



Gandy Dancer

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

Issue 6.2 | Spring 2018

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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 Postscript 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.

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Dearest Readers,

Welcome to issue 6.2 of *Gandy Dancer*, the twelfth in publication so far. This will be our last issue as managing editors, and we feel honored to have had the opportunity to embark on this journey with you. As we reflect on our year with *Gandy Dancer*, there are many things that could be said, but we want to focus on the places we started from and the places we may soon find ourselves. Where you, as a reader, may be starting a new journey as you turn this page, and where you may end up after you put the journal back on your shelf alongside other colorful covers and stories waiting to be told.

Perhaps even more than others, this issue transports us—taking us to Europe and the Middle East, the American South, to cities, and to the ocean. The writers included here take us all over the world and take us also to more intangible, intimate places. Pouring over these pieces, we recognized a feeling that kept circulating through stories, essays, and poems—a feeling of hope for the new and a comfort in the old places and spaces. Matthew Cullen’s essay “Self on the Straßenbahn” focuses on a narrator’s time in Germany and his growing understanding of self. Marissa Canerelli’s short story, “Buckyboy” takes us to a farm where the characters come to understand the power of the natural world. Lucia LoTempio’s poem “Hometown, Unraveling” returns us to the city, and explores what it feels like to return to a place you once called home. Isabel Owen’s poem, “the space between daylight & the darkness of the east river tunnel” examines summer love and reveals just how evocative place can be.

We may feel isolated at times—as just one school in the vast SUNY system, as tiny parts of the larger literary community—which makes it necessary to travel outside of our bubbles in order to recognize this world for all its connectedness. Getting the chance to attend this year’s AWP convention served as this type of reminder for us. Although we attended panels that were seemingly disparate, we found that it was inevitable for connections to appear between them, and among the hoard of over 10,000 other writers, publishers, and educators, we still managed to repeatedly run into familiar faces. We’d like to think that *Gandy Dancer* has the potential to offer something similar—a vessel, perhaps, by which the vastness and odd synchronicity of the world may be exposed. We are always standing and breathing in a space—whether that be a coffee shop in early morning or so far inside the mind that for a moment, no one can reach us. We hope you find this issue to be a place of wonder: a place where you can discover bits of yourself in these pages.

Yours,
Meghan Fellows & Lily Codera
April 2018

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Gandy Dancer

[anne poem #1]

Anne loved with deer hooves
in her stomach; since the country-
side she knew her first sex
had been stolen away; she loved
with flies circling her stomach;
a miniature death all over again,
looking at him.

She was thrust into the country-
side & there were the dogs bark-
ing with clenched teeth, & the shatt-
ered mornings during which she
was the only one awake.

The boys asked of her, in the orch-
ards, *when o when will you*
touch me & she could not help
it, *when o when will you hold*
my softest breasts—I am tired but I
am ready!

Prayers for Vagabond

I.

When Achilles fell in love with me I wanted
not to kill myself but die with my stomach
blown straight through in violence of crashing like cars.
Achilles with his hair that sagged like my breasts: our ways
of returning back to this earth. My breasts dragged
across the skin of earth, which is why they bruised
to bone & back, but still this was the only way
I could know how to survive like herds of planets.

II.

I know that my mother loves me even when I
cannot return this love because she will drive
to me at 3 a.m., touch blow light gentle against
my cheeks, then yell at me like the spots festering
white sprays of mucus down my throat.

III.

Picture god's leap of moon through my mother's bedroom walls.
I visit my mother & am surprised when she does not strangle me
like the heel of Achilles, who still loves me. How can I
separate him from my mother. There is never music
in my mother's house. The silence is constant & buzzing

like the headaches that I used to get when I was young
& sitting by cold rolls of saltwater.

IV.

Gold wheat bombards itself through my mother's kitchen window.
7 a.m. I am only 1 of 2 awake in my mother's house. The fridge
is shined & opening like the uprising of a new country.
Out the window still rests Achilles & he is teaching me to beg.

The Lie

I tried to pretend it wasn't there. Paper scrolls bound together on a wooden rod, hung to the wall by a thick white cord. It was meant to be art, images of levitating saints. Mary, the Virgin Mother, is in blue robes standing on clouds, her beautiful face washed of any emotion. There must have been twelve scrolls, with a scene on each side of the paper and the proud consumer could flip between images depending on one's religious mood. On one page, God the Father reigned triumphantly upon a throne. The throne sat stoutly on a carpet of clouds and the sky behind was blue, flecked with white like a Dutch piece of crockery. God sat with his legs spread far apart, his feet firmly planted on his cumulous carpet, muscular thighs covered by a white toga. He had flowing white hair, thick and curly, and a well-trimmed beard. His skin was tanned and his biceps shapely. Had I been older and more accustomed to gym-sharks and their culture, I would have said that God had glamour muscles. As it was then, I didn't know the anatomical or cultural terms for gorgeously developed musculature, the rock-hard pecs, the round shoulders, the long, sensual fingers, and strong, veiny hands. All I registered, as a five-year-old, was that God was one hunky old dude.

I stood on my twin bed, wearing a little purple sweater with a kitten silkscreened across the chest. It played with a ball of yarn in a coquettish way, with large eyes and a seductive turn of its head. I cocked my own head as I examined the images and flipped up the scrolls to look at the ones behind. After God the Father, there was the Holy Family: a blonde baby Jesus (alarmingly Aryan-looking considering his Jewish heritage) cradled in Mary's arms, with Joseph standing next to her in green robes. Joseph had short, curly brown hair and a beard. He looked demure, even feminine, compared to God on the previous page. So was this Mary's boyfriend? I had heard from my mother that the Annunciation was when God made Mary pregnant with

Jesus. I didn't know what that meant, but I knew babies could only grow in ladies' tummies when they were married. My mother had told me this with great emphasis, and I assumed that marriage was a special time in a lady's life when she could wake up one morning, ripe and round, and a baby popped out that day like a wonderful surprise. So if God made Mary pregnant, he had to be her husband. I flipped between the scrolls of the two different men and decided if I had to pick between them, I would definitely choose God. Joseph didn't look like he had much spunk, but God looked like he knew how to push around a lawnmower.

I pinched two pages in my fingers and lifted the scrolls as high as I could, holding them above me like a canopy of grace. I took a deep breath and looked at the scene in front of me. The top of the painting showed the underside of heaven, a hint of clouds, the last hope before despair. The painting lowered into shadows. At the vanishing point, indeterminable shapes dropped and fell, some head first, some with legs spread akimbo, starfish shadows falling into flames the color of Cheetos. The figures trapped in perpetual decent reminded me of pineapple chunks stuck in the middle of red Jell-O; they looked as if they ought to finally touch the bottom but never did. Figures danced around these falling shadows holding pitchforks, arms raised high in cheers. To the very bottom of the painting, curled up and close to the frame, looking patiently out at the viewer, sat The Devil. I assumed the cheering figures farther back were devils too, but this one, closest to the viewer, seemed to be The Devil. His skin was jet black and lacquered, white highlight painted on his shoulders and head to make his flesh appear as patent leather. His eyes were yellow and a forked tail, like a serpent's tongue, curled upwards behind him. He looked out, but he wasn't smiling. If he had at least been smiling or grimacing, he would have appeared garish, a cartoonish caricature of a demon. But he sat in stoic elegance, almost gracefully. His eyes, as they gazed into mine, had no message, and it was the fact that he didn't seem to care at all that scared me the most. In the midst of all these flames, he was as immovable as ice. There appeared to be no reasoning with someone such as this. At least if he howled or bellowed, he would evidently be capable of passion. One could appeal to extreme emotion: scream, beg, and writhe for mercy because the cloven master was himself capable of extremes, even if it was heated hate—but he was frigid.

We didn't have cable TV growing up because my mother didn't want us to be tempted or educated by modern media. Instead, she ordered VHS tapes through the mail made by a company called CCC, which charted its stance as "pro-family in the entertainment industry." The VHS tapes were a mini-series of lives of the saints. One afternoon, I begged my mom, "Please can I watch a CCC?"

She plugged one in called *The Day the Sun Danced: The True Story of Fatima* and set up her ironing board beside me. I sat on the carpet at the foot of our large wood paneled TV while the iron gasped steam and sizzled on my Dad's plaid work shirts. The story of Fatima tells the tale of three children: Lucia, Jacinta and Francisco between the ages of seven and ten in Portugal in 1917. While they were herding sheep, they saw the Blessed Mother and conversed with her. She appeared to the children over the course of the next six months as word spread and crowds grew. On the last day, a crowd of approximately 70,000 people gathered and claimed that the sun moved towards the earth in spirals and zigzags. While the sun danced, the three children received visions from the Blessed Mother and reported on them after. The children reported a vision that the earth opened before them and widened into a large chasm; black shapes fell into a landing of flames. The VHS did not hold back, and I sat with wide eyes as 1980s cinematography showed shadowy, dancing demons leaping among flames the size of a grown man while the bodies fell, screaming and shrieking into hell. The split earth slowly closed and the children returned their gaze to the ever-serene Mary.

My mother put her iron down and said, "You know, Bernadette, more people go to hell for sins against purity than any other sin."

I turned my attention to her and watched her. What were sins against purity? What was purity? I returned my focus to the TV for the culmination of *The Day the Sun Danced*. What happened was the usual course of events for a CCC narrative: the little saints undergo persecution for their spiritual communication. Sometimes, they landed themselves in prison or sometimes the town simply pointed their fingers and laughed. Then, a jolly man with a moustache, usually carrying a basket of baguettes, would experience a small miracle; his mystifyingly shriveled hand would plump up to a healthy limb, or his decrepit, barren wife would swell with pregnancy, and they would have a baby and decree that the children were in fact correct, and then the whole town, once again in unity, would sing the children's praises and become believers *en masse*. The narratives concluded so simply; faith was a communal experience. If a neighbor believed, why not you too? And the answer seemed to be, okay.

I remember sitting with my mother on the sofa one evening as she read me a children's story of Samson and Delilah. In cartoon depiction, Samson was a long-haired stallion, a character I would later see repeated in more detail on the cover of Harlequin Romance novels. He lived in a town that had all the tropes of a cartoonish Holy Land, and he was "friends," my mother said, with a woman named Delilah. My mother liked to stop reading to add her commentary.

"She was a very immodest woman, Bernadette. She would walk around in (and here she whispered) *see-through* clothing." She pointed towards our

curtains, white and sheer, long panels which fluttered across the carpet when she vacuumed beneath them. "Her dresses looked like our curtains."

We had two lovebirds in the living room, and their cage sat next to the curtains. Out of boredom, they had a habit of nibbling at the curtains until a good foot of the paneling was picked through with little holes. I looked at the holes and wondered if Delilah's dress would be considered more immodest with holes or if being see-through made it immodest enough.

The story told how Samson was invincibly powerful and men in the town were jealous. His hair was what endowed him with supernatural strength and God made him promise to never cut it as a contract: long hair for strength. I thought of God the Father on the scrolls in my bedroom and thought of his own long curls and figured this made sense. The jealous men in town found out about his hair and convinced Delilah to cut Samson's hair.

"She managed to trick him, Bernadette, because of her see-through dresses," my mother explained, speaking softly into my ear.

And so, poor Samson's hair got chopped while he was sleeping: an image clearly depicted of Delilah, in her sexy dress, smiling wickedly with scissors at the head of the bed while the innocent Samson slept. I couldn't imagine for the life of me why Samson was having a nap in her bed. Why didn't he go home to his own bed? But this was not explained to me by my mother or the book. In the end, Samson loses his strength, getting blinded in the process, and when his hair grows back along with his might, he goes to the pillars of the temple and pushes them apart so that they collapse atop him and all the hypocrites within.

Once in a college class, my professor quoted Rilke: "Man is the liar but woman is the lie." I have since tried to find which poem or letter this quote is attributed to and cannot seem to find its origin, indeed of Rilke or anyone else. Maybe it was her quote and I misheard her. I'm not sure, but the quote itself has stood with me for years. Woman is the lie.

I remember later in my childhood, around eleven, again I sat on the couch with my mother, and she read a different book. At this point, I was quite capable of reading on my own and very fond of the activity, but there is something cozy about having someone else read to you, and so I found myself again nuzzled against her. She read to me a book about a princess who had a pearl that was precious to her. Princes from all over the world came to her and begged for her hand and, as an addition, the pearl too. She meekly refused them all until one prince arrived, led her to a chapel with a priest, and they entered, as my mother phrased it, "the sacrament of marriage." I remember thinking that the priest looked too modern in a setting of stone castles and capes trimmed in ermine fur. I thought, "He looks just like our priest," complete with black, ironed slacks, a white cube of Roman collar and a neat little side part. After the anachronistic priest let them go as husband and wife, the

page turned to show the princess giving her pearl to the prince, a curved smile planted on his face. Without being able to state it, I had a gut feeling of the symbolism of the pearl and of conflict: “Why didn’t the princess get a pearl from the prince too?”

Years later, my mother found my diary tucked away and discovered from reading it that I had lost my virginity to a beloved and committed boyfriend. She followed up on this information with weepy phone calls and texts encouraging me to go to confession, to break up with him. These phone calls went on for months. One afternoon on the phone, in the midst of gasps and cries, she said to me, “How could you give yourself to him?” I was twenty nine. My brothers’ virginities were never cried over. In fact, I don’t think anyone, my mother included, really cared. Granted, they didn’t write about the experience in their diaries, partially because it didn’t seem too remarkable to either of them, and for the larger reason, they didn’t even keep diaries. Their sexual experiences were part of boyhood, a chapter in the bildungsroman of their ascents to manhood; mine was a grief, something wept over by my mother, as if it were also hers and she had not been consulted on the subject. Something to be confessed. Something that should terminate the relationship.

Another of CCC’s marvelous productions was a VHS called *If You Love Me... Show Me!* It was marketed to teens and told a thinly-veiled story of two teenagers who fall in love. He takes her to a look-out in his car and pulls out of his pocket a wrapped yellow condom. The first time I watched it, I thought it was a lollipop missing its stick. The message of the story is that real love waits for sex until it is blessed within the sacrament of marriage. One maternal character in the film smiles as she pours a pot of tea and says, “We decided to save that for our wedding night.” As I grew and moved away from my mother and her couch of stories, I took the term if you love me, show me a little more literally than CCC intended. My experience was a happy one, where love and sex intertwined into a harmonious, instinctual experience of togetherness. My childhood education taught me to mistrust myself: myself as a sexual being and myself as a woman. Delilah was a traitor but at least she showed emotion and action. The Blessed Mother, the only woman depicted to young girls, was completely stripped of affect. I had a pearl which, according to my mother, I gave to an unworthy recipient in an inappropriate way because it wasn’t blessed by a man in ironed black slacks. Therefore, by that logic, the relationship was doomed. I think there was power in the decision. The image of a pearl speaks of commodity, who is the highest bidder? Who is most worthy? I decided that outside of a stone church, and I gave it willingly. I was in love, so I showed it.

I went to Church recently after I woke up with a strange longing to go to Sunday Mass. I get the same ache to occasionally drive by my childhood home or flip through photo albums in my parent’s basement with stickers

on their spines dating 1989, 1992. With that nostalgic urge, I opened the front door of the church and sat in the last pew, deliberately several minutes late so I wouldn't have to deal with the cheerfulness of a church greeter. The pew creaked uneasily beneath me, and I looked out at the sprinkled congregation, sparse between the gaping rows of pews. Many women had their heads covered by mantillas, and the elegant statue of the Blessed Virgin was also veiled. All around me, the luxury of women's hair was modestly covered while my own hung long down my back as it usually does, and I felt strangely inappropriate, even sensual, despite being bundled in a winter coat, and I was glad again to be so far back. I felt like a voyeur in a world that had once been my center; I remembered the times I brought the hosts or the wine and water up during the Offering of the Gifts. I remembered when I had my first communion, standing in the center of the aisle, veiled, dressed in white from head to toe. My mother had gone to Sears the day before and purchased tiny, white pantyhose so I would literally be in all white. I remembered my Confirmation, countless Saturday afternoons in line for confession, masses where I felt moved, I felt kindred to the message, the organ, the communal responses. But now I felt like I had forgotten the language, lost my appetite for its fervor, lost my nose for the incense.

At the time of communion, the parishioners rose and filled up the aisle to receive the Eucharist. In the Catholic tradition, the faithful are not to receive the Eucharist if they are not in the state of grace, meaning they have committed a grave sin. I knew enough from examinations of conscience before confessions that sex outside of marriage was a grave sin. Out of respect for the tradition, I stayed in my seat and watched as the line inched its way closer to the priest dressed in green vestments, reverently offering each person the host: "The Body of Christ" to which one responds, "Amen." I watched jealously as parishioners gently chewed the host on their way back to their pews, solemnly lowered the kneelers, and bent their heads. I felt like I was little Bernadette again, from the albums of 1989, 1992, who was denied Neapolitan ice cream for smacking her sister. The message: you behaved badly and now you don't get your treat. But what is grace if not the undeserved favor of God? If God is everything, can he not see past my sin and welcome me?

There I was, the fallen woman in the last pew, with her long, lustrous hair hanging down uncovered, my lust trickling off of me like oiled perfume. Didn't Christ come for me too? Even more so, if one reads the Gospels correctly. I wanted to say "Fuck it," march up the aisle and hold out my hand; "The Body of Christ" and give my "Amen," but I didn't. I don't know if it was fear, shame, or the inertia caused from feeling like an outsider that stopped me. Instead, I walked outside. Away from the incense, the dim lighting, the polished pews; I felt one again with the concrete, the barren trees, and the busy hum of cars. Why must the state of grace be defined by someone else?

Even the term itself is faulty. I don't think grace can be a state because state implies territory, boundaries, and barriers. I believe that grace is fluid as liquid, porous, and permeable, and no sin is strong enough to stop its balm. I was not the fallen woman because my sin, measured against the barometer of my own conscience, was no sin at all. I realized that the Rilke quote struck me so profoundly years ago, and lingered on in my memory, because I instinctively knew it was wrong. I paused and looked down the downtown street, at the liquor store sign, the traffic light blinking red to green, and carefully combed my fingers through my long hair. There are lies, but I am not one of them.



Bent over easy (ceramic stoneware), Erin Doescher

HANNAH MCSORLEY

We Went to the Ocean to Forget

We return to the ocean to watch the gulls, to listen to the crashing waves hit the rocky shore, to feel its spit against our faces.

Our middle sister, Aila, descends the boat launch. She only wades into the water up to her knees today, and even though she's in the shallows, she turns, glances at us over her shoulder, as if looking for reassurance. She reaches her spread fingers to the surface to let the ocean nibble on her fingertips as an offering. I step down the boat launch just enough for the water to soak through the sides of my shoes, until I feel the water rise between my toes, and I place my hands in the water too. Take the dead skin, the hangnails, take what has already passed, I say—I hope—and maybe the water won't take anymore of us.

I look at both my sisters. As Aila tries to reconcile her love of the water with what it has taken, Adele stands staring at the sea defiant, angry that something so simple, so integral to life, could upend what she thought she knew. A week has separated the family of nine that we were from the family of eight we've become; the loss of our little brother Noah still raw enough to turn our stomachs.

We've always come to the ocean to forget; met here beside the boat launch—the fire pit—thrown photos of old boyfriends and papers with poor grades circled in red pen into the flames, which we then used to light our cigarettes

and exhale the day from our lungs. Today, though, I can't help but feel certain moments bombard me from behind.

A memory: waves kissing the tips of my tiny shoes. Papa is nearby talking to our two older brothers, Liam and Finn, about erosion, how water can cut through rock. My heart races as I look towards the rocky breakwater, protecting our shores from the rage of the sea. Images of waves, curling open into jaws, chomping through earth, race through my mind. Each time the waves lap against the shore in the nights that follow, I turn towards the window convinced that the ocean will have crept closer to our little red house, baring its teeth.

We were told of the curse from an age before our mouths knew words. Papa would lean forward in his burgundy chair in front of the fireplace, and remove his hat in respect for our drowned ancestors. His eyes would grow almost three times in size, and we'd suddenly notice the crazed chaos of his eyebrows. With my sisters and brothers gathered at his feet, he'd delve into the tales of the oak tree from which all life sprang, tales of an otherworld, of magic from his boyhood in Ireland. But he'd end his stories by rattling off a sequence of names once claimed by the lungs of our ancestors and send us off to bed with a warning. I'd imagine those names leaving their lungs in giant bubbles, as everything they were collapsed under the weight of water. At night our dreams would fill with faces that resembled our own, floating amongst cones of light.

Once all three of us had assembled between Ma and Papa in the middle of the night, with shaking hands and terrified hearts, Ma would sit up on the edge of her bed, take our hands in hers, and say, "Don't worry. It's a fib. It's a lie, an old story that no longer has power." But when Papa looked at the sea each morning, before he'd head to the docks and raise the sails, we could see a glint of fear, of focus, that he could shake no better than we could.

Adele was the only one brave enough to ask Papa about it. She was twelve at the time, Aila nine, myself five. He told us the sea simply craves the salt in our blood, that she whispers our family's name, searching for us. He said our husbands will be safe, but children must be watched carefully. He said the ocean has been swelling, churning and crashing with ever more power each year; that the sea was getting hungry.

When Papa's brother, Michael, drowned, Papa stopped telling the stories. We gradually forgot the names of the ocean's early victims and felt the details of their deaths slip further into history. With a little more than a decade separating our generation from the tragedy of the last, we all grew apathetic,

negligent. Whenever I touch the water, an ember in the back of my mind catches the wind, brightens to the shade of a spark. Because of it, I don't dare step into water any deeper than my knees.

I step off the boat launch and sit on the rocks separating the land from the sea. I look at my sisters, and I wonder if they're remembering the curse for the first time in a decade. My feet dangle above the water as I light a cigarette and guard the flame from the wind.

"Leah, you really shouldn't smoke, you know."

I turn back towards Adele, the eldest of the three of us, see her folding her arms in front of her chest as she paces.

"Says the person who handed me my first cigarette."

"You should stop. That's all I mean."

She stopped, so I should stop, is what she means.

I hear grass shifting as she approaches to sit beside me. She reaches for the cigarette between my fingers.

"I just want it for a second."

I smirk as she puts the cigarette to her lips and inhales; this is her first cigarette in four years, maybe five, as far as I know.

"Fuck...I forgot how that feels."

Aila turns around and glances at Adele from the water.

Adele lowers her head, cradles her face in her hands. "Aila, will you please get out of there."

"Yeah, or the kraken is gonna get ya," I sigh.

"Don't even start." Adele stands, walks back towards the table. "How can you joke about that today?"

She shakes her head and snatches her jacket off the table. I look at our black dresses and skirts, inhale another puff from my cigarette.

This town is filled with tongues that love to spin tales, a quality that fills Adele with rage. Some were beginning to speculate that our family would know loss again soon, but when news of Noah's death rolled through town with the fog, their guilt swept them like dirt up the aisle of the church to kneel in prayer before the tiny coffin.

Aila climbs up the boat launch, lets her dress fall from her grasp above the water.

"Adele, we're all thinking about it."

"Our family isn't cursed." Adele snaps. "We're surrounded by water—everyone knows someone who's drowned."

I shrug. "Sure, but our family has lost like twenty people."

Adele glances at me, but turns to Aila.

"What time is it?" She says.

Aila turns her wrist around and checks her watch. "Quarter to six."

I scan the growing fog and spot a familiar boat racing the clouds home.

"Papa's back." I stand, brushing dirt from my skirt. "We should head home."

"Well, let's go meet him." Adele pushes a rogue blond curl behind her ear.

"Why? We'll see him at home." I protest.

"Leah, you cannot be a bitch right now."

Before I can respond, Aila steps between us.

"The docks are on the way." She stares at me as she starts walking away from the water. Adele follows her in a huff, but I stay a second, take a long drag. I feel the smoke fill up the space behind my nose before the relaxation sets in, takes the edge off.

As scared as it makes me, I love to watch the gathering, surging water as it rolls towards the shore. Each time the waves finally break, I can hope that my silence has not been for nothing, that my siblings can see Papa in the ways that I can't. I can hope that one day I will collapse, gather, regroup, and get as far away as I can from where I started. The waves splash my shoes, as if the ocean is saying, "Go on now, go on." I spit into the sea, and take one more drag from my cigarette.

"Don't tell me what to do."

The smell of rotting fish is worst at the docks, though it fills the air all over town. Our shoes click against the wood beneath our steps as Papa's boat rams into his spot in the marina.

"Oh, geez." Adele runs ahead.

Papa jumps onto the dock, nearly falls onto John O'Reilly's boat on the other side, and lifts his arms up in the air when he spots us walking towards him.

Adele rips the bowline from his hand and ties it to the cleat on the dock so the boat can't drift away. As she stands Papa wraps his arms around her, rubs her head with his rough palm. I jump down into his boat, but I have to make my way through a sea of bottles, rolling from one side of the boat to the other to reach the main sail atop the boom.

Adele steps back from his embrace and watches him with worry.

"How're you doing, Papa?"

"I found some dolphins!"

He pushes Aila out of his way, so that she has to put one foot on the boat to avoid falling in the water, as he runs to the edge of the dock, pointing into the fog.

"Pulled up right alongside the hull here."

"Maybe that was Noah." Adele smiles, but we all enter a moment of stillness, of reflection.

Noah was twelve—five years, nearly six, younger than myself. He'd gone to work with Papa on his fishing boat at the beginning of last week, but he fell in the water and was carried away in a riptide. Papa, our brothers, Liam and Finn, and all the fishermen, even the coast guard, searched the rest of the week, but they never found him. He had Ma's big blue eyes and freckles crossing the bridge of his nose. After he'd play baseball with his friends and his socks would get all sweaty, he'd stick them under Papa's pillow. I told him to do it once—he was the one to make a habit out of it. Papa would yell for him, chase him through the house with the dirty socks, and then throw Noah over his shoulder when he caught him.

I watch Papa now as he stares at the horizon. His black shirt is buttoned askew, half of his shirt isn't tucked into his pants, and his yellow sailing jacket is falling from his shoulders. At the memorial this morning his hair had been combed neatly, but now the wind tugs bits and pieces of his greying hair in all directions.

Aila grabs Papa's arm. "It'll be getting dark soon. We should get back for dinner."

Papa nods, points at the sails, and steps down onto the boat to begin de-rigging.

As we turn onto our street, we see Ma handing coins to the paperboy on the porch.

I shake my head. "You've got to be kidding me."

The boy rushes past me with his messenger bag clutched tight to his chest, his hat pulled down to hide his eyes. I don't have the energy to chase after him today, but I turn to Ma who holds the paper, lifts her chin in triumph. I wonder what craft the classifieds and the apartment listings will be turned into today.

"You've been paying him to avoid giving me the newspaper, haven't you?"

She stares at me with dark circles under her eyes.

"I knew you wouldn't rest, not even today."

With that, I stop on the driveway and watch my sisters and Papa follow Ma into the house. I feel my nostrils flaring until I fear my nose will tear.

There are two boxes on the porch with Adele written on the side. At the age of twenty-seven, with one failed marriage behind her, she's moving back in with her eleven month old son, William. Once again, three beds have been squeezed into our tiny bedroom, but today they also crammed a crib between Adele's bed and the wall. There never was enough room before, but now we'll be lucky if our lungs can inflate.

The house is quiet when I finally step inside. Low voices susurrate through the halls. Liam, the eldest, is standing at the dinner table, talking to Aila. Finn, the brother between Liam and Adele, is shaking Papa's hand. Our remaining younger brother, Aidan, hands Papa an opened beer and sits on the floor beside the fireplace as Papa plops in his chair. In the quiet, I almost feel Noah slip into the room, as if he's observing us all from the steps like he used to, his big blue eyes sparkling.

Liam lifts his bottle in the air and says, "Dinner is served."

As we sit at the table I look at the freckles splattered over all of our faces, as if we were a single canvas receiving flecks of paint. Liam and I are the only ones with red hair. I hope to leave like he did: without ties to anyone or anything. But Ma didn't have any issues when Liam left; she said he had to go find a wife. With me it's different, I'm just supposed to be found apparently—I can't do any of the seeking.

I turn to my right and look at the empty chair between Ma and myself. Ma stares at the table where a plate should be, and curses as she stands and stomps to the cupboard. We all glance between Papa and Ma, as she sets up Noah's place setting. When she's done, we're all silent; no one dares move.

"Well, grace—let's say it, come on."

Ma holds up her hands, but puts one hand on the back of Noah's chair instead of grabbing mine when I reach towards her. I follow suit and place my hand on the back of Noah's chair as well, but look at my siblings as we lower our heads in prayer.

Papa whispers the "Our Father," and we all say "Amen" before dragging our fingers from our heads to our hearts and across our shoulders.

Liam begins to serve the chicken, mashed potatoes, and green bean casserole that he brought as our lips struggle to make conversation.

"Liam, how's Eilis?" Adele looks across the table at him, asking about his wife.

"She's doing well, she's enjoying the kids now that they're a bit older." He nods. "Aila, still swimming?" He turns towards her.

"Yeah, always swimming." She smiles beside me. She's training to get on a national swim team.

We start eating, but freeze once again as Ma stands up with Noah's plate, and gives him a serving of the food. Aila's eyes well up, and I watch Adele grab her hand.

"I don't want him to be hungry." Ma snarls, as she realizes we're watching her.

"Come now, Margaret." Papa shakes his head. "That's a waste of food."

"I will not send him to heaven without a proper meal, Owen." Ma snaps back.

Papa stands and puts his hands on his head.

“Pops, it’s fine.” Liam sits up in his chair. “There’s plenty—really, it’s not a problem.”

Papa puts his hands at the top of his chair, shakes his head once more, before lifting the chair and slamming it back on the ground. We all jump as he stomps down the hall, grabs his jacket, and leaves out the front door.

With the plates back in the cupboards and the food wrapped up in the fridge, Ma kisses us all on the cheek, says goodnight, but pulls Adele upstairs with her. When Adele returns, Aila stares at her.

“What the hell was that about?” She finally asks.

“Ma asked if the baby could sleep in their room...she just wants to hold him for a while.”

We nod, our hearts sinking. Liam pulls a bottle of whiskey out of a bag, sets it on the table.

“Anyone need a drink?”

We sigh collectively, relaxing our shoulders.

My sisters and I collapse at the top of the stairs in a heap. Aila lays on the floor in front of the door to our room as Adele and I lean against the wall, giggling.

“God, I haven’t been drunk in so long.” Adele laughs.

I kick off my heels and rest my head against the wall behind me.

“Tyler never took you to bars?” Aila looks up at Adele.

“No, not since the baby came. We went all the time when we were dating, we’d go dancing, and we did that a few times after we got married, but...”

She shakes her head, and looks down at her fingers now free of rings.

Aila stares at the ceiling, but whispers, “What are you gonna do?”

“I don’t know, Aila.” Adele sighs. “Stay here, get a job and save up for a while, I guess.”

Aila rolls onto her stomach, rests her chin atop her hands, with her eyes nearly closed. Adele rolls the fabric of her skirt between her fingers, her brow furrowed in thought.

“Ma’s excited to have a baby around again,” I add.

“Yeah...” Adele chuckles, brushes her hair behind her ears. “He’s pretty fun...”

We’re quiet a moment. In the silence we hear the house breathing, and then the tapping of the radiator at the other end of the hall.

“Goodnight sir,” Aila whispers.

A chuckle bursts from my tired chest, as Adele smiles beside me, and we remember the story Papa used to tell to squelch our fear of that very tapping: he said an old man played spoons within the pipes, that the old man grew

lonely in the winter, so when we heard the tapping we were to say hello, or say goodnight, offer him a word or two to stave off his loneliness. We used to lay awake at night in our room, waiting for the sound of spoons, so we could try to talk to him, ask his name, how he got trapped in the pipes, whether he was safe, happy. Papa was never as concerned as we were.

Aila drops her arms to the floor in front of her and rests her forehead atop them, exhausted. When her breathing slows, I look at my oldest sister, and my curiosity and the whiskey on my tongue draw the questions from my mind into the air.

“What happened with Tyler?”

She rubs her eye, and her mascara darkens her eyelid and the side of her nose.

“It’s late. We should go to bed.”

“Adele, come on.”

She studies me for a moment before beginning.

“It’s—we took Will to the beach a few weeks ago...we took him to Seal Point, where we used to meet Papa.”

I nod, remembering wind in our hair, as all seven of us raced to the beach to meet Papa for lunch during the summers, while all of his fishing buddies went to the pub.

“And we were way up on the beach like way up by the road where you park. The water was at least two hundred feet away, if not more. I set Will’s carrier on the sand beside me to help Tyler lay out a blanket...”

“It was a sound like thunder—the waves came rushing all around us, lifting everything up, the buckets, the blanket, Will...it dragged him towards the ocean, but Tyler grabbed him, so he’s fine. Tyler wanted to just go home after that, but I had to stay, and watch...the waves didn’t come that far up the beach again, but I sort of hoped they would so we could say it was high tide or that the breakwater was damaged or something...”

“What did Tyler say?”

“Once we were back in the car, he started laughing and was about to drive home, but that’s when I stopped him, told him we needed to stay. I was terrified. I told him about the curse.”

I watch her eyes well up, and she folds her arms in front of her chest.

“He told me I was crazy; I told him everything I could remember from Papa’s stories, all the names...but he just started yelling, and told me I was never to speak of it again, but then Noah...he started attacking you guys, Ma, Papa...so I grabbed my favorite clothes and my baby and came back home.”

I nod. We’re silent a moment. The radiator taps and pings.

“So you believe in it now?”

Adele turns her head, catches my eye, and says, “I don’t know.”

She's whispering now, as if the house, and the old man in the pipes, are listening.

"I just know that when everything rose up, and the sound of it; it scared the shit out of me. And I was helpless—if Tyler hadn't been there..."

The day that Papa returned from the docks without Noah I learned what it looks like when a heart crumbles. Aila and I caught Ma before she reached the floor and guided her down the rest of the way. Papa leaned against the frame of the front door with Noah's soaked sailing jacket, bought especially for this day and future sailing endeavors, dangling from his fingers, dripping into a puddle around Papa's feet.

Guilt dries my throat.

"He was so young," I whisper. Adele grabs my hand and squeezes it.

"Why do you want to get out of here so bad? I mean I know it's small, but..." Adele shakes her head.

I pause, consider my answer. "I just need to start over somewhere new, maybe head to New York City."

"Does the new place have to be so far away? Couldn't you start with Portland?"

"I'll have to start there. I don't have enough to get all the way to New York yet. But I need to get away from these trees, from the sea, as far away as I can. New York City is the exact opposite of this." I point out the window to the Maine landscape: the granite, the pine trees, the cold beaches.

"We'll miss you." Adele looks at me, as if she's just realizing this herself.

I'm struck by her sincerity, moved almost, but change is the only way to reconcile the memories that have shaped me. I can't be the only one of us that feels her regrets outweighing everything else.

I look out at the sun over the water from our bedroom window as I lift my head from my pillow and hear Aila and Adele chatting in the kitchen. Will giggles, coos. I dress and step down the stairs, listening for Ma's booming steps. When I round the corner into the kitchen though, it's just the three of them.

"Where's Ma?"

"Walsh's Diner," Aila turns.

"Again?"

She shrugs. "Says the coffee's her favorite."

I know better than that: she hates coffee. I grab my jacket from the foyer closet, step into a pair of boots by the door, and walk out into the foggy morning.

Ma is curled around a mug in a booth beside the window. I slide into the seat across from her, and she lifts her eyes to meet mine. She's tired. We're all tired.

"Ma, you all right?"

"I can mind myself, thank you." She nods, leans back in her seat.

"Ma..."

"Don't you give me a bit of trouble, Leah."

"I'm not giving you trouble. I'm asking if you're okay, Jesus."

Ma glares at the way Christ's name comes from my lips.

"I'm sorry...I just thought you might enjoy some company."

Her eyes skip from the coffee to me, to something behind me. I turn to see the doors to the kitchen swinging open and closed; where Ma was looking before.

"Good coffee?" I point at her mug.

"Yes, it's great coffee." She nods, folds her arms in front of her chest, raises her eyebrows.

"I don't mean to hurt you...by looking for apartments. You know that, right?"

"You always keep yourself so separate from us."

I nod, look at the table in front of me.

"I don't mean to."

She stares beyond me again towards the swinging kitchen doors. I know who Ma's looking for—the woman doesn't work on Mondays, but Ma can't know that I'm aware of that, even though it might help her understand why I want to leave. When I turn back, Ma is staring out at the docks, at all the boats.

"Truth be told, I want to get away from the sound of it. I don't quite blame you." She nods towards the ocean, her face still, but her eyes daggers.

I touch her wrist, watch her eyes narrowing at my touch. She's kept herself pretty separate from all of us this week, as if she's scared to recognize that it could have easily been any of her children.

"How 'bout we head home?"

She looks at me a moment, her eyes softening, before she nods.

I sit in the bay window in the dining room beneath the moonlight, with the window ajar, a cigarette between my fingers. Everyone else is asleep. On my lap, a local history book balances atop my knees. I've had the page flagged and dog-eared for years. I can't even imagine the overdue fee it's accumulated. I stare at the names, begin to remember them again, as if they were people I once knew.

The front door squeaks open, and I recognize the sound of Papa's steps interacting with hardwood. He steps down the hallway, opens the door to the closet to pull out his toolbox for his boat. When he turns around, his eyes meet mine for a moment. He turns, sets the toolbox on the floor. I hear the kiss of the refrigerator door opening a moment after he enters the kitchen. He returns to sit at the table, facing me. We sit, self-medicate in silence.

He lifts his eyes from the table to look at me again, and—when he gains the courage—lifts a finger from his curled hand rested on the table.

"Remember when you was little, and I'd spin you round this room by yer arms?"

"Yeah, I remember."

Papa nods, taps the table with his finger. When he looks up again he looks beyond me into the world outside the window.

"Fun to remember what we used to be," I whisper.

There's fear in his eyes. The same fear that fills him up before he steps aboard his boat, and I feel a sudden strength because I share a pronoun with that great expanse of waves. I blow a puff of smoke into the room. I remember when he got that old boat from John O'Reilly, and after fixing it up, he had us all crowd around him to reveal what he was going to name his vessel. He named it after me, waited for me to smile. I didn't.

"We have to keep movin' forward," he whispers. "Try to be better than we were."

He taps the table again, his temples roiling on either side of his head.

"I didn't tell Noah the stories...I couldn't bear them after Michael died, but I should've warned him. He should've known," he admits.

The guilt wells up in my chest, and I inhale another drag in an attempt to squelch it. This is why I have to leave: he says things like this, and my insides shiver against the cold breath of the past. I think of things Noah will never have, and I feel courage building in my bones. He won't look around the kitchen and see the faces of his siblings, and recognize how we all share the same eyes. He won't reach an age in which he'll get to see the ocean's strength in a woman's arms. He was so young, taken so easily.

Tonight, I breathe in the cold air and let some truth escape my chest. "I told him." Papa stares at me. "I told him and it scared the shit out of him, just like it scared the shit out of all of us."

As soon as we heard, I imagined Noah's fear, how it must've felt like an immutable weight in his chest as the surface eluded his reach. He must've known his name would be added to the already exhaustive list.

"Please, don't leave." Papa's whisper is nearly inaudible.

"Why? So I can stay here and watch every moment you lie to Ma, every moment you try to cover everything up?"

Papa shakes his head. "You can fix it."

"None of this was my responsibility, or my fault, but I've lived my life as if it was so our family wouldn't fall apart."

He looks wounded for a moment. I wonder what it must be like to see your own anger mirrored back to you.

"We both need change, don't we?" He nods.

My eyes well up, reflect the moon in their own saltwater. Papa notices and rubs his chin like he does when dealing with tough news.

"Papa, Ma knows. She's been at the diner every day for a week, watching her...she knows something. This was all for nothing."

He nods, takes a few big swigs from his bottle. I watch him stand up, stare at me for a moment, smile softly, and then take his beer and his toolbox out into the night.

A memory: I am eight years old, standing in a mud puddle, feeling water rise between my toes. I shout, "Papa!" He jumps back from a blonde woman leaning against her car, and I spot a bruise on her neck where his mouth had been. He rushes to my side, grabs my arm, drags me home swearing. He threw his glass bottle on the pavement so that it shattered at our feet. I danced through the broken shards, cutting my feet through my slippers, as he lifted my arm high above my head.

When I wake in the morning, a strange buzzing seems to fill the house, traveling through all the heating registers, white noise filling each and every room like smoke. Aila and Adele aren't in their beds, and Will isn't in his crib either. I rise to my feet, and realize a newspaper has been set on the floor next to my nightstand. Inside the classifieds are intact and up to date. I stuff them into my pillowcase, and rush down the stairs where the buzzing grows louder. When I enter the kitchen I see Ma sitting at her chair, Adele and Aila on either side of the table, with a walkie-talkie in the center of the three of them with its volume all the way up.

"What's going on?"

Adele looks up at me. "Papa didn't come home last night."

"When he is within range, he will radio." Ma whispers, but I see fear piercing the whites of her eyes in red crooked needles.

"John O'Reilly said his boat isn't moored, so he's just strayed a bit far from the usual places," Ma rationalizes.

Either Papa took to the sea, or the sea took him.

I feel a kind of pulse in the classifieds, which sit solid in my pocket. I turn from the crashing, spitting waves, and head for the payphone in front of the library. With all the change on me, I make four calls for apartments in Portland. I feel as if my insides are shaking, surging.

Papa used to say that you could find wisdom at the edge of the sea, but now, as I step back out on the rocks, I think that's bullshit too. I imagine the underside of the waves before me, the forceful twisting and curling of water as it thunders toward the land; the way it can erode rock, turn it to dust. I wish the ocean had a face, something I could smack hard until she was forced to explain what it has all meant.

I see the fog rolling toward the shore, rolling to envelop me like the big world awaiting my graduation. Maybe I'll lose my way inside of it, but maybe in its arms I'll find connection, warmth, freedom from the past.

At the far end of the beach there's a woman standing, waiting. Her straight light brown hair billows in the wind like a curtain. We both stare out at the ocean, looking for wisdom. I hear her squeal, shaking me from contemplation, and a man with black hair in a yellow sailing jacket wraps his arms around her, threatening to throw her in the sea before he kisses her. The shaking in my stomach intensifies, and I light a cigarette to calm it. I turn away from the lovers, but each wave hits the shore with the force of all the waves it's been in the past.

When I get home, I sit down beside Ma amid the buzzing, and their eyes scan my face. I shake my head. Papa had said we both needed things to change—admitted things were surging, gathering, and I can't wait to collapse anymore.

"I don't know anything for sure..."

I look at Ma then, and she leans back in her chair, exasperated, as if I've told her everything already, her cheeks reddening with fury.

"I think he left with her..."

Ma takes my hand in hers, starts to nod as she processes what he might have done. Adele and Aila look between us. "What do you mean? Who did he leave with?"

Ma pats my hand. "How long have you known?"

I feel the ocean swelling inside of me, and before I can try to stop it, I'm crying, collapsing like a wave.

"What did he do?" Aila's face is bright red, her eyes three times their normal size.

"I was eight," I respond to Ma. She squeezes my hand.

"He's just lost!" Adele stands as she yells, leans toward us for answers.

"He had an affair, Adele!" I scream back at her. The words flow from my mouth, into the air, and I can finally breathe after a decade underwater.

Adele is stunned back into her chair, looks to Ma who nods to confirm. Ma fights tears seeing the betrayal in our eyes, grabs all of our hands, gathers us in the stretch of her arms, and explains the words that have choked me.

We take the rest of his beer to the boat launch. Adele says, “I want to forget everything he ever touched, take everything that was always his.” We drink our fill of the beer, and dump the rest in the sea to watch it mix with the sand and the salt.

Adele shakes her head. “I don’t think I can stay on the peninsula—surrounded by the ocean like this.”

She runs her thumb over the label of her bottle.

Aila nods. “I agree...I might leave too.”

There have always been sisters and brothers, parents and children, lovers and strangers. But I look at my sisters and feel the specifics of my life taking up more meaning, imbuing those words, those titles, with tones and shades. With nothing to hide, no wedges between my siblings and myself, I could finally return to them, but only if we retain the meaning of these titles, and the last name we share, amidst all the pain.

Adele lifts the bottle over her shoulder, and smashes it on the rocks in front of us. As the pieces fly in all directions, I see the true threat of shattered glass, feel our splintered future surging toward us. Eventually the edges would smooth, soften after years in the sea and the sand, but the pieces would never fit back together again. I can’t imagine the resolve of our ancestors to stretch a string across the Atlantic, from Ireland to Maine, to keep their ties to home even somewhat intact.

I wonder about the names and dates we know, about the people behind the letters and numbers. I wonder about their dinner table conversations, whether Sionnon Brennan and her sister Eileen slept in the same room, giggled till midnight, whether they lied to their parents for their older brother John when he snuck out to meet a girl.

“Do you think Eileen and Sionnon Brennan were close?”

Aila and Adele turn.

“What?” Aila stares.

“I just wonder what they were like, that’s all.”

“I bet Eileen stole Sionnan’s clothes a lot.” Adele tugs on the sleeve of Aila’s shirt.

“Yeah,” Aila adds. “Maybe Sionnan could threaten to tickle Eileen well into their twenties.” She curls her fingers towards me and I jump away instinctively.

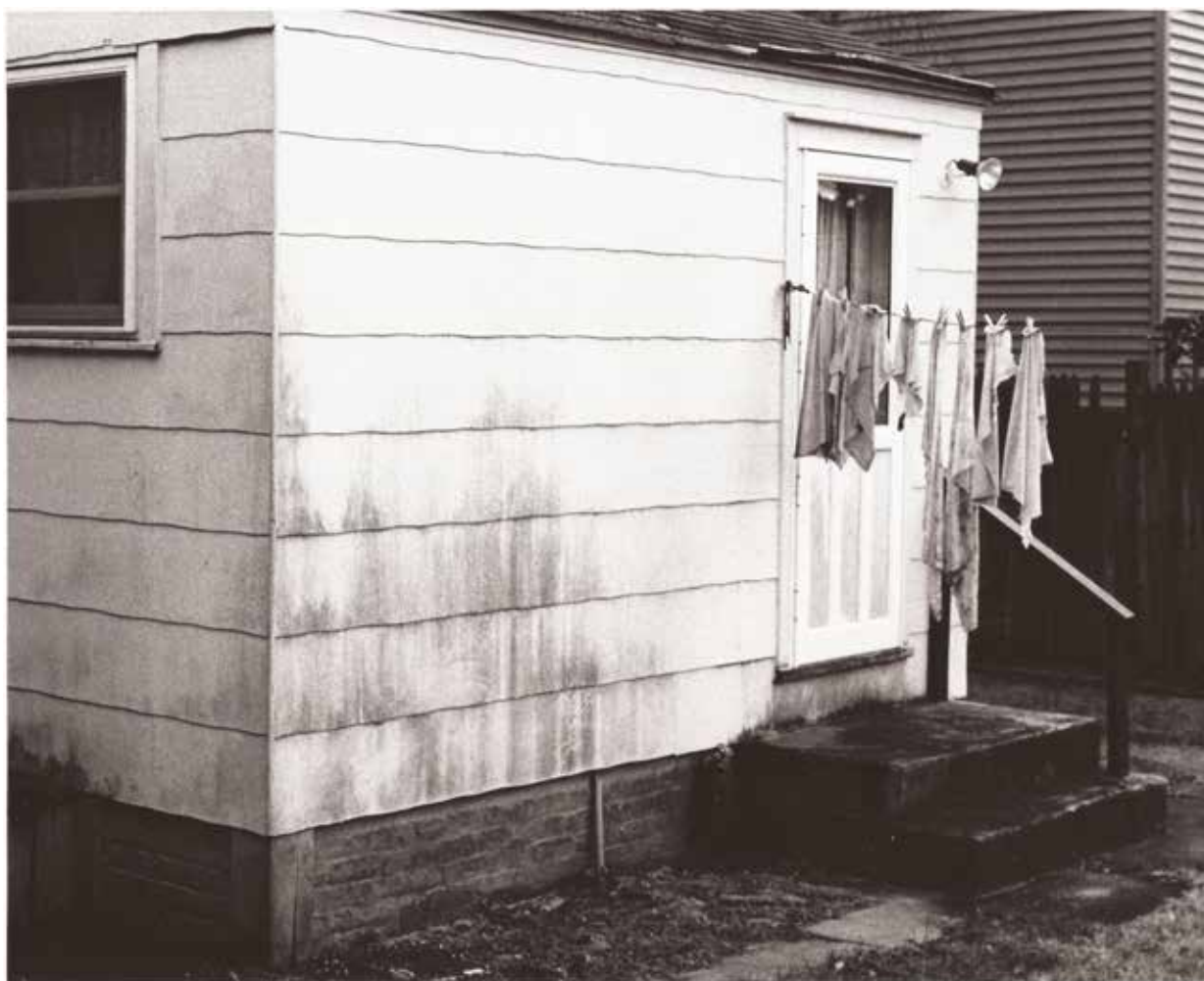
We laugh, but then we begin saying, “maybe, maybe, maybe,” spinning the thread of life with our tongues, reminding me of the memorial service for

Noah. When the mass had ended, everyone stayed seated. Men and women and children stood up to tell tales of moments Noah had made them laugh, had gotten away with a bit of mischief, had embarrassed himself so that his ears turned red. The stories came flowing out of the pews like water, whether motivated by guilt or grief. They were not a remedy to the tragedy, but at least we left the church with the remnants of a chuckle beneath our breaths, a feeling of tenderness between us all.

My siblings and I collapse against each other, gather together and regroup, as the waves have taught us. But instead of throwing myself far from where I started, I allow myself to melt into what I've resisted, but always been a part of. We continue saying, "maybe, maybe, maybe," building lives out of the dashes on our ancestors' gravestones.

I skip viewings for apartments in Portland, and my sisters and I stay on the peninsula for a few more years. Adele and I enroll at the local university together. Each night, the three of us sit in front of the fire, teach the stories to Will and Aidan, and welcome them into the process of creation so that the stories will never end.

We hold our family close with these stories, assuring that distance cannot be a threat. We grow old, tell the stories to our children, and when our grandkids visit the spot with their own children, where we took the stories into our own hands, we sit just beneath the ocean's surface, in the calm currents from the other side of this world. And there we listen to how our stories have grown in the mouths of our descendants, how they have turned from material for nightmares into the stuff of warm milk.



Neighbors (35mm black & white film), Adam Schnepf

Like Robins Devouring

The trees behind fidget, and stretch their spines
with gnarled cracks and leafy expulsions. Eyes cast
below at Donny with the Sox sweater,
his tobacco spit sucked up roots,
latching to the waves of xylem tissue,
folding nicotine and phosphorus and
snuff and nitrate,

And I'd play in parks, down slides,
hit the ground floor, my body pitching forward,
clenching flowers and weeds, fingers so deep
the worms mate with my digits. I'd pull myself free
eventually, but the dirt cakes sweet under nails to
be sucked dry. Crumbles between the
now webbed hands. Crunching on splinters,
feasting on mutton of earth.

In the last days of living there,
my sister's three-year-old best friend eats too.
He popped wood chips salty with rain down his throat
like greased frogs. For months they'd slide smooth to stomach,
classmates' gleeful giggles filling suburban air like manicured lawns
and condescension until
one turns.

Sideways it sticks, and
my sister
watched him
turn blue
with regret.
Her eyes gain a lens over them from then on,
like oil rainbows over muddy water.

I weep so loudly at the funeral my father
carries me out like antelope in lion's jaws. Maybe it's then and maybe it's now, but I
stand by the side of highway, in the shadow of Charles River cherry blossoms,
and water the ground.
The robins come out early in the spring with worms drooping like moustaches between beak,
but the boy
can't laugh once the Massachusetts roots finally claim him in their teeth.

ANDRES CORDOBA

Breakfast in Marblehead

I duck my mother's call as the
Jet Blue cuts the sky
perforated by clouds.

Two coats lie dead on my shoulders,
and everything I touch seems to
either keep me warm or hang listless
as I ignore the call from my mother.

When the sunlight bleeds down chest
because the shades were
left slack jawed and
in awe of every lactic acid shiver
and the mini strokes had in sleep.
my face drips now, steadily, and freshly squeezed
orange juice with waffles and my mom's mumbles
stroking small strands out of my eyes
while her chin lies in her hand so her head rises every time
she whispers.
I feel sticky, and it crusts white on my face,
all maple sweet spit on cheeks.
My phone rings,
and unanswered,
I wonder how the message machine sounds
to people overhead.

Pilgrimage

The place where the miracles happened is totally paved over. Everything is clean and painted white—probably for viewing purposes. You couldn't miss a miracle, standing out against all the white. I try to imagine how it must have been in 1917, but all I have to go on are the pictures from the pamphlets, printed in fifteen different languages—*Welcome to Fatima*.

As a child, this was always my favorite religious story; the luminous lady who appeared on the thirteenth day of every month in the Cova da Iria fields. I liked that the Virgin Mary had appeared in Portugal, where my dad was from. I liked that she had appeared to children. I liked the smallness and dirtiness of the shepherd children, with their baleful orphan eyes and their musical names—*Jacinta, Francisco, Lucia*. I used to mouth their names and study their picture, printed on a laminated prayer card—two young girls and a boy in black and white, very young. I guess I thought it would mean more to me than it does.

Towering fifty feet above our heads is a modern, stylized crucifix made of red plastic. Lego Jesus on His Lego Cross (cross sold separately). We stand and look at it for a while. If it's meant to inspire something in me, it doesn't succeed.

Cutting through all the white concrete is a path of dark gray tile, very smooth. People travel along it on their knees in scattered, shuffling clumps. Some carry rosary beads. Others wear kneepads. You can follow their slow progress down the concrete slope, around the chapel, and up to the sanctuary. We watch them knee painfully past us, lips moving silently.

My brother doesn't believe me when I tell him that some of these people have walked here from their homes, hundreds of miles away, but my dad confirms my story.

"They come from all over Portugal," Dad says. "They walk and then when they reach Fatima, they go on their knees. Your grandmother came once when she was younger."

"Is that why Vóvó's knees are so messed up?"

"No," Dad says. "That's just because she's old."

After we pray in the chapel, we wait on a long line to buy waxy, overpriced candles. There's a woman begging amid the candles. Dad hands her a couple Euros. It's a good place to beg, he concedes. Prime real estate.

Another line, then, in front of an enormous pyre of open flame. We wait our turn to step forward, hold our hands above the heat, and touch our wicks to the candles already burning there. Then I find an open slot to wedge my candle in amid the others, leave it to melt stringy and white into the fire.

You are supposed to stop and say a prayer, but I am being crowded and my brother's candle won't light, so I have to help him, and then we are moving away from the pyre.

I wonder if they collect the melted wax and use it to make new candles, recycling people's offerings to the fire. I don't know if that's how wax works, and I don't ask. I like the idea, the circularity of it. It makes me feel filled up in a way the rest of this place doesn't.

We've come to Portugal because my grandparents can't come home.

Or maybe that's me being egocentric. Maybe their home is Portugal. My father was born there. When he was a baby, they moved to America without him. He followed later, once they were settled, and Portugal followed them, too. It lingered in the dim wood-paneled kitchen that always smelled like foreign food. The hanging glass lamp that rattled when low-flying airplanes from LaGuardia passed by overhead. The crinkly, plastic-covered couches. The heavy accents. The tilde over the *a* in our last name.

Probably, they missed it. That's something I've never thought about before. Once they retired, they started spending the summers in Portugal. Five years ago, they went to spend the summer and found that they couldn't come back. The doctors said it wasn't a good idea. My grandpa's Alzheimers is too heavy to carry across an ocean. So now we are coming to them.

Murtosa is a small town on the coast. The roads are twisty, storybook-narrow. Everything is tiled and patterned and bright. The last time we visited, my grandparents were only there for the summer. I was ten and terrorized by the huge number of stray dogs roaming the little farm town. I was scared to leave the gated yard. Now, I dread having to go inside.

I am afraid to see what's happened to my grandpa. Even before they left, before he got so bad, I didn't like to be around him. I felt embarrassed for him. It felt wrong to nod at his senseless, circular stories and feign interest—humoring him like a child. That was five years ago. I think we are all expecting the worst.

Dad calls it our Portuguese pessimism—expect the worst, and at least you're never disappointed. Mourn when the boats go out, in the event that they don't come back.

"It's the kind of trip you have to take sometimes," Mom tells us in the airport. "It will mean so much to your grandma."

Mom is always looking for moral lessons to deliver. She tackles the world like a scholar annotating a classic novel, pulling out major themes and underlining significant exchanges. Usually I understand it; I am always trying to make things mean more than they do. This time I quietly wish that she wouldn't voice her reluctance. I would prefer to pretend that this is a pleasure trip, sixteen days spent in the home my Dad grew up in. It's fifteen minutes from the beach. That's what I tell my friends. Not the rest of it.

As we sit on the beach, fifteen minutes from the house, Dad points to a buoy out in the water, near the horizon. If you drew a line straight across the ocean, he says, we'd hit the Jersey Shore. This is an ocean we know. We're just on the wrong side of it.

We watch an old, brightly-colored fishing boat come back to shore, dragging an enormous net behind it beneath the surf. That's something I like about Portugal—history is so physically present. We walk along the waterline to watch the boat come ashore because Dad says it's worth seeing.

The sea starts to sizzle with panicked life, silver bright, as a tractor wearies its way towards the dunes, pulling the boat up the beach. The tractor grumbles and lows like the fleets of oxen that used to pull these nets ashore.

Overhead, a spiraling cumulus of seagulls is forming. My brothers yell and duck and throw stones at them, but they part and come together again, hungry. The tractor pulls the boat and the boat pulls a net, wriggling with life, up the shore.

Dad says that this used to be an incredibly dangerous job. Portuguese wives would stand on the shore in their mourning clothes, weeping and tearing their clothes as they waved their husbands off to sea, a kind of pre-mourning ritual. I imagine they hoped that the tears they shed, the clothes they rent, would stave off death for another day. I imagine their tears as food for a hungry thing, salt water offerings to the sea.

The fish come slithering up the shore, caught.

My grandfather isn't as bad as I feared. Mostly he sits on a lawn chair in the open garage in his blue-striped pajamas, vacant but content. If you smile at him, he will smile back. It's probably just instinct, but he likes it if you nod along as he speaks incoherent Portuguese. The only phrase I recognize is *esta bien* over and over again—it's good.

I smile and nod and say, "Yeah. *Bien*." When a fly lands on his arm, I shoo it away.

We sit for hours, him watching the clothesline sway in the wind, me watching the patch of skin between his socks and his blue pajama pants. I am mourning him before he has gone.

My grandma hangs laundry and picks lemons in the backyard. She limps badly, up and down the stairs, as she takes my grandpa to the bathroom. At night, I sit in the kitchen with her and watch her rub medication onto the swollen rounds of her knees. Their little brown dog runs the length of the driveway, back and forth, yapping furiously as two olive-skinned boys lead a horse down the street.

I like to be here. I am not as sad as I thought I would be. It's only when I think about leaving that I feel sad, thinking about the two of them sitting side by side in their armchairs. Him, talking nonsense as she rubs her knees, her, cooking elaborate meals, then cutting the food into little bites for him, watching him eat in silence. He can't leave the house and she can't leave him alone, so they stay home now. I think she must be lonely.

My grandma's English is still very good. She asks questions about college and shows me funny videos on Facebook. She marvels at how tall my brother David has gotten. She protests when my mom tries to do the dishes.

"Susan, you don't come to do more work. This is your vacation."

My mom dismisses this and starts soaping up a pan. "You work too hard already, Lucinda," she says. "Relax for a couple minutes."

Vóvó doesn't put up a fight, which shows how much her legs must be hurting her. She peeks into the living room to make sure my grandfather is still in his armchair, watching a soccer game with my brothers. He mostly sits quietly, but when Ronaldo scores a goal and my brothers cheer, he does too. I wonder how much he is understanding, how much is muscle memory.

Mom is trying to convince Vóvó to get some help around the house. A neighbor already comes twice a week to do some cleaning and mind my grandfather while Vóvó runs to the grocery store, but Mom insists that she needs more help.

"What if you fall in the garden and can't get help?" she asks. "What if Dad falls on the stairs? He's too heavy for you to catch him. The doctor said you need to rest your knees or they won't get better. How will you ever get any rest when you're following him around all day? You can't even leave the house."

"I don't mind work. I like to take care of him," Vóvó says.

"You've got to take care of yourself, too," Mom protests.

"Is not forever," Vóvó says. "Then I will come home."

She says that a lot. It surprised me the first time I heard it, the bluntness of it. She doesn't say it sadly or hopefully. It's just a fact. Her Portuguese pessimism. Things are deteriorating quickly. That's the reason we're here, after all, after five years of baseball schedules and college orientations and being too swamped at work to take off so much time.

There's a noise from the living room. My little brother Eddie comes to the door. He's wearing the Portuguese soccer jersey he bought at the market. He's worn it every day since he bought it, despite our mockery.

"I think Vòvò needs to go to the bathroom," he says, only twelve, a little bit embarrassed.

Vòvò gets to her feet, knees bending unwillingly.

"Let me," Mom protests, but Vòvò shakes her head and limps to the door.

"Is not forever," she says again.

There's a little glass gazebo built on the site where the apparitions are said to have occurred. It houses a small altar and a fleet of benches made of light colored wood. We find a free space to fit our sweaty American bodies, and then we sit. Mom prays. Maybe the rest of my family does, too. I don't know for sure. To ask would be to betray myself. Surely, if I really believed, I wouldn't be asking at all. *Is this just muscle memory for you, too?*

I put my head down, play-acting at something I don't understand. I don't pray, though I wish I could. I think I would find it comforting. But I am distracted—first by my brother's fidgeting, then by the *shhh-shhh* sound of kneepads on the tile floor.

I crack my eyes and watch an old man round the altar on his knees, back bowed, lips moving above his rosary beads. He moves slowly and with obvious effort. I wonder if these last few meters, the last bit of his crawling pilgrimage, are the easiest or the hardest part. I try to imagine how fervently and wholly you must believe in something to walk so far, to crawl on your knees across the white pavement, but it's not something I can understand. So instead I think about how sore his knees must be.

When my brothers ask Vòvò about Fatima, her hand moves to her knee with a wince, like she's remembering.

"I went with my church," she says. "Your daddy was very sick when he was a baby. I prayed for him. I promised if he got well, I would make the trip to Fatima."

We all look at Dad, surprised. He didn't tell us that part. He grimaces.

"It worked," he jokes.

"It works," Vòvò agrees.

SHANA BLATT

clone of a dandelion

i could be doing more
 than busting my body into
bruised fruit

more than
pantone matching
purple knees to
the creped drapes

i'll use
to strangle a second husband
after the electric fence kills the kids

i could

 i could do better

 retracting lashes on a misnamed train
 i watch smooth
 over the frozen bluejay.

She Was the Wall

Toby repeated her Gmail in my ear twice and asked me not to write it down because it was Shabbat, and we were at the Western Wall. I had surely learned my lesson by then; just a few minutes earlier Toby had whacked me in the back of the head with a prayer book for using my cell phone. And now here she was singing her email into my ear, inviting me over for Shabbat dinner at her apartment in Brooklyn once we both returned home.

“Promise me you won’t write down that email until Shabbat is over,” she begged me. It was like the validity of her religion was suddenly placed in my hands. If I wrote down the email, she would know, and she would start to question everything she believed.

“I promise.” I repeated the email to myself over and over until it started to sound like a prayer. I spoke it into the wall and shouted it towards rabbis, begging any holy thing not to let me forget it. I would be going to Toby’s.

When Toby first hit me in the head with that prayer book, I thought she wanted to convert me. I was already Jewish, but I think she could sense that I wasn’t Jewish enough. Before our confrontation, I was watching her. Everyone was. She was walking around the women’s section of the wall, armed with her prayer book, whacking anyone with a cellphone in hand. But these women didn’t care; as soon as Toby abandoned them, they just resumed what they were doing in a more secretive manner.

She was fascinating. Everywhere she went she caused a scene. She was on everyone’s radar, and everyone was on hers. The leader of my tour group leaned in close to us and scoffed, “If she’d put half the effort into praying as she does hitting people with prayer books, maybe she’d find her peace.” Or maybe this was her key to peace, guarding this wall against us disrespectful seculars, preserving its holiness.

And then came that *bang*.

"No phones on Shabbat!" she screamed in that high-pitched voice of hers that should have been familiar to me by then, but it was like something else when it was directed my way. I was shaking, but not because I was scared; I was honored to be one of her subjects, one of the cogs in the machine that gave her life purpose.

Her method of discipline was systematic; first came the whack, then the scold, and then approximately forty-five seconds of a cold hard stare to make sure the phone was put away and that it would stay away. I just looked into her eyes. This was the first time all night that I really got to see her face, and it was stunning. Pale and stressed and wrinkled in the shape of the words she scolded. And when I realized that the moment was fleeting, I asked her what her name was.

This threw off her sculpted stare. It was obvious that no one had ever bothered to ask her this before. I pulled over a seat next to me and asked her to sit. I wanted to know everything about her. What leads a woman to become a character like this? She was hard to break through at first, but when I told her I was from Brooklyn, her face lit up. She was also from Brooklyn. And then I knew I had her in the palm of my hand.

I told her that I wasn't religious, but all she wanted was for me to be present. To take it all in, because if you were Jewish, this was what it was all about—being at the Western Wall, singing and dancing, flaunting your Judaism because there was no other place in the world where it was so easy. Once I had broken through her thick skin, we talked for what felt like hours. I was no longer just sitting back and watching this scene unfold before me; I was a part of it. She brought me to life that night.

Since that day, Toby felt like a dream to me. I wrote down the email as soon as Shabbat ended the next day. I knew it was right, it had to be. I wrote to her when I got home, and a few hours later I got a reply from a man named Toby who kindly asked me to never email him ever again. What could I do to find her, knock on every window in Brooklyn with the lights off on Shabbat? Maybe. Or I could just keep praying her email, it was the only proof I had that she was real.



3rd Culture (monotype), Arnold Barretto



Untitled Innocence (monoprint), Arnold Barretto

sugar magnolia

if you were feeling clever, you would say life dealt you a bad hand and that was all there was to it. you were pressed as a flower to the yellowed page of a book, left between musty volumes until your petals were brittle and dry. you were something to be enjoyed, touched by nameless hands in dark rooms. when you sat in the garden, long legs curled beneath your lap, back curved in an inelegant slouch, you pointed to a flower made of speckled sunlight through the shade of a drawn curtain. 'in the language of flowers,' you said, 'the yellow carnation means i'm sorry i cannot be with you.' but your life is not an invitation to despair, your body is not made for show-and-tell presentations of rotten affection. you are magnolias sprouting from thick bramble, glorious pink so saturated it bites at the tired eye.

alien

7/11, pinned under fluorescent bulbs that burn his eyes, dipping his skin in harsh yellow light, casting a glow upon stained canines, spoiled-milk teeth covered in nicotine, hidden behind the chapped ring of his lips, brown and pink, unkissed and bound shut

greasy wisps of hair clinging to the plane of a creased forehead,
waning darkness, two crescent moons branded upon delicate skin
where eyelashes stand to meet red-rimmed sclera, a tired gaze makes
teachers worry, but he sleeps just fine ma'am, honest, and grabs a
bottle of tylenol

'cuz the cashier's leaned their arms on the sticky countertop waiting for the
other shoe to drop, for him to lift something into the pocket of his two-siz-
es-too-big jeans with the holes scraped through the knees

but he's not a thief, he pays without spilling one syllable from his
mouth, tearing the seal under the cap, shaking out two chalky pills to
swallow dry, willing away the migraine that greets him every morning

a choir of rhapsodical cognition, rocketing along, a comet in an orbit that
simply doesn't stop, that brought him home D minuses to hide from his
mom, on pages where letters swim and slip away from his grasp as if they
are the celestial bodies

encircled by fog that makes his hair raise, on arms outstretched to
that endless sky over his box of a home, where he still doesn't speak,
where he steals through his bedroom window onto the roof instead of

lifting lighters from the 7/11—he only did so once, and they never let
him forget it—stumbles across shingles until he can lie atop them, his
socks dangling over the gutter

where eyes do not look upon him and cast judgment, where the stars eclipse
his vision, softened by light pollution, sees cosmic dust swirling into clusters
of dirt road and streetlights and mobile homes and he can see nothing but
the boundless system that calls so incessantly

RACHEL BRITTON

Masks

In sleep, I discover my poetry and my seven faces. They all look like the woman captive in the mirror but here an upturned lip and there metallic eyes. My skin becomes their stage, their scenes more than often unscripted. It is in my bed that their absence leaves me wondering what my face looks like without them. Eyes closed, searching just behind the lids. Fold my cheek into the pillow, stretch out the eyebrows. If I want, I can mold my face like dough.

I.

We've just met. I stretch my brows up toward my hairline, widen my eyes. I want you to know I'm interested, even though the words are dried up and stuck behind my teeth.

You ask me to tell you about myself, because when you asked me out you only knew that I was an avid poetry reader and could name the summer triangle constellations, and I don't know quite what to say. Suddenly, it's as if my history is an abyss; I cannot reach in, cannot pull anything out. You stare at me, waiting, and I have to look up at the ceiling so that your eyes do not keep making me forget. I'm so nervous I'll say the wrong thing that my upper lip is sweating. When I finally settle on an answer, I tell you in short and restrained words that I'm a writer. Inevitably, my voice climbs up in pitch like climbing the tree I never scaled in my parents' front yard. Time reverses itself—my spine condenses and curves, body shrinks and drags me with it, and once again I am a child, so small compared to you.

Our first meet is short. As I walk away, into a city crowd I can get lost in, my voice returns and mutters with the exhale of stale breath. That wasn't

me, I think. That wide-eyed face tied me up in thick black rope and held me hostage somewhere deep in my stomach. I called up into the hollow of my throat, but my mouth was too far away and the sound only echoed back down to shiver me. Where did I get this malleable, rubbery face? And why did I let it mask me? Why did I wear it during the corporate job interview that resulted in a 'we're sorry to say' email a week later? Why did I cover up my real, cheek-splitting smile when another writer gave me a compliment, so we parted ways at the end of the workshop without cementing a friendship? Now that I've been released, I wonder if the next time we meet, my voice will crack the silicone of that face and let me through.

II.

Open-mouthed is the way they meet me. With a book sewn to my nose and a planner marked neatly in black ink—every column brimming with letters. In college, students are often subject to group projects and, always, one student must take the lead and bear the weight of all of them. As the semester progresses, it becomes clear that the boys who don't come to class, and the girl who schedules our meetings but conveniently misses them, have targeted me as their Atlas, although my shoulders slope and are not built for carrying.

Now that we've grown acquainted, I complain to you about my group project, and you notice my flickering eyes and the way my pencil shakes in my hand. Each of their suggestions for our project strays further and further from what our professor described in the assignment. Deftly, I steer them back toward what will work and, hearing their noncommittal ummms when we start divvying up the tasks, realize that I will be completing this project on my own. On a rainy Sunday afternoon, I will camp on the silent floor of the library translating six books at a time into coherent, streamlined notes. I will write a script, giving equal speaking time to each group member, and then construct a powerpoint presentation, and it will earn me an A in the class. Finally, once I am on break after the final exam and reading a novel on my parents' couch, I will be able to breathe again.

You take my hand in yours, so my pencil has to stop, and make me look at you. It's going to be okay, you tell me, I can get through it. And when it's done, we'll throw a wine-sweet celebration.

III.

"Be careful," I'll tell my roommate as she slips on her coat, car warming up outside for the drive. Once again I notice how alike I am growing to my mother. But that worry is shadowed by the sailor's knot now roping fear into my chest, knowing that she'll be out with all of those other drivers late on a Friday night. I remember all of the recent accidents: an intoxicated man

swerved off into a ditch, a fender-bender that crunched up the front of a small sedan, a ten car pileup. My face is granite.

And she'll just laugh, "Okay, Mom," as she slips out into the night. The red digital clock letters: 9:34 p.m. Sighing, I scan the pile of shoes on the mat by the door, now missing her heeled leather boots that leave a barren and muddled space, and shuffle away in my moisturizing socks and elastic sweatpants.

I'll write you a text message to make sure you're safe. You'll respond, thankfully, right away that, yes, you're staying in tonight and you're just fine, if not a little bored. I can sigh now and sink into the couch, into the space between cushions.

IV.

It isn't easy to convince me to go out. You have to stroke my spine a little, entice me with wine. But now, we know each other better and the merlot has loosened me up. It unravels my tongue like a new Persian rug and you can see the swirling designs, how they come together and fall apart.

My friend and I are driving the half hour back home from a paint-and-sip event in the city and I'm surprised by how incapable I am of keeping my mouth shut. In the dark, her face is hidden except for the occasional flash of headlights. Her voice is cloaked by the Top 40 on the radio, but I keep talking. The wine has stained my lips red. I wonder, aloud, if the reason it's hitting me so hard is because I haven't had a drink in nearly a month. My knees are cold, because the heat hasn't kicked on, but I'm somehow sweating. And though I worry that I'm annoying her while she drives—for which I apologize over and over—she is laughing, and the sound of the smile in her teeth soaks me in warm relief.

V.

My mother accuses me of being too critical. It isn't the first time, and I guess I am critical both toward her and myself. She is right; with me, there is no flexibility, and I crack when she tries to stretch me. It happens too often. Without meaning to be, my tongue is sharp and ribbons the roof of my mouth in long, thin strands that redden my lips.

"No, never mind," I cut into her sentence. It is jagged and leaves wisps of unfinished thought on either side. "Forget it. I shouldn't have asked."

"You're always so sharp," she cuts back. She's in the kitchen, behind the partition so I can't see her face. I know without even seeing her that she is wrinkling her forehead, pursing her thin lips, and scrunching up the nose she passed down to me.

My mother and I have been fighting. Of course, I'd never act this way with you. It's easier to be cruel to the ones who love you most because they care about you. It's easier because they can't help themselves when you cry in front of them, because to them you're worth putting up with, because they'll forgive you. What my mother and I are fighting about, though, is silly. It's me asking to change our plans and go to the local pub for dinner because I have an eating disorder and I'm afraid to eat rice noodles at the Thai place between the church and the hairdresser. When she wonders why I'm suddenly flip-flopping, my hand is beating my head, *stupid, stupid question*, and my voice now a stony octave lower mutters "never mind."

She probably would have said, of course it was okay. She would have understood. She would have rummaged through the folder on top of the fridge with our collection of takeout menus until she found one I could manage. But that question—*why*. I don't want to answer that *why*.

Dishes screech against the tin of the sink. "You never give anyone a chance. You just shut down." Sometimes I wonder if she thinks I can't hear her because I'm in another room. But she's right. This ceramic face is cracked down pale cheek, from eye to jawbone, and she isn't me. She must keep that missing ceramic shard in her mouth.

VI.

Maybe she swallowed it once, because now it's cutting up my throat and lungs and stomach. My face twists and I imagine the skin of my left cheek meeting the top right of my forehead. It hurts, and I am fighting not to open my mouth. You will hopefully never see this face. This face is haunted and contorts itself, runs liquid over itself. This face wants the Tylenol, but refuses it. This face steamrolls its quivering lips into a long, thin line, bends its eyebrows into concave wells, and drips from all its openings. Only a fistful of people have ever witnessed this face, enough to hold in one hand.

This face thrashes in a hospital bed. This face can't commit. This face is shadow behind the sun—please, try not to peel the gold back.

VII.

If the chisel is positioned just right, I can chip away at the sky and pull the stars down intact. I can melt them down in a great big vat and use the liquid glow to paint—both over and under the shadow. It laminates the page.

While I lie in bed, I let it pour over me, making sure it coats every crack, every pore, every crevice. It helps me sleep. Seals in all of the faces, makes them converge and conflict and I watch them all from a safe distance. I don't have to wear any one of them when I sleep. The muscles in my face unrav-

el and soften, relaxing into the pillow, the darkness, and night's untouched canvas.

Someday, when we share a bed, you might wonder who is facing you. It will be frightening, I'm sure. You'll probably miss me, think I've vanished and call my mother up in a frigid sweat to find where I have gone, but then I'll put on one of my faces and you'll see I was in front of you all along. You might even be able to see the blue, green, and red of the peony star leaking out of my left eye, and it'll blend with the white, gold, and purple in your eye. We'll meet somewhere in the middle, between our faces.

Mayyim Hayyim

In the shower we sometimes remember
the fantastic—
water coaxing shoulders
to rest; the steams of memory
fogging reflections

in the mirror; if we once shared
water with a lover or watched
the water pool in our palms; if we
saw all the troubles of our day sneak
out the window like a ghost; if we

closed our eyes and nearly
fell asleep in the downpour,
(as if to ask water to fund
our escape to dreams;)

if we wondered why hard water
is not as conducive for lather; if we
watched our blood swirl gorgeously down the drain,
a monthly reminder;

if we wondered where our lovers
are, what our childhood friends do
now, and if they still go to the beach,
what our mothers are

thinking about when we're not home

the space between daylight & the darkness of the east river tunnel

high-contrast insta-hued times sq i hate it—in the east village i found you & your white sneakers—you asked me the word in english for arrancar—i am sorry i almost dropped your sketchbook into the dumplings—the colorful marked painted pages, a turtleito and buildings with faces & highlighter bright—in between searching we find our way but are lost again, completely desconocidos—to look for toy boats in the penn station k-mart—you would use them in your thesis about the ocean filling with trash and the seagull that tried to pick up the pieces one by one—stopmotion animation—your father owned a mining company in chile and moved all over the country and so you were used to any and all cities, even new york city—going to your queens apartment was to witness the scene of my whole adolescence in front of me, on the train, the marsh between douglaston and bayside; the breath between suburbia and borough—have you ever fallen in love during a dream only to wake up and see light moving on the ceiling—stopmotion animation—you were the wish to escape all that i know—tenía miedo de times sq—why'd you always want to walk that way to penn station—but thanks for taking me—but to become so full of someone you barely know

yourself—you told me we could be friends-plus—you left me on read on
facebook messenger—I waited for you in the starbucks and pretended to
write—you left me on read on facebook messenger—is this what the inter-
net does—I find your polaroids in my notebook—stopmotion animation—
like the animated shortfilms on your instagram, all the projects, all the
temporalidad—all quick and saturated stories end & i continue scrolling,
desconocida again



stop fucking shooting people (relief print), Azure Arnot



seven sundays (relief print), Azure Arnot

Buckyboy

Buckyboy was lame so Father was going to shoot him. He planned to do it behind the barn so that Hattie didn't have to see and the stallion would be closer to the fields where he was to be buried. Hattie was understandably upset. Mother explained to her that Father was being generous; it was a kindness for him to do it behind the barn, when he could make money by selling him by the pound. Buckyboy weighed just shy of a ton so Father's good nature was costly.

There had been a snow storm last night and Hattie was not in bed. Being the eldest daughter, I was sent out to find her by Mother, who woke me with a touch to the shoulder. I had been under the covers, curled in a pocket of heat with Hattie's empty space against my back. My eyes adjusted to the dim light and I made out Mother's stern-set mouth as she cast me out of my nest of sheets. She had the baby, Beatrice, fat and gurgling, awake and bright-eyed, set on her hip. Father's snores rolled through our home like a crashing wave; he slept like the dead after a day in the field and would be up and gone before breakfast. Just as I was about to leave the room, Mother held me back and using only her single free hand, pulled a hat down over my head.

I traversed our property in my thick leather boots with a shawl wrapped around my shoulders and the hat shielding my ears. In my left hand I held a lantern; in the right, my pocket knife. I had only ever used it to gut fish, but its familiar weight felt good to hold. Coyotes weren't uncommon on our land.

First, I searched the shed that housed Father's equipment: the plows, Buckyboy's harness. I jumped when eyes flashed from underneath the broken frame of a wagon wheel leaning on the wall, but it was only Sheba, Mother's mutt, watching me. Usually she slept near the chicken coop and guarded it from foxes. Tonight, she had tucked herself away from the bad weather and was buried in a pile of empty feed bags. She was a shaggy mass of dark fur

that blended with the shadows. Her pups were due any day now; her appetite was off, and she was being even more unapproachable. Just that morning, she had barely been interested in the bits of charred bacon that Mother tossed her. Sheba watched me with sleep-heavy, yellow eyes as I examined the shed, but there was no Hattie. Feeling the weight of Sheba's gaze on my back, I left the shed behind.

Outside the wind was picking up, the gusts having gained momentum over Otisco Lake not five miles off. There was no fresh snow falling, but the overactive currents lifted heaps from the ground and hurled them into the air. The white flakes made the black sky flicker. Hattie's escapes were routine, but usually she had more sense than to run out into bad weather. The chicken coop was quiet, all asleep. I wrapped myself tighter in the shawl. The lantern's light wavered with the wind, and I slipped into the barn before it could be extinguished altogether.

Considering the age of the wood, the barn wasn't drafty; it had been crafted with expertise by the hands of my grandfather and great-grandfather. The animals that filled it gave off a comfortable heat. I heard movement as I slid the door shut, the iron squealing. The darkness made my skin prickle. I reached out with a hand and felt the wall for another lantern. I lit four in total, and the barn glowed. Surprisingly, the animals were all awake. There was the milk cow in her stall; in the next was her yearling calf, who we planned to sell in the upcoming spring markets. The mule flicked his ears backward in irritation. When I came closer he turned his face away from me and stuck his hind end into the light. The last stall was Buckyboy's. His large head hung over the stall door and the tips of his ears grazed the rafters. They flicked attentively in my direction but after a few seconds focused on a sound behind him.

Even after my most recent growth spurt, I stood just under Buckyboy's shoulder. Years ago, Father had placed Hattie on Buckyboy's broad back before she could hold a conversation. This past autumn, the stallion had even carried little Beatrice with our Father's hands clasped tightly around her abdomen. Buckyboy's whiskered muzzle twitched as he took in my scent, his hot breath warming my chilled fingers. I was not yet six when he had arrived at the farm. I remembered him as a giant, but when he took oats from my cupped hands he was always gentle. That seemed a world away from the here and now. Under his dark forelock, his eyes examined me carefully. I looked over his stall door and scanned the piles of bedding. There, curled by Buckyboy's massive hooves, was Hattie.

"What do you think you're doing?" I asked.

Hattie squinted up at me, her eyes adjusting to the light of my lantern. "Ida?" After a moment her brown eyes widened and she scowled. "Oh, Ida, just go away." She was squatting in the straw with bandages beside her and Mother's sewing scissors teetering on her knee. Buckyboy's lame hind leg was

nearest to her. He was favoring it, keeping as little weight on it as possible, the toe of his hoof cocked as to minimize touching the ground. Several inches up from the hoof, his whole fetlock was swollen into a meaty mass, bulging out from his cannon bone. A thin layer of bandage was wrapped just below his hock.

"You're not a vet."

"I said go away, Ida. Nobody asked you." Hattie cut a strip of bandage with the sewing scissors and set them on the ground.

"You better not lose those." Mother wouldn't be happy, even if she was always sympathetic to Hattie's silly causes. Like the time she tried to heal a robin's wing or nurse the orphaned rabbits under the shed. She didn't understand the workings of the world. I watched her ignore my warning and wrap the linen carefully around the stallion's leg. He flinched at her initial touch, but otherwise was motionless. Her tongue stuck out as she focused. I said, unable to bury my frustration. "That's not going to help anything."

Hattie spun around to glare at me and snapped, "You just don't care if he dies. None of you do."

Mother said that Hattie was too passionate. On hot summer days, she exerted herself so much that her entire face would burn crimson; she radiated like an ember.

"You're being unreasonable," I said. Hattie glared at me and I realized then what she must have noticed earlier—I sounded exactly like our parents.

Buckyboy sighed and his hot breath let out a cloud of steam. Hattie saw and giggled. She began to exhale large puffs of air as well, the billowing vapor an amusement. Like ghosts, the white sheen floated upwards and then disappeared.

"Let him sleep, Hattie. We'll put a rug on him before we leave." I saw her pause for a moment, then unclench the scissors and shiver. "Come on," I continued. "I can't go to bed until you do."

She fell to my reason, and together we threw a blanket around the stallion. He had a full winter coat; his hairy feathers were as thick as muffs around his legs. He barely felt the chill, but it was more for Hattie than for him. After some coaxing, I was even able to convince her to undo her knotted wrapping. I went into the stall to help her and felt the heat rising from the limb. I ran my hands down the bone as Father had shown me to do and kept a watchful eye on the stallion's expression, wary of the telltale pinning of the ears or a frustrated swish of the tail. But Buckyboy seemed merely curious of my sister and me, and examined Hattie for treats, nuzzling his muzzle into the pockets of her skirts.

Tucked there beside my sister in the bedding, I noticed braids tied in Buckyboy's feathers. I felt the thick strands of hair with the pad of a finger and followed a single track as it twisted under and over. I had forgotten how

Hattie and I used to tie clumsy braids in the volumes of hair coating Buckyboy's sturdy legs. We never feared being so close to his powerful hooves.

"He'll get better," Hattie insisted as we walked out of the barn, extinguishing lanterns as we went. "He just needs more time."

I nodded, but it was just to humor her, as I was already thinking of being back in our warm bed. As I opened the barn door, I realized that we were being watched.

"Sheba!" Hattie cried. The mutt was always wary of Hattie's brazenness. She never showed my sister anything more than tolerant indifference. Instead, she was watching me. She had followed my tracks in the snow; her prints paralleled mine.

I closed the barn door, trapping its heat, and pulled Hattie forward past the mutt. "Go away, dog. I don't have any food." She blinked, hunched in the snow, with her ruff thick and shoulders braced against the wind. She followed us back to the house, ten or so feet off, until we were on the porch and then she returned to the shed.

Inside, Mother was waiting. With Beatrice finally asleep, she had two free hands to smack Hattie with. Mother made her take a bath to wash the smell of the barn off her. I set aside my hat, shawl, and boots and slipped under the bed's thick blankets. I looked away as she bathed; unlike our early years where we were one and the same, I now felt like my body had left hers behind. Into what, I could only guess; I was as little like Mother as I was like Hattie. Mother said that I could expect more changes to come, and while her words were spoken with the insight of experience they only made me more cautious of the body underneath my cotton nightgown. Silently, I listened to Hattie chatter to Mother in excited whispers. Mother's replies were low hums. Even in my uncertain age, her voice was like a soft hand running over my hair, comforting and sure, even in its invisibility.

Once Hattie was clean, she crawled into bed by my side. There was no kiss goodnight from Mother, as it was too late and she was tired. She merely blew out the candle and left us in darkness.

The next day was warm for early February. The sun could not escape the thick clouds, but the wind had ceased. The snow barely sparkled in the mid-morning dim, making it the same shade of gray as the sky. I could hardly tell one from the other. If it got any warmer, all the snow would melt. Hattie caught water droplets on her tongue from icicles dripping off the porch.

Today, Father would not shoot Buckyboy as the storm had damaged our neighbor's fence, and Father had offered to help him repair it for six jars of beets and a rabbit. If the fence was not repaired quickly, our neighbor's sheep

could be preyed upon by coyotes. So Father left with the mule, Hattie played in the melting snow, and I stayed with Mother and Beatrice in the kitchen.

Beatrice slept in her bassinet as Mother taught me to skin rabbit. I had only ever watched Mother prepare the meat—I knew little of how the blade sheared just below the skin or where to cut the abdomen as to not damage its liver.

Mother was a calm tutor. She seemed to enjoy our quiet hour together, even if she did not say so. I used to think it was hard picturing Mother as a young girl, as soft and lanky as me. Before my cycle began in the last days of the previous summer, she had prepared me for the event and told me a story from her childhood. She said that when she was young she had long, dark hair just like me. But that was impossible, her hair was the color of adler. Sun bleached, she said. And age, she added with a smile. Her mother had not told her about the bleeding at all. Mother woke up and thought she was dying, and my grandmother had laughed when she ran to her in tears. Mother added at the end of her story that many things seemed less scary in hindsight.

I watched Mother chop vegetables with her skilled hands. She sliced beets into clean rounds, revealing the inside of the bright magenta root. The purple coloring stained her hands.

She cast me a sideways look. I dropped my gaze back down to the rabbit carcass and returned to ripping flesh from the bone. “You’re doing well,” she said.

I nodded. Even from inside the walls of our kitchen I could hear Hattie giggling outdoors. My hands were slimy from the viscera and I wiped them on a towel. “Hattie was hiding in Buckyboy’s stall last night.”

“I know. She told me.”

I scrunched my nose. “Why do you let her do things like that? I wouldn’t.” I thought of Father and firmly believed that he would agree with me. He would, if he had time to be bothered with such silly things. “You treat her like she’s a baby, and she’s not a baby.”

Mother wiped her purple hands on her apron but it did nothing to remove their color. “You’re all my babies,” she explained. She laughed and went to hold my face in her hands.

I shied from her reaching fingers.

“Ida,” she said, her voice strained.

She looked at me like she didn’t recognize my face, even if it bore the same long, dark hair she once had. But I couldn’t see any bit of myself in her either. It was an unsettling foreignness. I swallowed down a habitual apology and returned my attention to the rabbit.

When Mother’s head shot up I assumed that I had not heard Beatrice let out a cry. I looked to her, but she was still bundled tight and asleep. No, there was something outside of the window. I followed Mother’s gaze a dozen

yards away from the house. There, a weathered coyote was stepping toward the chicken coop. Mother grabbed a pan from the sink and a wooden spoon. I brought the knife and followed her as she charged out the door. We scared Hattie, who was still licking the icicles on the porch, unaware of the threat. I grabbed her elbow to hold her tight and watched Mother march up to the coyote with the pan and spoon held over her head like a sword and shield in her purple hands.

The coyote was slim, with large ears. It moved in jerking, anxious steps. It held its ground.

Mother began to bang the pan and spoon together; she began to yell, shout, and dance a madman's jig. The chickens screamed in their coop. The coyote leaped into the air, took a few steps back, and then stared at Mother, hackles raised. Mother was undeterred. She beat the pan like it was a drum and hollered cusses with the passion she reserved for prayer. After only a few seconds, the coyote spooked and darted into the bushes from which it had first appeared. It was not alone in its retreat. There were three others with it, a small pack.

Hattie ran to Mother, and I followed feeling silly still clenching my knife. She finally lowered the pan and spoon and let out a haggard breath. "You saved us," Hattie squealed.

Mother smiled gently as Hattie embraced her.

"What are they doing so close to the house?" I blurted.

Mother looked down at me. Her hair had fallen out of her tidy bun. "This is the first day of good weather after many days of bad. They're hungry."

"I'm hungry too," Hattie said.

"Well, good. Ida was just making us a delicious lunch." Mother smiled at me. There was no heaviness in her voice from my cruelty. It was forgiven, a blemish healed so well that it left no physical defect. But I felt its ghost. I averted my gaze from her and toyed with the kitchen knife. It suddenly seemed very blunt and small.

Together we walked back into the house. I ignored Hattie's giddy exclamations at seeing the dent that Mother had bashed into the pan. I saw Sheba laying in the entryway to the shed in a rare patch of sunlight. Her posture was relaxed, but her ears were focused. They were fixated on the far edge of the fields, where I saw a band of four gray dots disappear into the tree line.

After lunch, once Hattie and I helped Mother with the dishes, we were allowed to do as we pleased. Father had not yet returned from the neighbor's, so Mother let me do some shooting practice as long as she could see me through the kitchen window. She never minded when I shot at the crows. They were a nuisance.

Father had taught me to shoot the fall before last. At first, the rifle had felt far too long and too heavy for my arms. Now, I could raise it to my chest in one flowing motion. I imitated Father's posture, the sureness of his gaze, his resolute stance. The kickback was still jarring and made me wobble on my feet, but Father said that I had plenty of time to improve.

I never actually killed any of the crows. They were not for eating, and Father emphasized never killing for sport. Father had painted cans and targets for me to practice on. Only occasionally did I shoot at the tree line, when the crows were getting too cocky with their loud, jarring cackles. The birds would flee the trees in a black cloud, as if they were dark leaves and autumn had happened all at once.

Hattie ran off again, and with Father still not home and dusk approaching, Mother was more nervous than ever. This time, I knew to check the barn first. It was warm, so I didn't need the shawl and hat, but I still wore my boots. As predicted, the heat had turned many patches of snow to slush. Mud and murk appeared as brown sores. As I passed the sodden soil, I checked for sprouts of new green grass. There were only the dull remains of the summer before.

Hattie was not in the barn. The cows were antsy. With Father's delay, feeding time had come and gone. I threw a flake of hay or two in their stalls, skipping the absent mule's, until I reached Buckyboy's and found it empty. His stall was a dark cavern without his massive girth inside. I half expected to find him dead on the ground, as improbable as it was. I only discovered a nearly empty roll of bandage and sewing scissors in the straw.

I left the barn, slamming the door behind me so hard that the wood trembled. Looking back at the house, I contemplated telling Mother. Light illuminated the curtains in her and Father's bedroom. She would be awake, tending to the baby or waiting for Father's return. He'd said that he would be home before nightfall.

The only thing I could do was keep looking. I stepped forward, only to find my boot stuck in a fresh pit of mud. I snarled and with both hands grabbed my boot and yanked upward. I nearly fell onto my back, but not before noticing the extra large set of hoof prints that had torn at the earth.

The size and disfigured gait labeled the prints as Buckyboy's. They were paired with footprints several sizes smaller than mine. I followed the tracks, and they led me around the barn and continued on, pointing towards the fields. I paused at the edge of the lot, where the corpses of last year's corn crop extended into the daylight. For several acres there was nothing but slush, snow, and mud until the fields reached the tree line. There, the barren limbs of tree branches clawed at the encroaching dusk.

I squinted into the distance to try and spot the pair but was unable to see anything amongst the rolling hills. Instinctually, my gaze fell on the section of trees where the pack had fled. But the distance was too far; nothing could be distinguished except for the sharp transition from white snow to blackened bark. Before I began my search, I returned to the barn and grabbed my gun.

Buckyboy and Hattie left an easy trail to follow. It was mostly a straight path, only occasionally meandering around a ditch or deep puddle. The stallion had plowed these fields every spring for half his lifetime. Where I stumbled on uneven, thawing earth, his steps would have been surefooted, but Buckyboy's lameness would no doubt hinder his and Hattie's progress. I expected to run into them soon. The clouds dulled the glow of the setting sun, but I could still sense it falling as the air chilled. Marching briskly, I clamped the gun against my chest. Beneath the cool metal of the barrel and the warm flesh of my breast, my heart pounded with brutal intensity.

The break of a corn stalk from behind caused me to spin around. I fumbled with the gun in my arms, the shape suddenly bulky, my arms weak. Before I even had the barrel raised, I noticed that the intruder was only Sheba, her large belly making her almost wobble side to side as she walked towards me. "Damn, dog," I said as we regarded each other. "You shouldn't be this far away from the coop." I waved an arm in the air to try to chase her off, but she merely licked her jowls, obviously unimpressed. With a scowl, I turned away from her only to hear the gentle sounds of paws crinkling dried vegetation. I paused and the sounds stopped. I looked over my shoulder and found her just as close as before, looking up at me impatiently. "Suit yourself," I said. We walked the rest of the way together, always staying several paces apart.

I found them at the far edge of the field, only a few hundred feet from the line of trees. Buckyboy was refusing to move any further and Hattie, tugging at his lead, was using all of the weight in her body to try and pull him forward. She was talking to him sweetly before she noticed my arrival, but after she saw me she began to tug harder and harder, her feet slipping into the mud. "Come on," she cried. "Come on, Buckyboy, or you're going to die."

I grabbed the stallion's lead from her, pushing her away, causing her to slip down into the murk. "Why do you always have to be so stupid?" I snapped. Hattie stayed on the ground, sobbing, her skirts becoming flaked with mud and dampened by the snow. "You're hurting him!" I continued.

I looked at the spooked stallion and found his head thrown high, his eyes wide and bulging from stress, pain, and uncertainty. I placed a hand on his shoulder and felt him tremble at my touch. Behind him, Sheba stood a safe distance away, her ears pricked forward, subtly changing angles to hear things I could not. Behind her, I was able to see just how far Buckyboy had walked to get to where we were now. His injury was no more healed than it would ever be, but still, he had walked because Hattie had asked him to, and did so

faithfully until he reached the edge of his only home. He let me gingerly feel along his swollen limb. Under his thick feathers was the burning heat of pain.

"Come on, old boy, let's head home," I murmured as I gently guided him to turn around. Every step he made was precise and seemed painful. Hattie began new sobs as she watched. "You too," I said, ushering her up with a nod of my head. For a moment, I thought that she would refuse me but then she slowly teetered upright.

"I never meant to hurt him," she said with a snuffle, shuffling towards me. She clenched my skirts as she did Mother's. "I just thought...I just thought that we could hide out in the woods until he was better. So that Father wouldn't have to shoot him." The mention of shooting set her off once more. I let her cry. I was too focused on watching Buckyboy carefully place each hoof into the snow, as the light dimmed and the division between field and forest became muted by shadow.

As the sun set behind the line of trees, the shadows of tree trunks stretched across the field like dark snakes. Buckyboy was stumbling worse than ever before. His breathing was rough and shallow, coming in abrupt, inconsistent jerks. Hattie hummed to him, her voice breaking every few moments from the heaving of her chest as she held in tears. I let her hold the stallion's lead. She clung to it desperately. I wanted both hands free to hold my gun. We were just under halfway there.

Sheba was staying at our perimeter, to the back and to the side so that I could still see her from the corner of my eye. She paced anxiously every time we paused to allow Buckyboy to rest. I tried to ignore her, but my body was picking up on her tension.

"Oh no, oh no, oh no. Ida! Ida! He's laying down!" Hattie cried. I turned and saw my sister struggling to keep Buckyboy standing as his body collapsed under the weight of itself. His whole bulk heaved as he fell to the ground. I took the lead from Hattie and pulled, dropping the gun to use both hands. Hattie stood behind him and pushed, smacked, and clucked to urge him forward. Sheba paced.

Buckyboy would not budge. I gave up, stumbling backwards as I released the tension on his lead. "What are we going to do, Ida?" Hattie asked.

I shook my head. I didn't know. I was tired. I was cold. I was supposed to be eating dinner around the warmth of our family table. I placed my hands on my knees and exhaled, my breath escaping my chest unevenly. Then a sound, deep and throaty, caught my attention. Sheba had moved close to me, so close that I could touch her. She faced away from me and growled.

I stood upright and stared down the trail that we had made in the snow and shadows. Four coyotes stood barely fifty feet behind Hattie.

Hattie had not noticed Sheba's warning. She was wiping the tears from her face and then moved to the stallion's neck to cry into his mane. "Please. We have to get you home." The stallion hardly noticed her touch. His ears were forward and alert. The whites of his eyes rolled, bloodshot and bulbous.

Very slowly, I crouched down and retrieved my gun. "Hattie," I said, just above a whisper. "Stay between me and Buckyboy." Before Hattie could question me, I moved in front of her. My feet were heavy, as if they had been swallowed by the mud and buried. I pressed my back against her, forcing her to take clumsy backward steps. Sheba stayed at my side, her teeth bared.

The pack was quickly ensnaring us in a tightening circle. I stood motionless as they moved closer. They weaved in and out of the shadows. A corn stalk snapped in one direction, then the opposite. With numb fingers I clenched my gun, but I could not get myself to release it from its position clamped at my chest. Hattie's breathing grew frantic. We were so close together that I could feel the pulsing of her heart against my spine. I heard her say my name, muted and faint with fear, the syllables out of place with her tone, as if she were calling out for Mother, not for me.

The pan. The spoon. I lifted my hands in the air, raising the gun high. It felt as if I was underwater, my arms unbearably heavy and just as slow. I attempted to shout. My words were caught in my throat. A couple of the more cautious coyotes had paused. Sheba's growls radiated up my legs, stirring the terror in my belly. I raised my arms again and yelled; the sound was hollow and hoarse, but it sent the wary members of the pack back. Before I tried to spur my voice again, a coyote sprung forward and latched its jaws around one of Buckyboy's thick legs.

I pulled Hattie away as the stallion attempted to leap upright. He did not have the strength to raise his hind end out of the mud before another coyote leaped onto his broad haunches and dragged him back onto the dirt. Hattie screamed. In the dim light, Buckyboy's blood was the color of ink. For the first time, I raised my gun, but the end of the barrel bounced this way and that from the shaking of my hands. One coyote clawed at Buckyboy's haunches; another had his lame leg between its jaws.

I felt a tug at my sleeve. Hattie. She frantically directed my attention to a coyote that was nearing, body crouched, compressed like a spring. I was about to try and shout to scare it off when it sprinted toward us. I had always mocked Mother's chickens for being so dumb and still when danger was upon them. In that moment, I had no ability to do anything else. I had my gun, but my finger was frozen on the trigger. No crow had ever come after me before.

One moment she was at my side, the next Sheba was charging at the much smaller coyote. They collided, Sheba's black mass pummeling the creature into the ground. It yelped and before it could lift itself off the ground, Sheba was at its throat. Her upper hand was quickly lost. Another coyote leapt onto

her back and began to rip at her head, her ears, and her thick, dark ruff. She could not fight both at once, and I found enough voice to cry out as the two coyotes began to attack her in turn.

My gun was raised before I was aware of it. The sounds of the carnage around me was deafened only by the pounding of blood in my ears. My knees felt weak. Had my feet gone numb? I could feel nothing, only the cool trigger under the tip of a finger.

The recoil woke me up. That and the single uninhibited yelp of a coyote before it dropped.

The blood formed a small pool the color of beet juice.

The three remaining coyotes had frozen, one over Sheba, two over Buckyboy. The gun was still braced against my shoulder, the end of the barrel was still shaking. I waited for them to run. Why wouldn't they run? Instead they stood and watched me. All three, silent judges. With unblinking eyes and twitching noses they asked, *what are you made of, girl?* Then, one cautiously sniffed the now open wound on Buckyboy's leg and began to teeth at the flesh.

In a frantic rush of movement, I pointed the gun upwards, closed my eyes, and fired. When I opened them the rest of the pack, minus one, scattered. With fresh blood staining the fur of their jowls, they ran back into the safety of the forest. My arms shook. The gun had tripled in mass; I could not bear it but neither could I let it go. Sheba's body was still in the snow and Buckyboy, trapped in a sopping mess of hoof-torn earth and blood, was struggling to stand.

His strength had long left him. He rocked to try to put weight onto his legs but they could not support him. Taking shallow breaths, the stallion dropped back to the ground, head falling back into the mud. Things weren't going to get any better, I recalled my Father saying the day Buckyboy's fate was sealed. It's our job to keep things from getting worse, whatever that may mean.

I heard sobs and didn't realize they were my own until tears froze on my cheeks and snot hit my lips. Father wasn't here. Mother wasn't here. It was just me, a gun, and a dying horse trembling in the mud. How I wished that things were just as easy as Hattie had wanted them to be; just run to the woods, leave the bad things behind. Instead, I raised the gun as I had always practiced.

At the end of the barrel was the stallion's skull. Hattie was calling out to me but her words were unintelligible. I wanted to cry with her and beg with her and curl into Mother's lap with her, but that wasn't an option anymore. The gun was already raised and there was no one but me to do it.

"Ida!" a voice called, too low and deep to be Hattie's. Suddenly, a hand reached from behind me and grabbed my gun out of my hands. Suddenly, I felt so weak I believed that I might collapse.

"Father!" Hattie exclaimed. I turned and found Father holding his gun in one hand and mine in the other. His face was as grave and pale as the landscape. Standing not far off was the mule, pulling a small sled behind him that held Father's tools. Father ignored most of Hattie's rushed, nervous prattle. He looked her over, grabbing her chin to turn her face one way then the other. Still, she blabbered. He had her hold the guns. Father made his way across our small battlefield, where the snow and mud churned into a filthy brew. Buckyboy nickered when he saw him. With his back to me, I saw Father pause in front of the ruined stallion. He crouched and ran his hand over the stallion's muscled, trembling neck and topline, stopping before he reached any areas flecked with blood. He ushered him to stay down with a calm word and an open palmed gesture. Then he moved to Sheba and her limp body. Her belly was swollen. It rose and fell as she breathed, but she did not move. I watched Father pick up Sheba, careful of her wounds, and he carried her towards us. He asked me to move aside his tools on the sled and then set Sheba down upon the faded wood.

"Take her home," he said. "Be quick about it."

My body eased, welcoming a task I could accomplish and the prospect of home. Grabbing the mule's lead, I waited for Hattie to appear, but she was lingering in Father's shadow, still holding the guns. They were as large as ship oars in her small arms. I wondered if I had looked half as ridiculous, a pathetic mimic of strength.

Father coaxed Buckyboy to stay down as the horse again tried in vain to stand. "Rest easy, old boy. That's it. That's my boy," he said softly. Father knelt in the dirt and with a great heave the stallion was resting his head on my father's knees. His breathing slowed as Father gently ran a hand over his cheek.

"Hattie, go with Ida," Father said after a moment. For once, my sister was silent. The only sound was the breathing of Buckyboy, each breath like broken bellows. Before we left, Father took his gun from Hattie and a shovel and lamp from the sled.

Hattie and I guided the mule back toward the house. Sheba was a quiet passenger. The mule shied as a gunshot pierced the still air. I expected to hear the earth quake, for the tilled dirt to tremble, for the corn stalks trampled beneath my feet to quiver like bowstrings. But we were too far off and heard nothing. The sun had set completely now. I could see a lamp on in the kitchen. I could almost see Mother's shadow.

The attack had prompted early labor and Sheba had no strength for it. After stitching up the back of Sheba's neck and the tattered remains of her right ear, Mother stayed awake to assist with the birth. Hattie and I were determined

to help as well. But the process was long and we were exhausted. We slept in shifts. Mother did not seem to need sleep at all.

After several hours, Father returned to the house. He explained everything to Mother from out on the porch. From behind the kitchen window, the porchlight etched their faces and shoulders in silhouette. The darkened shapes moved soundlessly and blended together into one. Eventually Mother came back inside with Father following slowly behind. His shirtsleeves were heavy with dirt and moisture. He made no comment about how comfortable Mother had made Sheba in front of the fireplace. Father had a strict rule that she was never to be in the house.

Mother awoke Hattie and me when the first pup was born. I had never seen life so small. Five more followed. Two were dead, born not breathing. I rubbed one's chest as firmly and as gently as I could. I cleared out its tiny nostrils and mouth just as Mother showed me. Still, it wouldn't take a gasp. I warmed it between my palms, breathing a hot breath onto its fur as I had done hundreds of times before to warm the metal bit before putting it between Buckyboy's teeth. After several minutes Mother took the pup from me and wrapped it in a towel and set it aside.

After the birth was over, Mother brought over a basin and I washed my hands in the cool water. Blood washed off my skin in clouds. Mother emptied the basin and filled it once more, dampening a towel and offering it. Hattie and I washed our faces. The water that fell onto my lips tasted of salt.

Sheba had little energy to tend to her pups, but she relaxed as they curled up into her side and began to nurse. Father picked one up, the pup fitting in his hand as perfectly as a teacup.

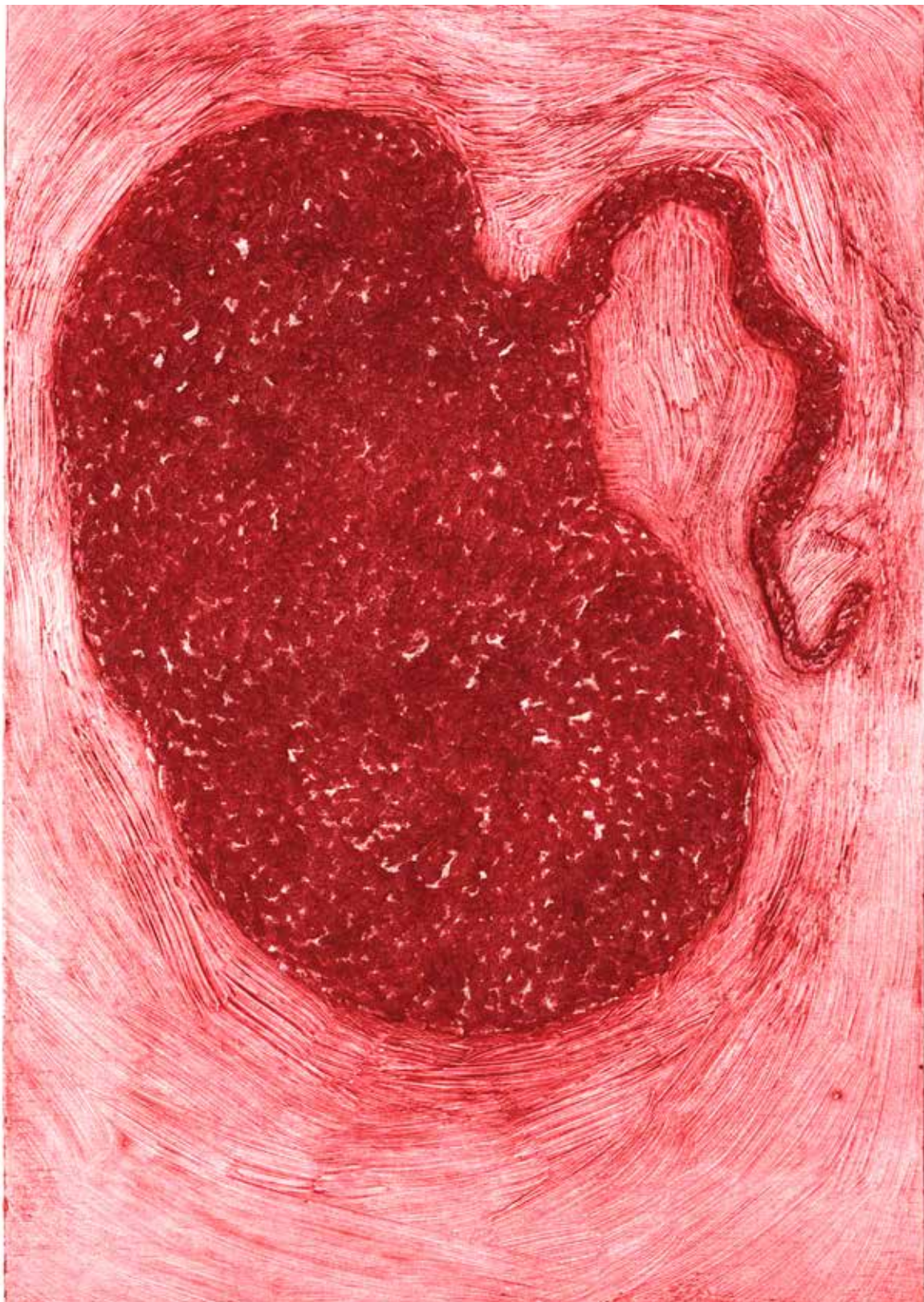
"Coydog," he said as he assessed the pup he held. They were small, with slim muzzles, their fur light, with black tipped tails. Father set the pup down as Sheba began to growl at him. He chuckled. "Easy, Mama."

Tomorrow, Father would go to the nearest town to purchase a new plow horse, but daylight was far off. I watched Father slip something out of his pocket and cup it in Hattie's hands. One of Buckyboy's braids rested between her fingers. Tomorrow, Hattie would go with Father to market and name this new horse, as I had named Buckyboy all those years ago.

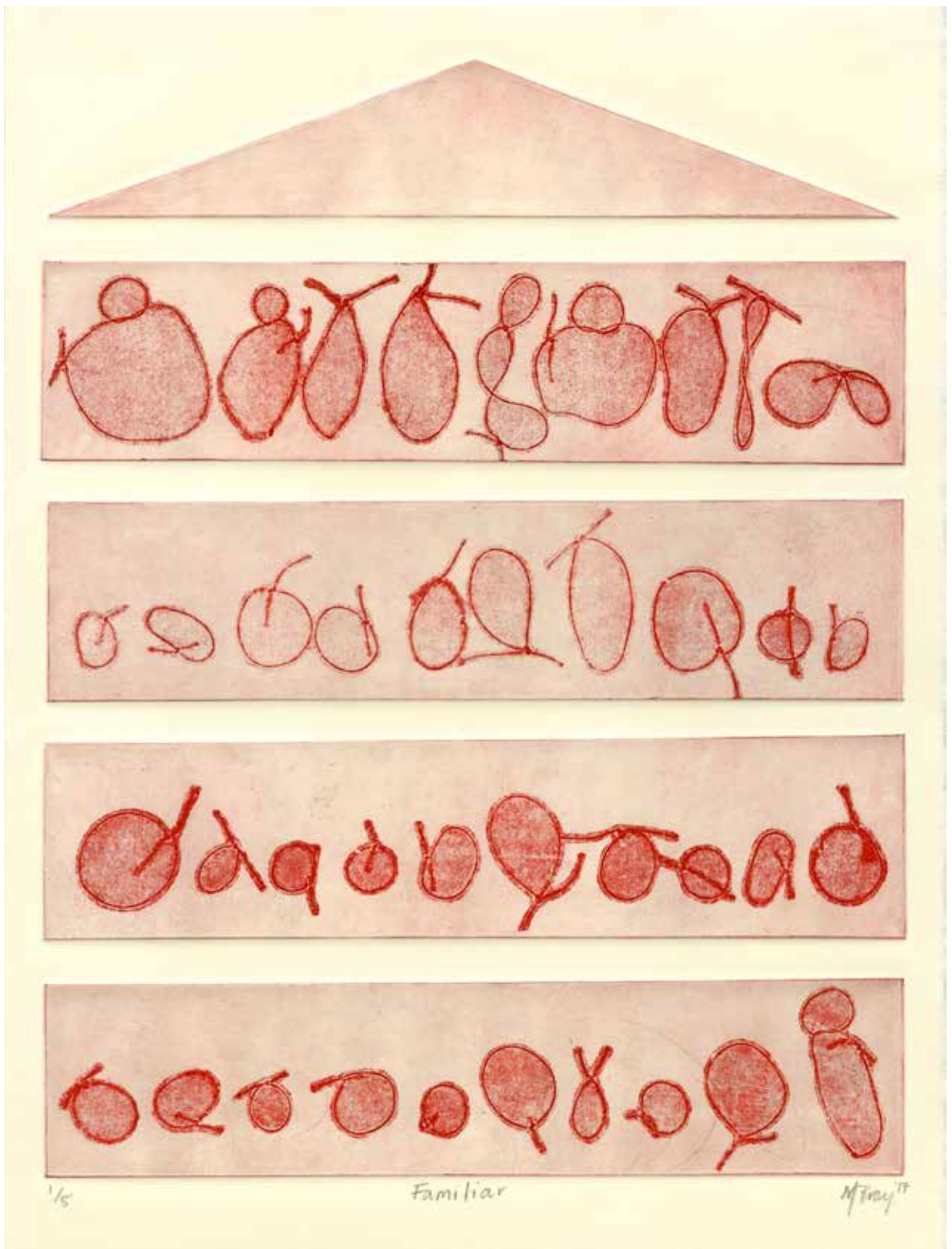
Even though we were all tired, no one mentioned going to bed. Mother sat in her rocking chair with Hattie nestled in her lap, clutching the tattered braid. Father tended the fire burning under the mantel. His eyes gleamed as if stung by the smoke and his hands trembled around the fire iron. I remained on the floor, close to the pups. No one spoke. The pups whimpered. Sheba's breathing was deep and even. In my palms I felt the ghost weight of the dead pups. I tucked my knees under my chin and placed my head on Mother's knee and rested there until she woke me to say that it was time to go to bed.



Placenta (mixed media print), Marita Bray



Flourish (collagraph print), Marita Bray



Familiar (intaglio print), Marita Bray

Birmingham's Little Angels

*See that host all dressed in white?
God's a gonna trouble the water.*

It was nine a.m. when Divine came knocking on my door saying her mama wanted us down at the community kitchen. It was Saturday, which meant Divine's mama would be seeing all of Birmingham at the kitchen. Though her mama insisted she didn't need our help, Divine signed us all up for kitchen duty. She's what our teacher, Miss Newton, called an overachiever. Overachiever: someone who tries too hard to be perfect. My Daddy was an overachiever. He went out with hordes of midnight colored men claiming they're trying to change the world. Stop the race war, they'd say. Mama knew better. Mama knew there wasn't no stopping it. She's seen enough to know. She was here when the bombs first started going off around Birmingham.

I met Divine outside on the porch. Her thick hair was braided down her neck. When she was born, her skin was light and shiny like a porcelain doll. Her father nearly ran off thinking that white baby wasn't his. With time, Divine's complexion came into its own. She wasn't mixed with no white, Divine was as dark as the burnt parts of Mama's fried eggs. She sure was beautiful though, if you stared at her long enough. Her big brown eyes were adorned with long eyelashes and her cheeks were plumped like they were stuffed with something. When she spoke, you'd swear she was about to break into song. Sometimes she did. "At last my love has come along, my lonely days are over," she sang in the highest note, trying to copy Miss Etta James.

Divine didn't listen when I told her that Pretty's gonna say something real mean about her singing. Instead, she continued singing loud and swaying her hips.

"You ain't got no lover," Pretty said when we reached her door.

Pretty was thirteen, a year older than the rest of us. She liked to think that being six months older than Angel, who was two months older than me, and five months older than Divine made her the leader of our group. Her run for Queen of the seventh grade was solidified when she kissed Tommy Tucker by the swings during free time. That kiss made Pretty's head blow up like a real balloon. Her mama named her Priscilla when she was born, but the nurse in the room kept calling her Pretty, so the name stuck.

"I got me a nice lover," Divine said. "He's got curly hair and light brown skin. His eyes are gray."

"You got you a mulatto boy?" Pretty asked.

Divine nodded. "Yep, met him when I visited up north with my mama. It's real nice up there in New York. The streets are wild."

"Wild like your daddy after a sip of whiskey."

We laughed and trudged down the road to Angel's house. Angel had the nicest house on the block. It was painted yellow with a white porch. That's why the older folks on the block called Angel's house "Sunshine." Her house resembled the sun on a good day. It's funny though, Angel had a house called Sunshine and she had her a biblical name, but Angel was far from any of those nice things. She was the sourest in the group.

"Angel baby, time to go feed the homeless!" Pretty shouted as Angel came out in her little pink dress.

Angel pulled at the bows in her hair and frowned. "Why so early? Are people really that hungry this early, Divine?"

Divine frowned. "Of course, silly girl. Can't leave my mama with all those hungry-bellied folks. She's at the kitchen all by herself. Plus, my daddy snores so loud, you can hear him through the floorboards."

Angel wrapped her arms around mine. "Save me from her madness," she whispered to me.

I smiled at her and we walked hand in hand to the kitchen. Divine's mama, Mrs. Della, started the community kitchen a few years back when a storm destroyed a few of the houses. The kitchen was known all over Birmingham. Joe Carpenter, one of the few black writers at the newspaper, said the kitchen was "spectacular!" and Mrs. Della was a Godsend, a real black woman of class.

"Mama," Divine yelled when we met Mrs. Della in the kitchen. "Mama, look. I got all the girls."

Mrs. Della pulled Divine into an embrace. Her large breasts engulfed the girl's head.

"Divine, I told you that I didn't need the girls. It's their one day to sleep in." Then she looked at the rest of us. "I'm so sorry, babies."

"It's alright, Mrs. Della, we don't mind being up this early," I said.

Pretty groaned. "I guess we don't."

"Well, I suppose it's good you're all here. People are gonna start coming in by the dozen now. How about you go on up front and start setting up the tables quickly? Let me know when people start coming in."

We nodded together and grabbed the items we needed for the tables. The bag of forks, spoons, table cloths, and napkins. Divine ran ahead of us, eager to show that she was the queen of table setting.

"Turn on the TV!" Pretty shouted to Divine.

"I'd rather sing for all of you," Divine said.

Pretty groaned again. "No, no, none of that. Turn on the TV."

"You always wanna watch the TV like you know anything, Pretty," Angel said, staring fiercely. "Ain't nothing happy on that TV. You know, I asked my Daddy yesterday if we could move. I said 'Daddy, please, I don't wanna live here any longer. I don't care about this stupid yellow house. I just wanna go somewhere that people like me.' People got to be protesting for stuff to happen. Stuff that shouldn't need protesting."

"We like you," I said, holding her hand. "I get it. But there ain't no getting out, alright? You got me, and Pretty, and Divine. You got your family. Ain't nobody leaving you, and you ain't leaving us."

"Can I sing a song now?" Divine asked.

We laughed together.

"Go on, girl," Angel said, forcing a smile.

Divine grabbed a spoon and brought it to her mouth. She closed her eyes and leaned her hips to the side. She wrapped her fingers tightly around the spoon and opened her mouth.

*Down in my heart
Down in my heart
I have the love of Jesus, love of Jesus
Down in my heart*

We all joined her, hearing our Sunday school teacher's voice in the back of our heads. *Sing it girls, sing for Jesus!*

*Down in my heart
Down in my heart
I have the love of Jesus, love of Jesus
Down in my heart*

When the singing ended, we returned to our chores. Divine and Pretty took the left side of the room. Angel and I took the right. We decided that the fastest way to finish Mrs. Della's task was to turn it into a game. First team to finish their side would get the first scoops of chocolate ice cream Mrs. Della got in the fridge. Divine loved chocolate ice cream, so she was gunning for first place.

"Alright, girls," Pretty said. "On your mark, get set, go!"

We each took off to a separate table. I laid the sheet across the first table, smoothened out the edges, placed a folded napkin at each corner, and finished it off with a fork and spoon on each. I repeated this with two other tables as Angel rushed around me. One last fork in hand, I reached towards the napkin.

"We're done!" Divine yelled, standing back to back with Pretty, "Losers."

"Oh, shut up!" Angel said, tossing a leftover fork at Divine.

"Love, stop her!" Divine shouted at me, as Angel tackled her to the floor.

"Get her, Angel," I said.

Pretty hurried back over to the TV. She tinkered a bit with the buttons and the screen lit up. We watched as Martin Luther King Jr. stood up at a podium, waving his hand at the crowd, his confidence beaming across the thousands of white faces. His hope. *We cannot walk alone. And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back.* Thousands of people stood at his hem, feeding off the words piercing from his microphone.

"I wish I was there," Divine said, rising from the floor.

"Do you think he knows about us? About Birmingham?" I asked.

Pretty kissed her teeth. "Of course he does. Everyone does. It's hell we live in, that's what my mama says. She reads the Bible every day, says you'll see Birmingham in there, right in Revelations."

She turned from us and sat at one of the tables.

"You think Mrs. Della would mind if we went to the park and came back? We finished up here pretty fast," I said.

"Come on, Mama won't mind. By time we come back, this place is gonna be all filled up." Divine always spoke for Mrs. Della.

We followed her out the front door onto Main Street. The streets were always alive on the black half of Birmingham. Mr. Henry, the town's drunk, sat on his stool outside the smoke shop. He waved at us before leaning back against the wall. Mr. Henry had probably been in our town the longest. Been here since his mama who was a slave got free and moved to Birmingham where not much changed for her. We all understood why Mr. Henry drank as much as he did; he saw more than most of us. He saw buildings fall to the ground 'cause of the explosions, men hanging from trees, and every other nightmare we could imagine. Even heard angry men in white hoods curse the

day he was born. Mr. Henry said nobody should be sheltered from the truth, not the newborn baby or the oldest man.

Divine ran ahead of us over to the park, so she could claim the first swing.

"I remember when I kissed Tommy here," Pretty said, twirling the short curly lock hanging in the front of her face. "He said he's gonna marry me some day."

Angel and I smiled at each other and followed her over to Divine on the swings. I sat on the grass beside the swing and watched as they moved in the air back and forth. Divine laughed like she'd never been happier. I wanted to tell them about what Daddy does. That he's gone for days, and he comes back looking a little older and sadder every time. I wanted to tell them that there ain't no changing the world cause people don't want to be changed. Yet Pretty gave them hope. She showed them Martin Luther King waving his hand on TV, and that was supposed to change everything, supposed to make it all better somehow. Ain't nothing changing.

"You want a turn?" Divine shouted at me.

I nodded. "You outta breath?"

She slowed on the swings and brought herself to the ground. She staggered to a leveled position before wrapping her arms around me.

"Swing got me dizzy," she said.

I laughed. "Sit down before we gotta run back to Mrs. Della."

I slid onto the swing and kicked against the ground. My body lifted into the air and I brought my head up to the sky. I wanted the sky to take me. I wanted God to reach his hand to the Earth and pull me into the heavens.

Wouldn't it be nice if the sun was always in the sky? If the storm never came and took away the homes of the men and women in town? If I could walk to the other side of Birmingham and tell the little blonde girl on the swings there that we were friends?

I closed my eyes as the breeze hit my face. I kicked deeper into the earth. Soon, I could no longer feel the ground beneath my feet. I pushed my chest in and out, so the swing went higher and higher each time. I wanted the swings to reach the heavens, so I could bring myself a little closer to God, just for a second.

"Love," someone yelled, and my eyes flickered open.

"Come on, girl!" Divine yelled. "The hungry bellies are waiting for us!"

They were already heading down the street. I slowed my swinging, and let my feet touch the gravel again. I stood there for a second, inhaling and exhaling. I should've stayed there. I should've kept on swinging, until God had no choice but to bring me up.

When I turned back onto Main Street, the girls were gathered in the center of the road. I ran up behind them and pushed myself into the circle.

"Someone ran it over," Divine said, a crystalline tear rolling down her cheek.

"It's Mr. Henry's dog," I said, looking up at the smoke shop. Mr. Henry's stool was still there but the old man was gone. "Where's Mr. Henry?"

"He must have left when we were at the swings," Pretty said.

"But why wouldn't he bring his dog?" I asked. "Mr. Henry don't go nowhere without Ike."

"Let's go tell Mrs. Della," Angel said. "Somebody's gotta find Mr. Henry."

We ran inside the community kitchen. There were families sitting at each table, and people gathered around the main room. We pushed through the crowd, twisting our heads looking for Mrs. Della.

"Mrs. Della! Mrs. Della!" We were all shouting for her. "Mrs. Della! Mrs. Della. Where are you?"

An older man with blue-black skin stopped in front of us. "She's in the back," he said. "Making that good soup I look forward to every Saturday."

We continued pushing through the crowd, until we were in the back room. Mrs. Della was standing by the stove, an apron wrapped around her waist. Her hips were moving to the soft jazz coming from the radio in the corner.

"Mama," Divine said. She was breathing real heavy, like she'd just ran a marathon. "Someone's killed Ike."

"What?" Mrs. Della said. "Was Mr. Henry out there?"

"No, he's gone."

Mrs. Della kissed Divine's forehead, caressed our arms, and disappeared out the kitchen. There was a moment of talk and laughter, until the door swung shut behind her. Then there was just nothing but silence.

My stomach growled. Not because I was hungry or because I drank milk the night before, even though Mama says it's bad for you. It's because I knew. It's because I knew something was wrong. Mama called it the pre-bad-happening feeling. It's when something bad gonna happen and your body starts warning you. Said she felt it the day I was born. She knew something was wrong with me. She wasn't hurting, but she could feel me hurting. She said she sat down in the pool of water and started talking to me. *I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.* She must have repeated it a hundred times. When I came out silent and remained silent for what felt like forever, she prayed for God to bring me back. *I love her, God. I love her so much. She's mine. Only mine. You can't have her yet.* I started crying a second later, and Mama said my name appeared to her in the form of a whisper: Love. I would be loved more than any other child. She'd make sure of it.

"Somebody gonna get that?" Divine asked, and I looked at her.

"Get what?" I asked.

I heard the ringing then. It was coming from the gigantic rotary phone Mrs. Della had on the wall.

"It's your mama's building, Divine. You get it," Pretty said.

Divine rolled her eyes at us before walking over to the phone. We stood still, anticipating whoever was on the other line. The only person that ever called was the landlord. He was a nice man, never made Mrs. Della pay more than she could handle.

Divine stood numbly in front of the phone, her hands trembling at her side. "Mama never lets me answer the phone. What do I say?"

"I'll answer it," Pretty said, pushing past Divine. She lifted the phone to her ear. "Hello?"

A puzzling look glazed over her face. She dropped the phone, letting it dangle in the air. I listened to the dial tone as Pretty turned her attention back to us. She opened her mouth to speak, but a rattling sound came from the stove.

"Who was it?" I asked.

"A man."

"What'd he say?"

"Said we got a minute."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Angel asked.

The rattling became too loud to ignore. We followed it over to the stove. As I opened the door, the rattling suddenly stopped, and a silence fell across the room. We waited to see if it would start again.

"Shouldn't we call someone?"

It was Angel. I felt her hand on my shoulder, her small, warm hand. I wondered if she felt it too, the pre-bad-happening feeling. Did it move in her stomach, her heart, and her legs? When the room erupted beneath and around us, I felt nothing. Not at first. We didn't even have enough time to scream. Instead there was just white. White spots. White nothing. Just a bright white light.

When I woke up the next day, I was lying in a soft bed, in a room that wasn't my own. My leg was gone. The skin around my thighs was blacker than the night sky. I couldn't feel my hand or any movement in my fingers. My parents were sitting on the opposite side of the bed, both fighting the sleep trying to take over their body. Before I could speak, or move, or think, I cried. Not for me. Not for my leg. Not for Mrs. Della kitchen. For my girls, because I knew. They were gone, and I was here.

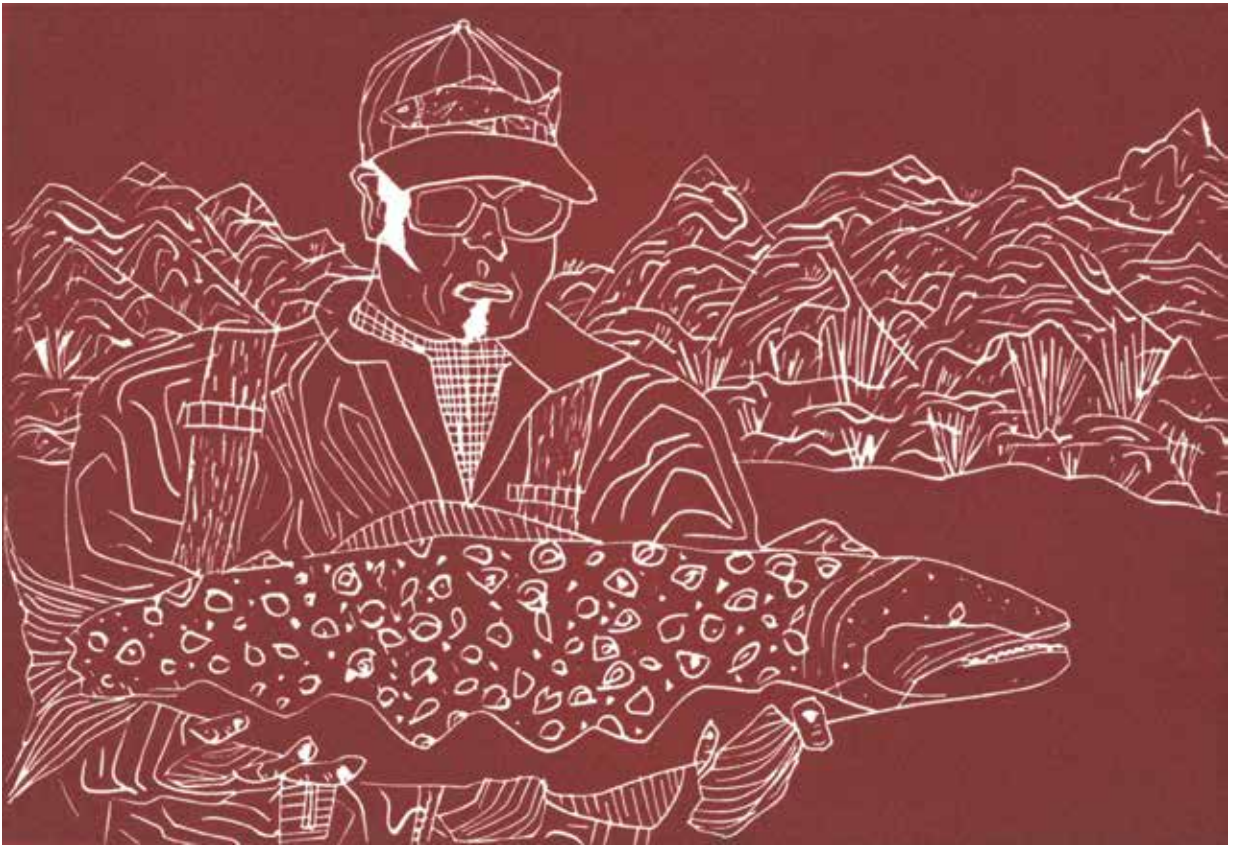
Forest for the Trees

Your phantom limb cradled the newborn lamb—
charcoal hooves shined & polished, gnarled bleating
echoing among the diamond coos. Sipping Pepsi
from a plastic straw while smoking Leika cigarettes.
Lamplight spurs through white-curtained windows,
chanting on about the ends of things, our desires,
our exhalations in the hushed evenings where we sit
beside their cleaved openings perfuming the summer
with our tiny crafted deaths. Shepherd guiding the wolf
through the godless field. The sky's wound blistering
& wilting, peonies sprouting from our shoulder blades
like the slivering of smoke scalped from the stars.
The lamb lowered & placed gently on the grass—
away into the swaying stalks, our bodies orbiting
pitched needles, the crackling of the holy crickets,
our crystallized foreheads against the cool glass.
The lamb's white coat dissipating into the unknowable.
Sauntering quietly into the dream, eyeing the forest
for the trees—those spectral ladders, this spackle
of a white particle, quenching the ecstatic dark,
from which you were never born

Closer Than They Appear

Beyond this floor-to-ceiling glass,
blue dusk—waterfall coursing my limbs,
dousing me in its paternal rage—
airtight window, you cannot hear
the screeching streams,
the teething trees scratching the wind,
outstretching
brittle branches to the moon's dribbling milk—
a father reunites with his son
after a decade apart—
whispers piercing porcelain plates—soup steam
rising upwards, apparition
here to warn us
of the pitiless depths—
of our newborn skulls—
of the way the lamps in the restaurant dimmed as
our futures waned &
dusk drifted into night,
that blue light here for those spare seconds
scavenged into sapphire—
we are the last table—
the cerulean neon
burnished the pavement, echoed
in the puddles—

the falls deafening, devouring
the bones that hold us,
those adrift hitchhikers—
strangers to Chevys sliding
across slicked highways—
seeing in every rain-specked windshield
the faces of our mother & father—
waiting ceaselessly for
them to slow to a stop & flick their blinkers,
gazing at us in the foggy rearview
mirrors, slowly nearing
their sealed doors, reddening ears peeled for
the divine click of the lock



Swipe Left (linoleum print), Heather Loase

Self on the StraßenbaÚ

It makes complete and utter sense to me that all life began with the jellyfish. Abigail and I are in Berlin's Zoologischer Garten, the first sun-filled day we've had in this country, our final hurrah before we fly home. A minuscule, gelatinous, squishy mass of life thrusts its way through a vertically cylindrical tank of water, propelling itself onward forever. It pushes forward, pulling itself in before throwing itself out, the entirety of its life sustained within that millimeter membrane. In my mind, the universe spreads across that astral plane, stars like the twinkling bubbles of air and dust within the tank. I want to put my hand to the glass, to experience the world which we inhabit. I step closer. The tendrils drooling in its wake pulse with creation and flash with destruction. Another step. Every thrust forward is an inhalation, an exhalation; a birth and a death. One step closer. My breath fogs the glass and my nose scrunches. I touch the tips of my fingers to the tank. I picture one of the guards coming over, "*Was machst du denn?*" they'd ask. And what would I say? "*Ich gucke einfach.*" I'm observing the universe from outside the universe. No, I'm just looking. My forehead presses against it now, glasses squeaking from the strain. The jellyfish pushes itself onward through infinity.

I perceive a rumbling at the center of my being, something being shaken into place. Above my vision is an older vision, and the pages of Haruki Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* appear. His characters, Toru Okada and his wife Kumiko, visited a similar aquarium in Ueno, Japan, an aquarium also displaying jellyfish. Toru grew sick watching them and couldn't understand how Kumiko appreciated them so much. To his question, she responds, "I don't know. I guess I think they're cute."

“But one thing did occur to me when I was really focused on them. What we see before us is just one tiny part of the world. We get into the habit of thinking, this is the world, but that’s not true at all. The real world is in a much darker and deeper place than this, and most of it is occupied by jellyfish and things. We just happen to forget all that. Don’t you agree?”

As I focus once more on the jellyfish before me, I recall just how much of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* resonates within me still. Kumiko, so far away, continues, “Two-thirds of the earth’s surface is ocean, and all we can see of it with the naked eye is the surface: the skin. We hardly know anything about what’s underneath the skin.” And I think she’s right. This book shook me when I first read it. It grabbed my shoulders and thrashed me about at times, pushed me along its pages with a gentle ferocity. Each word would lift off the page, enter my mind, and fall back down onto paper. The jellyfish floats on. The universe shrivels and expands.

It is morning. The next day, presumably. Abigail and I are asleep. The wild covers have been thrown about, the window vertically ajar. Outside a bird, somewhere, somehow, emits its call. It is distinct, unnatural, and yet entirely organic. Its cry: a harsh creaking carried by the wind. The rasping sound of the world reborn. The world’s spring has been wound for the day. Or, I have been woken by Abigail’s cough.

We set about packing our bags. One of our suitcases we have aptly named Jennifer because it is of the Jennifer Lopez brand. She’s falling apart. Absolutely dilapidated. She will not survive the trip, of this we are sure. This is her second time in Europe, and how she has made it this far we cannot know, but we do not question. It’s some work of the fates, some miracle. We would duct tape the damaged bits if it would do anything (if we had duct tape) but all we can do is hope.

Berlin is closing around us. Neu Wulmstorf, Hamburg, Germany, France—Europe folding behind us into memory. Each step we take away from our apartment is a removal, a disconnection, a dying. We are home-bound. The freedom we have come to breathe on this continent dissipates as the fogs of Neu Wulmstorf, the rains of Hamburg, the great overcast of Deutschland.

The sun shines now, and yet we must leave. Lyrics to a Revolverheld song, *Hamburg hinter uns*, repeat in my head, “*Wir lassen Hamburg hinter uns/ Machen das Leben wild und bunt*,” but we already left Hamburg behind us, Berlin joining her. Hamburg has been *hinter uns* for quite some time, and when we will meet her again we cannot know. Where we are going there will be no Seine, there will be no Elbe, no Spree, the only river will be that of traffic. “*Hier gibt’s viel Stau*,” my host father would say in that clunky

Niedersächsisch on the drive into Hamburg, all of the words rolled into one low monotone mumble, each on top of the other like the cars, bumper to bumper.

In Berlin, we've managed to reach the spotless *Straßenbahn*. One suitcase contains our clothes. Another is near bursting with books. The books outweigh the clothes. Why we have entrusted Jennifer with our precious books, we will never understand. We have sacked every *librairie* and *Buchladen* we could find and will return to our monolingual motherland with the glory of Babel piled between our arms.

We stand out in the morning crowd. Two stressed, sleep deprived Americans mumbling German to one another. The stares glaze over, finding their respective windows and objects of scrutiny. Once we're settled, we toss bits of English into our conversation and mourn over our impending departure, but we don't speak much. There is a difficulty pronouncing the truth of the situation. I want to speak as much German as I can, to get it all out while there are people whose ears it will not fall empty upon. I want to read every street sign, every advertisement. Never will the announcements over the loudspeakers leave my mind. *Austieg links. Austieg rechts.* I want to hear them, want the railroad from the Newark Airport to New York City to feel as relaxing as the Deutsche Bahn.

Our suitcase rolls around on the streetcar, and I wrap my legs around it in the aisle to keep it from falling. Within are books in French, German, and some English because we couldn't resist the temptation of fiction. They are ours. Nobody can touch this suitcase. "*Entschuldigung*," I'd quickly mutter if anyone dared lay a finger on her. The movements of this tram are akin to that of a slow washing machine, and that perceived circumference becomes Toru Okada's deep, damp, waterless well where he sits in contemplation. I too sit, eyes closed, allowing the movements to drench me as I attempt to retain my gravity. Toru sits in the black, trapped: "In the darkness, I pressed the fingertips of one hand against the fingertips of the other—thumb against thumb, index finger against index finger, and the fingers of my left hand ascertained the existence of my right hand."

The *Straßenbahn* rolls onward towards the S-Bahn, which we must take to reach Schönefeld Airport. One hand I clutch around Jennifer, ensuring her safety, one around Abigail, ensuring her existence. My eyelids veil the truth from me, and with an inhale I'm outside the streetcar. There I sit, washed in thought as the rains of this country have doused me. I hold my fragile needs in those two hands. Books and love. Words and comfort. Language and her. A silence sits in the sliver of space dividing Abigail and myself, and neither of us can utter the words to smash it. "Words are just words," I want to joke, but I watch and feel the grip of my palms; I know the contents of Jennifer and that words are not just words. Was it Emerson who said language is fossil

poetry? That each word was once a poem of its own? He was right about that one. I swallow the joke and savor the sour tone it's left unspoken on my tongue. Too gentle is the truth of it to wield against the silence. In the richness of the word, I find *selbstverständnis* and hold my breath on it. Self and Comprehension fuse together to forge the self-concept. This moment, this singing moment, signifies me; she and I lugging those suitcases through the streets of Berlin. Here we are, surrounded by the lives living in another code, and we can decipher it. German and French being *lingua francas*, but think of the dialects. Think of the borrowings, the stolen speech, the lexicons from town to town, person to person.

Abigail and I have more books than we will be able to read in the next decade: French, German, English. Words of all the same building blocks, the same LEGO bricks. Those beautiful variants of that same alphabet—accents and umlauts making the script all the more rich. Though Murakami describes destiny as a thing of the past, detached from the here and now, if I would declare eighteen years of cumulative experience to amount to a single instance of being: this is that instance. It is the consistent addition of past selves which amounts to the current self, and this current self will determine the next me, and shed my skin to breathe that self free. Now I am this, and this self is one I've climbed towards since I first learned *hallo*, since I found my first stories. Books, words, language. Surrounded by everything that will determine the life ahead of me, and I am the catalyst for all to come. I choose which words to speak, which to write. I inhabit my own vertically cylindrical tank, my own universe, my own bubble of existence. My palms press against the cool glass, eyes wide behind my glasses, staring out at the world in awe. I turn away. I propel myself onward through infinity.



Clairvoyance (monotype), James Blanchard



Division (monotype), James Blanchard

Shara McCallum's *Madwoman*

In *Madwoman*, poet Shara McCallum examines themes of identity and womanhood, but what strikes me the most is the way she ties it all together with a particular music. “Here, a woman is always \ singing, each note tethering\ sound to meaning,” croons the poem “Exile,” cunningly exhibiting how Shara McCallum’s *Madwoman* is composed, in both a musical sense and in a mild deportment. The collection is comprised of a range of human sound interwoven with the language of identity and consequence. The first stanza of “Exile,” “Say *morning*, \ and a bird trills on a doorstep \ outside a kitchen,” is both a picturesque and startling reflection of the human association between harmony and control, the lines leveled on the page like descending notes on a piece of sheet music. At the end of the piece, our take-away is that “time is a fish \ swimming through dark water,” a distinctive type of lyric, in which the euphonious and simple song of woman and bird becomes something murky and boundless, a depiction of what humanity sounds like when faced with its sad impermanence.

McCallum’s sonic eminence traverses the collection, beginning with one of the debut poems, “Memory,” in which the speaker asserts, “Wherever you go, know I’m the wind \ accosting the trees, the howling night \ of your sea.” Where we had a bird and woman singing in “Exile,” we now have the rhythmic howling of wind and trees, a new occurrence of lamentation. The song becomes barbed and brazen, a disquieting threat, when the speaker avows, “No, my love: I’m bone. Rather: the sound \ bone makes when it snaps. That ditty \ lingering in you, like ruin.”

Above all, the ditties that resonate and linger longest are those in which McCallum's Jamaican *patois* takes center stage, mingling an abundance of sharp voices across many pieces, engaging the essence of nationality, identity, history, and womanhood. In "Lot's Wife to Madwoman," one of the most historic, one-dimensional feminine emblems of the consequence of man's insubordination is transformed into a cheeky and petulant speaker. "As happen to all a we, \ my life been reduce \ to one sad, tawdry cliché. Gal, just \ lef mi in peace where yu find mi," spits McCallum's reconstruction of Lot's wife, a request that is representative of many notable women in history—the burden of another's actions becomes the face of the victim; in this case, "never look back" becomes a timeworn lesson that Lot's anonymous wife was never given the choice to teach. McCallum's refurbishment of unacknowledged and underrepresented female characters into women with a distinct attitude and *patois* is a noble effort, one that embodies what any celebrated poet with a platform should aim to do: give the disenfranchised a space to proclaim what they would if their mouths were unbridled. In company with Lot's wife is Claudette Colvin, an uncelebrated young black woman who made strides in the fight for American civil rights, and Madwoman herself, who can arguably represent anyone from Shara McCallum to every woman in history, whether she is faceless or famous.

The namesake of the book, Madwoman, is perhaps the most indispensable manifestation in the collection. Though she is present in most every piece in the collection, we get to know her best in "Ten Things You Might Like to Know about Madwoman," a list poem that is both disdainfully candid and irrefutably comical. We learn a bit about her familial background, love for poppies, and penchant for Abba's "Chiquitita." More importantly, however, we learn that "she's confused about many things," a theme that seems to originate with and speak to the questions of identity that arise throughout the collection. The poem "Race" heralds it most clearly with the concept of being white-passing: "*She's the whitest black girl you ever saw, \ lighter than 'flesh' in the Crayola box. \ But, man, look at that ass and look at her shake it.*" Though it is unclear who is speaking here, it is clear that Madwoman is "so everywhere and so nowhere," a looming construction formed from the very incongruities of self that McCallum masterfully sets to rich music in this poem and elsewhere.

In the concluding poem of the collection, "Madwoman Apocrypha," an endearing question-and-answer session with Madwoman, the interviewer asks, "What created you?" to which Madwoman replies, "A breach in the self." The symbolic character of Madwoman herself is a perplexity, a sloped topography of uneasy landscapes. She is poised, one foot planted in a brave mythology and one in a cluttered identity. She is a docent in the reader's own troubled mind; within the collection, Madwoman both is and isn't a personi-

fiction of the poet's own woe and reminiscence. She is a presence that never abandons our consciousness. She is consciousness itself. By the conclusion of the book, the reader has no choice but to confront whether or not they are, in fact, Madwoman, who, as mentioned in "Ten Things You Might Like to Know about Madwoman," "has problems distinguishing fact from fiction."

An Interview with Shara McCallum

Shara McCallum is Jamaican-American and the author of five books of poetry published in the US and UK, most recently *Madwoman* (2017), which won the 2018 OCM Bocas Prize in the Poetry category and is currently short-listed for the overall 2018 Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature. Her work has been widely published in the US, the Caribbean, and Europe, and has been translated into several languages. In addition, McCallum has received recognition such as a Witter Bynner Fellowship from the Library of Congress and an NEA Poetry Fellowship. She lives in Pennsylvania and teaches creative writing and literature at Penn State University. In February 2018, she visited SUNY Geneseo to read poems from *Madwoman*.

Gandy Dancer: It becomes clear that the concept of memory is important to *Madwoman* as early as its epigraph. What role has memory played for you in your development as a writer?

Shara McCallum: Memory has long been a driving force for me as a writer. I not only build poems (and essays) from and out of memories, but am interested in how writing itself becomes an act of memorializing—the dead, the past, all that is seemingly lost but which language tries to rescue from oblivion.

GD: This collection also explores what it means to be a woman and a mother, and what it means to use these as labels. At what point do you remember feeling comfortable with the label of “mother,” and has this, in turn, affected your writing? The piece “Now I’m a Mother” first comes to my mind in re-

gards to this, as there definitely seems to be a clear shift in attitude of how the speaker uses the word.

SM: I don't think I've ever felt *uncomfortable* with the title "Mother." If anything—and this is what I think the poem you mention explores—I have been uneasy with the roles I was supposed to play as a "mother" once I became one, with the often one-dimensional notions in our culture about "motherhood," and with the frequently unreasonable demands placed on women when we become mothers, both by others and by ourselves. I hope the poem's humor is as much a take-away as any of its potential critiques, and that it's clear I'm poking fun at myself as much as at anyone or anything else. I enjoyed writing the poem a lot, despite its serious underbelly, because it pushed me toward using satire, irony, and dark humor—tones and registers I don't work in often enough as a poet, I sometimes think.

GD: You make use of an array of forms in this collection. Staying with "Now I'm a Mother," why, for instance, did you chose to make use of and rework the ghazal form?

SM: I love that particular form, first and foremost, but I always think in terms of form when I'm writing. The "line" is the most basic element of form in a poem—so any structuring of language to me is form. When poems arrive in recognizable forms, "fixed" or "traditional" forms, this is not always entirely a conscious decision, any more than my writing in lines or sentences is entirely conscious. They arrive through habits of reading and practice often ahead of my own conscious recognition of them. I find poems suggest their forms, the shapes they want to take, early on to me in the drafting process. But why this poem suggested itself to me as a ghazal is harder to answer, exactly. I think it might be because the phrase "now I'm a mother" came to me in the first draft and I thought it worth repeating. I'd have to look back at my notebooks, though, to be sure I'm remembering this correctly and not just making this up now! With the ghazal, what I can say with certainty is that I love the tension in the form between continuity and discontinuity. The tight refrains create a lot of cohesion in the poem, on the level of sound, image, and idea. But because the couplets are self-contained and should be able to be moved around (with the exception of the first and last for reasons dictated by the form), when you are working in the ghazal it feels like casting a fishing line—out toward the water and back again, out and back like that.

GD: We loved seeing the knotted string-like illustrations that wind throughout the book. They're as visually pleasing as they are enticing, and also kind of function as a force that helps to hold the poems together. Could you speak a little to the thinking behind this aesthetic choice?

SM: Thanks for noticing this. The designer for the book, Pamela Mackay, gets all the credit for the image you see on the cover (she's responsible for

the whole of the book design for the Alice James edition, in fact). The cover image that contains the “knotted string” you noted is carried throughout the book. My role in regard to this book’s design was twofold but limited and part of a collaborative process, as I’ll try to explain here. First, unlike my previous books which all contain a reproduction of a painting on their covers, I asked the editors at Alice James Books if Pamela would come up with a cover image for the collection based solely on the title (*Madwoman*), the poems, and that would incorporate the color red. They and Pamela readily agreed, and Pamela came up with two different cover images for us to select from. When the image that contained the scribble or “knotted string” as you call it (I like that) was chosen as the cover by the editors—and I had input too on this—I then asked if it could run in some iteration throughout the collection on particular pages. I loved the idea that the “string” functions as a unifying element, as you mention, but also that it manifests “madness” in a visual manner. It might be worth saying here too that I loved the other of Pamela’s potential cover designs/images very much and was able to procure it for the UK edition of the book (published by Peepal Tree Press in England). That cover image is quite different, so I wasn’t able to use a piece of it throughout the UK edition of the book in the same leitmotif manner as the Alice James edition made a refrain of the “thread” in that cover. But I mention this all to say how much I think book design is itself an art and that I particularly admire the work of this artist, Pamela Mackay, who had also worked on my previous book with Alice James as the book designer for that one too. Here’s the link to the UK edition if you want to see her other cover image, for comparison: <http://www.peepaltreepress.com/books/madwoman>

GD: When you came to read at our school, we had the pleasure of experiencing what a dynamic and engaging reader you are. As you are writing and revising, do you think about how you will eventually read or perform a piece? Does this ever play a part in your writing process?

SM: I read my poems aloud obsessively when I revise them, so in that sense I am already thinking of them as existing in the ear. I don’t think about “performance” when I write, however, which is often surprising to people to hear. Rather, I think of how to get on the page features of orality and aurality I believe poems demand. I work to shape diction, syntax, and line so the voice of the poem and the poem’s music can be audible when I am absent. As someone who practiced arts rooted in performance (singing, dancing, acting) a long time ago, the distinction between “performance” and “performativity” matters to me. I want my poems very much to contain musicality, voice, attitude—all things I attribute to “orality” and “performativity”—but to do this through language, not to depend upon the gestures of the body, on facial cues, or the inflection of the human voice, all of which are the more rightful registers to me of “performance.” I hope that distinction makes sense. Obvi-

ously when I am reading poems aloud to an audience, though, I am aware that my vocal inflections and body language are emphasizing the tones and coloring of meaning and music I hear in my mind's ear as the poet. I also would guess that my strong attraction as a poet to the dramatic monologue (or the "persona poem" as its more commonly referred now) is likely influenced by my practice of drama at one time. So even while I think it's useful to make the distinction between "performance" and "performativity" when I'm writing, I don't hold these to be entirely separate spheres of influence when I'm giving readings or even in directing me toward the modes I work in as a poet.

GD: I remember you mentioning that Madwoman has taken the form of many female voices for you. In the collection, we get to see her depicted in some of these roles—for instance, in "Madwoman as Rasta Medusa." How much do you feel that you relate to her (to them?) on a personal level? Have you been drawing inspiration from her for a while?

SM: I think Madwoman in this collection is me and not me, at the same time. I wrote this book to try to answer your very question for myself: who is she to me? I felt at the outset of writing the poems that the Madwoman is often that figure we see at the margins of stories and history, the self we place outside of ourselves, individually and collectively. In wanting to understand her more, I had to invite her in. And in doing so, I came away feeling I could not distinguish between where she ended and I began, or vice versa. If that sounds confusing, what I mean is that I came to see while writing this book just how much she is personal, mythological, historical, political, cultural, literary all at the same time, in these poems and in my own experience as a woman, a woman of color, and an immigrant whose narratives of self have often felt not entirely of my own making.

GD: Do you feel that it's unavoidable for certain aspects of our identity to leak into our writing, both in terms of content and form? For instance, being a woman, being biracial, or being a child of immigrant caretakers.

SM: I think I unwittingly answered this above. Yes and yes and yes is my resounding answer. And why would we want to avoid ourselves, if we can do that even, when we write? This is the question I would ask in return, to you and any other younger writer embarking now. I hope your own answers will lead you toward the kind of poems you are meant to write.

Thank you for your thoughtful readings of these poems and your good questions here.

Hometown, Unraveling

after Kim Grabowski Strayer

I saw a man halfway in his car pissing
out onto the mall parking lot, soft
his eyes followed mine down. Leaving
was a long slow circle. I turned the steering
wheel and didn't speed. This is just the beginning.

When the snow melts it doesn't really melt,
becomes a sticky grey sludge and inedible—everywhere
in this place (they say) used to be beautiful. I swam
the wakes—never underestimate how soft
even salt can make. Every night,

the building shrinks in and gets hot.
begins from the cement beams to the bundled
horse hair in the walls. Open up the windows
and the air rises all the way up like a lake in a car
that's sinking, and sinking past hope for a bridge.

There is nothing I could create. The Easter
market has the same man selling
the same butter shaped as a lamb
since they started it. When my grandfather

took it home the red ribbon was sucked
to its neck the same soft way. More
than once, mailbox a smacked crime
scene of scattered envelopes. A backyard brimming
with men and too-shaken cans.

In my new city there is a sharp quiet.
With a whole group waiting, I love
a bus that stops just in front of me;
spits up rock salt, grey scum at its gills.
I say I am a rumble about to fall apart—
if to pieces, then there's still hope
for it to all come back together.

This is still beginning. If I could go
back to: me as a girl on the rug,
just seconds before—; when I was
a foamless touch to shore—
empty and ready with promise.

Silverfish in the Shower

My love has too many bones, hard things
you aren't supposed to see up close.

When my father would kill a bug for me

he'd bring the tissue in close to my face
and laugh. I hated that. I want

a face to bring things close to—you need

to be drunk to make plans like a child.
Water floods up each time

from the drain, all clogged with hair.

When the silverfish came, my love said
you made me kill a live thing today.

Sweet boy, sweet bug—I should have let

You both wash the sleep off without me.
Or at least let the pest have what it came for:

the rough noise of two breathing beasts;

like its split of legs, us two wild halves
going in perfect synchronization.

Tenderness will flare out. When my father

was in college his mother sent him with a cooler
of sauce in old ricotta containers for his Sunday dinner

week after week. When she died, there were

the frozen plastic tubs, iced over and blood red.
It was still a live thing. Just now, the baby

cries out from the apartment behind the wall.

I've heard them shower too, the heavy drop
of water from gathered hair to plastic floor.

We think ourselves to be more than separation;

but the buzz of a hummingbird that's almost
as big as a silverfish, colorful and churning,

a blur of wings like a ghost's veil.

Ill-Omened

The movie has me cry long after we leave

A few kernels spill as I pull on an old shirt

I weep my small self tired

Your head is hard and your breath is hard

My mother wants to build a new house, this one without stairs

In the movie, the mother a house on fire, then lit again

The bees die off in South Carolina

Honeybees, not hornets or wasps or even bumble

Massacre without blood, but sweetness

Smudge of bodies like dregs at the bottom of a cup

I dream of mandarins molding

Next morning mandarins and coffee

Brown mark on the skin like a rot healed over

Sometimes it's easy like that

When the child is on the horse

When the daisy chain passed from head to throat to head

That is how the sad movie ends

Like Eve, our clothes slough like cooling wax

Our faces patchy, dry, once touching

Fear crystallizes to horror

I know you by scent, a sweet rot cavity

A light of filmic static, shrinking to pinpoint center

“The green all green things aspire to be”

—Rebecca Lindenberg

:: *Berlin, July 2015* ::

I’m anxious at the handlebar & the Germans, the three Dutch, they aren’t waiting for me

One of us is ready to turn & I’m anxious the tram-tracks will slice me off my bike & when we round
curb, parked cars make me anxious I’m too far behind our swarming pack

This city it holds me like pollen & its roads bruise me like hyacinth & when my guy

lifts feet & slows to the end, he spits on the ground & I want to bless him as if he’s sneezed

This city he says *this city is all graffiti* & his accent ghosts graffiti as gravity & I don’t say a thing

because I know what he means; because I’m anxious for some extra anchor at the handlebar

We ride—wind through this heat is like when he hands me a plum; like he threads belt loops

& with each traffic stop I think *green light, green light*

& when we ride I think *green light, green light* just to be certain

LUCIA LoTEMPIO

At dinner the six of us are paired off, but my guy is all
 beer & sweat & I am anxious of verbs & hand motions & not getting to
 the right translation for *carburetor* or *fishing rod* or *melanoma* or *plum* & that I'll lose
 too many letters when I use words like *kitten* or *patent*
 The six of us, the six of us we are eager & we are sweating; we are reaching
 to each other how you grab a rabbit by the ears, uncertain of butchering or magic

 At night I'm all bug bites & sweat & my guy & me reach in our sleep like otters; like one
 float reaches for the next in a passing parade

 & morning when the six of us breakfast, one of us boils the eggs too hard & I don't know how
 to not be rude when I make them right—deep breath as one cracks into solid white bubbles

 On our bikes we are sucked in by trees & everywhere it's green light, green light
 & the forest is too green to be surrounded by city; the forest, too green to have our wheels throw gravel
 I am still the last of us & sweating; keep hands on bars, keep head down, keep with
 The beer as it clinks in my basket, keep from tilt up to a canopy of green light, green light

My guy takes off his shirt & I am sweating; we spy backyards of stacked bungalows rowed like orchards
So ordered after the shuffle of buildings from our swelling sixth floor window
—so full of things like wonder, like beauty—& at the lake we are intent on shadow; we skid
to a shaded spot, then another When my guy lays on my stomach I'm all sun
until his head In the lake, children slick with sunscreen: uncertain of all the places they will be adults
& all the places their adults have ripened & all the ways in which those places stop them
from throwing sand, from throwing water, from throwing balls, from throwing themselves out of trees
When we are in the water, the water vibrates soft & bright & we can't see down into each other's hands
through all its cold green & one of us in anxious to round the edge of the shore
But my guy is swinging from a branch; he turns & water beads off his back, off his shorts
 & a sluice of leaves falls in behind him
& when he splashes up, he treads up into their green light, green light

About the Authors

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