MELISSA ROMEO
"Are We There Yet?"

Cover Art: ISKAELDT

"Where Ravens Weep and Vultures Laugh"
# INFINITE RUST
FALL 2018 Editorial Staff

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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
TEXAS SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY
HOUSTON, TEXAS
“Are We There?”
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That we can be lonesome
for a place, for the person
we were in that place.
That a cool August morning
in Boston is a warm October
morning in England.
That it’s better
to feel loneliness than to refuse it,
because it’s a thing we will never
outpace. That it will prove
useful, or not. That it has
a fragrant taste,
like bergamot or rose,
a longer half-life than
tellurium-128,
a radioactive isotope. That
isotope comes from Greek,
meaning same place.
Twisted Roots

1: Turned In

The way some look on water,

enough to drink or drown in,

feeling something else is possible;

a certain thirst is quenchable,

Narcissus made a study

of himself, one gaze-face

after another: If I am to survive

scrutiny, first I have to learn

the rules of reaction:

What do my emotions mean

to my mouth & cheeks, my eyes & brow;

how much of feeling can be shown?

Shown or displayed?

Directly or filleted?

Overjoyed, like this?

Resolute, like this?

Rueful, like this?

Beautiful, like this?
Caught in the act, Narcissus, unguardedly and stuttering,

spoke against assumptions ready to a group of men with a fish in their net: 

*No, I—I don’t want me.*

*If anything I want youth,*
*or not even that—*

*only time, just time to see what it is I’m looking at.*

2: To a Tree

*Between a man*
*and a woman,* it’s said

as if it were a secret whispered in a tree house,

then later in correct colonnades, down

select passageways. As if it were a secret

that would, if told, be less special, less lock-and-key,

more looked-over,
the chance to see
the mirage in marriage.
As if it were a secret,

how we go there,
thirsty, anyhow—

how paradise is anywhere
the air is clear enough

for pairs of eyes to raise
a tree despite the gravity.

As if it were a secret,
how love grows from anything,

even carbon—
filaments to figments

of our own desire. Ghosts
of whomever’s holy making.

As if it were a secret
that could be kept

from taking root:
how soon a lift of arms

will allow
All

within
the willow.
A Woman Like Me

A table of men. Beer. Ouzo. Stars like tiny light bulbs strung along the sky,
the silence beyond the *plata* closing in on me as the men laugh with wide grins.

But I don’t understand anything as they begin spitting the words, mumbling
guttural sounds that scramble the stray cats. I feel a wedge coming between us.

The tourists have left. And the women of the village are never out alone on a weeknight.

Cicadas rustle mating calls. But I’ll rope the moon and drag it along. I could ride
all the way to America on just a sliver of light. And no one would question a woman like me
out at night at a table of men, my legs crossed, the wind pummeling

off the sea, the deepest darkness hovering. Would they protect me? Why should they?
prairie state cavity

doug van hooser

the town is tired as a double shift
beaten buildings old men that can’t stand straight
sidewalks heave and sigh
streets potholed like a gopher colony
outline the square where the courthouse squats
like an old metal South Bend coffee percolator on a church social table
the cursive window sign of Betsy’s Luncheonette
looks like whitey-tighties laundered with blue jeans
in another culture Betsy would be High Priestess of God Damn
her favored conversational epithet
but for four-fifty she serves pancakes juice and coffee
breakfast all day grits with gossip gravy
the customers are hard boiled over easy sunny side up
with names you don’t give a pet
Harold Henry and Horace Marcie Marge and Mable
the train still stops at the station
then exhales hope as it trundles toward the money
skyscrapers hold the winning hand
college graduates flock and migrate there
kids who stay nest and brood in weary hand-me-down houses
churches taverns and Friday night football still fill the seats
but not the furniture factory and showroom
or Gamble’s Hardware and Department Store
the barber shop and hair salon remain unisex
and everyone knows the middle school principal is gay
once a month takes the weekend train to the big city to play
fifty plus years the town has taken on water
run aground in a man-made lake
Walmart an Emerald Ash Borer
corn and soybeans the only lifeguards
while bituminous lawyers judges and government
detonate and dig the courthouse coalmine
filthy well paid work if you can get it
tulip trees for generations aspire with bloom each spring
but the flowers’ beauty has little scent
petals surrender and litter the ground
centuries of headstones domino the hills
both sides of the highway before Burma-Shave signs
mark the way out of town
On 14th Street

No gum-chewing jump ropers, 
rope in each hand, turn double-dutch 
and chant. No skaters sail past, 
jeans rolled to the knee. Corner store 
is boarded up, graffiti stained walls 
where boys once pitched nickels, 
eyed girls with tight sweaters 
and loose reputations. I do not hear 
the familiar vernacular of 14th Street. 
Where is Mr. Mac? Donna Rae? 
Snookie? Am I the one chosen 
to record a history set aside 
to accommodate progress today? 
To accommodate today? In a dream 
sycamores wave green-gloved hands 
blow kisses. Welcome back, they call, 
we've missed you. 
Row houses renovated to chic condos, 
corner store a Starbucks, 
spreading sycamores replaced 
by scrawny maples. Show dogs trot on leashes; 
joggers encased in spandex flash past; 
taxi disgorge designer-clad women 
in stiletto heels. 14th street patois 
takes on a clipped upper crust tone; 
I no longer speak the language.
Personal Pizza for Two

How we ended up on opposite sides of the couch listening to each other chew our individual pizzas – you tweezing the toppings with your finger and thumb, abandoning the crust I would later eat dipped in honey – is a matter of opinion. Where to mark the beginning? Your hookie day spent enveloped in the funk of pot and coffee, cigarettes and slept-in clothes? The night before when you proposed the idea of a rosemary-rubbed Butterball paired with the purple knuckles of fingerlings? Or the two-columned grocery list, your WHOLE TURKEY (SMALL) a block-lettered domestic covenant? Perhaps it started before the mortgage, HOA, utilities, garbage day, broken disposal, forgotten mail, dusty blinds, wrinkled shirts, toothpaste-spattered mirrors, empty toilet rolls, unscooped litter boxes? Or maybe this moment began eight years ago when, locked out, I pressed my ear to your apartment door and imagined you coked out, crouched and sweating in just your boxer briefs on the dirty linoleum floor? I could hear you holding your breath.
To Curse In an Ancient Tongue

The descendants of the El Jefe the Jaguar and the thick-billed parrots still live, hiding in the Salt Cedars and Bougainvillea surrounding Albert’s Alignment and Body Shop.

My husband, our son Eduardo, and my mother live across the dirt yard where Eduardo lets his three chickens roam. Esmeralda and her daughter live in the third house; a small adobe that was once the shop office that anchors the two exterior fence lines where they meet at the corner.

They are all descendants of Alberto except me, even El Jefe and the thick-billed parrots are indigenous to this dirt. I keep my seven chickens in a small wire enclosed run with a covered plywood roost at one end - they are too much of a pain in the ass to catch if I let them roam free. I thought at first that the jaguars would eat them but the truth is that even a jaguar cub wants little to do with the talons of a South Tucson laying hen. A slashed nose is not worth a few mouthfuls of dirty feathers, splintery bone, and stringy meat. The parrots are immune to the scuffling between the jaguars and the laying hens. They are immune to us all.

The fights between my lover and I. The silence of my husband and his mother. The laughter of our son. The only one the parrots will come to is Nana who trains them to curse in an ancient tongue.

During the monsoon, after the rain and the lightning and the sirens have passed, when the humidity and the heat make walking down the sidewalk feel like drowning in a quiet hot tub, Nana shows up at the United Firefighting Equipment on 4th Avenue where I work as an accountant. She pulls up in her blue Cadillac El Dorado, the roof and long hood burned to a pale grey from years in the Arizona sun. She climbs out clutching her rosary.

“Natalie, you must come home, your chickens -” She looks stricken.

“My chickens?”

“Yes, Nini, your chickens.”

Perhaps the jaguar cubs finally got brave; maybe El Jefe was not shot dead in the Catalina Mountains and has instead returned to eat laying hens. Maybe the colorful parrots finally got sick of their dun-colored, small-brained kin and have begun to decapitate them with the powerful beaks they are named for.
When I pull the old metal alignment shop gates closed, there is the smell of burnt feathers, like hair touched too long by a straightening iron, but stronger. I go to the wire chicken run on the side of the house.

The bodies are scattered across the run. One is crumpled and covered in melted feathers, blackened and singed in a way that makes me able to almost see the long gone smoke still rising from it’s body. The other three carcasses are scattered around a depression that must have been a puddle of water when the lightning hit. Instead of being melted and blackened, these three have been blasted naked, plucked by the lightning.

Eduardo and I shovel up the chickens and put them in the trashcan that goes to the street. I wish I felt bad but the truth is I don’t have much emotional attachment to the laying hens, just their eggs.

Eduardo’s chickens continued to lay eggs, scattered around the property where they were often difficult or impossible to find, but from my three surviving chickens I never saw a single egg. Not one. I waited a week, then a month. Finally I stopped keeping them in the chicken run since there were no eggs to gather. I let them join Eduardo’s free-range chickens and the jaguar cubs and the thick-billed parrots in the Salt Cedars and the Bougainvillea.

I’ll get some more chickens, I suppose. Fall is coming to the desert and it’s hard to go back to store-bought eggs once you’ve had eggs from your own chickens. Then I’ll wait for the return of the jaguar, the thick-billed parrot, and the lightning.

Hopefully, soon, I’ll be gathering eggs.
I Had Finished Unpacking

and so we stood side by side
his arm around my thickened waist
my arm bent up,
the nail of my thumb between my teeth,
in front of the door I never wanted.

We stood looking across the yellowed lawn,
strewn with pennysavers and newspapers
from the couple next door,
to the houseboat across the street
where flocks of birds—seagulls, geese, swans—
had taken the homeowners captive, overrun the yard.

They honked and quacked and guffawed all afternoon,
running amuck, shitting all over our cars,
napping in the dying grass out front,
and we watched, through a door we never wanted.

When the sun tinged purple, yawned, they knew it was time,
they strutted back across the street and,
too lazy or arrogant or comfortable with their lives,
they did not fly, but ducked down so that their bellies
flattened against their feet, feathers sticking in all directions,
they made their way home together underneath the chain link fence.

It was then that he started laughing,
I started crying,
and we closed the door I never wanted.
MARIAH JOYCE

“Good Things Bad Things”
Immigrant

I grew up eating cheese with bitter olives, sesame and thyme-infused olive oil on warm bread. Names in my family all meant something, like lifelong challenges: beautiful, splendid, victorious, forgiving. In my childhood books words flowed from right to left, direction didn’t matter then.

At ten we traveled east to west against time. I gained seven hours of youth, lost my compass: in New York, no sea to swallow the sun each day.

Foods were sweet in America. People spoke as fast as they walked. Everything was large: washing machines, supermarkets, even bananas and red grapes. We settled in this vast, cold place with neither boots nor a sense of how to be warm. Snowfalls were beautiful and cruel, the freezing air slapped our faces each morning.

Inside there was the smell of garlic and onions on the stove, loud talking over the phone with relatives overseas. My family inhaled and exhaled politics like cigarettes, all the time. We blamed the British, the Americans, Arab leaders, Zionists, communists, or a history that was simply unkind. The TV in the background reported news in a language we spoke but did not really understand. All this over a good meal, always, as if the hunger was in our bellies and not in our hearts.
Bule

The first word they teach me
is want.

“Mau ojek ke Hypermart” I say
perched on his motorbike

and we ride, village on both sides,
lush green and bright flowers

one gas station one bank
one store they stare

I crouch over him wind warm
his smell like bucket bath and mangos

he leaves me at the entrance.
They shout the second word I learn
“bule!” “white!”

I hate my hair
my skin, my eyes, I hate my tall.

I fill a laundry basket with a pot a pan,
silverware blankets shampoo

I hand crisp money and smile
the cashier, shy.
Someone asks for my autograph
but my hands are full.

Back on the bike
I balance the basket

I hate my hair my tall my eyes
I hate my heart my weak my pale

How will I live so lonely for maybe years?
Encased in Amber

She could keep a secret. Like living things encased in amber.

Suffocated. Stilled. Drowned in a pretty glass tomb. Waiting for a day in the sun when dead things would be given their due.

She knew better than to tell the family business. Little good it would have done her anyway. Walls telling her story with whole pieces of her innocence missing. They resembled nothing so much as bars, with all their broken spaces. People looking in on her like they had paid to see the show and would be damned if she wouldn’t, at very least, beat her chest and roar. People, who confused the keeping of her, mistaking close for safe.

Her bars were slow-gold-brown-soft and fluid. Time made them harder. She grew her shell.
Like a living thing, encased in amber.

She began a giving of herself in dark moments. A sharing of things so easily stolen away. No one could take what you gave. That’s how giving worked, she knew. When she gave she dug deep in her bag, searching for only the most precious parts of her soul. Separation key to organization she accrued many bags, all brown and gold. Convinced that the deeper she gave the more her gifts would be valued, she emptied. All her goods and all her good, gone in the giving of things. Her many bags now empty of every little treasure, their color the butter brown and deep mahogany and liquid ochre of crowned beings loved deeply by the sun god.

She caught the light as she walked, covered in her empty bags.
Looking like a living thing, encased in amber.

She knew someone had meant for her to die that way. All slow and sad and pretty like. Like living things encased in amber.

Keeping her secrets.
Content in her cage.
Giving away all her precious things.
A bag lady.
She knew they had already prepared the eulogy. Wishing her a peaceful rest like she had ever really awak-
ened a day of her life.

Well, she was damn well woke now.  
*And she would have none of it.*

She began a telling of things. Words like ember fountains, burning and blazing and building whole universes 
and timelines and dimensions. Secrets flowing like hot magma running down mountains that *moved when she 
whispered.* They glittered from her pores. Her every utterance a precious jewel searching for the sunlight.

*Shimmering* and *shivering* like a living thing, encased in amber.

When they came again to see the main attraction, she was ready for a show. Calling for her same old act, *she* 
emerged as the conductor. The bars they looked through had always belonged to their cage, not hers. She 
knew that now. Her innocence had gone to make way for her elegance. Heads swayed to the motion of her 
golden hips, entranced as she danced to the beat in her chest. Her roar rumbled, gentle and loving and strong 
enough to shine through the centuries. Dipped in sun beams she remembered she was a living thing, encased 
in amber.

To those things she gave away she said her final goodbyes. A unification was happening. A filling of things. 
*A feeling* of things. She knew that now. There was no space in her hands for all those bags anymore. She 
needed room to carry her loving self, heavy and huge and humble as it was. She tore apart those empty bags 
and stitched them back together into a fine-glitter-gold-ground-brown blessing that covered her breasts and 
blew across her feet and breezed in the wind like gold feathers on the crowns of her healing tree.

Covered as she was she resembled nothing so much as a living thing.  
Encased in amber.
The Testimony of the Child at Play

Hear this reed as it complains,
and tells the story of separations.
Ever since I was cut from the reed bed,
My tune made men and women to lament.

—Jalal ud-din Rumi, Masnavi
Book I, lines 1-2. (Trans. Robert Abdul Hayy Darr)

1948. Western Australia.

In the formal sitting room, the curtains are drawn. Thick carpet and upholstered furniture muffle all sound. The boy seeks out this place, once more to be alone, to find his way back home.

But first, he goes to the room across the hall, to the cupboard where his mother’s dresses hang, bereft of form, awaiting their brief moments of coming to life—all fullness and motion, then. He climbs up into the wardrobe to reach for one of these that glows special to him: it’s golden yellow, dappled with green. Clambering down from the cupboard, he slips it over his head and the gown hangs loose around him, its folds cascading onto the floor. Silky texture is cool where it skims his skin.

Women’s voices murmur in the kitchen.

Suitably attired, the boy returns to the sitting room where he twirls slowly in the half light, head cocked, gazing down at the skirt as it rises round him in the air. Entranced by its golden glow, he settles down to sit on his heels, spreading the ample folds of fabric in a perfect circle around him on the floor.

Eyes closed, he rests in peace, ears singing in the silence. Dust motes float, lazy, in the light.

Sometime later, the dress is returned to its waiting place.

But one day when he reaches into the cupboard, the cool fabric isn’t there to meet his touch. He wants to catch the magic feeling, wrap it around him, disappear. He tries the cupboard again, and then again, but no matter how carefully he repeats his actions he fails to make the dress appear. A heavy feeling drags in his chest.

Another day: he’s in the washhouse, in the back yard. A copper tub squats above the fireplace where the women boil the water to wash the clothes, on Mondays. Sifting through the ashes of another day, he finds the charred remains of the dress ... this lovely thing banished to dirty dust in his hands.

In the fowl run a hen murmurs cluck cluck, sloooow ... and the heaviness returns to roost in him as, inside the house, a door clicks shut.
1992. Los Angeles California

My father dies and I fly back to Perth for the funeral.

When I return to work, I’m sitting with an editor as he shuttles rapidly through videotapes to find the shots we need for a story we’re cutting. I feel a new freedom to shuttle through memories buried long ago. The earliest? This incident with the dress and the acute feeling of loss. The shaming. Later, in elementary school, during the breaks the boys and girls were separated. I was drawn towards the tricky games girls played with skipping ropes but if I were to cross over I would be called a ‘sissy’ by the other boys. And by the teachers, too.

I ponder the attraction of the golden dress, and wonder where I used to go when I played in the yellow robe? I read that shamans cross-dress to access altered states of consciousness. What zone was this, then, that I loved to enter and how was it that a child of around three years of age could enact a home-made ritual like that, spontaneously, in the bland wasteland of suburbia, entirely without tuition? What was the nature of the experience that he found there and what did he lose when he came across the remains of the dress?

They never discussed the incident with me. They must have seen me cross the hall riding my magic carpet and perhaps they were troubled about my gender confusion. But this was circa 1948, and they wouldn’t have used such terms then. I guess all they could see was the dress; the externals. They never asked him what he was up to and, with minimal language skills, I doubt he could have explained anyway. Had he done something so bad that it couldn’t ever be discussed? An unspeakable transgression. Was it a sin? Perhaps they were motivated by good intentions but absences may resonate as deeply as presences and their discretion left a yawning absence to reverberate at the core of his being.

In subsequent years of wandering and wondering I learned to open my inner awareness with regular practices of meditation. It has become easier to resurrect the memories now, rendered accessible in the contemplative state before thought. In the silence these lonely spaces begin to reveal their secret significance. Memories of many other luminous encounters wait in the wings, to take their place center stage.

As a faerie child, not even a ‘he’ yet, my wings of wonder were amputated. But now it’s as if I can feel those wing stubs tingle, as unexpected events brush up against the dullness of everyday awareness, catching me up on breath’s wings to take me home. I liked to disappear into this ‘empty’, formless space that was ‘home’ before all thought forms and rehearsals of social identity usurped my innocence and trained me into obedience. Shame is a such a blunt tool to enforce conformity. The young child had a simple, intuitive familiarity with a first order of being. Amid all the roles I have been required to enact, my private project has been
to find the way to properly mourn the loss and heal the separation at the root of being itself.

Before there was gender, this is; the original state that was, always, my birth right.

Could you erect a building without a base; made up only of a second and third storey? The original state of being that I once knew well, existed, surely, as the primal first order of reality (and awareness); before language, and certainly before gender. To cleave to gender is a second order of reality only, with sexuality coming in a distant third. Trying to establish an identity without a deep awareness of the fundamental state of affairs proved to be an unstable basis for being in the world—an identity with no inner foundation, dependent only on external elements, buffeted by events beyond my control.

To shame a child over his or her nostalgia for the original self—the ground of being, shared by all—is a wrong-headed, misguided and toxic intervention into the integrity of their being. Such a radical displacement has long-term consequences, and the confusion spreads in all directions. I grew up feeling that I was not one of the ‘real’ people. But in a slow return from exile, I did find my way back into the awareness of my origins to be reconciled with a ‘home’ that has less to do with geography, culture, or family ties than with a deep, internal re-orientation that has shifted my wrong-headed notion of a separate, personal self into re-alignment with the unified field of consciousness that underpins all life forms. I once knew that, intuitively, as my core state but I was driven away in an internal displacement from that original home, as I learned to survive the zone of binaries.

My struggle to reconnect with the lost parts of self relies less on religion, on psychological therapies, and even on language itself, for integration. To recover the root of being is a resurrection that occurs in liminal, pre-rational spaces, accessed in my case almost entirely through meditation.

Recovering the root of being—of consciousness itself—my return homeward, increasingly, has been drenched in peace.
Invasive Species

I am an invasive species.
I have crept or sailed
or been carried or flown
all by myself
into your dirt. Here, I
put down roots
that disrupt your
manicured,
heavily trimmed,
ostentatiously restricted
and rarefied land
to cultivate my own interests.
I make bumps underground
and make your stumble,
I am happy to trip you
and send your lofty brows
into the grassy hardness
of the ground. I grow faster
than you can cut me back; I grow
in the dark and the rain and while your back
is turned, I have taken over
your plantation.
I choke your delicate lilies, run rampant across
your beds of baby cabbage, twine with my sister-species
and force you to view us
if you would look at the sun.
I am resistant to your poisons, I cannot be cut back,
slashed or burned or frozen away. I am at home
here, now.
MARIOS LIOLIOS

“The Nature of Attraction”
Open Letter From an Outsider

Let me begin by saying I am very happy to be with your daughter. I am proud to know such a kind, loving, generous woman. I am writing this before we meet so as to spell out my current intentions involving Mui. I don’t want this to come as a bigger shock than it already has. I am fairly aware of the issues that have arisen by my dating your daughter; the main one that being your reluctance to welcome me into the fold. I am aware of the mentality, involving the issue of a relationships legitimacy. I know that you consider this relationship to be a fling, a tryst, what have you. It is not anything of that nature. I admit the whole thing is still confusing for me, but I am aware of this significant fact.

I am an outsider.

I am fully aware of this. I am aware of what effects that entails; whenever Mui answers the door. I understand the painted on smiles, hiding the annoyed and disappointed looks that she didn’t pick one of the men you tried to match her with. I know the disapproving discussions involving welcoming in someone who doesn’t have your hair texture or who can’t speak your language. I understand your “reluctance”. I know very little about Vietnam and the culture. What I have been learning is mainly from your daughter, who knows a great deal more than I. I am not Asian. She and I share similar values, but I am still learning about Vietnamese customs and family views. I’m not Asian. I’m not white. I’m a biethnic man and according to every stereotype, I am considered as a man that is seen as not an ideal match to the Asian community simply for that reason alone. I am a mixture of thousands of years of proud, strong people and have every intention of being beside your daughter so as to support her. I know this is still difficult for everyone involved, my parents included. They are aware of the issues involving her and have agreed to my decision of continuing to date her.

It is clear that I will never fully understand your culture, but I hope you understand that I am trying to learn. My Mexican American mother did the same when marrying my African American father and vice versa. I am trying because your daughter is part of my life. Every date, every bit of time she and I have spent together, has allowed us to understand the other’s family and their history. I am very happy to have her in my life and want what children that come out of this relationship to understand their heritage as well as mine. I want my future children to represent every piece of their culture respectfully and honorably. I intend to have them learn that
their respective cultures must not supersede the other.

I know I’m an outsider, and I recognize your misconceptions in regards to both my ethnicities. They are mainly due to the lack of experience of being around a specific race. I am not to be a speaker for all Mexican Americans or African Americans. I don’t wish for your daughter to be a spokesperson for the Vietnamese community as neither of us wish to speak for everyone in our respective cultures.

You might think I am not meant to be near her given my ethnic background. I am a man who has learned to be self sufficient thanks to both my parents and has had to deal with the issues that you have so blatantly justified through years of social conditioning.

Let me be candid when I say that I honestly was hurt upon hearing your disapproval of myself. I say this in regards to not myself, but your daughter. I am positive you have done your best in raising her. She is a talented, intelligent, caring woman. She upholds your values as best she can and she strives to find someone who matches her ideals. Your disapproval says to me you don’t trust your own daughters judgement. You’ve obviously raised her well and you should respect her choice of significant other. I understand this is easier said than done on both sides.

Your daughter will be the first Vietnamese American to marry into both sides of my family. It might be a slight adjustment, but she is fully aware that that will quickly pass and she will be welcomed into the family. She will bring a unique experience and will help with bridging the gaps between cultures. I intend to marry your daughter, I also intend to follow the custom of asking for her father’s permission. I hope in time you will understand your daughter’s decision. Once again, you ought to be proud of your daughter. She was obviously raised by wonderful parents and has trusted her judgement in making the decision of finding a loving spouse. I look forward to seeing you both next week for dim sum.

Daniel Hector Washington
Living in the Dark

I wear yellow flippers to the party  
but nobody acknowledges them  
or offers me a drink. It kills me  
that people don’t share  
my exact feelings, at all times  
even when I spike the punch  
with old diary entries.  
I wept on the bus here  
over another school shooting  
in America. I fired spitballs  
at an immigration officer  
through the window even though  
it was cold outside and traffic was fast  
then returned to sucking my beer yes  
through a straw - I had a toothache  
made worse by the weather.  
I am afraid of the dentist /  
statistics / flightless birds / bedroom tax /  
the provident woman / the postman  
sometimes / preparing tofu / letters  
from the bank / letters from school / letters  
from distant relatives. It is February  
and everybody’s skint and freezing.  
I know of a man with no legs  
who was declared fit to work  
two weeks ago. Without the sun  
I can do nothing to fix it all.
two dollars are enough—
one for taco bell, one for the vending machine,
for a kashi bar the size of your thumb—and once,
with your mother, you would buy organic cereal,
two boxes for the week—
but two dollars are enough,
if you skip breakfast,
if your friends are generous with their food.

pack as much as you can carry
in a laundry basket, and put your clothes on top, and anyone
who looks into your car will think
that you’re just like any other student
going home for the weekend.

you will recall back to school shopping—
a custom of the country (the one in the suburbs,
the one you grew up in)—and think it strange, that you bought magazines
to decide what to buy.
but you chose well. those button-downs
will last through senior year.

the library closes late,
and the basement of the parking garage
does not close at all—and you will remember this,
though there is always someplace else to sleep.
it isn’t prostitution, not really, not if
he never gives you money.
people will think you puritanical,
years later, when you mention
that you didn’t drink in college—but
it wasn’t that you didn’t
need a drink.
god knows you will love your professor,
for pouring you a tall glass of off-brand baileys,
the day your cat dies.

miscellaneous tips— choose gas before food,
and birth control pills before either.
fuck someone good at fixing things.

the climate is much like the one that you are used to.
yet it, too, will be new
if you lose your coat.

but you will say that you are always warm,
and they will believe you, and they will believe
that you are a minimalist
and on a diet and in love
if you are half-convincing.

and if you pass
the bulletin board and see the offer
for a semester in florence, for more than the cost
of your pell grant, you will spit
and tear the flyer from its tack.
Mary Fowke

**Birdhouse**

She indulged in writing. Words transported her as though beads along a prayer string and became birds in the branches of a plane tree at the foot of Avenida dos Aliados in Porto. She referred to the sound they made as a “cacophony of the best kind” and wanted to transcribe both it and her state of mind upon hearing it. Her subjectivity, despite this, was something of which to be ashamed. This was partly due to its syntax. Her name was Leslie. She had murdered a woman named Mary in 1969 and instilled fear in me as a child.

Last summer, August, 2017 to be precise, I came across a framed photo of a great aunt who died in 1926. She was born exactly a century before I was. I had been told only a few things about her, and these from my mother even though she was a paternal great aunt. These were that there were no photos of her, she had never married, she had painted, and her nickname was Birdy. I also came across her obituary, which described her charitable works and provided other details, such as her address: Division St, Oshawa, Ontario, and the cause of her death: a stroke. Rummaging through an old box in the attic I discovered a photo of her and hung it on a wall. It shows a woman with symmetrical, somewhat austere but also delicate features (hence her nickname) and short hair with a band across her forehead, the kind associated with the roaring twenties.

On an ongoing basis, I feel dispersed. Like ashes, thrown from an urn to the air, where they sparkle. If beads, they’d be made of carbon; if a string they’d also be a spine. In grade four, when Mrs Wentzell asked us which non-human creature we would like to be I said a bird. Memory is almost everything, right up there with love.

When my father, Birdy’s nephew, lost his memory, in his eighties, he told me he was going next door to visit neighbours who had moved away over half a century ago. We were sitting in the kitchen and he kept trying to get up out of his chair to go there. “I’m going to call on the Chestnuts”, he kept repeating. They were Americans who were summertime neighbours and he had always been fond of them.

He was sitting in the exact spot in the kitchen where I had sat one rainy summer morning as a child of about ten. Only the chairs were different then, chairs I can no longer remember, though I can imagine them. I was watching my mother, who was standing across from me to the left, bake raspberry tarts. Or maybe they were not tarts but a pie; the thing was, I liked the tart tins, which were miniature, almost doll sized.

Carol King was belting out It’s Too Late on the radio. It was the summer her album Tapestry was at the top of the charts. Or maybe it was Carly Simon who was on the radio that day, singing about taking a Lear Jet up to Nova Scotia to see a total eclipse of the sun. The Canada of my childhood was infused with Americana like this, from its best – the other American summer residents now living in the house that had belonged to the Chestnuts – to its worst, like the Manson murders of the summer of 1969, bizarrely, two years after the infamous “summer of love” and one year after the student riots in Paris.

The atmosphere or mood created by the rain falling gently on the grass outside the kitchen window, my mother’s presence - she was simply there - the smell of her baking mixed with that of the woodstove, which she may or may not have been using that day, and the music on the radio, which she may or may not have been singing along to (she loved to sing), resulted in a subjective state I find myself sometimes wanting to re-
turn to. It is as though it has become a “felt” photo that I want to penetrate, to indulge in.

The “she” I started off with – Leslie - was one of the several teenagers who were “lost” in the 1960’s and became Charles Manson’s “followers”. Her father had left home – left the family. She herself left home and lived in the streets. She became pregnant and had an abortion, apparently forced upon her by her mother. The media reported that she was subsequently “angry” with her. As part of the murders orchestrated by Manson, and involving psychedelic drug use, she killed a woman named Mary by stabbing her more than sixteen times. She is still incarcerated in California four decades on.

Later, she wrote in captivity, in journals. I think of her periodically when I scan my bookshelves and see the book written by the prosecutor in the trial. I have charitable thoughts about her though I have not undertaken charitable acts such as petitioning for her release. That said, I have signed countless petitions during my adult life. As one does. As perhaps Florence would have done, in her day.

All the difference in the world between a birdhouse and a birdcage. Though language is both. Birdy’s language would have been different from mine in a nuanced way since we are blood relations and share Canadian English. A generation removed from my father, she would have used words that he did not, in the sense that my father used words that were common parlance for him while outdated for me. He used the word copper for penny. He called ketchup catsup. He would refer to a delicious meal as a sumptuous repast or as splendid. He called me Marylove when I was little. He would have called Birdy Aunt Florence or perhaps Aunt Flo. Birdy came from Non-Conformist roots but would have been Baptist or Presbyterian, since her family’s religion had morphed when they moved from England to the New World.

She was one of five siblings, my grandfather, Frederick, being the eldest and Birdy fourth in line. She had another older brother whose name was Everett, an older sister, Mary Caroline, for whom I was named, and a younger bother named Lincoln. My father spoke of his uncles, and his Aunt Carly, as he called Mary Caroline, with affection but he never mentioned his Aunt Florence.

As I mentioned, I am dispersed. I identify and connect with this and that, as one does. With prayer bead words that represent birds, for instance, birds that migrate and whose existences are fleeting. Who flit but also nest. Fluffy, feathery, safe.

Leslie has spent her entire life in a cage. Yet this is not so much about her or her captive subjectivity, as it is about me connecting with her through words and images, as with Birdy. Flights of memory and reconstitution have taken me here to the random bits that constitute my early nest, a particular childhood summer one. I have indulged in the privilege and freedom of having the time to do this, as well as having the frame of mind. In defense of indulgences, it is presumed that forgiveness has already taken place. Now there is a picture on a page, a name and a face and a bird that sings.
The Built House

The house was built on the scrap-metal/plastic/glass/wood offerings of girls without fear. Fear is defined as that icy, hollow feeling in the belly that causes one to fly, freeze or fight. It could be said the girls scrounged their pink palms raw with misplaced determination.

In the construction of the house, approximately 892 bobby pins (black, brown, pink, blue, silver, yellow, leopard-printed) were lost, which roughly equates to 68.6 bobby pins (just over the standard amount for a single Goody® pack) per girl over a two-year period. A dozen or so rusted, dust-covered pins have since been discovered throughout the house sandwiched among floor boards, lounging among the coffee mugs, standing (soldier straight) in the carpet pile, their plastic nubs long gone.

Makeshift uses for bobby pins include but are not limited to:
- clothes/safety pin
- paperclip
- bookmark
- needle (for ribbon, yarn, shoelace, etc.)
- cherry/olive pitter
- lockpick
- roach (as in Mary Jane, hash, dope, reefer, grass, ganja) clip
- fish hook

The house’s original occupancy was two but has since been reduced by half.

The girls periodically (once or twice a year) visit the house but remain outside. They prefer to imagine the house’s inner life by what can be gleaned from its exterior: a turned-over red bird feeder with bead-like seeds stuck to its sides, a water-logged welcome mat, a spider-web blanketed water spout, a seasonally nondescript sun-faded wreath. The paint, while not yet peeling, looks ripe for the picking.

At the end of each visit, the girls blow imaginary kisses (to the house, to its occupant) goodbye.
Not A Bee

But a hornet, in January,
walking across the carpet; all six

legs heel-toeing unsteadily
like a drunk with a sober purpose.

Sub-arctic outside and despite two
heaters full-blast it’s only

reached arctic inside. Where did it come
from arcing its way from one side

of the room to the other? And for
what purpose? Frost fireworks fill the window

with stars, standstill explosions the shifting
sun will erase. The march of time. On

the bed the dog is unfolded like a Swiss
army knife, head, tail, and legs extended.

Everything used to matter so much
but then you died, and everyone scattered

and everything changed. Now I’m belly down
on the floor watching a hornet heading,

by any means necessary, home.
Tales of the Web

Anansi baba creepin.
Watch him what he do.
Trade your seein eye ja
For a piece of spoiled fruit.

I know who my father is. He is the trickster. My god, I am his son.
Anointed, I was appointed to be the dark devil blue smiling, honey seeping through golden places, milk running down charcoal faces, sweet kisses in the moon light, quick hard goodbye, gentle greetings to a new sun. I’ll never be done and gone again returning when…

Anansi baba singin.
Listen how he do.
Words a ’weavin spells now.
To catch you like he do.

I know who my father is. He is the father of all lies. My god, I am his son.
Crowned, I was drowned with all my brothers the second I left my mother’s womb, tomb laying open on the third day, prayers begging let him stay with me just a little while longer, growing stronger in the fire, untouched bodies swaying in the flame, there is power in the name, don’t move till I speak, I am weak. The meek shall inherit the…

Anansi baba leapin.
Movin like he do.
Jumpin like de spida
From trunk to leaf to root.

I know who my father is. He is the dead man. My god, I am his son.
Beholden, I was stolen from freedom and sold into his casket of lies, deprived of any breath of truth and serenity, the end of things was beginning for me, to die everyday is a blessing and a curse, no birth for the child of a dead thing, lying, dying. Buy me more time to find my…

Anansi baba peepin.
Look him how he do.
Eyes like stars in mirrors
Lookin back at you.
Eleven

We plant the trees in spring the year Alice turns eleven, the year of the sunflowers blooming purple in a haze of honeybees. We are rebuilding our home, tearing down walls, replacing the bathroom sink, kitchen counters. Alex and Ryan build new window frames. We spend an entire weekend on our knees, lining up floorboards, measuring and cutting and aching. Alice learns to use a paint roller and grows so tall. When she chooses her tree on Earth Day in the park, she carries it the half-mile home down Canton Avenue on her own.

In the moment it’s happening, I see myself telling the story somewhere in the future. How she touches the thin bark, runs her hands over the new leaves. How she carries the tree in its one gallon plastic pot in her backpack, its branches like plumage behind her head. Is there a word for this nostalgia for the present? In the moment of planting, I feel the shade of the future tree, and the memory, also in the future, of the sapling. I see my daughter as the woman she will be and, in that woman, the girl she is. I remember her, though she’s standing in front of me.
How to Lose Your Home

Launching or landing; I can’t tell if those are branches boiling over with blackbirds or unrecovered remains of a charred plane. Or if it matters. From this hill that overlooks what is left of our town, which isn’t much, figures approximate. My parents are ants. Our home made up of plastic blocks. & the lights in our home, flintsparks. Briefly, so briefly, gone: the last holdouts. As stars yield to morning. As the neighbors sell their lots to lengthen the runway planes have a habit of missing. Here’s how it happens: I launch a rock & it lands. In the soft earth or through the windshield of the man paying us for our memories. What is known as the final straw. If it still matters, we held out as long as we could. All it takes is one brief shattering for my parents to give in. As if blameless I watch the bulldozers come. High on this hill, flattening, as if I can still measure with my fingers where we came from & are going.
An Elegy for Scioto County

The devil in them hills is manmade,
chock full of needles and a sting’d make a coal canary shudder.
When the weather gets rough and the baby needs her diapers,
choices ain’t so easy and when neither one of ya’ll got steady work
prayers don’t do you no good.

But sure as shit it ain’t the government’s business.
If you ain’t from here then you don’t belong
and sometimes even if you was from here, a spell
away will make any man loathe to call you his brother
for fear you’re after his job, his woman, or his pills.

And the only solace is settin’ them deep dark nights out on the banks of Brush Creek,
straining to hear that long forgotten hymn your mammie sung
at them pines, that’s been knocking around somewhere inside your brain,
afire with codeine and tinged with a loss so grave that you bury it deep
within, a time capsule for another millennia—

But hillbillies ain’t got a millennia.
Hell, we don’t even got tomorrow before the chill
of the wind whips through the uneven slats of the shed,
the tops of our hills are blown off for profit,
and the baby’s crying for her own fix, mom shaking
and sweating in the corner, burning for the devil himself.
**Little Known Fact.**

The brower history of a sex robot is just a list of nearby churches. Even in Philip K. Dick’s world, if you head down the right alley, you will find them there, too, minds exact, lost to reverie, trying to sneak a glimpse of *The Word For The World is Forest* in-between their trying to sneak a glimpse of the outside world through cantilever beams of light coming through windows of devotion.
The game should be over now, so they must be in extra-time. This is the part that drives Kate crazy. It’s like when the plane lands, and you’re waiting to get off. The trip is over. You should be done, but you aren’t. There is a desperation to this phase. Plus it seems secretive somehow. You don’t quite know how much time is left; it’s a kind of slush fund for the referee. Fuzziness introduced into certainty. Definite halves. Definite amounts, and then like the baker or deli guy throwing a little something extra in, just a little more. Extra time is the fries in the bottom of the bag. It’s the store announcing they’re closed. They haven’t kicked you out yet, but you know they are going to soon. It’s desperation intertwined with hope: wait, wait, wait, not yet. I’m not done.

Isn’t that what we all want? Just a little more time? Isn’t it what Nanny had asked for while holding Kate’s hand? She hadn’t been ready to go. None of that “I’m ready” or “I’m at peace” bullshit. She had wanted one more day, even hooked up to the ventilator and the wires and the tubes, and knowing there would be nothing that could change things at the last minute. No golden goal. No envelope in the mail. No miraculous cure. Just a final whistle. That’s what those machines should have at the last breath and the flat-lining. A whistle. The doctor or nurse could come their hands in the air to indicate “That’s it. Game over. Time for everyone to pack up and move on.”

Even when we know the end is close, we think there still might be time. We can still score. Somehow. We can recover. We can apologize. We can forgive. Is it Catholicism where someone can repent at the last second and still go to heaven no matter they’ve done? The few Catholics Kate knows love sports, so there probably is some connection. You can play a horrible game and still win.

But the whistle is coming. Everyone knows it. Kate can sense the rustling through the bleachers. She puts her hand in her bag to get her phone. She stirs around, feels something odd, and pulls out a three-inch X-Man Wolverine grappling a two-inch Superman. Junk. Even in her purse. Junk like this fills the house, the garage, the cars, the yards. Once, in the middle of sex, David had reached into their tangle of legs and, like some kind of magic trick, pulled out a Playmobil figure.

Kate had helped her mother clean out Nanny’s house, and they had discovered closets and drawers stuffed with junk. For years, every time they took Nana out to eat, they would laugh at how she dumped the restaurant table’s sugar packets and crackers into her purse. They thought she was frugally using them at home, but she wasn’t. She had squirreled them away in cupboards. Pounds and pounds of food in ounce and quarter-ounce packets. “Ah Jesus,” her mother had said, “I’m not going to do this to you, Kate.” But she had as well. The dementia taking her early before she could clean out her own house, if she had ever intended to. So Kate had emptied her mother’s house as well, all the flotsam and jetsam, the detritus of a life; she was better at it the second time, not agonizing about what anything might be worth.

It’s her mother’s birthday this week; after the game, Kate will go get a present, some flowers and a card, and she will make the boys come with her, dragging them out to see a woman who doesn’t recognize them and who talks constantly, but not lucidly. Her mother’s rambling monologues are unfiltered, profane, and often vicious. Kate finds them funny, but they make the boys nervous. Kate wonders sometimes why she goes. Is it
because it’s expected? Is she playing the role of the good daughter? Not to her mother, who is no longer there, but to the staff? The flowers say to them, *Look, I care. I’m not a bad person.* Kate doesn’t tell herself that somewhere inside, somehow her mother knows. Believing that would make it unbearable. The body at that home is an empty shell in the shape of her mother.

David’s parents are the opposite of hers. They go on and on like energizer bunnies, ignoring any attempt to discuss end-of-life preparations, wills, medical issues, the house. They travel constantly, each time bringing back stuff: ceramic bowls, holiday decorations, leather-tooled bags, brass picture frames. Each time they show her and David something from a trip, Kate thinks, “I’m going to have to deal with that someday.” Their plan seems to be to leave the mess behind, and David shrugs when she brings it up, saying “In a way, that’s fair. After all the years they cleaned up after us.” Except Kate knows it’s going to fall on her. There is no way that David and his sisters were going to be able to rationally deal with what is to come. They argue over what restaurant to go to for lunch. Two of them can never agree, and all four simply gridlock. David’s father, Harry, said once, “You guys fight about the little stuff, but you’ll be fine about the big stuff,” but Kate thinks this is either naively optimistic, or willfully blind. She can see it coming. Every time she and David visit, it is clear that his parents aren’t taking care of the house the way they used to. At first it was burned-out light bulbs, loose door handles, dishes in the sink. Now, it is ripped screens, broken windows, drawers stuck closed. The house, like their bodies, is deteriorating.

Of course, to be fair, Kate and David’s house isn’t in any better shape. There is the layer of toys, for one thing. Wolverine. Superman. Spiderman. Optimus Prime. Playmobil characters. Like dust, they pile up and get into everything. The steps. The beds. Her purse. She often thinks about her grandfather who always kept glasses turned upside-down so dust wouldn’t get in. Even decades after the Depression, he couldn’t break himself of this habit that he’d learned as a boy. He would wipe a clean plate before he put food on it, a plate that might have just come out of the dishwasher, or one that he had just seen someone wash. He couldn’t help it. Dust was everywhere in his mind. Like him, Kate suspects she’s being changed by the experience of living through these times. Someday, she’ll be in assisted living, warily poking at her mashed potatoes in case Magneto or Rogue is buried within.

Kate tries to get rid of the stuff. She takes a trunkload to the Goodwill what seems every month, but legos, dinosaurs, storm troopers relentlessly flood into their lives. Kate sometimes imagines driving a bulldozer through the house or having the sweeper machine from *The Cat in the Hat.* The end of that book is a parenting fantasy. That is the part that is unbelievable. On a rainy day or a sunny day, kids trash the house and, at the end, it stays trashed. Her heart sinks with every birthday invitation because she knows they will come back with a “goodie” bag of plastic knick-knack crap from the Dollar Store. Why do people do this? People who should know better? It’s like giving cigarettes to a smoker with a bad cough. Who was that Puritan who was getting crushed to death and kept saying, “More stones, more stones”? Please, another Barbie. Another Professor Xavier. Another 5,000 piece Lego kit.

Kate considers pitching Wolverine and Superman into the trash barrel, and she might if they were figures she didn’t recognize. Aliens. A Zorromeegatron or whatever. But Superman? She can’t throw out Superman anymore than she could throw out Yoda. Besides Tyler might want these. Clearly, he has been playing with them, and he will miss them. Plus maybe they would be worth something someday. It might end up being a rare Happy McMeal Wolverine collectable. She doesn’t want to be *that* mother, the one who threw out the
comic book collection that would be worth millions now. Except everything is collectable. Every toy, every figure, every trinket. That doesn’t mean they are valuable.

This is the paralysis that affects every parent. Astronauts with kids probably find creased Pokemon cards in their zero-gravity suits, and, then debate about whether to bring them back, thinking, “I wonder if this is part of a set. I wonder if they need this.” The parents end up caring more about the crap then the kids. They end up being mules. Sherpas. A van is just a huge storage bin. A house is simply a big toy chest.

She should at least get rid of one. She decides Wolverine should go. She doesn’t care about him although Hugh Jackman is hot. But Superman is smaller, cheaper, even a possible choking hazard. She thinks Tyler has reached the point that he won’t put random things in his mouth, but in college she saw a guy jam a billiard ball in his mouth. Why? Because he had been told it would go in but it wouldn’t come out, and he wanted to see if that was true. So maybe boys never reached that point. Maybe Superman should go. Or she could have them fight it out. That seems fair.

She makes the two toys seem to grapple, a fight to the death for one of them, and as she’s playing with them, parents around her start applauding and cheering. Someone has scored in the final minute. She looks up, hoping it wasn’t Tyler, hoping she hadn’t missed something important.
What Am I to You?

I ask, passive-aggressive, but hopeful she’ll say
Red of the Rainbow & the Brightest Orange,
rather than admit I’m opposite end of the spectrum:
ultraviolet, invisible. I want her
to call me her Golden Elephant, her Favorite Madness,
her Song of Many Verses with a Sweet Refrain.
She nods, trembles, tells me nothing
I haven’t heard before. There’s not a line
of sunlight in those shadows.
I’m more the Lie She Tells Most Often,
or a Prayer at Night That No One Hears,
Not Even a Minor Deity Like Me.
Design Flaw

The construction of the Sydney Opera House began before it should have: before the blueprints were complete, before the architect knew how to make the large, amorphous sails from his illustration, meant to evoke the ships on Sydney’s harbor, into something free-standing. The strongest symbolism can’t keep a roof from collapsing.

It took twelve tries to get the geometry right. They considered parabolas, then ellipsoids: neither practical nor cheap. It was years before they thought of spheres. The six iconic shells that arc over the harbor were derived from the surface of a single sphere. The solution to the design flaw was something the architect held in his hand as a child: a snow globe or a baseball: shaken, released.

On the tour with you during the part of our honeymoon we most resemble tourists, I twist my wedding band around my finger. I’m getting used to the way it tightens, then loosens depending on the weather and how much salt I’ve consumed. So many items are left in my childhood bedroom. I have let go of so much of what my parents gave me be on this side of the world with you.
Admission, On Leaving the Port of Belfast, 1988

From here in the middle of the lough  
I see both shores converge behind the boat  
As the City of the Gantries moves away,  
Long lines processing slowly on each side.

Ahead, tilted clouds build to a height,  
Slab to slab,  
Cemented from behind with trowel-sweeps  
Of acid-yellow, failing light.

With coldness I know where I am.  
At heart everything is cold.  
From there I can begin.

This city that I’m leaving taught me these:  
Hatred of words,  
Hatred of heat,  
Hatred of compromise.

Knowing my own capacity for sham  
And learning others’,  
Humiliated by my own desires  
And learning others’,  
I vowed myself to all that is cold and hard.

Gradually more and more at sea  
The ship carries its world of sound through the dark.  
I stand in the breeze of passing,  
Grasping a rail,  
Letting myself grow colder,  
Shedding the layers that build up if I move,  
Waiting until the cold outside  
Matches the cold within.

My hand is warming the steel,  
My cheek the wind.
They Wanted War

They wanted a war with us. I don’t think many of us knew it at the time. They didn’t exactly go out of their way to let us know that they wanted a war with us, though. I’m not sure why. I suspect it might have been sort of a sense of civilized politeness about them. They wanted a war with us, but they didn’t...like...want to be rude about it or anything. So they just sent us a little note that got right to the point. It just said: “Hello. We would like a war with you. Thanks.”

I don’t know that they sent the note to anyone in particular. They just sort of decided to send it out to ask if it was okay that there be a war or whatever. Nothing more than that. Without any formal notice of who it was, there was no way to get back to them about the whole war thing. I would suspect that there was a bit of a bemused confusion about the note before it was casually discarded. Nothing major. So it didn’t really register with the larger population and the people who were aware of it probably figured it was some kind of joke.

So they ended up sending out another note that added a “please,” and writing it in a stronger, bigger font that was perhaps a bit more assertive. And they’d made a few copies and sent it out to a few more people. I got one of those notes, which was a bit of a strange situation because I wasn’t really formally representing...anyone. I happened to have a few idle moments when I received the note or I wouldn’t have given it a second thought. I looked at it a bit more closely and did a little poking around online, discovering that there were a few others who had received the note.

We got to talking about it. None of us really knew each other. There didn’t seem to be any specific reason for specifically getting ahold of US to declare war. We might well have been chosen at random from a list of people in the population they on which they wanted to declare war. Clearly either they were intentional about doing a very good job of declaring war on us or they just didn’t know how to declare war at all.

And so in a sense we kind of felt sorry for them. I don’t know that any of us felt sorry enough for them to actually go ahead and call attention to their desire to declare war to the right authorities or anything like that, but we DID feel sorry for them. There was no question that we were feeling like we should probably do SOMETHING for them because they were insistent enough to want to send a few different people to let us know, but were they really all that interested in getting into the whole “war” thing with us?

We really had to consider what might happened if someone took them seriously as some kind of serious threat because . . . they seemed like nice enough people and we didn’t want them to get like . . . killed or anything like that. So maybe it wasn’t really anything that we needed to call to anybody’s attention. That
being said, wouldn’t it have been rude NOT to forward the note off to the right people? It would only be fair. I mean…it’s not like those notes were necessarily meant for us, were they? Not us directly anyway...so perhaps it was up to us to actually get the information to the right people anyway. It wasn’t our business if they were to actually get hurt was it?

So we were all ready to actually forward the note to some kind of authority when we stopped to consider the possible consequences for us. With no formal notice of who it was who was asking to declare war, one of us brought up the fact that it might seem a bit like WE were the once who were declaring war on us, which might be a bit difficult to explain. And that was assuming, of course, that we were taken seriously at all.

We’d be laughed out of a police station for even bringing it to anyone’s attention at all. This is, of course, if they’d even pay any attention to it at all. In all likelihood there would be reports made and the notes would be filed away never to be seen again. It would be a very formal kind of disinterest that would descend on the notes. We all agreed that we didn’t want that. And we all agreed that we weren’t in any kind of position to do anything else about the situation.

It would have been nice to be able to actually get ahold of them and let them know that we weren’t the ones to try to declare war on, but it was going to be difficult as we didn’t exactly know who they were or anything. It was a bit upsetting all in all, but what were we going to do? SO we went about the business of trying to forget about the whole thing altogether. Personally I felt as though I was doing a pretty good job of forgetting about it until the initial invasion force showed-up.

They were really nice about attacking us. They were really nice about totally decimating our military. It was all very polite. They entered and mercilessly killed everyone who tried to stop them. I guess it kind of felt a little weird for me personally, but I’m not entirely certain why. It wasn’t like I didn’t receive any kind of warning at all. I knew it was coming and I knew that they were going to officially engage in war with us. I guess it was the follow-through that I wasn’t expecting. That and being a prisoner of war. I don’t think I was expecting that. They’ve been really nice ever since they’ve taken over, though...so I guess I can’t really complain.
The blue corrugated back of the screen
matched the parabola roof that sheltered
the ticket box. In my dad’s big Chevy
we piled in to see a movie, arriving at dusk,
playing on the swing sets below the screen,
the rhythmic rush of being pushed outward
to kick at the audience of anonymous cars
before falling backward, like a second thought,
waiting until dark so the movie could start.
What possessed my parents to take us to an R-rated movie?
Maybe we took what we got at the drive-in, whatever
was showing, and no one asked questions if
a blue collar family with underage kids
rolled in to see Bonnie and Clyde. I was six years old
and remember an extended scene playing out
on the screen of a shoot out punctuated
by the close-up of a hand with a finger missing.
And that’s it. My attention was more focused
on the scene within the car, on soda bubbles clinging
to the edge of the circle atop a waxed paper cup,
on the heavy face of the electronic speaker,
its spiral neck tethered to a post beyond my father
in the driver’s seat, my mother on the passenger side,
and my three sisters and me playing in the back,
how the drive-in made us both outside and in
at the same time, an inkling that home comes with you,
while the miracle of a soundtrack piped into the car
makes you notice the weight of every
simple action long after the movie’s over,
the slide of soles on a step, the click of a key
in the lock, and the door opening to the glow
of a light above the kitchen sink.
Raoul lay in bed for a long time, staring at the smooth glass bell of the electric light suspended from the ceiling like a man on the gibbet. He decided never to work at the insurance firm again. As he bathed, his hands traveled over skin that seemed as fresh as a newborn’s. He took the cable car downtown, bought a new camel-colored suit, and, at the barbershop, had his beard removed entirely. When he looked in the mirror, he could no longer recognize himself.

He wondered whether all people hid others inside them, waiting to emerge. The old Raoul was dead— for better or for worse—and in his place, the new bought a bunch of lilies, the favorite flower of the dead, and took it to the bridge. Even this far inland, the gulls followed the barges. How long could they survive without their native sea? The fragrance of the flowers was strong enough almost to erase the stench of burning coal. Raoul tossed them to the river.
A man chastised him: *Just think what the world would be like if everyone did that.* Raoul said, *I’m sorry. I’ve just lost someone.* The man said, *Why not visit his grave?* Raoul said, *There’s no grave to visit. There was no body to bury. But it all happened so fast. I don’t feel sad. I feel free.* The man, who introduced himself as Morel, put a hand on Raoul’s shoulder: *That means the pain is still to come. Leave the past behind. From now on, you must be someone else, someone entirely different from your present self.*

* 

Thus, Raoul, who had been himself—his new self—for only a few hours, became Eugène, Morel’s distant cousin. Morel took him to the Café Cécile. Chatting amongst Morel’s friends, Eugène invented for himself an upbringing in the mountains. His father had kept him locked in the attic, and he had escaped by setting fire to the house. This is how he had acquired so many scars. Only recently had he knelt at his father’s tombstone and offered forgiveness.
Whether Morel’s friends believed anything that he said was irrelevant, for it was his story, not theirs. And when Morel said that it was time to go home, Eugène asked to go with him. After all, he had just arrived in the city and had no home of his own. Morel agreed. And as he and Eugène strolled arm in arm, he confessed that he had always wondered what had become of his tragic cousin, born to his mother’s sister but kidnapped when he was but two years old.

* 

It’s fortunate, he said, that we’re only cousins. Otherwise, what we’re about to do might be construed as incest. Had Eugène been someone like Raoul, he would have thought the same thing, but as it was, his mind had been broken by an abusive father. Do you have an attic? he said. Yes, said Morel. Eugène said, I’d like to lock you inside. Morel said, Perhaps it will free you from your ghosts. And in the days that followed, Eugène sat alone, listening, looking out at a city that was slowly becoming familiar.
INTERVIEW: Leamon Green, Artist

Artist and TSU Professor Leamon Green discusses creativity and discouragement, work-life balance, and learning to survive as an artist away from home.

Leamon Green is a professor of fine arts at Texas Southern University. He earned his undergraduate degree from the Cleveland Institute of Art and his MFA from Temple University in Philadelphia. He was a recipient of the Fulbright award in 2007, which allowed him to live and teach in Tanzania for a year. Green is represented by Hooks-Epstein Galleries in Houston, Texas.

MW: You are a professional artist along with working full-time as a professor. At any given time do you feel as if you are neglecting one of those roles in favor of the other?

LG: Yes! It’s constant… (laughs)

MW: Is it discouraging, or have you found ways to balance the two?

LG: No… Well it’s kind of like, when I first started teaching, I considered myself an artist who was teaching. And I would try to leave myself plenty of time for making art. It was a big priority. And over the years, its gone the other way. There’s less downtime for me to focus on my art, because by the time I get home I’m too tired to do anything, so I’ll just vegetate ‘til I go to sleep.

MW: Same!

LG: But I think it’s mainly the workload that’s expected here. When I was in school… I went to an art school. My undergraduate and graduate curriculum was more art than liberal arts. So my professors all had a schedule where they would teach 2 or 3 days a
week and then they were gone. They weren’t on campus at all, they were presumably doing their own work, you know? And they were actively showing, you could see their names in the newspaper or whatever about shows they were having. So here, it’s just, there are a lot more expectations. I think some faculty can make it work, but I can’t really. Not satisfactorily anyway. I do the best I can, but my production level has definitely dropped in terms of finished work.

**MW:** Are you able to work in shorts bursts, for example, can you come home and say, “I have an hour, I’m going to do some art real quick?” Do you have to be in a certain state of mind, or are there certain moods?

**LG:** That’s basically the way I work now: “Ok I have an hour…” Even if it’s just going into my studio and looking at stuff, or thinking about stuff, or piddling around, or trying to change a color or something, then that’s what I do. And so I might draw, might work on a print, or might work on a painting, you know but it’s just a little bit. But like on the weekends I just stay in the studio, 8 hours or something.

**MW:** It seems like it would be hard to work like that. I know when I want to do something creative, I need like a whole day, and a good mood, and everything to be lined up just right.

**LG:** Yeah, well you learn that you can’t afford [to wait for] a good mood. So you just have to start. Right.

**MW:** I guess that’s what separates the professional from the amateur.

**LG:** No, well, you just have to get selfish and say “No matter what, I’m gonna do this.” And that’s what you do.

**MW:** Do you critique your own work, while you’re doing it or when its finished?

**LG:** Usually while I’m doing it, because when I’m finished it’s too late. I don’t want to touch it again, so that’s why it takes so long, because you’re like “Oh hmm I wonder if I change this color…”

**MW:** Do you have a process of critiquing your work, like certain points that you go through and check off, or do you just look at it?

**LG:** I look at it… and I try to look at it different ways, like looking at
it in a mirror... then I start thinking about, what is it I really want it to express? And that’s where I think of it as like “tangents” where you’re sort of going along this way and then you see something else, “Oh, what about over there?” And then you go in a different direction. So that’s kind of what happens. I guess the best example is when you’re painting a portrait, trying to make it look like someone. What I usually end up doing is going ahead and painting it, and then after I’m done painting it then I’ll look at it and I’ll think, that doesn’t look right, or that’s not the right color, or shade, or the eye is too big, or something, and then I’ll change it. And usually when I start changing it then something different happens. And either you say, “That’s a mess”, or you say “Well that’s interesting,” and go with it. So the process can be very disorienting and distracting. But the fun is when you do something and it comes out unexpected.

MW: Who are some of your favorite artists or artists you identify with?

LG: Well... We were just talking about Charles White. I’ve always liked him. Charles White has a big retrospective exhibit at MOMA in NYC right now.

MW: Are you planning to go?

LG: Yeah! I’m going to go to that. I like a lot of different kinds of art and artists, but currently I’m thinking a lot about Charles White. He was like the draftsman. Could draw anything, anybody, he was known for portraits. He did portraits of Harry Belafonte, Nina Simone and all of these stars. And he was very active politically, with the Black Power movement and Black Arts movement so he got to meet a lot of those people. It’s good that he’s having this retrospective because I don’t think there’s ever been one. There have been shows of his work but I feel he’s basically underrated.

MW: I know you lived in Tanzania for a year and you continue to visit. How did that change, or did it change, how you approach your work?

LG: Umm, well I don’t know... I’ll let you know when I figure it out.

MW: So then it did change in some way?

LG: Yeah, well you know, while I was there, I was living there. I started going as part of the study abroad faculty-led program. But while I was living there it was more like just trying to observe the culture. And I came away being really impressed with how well the different cultures work together. There’s the African cultures obviously but there’s Asian, some European especially thru religion, you have all those merging together and it’s this relatively stable environment. People just kind of accept it: “Oh well you’re a Muslim, you’re a Christian, whatever, we have business and we do our business and then you do whatever you do and I’ll do what I do...”

MW: Right, and we don’t have to agree about the big questions in life to get along.

LG: Yeah, I was really impressed with that. And then of course just seeing the art. What they’re known for in Tanzania is wood carvings, so seeing those and being able to talk to some of those artists was really impressive because they’re all self-taught. When I was there they were doing these wonderful carvings with few to no power tools – if they wanted to use a chisel they had to make it. Stuff like that. Thinking about, how do you survive here [as an artist]? I brought paint with me but I knew I would run out. I thought, “Oh I’ll just go to the store and get more.” Well there’s no store!

MW: And no Amazon delivery either?

LG: Although now I bet they have Amazon. There was a hardware store, a little shop in the middle of the city that sold art supplies. And this guy literally had like a kiosk set up and behind the counter he had a few oil paints, on one or two of the shelves was some acrylic paint. And the rest was hardware, keys, hammers and tools and whatever. Because there are no art stores here, every art student knew about this place and finally they took me there. There were no maps, you just had to know how to get there. Trying to figure out how to do things without the benefit of an art store was really challenging. I brought plenty of pencils and charcoal and all that kind of stuff. But I didn’t have paper. I thought I could get paper there, and there were people who made paper but only in smaller sizes.

MW: What environmental or psychological factors do you consider to be helpful or limiting to your creative process?

LG: I guess when I have something else to do. But when I’m in my studio, like on a Saturday, and I know I can sleep late and then just go into my work space and be there all day, that’s really great.

MW: What kind of impact do you
hope your work has? Aside from the message, is it enough that it’s beautiful?

LG: Well I hope it has a message but I never really worry about the message. I don’t want it to be too didactic. I don’t want it to explain itself too clearly to people. I want them to be intrigued by what they see and try to figure it out or bring their own meaning to it. To me that’s a lot more powerful. A lot of times I invent stories, like with this one (work in progress). But I want it to be open-ended, suggestive. Not too much of a straight narrative.

MW: Is there anything in your personal life that influenced you to choose your career and were you ever discouraged by anyone?

LG: Every time I hear No, I’m discouraged (laughs).

MW: Really? Do you still feel that?

LG: Yes, oh yeah, but also now I don’t care so much, I’ve been at it a while. I’ve always liked art, always been intrigued by it, I remember as a little boy trying to copy an image, a photograph, something I saw or an illustration from a comic book, just trying to
**Artist Statement**

The artworks’ content is derived from reflecting on similarities and differences in cultures. Specifically, the imagery reflects the complicated definition of being African American in an increasingly global community. The figures are anonymous portraits of characters or types, who could be family members, either yours or mine. There are clues to identities such as patterns viewed in the clothing or the surrounding space, and historical African or European objects, all placed in ways that support the figures. For the artist, identity is an accumulation of cultures one experiences both directly and indirectly.
copy that, and I remember being really frustrated that I couldn’t draw people that look like people. But there’s always been discouraging things, like I was just talking about graduate school with a former student of mine, and he was telling me how one of his instructors is really hard on him. I was like, “That’s my graduate experience all over again.” There are always those kinds of challenges, and then after school, either applying to be in an exhibition or in a gallery, hearing them say no… those kinds of challenges.

MW: Does that influence your creativity? Or your motivation to work the next day?

LG: Not so much anymore. But especially right after school, for me it was constant “No.” It would slow me down. But still, I get a lot of pleasure out of making something and bringing it to some sort of a conclusion point. And then I put it away. Next! And then I try to work on something different. That just kind of keeps me going. And, you know, I can’t keep all this stuff in my house. So I do want to show it, and display it, and try to sell it because I think that also helps me grow as an artist. To hear what people have to say and all of that. But I do feel I guess disappointed that I can’t just focus on the making. But that’s part of the whole teaching thing.

MW: How much emphasis do you place on formal education for artists?

LG: A lot. I think it’s important. I don’t think it’s for everybody… but I think it’s very valuable. I started out at a liberal arts school because I wasn’t sure if I wanted to major in art, and then after 2 years it was like I don’t want to major in anything else so I switched to an art school. But my parents - my mother was a teacher and my father always wanted to be a teacher so education was always important. They didn’t necessarily stress art, just education. The advantage of being in school in a program like this is that you can study art or whatever it is that you want to study and focus on it, make it a full-time thing before you have too many other responsibilities in life. And I think artists are always learning. You see something, you become curious, and then you start to investigate and learn about it.

MW: Any words of advice for your students or others just starting out in a creative field?

LG: Just keep trying. You are going to mess up. It’s okay. Keep trying.
Let the Child Think She Has Found an Arrowhead

As lies go, I know it is a weak one,
but since I am going to make her
walk this tractor-torn landscape
either way,

I might as well leave her the patience
to keep her head down, her eyes treating each
rock in the churned earth like the answer
to a question.

I know children can be easily discouraged, but
in the winter I have seen sparrows scan the
spent seed shells the same way after I forget to
refill the feeder.
KERRI VAUGHN

“KAREN IN THE KITCHEN”
Biting wind tugs at the sails
of morning. I squeeze my eyes shut
as if they could keep out
the sunrise.

How could it be
that an almost sleepless night
has already hooked me
into tomorrow, floundering
for a single dream whose whisper
ebb's on the shores of my mind?

Sweating, I flash the lights on
at midnight to see myself alone
without the craggy limestone peaks
and golden larch branches
of the land that raised me italiana,

buttoning into my ironed uniform,
patient for timeless days spent
making marmellata with Nonna Dina
during breaks from Catholic school.

Flown across oceans just yesterday,
my body is still there,
soaking in the rosemary sun.
Worryin the Line

Us boys had been late on Brush Creek frog giggin with ski poles and a spading fork, wading hip deep in the murky water, under the covered bridge of Otway. Flashlights shining in the eyes of stunned bullfrogs, we swum among the algae and the garfish, the still June air pleasant on our faces.

Forrest had butchered the frogs on site, the still-twitching legs bothering in his cargo shorts when we went back to the car, creek-wet and young. The next morning, smells of cooking oil and yolk batter woke us—mammaw in the kitchen frying up our bounty, the quiet, ancient contentment of a matriarch feeding her babies.

When mammaw died, we all gathered around her tombstone and said a few nice words about her, tears cool on our hot faces, and all I could think about was them frog legs. Quickly, my thoughts now wander to my own mother, who I watch toss my nine-month-old in the air with the joy of ages wrinkling her eyes and I feel nostalgia for that muddy creek and them brambly thorn patches in the foothills of Appalachia.

I think of the impermanence of youth and the shock of old age, of walking sticks whittled from birch and honeysuckle sweet off the vine. I worry the line between joyful remembrance and sorrow for times past and catch myself dreaming Appalachia whose bounty seemingly never ends, living the past alive.
Leaving

1. Dying

Since my younger brother died an abrupt dead—at the break of dawn on St. Valentine Day—I die every night. I mean I prepare myself. Because why should I survive him? I don’t see a reason. Therefore my existence, which always was kind of inconsistent, has become improbable. Frankly, each day is an exception. Each evening, a vigil. Each night, a possible grave.

He died of a congenital aneurism, they stated. If so, chances are I’ll share the opportunity. I have had the same (mild, un-worrisome) symptoms he had for years. His apparently were prelude to the briskest conclusion. Why shouldn’t mine? I have reported them to my doctor, a bit carelessly. I shall do some checks in due time. Soon. Truth is, my state doesn’t suggest emergency. His didn’t either.

He died instantaneously. Certainly, they said, without noticing. His body was composed, his face peaceful. His hand seemed to have hinted at pushing away the edge of the blanket. Did he feel anything? Was he suddenly warm? Did he wish to get up, seek a glass of water? His face, they said, was peaceful.

Each night, since, before I close my eyes I say my farewells. Because why should I stay if he left? For a fact, if I pass it will not be terrible, because I’ll be unaware of my absence. For a fact, whoever will suffer for the loss of me will recover at last, because life goes on. Therefore, all I have to deal with is this moment’s subtle, ineffable sadness, which is only related to leaving. Leaving it all.

I recall having pondered this quite a lot—in a fictional, artificial way—a few decades ago. I was acting a prisoner in a play, and I was about to take my life, in my cell. After my decision was made, there were quiet yet meaningful moments when my expression should convey my forthcoming departure from the world. I had rehearsed the scene over and over until I felt it was solid. The device I had found was to picture a familiar landscape filled with things, places, beings I loved. Then I’d see the landscape gradually recede, irreversibly but with a slight, almost imperceptible progress. A smooth fading, a loss of contour, details blurring themselves. Because nothing was abrupt, despair had no place—as it is a flashy, fast emotion. Sadness applied—a slow-release kind of feeling, manageable in a way. I had the time, while watching it disappear, to realize how precious everything was. Had been.

2. Splitting

When my divorce papers arrived—on the day of St. Valentine, with the evening mail—I sat on the floor. Precisely, on the sill of my kitchen backdoor, opening on a narrow hallway facing a concrete wall. Someone, on the phone, as I reported the news, suggested I’d celebrate. Should we toast, have a glass of champagne? I was perfectly horrified.

After pondering long and deep, I had concluded that divorce—the end of relationships in general—is the saddest of things except for untimely death. The latter tops it all, but splitting from a loved one (even when love is over) is a tight run-upper. No, I shall not celebrate.

Maybe mourn again, as the worst of it had happened years before, when I resolved to separate from my husband. As my intention solidified, once I was in a store with my child, buying a card for Fathers Day. The
boy’s eagerness, enthusiasm and innocence so clashed with my awareness of impending diaspora, I felt petri-fied on the spot. I knew—and the boy didn’t—this small ritual will never be the same. Maybe, with some luck it will be repeated. Perhaps we’ll still buy presents for Dad. But the context of such gesture will be entirely changed, unavoidably altered. Uglier.

Suddenly, the child’s universe as it presently was looked like a crystal egg, unbelievably fragile. Also iridescent and beautiful. Perfect, integer—to the eyes of the child, at least. And I was about to crush it, to de-stroy it by leaving. As I looked at the cards displayed on the rack, I felt like an automaton, paralyzed by regret, guilt and pain. Plus, again, the most ineffable sadness.

3. Dumping

I used to be the one who could decide to go away. Lift the anchors, hoist the sails, say goodbye. I used to be the one who didn’t mind peeling off the bandage, as it must be done and the sting is short-lived.

Once, a boyfriend dumped me. I liked him and enjoyed our relationship. I hadn’t seen the end coming. I was surprised and dismayed. Very briefly. In fact, as I had never been ditched before, I discovered how easier it was to be confronted with dismissal than to perform the cut. How the sorrow of abandonment is faster absorbed, because there is no alternative. I healed of being left way more rapidly than I ever recovered from leaving.

Two weeks later, my ex-boyfriend called me in order to hook up again. I was mystified. He said he hadn’t meant to split up, truly. He explained it was just… strategy I guess? A move, like if we were playing chess. To get more of my attention? I was confused and upset. But I couldn’t step back.

I had cut the cord as requested, then I had cauterized the wound. It had scarred. You see, I had never conceived one could leave for fun, for a game of hide and seek, perhaps peek-a-boo. I thought it was for good—no other options.

4. Fleeing

I don’t miss my homeland. I know it exists. It will not die. I will. My homeland will not remember me. I recall it with love. ‘It’ (my country of origins) doesn’t reciprocate. It can’t. It is lovely, not loving. Not its fault. It is lovely and always will, independently from my witnessing. Yet I like to witness its loneliness, its unique, tender beauty. Unique, moving, touching, only because I know it so well.

I do witness it each time I briefly return to visit my folks. I like watching the land approach as the plane loses elevation. I am impressed each time by its being there, equal to itself. Such persistency feels especially generous because of my defection. In spite of my absence, my land doesn’t reject me. It still lets me in, holds me if I wish, blesses me with its cozy decipherability, has no secrets.

I like watching it as I leave, the plane lifting higher and higher. How the land becomes smaller, unde-termined. I am impressed, again, by its reliability. No matter how far I fly, it will keep in place, and resemble itself with little variation.

I don’t miss my homeland, and I know our stance is reciprocal. I like to think so.

My siblings resent me, because I went away and I never came back. Which you can’t foresee when somebody takes off. ‘Never came back’ can only be stated after the fact. Actually, at the very end of the line. Like death.
The absent—says a song—is always wrong. That is true. It might be why I have decided, long ago, to be that person. To ensure my un-righteousness and un-respectability. In order to be respected, as the word implies, you need to be chest-to-chest with someone. Face to face, ready for ‘confrontation’—an activity I truly detest. I’d rather desert.

Like the dead, the absent is always wrong. Would it help to affirm the absent is actually present—necessarily so—somewhere else? Clearly, there are different categories of ‘where’. There are ‘where(s)’ as remote as the underworld. They don’t count.

My siblings do not care about my whereabouts. My homeland doesn’t either. Does it (my land of origins) feel betrayed? Did I betray it by leaving? It doesn’t care. Lands are kind of insensitive, if (as I explained) unbelievably lovely. All of them: lands of departure, of arrival. Your own, other lands that become your own.

Or they don’t. I, for instance, don’t own any. That is why I am awed by all. Every step, every stand, has become exceptional.
To Break as Blue Jays Do

When I was fourteen my Aunt Catherine called all of the cousins, one at a time, into her hospital room. I don’t know if she said the same thing to each of us, but I’ll never forget what she said to me:

“When you die,” she said, “you feel all at once all the pain you’ve ever caused to others. And then, if you think you still deserve to go to Heaven, you go to Hell.”

Today is my twenty-fourth birthday and I’m sitting in my parents’ living room at my sister’s wake. It looks exactly as it did when we were growing up: the same novelty spoon collection hanging next to the same framed Thomas Kinkade prints, next to the same particle-board bookshelves, arranged with the same sports memoirs and military biographies and one-a-day devotionals that Dana and I would stack into towers on bleak afternoons. Everyone is here with the exception of my Uncle Greg, who remained in Haines City to officiate the marriage of two members of his congregation. His son, Calvin, is here representing their branch of the family.

“He should be here himself,” says my Uncle Maurice. He stands up from the table and walks to the unlit fireplace. “One of the elders can handle the ceremony. He should be here, with us.”

“He’s coming up for the funeral,” my mother says as she flattens the corner of the tablecloth with her thumb. “He has a responsibility to the church.”

Uncle Maurice places his styrofoam cup on the mantle. “He has a responsibility to us.”

“Please, Maurice,” says my father, standing behind my mother and resting a hand on her shoulder. “Cheryl’s been through enough already.” Uncle Maurice shakes his head, shrugs, and goes outside. We all sit or stand around with our plates of cheese cubes and devilled eggs, each of us staring in a different direction.

The young couple whom Uncle Greg pastors, we find out from Calvin, has recently moved into a small but comfortable basement apartment just outside the city. He, the groom, works as a software developer for a mid-sized marketing agency, while she hand-makes greeting cards to sell at the farmer’s market on Saturday mornings.

Uncle Greg, the story goes, had only recently become the pastor of a small but well-established Lutheran church when he arrived one Sunday before service and found the young man on the sanctuary steps, unshaven and rank, asleep on a bed of newspaper. Greg, Bible in hand, shook him awake and led him to Christ right there and then, as passing pick-ups revved their engines and ladies wearing gold brooches stood at a respectful distance to witness. The young man was in rehab by the end of the week, was enrolled in a computer science course by the end of the year, was engaged to an assistant youth director a year after that, and now stands, in his third year of sobriety, before the altar of Uncle Greg’s church.

The screen door clacks shut behind me. Uncle Maurice, with his back against the side of the house and his eyes closed, smokes a cigarette.

“Uncle Maurice?”

He jerks forward, spilling ash down the front of his coat. “Seth, hey,” he says. He drops the cigarette on the porch and lifts his wingtip, then pauses. He smiles at me, then reaches down and picks up the cigarette, breaks off the burning end, and sets the butt on the sill. “How’s it going?”

“Okay.”

He nods once, leaving his head bowed. I zip my jacket up to my neck and lean against the siding, a few feet away from him. Out in the yard, the rope swing twists and sways.

“Uncle Maurice, can I ask you something?”

“Sure, yeah. What’s up?”
I knead my fingertips into my palms, then take a deep breath and swallow it. A pair of blue jays lands on the branch connected to the swing. They dip and flutter, leaning forward as though working up the courage to leap.

Uncle Maurice steps forward and rests both elbows on the railing. “Your Aunt Catherine loved blue jays,” he says, looking out at the birds and running a hand over his mouth and chin. “I always said she should pick something different, something more unique, but I think she liked that you could find them just about anywhere. She didn’t talk about them often, but when she did she would go on and on. They mate for life. They can imitate other birds, cats, even humans. And nobody knows why they migrate, you know that? Sometimes the same jay will go south one winter, come back and stay put the next winter, and go south again the next.”

I feel the weight of skin on my cheeks. “I’m sorry,” I say.

He smiles, steps back and relaxes against the sill, picks up the butt, and relights it. The breeze has stopped. The blue jays lunge and feint like fencers.

“Once, when we were kids,” I say, stepping forward and gripping the handrail with both hands, “Dana came into my room. She wanted me to push her on the swing. I was listening to music or something and didn’t want her to bother me, so I told her to leave and I locked the door. She sat in the hallway for a while, then went outside and climbed the rope so she could look at me through the window. When she reached the top, she froze. She yelled and yelled, but I couldn’t hear her. Four hours later my father came home, got out the ladder, climbed up, and carried her down. He didn’t discipline me or anything.”

The wind returns, stronger. Uncle Maurice turns his jacket’s collar up and pulls it closer around his chest. “You wanna know something?” he says, taking another drag and tapping ash over the railing. “About that couple at your Uncle Greg’s church?”

I don’t say anything.

“They’ll be happy. They’ll make a life, start a family. They’ll have everything—dog, cat, potlucks, PTA meetings. Do all the things young couples in churches do. And every night,” he continues, rolling the cigarette with his fingertips, “when she’s asleep and he’s lying on his back next to her, and the room is black, do you know what he’ll be thinking about?”

A cloud moves in front of the sun. One after the other, the blue jays, in the order they had landed, take off and break around the side of the house.

“What?”

“Heroin.”
Conversion Therapy

“It’s hard for me to believe they would seek to rid themselves of their God-given desire to love someone of the same sex if it weren’t for the leaders in their communities who fail to consider the possibility that they’re wrong about the value and dignity of L.G.B.T.Q. people made in the image of God.” -“What I Learned from Gay Conversion Therapy” by Julie Rodgers, *The New York Times*, May 5th, 2018

Every emotion we didn’t know to name —
a child calling anything blue a lake

everything God,
everything a song

“Do everything without complaining, do everything without arguing, that you may become blameless and pure children of God.”

My mind a room full of sleep, sweat salty and breath caught with the door closed,

I think like you taught me

Never good enough,
afraid behind my ribs of the hook in hell I’ll hang from for loving the long lashes of a girl, her voice like a tightrope
where she balances,
her hips meadows I want
to dance in, I am
so good at programming myself,

a verse memorized for everything,
names of people to pray for taped
to the shower wall, a song
to cover anger or sadness or fear

I am so good at drowning myself out. Sin, you say, is the constant struggle with your carnal being:

I see my body roasting over the fire
as you turn the stake,
all the words
that slipped out of my pockets
feeding the flames. I wonder

is love more evil
than obedience?

Did the flames strip me clean
of God’s imprint? Or was it there, between my pelvic brim
and floor?
It's like a slow peel
of a mandarin orange.
You don't quite know where to start,
You don't think twice if you're doing it right,
it happens as it begins,
beginning as it happens,
as my fingers become slowly unaware,
and my mind’s eye wander,
reckoning my younger father,
once tenacious and strong,
teaching me the ‘proper’ way of mandarin peeling.

Gentle, slow, pressured,
unconscious movements of
past mirroring present mirroring future
as you peel the tangy skin of childhood,
bright and delicate like a baby orange
the succulent spouts of juice
awakening to your measured intent
to survive, to taste, to nurture trust.
Trust that crumbled with the peeled layers
of worship, of adoration, of you.
The peel itself inedible:
Bitter, sour, disintegrating,
canned, waiting for a rebirth.

I long for the slow unpeeling
of the mandarin orange,
the unraveling of your hands, father,
the one-cupped palm and the other one swiveling the peels,
the picturesque perfect for Ma, Che and I,
the moment transient, dismantled by the careworn
skin of yesteryearns, stripped all too soon, all at once.

*Citrus Reticulata, Tangerine, 橘子, Mandarin Orange,*

*many as one, one as many,*

*coatings protecting the core,*

*the inner workings,*

*of life, of zest, of mine.*

Unteach me the ways of peeling,
of knowing something,
as I mourn the unfolding of the rinds,
as I mourn you,
as my hand reels and reeks of fermented peels,
fisted, clenched into a tangerine,
against your empty hands.
You, calling and calling for my return.

It's like a slow peel
of a mandarin orange.
Where and how do I begin?
Ocean Queen

An oyster is a polished apple, a lyrical topcoat
amidst a flat rock of sweat,
salt and flesh. It is a peninsula,
a panhandle, a wing,
a tuxedo in the sand -
cultivated in human history
to satisfy our ravenous appetites.
We should all bow and take note;
oysters are fresh flesh gulf beasts:
pry, slurp, swallow -
hold oysters to the sky!
Perhaps that was the plan of the gods
from the first little oyster-suckling,
salt-licking tongue princess.
Brood

After two unhappy marriages, my sister settled
on a man who marked their mid-life union
by retraining as a vermin operative,
the neon strips in his kitchen having turned caramel
with cockroaches. He mastered the mechanics
and theory of quenching little lives that flickered
briefly in strange environs. And noted, for instance,
that, when roaches infested a disused cooker,
it was always the babies who emerged first
when you ignited the gas. The gas was that—
if you left it burning—little roarers kept on
coming, and in increasing sizes, till the fat
daddy-roaches finally left the ship.
He studied weevils which flourished
in flour. And silver fish that slivered
at human approach. Rat-trapping
was daunting at first, then a thrill.
I heard that housewives would call him out
to halt fledgling tits which had flown
into summer kitchens, twitching behind fridges;
pigeons plumped in chimneys; squirrels
nesting in lofts, all high hiss and spit.
He used to say, my sister’s husband,
as he polished his leather belt on a Saturday,
ready for church (the belt had a fine silver buckle
which shone and jingled), that pests are only
creatures who happen to have strayed
into alien territory. It made me hope my sister
pleased him, and fitted in; was protective of her brood.
Teaching
for Wafaa Alashram

This is on
and this is off.
This is in
and this is out.
This is here
and that is there.
This is hot
and this is cold.
This is his
and this is hers.
This is me
and this is you.
This is yes
and this is no.
This is day
and this is night.
This is happy
and this is sad.
This is rich
and this is poor.
This is home
and this is away.
This is now
and that was then.
This is the hour
a week I can give
to teach you English
and here are some flowers.
This is all I can do
to help and this is
my very comfortable life.
This is excuse me
and this is I’m sorry.
And when I say sorry
and sorry again
this is repetition.
Like bang
and bang
and bang.
Expected

Turkey Day rushes with freight train velocity straight toward me. The 500 mile drive to a place no longer home since I moved out twenty-one years ago draws with all the intrinsic horror of an interstate pile-up and is just as difficult to avoid. I’ll step into my preordained role: geek, bully, over-achiever, refight battles one more time, take seconds of turnips

I’ve hated since childhood but Mom made just for me. I’ll bounce Lee’s colicky baby, compliment Janie’s Jello mold, admire photos of Karl’s Jack Russell, grin at stories in which I’m villain, dupe, or befuddled innocent, restrain rebuttal, help with dishes as proscribed by Tallulah who should be employed as a drill sergeant. I’ll tuck drunken Uncle Al, once more, into the parlor daybed,

and listen again to how Ed almost died, twice, during gall bladder surgery. I’ll approve the savvy champagne purchase (Texaco—$2.97 a bottle) then escape pleading an eye condition that prohibits night driving, pausing only to admire gaudy new wallpaper, and give Evie’s little rat dog another chance to strike my ankle. I’ll be noncommittal about Christmas.
Abhishekham

Water falls
Milk pours
Turmeric balms the black stone deity.
Saree weaves
Jasmines cluster
Diamonds wink
Flames dilate as
Oil wells from the brass lamp with five mouths.

Coins flick between nimble fingers of the 6:00 a.m temple priest on duty.

Mother sits hands clasped facing the goddess.
As temple bells toll overhead
Her prayers heighten:
“For this girl, give her hope, husband and fertility.”
These words have passed her lips earlier.
This time after that prodigal return:
“where her eye is battered, o goddess of all rivers, balm it with sight.
Let there be peace with love.”

Slow dissolve, our furrows deepen.
I see the last vestige of unconditional love flow
Into the pool of milk and turmeric, jasmine, oil and ash
Rushing in the gutter by the feet of the goddess.

The song to Ganga
Finds a new meaning in Mother.
My rite of birthday passes.
Colonial Lag

In a bar in Belfast, I met a man who grew up in Hong Kong. His family would eat chow for tea, which he demonstrated by lifting hand to mouth with fingers pursed together in the shape of a cat’s anus. They ate it with Mrs Magee a sauce imported for families just like them. To explain the name he referred to the artist’s colony at Islandmagee, said it’s spelt the same.

But Islandmagee is not really an island, he said, it’s more like a pituitary gland, and he drew an imaginary peninsula on the bar. After he left, a guy sitting behind me leaned in and said, you’d better check that chink didn’t just pluck your bag.
**Kri’oht Shaballa-Toth**  
*(The Young Keeper of Knowledge)*

Soon, I shall return home,  
Where others haste call my name  
And from my actions, there comes no shame  
And in our ways, we cause no pain  
Please, take me home.

I have observed your planet, as was my duty;  
I saw only strife, anger, conceit a-rife.  
You yell and worry of supposed birthright  
But never love any truly

Where is my promised vessel to carry me away?  
Back to the place of q’nar-ackdan (brotherhood)  
Telif ma’at, ma’ar apan (you have forgotten the cosmic laws)  
Allow me to remind you of your rightful place.

Never leave any behind in knowledge.  
To curse another is to curse the self.  
To use another is to destroy the commonwealth.  
To uplift all, you must embrace freedom;  
One needs space and in space you need them.  
Those who will not heed must learn,  
There is no room for self-gutamyearn (ignorance).  
Always love and have much patience.  
Never belittle the smallest of sentience;  
For all of life has its own form of college.

My name is Kri’oht Shaballa-Toth.  
Born under a dying star in a distant village  
To a people lost and seeking pilgrimage.  
Prove yourselves, I may yet return.  
For now, I must leave and continue my journ’.  
Seeking habitation for the people of Mekshi;  
Finding life is not so easy.  
But we shall not share with those who care not for their own species.  
Your maturity is lacking in a myriad of ways,  
And so, I shall not prolong my days  
Upon this rock of hollow cause.

Soon, I shall return home,  
To our floating oasis among the star fields.  
Inik bashad ko’lop markeild (I hope another was successful)  
And that soon, our pride will be quickly rebuilt  
Please, take me home.
The Night Kids

I am covered in a darkness.

One that refuses to abate even after a deep scrubbing.

A darkness akin to covered things, shadowed in the deep embrace of a looming giant that would crush me if I ever decided to make it fall.

I am cloaked in this blackness.

Born mourning all the things I was never meant to be.

So that even before my first breath I am made to bury a thousand selves.

I… have had… to murder my sunrise for this nightshade skin.

Fed my bright blue skies poison berries, stained the lips of my horizon with bittersweet juices passed to me from my mother’s hands.

My day… Is always coming.

I dwell eternally in this twilight knowing that the dawn is a myth that they tell to the bright kids. The light kids. Not the night kids.

I feel… unclean.

Covered in a darkness that refuses to abate even after a deep scrubbing, rubbing my fingers into skin bruised by fruit falling from felled trees I fall… to my knees.

Whispering to the moon prayers of a shared sorrow.

Forever cloaked in darkness, eternally grasping at the sun.

I wish to be done with the shades of my shameful past! Relinquishing the chains! Holding tight to the future that was promised to me when I! AM FREE! AT LAST!

But-this-shadow haunts me.

A spirit of all the things I’ll never be bright enough to do.

A spirit of all the things the world could never believe I knew.

A spirit of all the things that went unseen because of things they can’t seem to see through.

I am covered in a darkness.

One that refuses to abate even after a deep scrubbing.

A darkness akin to covered things, shadowed in the deep embrace of a looming giant that would crush me if I ever decided to make it fall.
MARIAH JOYCE

“Desert”
Mama smears tapioca pudding on her bread
and remembers her rendezvous with Father.
They shared a labneh sandwich and a cigarette
at Café du Liban. When the young physician
with rosy cheeks checks her pulse, Mama taps
his hand politely and points at the empty chair,

*My husband’s watching.* The doctor smiles
and scribbles notes on his clipboard.
Mama thinks he's the waiter and requests
more pita and hummus, light on the olive oil.
The Russian nurse with a bouffant tucks
Mama in. She resists. *This is the belly dancer,*

she whispers. Your father keeps eyeing her hips.
She sips cough syrup like coffee and wishes
someone will pass the tray of baklava.
"Have a guess?" Richter said, looking at the object then circling his gaze around the small audience in his drawing room. His dark eyelashes swept away the frenzy of traffic in the greasy rain, the ambulance sirens, and the crowds beginning Christmas shopping at Oxford Circus down below. Even for the cringing late-comer the steep, breathless climb up three floors on the narrow dogleg stairwell was forgotten. It was swiftly wiped away by the smile of the Apprentice who stood by the open door with a glass of sparkling mineral water.

The afternoon November light from the window fell on Richter’s emerald green velvet jacket. The soft ball of light from the contemporary chandelier was growing brighter. Nine adults were seated in a semi-circle in an assortment of Victorian winged armchairs in green leather, country church pews with thick and brightly cross-stitched cushions, an Italianate love-seat with painted frescoes of adoring men and adored women in conversation with each other on its curved back, and colonial wickerbottom chairs that must have travelled the Indian Ocean and South China Seas to the now defunct East India Company warehouses of Leadenhall Street. The nine were a gathering of antique enthusiasts; domestic brokers for wealthier investors on a mission of speculation and interest. They were neither connoisseurs nor collectors, Richter could tell.

For Richter this was a teatime treat when he talked about his favourite objects recently acquired, some of which were yet to be listed on the on-line catalogue. The people listening, too, were objects of great interest, as their inclinations and choices of those whom they represented would be gleaned for a client list, some regular, others organically shed like snake skin.

The dark spine of books in his library shelved from floor level up to the Regency ceiling of his drawing room had berry red and holly green covers bound in leather. Their vertical titles glistened in gold of Cosmos, Andhra Art, Ramkien, Saffavids, Silk, Pharaohs.

"Guess what this could be?" He held the object by its dark wooden carved head wedged with grooves signifying hair, or oceanic waves, and a mythical beast’s head. The beast had sat in a silent snarl from the time it was carved. Three finely chiselled long prongs, spaced a few centimetres apart, faced down. It was eight and a half inches long and half an inch wide. Everyone was staring at it, thinking. Richter was backlit by the window, his head dropping into shadow. The chandelier poured brighter light at the Apprentice’s wave of a switch and the object looked like a jewel encased in a green velvet frame, with hands.

The woman in orange tights and hot pink lipstick with handbag-to-match blurted in a global American accent common to Indians from Delhi, “A kind of dagger?” The man with the bald head and parrot nose, "An African comb?" as his white eyebrows shot up his forehead. To each of these Richter said "Ah! close, but..." wearing the subtle satisfaction of a magician who contains his excitement about revealing, and timing the prestige, for total impact.

The lady with flushed cheeks and henna-coloured hair showing white roots leaned forward as the lilac chiffon dupatta slid off her shoulder. She held her spectacles like opera glasses and said: "But the carving looks Thai, or...?"

Richter's lips quivered like the whiskers of a discerning rodent. "Yes-s-s! Very close. It's Indonesian, in fact." There was a chorus of "aah!" and everyone slumped back into their seats. "Oh, but it's not over yet, there's more," Richter held out the object between his palms like bookends, and gently pumped his left hand against it to demonstrate the sharpness and pliable wood of the three prongs. Richter smiled like a Pharaoh gazing at the crowds from the coronation plinth at his people who looked at him for protection. His eyes focused on the near distance the way Tutankhamen must have taken in his gaze the individuals within the crowd;
living in the present and smiling confidently at the blind soothsayer's prediction of immortality.

Richter swivelled the object, holding the carved head between thumb and index finger of his left hand. The eyes of the beast looked inviting and the snarl almost turned into a persuasive smile creating a man-beast-woman effect. The prongs rested on the ridge of his right palm. He drew his head closer, and all nine of his audience craned their necks forward. The soft ball of light danced on the pink and white mounds of flesh of his palm making the prongs gleam gold. The leather chairs crackled and hissed, as people uncrossed their legs, or straightened them, or just sat closer to the edge of their seats. No one noticed night had fallen as it always did in November by 4:30 pm. The smiling Apprentice brought in steaming sencha green tea in tiny bowls on a lacquer tray and everyone in the semicircle lit up in the way lotus petals open with the sunrise.

Richter paused, sipping water from his ordinary glass tumbler. Everyone settled cupping their warm bowls. "In Indonesia there continued to be tribes, and the men and women kept the customs alive. There was a particular custom to do with high esteem and admiration. If there was successful barter led by a visiting trader, or tournament won by a dextrous athlete, that person was invited for an honour celebration where he was treated with delicacies that raised him to the status of an ancestor. A sort of excellence award.

"The next day, there was another feast celebrating the triumph of imbibing. The supine movements of dancers formed a screen against the glare of the day. A master of ceremonies would come through the rows of dancers with a polished bamboo tray, a bowl and this." Richter set it down on the low table by his knees. He was creating shapes with his hands; smoothing the air for the tray, curving his palms upward to signify a bowl. His gestures were clear lines, no stutter. Swiftly he picked up the object and dipped it in the bowl.

"And the ululation of the praise singers and dancers reached a high pitch. Then the Chief of his tribe dipped the prong into the bowl like a fork, harpooning the glutinous ball of food and placed it in his mouth." Richter's animation almost had his audience salivating. The man with the bald patch and bushy brows broke the trance: "Ah! If only I had thought of food! I was thinking of hair - an African comb came to mind!" Nobody laughed.

The Apprentice appeared again with jade green china bowls filled with contemporary dim sum drizzled with soy on crisp seaweed speckled with sesame seed. These were quietly placed in each audience member's cupped hands. They had not dared to pop the dim sum in their mouths. One of the group stood up and looked around, visibly controlling his urgency. The Apprentice discreetly led him to a door in the dark paneling that was not covered by books.

"So, what was 'imbibed'?” asked the woman occupying the Italian love seat; her red nails flirting with the curved backrest of her neighbour's cane chair.

Richter looked straight at her as he placed the carved prong on the table in one clear arc of movement. "The guest of honour's brain." Silence.

Then the gurgle of the flush, once, twice, thrice behind the panelled door, and the man returning to his seat looking green, with a growth of beard leaping up his face like ivy around Rapunzel's window. Almost everyone was looking at their dim sum in their bowls. Possibly a meditation on what was in the dim sum.

"I'm vegetarian,” said the man who still had bicycle trouser clamps at his ankles. A ripple of laughter and conversation puckered the silence that had been seamless. The aroma of soy sauce lingered, and one of Richter's staff discreetly opened a sash window; just a slash of fresh air so no one would be distracted by the sound of the traffic down below or feel a chill draft. Everyone was engaged in a Chinese whisper of piecing Richter's tale about the triumph-of-imbibing object.

"Ah! So the guest of honour - an athlete, who excelled and was celebrated the day before..." said the woman who took copious notes.

"Was the glutinous ball of food...." started the man who had just returned from the toilet.
“Brain. Genius!” said the woman on the love seat.

"So his qualities could be imbibed?” said the woman with the orange tights crossing her legs.

"Cannibalism?” asked the coordinator of the Art Tour.

"You know, at temples we are given a sweet laddu after listening to Ramayan. That way we 'eat' the story and 'imbibe' its values..." said the lady with the lilac dupatta now with flushed cheeks reflecting her henna-coloured hair. She started dabbing her perspiring forehead with a handkerchief and fanned herself with the dupatta.

"Well, the wine and wafer at Holy Communion at church could be seen as... No, no, it can’t be. It’s symbolic. Isn’t it?” said the man who professed being vegetarian.

"How old did you say it is?" asked the bald man following it with a violent sneeze.

Richter had drained another glass of water and stepped in. "Bless you! This object is dated to have been in use from the 1600's. The ritual, of course, must be much older.” Richter was checking through his mental list of the next two objects he had, and which one should follow. His large brown eyes fell on the silver Folly commissioned for a British Indian Army regimental mess. He had found two objects contrasting in size, but with pretty much the same esteem and honour celebration. It involved a killing of a kind.

He was increasingly getting into this interior world that was fluid about timelines. He couldn’t help smiling as he always stopped himself in a situation when he was in public by telling himself that it was “A reef too far.” He found his thoughts swimming. When he looked at the gathering in front of him, his eyelashes swept the moment and he could see someone in another time. There was no distinguishing the past or the future. The vegetarian could be a Samurai, the lady with red nails a Bodhisattva. They were not interchangeable, but he had travelled realms in his passion for collecting. How could he explain to anyone the unfathomable connection between the dark beauty of craftsmanship emerging from the past followed by an unquantifiable time in the future of someone gazing at it?

"How do you distinguish between fakes?" The woman with red nails asked with an air of intimacy. Richter was half-emerging from the reef he had involuntarily led himself into in search of something he had left there to be collected.

"I do the research personally if an object of interest comes my way. I have research teams and that’s what the apprenticeships are about. Sometimes it involves travel that could end up in a wild goose chase. But I always tell myself, nothing is lost. Identify, verify checks. That’s imperative. Anything smuggled here can be disastrous. I sell to museums and public bodies so I have to be ethical as far as is possible. There’s fierce computer technology too that can make or break us. But more importantly, I just know a fake after years and years of sighting and handling. There is a science, but it’s the intuition that makes the scent stronger for knowing a replica from a relic." He held out the prong again. "The well-preserved tips, its well-oiled resilient wood, and used for the one purpose handed down over generations, computer tested." Nobody touched it; the taste of soy sauce going stale on his or her tongue in front of him.

The woman in the love-seat waited for the rumble to die down. "What makes you collect?"

"Good question," said Richter and interlaced his fingers on his right knee.

Richter was starting to swim to the reef again. Can we really inherit what we consume? Become what we eat? Do I want to enter Shipman’s mind as he administered each last farewell, a death reported after hundreds? Would I have his green smoking jacket in my collection? What makes me collect?

Again she asked: “Isn’t it like asking a gunman trained to shoot – is your training about when to press the trigger or, about how long you can keep your nerve and not shoot?” A red herring. His hair was floating like seaweed, the bubbles from his breath made Richter know he was alive on limited air.
What was the secret in the reef that often called to him? He had grown up to the song of the mermaid; it was a dwelling with so many fissures. Each time he swam deeper toward resting in its dappled shade, another force dragged him back to the certain, the familiar lit space. Once he had grazed his hand on an axe-head and then it had completely disappeared leaving his certainty with a trail of blood.

"Some collectors will collect solely for passion. I guess that's where the word 'price-less' comes from. Certain objects they will not sell at any price. It is about possession. Me? I want to live across worlds. The past is real through these objects that people used. There's a certain - I don't believe in ghosts, but a certain chilling, or indeed thrilling sensation of what if one met that person. Would I collect Harold Shipman's jacket? I expect someone will. It will be priceless. I don’t think anyone will wear it. But there’s a dark beauty in knowing why someone would want it. Or the falling blanket from Grenfell’s fire? I look at objects as a fingerprint of the past, I guess. I must be an interpreter of their existence in a world that thinks it has no need for them."

Richter was swimming the reef, closer to the inner sanctum as he called it. Even now, the brainpicking comb held him with a shiver that conquest brings. Suddenly he can see before him as he often does the past. From panes of broken glass, an unnamed infant flying from a window edged with fire flames for teeth, followed by a falling blanket woven close with seventy-two knots and a contorting decibel level of dying mermaid voices. A blazing building, with tongues of smoke and greed hastening up the fire between safety hatches of all the floors. It looked like Beowulf’s Grendel, so close in name, darkening all knowledge of kinship or kindred.

It was smothering him in a fire underwater.
Contributors

FICTION

Russ Bickerstaff is a theatre critic and aspiring author living in Milwaukee, WI.

A faculty member at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts, Joseph Mills has published six collections of poetry, most recently "Exit, pursued by a bear" and "Angels, Thieves, and Winemakers."

Vayu Naidu is Royal Literary Fund Fellow at UWL 2018-2019. Her PhD from the University of Leeds was in performance oral traditions. She won the Humanities Teaching Award for her work with Tsunami survivors in 2004. Arts Council England funded Vayu Naidu Intercultural Theatre as an RFO from 2004-2012. Her work includes Radio Drama - BBC 4, Theatre, Storytelling for Contemporary Music, and Ramayana. Sita’s Ascent (Penguin: 2013) was nominated for the Commonwealth Book Award, The Sari of Surya Vilas (Speaking Tiger, Affirm Press: 2017) on the freedom struggle, was featured on ABC’s (Australia book of the week). She is on her third novel.

Jesse Sensibar’s work has appeared in such places as The Tishman Review, Stoneboat Journal, and Waxwing. Jesse's first full-length work, Blood in the Asphalt, is forthcoming from Tolsun Books. You can find him at jessesensibar.com.

David Sorensen works as a writer and freelance editor. His stories have appeared in Bastion Science Fiction and The Squawk Back, and his plays have been featured in ARTS' New Works 2016 and Live Arts' NWOF 2017. He graduated from Eastern Mennonite University in 2012 and currently lives in Charlottesville, Virginia, where he spends his days procrastinating and avoiding eye contact with the baristas at Starbucks.

NONFICTION

Mary Fowke is a Canadian Psychotherapist who has been living and working in Lisbon for over 15 years. She holds a BA in English Literature (University of Toronto) and an MA in Comparative Literature (Sorbonne) as well as certification from the Gestalt Experiential Training Institute in Vancouver. She is currently doing a PhD in Anglo-American Studies at the University of Lisbon and is a researcher at CEAUL/ULICES (University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies). She has a particular interest in memoir and memory studies, especially as related to attachment, displacement and nature. She also writes short fiction.

Victor Marsh has been concentrating on life writing – biography, autobiography and memoir – since his retirement from television production work early in 2002. Previously he lived and worked as a modern-day monk, teaching meditation practice through a dozen or so countries in East Asia and the Pacific Rim. He was awarded a PhD from the University of Queensland, Australia at the age of 62.

Toti O’Brien is the Italian Accordionist with the Irish Last Name. She was born in Rome then moved to Los Angeles, where she makes a living as a self-employed artist, performing musician and professional dancer. Her work has most recently appeared in Duende, Chantwood, Aji, and Folio.
POETRY

Jen Anolik is an educator and writer. Her poems have appeared in Apiary Online, BlazeVox, and The Prompt Literary Magazine. When she’s not writing poetry, she writes curriculum; she has taught and developed curriculum for teens in after-school and enrichment programs focused on gender, sexuality, poetry, art, and mindfulness. A third-generation Holocaust survivor, she also devotes time toward sharing her grandmother's holocaust story.

Zeina Azzam works as an editor for Arab Center Washington, a DC think tank. As a community activist, she volunteers for organizations that promote Palestinian human rights and civil rights of minorities in Alexandria, Virginia, where she lives. Zeina’s poems have been published in Mizna, Sukoon Magazine, Split This Rock, Heartwood Literary Magazine, Lunch Ticket, The Fourth River, and the edited volumes Gaza Unsilenced (Alareer and El-Haddad, eds.), Yellow as Turmeric, Fragrant as Cloves (Fowler, ed.), The Poeming Pigeon: Love Poems (The Poetry Box), and Write Like You're Alive (Zoetic Press). She holds an M.A. in Arabic literature.

Sarah Joyce Bersonsage received a doctorate in English from the University of Rochester. Her work has appeared in a number of publications, including Antiphon, About Place, and Boston Accent Lit, and her first chapbook is forthcoming from Bitterzoet Press.

Ace Boggess is author of three books of poetry, most recently I Have Lost the Art of Dreaming It So (Unsolicited Press, 2018) and Ultra Deep Field (Brick Road, 2017), and the novel A Song Without a Melody (Hyperborea, 2016). His poetry has appeared in Harvard Review, Rhino, North Dakota Quarterly, and many other journals. He lives in Charleston, West Virginia.

Michael Carter’s work has appeared in Ploughshares, Boulevard, Columbia Poetry Review, and Provincetown Arts Magazine among many others. He is a two-time Writers by Writing Tomales Bay Fellow, a Nadya Aisenberg Fellow at the Writer’s Room of Boston and was recently selected as a Summer 2018 Wolf House Resident. He has poems forthcoming from Black Rabbit Review, Ghost City Review and a Nothing Books anthology entitled DARKNESS AND LIGHT. A graduate of Sarah Lawrence College, he has an MFA from Vermont College and an MSW from Smith College School for Social Work. He is a poet and psychotherapist living in Connecticut.

James Cihlar’s new book, The Shadowgraph, is forthcoming from the University of New Mexico Press in 2020. He is the author of the poetry books Rancho Nostalgia (Dream Horse Press, 2013), Undoing (Little Pear Press, 2008), and the poetry chapbooks A Conversation with My Imaginary Daughter (Bloom, 2013), and Metaphysical Bailout (Pudding House, 2010). His writing has appeared in The American Poetry Review, The Threepenny Review, Prairie Schooner, and Nimrod.

Geraldine Clarkson is a UK poet and artist whose work has appeared widely in print and online journals (including Poetry magazine, The Poetry Review, Poetry London, Ambit, and Riggwelter). She is a former winner of the Poetry London and Ambit poetry competitions, and of the Magma Editors’ Prize and the Poetry Society’s Anne Born Prize. She has three poetry chapbooks: Declare (Shearsman Books, 2016), a Poetry Book Society Pamphlet Choice; Dora Incites the Sea-Scribbler to Lament (smith | doorstop, 2016), a UK Laureate’s Choice; and No. 25 (Shearsman Books, 2018). Her poems have been broadcast on BBC Radio 3.
Annie Diamond is a Connecticut native living presently in Chicago. She earned her BA in English and creative writing from Barnard College. Her poems are forthcoming in The Laurel Review, Free State Review, Rabid Oak, Juxtaprose, and Dirty Paws Poetry Review, and have appeared previously in Misadventures, Cargoes, and elsewhere. She has been awarded fellowships by The MacDowell Colony, The Lighthouse Works, and Boston University, where she completed her MFA in 2017.

Lynley Edmeades is a poet, essayist and academic from New Zealand. Her first book of poetry, As the Verb Tenses, was published in 2016 by Otago University Press. She is currently working on her second while on a writing residency in Christchurch, New Zealand.

Born in Los Angeles and raised in Massachusetts, Evan Fleischer has written about William Faulkner's maps for LitHub, Alasdair Gray's sense of Glasgow for The New Yorker, explored a French translation of Groucho Marx's memoir in The Paris Review, and is currently working alongside other writers and editors over at Hobart Pulp.


A Colorado native, Deanne Gertner holds an MFA from the Vermont College of Fine Arts and a BA from Regis University. Her fiction has appeared in Quaint Magazine and Scintilla while her art criticism has appeared in Daily Serving and Presenting Denver. She serves on the board for Lighthouse Writer's Workshop, the largest literary center in the Rocky Mountain region.

Angela Graham is a writer and film-maker from Belfast who works in Wales. She completed a short story collection in 2017 (Literature Wales Writer’s Bursary) and is writing a novel about the politics of language (grant from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland). In 2018 she began submitting poetry for publication, so far accepted by The Bangor Literary Journal; The Open Ear (Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry); The North, and previously by Poetry Wales. The Scottish Referendum was written for performance alongside National Poet of Wales, Gillian Clarke; Edinburgh’s Makar (laureate), Christine de Luca and Welsh poet, Jasmine Donahaye. http://angelagraham.org/


Eric Hunt is a Senior ACS Chemistry Major student at TSU. He has always had an interest in writing and in different languages (even those that don't exist!) and wanted to submit this work as an exercise in formalism. He hopes that someone can receive the message positively and be inspired to do more for themselves and those around them as they interact with an ever-changing environment.
Austin James is a Visiting Professor at TSU who loves to teach and learn. His formal education includes a BA from Southwestern University in Georgetown, TX, an MBA from the University of Dallas, and a Master of Fine Arts from Naropa University in Boulder, CO. He believes in students. Professor James is a painter, poet, and professor. He has published several books on poetry and painting through Lawrence and Crane. He ran an art gallery for ten years (2001-2010) in Houston, TX.

Gregory Kimbrell is the author of The Primitive Observatory (Southern Illinois University Press, 2016), winner of the 2014 Crab Orchard Series in Poetry First Book Award. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in Manticore—Hybrid Writing from Hybrid Identities, Masque & Spectacle, Zetetic: A Record of Unusual Inquiry, Alcyone, and elsewhere. He is the events and programs coordinator for Virginia Commonwealth University Libraries. More of his writing, including his magnetic sci-fi/horror haiku, can be found at gregorykimbrell.com.

Amber Lee is a native Houstonian and proud student of Texas Southern University’s undergraduate degree program. Majoring in English, she is consistently occupied with what the literature of the past and present reveal about the “mind” of society. As a creative writer and an aspiring educator, Amber is passionate about the written and spoken word, with a focus on narratives composed by and about traditionally marginalized peoples worldwide. She is a strong advocate for education and the personal and professional advancement of peoples through increased literacy and creative artistic expression. Future goals include but are not limited to teaching at a university level, creating a non-profit literacy organization, and ending pollution. Amber’s short-term goals all revolve around graduating and navigating the treacherous minefield of student debt.

Kendra Preston Leonard is a poet, lyricist, and librettist based in Texas. Her work centers around things, figures, and places local, mythopoeic, and historical.

Robert Lynn is a writer and attorney from Fauquier County, Virginia. He studied painting and poetry at the University of Mary Washington and law at the University of Virginia.

Cody Mullins is Associate Professor of English at Ivy Tech Community College in Kokomo, Indiana and a PhD Candidate in American Literature at Ball State University. His work can be found in The Southampton Review, Apogee, and Parentheses. He lives in Noblesville, Indiana.

Shahé Mankerian is the principal of St. Gregory Hovsepian School in Pasadena. His manuscript, History of Forgetfulness, has been a finalist at the Bibby First Book Competition, the Crab Orchard Poetry Open Competition, the Quercus Review Press Poetry Book Award, and the White Pine Press Poetry Prize. In 2017, three literary journals, Border Crossing, Cahoodaloodaling, and Lunch Ticket nominated Mankerian’s poems for the Pushcart Prize. Antioch University’s literary publication, Lunch Ticket, nominated Mankerian’s poem “Inner City with Father” for the 2017 Best of the Net Anthology. Recently, Shahé received the 2017 Editors’ Prize from MARY: A Journal of New Writing.

Lisa Masé has been writing poetry since childhood. She teaches poetry workshops for Vermont’s Poem City events, co-facilitates a writing group, and has translated the poetry of writers from Italy, France, and the Dominican Republic. Her poems have been published by Open Journal of Arts and Letters, Wander Lost, the Long Island Review, 3 Elements, Zingara Review, River and South, and Silver Needle Press among others.
Vayu Naidu is Royal Literary Fund Fellow at UWL 2018-2019. Her PhD from the University of Leeds was in performance oral traditions. She won the Humanities Teaching Award for her work with Tsunami survivors in 2004. Arts Council England funded Vayu Naidu Intercultural Theatre as an RFO from 2004-2012. Her work includes Radio Drama - BBC 4, Theatre, Storytelling for Contemporary Music, and Ramayana. Sita’s Ascent (Penguin: 2013) was nominated for the Commonwealth Book Award, The Sari of Surya Vilas (Speaking Tiger, Affirm Press: 2017) on the freedom struggle, was featured on ABC’s (Australia book of the week). She is on her third novel.

Christopher Phelps studied physics and philosophy, but Dickinson and the dictionary were his first loves. His poems have appeared in magazines including Boston Review, Colorado Review, The Kenyon Review, and in the anthology Collective Brightness: LGBTIQ Poets on Faith, Religion & Spirituality. His first chapbook, Tremblem, was published by Pococurante Productions. More information can be found at www.christopher-phelps.com/details.

Elise Toedt is currently a PhD student at the University of Minnesota in the field of Curriculum and Instruction, with a focus on Literacy, Language and Culture. In her poetry and in her research, she is interested in what and who silence protects in communal and institutional spaces, particularly in shoring up the constructions of gender, race, and class. Her poems, short fiction, and non-fiction writing have been published in books and online publications, including Lumina, Teaching Tolerance, Mutuality, and the book Creating a Spiritual Legacy.

Doug Van Hooser's poetry has appeared in Chariton Review, Split Rock Review, Manhattanville Review, and Poetry Quarterly among other publications. His fiction can be found in Red Earth Review, Crack the Spine, and Light and Dark. Doug is a playwright active at Three Cat Productions and Chicago Dramatists Theatre.

Amy Watkins grew up in central Florida, surrounded by armadillos and palmetto brush and a big, loud, religious family--the kind of upbringing that's produced generations of southern writers. She married her high school sweetheart, had a baby girl, and earned her MFA in writing from Spalding University. She is the author of Milk & Water (Yellow Flag Press) and the art editor for Animal: A Beast of a Literary Magazine.

Jessica L. Williams is the author of Media, Performative Identity, and the New American Freak Show. She teaches in the English Department at SUNY College at Old Westbury in New York. Research and teaching interests include multicultural American literature, disability, and popular culture.

John Sibley Williams is the editor of two Northwest poetry anthologies and the author of nine collections, including Disinheritance and Controlled Hallucinations. An eleven-time Pushcart nominee, John is the winner of numerous awards, including the Philip Booth Award, American Literary Review Poetry Contest, Phyllis Smart-Young Prize, Nancy D. Hargrove Editors' Prize, Confrontation Poetry Prize, and Vallum Award for Poetry. He serves as editor of The Inflectionist Review and works as a literary agent. Previous publishing credits include: The Yale Review, Midwest Quarterly, Sycamore Review, Prairie Schooner, The Massachusetts Review, Poet Lore, Saranac Review, Atlanta Review, TriQuarterly, Columbia Poetry Review, Mid-American Review, Poetry Northwest, Third Coast, and various anthologies. He lives in Portland, Oregon.

Regina Yoong is a doctoral student in Literature at Ohio University, Athens. Her field of interest is in 19th century American literature, especially in regards to religion and womanhood. She is Fulbright scholar from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and is currently working on her dissertation on Emily Dickinson whilst preparing for her comprehensive exams. Regina is a published poet and is the co-editor for Parlour: A Journal of Literary Criticism and Analysis.
Leamon Green is an artist and professor at Texas Southern University’s Department of Art. His artworks’ content is derived from reflecting on similarities and differences in cultures. Specifically, the imagery reflects the complicated definition of being African American in an increasingly global community. The figures are anonymous portraits of characters or types, who could be family members, either yours or mine. There are clues to identities such as patterns viewed in the clothing or the surrounding space, and historical African or European objects, all placed in ways that support the figures. For the artist, identity is an accumulation of cultures one experiences both directly and indirectly.

Mariah Joyce is an artist living and working in Portland, Oregon. Her work blends elements of the real and the surreal into landscapes that serve as a way for her place herself (find a home) in a world that can often feel alien.

Mario Liolios’ life has contained an abundance of imagination and sentimentality that informs his work, and continually drives him towards creating pieces that are reminiscent of emotionally driven audio compositions. His visualizations contain information that is constantly being churned by his ambition to bring these thoughts into a physical form and experience them. He has always been easily moved by his senses, and he contains a deep desire to create work that is highly personal. He endeavors to create a world that resonates within himself and his audience, and transports viewers to an environment overrun by an aura of emotion and hidden symbolism. Find more of his work at marioliolios.blogspot.com.

Melissa Romeo is an artist, educator and collector of trinkets currently working in Portland, OR. Her work is inspired by dreams, global events and local stories. By illustrating objects and ideas in a slightly askew, colorful, and sometimes even uncomfortable way, Melissa hopes to draw attention to the act of perception itself. Which aspects of our personal histories, interpersonal relationships, cultural backgrounds, social constructs and unconscious biases influence our interpretation of what’s before us?