose your eyes your cheeks your eyebrows your tongue your lips your lips your lips your lips your lips.

IMMACULATE
[see 'HEAD']

JARRING
How much funnier that joke is when I hear it from you.

KATHLEEN
Name between names. From the ones who loved you first. It can never be taken away.

LOVE
Resisting the urge to watch the next *Breaking Bad* on your own. Feigning laughter to fill the silence after an unfunny remark. Identifying the ways you are willing to change.

MEMORY
Contemplating in bed as I flirt with slumber. Mind's destination on long car rides, too far for my GPS to navigate. Simultaneous happy place and tormentor. Flexible, changing with time. Easily manipulated. Worst torture of all. Source of all guilt.

NEEDLE
The cross-stitch you brought into this world for no other reason than my contentment. The acupuncturist's tools that have helped you more than all the Ibuprofen in the world.

OBSERVATIONS
The process of converting your thoughts into text, rearranging into sentences, and escaping your mouth with exactly the right intonation. Insightful. Witty. Unique. Perceptive. Never vainglorious.

PRINCESS QUEEN
Unsure why I started calling you this. Unsure if stolen from a television show. Unsure if you are the queen of princesses or the princess of queens. Unsure which is better than the other. Unsure if I will ever stop using it. Certain that it suits you.

QUIET
Walking in your house at night. Adjusting myself so I can watch you wake. Trying to think of what to say in a fight. Driving home after a weekend with you. The highest attainable volume on Netflix. 4:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m.

QUINTESSENTIAL
The middle piece of a cheese pan pizza.

RAIN
An anarchical presence that signals the hopelessness of productivity, the cancellation of events, and the stalling of progress. Emancipates behavior otherwise unacceptable during peaceful conditions. Only when we are in the thick of a storm's pandemonium does time seem to renounce its rigid schedule and take pause.

SWIM
Summertime pleasure. Total connectivity in a body of water. Sensual dancing in 360 degrees. The struggle to stay afloat. You in a bikini.

TRAIN TRACKS
Our early destination. I suppose we were too scared to cross it. I suppose we never had a good enough reason to leave.

TROCHILIDAE
The bird around your neck.

UNDERSTOOD
That quick glance you just gave me. The corner of your mouth twitching. Why you wore that shirt. What you would say if you were here. How much to drink on medication. That joke in *Arrested Development*. The occupancy of my discomfort. The moment just preceding hatred. That I did not mean to say what I did.

VEHEMENT
My passion for breakfast/your passion for filtered water.

WEGMAN'S
Where all roads lead. Inviting to all with shirt and shoes. Instant satisfaction. Gluten-free macaroni and cheese. Cheddar bunnies and coconut water. Ingredients that we silently agree to not try to pronounce.

XENON
The word that always catches my eye on your Scrabble mug. I imagine something extraterrestrial. Something fantastic.

YESTERDAY
Wanting to go back to relive it/wanting to go back to change it. Wanting that same high. Wanting to forget the consequences.

YOUTH
Never stolen, just misplaced. Never lost, simply prioritized. Release all preconceptions if you wish to retain it. "Oh, to be young forever," we hear the townies in the bar say.

ZUCCHINI
Yellow and green spread before me. Eaten only after that joke bombed. Your blue eyes are the only confirmation I need.

Allein

Die Nacht ist in mein Zimmer eingezogen
und alles schweigt vor ihrem Steingesicht,
auf dunklen Füßen geht ein Silberbogen:
in Mond, ein Stern, ich weiß es nicht.

Es ist so kühl auf meiner Hand, als schwebe
ein kleiner Vogel immer an mir her—
ach trag mich, die ich kaum mehr lebe
ins Eis, ins Feuer, weiter noch, ins Meer.

Da lieg ich unterm Traum und atme Träume
aus einer Gegend fern und hell wie Schnee
und eß mein Brot mit kalten Fingern—all die Räume
der Liebe sind verbrannt und tun nur weh.

TRANSLATION BY AMY ELIZABETH BISHOP

Alone

The night has moved into my room—
all silences before its stone face.
A silver bow moves along on muffled, dark feet,
a moon, a star—something I do not know.

My hand is chilled, as if a small bird hovers—
always with me. Oh, carry me, the one
who scarcely lives any more, into the ice,
into the fire, even further into the sea.

There: I lie under a dream and breathe only dreams
from a home distant and bright as snow—
I eat my bread with cold fingers: all the quarters
of love are burnt up and only cause me pain.

Rushing Stillness, Shareefah Pereira

KATHRYN BOCKINO

The Most Feared Man in Italy

He crossed the street without trembling. All around, people eyed him sideways or kept their gaze directed at their own shadows. Their mumbled, incoherent apologies to him flew along with the breeze as he sidestepped their quivering bodies. He never once acknowledged their presence.

As he got closer to his destination, he silently regarded how those around him were getting more and more agitated. Some fidgeted their bleak-looking ties as others wrung their hands from within their pants' pockets. The men kept their jaws locked into place as the blood from their already pale faces drained, drop by drop. The women picked at their stubby nails while glancing toward their companions, hoping no one would notice their lipstick fading from constantly licking their dry lips.

To Arturo Bocchini, he was just walking to work.

He had nothing to fear while walking near the Capitoline Hill. His shirt never clung to his back with sweat, and he never had to beg his stomach to keep its contents down in this part of town. Palazzo Venezia, the dreaded medieval-looking building coming up on his right, was what caused those around him to shake with dread. Arturo knew this, and stored everyone's reactions in the back of his mind. He would be able to recall these facts at a moment's notice if his boss ever asked. And, knowing his boss, he sure would be interested in knowing what the average person thought of him.

Palazzo Venezia's beautiful balcony, which overlooked the cobblestone piazza, was something Arturo always liked to admire. It reminded him of his Italy: it watched over its inhabitants day or night, rain or shine. Sometimes, if

the weather permitted, he would enjoy his espresso up on the balcony and let his mind wander, knowing that no one would dare look up.

Any other man who held his job would have smirked with this knowledge. They would chuckle at the poor, sad people around him; people who lived in constant fear of what was going to happen next in Italy. Any other person holding the amount of power Arturo had would stare back into a pair of frightened eyes and soundlessly convey that no, it was not going to be all right.

Arturo did not see it that way.

He was doing his civic duty and keeping the peace. He was being a good citizen and an even better employee. That was all. It wasn't black and white to him. It was just what life was like in fascist Italy.

As his thoughts strayed to such matters, he didn't even realize that he'd arrived at his objective location. His mind whirled with what he wanted to tell his boss first, but he knew Mussolini would want the most urgent updates right away.

It wasn't always easy being the head of the secret police in Italy. But to Arturo Bocchini, someone had to do it—and at this point in his career and life, why not him?

My family likes to talk about Arturo Bocchini, our most famous ancestor. Any dinner at a relative's house somehow always finds its way to him. Whether it's the food on the table, the wine generously being poured, or whatever is on the news that evening, something always reminds someone of Arturo.

He's not in any American history books or stories. If I were to skim a textbook, I would never find his name. I can ask any of my friends who claim to be World War II buffs, and they'll just shrug their shoulders and say, "Never heard of him." Arturo Bocchini is not a recognized figure in America.

But to my family, he is the celebrity of every hour. My dad, grandfather, and uncles love to discuss who he truly was. Was he the man the Italian government portrayed him to be? Or was he the man my family (those who were alive during World War II) knew?

The contradictions are endless, and already his name is slipping away from people's lips. But when I watch my great-uncle Ralph slam his fist down, making the table shake with anger, and say that "the damn bureaucrats don't know a damned thing," it gets me mad, too.

I never knew Arturo, and neither did my dad. Yet, when we talk about him it's as if he's still around, still in the shadows, still walking up and down central Rome with his unflinching eyes.

It was 1922 when Benito Mussolini first became Prime Minister of Italy. World War I left the country in shambles, but Mussolini offered Italy hope.

Italy was still a new country of sorts; unification of the area had only taken place a few years before, and the war cost the nation more money than they had spent in the previous fifty years combined.

The Treaty of Versailles, the treaty that was hypothetically going to settle the disputes of WWI, was supposed to give the country faith that its high unemployment levels and equally high inflation rates would soon be a tale of the past. However, as fate would have it, Italy was left out of most of the treaty, causing resentment to stir between them and the other European nations. Dishonored and disgusted, many Italian citizens blamed the government for not having the balls to stand up to the "Big Three" (America, Britain, and France).

The everyday civilian prayed that Mussolini would change the current government for the better, while the monarchy craved he would stop the disgruntled murmurs from those who were aggravated with their authority. He and the fascist movement promised the nation—and the world—that a new Roman Empire would soon come forth from the ashes. For all that Mussolini promised to his hungry citizens, obliterating representative democracy seemed to be a small price to pay.

What he aspired to was simple: "Italy wants peace and quiet, work and calm. I will give these things with love if possible and with force if necessary." So the question ran through his mind; how does one lucratively achieve this goal?

Then Benito Mussolini met my relative.

Arturo Bocchini is my great-(great) uncle on my dad's side. Sometimes when I talk about him I forget to mention one of the "greats," but I figure people still get the picture. His family branch veered away from ours, with most of his kin still residing in Italy today. My great-great-grandfather moved to America after World War I, and we have all stayed here since.

My great-(just one) uncle Ralph was born in the United States and fought in World War II. He would joke with us around the dinner table that he sometimes wondered if he was flying over Arturo during the war, and if Arturo ever thought of him. The two men never officially met, but through other relatives they kept in touch and were informed about the other's life.

It's my great-uncle Ralph who tells me all about Arturo and the "truth." He shakes his head, and breathes out family lore every time I visit. I love hearing about Arturo, about what made him tick, and want to become such an infamous man.

Arturo Bocchini did not grow up envisioning that *The Milwaukee Journal* would one day dub him the "The Most Feared Man in Italy." He did,

conversely, dream of becoming a lawyer, and was proud when he finally finished his law degree from the University of Naples in 1903 at the young age of twenty-three. Whether it was because of the economy, family problems, or just sheer curiosity, he took a different turn after graduating and quickly joined the Ministry of Interior under Victor Emmanuel III. Instead of trying to get people out of jail, he was now part of the security force (called Prefects) that threw people into jail.

In 1915, he was personally called to Rome to focus his already well-known efforts on the Fifth Division of Safety, as the General of Public Security. His reputation as a no-nonsense, tough but fair Prefect continued to expand until certain people in power began to wonder if he was the right man for the most laborious of jobs.

His influence spread near and far. Despite never being a member of the National Fascist Party, he was made Prefect of Brescia, Bologna, and Genoa after he finished his duty in Rome. All of his colleagues knew him as the man who could recall any fact or face within seconds, as the man whose voice never altered or stuttered, and as the man whose eyes never gave any emotion away. If Bocchini saw your wife through the window of a tearoom one afternoon, he could recall the exact address and time she was there weeks later.

Mussolini was no fool. He knew the second his hands brushed the intoxicating power he yearned for that certain people would have to go. Some people were kicked out within a fortnight of him stepping up to the plate in Rome. For others, he knew he would have to twiddle his thumbs before he could somehow get them out of the picture.

It took up to four years to completely overturn every government official, officer, and Prefect that might dare to question his authority. But by 1926 Mussolini had successfully morphed the Italian government into an impeccable pool of devout minions who would nod their heads at his every word.

On September 13, 1926 it finally became Bocchini's time to shine. Over the years, everyone who was anyone in fascist Italy had learned that this was not a man to cross. And Mussolini knew this, too. After steadily moving up the ranks, it was time to get the Holy Grail of jobs: Chief of the Secret Police in Italia. This meant he would have almost absolute control over the inner workings of the Italian government—after Mussolini, that was.

During his reign, my great-uncle's pride and joy was the creation of OVRA. The acronym seems to be lost to time, but one twisted tale says that Mussolini's deepest desire was creating a police organization that would snare every single breathing Italian in its giant octopus tentacles. In Italian, *piovra* means octopus, and many wonder if the word somehow comes from that gruesome analogy. One can only shudder at the thought.

OVRA had two main objections. The first and foremost goal was to protect Mussolini. Bocchini was so successful with this task that after he assumed his position in 1926, no hopeful assassin ever came close to grazing Mussolini's balding head. The second aim was to help create an illusion of harmony surrounding the fascist regime.

The men Bocchini recruited had special privileges that no other Prefect or police officer ever got; they were allowed to bypass the usual chain of command to get their job done. Bocchini himself handpicked the men who worked in OVRA—he looked for those who reminded him of himself. The organization was small, but scarily effective.

He asked these trusted men to look around. He asked them to watch the local coffee shops, to ask their wives what town gossip was going around, and to keep their ears open at Sunday Mass. Bocchini wanted to know what (not *if*) underground activities were taking place in the heart of Rome, in the countryside, and on the coast. There had to be people wanting to take down the fascist government, but where were they? Who were they? The neighbors? The teachers? The priests? Those with any suspicions were urged to go to the boss. Just like an octopus hoping to lure in unsuspecting fish, Bocchini knew how to hook his bait.

He had spies in foreign countries poking and prodding around. He tightened border patrol security to make sure no one got in or out. He, and his hissing friends, knew where you were, what you were doing, and what your sighs at night actually meant. No one was truly safe.

But did that mean if you were accused of traitorous behavior that you were immediately put to death? Not necessarily. While the death penalty was reestablished during this time period, only ten people were ever actually sentenced to death. Bocchini was able to keep Mussolini's system in check without truly resorting to the chaotic, violent system of the Nazi SS.

To my great-uncle, it seemedas though his work was sincerely helping the country. That's what my family continuously says. According to them, he thought in his heart of hearts that Mussolini was actually assisting the struggling, fragile country. I can't answer one way or another if up until this moment he agreed with everything the fascist government did, but he loyally did his job. For the fourteen years he served as the head of the secret police, Bocchini was the only person to survive Mussolini's changing of the guard. At one point or another, every other employee was dismissed, fired, killed, or fled. Bocchini was the only one who stayed in power. Perhaps it was because of how discreet he was in keeping his personal life separate from his work. Or maybe it was because of his marvelous administrative skills. Perchance it was just because Mussolini and Bocchini got along famously. All I know is that as

Director of the OVRA, and Chief of the Secret Police, my great-uncle was the second most important man in fascist Italy.

In 1936 Germany and Italy created the Rome-Berlin Axis. On the first of November, Mussolini stood in front of a Milan cathedral and announced his glorious plan to the world. This shocked many, since it was well-known that Hitler and Mussolini did not truly trust one another. Mussolini worried that Germany's territorial takeover would eventually make its way to Italy, but by this point that thought was only lingering—a meddling fly buzzing around. The new agreement meant that if war broke out, Italy would proudly stand beside Germany.

This was the start of Hitler's influence over Mussolini. Little by little, notions that Hitler believed in crept their way into Italy's politics. It is well-known that Germany was supplying Italy with military supplies and equipment, and so many wondered if Mussolini merely entertained Hitler's polices to keep him content. Others wondered if Hitler's dark web was finally just making its meal of Mussolini. Either way, by 1938 the Manifesto of Race was introduced to the public for the first time. The Manifesto of Race eerily resembled the Nazi regime's Nuremberg Laws. It stripped Jews of their Italian citizenship and any position they held in government, made marriage between Jews and non-Jews illegal, forbid them from having any power in the military, and prohibited them from working in factories that hired over one hundred people.

These laws challenged many people's beliefs and principles. Many non-Jews hated this new system and believed that Mussolini had gone too far.

I've asked my dad, my great-uncle Ralph, consulted books and newspaper articles, but I don't know what exactly made Arturo switch sides. They don't know. No one knows what made my relative one day realize that Mussolini wasn't helping the country, but ruining its principles and ideas.

I once had a nightmare about Arturo. I was there with him, but he couldn't hear me. I just sat on a creaky wooden chair and watched him pace back and forth for hours in his little bedroom in central Rome. When I woke up the next morning—very confused—I asked my dad what it could possibly mean.

"Well," he said, sipping his dark coffee. "Maybe you got an exclusive peak into his inner torment? Maybe you got to see what made him change his mind?"

I wish I had. I wish I could know. I imagine it could have been one of these three scenarios:

1. Arturo twisted and turned all night long. He couldn't sleep. He couldn't eat. He didn't want to breathe anymore. Each gasp of air just reminded him of the life force he would soon have to take away from his butcher and friend down the street. These people had never done anything wrong; in fact, they were model citizens whom he praised for following the country's orders passionately.

Pushing back his thin sheets, he dragged his feet out of bed to get a glass of water. Tomorrow, he would call in sick.

2. Arturo inspected his list. The next family he had to round up lived a corner away from him. He shook his head and sighed. It seemed like every person he was ordered to take into custody was someone who knew him, or his family, or his hometown. He couldn't escape the fact that the people he was sending to the camps were people he knew.

Stop it, he scolded himself. *These aren't people. If Mussolini thinks they're less than human, then I should too.*

He was the Prefect, the second-in-command, and he would not disobey orders today. He—

Across the street ran a screaming girl. Wailing incoherently, she begged the OVRA police officer to take her back to her mother. Smirking, one of Arturo's men yelled that they would be reunited soon enough and tossed her over his shoulder.

Arturo and the girl only made eye contact for a few seconds before he turned away and broke down in soundless sobs.

3. Arturo felt sick to his stomach. He'd just had one of the best lunches of his life, and he knew he had gone too far. He shouldn't have had that extra forkful, but he had to keep going, and he had to eat just a little bit more.

Looking around at the vacant restaurant, he wondered what would happen to the little shop once his men got ahold of its Jewish owner. Would someone else swoop in and take over? Or would it just fall to ruin, like many of the other vacant stores in Rome?

As Arturo was wiping his face, he watched the owner sweep behind the counter. He whistled as his mind wandered, oblivious that Arturo was still even there. Arturo began to smile, just a little bit, when the owner's wife tiptoed in and gave her husband a quick kiss on the cheek. Their eyes were twinkling as they gazed at one another.

Running out of the restaurant, Arturo threw up his entire meal right there onto the pathway. How was he to arrest that old couple in only a few days? How was he to separate them, when they still were so much in love?

How was he going to live with himself the next day, and the day after that, and the day after that…?

I don't know why Arturo changed his mind. I don't know what moment, if any, made him realize that he could no longer go along with Mussolini's fascist ideals. I can't tell you if it was a dramatic flash of light, or if he cried, or if he just always knew that he would have to put a stop to the craziness around him one day. I wish I knew, and I wish I knew him better.

That is what I imagine, because what else could make a man who religiously followed Mussolini's orders snap? The whispers that my family tells are only that: whispers, rumors, hints of a life that is so fascinating to me, but one I cannot access. I have only these murmurs on which to base my story.

I do know that it was around this time that something inside of him snapped. I know that he could no longer look at Mussolini as a colleague—or maybe even a friend—but saw him as a villain.

There are rumors about what Bocchini did from 1938 through 1940. Many Jews never saw concentration camps because he would not allow it. For two years he was able to get by without anyone else suspecting. Perhaps some papers got "lost." Or maybe that train, for some strange reason, never arrived to take them away. Using his influence, he delayed the deportation of many Jewish families as much as possible.

Yet by 1940, people began to take notice. Bocchini was known for always being organized, for never letting any of his men slip up, and for always getting the job done. So then, why was he slacking now?

He started to openly question Mussolini's laws. With other Italians, he pondered their effectiveness. Criticizing the fascist state in any such way usually meant OVRA would appear on your doorstep, but what does a person do when his boss is the one imparting these treacherous notions?

Word spread, gossip flew from one spider to another, and before long Mussolini himself started to hear about these doubts his friend Arturo was having. Rumors that he questioned Jewish banishment and encumbered their exile swirled around and around in his office.

But this was Arturo Bocchini, his second, his right-hand man! This was his prodigy, the only employee still with him from the very beginning. What was to be done?

There are two versions of what happened on November 20, 1940. Two versions of that same day, that same moment in history. Two accounts that don't fit together and never will. Two stories told from two different sources,

two different types of people. One my family swears by, and one a historian swears by. To this day, there is no definite answer about which is accurate.

A colleague of my dad's (who is well versed in World War II history) once exclaimed that there is a statue of Arturo in a little village somewhere in Italy. It's this that makes me want to close my eyes and imagine staring up into his carved face. Or, at least, try to envision what others think when they pass by the statue on their way to work, to the bank, to the grocery store. What goes through their minds as they gaze up at someone who might have my nose, or my ears? Do they smile as they pass by my relative or sneer?

Arturo Bocchini was lying on his back. The pain seemed to escalate with every breath he sucked in and every twitch of his eyelids. His family quietly prayed and cried around him. He couldn't speak, but he was still conscious enough to realize that he didn't have a lot of time left.

The stroke came out of nowhere, and he knew he would not recover. He knew this was his last day on earth, his last thought, and the last time he would ever see the beautiful blue sky.

He was on the job when it happened, and he never saw it coming. Maybe if he had taken those vacations, or slept longer, or ate healthier, he wouldn't be on his deathbed right then and there.

It was November 20, 1940.

Arturo Bocchini trembled as he crossed the street. Everyone around him seemed so calm, so relaxed, but he couldn't stop his fingers from quivering in his pockets. Each step he took made his heart fall into his bottomless stomach. Why was Benito calling him in on his one day off? Did he suspect anything awry?

Of course not. I've covered all my bases.

Walking up the steps to the Palazzo Venezia, he hoped he wasn't getting fired. Perhaps they finally realized the number of his arrests were down. Perhaps they were about to demote him. Shaking his head, he couldn't accept that after fourteen years as the head of the secret police he might have to start at the beginning.

Numbly, he walked the familiar path to Benito's office. The door to the balcony was coming up on his right, and he longed to go outside, drink a little, laugh a little, and just be someone else, just for today. Instead, he headed to Benito's office. Forgetting to knock, he walked right in and sat across from his boss.

Benito smiled. "Sit down, friend."

Arturo felt beads of sweat along his forehead. "Is everything alr—"

"It's hot out for November, isn't it? Have some wine with me to cool off. You look like you're burning up." Benito reached to his left and poured two small cups of red wine from the bottle that was sitting on his desk. Sliding the cup over, he raised his own to clink with Arturo's.

"To fourteen years together, my friend."

"To fourteen years." Arturo downed the refreshing drink and then cleared his still-dry throat. "So why did you—"

He coughed. Twice. Three times. His chest was so tight, so tight, he couldn't see straight. His eyes were bleeding, they must be, everything was red, dark red, black, no colors, no light. All he could hear, over and over again, was: "To fourteen years together. To fourteen years together. To fourteen years…."

It was November 20, 1940.

What do I swear by? I know which truth I believe in. I didn't know Arturo. I don't know him, but I believe in his story, his tale, and his goodness of heart. I believe that November 20, 1940 is a day to mourn, not to celebrate.

JOSEPH O'CONNOR

On the Barber Pole

Outside, the red & white needle helixes like a lighthouse:—centrifuges clientele, unraveling men from boys. A bell alarms as I pass through. Dip behind the dirty aquarium: sink into black leather couch. Springs push relentless on my tailbone:—try to sperm their way inside. Waiting makes my thighs sweat. Astroglide forward: Playboy spread like playing cards. Chin down:—shades drawn over my poker face. Draw one. Lick my pointer:—the ladies oblige, open their glossy insides [not as smooth as Barbie's]. I could sense the sudden hair on my tongue. I was speechless. The barber calls for me in a language I do not speak. No telephone-book cushion: the firm support of two-thousand strangers. He sits me in front of myself. Robes me in black. Vibrator whispers in my ears: *zzzzzzzzzzzzzzz*. Dead cells pepper the air. Chin up. Hands tell my temples where to look: *left*. Spins my head like a globe this way and that. His stomach mushrooms over my forearm as he cleaves my veil. The shock of buckle metal is cold electricity. He does not see me quake underneath. I do not see him shoot warm cream on my nape. Sit still while his blade carves me into hard edges. I tip him three dollars more than my father told me to.

The Ascension: EC-JFK, James Mattson

ESS GORMLEY

Learning the Language

I sat in the grocery store's parking lot, my forehead pressed against the top of the steering wheel, trying to remember what I needed. The store closed in ten minutes and Leila wasn't picking up her phone. I looked into the big, glaring white windows along the front of the supermarket. A college-aged girl was scanning a cart full of food. Her hair reminded me of Leila's before she had it cut short. The girl's face catered to no emotion as the scanner beeped the same incessant tone. She was young and sad and familiar.

It had only been fifteen minutes since Leila told me what I needed to get from the store. How could I not remember? The bathroom door had been closed and she was behind it getting ready for a bath. She told me what I needed and asked if I knew what the date was.

"December 11," I said, pretty sure I wasn't forgetting anything that could get me in trouble. Her birthday was in May, and I knew it wasn't our anniversary because we'd started dating in July, two years back.

"Today was the day we had planned on leaving," she said through the closed bathroom door.

"Leaving?"

"For Québec."

"Oh."

"Whatever happened to that?"

"What do you mean?"

I sat down on the bed. It felt cold and stiff.

"I mean, whatever happened to all those nights you said we were meant for Québec?"

"Traveling is pretty expensive right now."

"But if we really try," she said. "And if we saved and—"

"We can't afford something like that this year," I said.

"I don't care." She raised her voice. "I don't care about money. I don't care about what we have and don't have." She stepped closer to the door and I could see her shadow under it. "I just don't care, Ryan. I can't sit around here anymore."

Her shadow disappeared. She slammed on the lever to the tub.

"Well, you..." she said, but I couldn't hear her over the rushing water.

"What?"

She opened the door, leaving a small space between it and its frame where light broke through into the dark of the bedroom. The rising cloud of steam looked warm and thick from the cool shadow of the bedroom.

"You said we could before." She was still out of sight on the other side of the door.

"It costs more now."

"It wouldn't have mattered to you then," she said.

"Well, I was dumb then. Jesus, what do you want me to say, Leila?"

She was quiet.

"Things change sometimes," I said.

The beating of the water was the only sound in the apartment until something made a hard noise as it dropped to the bathroom tile floor. I stared at the bright open space between the rooms.

"Today was the first time that I've left Stillwater in—I don't know how long," she said.

"You should go to Saratoga more often." I lay down and gazed at the black ceiling. "Make it a weekend thing. It's what? Twenty minutes?"

She slammed the cabinet under the sink shut.

"When would we start that?"

"Whenever you want," I said.

"I'm not going alone again," she said. "I hated it."

I sat up slowly with my knees over the edge of the bed and my feet on the dark gray of the carpet.

"I never said you had to."

Headlights flashed in the rearview mirror and into my eyes. A car pulled up close behind mine. I checked the clock: 8:51 p.m. A man stepped out of the car and closed the door. He hurried into the store before it closed. Stuck in that car alone, not knowing at all what I needed to get, the snow falling, Leila not answering my calls, I couldn't watch the girl anymore. I turned on the radio.

"Leçon dix," a woman said through the speakers. *"L'université."*

I pressed the eject button and snatched the CD. *Learning French*. My face floated behind the words of the shining disc. I thought maybe she was learning it to impress me. I figured that she wanted to surprise me by ordering herself a *chocolat chaud* as we brushed off the Québec snow from our jackets inside a café. That was something she might've done then, back when we planned on Québec. Or, I thought, maybe she still planned on going.

Leila had tried asking me something in broken-up, out-of-order French that evening before I'd left for the store. She said it through the cracked open door between the bedroom and the bathroom, the steaming bathwater filling the tub. I stood up before the bed.

"Say it in English," I said, looking at the thin, fake wood of the door.

She turned off the tub. I heard the water move as she dipped in her toes.

I studied French for a while back at school. When Leila and I first met, she'd ask me to teach her some things every now and then. How to say things like *tu veux aller*. We'd read one of my old textbooks at the table with a bottle of wine every Friday night. That was back when the whole Québec thing was planned out.

"Do you ever miss speaking French?" she said from the bathroom.

"That's what you were trying to say?"

"No, I'm just curious."

It sounded like she was looking at the doorway.

"French isn't too convenient here in New York," I said.

She didn't laugh. I couldn't see her, but I knew she didn't smile, either. I thought about how she might've laughed at something like that before.

"You have to miss it a little," she said.

I stepped away and sat back on the bed.

"What were you trying to say?"

"I want to see what Sue's doing for Christmas this year," she said.

"That's what you were trying to say?"

"I just want to see what she's doing. That's all. Maybe she's finally skiing out West."

"I doubt that."

"Why?"

Sue didn't go anywhere besides to work or down the road to her brother's, not without Tom around, but I didn't say anything, hoping to prevent another argument. We'd been arguing a lot at that point and it wasn't looking good.

"She could," Leila said to the partly open door. "You never know."

"You should call her tomorrow," I suggested. I had learned the language when it came to certain topics with Leila.

"I'll bet she's off somewhere already." Her voice bounced off the mirror and slipped through the steam in the doorway and into the bedroom. "Remember how she'd talk about those ski trips?"

Leila and I had skied with them once.

Tom and I were on the lift, rising to the summit. It was Leila's first time skiing, and though I had snowboarded once before, I was nowhere near comfortable with the plank attached to my feet. I saw the girls in the following chair and watched the base of the mountain slide away. Tom looked at me and laughed.

"How you feeling?" he said.

"Ask me at the bottom."

"There's a lot of falling," he said. "But it's worth it."

I could barely slide down the mountain on my ass those first couple of runs. I dug the edge of the snowboard into the trail to keep from sliding off into the woods. Leila was standing with a ski and two poles in her one hand. She dug through a patch of powder with the other hand, searching for the ski that unclipped when she fell. Tom and Sue stopped waiting for us after a while and took off down the mountain, gliding over the trail's curves. I shook my head, amazed. I unclipped my snowboard and trudged through the powder to Leila.

"They make it look so easy," she said, out of breath.

I agreed and kicked at the snow until her ski emerged.

"Ha!" she shouted. "You found it." She kissed my cheek. Her lips were warm on my bare skin.

I brought the snowboard over to her and we leaned over to strap in together, not giving up. All of a sudden she let out this sort of *uh-uhh* sound, almost like a build-up to some giant sneeze. She was sliding down the mountain without one of her poles, and she hadn't exactly mastered stopping at that point.

"Ryan!" she said. I unclipped my boot and stood up. I sprinted after her and snatched the pole off the ground. I caught up. I wrapped my arm around her waist, and I felt pretty great—like Brad Pitt great—until I tried stopping her. One of my feet landed on the back of her ski while my other stayed put on the summit, sending Leila and me to the ground, and turning me from Brad Pitt to an abusive linebacker, sacking my one-hundred-and-five-pound girlfriend. We hit the ground pretty hard.

"Are you all right?" I asked her before I even slid off the back of her legs. She was on her stomach, her small frame bobbing up and down against the snow. "Leila," I said and rolled her over. She looked up at me, laughing.

"Thanks a lot, Ry." She pushed the front of my shoulders.

And then I knew Tom was right. An afternoon like that had to be worth it.

That mountain wasn't as cold as the sheets on our bed. That mountain wasn't as cold as the parking lot outside the grocery store, alone.

I watched my breath steam to the roof of the car. I put the CD back in the slot, turned off the radio, and stared at the cool blue light of the digital clock on the dashboard.

8:52 p.m. The store locked its doors for the night in eight minutes. I shifted in the seat of the car, my thumb tapping the button of the seatbelt. I stared at the clock and waited for her call.

8:53 p.m. No one was inside the market besides the girl leaning against the counter. She waited for the okay from her boss to count her drawer and end the shift. She just wanted to leave and go home, to sleep, to dream of places to see. Or maybe she'd go out with friends to Saratoga for the night. Something fun. Something that she really wanted and could still do. I thought about the last time I had brought Leila to Saratoga. It was in October, before the winter choked the life out of the season.

We sat in the front of our favorite downtown coffee shop looking out the windows from stools we must've sat on a thousand times before. We looked at the same street with its same cars, their same tires rolling over the same white lines of the crosswalk. The streetlights beamed across Broadway to the same motel with its brightly lit lobby that shined the same white all year long. But then, from those windows, the lights looked dim—distant.

"Did he say why he's leaving?" she said.

"No," I whispered, as if Sue was behind me and Tom hadn't told her yet. But she wasn't and he had. He was already gone.

"How's she taking it?"

"Terribly," I said. "How else?"

"Poor Sue." Leila sipped from her coffee. "These kinds of things are always so tough."

"What kinds of things?"

She raised her eyes and turned to me. Her knees touched the side of my legs.

"What? A break-up?" she said, as if that was all that it was.

Whenever I talked about Tom and Sue to my parents, they would interrupt me. "Are those two married yet?" they'd ask, and Leila and I would say, "No, not yet."

I held up my forehead with my hand until I peeled my palm away. It was shining with sweat.

"Are you all right?"

I didn't look at her.

"You're pale and your face looks like it's sinking into your mouth."

"I'm fine."

"No, really. You look—"

"I said I'm fine, Leila. Jesus Christ."

She looked behind us to see if anyone was listening.

"Do you want to leave?" she said.

"No. I'm sorry." And I was then.

"Could Tom and Sue get their deposit back on the room?" she said.

It was Tom's idea and we'd all fallen in love with—going to Québec to see the City Lights Festival.

"I don't know. I only talked to him briefly."

"What else did he say?"

"I only talked to him briefly," I said again.

"Something's bothering you, Ryan. He must've said something."

"He said that it just hit him one morning."

"Oh, stop. Is that what this is about?"

"No, it's nothing. I told you—"

"An aneurism will just hit you one morning. Jesus, Ryan, a stroke will just hit you one morning. These kinds of things don't just happen."

Leila doubted it, but I figured if it could happen to Tom, it could happen to anyone.

"We're still going to Québec, right?"

"I don't know," I said. I looked away from her and down the street. "I feel weird about going on their trip if they aren't."

"That trip wasn't just theirs, you know."

"Why don't we play it by ear?" I said.

I took a sip from my cup and the coffee was cold. I wondered how long we'd been sitting there watching things go by.

In the silence of the car, my phone made a noise.

8:54 p.m. Low battery, and still no call. The man wheeled his cart with some food to the girl's aisle. The guy was going to make her cash him out and I hated him for it. He was around my size—tall and a little too skinny. He couldn't have gone earlier? I figured I would've gone earlier if I could have, and I would have been quick. Now though, I thought I might be even worse than him, just barely sneaking in the store in time. I made sure the ringer of the phone was on loud.

8:55 p.m. I watched her swipe the food through the blood-red light of the scanner. In between a carton of milk and a loaf of bread she looked up at the clock on the far wall. I checked my phone.

8:57 p.m. Nothing. He was helping her bag. He was really moving, too. Maybe he wasn't such a bad guy, realizing how her shift was about to end. He saw that she needed to get out of there. He was practically throwing the bags in the cart. Some things he didn't take the time to bag. Some things he actually threw. I pressed a button on the phone to light up the screen and check the messages.

8:58 p.m. Still no call, still no message. The cart was full again. The snow had stopped falling and the pavement of the parking lot was a thin white, the black of the ground still running through to the surface of the snow. He talked to her. She smiled as best as she could, but I knew it was fake. It had been fake for a while at that point. He still hadn't paid. I checked the time.

8:59 p.m. No call. He was talking to her. He was going to keep her in that place for too long. I decided I wasn't going to do that. I turned the keys in the ignition to start the car.

9:00 p.m. Leila didn't call in time. I looked to the girl to watch her leave the register. The shift was over, but she was still stuck there. She looked scared. The man said something, shook his head, and reached into his jacket. Her arms were stiff at her sides—frozen. He grabbed one of the tan plastic bags.

She screamed as he jumped over the counter and pushed her to the side. Another employee saw and ran away. The man shoved all the money in the register down into the bag. It looked heavy swinging in his hand as he took off out of the store, the cart abandoned at the counter. I saw that she was crying. Holding her chest, crying.

The first heel that hit the pavement slid, but with flailing arms he regained his balance. There were only two cars left in the parking lot—mine and his. The button on my seatbelt clicked in the quiet of the parking lot, where everything seemed like it should be loud but nothing was. He sprinted for our cars and I knew he was going to run right by me. And I knew I wasn't going to do a thing about it. I fingered the keys, still in the ignition.

The phone rang. I jumped in my seat, looked down at the screen and saw her name—too late. The store had closed and I was stuck in that parking lot. Over there at the register, she was crying, with no one to help her. The other employee was in the office, on the phone, calling the police or whoever fixes this sort of thing, although I was pretty sure it was too late to fix anything.

The man was getting closer in my mirror. His face was as dark as mine under the orange of the light pole. I heard his footsteps hit the ground, so clearly that they could have been my own. The lock to the door was loud as I clicked it with my thumb.

And he ran close. I didn't know what was happening. I let go of the keys. His footsteps screaming, Leila calling, phone ringing, while the girl was crying inside and the car door was unlocked, the bottom of my feet suddenly pressed against it, my hand ready to open it, the heaviest door I'd ever felt, and he looked down in the window, mid-stride, just before I kicked it open and it crashed into his side.

The only noise was the buzzing of the parking lot light above us. I stepped out beyond the door and into the light. By following the route of his feet on the thin snow, I could see that he had fallen backward after hitting the curb. He slouched against the cement base of the light pole. I wasn't really sure

what I'd done or why I'd done it. But she was looking at me. She had stopped crying. My fists were clenched and my fingers were slick with sweat. He made a noise, and I took my eyes away from her. I walked over and saw the line of blood sprouting out of his forehead, outlining his chin and neck. My hand reached into his coat. It was a gun—or, it felt like a gun. I pulled it out and realized it was light. It rattled when I moved it. It was a BB gun. A toy. She had lost everything because of a toy.

He looked up at me holding his weapon. Then he looked at the bag, and I followed his eyes to the car door, and his eyes, dazed, gave me a look that asked how this had just happened to a guy like him, no different than me. I started laughing—first slowly, once or twice, and then into a hysterical, exhaling laugher.

After the sirens, lights and questions, I got out of there as fast as I could.

I parked under the bright white lights at the pump of the gas station. I checked my phone. 10:21 p.m. Over an hour after I'd first called her, and only one missed call. She had given up.

I dialed her number. Steam swirled from a snowbank beside the road.

"Hello?" she said.

"Leila."

She said my name, and then I remembered what I'd forgotten.

Her words were slow and sharp as she said, "Where are you?"

"I'm at the gas station. I called you earlier because I forgot what I needed from the store."

"What did you say?"

"I was at the store. You won't believe what happened."

"What about the store?" she said. "Ryan, I have no clue what you're saying."

"No, listen." I spoke slower. "I forgot what I needed from the store. It's too late, but I can pick us up something else."

"I don't know what you're saying, Ryan." She sounded young, and then laughed like she used to.

"Never mind," I said in English. "I'll be back soon."

Threshold, Meghan Kearns

SAVANNAH SKINNER

On the Ovarian Nature of the Mouth

There are little match girls striking the insides of all our ovaries.
Organs enamel & disintegrate in the sink like baby teeth
umbilical inside our skulls—digest us through an awakening
cathedraled & façaded,
a peristalsis like marbled malá strana.

Hips—the narrowness now waxing—rise so lethargic
from the damp menarche: ulcer a space as solemn.
We pendulum from doorknobs & clot drains with vacancies of incoming molars.

Down the hall, my sister's mouth brims with cotton fields.

A young boy's cuspids crown between her jawbones & they're just bodies
inside bodies inside themselves:
a matryoshka so skeletal, a cavity
so filled & swollen.

O, how our thighs have gaped for them, as if curtains made windows
any less transparent. Rib cages replicate
& nest further within our chests.

We anticipate the hollows of bras to see
if all our areolas swell like first kisses
in some other family's basement.
Like mouths inside other mouths.

Molars give way to more molars & molt—
removal as an expansion
of the borders of the body. Rust rings

in the satin & ceramic of the little coffins where
my mother cherishes our eyeteeth:

still-fleshed extractions strung up for thirteenth birthdays.
Our ovaries are mimicry, fresh-gummed & released.
As if organs incubating teeth were any less horrific.

SAVANNAH SKINNER

On the Places We Have Lived, with Children Not Quite Born

Lust through doors & vibrate screens like humming paper nests.
Say you don't believe in ghosts
of a before-life
though the bedskirts rustle, & I
have smelled you burning
sage beneath the windows. This is an old house
with no refrigerator
& we can hear them laughing in empty bedrooms.

Imagine life before kitchen cabinets:
My father chewing
jars of pig knuckles, brined & coaxed

sardines between his blunt teeth:
five sisters learning to honeycomb
the anatomy of the absorbed twin
sized beds where we slept—

I emerge from the mouths
of my sisters & become incarnations of all our mothers
: un-fossilization of a firstborn, crowning

of the wasp queen. A father marrows
in your baluster spine—waiting
& your ulnas, they vellum—filmy
as the pregnancy of radiator air, of me:
Crystallize a hive in my abdomen
& I'll fill the cavities of my sister's molars.

You were the wasps living in our walls,
a welcome stinging—
a harvest of clover & carrion:
my ovaries staining the hardwood with a
we've been waiting for you.

Abandoned, Ariana Elmayan

SIMEON YOUNGMANN

Our Farm House

it seems fitting
the cold should keep company here
entertain guests on uneven floors
slumped precariously on stone stilts of a foundation eager
craning to crash back into the earth

visitors are escorted through the obvious doors
but the mistress herself, the balmy blue-grey frost
sidles in through as many gaps and slits as science can support

and in, always in, as there's no about-face capacity
with winters; they simply soldier on until exhausted
somewhere around Moscow

Skinny and Fatty, Britina Cheng

LUCIA LoTEMPIO & KATHRYN WARING

Documenting Desire: A Review of Erika Meitner's *Copia*

Erika Meitner's latest collection of poems, *Copia*, is tied together with the common theme of desire. Although the collection is divided into three sections—which focus on our materialistic desires, the need for home, and an exploration of Detroit (which serves as an extended metaphor for infertility)—Meitner's collection is surprisingly cohesive. Because Meitner relies on recurring images to explore both personal and cultural identity, reading her collection feels like reading a particularly enthralling story: there is a careful attention to narrative arc, character, and setting within the pages of *Copia*.

"Objects around us are not strangers/They are the ruins/in which we drown," the speaker of the first poem in Meitner's collection ("Litany of Our Radical Engagement with the Material World") proclaims. Thus begins Meitner's examination of our desire for the material. When Meitner visited Geneseo in October, she discussed her decision to write about the most un-poetic subject she could think of: Wal-Mart. The resulting poem, "Wal-Mart Supercenter," showcases Meitner's ability to take the banal—the trips to Wal-Mart people take everyday—and turn it into the poetic: the memorable. In this poem, Meitner grounds vignettes of parents trying to sell their children and women being carjacked with commentary on consumerism: "Which is to say that the world/we expect to see looks hewn from wood, is maybe two lanes

wide,/has readily identifiable produce, and the one we've got has jackknifed itself/on the side of the interstate and keeps skidding."

In a world where things are so present, so unyielding, it is complicated and devastating to lose the intangible, Meitner suggests. Throughout the collection, Meitner's collective speakers seem to desire two things above all else: familial connection and a place to call home. When Meitner's grandmother died, her family's access to Yiddish did as well. In her exploration of her Jewish heritage in "Yiddishland," she states in the opening lines, "The people who sang to their children in Yiddish and worked in Yiddish/and made love in Yiddish are nearly all gone. Phantasmic. Heym." Here, Meitner's connection to her family, and thus her familial history, is the disappearing intangible: as her speaker says in "Yizker Bukh," "Memory is/flotsam (yes) just/below the surface/an eternal city/a heap of rubble…" Within her speakers' struggle to maintain connections to their families and cultural heritage, another struggle arises: finding a place to call home. In this regard, geographic borders are a recurring theme within Meitner's collection. "Everywhere is home for someone," the speaker states in "Apologetics." "We are placeless. We are placeful/ but unrooted. We are boomburbs and copia. We are excavated/and hoisted. We are rubble. We are" the speaker in "The Architecture of Memory" continues. From suburban Long Island to Niagara Falls to the rubble of Detroit, Meitner skillfully combines physical location with vivid, unexpected images and sounds to explore location and what it means to call a place home.

The title of Meitner's collection, *Copia*, means 'abundance,' 'fullness.' But in the third part of the collection, we travel alongside Meitner to a place that is the opposite of 'copia'—a place that is empty, in need of being re-filled and rebuilt: Detroit. Meitner's decision to use Detroit as a metaphor for infertility and the desire to rebuild comes across loud and clear: "Inside me is a playground, is a factory," the speaker of "Borderama" proclaims. "Inside me is a cipher of decay./[…] Inside me is America's greatest manufacturing experience." "Inside me is someone saying we will/rebuild this city," the speaker seems to conclude. Meitner describes Detroit as a modern-day ghost town: in "And After the Ark," the speaker describes a section of the city where artists have transformed the rubble of a largely-abandoned neighborhood into an open-air museum: "what was left behind was astounding:/dead trees wearing upside-down shopping carts on their hands/conference call phones, black and ringless, resting on a park bench." Perhaps because of the poem's setting in a neighborhood that creates art from the detritus so prevalent in Detroit, there is also a physicality, a sense of responsibility and call to action that arises within the poem (and the collection, as a whole): "And You Shall Say God Did It," the speaker of "And After the Ark" continues, "but really it was racism/poverty/economics/ inequality/violence." *How did we allow this happen*, the speaker seems to be asking readers. *How could we have prevented this?*

The third section of *Copia* also presents a fascinating commentary on the blurred borders that exist between poetry and creative nonfiction: Meitner wrote the section of documentary poetry after traveling to Detroit with photojournalists Jesse Dukes and Kate Ringo to give voice to the people, the buildings, the graffiti through poetry. In "All That Blue Fire," Meitner reconstructs, verbatim, an interview with a Detroit automobile factory worker: "they lay the motor down,/they put the heads on,/the spark plugs in." In other poems from the section, her speakers become part of Detroit itself, as in "The Book of Dissolution," in which the speaker is "a house waiting to fall in on/itself or burn." On the whole, these poems feel honest, even hopeful about the future of Detroit. By traveling to Detroit to experience the city herself, Meitner, in some ways, transforms from a poet into a new journalist: responsible for reporting the facts, she delves into the personal—gives life to the city by documenting the lives of the people she meets and providing them with a space to tell their own stories. The investigative approach of *Copia*'s third section offers new possibilities for both Detroit as a city and poetry as a genre.

Meitner's poems rarely provide concrete answers, but her sharp, evocative language invites readers into an important conversation on the hollowness of the American dream—the common desires that go unfulfilled everyday. Grounded in the objects that surround us, in the desire to have strong connections with family and heritage, in Detroit, *Copia* hooks readers into an important debate on the role of desire in everyday life, but also encourages us to enjoy the ride with its unexpected imagery and masterful use of sound and cadence. Meitner is skillful; she does not blame, but calls to action, "[b]ecause though this world is changing,/we will remain the same: abundant and/impossible to fill."

LUCIA LoTEMPIO & KATHRYN WARING

An Interview with Erika Meitner

Erika Meitner is a graduate of Dartmouth College and the MFA program at the University of Virginia, where she was a Henry Hoyns Fellow, and also earned an M.A. in Religion as a Morgenstern Fellow in Jewish Studies. Her first collection of poems, *Inventory at the All-Night Drugstore*, won the 2002 Anhinga-Robert Dana Prize for Poetry from Anhinga Press. Her second collection, *Ideal Cities*, was a winner of the 2009 National Poetry Series Award and was published by HarperCollins in 2010. She is currently an associate professor of English at Virginia Tech, where she teaches in the MFA program.

LUCIA LOTEMPIO: You had me with the epigraph with this book. Where did you find that definition and example sentence? I was literally giving you snaps after I read it.

ERIKA MEITNER: Lucia, the definition was mostly from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but the epigraph includes additional definitions from other dictionaries too—so it's a sort of amalgamation of everything I could find on the word that seemed pertinent to the book. Believe it or not, that example sentence was in the *OED*, and as soon as I saw it I had to nab it for the epigraph.

KATIE WARING: I read on your website that you decided to title the collection *Copia* after seeing a photography project by Brian Ulrich. There's definitely a striking similarity in images here (I'm thinking specifically of your first poem, "Litany of Our Radical Engagement with the Material World," though obviously these images threads throughout). How did you discover Ulrich's photography, and have you ever spoken to him about your collection?

EM: Katie, I'm glad the imagistic connections to Ulrich's project are clear! I'm not sure what exactly led me to Ulrich's work (other than possibly Google). I know I became interested in this idea of 'Ghost Box' stores and 'Dead Malls' first, and found Ulrich's photos online later. I read and listened to many interview with him, in addition to looking at his photos. And then I got to see his work in museum format at the Cleveland Museum of Art in 2011—which was a few years after I had started writing from his poems online. But I've never spoken to him about my book.

LL: The copia of commercialism and material goods are at the forefront of your book, yet there is also a focus on absence and empty space, like with the speaker's body in "By Other Means." Similarly, your exploration of Jewish history and the Yiddish language within the collection offer a contrasting discussion of memory. How did you begin to approach these ideas/topics within the collection?

EM: I'm not a project book kind of person—meaning when I set out to write, I just write poems; I don't usually think about a collection as a whole. It happened that my obsession with Detroit (and its abandoned buildings) coincided with my struggle to have a second child, and those empty buildings (in retrospect) became a really fitting metaphor for my body. At the same time, my grandmother had died, taking her language (Yiddish) with her. Which is to say that life happened, and art became a way to work out the deeper meanings and resonances of things that were happening to me, rather than the other way around.

LL: I know geographic location is important in your other collections, but in very different ways (I'm thinking of *Ideal Cities,* in particular). Can you talk about the importance of this specific place, and locality in general within *Copia*?

EM: While poems about Detroit are a big part of this book, when I started the poems in *Copia*, I was actually thinking a lot about what it meant to be from or of a place. I'm first-generation American. My mother was literally a refugee—a stateless person—as she was born in a Displaced Persons camp in Germany, which is where my grandparents settled after they were liberated from Auschwitz. My father's family escaped the Nazis in what was then Czechoslovakia by moving to Israel when it was still British Mandate Palestine. I grew up in very Jewish parts of New York, in Queens and Long Island, and my family and friends are mostly still in the tri-state area. But I've been living in rural Southwest Virginia since 2007, and trying to figure out how to bridge that dislocation became a central tenet of *Copia.* So a lot of the poems take place in and around the town I live in now, but some of the poems also go back to the Bronx of the 1950's and 60's (which is where my mother spent her later childhood), the Queens of my childhood, and Detroit.

While Detroit is an actual place in these poems, it's also a bigger part of the story of American desire and consumption. And I think that Detroit is a city that's changed so much in a relatively short period of time, that even the people we spoke with when we were there acknowledged a feeling of dislocation inherent in the dissolution and renewal happening in various neighborhoods around the city.

KW: What was your process like when deciding on the organization of the collection, both throughout the book as a whole and within the separate threads of each section?

EM: Because I was working from series of photographs in many of these poems, some of them share titles (like "Niagara"). I was also really interested in what happens when you approach the same concept via wildly different content (as in "Terra Nullius" where I was trying to explore the idea of 'no man's land'). To organize the collection (and to order most of my books), I need wall space. I usually try to go to an artist's colony (most recently, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts) where they have studios for writers that have giant bulletin boards on the walls. I'll post all the poems I'm try to organize, and shift them around until I can see the connections between them (which can be both subtle and more overt). I also ask poet-friends to read the manuscript, as often they see connections in my work that aren't obvious to me. In *Copia*, the first section is all about desire—often physical desire for a 'you,' or desire for objects. Section two deals with domesticity and violence, place and dislocation—desire for a home and homeland. There's a word in Judaism—"galut"—that means exile; more specifically, it refers to the historical exile and dispersion of the Jews after the destruction of the First Temple in the 6th Century BCE (when Jews were uprooted from their homeland and subject to alien rule). What I was trying to get at, in section two, is not only the harshness/violence of the mountain landscape in rural Southwest Virginia (where I've lived for the past seven years), but also what it means to be people in exile, and be in a place that feels wholly alien and Christian, and detached from the Jewish areas in New York where I was raised. Section three has to do with infertility—desire for a child—and includes my documentary poems about Detroit, which function as a metaphor (all those abandoned buildings) for my body, for a hopeful sort of re-birth from the ashes. So desire ties the book together, but the subject material was disparate enough that the book needed sections.

LL: Aesthetically, this book is beautiful. I love when collections have off-beat shapes—and with *Copia*, this fat square is so necessary considering your fabulous long lines. I felt like it was almost selfish with space, while at other times luxurious in its usage of it, which is awesome considering the subject matter. Did you work closely with BOA with design?

EM: Thank you! It's interesting—I did choose the cover art for the book (and the amazing book designer, Sandy Knight, made the art on the cover work in really creative ways), but I had no idea what size the book would be until it showed up in a box on my doorstep. I was so happy with the larger format of *Copia.* I knew when I was looking at the page proofs that none of my lines wrapped—which was something that had happened with all of my previous books—there were always two or three poems where the lines wrapped past the end of the page. But I didn't know how good-looking the book would be until it arrived, or how big it was!

KW: Another thing I loved: the playlist. I've never seen a poet construct a Spotify playlist to parallel their collection before. Is this the music you just happened to be listening to while writing the collection, or songs you think pair well with specific poems within *Copia*? What gave you the idea to share this music with readers via Spotify?

EM: I actually got the idea from the blog "largehearted boy," which has a section called "book notes" where authors create playlists for their books. Some of the music is stuff that I was listening to when I wrote the poems, or inspired the poems in some way. Other songs evoked the flavor (time/place) of some of the poems in various sections. I felt like the playlist was one other sensory way to help readers find their way into *Copia*.

KW: I've been thinking a lot about the crossover between poetry and creative nonfiction lately, and if the two genres should always be so black-and-white in their categorizations. In the reading guide you posted on your website, you list quite a few nonfiction books as background reading for *Copia*—personally, I was super-excited to see Charlie LeDuff's *Detroit: An American Autopsy* on that list. You spent a lot of time in Detorit conducting research and interviewing local residents in order to write the poems in section III, correct? Have you ever thought about writing a CNF essay using some of that research? Or are there topics/ideas/images within the Detroit section that you think naturally come across better in poetry versus an essay?

EM: I actually did write a nonfiction essay to go with the Detroit pieces that doesn't appear in my book, but you can find it online with the Detroit poems, at *Virginia Quarterly Review*. In this instance, I do think the poems allow me to use some of the language of people and place in different ways than the more factual essay does. But it was important for me that my process for the project was transparent and contextualized in some way, thus the essay.

KW: I know *Copia* is still hot off the presses, but is there anything we can expect to see from you in the near future? Any ongoing projects you're currently working on?

EM: I'm currently at work on a collection that's tentatively titled *Fragments from Holeymoleyland* (and the title comes partially from my visual artist friend Kim Beck's piece "Holeymoley Land"). I also borrowed much inspiration and a title and cover art from her for *Ideal Cities.* Anyway, my new collection has to do with various kinds of violence—and especially gun violence. I'm headed to Belfast, Northern Ireland, in December with my family for six months on a Fulbright Fellowship, where I'll be teaching at Queen's University Belfast, and also doing some research and interviews on the conflict in Northern Ireland as part of the project.

Wake Up Call

All of my dreams get interrupted
by waking up, by the distraction
of having to actually live—
to walk around & bump into things,
to breathe real air with consequence
& weight. Still the basil in the window
quietly getting bigger, the cilantro
brazenly becoming pungent
& filling the house. My pillow
aches with loneliness which makes it
just like the small patch of weedflowers
wanting those deer to come back.
Every morning, your face
right beside mine, & me hidden
under my hair, behind my very own face,
no matter what I dream in the dark.
Most nights I find myself
in situations I can't get out of,
trapped through celestial mechanics
in some different story while my own
real feelings hover just out of reach
like pollen in the air in summer.
Invisible but with repercussions.
Surrounded by a flurry of questions.
Sometimes you just need to get
belligerent in the face of the whole
universe getting sappy. We fall
the way the leaves fall, slowly.

NATE PRITTS

Alarms at Noon

I'm always talking about the soul,
about the divine hovering

like a voyeur outside my window.
But what I'm wondering is how

the early season bumblebee,
size and shape of my fist,

fits into the overall scheme
as it knocks against my window

like a drunk friend jabbing
a finger into my chest

to emphasize how we were done,
really done forever?

Such beautiful armies are gathering
on my hilltop stronghold,

all their armor glistening
like a birthday cake, the mud

turning green under their
aggressive boots. I mean tulips,

of course, & all those stick trees
getting full, baby yellow buds

screaming on the branches.
When the bluebird stared at us,

tiny beak chittering,
we saw the soft white throat,

we saw that it was good.
We guessed there were other things

we couldn't possibly see.

Infinity's Kiss (Sunflowers)

My primary habitat is memory

a space opened up

inside of regular time

where duration cannot be calculated

because none of these frames of reference

mean anything condensed as they are

into a field of stunning engagement

all these different waves of light

find themselves entangled

some stories move without any action

devoid of memorable occurrence

nothing happens

but the tension builds

anyway clipped reactions

inexplicable to our planet or the inhabitants

with their complex incompressible souls

we worship geometric figures

we worship remnants

we believe in something solid

an eruption of sunflowers on the side of the house

in a memory someone is having

we are all experiencing the thrill of past life

reified & alive now

a single compact moment

when everything good / every pleasurable memory

comes back to haunt us

to live ghostly permeating the present

& we believe in something solid

we believe the stories we tell about ourselves
are ourselves

we believe that everything is lost around us

& we believe everything lost can be found.

About the Authors

Amy Elizabeth Bishop is a senior English (Creative Writing) major at SUNY Geneseo. She calls Cooperstown, NY home, although she hopes to become a Manhattanite after graduating this May. Her poetry appears or is forthcoming in *Gandy Dancer*, *The Susquehanna Review,* and *Dialogist*. She currently serves as the Editor of the *GREAT Day Journal* and as a fiction reader for *The Rumpus* and *Wyvern Lit*.

Kathryn Bockino is a junior English (Creative Writing) major at SUNY Geneseo. While she knows that someone like Elizabeth Bennet would make a great best friend, she can't let the idea of Voldemort go. He might be crazy, but she likes to give hugs, so in a parallel universe they could balance each other out. If that doesn't work, there's always the chance that she'll discover Narnia one day.

Cassidy Carroll is a senior Creative Writing major at SUNY Oswego. When not reading class material, she enjoys Anita Shreve's books and hunting through bookstores for memoirs. She is also a copyeditor for Oswego's student-run newspaper. If she could be best friends with a fictional character, it would be Edna Pontellier from *The Awakening*.

Britina Cheng is a sophomore at SUNY Geneseo studying English, Art History, and Film. Her roots start in Coney Island. She is a fledgling photographer who mostly photographs her friends. Britina has been looking for graphic novel suggestions, and would probably befriend Asterios Polyp if they ran into each other at a flea market.

Michael Cieply is a junior at SUNY Geneseo who studied at Binghamton for two semesters before transferring. As far as fictional characters go, he would be best friends with Sal Paradise from Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*.

Amanda Coffey is a junior English (Creative Writing) major at SUNY Geneseo who enjoys cheap wine and the occasional night of debauchery. She would like to teach high school English if they'll let her. She would be friends with Raskolnikov because if anyone needs a friend, it's that guy.

Ariana DiPreta is a student at SUNY Geneseo. She comes from Port Washington, NY, a beautiful Long Island suburb. She hopes to one day travel the world and photograph for *National Geographic* and is inspired by Steve McCurry. When she is not taking photos, she is reading, writing, or trying to catch up on the latest episodes of *New Girl* or *Parks and Rec*.

If she were to befriend a fictional character, it would be Rust Cole so she could get lost in his philosophical tangents.

Ariana Elmayan is a freshman at the Fashion Institute of Technology, majoring in Fine Arts. Originally from Long Island, she is dorming in the city and loving it. Ariana hopes to one day pursue a career in Art Therapy.

Chloe Forsell is a sophomore English (Creative Writing) and French double major at SUNY Geneseo. She was born and raised in a small town about an hour south of Buffalo, where she grew into a cat-loving, bike riding, pizza fanatic. If Chloe were to become best friends with a fictional character she would befriend the tree from Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree,* because who could ask for a better friend?

Rose Fritzky-Randolph lives with her beautiful wife and awesome pitbull in Ithaca, NY and is in her final semester of the MA program for Creative Writing at Binghamton University. She's currently working on her thesis, a memoir told through a collection of short stories. Rose strongly believes that if the narrator of Janet Fitch's *White Oleander*, Astrid Magnussen, was real, they would have been roommates at some point—roommates with a fierce friendship expressed through art.

Ess Gormley is from Ballston Spa, NY—a small Upstate New York town beside Saratoga Springs. He is editor in chief of SUNY Oswego's *Great Lake Review*. Ess could see himself spending a lot of time with Sal Paradise, cruising around the States on the back of a pickup truck.

Originally from Palmyra, NY, Leandra Griffith is currently a junior at SUNY Geneseo. She is a double major in English (Creative Writing) and Communication. She hopes to one day visit Seattle because she is a die-hard Seahawks fan and obsessed with *Grey's Anatomy*. The fictional character she would be best friends with is Lord Goring from Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*, because he finds humor in everyday life's absurdities and she thinks he'd be great company.

Emmett Haq is an MFA candidate and teaching assistant at Stony Brook Southampton. He's studied under Ted Pelton and Susan Scarf Merrell and is an editor at Starcherone Books. His work has also appeared in *SLAB Literary Magazine* and *Many Mountains Moving*. He currently edits for local magazine *Dan's Papers* while (supposedly) working on his thesis. If he were to befriend a fictional character, Yossarian would be pretty high on the list, though most of his friends had a shockingly low life expectancy.

Meghan Kearns is a senior English Literature and International Relations double major at SUNY Geneseo. Her nonfiction essay was published in *Gandy Dancer* 2.2. If she could be best friends with a fictional character, it would be the BFG.

Ethan Keeley is a senior English (Creative Writing) major at SUNY Geneseo. He has lived most of his life in Rochester, NY. His short story, "Half," was published in

Gandy Dancer 2.1. He would be best friends with Huckleberry Finn because of his philosophical nature and adventurous spirit.

Joshua Kent is sort of a student at MCC because of relationship troubles with SUNY Geneseo, where he studied International Relations. He lives in Saratoga Springs and sells peanut butter at farmer's markets. He spends most of his waking hours beneath a triangle of trees in Congress Park. If he were to befriend a fictional character, it'd be Arturo Belano for the quixotic quests and wanderings.

Erin Koehler is currently a senior at SUNY Geneseo studying English (Creative Writing) with a Native American Studies minor. After college, Erin hopes to find a career writing children's literature and being creative. Bilbo Baggins is her literary kindred spirit because of his love of comfort, good food, and things that grow.

Cielo Ornelas MacFarlane is a junior in the Visual Arts and New Media Department at SUNY Fredonia. She is the daughter of two dancers, who encouraged her to express herself from an early age. She was raised all over the United States, spending time in New York, New Jersey, Texas, New Mexico, and Michigan. She likes to think that she would get along quite well with Zaphod Beeblebrox.

James Mattson is a junior at SUNY Geneseo. A Biology major and aspiring physician, James spends his free time behind the eyepiece of a camera. He enjoys good cigars, anything pizza related, and washing his car. He was once a swimmer but exchanged his passion for the water for a four-year college education and an extra thirty pounds. The fictional character he would most associate with is Peter Parker: superhero photographer.

Lore McSpadden is a second-year graduate student at SUNY Brockport. When she's not compulsively reading and writing poetry, she is usually lifting heavy weights: she is currently in training for her first powerlifting competition. If she had to pick one fictional character to hang out with, it would probably be Chloe from *Becoming Chloe* and *Always Chloe*.

Catherine McWilliams is a senior English (Creative Writing) major at SUNY Geneseo. As a life-long nap enthusiast, Catherine commonly falls asleep while reading next to a piping hot jar of tea. When she isn't napping or writing, Catherine spends her time taking photographs and studying the work of other photographers. She has yet to come across any fictional character she would ever want to encounter on a regular basis.

Chrissy Montelli is a student of creative writing and anthropology at SUNY Geneseo. She grew up in Mastic, New York, a quaint-yet-quirky Long Island hamlet. Her writing has been published in *The Adirondack Review*, *Axe Factory Press*, and *Contraposition Magazine*. She hopes to pursue an MFA in poetry after graduation. Her fictional BFF/twin would be Bubbles from *The Powerpuff Girls*.

Christina Mortellaro is a senior English (Creative Writing) and Communication major at SUNY Geneseo. Christina has been previously published in *Gandy Dancer* and her poetry has been presented at the Sigma Tau Delta 2014 International Convention in Savannah, GA. In her spare time, Christina likes to cross stitch and eat peaches. Christina has been best friends with Jo March from *Little Women* since first reading the book when she was ten years old.

Joseph O'Connor is a student of Literature and Gender Studies at SUNY Geneseo. He hails from Lynbrook, NY. His work has been published in a myriad of campus magazines as well as *Gandy Dancer*. He hopes to pursue a career in adolescent education after graduation.

Ashley Olin is a senior at SUNY Geneseo, majoring in English Literature but occasionally dabbling in poetry. She spends most of her time at Leg Up Stables riding for Geneseo's Equestrian team, and can otherwise be found buried in reading at Starbucks. She would probably be best friends with Elizabeth Bennett from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.

Shareefah Pereira is working towards a degree in Early Childhood Education at SUNY Cortland and hopes to combine her passion for photography with her work with young children. If she could, she would be best friends with Phineas and Ferb, as they always have the best summers.

Emily Perina is a senior at SUNY Purchase studying sculpture. She was born and raised in Staten Island, New York, which, despite its unsavory reputation, has inspired many of her works.

Nate Pritts is an alum of SUNY Brockport where he took classes with William Heyen and Anthony Piccione and spent a lot of time walking by the Erie Canal. He went on to earn an MFA in Poetry (Warren Wilson College) and PhD in British Romanticism (University of Louisiana, Lafayette). He has published six books of poetry, most recently *Right Now More Than Ever*, as well as several chapbooks including *Pattern Exhaustion* and *Life Event*. His work has appeared in A*merican Poetry Review*, *Gulf Coast*, *Southern Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, T*he Boston Review* and *Poets & Writers magazine*. He founded H_NGM_N, an independent literary press, in 2001. He lives in the Finger Lakes region of New York.

Denise Seidler is a student at SUNY Cortland majoring in Art History with a minor in History. She is obsessed with capturing emotion through body language and facial expression. When not taking photos, she can be found writing, painting or running marathons…of TV shows. The fictional character she would be best friends with is Denise from *White Noise* by Don DeLillo, and not just because they have the same name.

Savannah Skinner is a student at SUNY Geneseo, and is probably a junior, but maybe a senior. She is currently studying English (Creative Writing) and European History, among other things. She declines to pinpoint her origins beyond "near Buffalo… sort of." Were Savannah to befriend a fictional character, she hopes that it would be Piglet, an agreeable pal who would also fit nicely into a compact space.

Devin Stabley-Conde is from Youngstown, NY and is currently a senior English (Creative Writing) major at SUNY Geneseo. If she could pick a fictional character to be best friends with, it would be Pippin from *Lord of the Rings*.

Simeon Youngmann is an MFA candidate in Painting and Drawing at SUNY Albany with a longstanding interest in the relationship between visual art and poetry. He hails from upstate New York, just west of the Vermont border. Simeon hopes to teach art at the college level following the completion of his degree. Simeon would be best friends with Calvin, from Bill Watterson's *Calvin and Hobbes.*

GANDY DANCER is open for submissions

As always, our submission window is rolling, but the deadline for our upcoming Spring issue is **February 24, 2015**. If you are a current or former SUNY writer or artist, send us your best poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and art!

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