**ellipsis... Award**
Judged by Camille Dungy
“Sonnet for Dolores O’Riordan” by Lyd Havens

**Runners-up**
"Have You Tried Unplugging It & Plugging It Back In? God Asks of My Heart" by Nick Alti
"Trans" by K Lange

**Academy of American Poets Student Poetry Contest**
Judged by Camille Dungy
"God Asks of My Heart," “A Fear,” and “A Truth” by Kate Wilson

**Anne Newman Sutton Weeks Student Prose Contest**
Judged by Camille Dungy
“Lost” by Lela Howard
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**Cover art** “Interview with a Cloud” by Jacqui Larson
Peppermint tea, that’s how the world
began. Good morning October air, good morning
ex-girlfriends, daylight it is. I’m thinking about the gut flora
of love. I wonder what I was like. I greet the common
cloud behind the yellow curtain; I greet the lavender soap
and scrub my longitudes; I greet my histories of affection.

A fern on the dresser, a thong on the bush,
150 watt memory. Popsicles weep down our wrists.

We go out walking in French. Les brindilles, peux-tu imaginer
d’être tellement fucking gorgeous, tellement flammable, darling.

A lark turns my clock radio up. Time measures on.
My first couplet. My first tercet. The floorboards
of my bedroom where I kick my legs open and play solitaire
in the nighttime mayhem under my orange lights, in my pink
nightshirt. Peppermint tea, the world continues. I turn
on the light above my kitchen table. It’s not wired
to a switch so I screw the bulb until it turns on
and I’ll unscrew it halfway when I go. The bulb will be unbearable
to touch for long, that’s scientific. I haven’t been touched
in a long glow, that’s the echo of a grip. I greet the blue ceramic sign
my housemate put above the toaster; I greet my chipper
chipped lemon mug; I greet my dead mouse on the porch steps,
a gift left by the cat from around the block
who I look after when his mothers go out of town.
The sign says, *If we were meant to pop out of bed, we would sleep in toasters!* I make a merriment. I make a mess with liars and superglue. I’ve wanted an eon more than I’ll admit.

Each desire is permanent. Each permanence can be felt like a horse chestnut in a palm in the pocket of a coat in the bluster of a firm kiss.
Cherished Patty! I cover you with a cape of protection. We watch it float to your shoulders. I gaze on your reflection in my round mirror splashed with keepsakes my other friends have brought me from their vacations in New Orleans and Las Vegas and the Holy Land. I know you think they are cheap and tacky. I know you photograph my decor when I am around the corner, mixing your hair coloring. You text the photos to your friends. Sometimes I go out and have a smoke. You are happy playing with your mobile phone.

Then I stand behind you and grasp your hair, splaying it out and scratching your head as though you are my beloved cat. I urge you to remove your earrings, placing them on the narrow counter in front of my mirror. I ooh and aah at your turquoise or amber. I lift and remove your thick-lensed eyeglasses, so the chemicals will not harm their stems.

I amuse you with stories of my youth in the Ukraine. How I would try new things with my hair for novelty’s sake, like shaving back my hairline or sporting cornrows, or dying it the matte black of a charcoal briquette. I tell you about the time I dyed my hair a volatile red, so stylish! It was for my only trip home, 15 years back. How I arrived at the airport and all the Ukrainian ladies wore their hair the same fox-red shade.

I am helping you grow your hair out and lightening it over time. You joke that you are trying to look like me. But you do not know my looks; not the way I know yours, Patty. I know your skull, your hairline. That weird curly patch. I know about your affair. Without your eyeglasses, you cannot see. We have that trust.

I am aware you have seen the fleshy growths on the back of my head. The ones I cover with my honey-hued waves. I registered your shock before you averted your eyes.

I soothe your fears when you come to me in a whirl over the latest thing President Trump has broadcasted on social media. I give you Russian tea. I give you samples of hair products good for our babyfine hair. I give you a chunk of honeycomb. I wrap it for you in aluminum
foil, twisted into the shape of a swan. You take a photo of me proffering it. It never occurs to you I’ll see it on Instagram.

You just love to keep up on the news. The day of that terrible fire in the Russian mall, you ask me what I think. You have tears in your eyes. I tell you it was definitely worse than you think.

Way back when, you may have actually heard about Chernobyl before I did. I was there for the people lifting their babies up to see the weirdly beautiful light. But what I am saying is, you might have heard the truth.

This is what it is—was—to be Ukrainian. Throw yourself dreamless on the fire. Defend. Sacrifice. Dread is something inside of us, Patty, like a ghost we harbor. A full day after Chernobyl, volunteers appeared to shampoo the streets. From behind our curtains, we watched in our robes. Over and over, this happened, in the early mornings. Shampooing and shampooing.

When we are done, I spin you with care and tell you that if anything, your hair is thicker.
In the room where I once invented mirrors, you tell me
I am so pretty the way I am. You have been dead 5 months,
and my parents are making fun of my taste in music again.
My dad says I only like women who sound like goats
when they sing, but I mishear it as ghosts. In that case,
he isn’t wrong. I like people who sound like dried fruit
Nobody else was screaming, so why couldn’t you?
You taught me how to scream when I was 10, you know.
My dad left me in the car while he ran into Basha’s,
and Dreams came on the radio. I had unlearned childhood
by then, and so I howled along. All the windows up,
I dreamed for a dream. I think that’s when I started
being louder. I think you invented my voice.
LAUREN SCAVO-FULK

Commonplace
Last night the pug ran away. We were quite beside ourselves when we noticed her missing. Our first clue was the pile of crumbs beneath the kitchen table. Our second was the lack of pug in all the usual pug-shaped places: the bathtub, the sunny spot in the kitchen.

We began to look in the upper cupboards, thinking she had learned how to climb. Upon discovering chew toys in the vitamin cabinet, we realized that, perhaps, she had. We found the front door open, the smudges around the deadbolt perplexingly puggish.

It came to our attention that our pug may not be of ordinary stock.

Our next-door neighbors were waiting for us on their porch dressed in bathrobes and bunny slippers, which we found terribly gauche but didn’t say. They said they caught sight of her at half-past seven, then complained about the way she breathed. We apologized for her deviated septum, and asked why they hadn’t called. They said she looked like she had places to be.

We followed the lengths of their forefingers out of the cul-de-sac. We came to the fork in the road and had to flip a coin to decide which way to go. Heads.

Construction cratered the asphalt. We held our breath at the edges of the deepest pits, listening for a falling, pug shriek. Nothing but wind whistling through traffic cones. Relieved, we moved along until the road gave up in favor of dirt. We fanned out between ferns and apple trees—their intermingling the result of an invasive species of fruit bat—then crept on hands and knees in our pursuit.

The dirt became clay, saturated and so sticky that it pulled the socks and shoes from our feet. We kept going until, suddenly, we were mired in a bloody marsh. The more we struggled, the deeper we sank.
When things seemed their bleakest, the congealed blood began to flow and a contraction sucked us into the ground through an unseen artery. We sped along with platelets, blinking through red to see a distant heart tangled in the roots of an apple tree.

As the last of our oxygen bubbled from our lips, we mourned the loss of ourselves.

There was a light, one that the current would not let us escape. We had no choice but to be carried through to the unknown. We were pumped through a hillside where we found our feet, ignoring the pain left in our soles as we explored a gravel path that took us to the threshold of a newly-turned graveyard.

We stumbled between headstones, weeping when we saw paw prints tracked over fresh graves, leaving flowering crocuses in our bloody wake. We found her next to a headstone. She rested her scrunch face against her paws, wheezing with her deviated septum.

We could still feel the apple-tree heartbeat beneath our feet. Not quite sure what to do, we sat beside her, a pug-shaped place.
Summer’s knives open
our apples up to bees. All
the sweetness stolen by
thirst or rot. The little
left us when the rains
return to scatter
the insects we crush
into nectar & water down
for our kids so they know
what it’s like to drink
from the world.

x

A schizophrenic sky
shakes the birds free
of their branches, blurs
the kitchen window; we are
choosing to be trapped
inside rather than risk
that openness. Grandma
is turning white bread
into ash again. Edges
singed. Center dark as
a savior’s skin before
the bleach. She asks
if I can see Jesus
in the burning.
She asks if I can taste him
there.

x
My father burns the meat
to make sure it’s dead. Enough
blood on our lips, he likes
to say. He likes to say
take whatever fits in your mouth
& chew. Chew the names off
the dead. Chew history
down to gristle & bone.
Soak it all up in sauce
so we forget what it is
we’re eating.

x

At my mother’s funeral
a priest offers us
a stranger’s body
dried & pressed,
flavorless. My own
children are licking
the dust off the pews.
Together, we mantra the word
\textit{savor savor savor savor this}
until we lose her face in the saying.
the fawn, unsettled by a switchblade, eats his mother whole. the stag in-passing asks *how did you do it?* and so the fawn replies *hooves first, head last* as if teaching how to shed velvet from antlers by summer’s end, how to choke the blood vessels ‘til the husk blows off by chance in the wind—soft as a gunshot heard a half mile off. in this land, you must swallow all you love for fear of it being taken. in this land, a man tattoos his face to count toward spring, to deter mosquitoes despite winter’s withdrawal from the cycle. the heat never rests. the sun is always shining, the undergrowth scorched white like scar tissue. at this, the fawn vomits, and the stench of bile has infected his mother, her fur packed and reeking.
art

K R I S T I N E   T U R K A L

Magnolia
Adam proposes one hundred feet from the jazz club where we met. He murmurs against my mouth and gets down on one knee and takes my ankles into his hands, as if intending to anchor me there.

I’m twenty-five, but watching him kneel makes seventeen-year-old me explode inside my chest and dance around my childhood bedroom—blue walls, lavender curtains, stacks of young adult novels. The twenty-five-year-old body I live in stays silent.

Someone exits the jazz club. The music—furious, propulsive—spills into the winter stillness, jolting me into speech. “I need to pee,” I say, and then, “Fuck, sorry,” and then, “Can I let you know? I can’t think, I’m not thinking.”

“Of course, take your time,” he says cheerfully, but his face is wounded.

The next morning, I remove his hand from my thigh and stare at my skin with suspicion. “I think we have bedbugs,” I say. Adam mumbles something and turns over, facing the wall.

Before the proposal, as Adam performed his drum solo, I observed other women watch him with longing. After the gig, when boundaries between musician and audience dissolved at the bar, I admired Adam from afar as if he were someone else’s before reminding myself he was mine by walking over to claim him.

I wait thirteen hours before making my decision. I drive into downtown Denver and buy dresses from three stores only to return them hours later, digging receipts out of my purse, and then I walk another twenty minutes to where I parked the car, and then I drive home, and then I tell Adam yes.

We hug, tightly, as if reuniting. But when we break apart, he stares at a spot on the wall behind my left shoulder and says, “Why’d it take you so long, Jules? I need to know.”
I’d anticipated something logistical like *where have you been* or *what did your parents say*, but now I’m forced to retreat inside my own uncertainty. “We’ve never really talked about it,” I say, which occurs to me as true.

“We did,” he insists. “Of course we did.”

I try to remember a conversation, but can’t.

“Oh, okay, so, I think we should have one final date. With a stranger.” He enunciates each word slow and tight. “It sounds silly, but maybe we need reminders of what we don’t have with anyone else.”

I close the refrigerator and let the wave of this knock me over and pull me under and when I come up for air, I take a deep breath. He’s forcing me to remember what it used to feel like: not having him.

“Oh, okay.” I stick out my hand, force him to shake it.

On Monday, after leaving the office where I copyedit advertisements, I go to my favorite café in Denver’s Arts District. I order a scalding cappuccino and make eye contact with the barista. He has an eyebrow piercing and doesn’t return my gaze. I scan the café for potential final dates, attractive men to flirt with, and wonder if people noticed Adam and I back when he was a man and I was a girl, back when we leaned close together at a table in this same café. My scalp starts to itch, and the curve of my ribs, and my shoulders. I feel dirty. I scratch underneath my hair. I imagine little legs crawling on my skin and so I toss my coffee into the overflowing trash and walk outside into the cold. Waves of people flow down the street and I push through them.

When I return home, Adam is backing his car out of the driveway. It’s the same car he’s always had. The blue paint is covered in scrapes and scratches, and I’m overwhelmed by a surge of resentment that I can’t swallow down. When he shouts out the window about purchasing vintage cymbals for his drum set, I wonder if this is a lie, if he’s instead going
on that final date with someone else, and so I shout back, wishing him luck. He looks at me strangely before rounding the corner.

After entering our home, I call a bedbug exterminator to inspect our nooks and crannies. It’s been on my to-do list for a while. I’m an adult and I make adult appointments. I take care of things.

The exterminator brings a small dog with him but leaves it inside a crate in the living room for most of the inspection. The dog unsettles me but I don’t want to inquire. Perhaps the man was out and about with his dog when I called pleading for his assistance, or perhaps he brought his dog to the vet because of some sort of emergency and didn’t have enough time to bring the dog home before our appointment. There are many possibilities.

Bedbugs leave tiny dark spots on the mattress, the exterminator explains to me, blood they ingest and poop out. “This is what we’re looking for,” he says, producing from his briefcase a real bedbug in a tiny airtight bag. I recoil as he discusses it in detail, his eyes bright, almost loving, and I gag a few times at the thought of the bedbug escaping from its airtight confinement. When the exterminator places the bag on my desk, I resist the urge to ask him to put it farther away.

The exterminator takes apart the bed, reducing it to a skeleton: bedframe mattress box-spring headboard, all disassembled. I’m reminded of the day three years ago when I first laid in it, when I wondered if I was finally old enough now.

###

Adam and I have been dating for three years, but I’ve known him for nine.

My friend Anna and I, seventeen-year-olds boasting decent fake IDs, drove into the city from the suburbs where we lived, hoping a jazz club would turn us into who we wanted to be.

When the pianist introduced the rest of the band, I googled them. The drummer, Adam,
had wavy blonde hair and green eyes. His website revealed he was twenty-five and based in Denver, though he often toured nationally, and an idea of him began growing in my head. After the gig, the musicians headed for the bar. I drank two glasses of the cheapest wine available and waited for an opening in conversation. Anna watched me walk over with her mouth open.

Appearing at Adam’s elbow, I said, “I really enjoyed watching you play.”

His head turned first, taking me in, and then his body followed. He thanked me and extended a hand. “Glad you dug the music. I’m Adam.”

“I know your name.” I held his gaze. “I’m Julia.”

“Are you a musician, too?”

I shook my head. “Just another groupie.”

“Jazz musicians don’t usually have groupies,” he said, laughing.

In his voice, it sounded like a suggestion. “Well, I’m not a full-time groupie. I’m a student.”

His eyebrows lifted. “What do you study?”

He assumed I was college-aged. I let him. “Literature,” I said, because I loved to read.

He flicked his eyes at someone behind me. “Hey, so, our bassist needs a lift to the airport. He’s catching a redeye to New York.” His hip bumped against mine. “But can I snag your number?”

“I’ll snag yours,” I said. It was a flirty move I’d read in a magazine somewhere. I took out my phone and he recited it.
“I hope I hear from you, Julia,” he said.

Anna approached after he departed, annoyed about her abandonment and designated-driver sobriety, but unable to resist asking questions. Before dropping me off, we rehearsed lies to tell if our parents asked where we’d been.

I texted Adam two days later, suggesting we hang out. He named a bar downtown, so I told my mother I was meeting Anna at a café and asked if she could drive me into the city.

I re-adjusted my scarf until her car disappeared around the corner, then walked toward the bar. I noticed Adam right away: he was sitting on a stool facing the door with a beer in front of him. His blonde hair gleamed even in the moody, blue-tinged light. The bartender looked at me for too long but didn’t ask for ID. When Adam gestured at the stool beside him, I sat.

“I have a question.”

My face flushed with heat. “What?”

He studied my face. “How old are you? One of my buddies said you looked young, told me to be careful.”

I decided to shock him. “I’m seventeen but my birthday was in August, so I’m actually closer to sixteen.”

“Jesus, okay.” He swept an anxious hand through his hair. “Here’s what we’ll do. I’ll drink this, and then we’re going to a café with brighter lights. We can talk for a bit, then I’ll leave.”

I tried to seem blasé. “Sounds like a plan. Although a sip would be nice.”

He tried to look stern, but a smile collected in the corners of his mouth as he slid his beer towards me. I drank slowly and hoped he was watching. He was.
At the café, he asked about my homework, hobbies, family. I hated being reminded I was a child, and so, when he asked about boys at school, I fabricated stories so he knew others wanted me, knew he needed to claim me before I belonged to anyone else.

After texting for a few months and dodging my requests to meet again in person, Adam began calling late at night, after his gigs. I huddled under blankets and listened to him describe musicians he played with, venues he traveled to. I spent a lot of time listening. I never wondered if that was all he needed from me.

When I turned eighteen and got my driver’s license, Adam offered to buy me lunch to celebrate—our third in-person meeting ever. I chose an edgy look: black dress, leather jacket, ripped stockings, knee-high boots. My parents overestimated me, suspecting nothing. I was supposed to know better. I didn’t tell Anna, either. I knew what she would say.

At the same café I said, “we’re both officially adults now,” even though I was still a virginal teen. He was the only person I spoke to this way.

He nervously sipped his coffee. “Oh, Julia, you know it’s not like that.”

“What is it like?”

“We’re friends,” he said, with an unconvincing air of shock, as if he had no idea what else we could possibly be.

“A twenty-six-year old wants to be friends with an eighteen-year-old?” I gave him a pointed look. “I must be fascinating.”

He laughed again and said, “Of course you are,” but I’ve often had trouble believing it.

In March, I received college acceptances to schools in Colorado, as well as to New York University. I’d applied on a whim hoping it would make me more interesting.
A few days after I found out, while sitting at our usual café, Adam’s phone wouldn’t stop ringing. He peeked at the screen and then slipped it into his pocket. “Sorry,” he said. “I need to leave sooner than I thought. The pianist wants me at the venue early.”

I hadn’t yet attended any more of his gigs. I preferred having him to myself, but sometimes I wondered what happened after-hours on the nights when he didn’t call me back. “Yeah, no worries, you can go.” Bitterness oozed from my voice. “I just thought I should tell you I got into NYU.” And then louder, I said: “I think I’m moving to New York.”

“Wow, Jules, congratulations, that’s great!” He leaned over and hugged me, my head fitting under his chin. I was speechless for a moment. We never touched.

But I didn’t want his approval, his pride. I wanted to show him what he might miss.

“I also got into a few places in Colorado.” My mouth was dry. I swallowed. “My parents will want me to stay, so it’ll be a hard decision.”

“You’ll convince them,” he said. “NYU is well-respected. You’ll have a blast in New York!”

“Isn’t it the jazz capital of the world?” I said, my voice suddenly fierce. “Why haven’t you moved there?” I pictured us: literature student and jazz musician huddled under blankets in an East Village apartment because we couldn’t afford heating, cutting coupons and eating pretzels and having lots of sex to keep warm.

“New York rent is insane. I’m established here.”

I nodded, then said what I’d told myself I wouldn’t. “You don’t care what I do? It doesn’t matter if I stay or leave?”

He heaved a heavy, exasperated sigh. “Of course I care. I just don’t want you making decisions based on anyone else. Do what you want. Denver will always be here.”
But will you? is what I wanted to ask, but didn’t. Instead, I said: “Can you drive me to my car? I had to park a few blocks away, and look—it’s raining now.”

I’d never been in his car before. It smelled like him, like faint woodsy cologne. There was a record player on the back seat, a crowd of cymbals and drumsticks. I gestured at the assortment. “Oh, wow, are you a musician or something?”

He grinned and poked my shoulder, a second touch. “I’ll miss that sarcasm when you move east.”

My whole body tingled with warmth. Before I could chicken out, I said, “Can you kiss me?”

His fingers twitched on the steering wheel but he didn’t look at me, and in the silence that followed I felt dispensable, and foolish, and young. When he began, finally, to open his mouth, I said quickly, “I was just kidding, jeez. Oh, that’s my car—yeah, can you let me out?”

I took my seat belt off and unlocked the door and it was then that Adam dragged my face toward him, kissing me so deeply that I pitched forward, dizzy, colliding with his mouth as if intending to disappear inside. We grabbed at each other’s waists for a few seconds until he pulled away.

My heart was pounding. We stared at each other until he reached across my lap and pushed my door open. “See you soon, Jules.”

I texted him the next afternoon. He responded three days later. I replied within ten minutes. He didn’t respond for weeks, so I sent two more texts, asking to see him. Those weren’t answered either, and six months later I moved to New York.

Halfway into my freshman year, drunk and sleepy after a party, I searched the Internet for signs of him. Eventually I stumbled onto a YouTube video of him drumming at the Denver jazz club posted by a woman whose name I then searched for on Facebook. Adam didn’t have a Facebook, a detail I’d always found annoying, but pixelated versions of him were
splashed across hers. The captions confirmed she became his girlfriend a few months before Adam kissed me in his car.

The other woman was beautiful and age-appropriate and in photographs it looked like they were in love, so I slept with many men in the years that followed. I wanted to be desired, to prove I deserved to be.

***

After the exterminator finishes inspecting, he turns to the dog. “Are you ready to work?”

The dog wags its tail madly, and I understand. There are bomb-sniffing dogs and Seeing Eye dogs and dogs for epileptics and now, apparently, there are dogs who specialize in sniffing out bedbugs. Soon there will be dogs that come door-to-door, sniffing close to our chests, confirming if we’re being truthful. Soon there will be dogs that determine if we’re in love.

The exterminator opens the crate and the dog bounds around the corner. “Beagles are trained well,” says the exterminator. “They find everything.”

I consider this. “I just got engaged,” I say.

The exterminator is startled. “Oh, congratulations.”

I shrug. “Are you married?”

He brandishes his ring finger. “Almost four years now. I’m forty-three. Took me a while to find her.”

I feel compelled to prove to this stranger that I know what I’m doing, that my future is bright, that I’m deeply enmeshed in love. I wonder how he’d react if I told him everything—if I told him how, on my first real date with Adam three years ago, everything felt soft and warm, and we stayed too long, probably past closing time, and waiters started stacking chairs on
tables and I laughed so hard at something I can’t remember, something that might not have been funny, and almost chipped my tooth on a wine glass.

I wouldn’t have minded chipping it. I would’ve been able to look in the mirror every day after and remember everything. Adam removed my clothes for the first time that night. He kissed his way from my ankles to my lips and I didn’t know where to look, didn’t remember how to breathe. I worried I’d make the wrong noise or say the wrong thing and he’d remove his hands and leave. I felt the place where we merged like an ache. Sometimes I still don’t know where to look.

“I found him a long time ago, but things got in the way,” is all I manage to say to the exterminator. I tell him my obsession with bedbugs began gradually, but now consumes my whole day. He nods, listening, or perhaps just pretending to listen. I tell him that I imagine little legs crawling on my skin in circles and squares.

I stop talking when I hear paws clicking on the hardwood floor. The exterminator edges away from me. We both focus on the corner where his dog will appear. I want the dog to come back barking and whining, to lead the exterminator and I to where the problem is. I want them both to show me what to do next. When the dog appears, he trots back into his crate, spins in a circle, and lies down. “That means you have a clean, bug-free home,” says the exterminator.

When I blink at him, he says, “Good luck with your engagement, I’m glad it all worked out.” He picks up the crate, and the bag containing the bedbug, and leaves. I reassemble the bed.

***

Adam texted me during my junior year. He was in New York with his band. We were in the same city again, and so I was finding it difficult to breathe. I half-expected him to turn the corner of MacDougal and West Fourth where I now stood, typing to him on my phone’s small screen.
I’ve been thinking about you, he texted.

Instead of telling him to fuck off, or asking why now, so many years later, I wrote: I’ve been thinking about you, too.

When he invited me to his gig that night at Smalls, I went. I was twenty-one now, and hoped Adam realized this. I sat close to the instruments and to the people playing them, and drank two glasses of wine, and shivered every time he looked at me, which he did often. But after the gig, he was surrounded by people and I lost his eyes, and waited in the back nursing a third glass of wine, and when he finally approached, and kissed me on the cheek, and said it was so good to see me, and then left with his posse of musicians, I hated him, hated him, hated him, but spent the rest of my semester replying to his flirtatious texts anyway.

It was not supposed to happen. In New York, I was not supposed to text Adam in the bathroom of a bar on Bleecker Street, or under the desk during class, or after having sex with a nice boy who lay with me in the twin bed of my senior year dorm, who said he liked the way I smelled—but still, I kept typing.

Adam never mentioned his girlfriend, but I knew she was there unspoken, unseen, and it made me—us—feel special, misunderstood, beyond judgment. We exchanged messages for days until one night I called him on FaceTime and asked why we weren’t more than we were.

“We intrigue each other, I guess,” he said. “Nothing less, nothing more. Isn’t that true?”

I said, of course, that must be it—I agree, and then we didn’t speak for a long time.

Eight months passed before Adam called to congratulate me on my graduation. I thanked him as offhandedly as possible and said I was running out the door to meet a friend, which wasn’t true. I was in my pajamas. Before I hung up, he said he and his girlfriend were no longer together, even though I couldn’t remember if I’d even asked.
And so, well: I moved home to Denver after graduation. The news confused my New York friends, confused the professors generous enough to write my job recommendations, and even confused my parents, who nevertheless welcomed me back with open arms. I got a job in advertising and moved to an apartment a few miles from where Adam lived. It seemed far from my childhood bedroom in the suburbs, even though my parents still paid half my rent, and I hoped Adam would someday forget that version of me had existed. I wanted to do more than intrigue him.

Six months after returning, I moved out of my apartment and into Adam’s house. The first time I stepped inside felt like winning. I was finally allowed to know him. Sometimes I still don’t believe it—even every morning for the past two and a half years, we’ve awoken together in his bed. Adam believes we were destined to keep crossing paths, but I’m the one who keeps making choices.

***

When Adam returns to our home a few hours later, I tell him the good news. We don’t have bedbugs, I say. He laughs and removes his jacket and joins me on the couch, but I still scratch the itch, and this time I have no excuse for it. Beside me, Adam drums out a beat on my back, as if his touch can convince me, can remind me of something. I’ve often begged him to treat me the way he treats his drums. When he plays, he inhabits space differently. I can’t tear my eyes away and neither can anyone else. There’s something he shares with his drums that he doesn’t share with me.

After reading the same sentence three times, I poke his shoulder and ask if we can go to dinner, just the two of us, and talk.

“Have you been on your date yet?” he asks.

I shake my head.

“Cheater,” he says, but I watch him put on a nicer shirt, and so I put on shoes, and then we
walk to our favorite Indian restaurant, which is across the street. Whenever we leave the windows open, our home smells like tikka masala and korma and garlic naan.

We sit facing each other at a table near the kitchen, where things clang and clatter. “Tell me about your date,” I say.

I want to know if there’s someone out there who might be better for him than I am. That would mean there’s someone who might be better for me, too.

Adam laughs. “This was just for you, Jules. I don’t want anyone else. I love you.” My mouth feels dry. The waitress, who’s headed in our direction, sees my face. I don’t know what my face is doing but I do know that it hurts the muscles of my mouth and the waitress slows down and goes to a different table instead of coming to ours and pours them more water.

I look at Adam and hope to feel the old feelings, when I was desperate and hopeful and filled with sharp sweet longing. I touch his face and hope something will thud and expand in my chest. Nothing happens. I feel an indistinct rage, but mostly sadness. I open my mouth. The words are heavy. I struggle pushing them out, but I succeed, I’ve succeeded—I can’t forget this.

“I love you, too,” I finally say.

Adam leans over the table and we kiss with open mouths. I close my eyes and hope to become my seventeen-year-old self as she dances, giddy, around her childhood bedroom—blue walls, lavender curtains, stacks of young adult novels teetering on the edge of collapse.
golden baseboards and declarations of love hanging from the drapes maybe a glass of wine next to a lavish chaise a place where you could lay and be as pampered as you deserve to be and maybe we’re letting ourselves be in love today and isn’t it nice you and I going about our days alongside manicured rose bushes perhaps a china cabinet overflowing with the most ornate dishware a bathroom cabinet full of soaps and scrubs and maybe we lie together in the garden and listen to the birds chirp a love song and I tell you they wrote it just for us
Mother always says, I can tell you’re thinking of your heart things again. They’re going to rot in there.

So I’m scrubbing my chambers now, unscrewing the valves to drain effused memory fluid, tweezing millions of twisted fibrils stuck to the walls of my atrial bureaus and unfolding each to whisper the scrawled secrets on the wind, votive candles to my pasts.

The bloody baby stump I buried in the back garden, terrified. *My teeth throb when I admit to mistakes.*

Once-glances like honeyed milk, furtive and thick. *When I said I would give it all up for you, I was lying.*

Panic that tides on the loneliest nights, ankle to head. *I want to exist after dark.*
i can’t remember how you want me to remember you
all ligatures and ligaments
a scholarly grub
imbued with the souls of all the pickles-on-the-side
i’ve discarded
the spot past the hill
i fear is an old gulch
but haven’t confirmed
hoping it to be a river
and now this poem is about me
the same way a bathtub full of piss
shows effort and intent
and i haven’t decided
if i’m afraid of things i cannot change
A spur of fuzz / the back of my leg / missed / by cheap pink razor / growth / is change / in strange places / there is part / of me / that can / not be sheared / is silently resistant / to whatever forces / force it / into boxes / lace-thin / girl names / any kind of touchable / softness / the unimpressive / circus of men / trying to look / up / my skirt for something / that is not / this secret fur / sprouting / makes me / feel / dirty / in a rowdy way / I like / a muffled yelp / of freedom / that dissolves / on my tongue / I know / myself / when I taste it.
This gold pinky ring means I miss you, this
Xanax means I love you (4mgs of
I love you madly) (no I haven’t quit yet sorry everyone
I’ve just been lying
so you all shut the fuck up)
the liquor means I’ve not stopped trying to stop trying & I don’t know what the codeine means but it’s my favorite

How small I am & so the world crushes me.
How big I get & so I topple toward horizon.

Shakespeare said
don’t trust a man who doesn’t like music.
I say don’t trust a man who wants to fuck his little cousin,
& can you all turn that bullshit country rock off? This is Michigan.
Either listen to 80s rock or your neighbor
beating his wife in the driveway like you’re supposed to.

Besides benevolence Jesus had the best poses. Look at
the old paintings. Perhaps I’ll buy a sparrow-bone bonnet. I’d look like Lucifer
if I stepped in the sunlight. Look at a man on a cross. Drama! Drama is fashion!
Can’t you just picture me pierced & bedraggled? How beautiful I am in dark or,
at least, drenched in blood, one step past half-dead.

Sorry to bring up Jesus, it’s just, he’s got this fabulous aesthetic & also
my palette of non-white mythology is empty. Medusa is my fetish, I guess,
but my Asian friends aren’t impressed. Hey wait I’ve read Lao-Tzu I say in defense.
Yes & how did you respond to that? they ask.
I’m in the way of The Way aren’t I?
What does that mean? Who’s Lao-Tzu? I’m seven my Filipino friend’s niece says.
I know, I know. But, it’d be really embarrassing to talk to the grownups about my ignorance.
She trots away cheering *Nick’s ignorance! Nick’s ignorance!* & her uncle is so disappointed in me again.

This is the ocean of big fish eat baby fish. 
Baby fish eat dead fish. Dead fish eat the ocean. 
Remember: give me a fish & I’ll have a meal, teach me to fish & I’ll kill you for your tackle box.
her nostrils—two holes
a nose defined by absence  godforbid

it take up residence on a ready made
for tv face with lips

overdrawn: a decorative fringe
for “I don’t know about this

Mulder” and “we should make sure
before—” any light is diffused

dampened by the beat-beat of classic
ivory on a pouf pressed into pores godfor

bid we see secretion  why let a pore be
a pore when it could be a tether—god

forbid a gaze go
unrewarded, but my eye

flashes, is instead drawn
to the sure flap of a wing framed

by the window above the tv

above Scully’s frothy hair beyond
her alabaster jaw her blanched visage

it is daytime and a Cooper’s Hawk hunts
for a finch’s head a robin’s egg  for minute tendons
picked from the place where muscle
cleaves to bone grey when cooked, a pale red
when raw

   it’s sad my husband says those hawks
sometimes hunt songbirds, but I guess
we all gotta eat
Scully surveys her options

raises her gun raises her gun raises
her gun tucks the softest hair on tv

in 1993 back, away—hesitates godforbid
she fire. All action is reserved

for the small-bodied bird
beaked and taloned with a mouth allowed

to wallow in incision. Our two windows
stacked godforbid we go without

something to look at and I see
two figures: one’s sharp angles thrust

into focus. Another’s glossed
over, pressed

into relief.
Baruch Atah Adonai
Blessed (Baruch)
are you (Atah)
O Lord (Adonai)
Oh lord/oh lordy
lordy lordy lord
Adonai
Adonai
Adonai
don’t Adonai don’t
Adonai don’t deny it Adonai
that’s not your real name

When
the choir/shofar
howl abandon, I
don’t head nod
but davenh
Davenh down
holy movement
bow/rock down down
to the synagogue
of 5am/I don’t
Adonai/don’t
I don’t bend to you
too many singulars
Adoshem/Baal/Yahweh/Elyon
pick a theme

I don’t
stand on ceremony
nor/do kneel in penance
I bend/davenh down down
to other humans/wailing
wail against every wall
of this city
I am not
from this place, I
am of it and in
in them/it are you
oh Lord/lordy
plural plural never
skyward/always
in the eyes

Adonai don’t
Your presence
singular bears
no currency
completes no
transaction/solution
to any/all of this
brute math
How can you
stand there just
   being
   one being?

Home is
where I hang
my head/lift
my eyes only
to meet yours
their/eye level
plural plural
in god/in all them
adonai

This is a prayer
thrown down down a staircase
    Faith in you/the pedestal
    singular comes
    slow/never as you
    made us to bear
the weight of your essence
but never your name

Don’t Adonai don’t deny it
The lack of faith
is yours
It is now
the small sun of
a Southern winter
let it never blind
a New England
mud/scum ice
never slipping
thin New over top
the old glaring through

I am sick of
saying “Faith”
quotation marks implied
means I don’t know
what it means
I have
coughed the word
dry/I reach back
for salvation
and come up with
sawdust/the Word
gelled/frozen
thin new/old glaring
blind

I need
another word
anew/a new synonym
free of the old
blind/desiccated/bereft
that flips the hymnal
burns the altar
unbent knee
lifted head
wonder
blessed
ruleless
boundless, yet
even these are all
old/frozen/sawdust/slipped
and bereft of god

I take stock
I have ____
I still have
stained teeth
I have never ending
stained teeth in god
and boundless lazy eye
that it/they surround and bind us
I have enduring smoker’s cough
in the goodness of some
Undying widow’s peak
in the wickedness of others
and frayed combat boots that
judgement will find them
I have sawdust coupled with good works
Too often I have no slipped disc
in myself

I pray
that my crisis
of upturned hands
abates/can live
despite the fact
that god/G-d/God
however you spell it
no longer has worn knees
in any of us

I often question
my short life span in
that changing
Barack & Michelle Obama Gone Ghetto #1 & #2

1.

The City on the Hill haunted by all manner of gunshots & protest signs & constricted throats of umbrage. Pundit wolves gnawing at the ballet-slippered sheath of flesh-glazed bones: *Poverty is a state of mind.* The cloy of fear a cheap perfume-scented cover for panic wafting from corporate person-hoods of deceit & profit at-all-cost collateral damage mass-graved beneath a porcelain hunter’s moon. The jagged hook of rock & blood clotted hank of hair. Something cunning is always blooming. A flowering of friction & conflicts & the indifference of a nation just bordering on extinction. Comeuppance stealing from its lair toward its prey that somehow manages to be simultaneously anxiety inducing & exciting. The negative duality of metaphor that loopholes the mandatory laws that never apologize. A sporadic light between freight cars—the distance between index finger & thumb—like the mantis of axiomatic peril that implies a reckoning oncoming from the distance & it is there between guest-expert opinion & magic long as train smoke that you will find the truth of it all. The road-to-nowhere been-marginalized anxiety of deferred beginnings & the seething deranged. The sick & the scared to death. The small-voiced solely afflicted with powerlessness. Nervously toeing the tide but ever vigilant of failure. The status mandated boundaries & what can be taken away.

2.

An international optimism
that dazzled from the executive distance. The wannabe messianic vision askance, but talkshow familiar
to the ear. There was just so much shit
that we didn’t want to see, or hear, that colored
the monotone rise & passing of our days. The peripheral odor
of recycled bullshit, pulse pounding a hyena capitalism, that cattle-prodded our be patient
infinitesimal waiting. The repetition that accumulated, & instead of dissipating, stacked up against us

(as in next to, alongside),

anxiously clinging, if not insisting that, we prepare ourselves, though we have no sound idea for what.
at the corner of 26th and girard, between the dollar tree and an eight foot tall ancient stone fence sits the laundromat. the laundromat doesn’t take quarters, contrary to common sense, but only takes tokens which you get by putting cash into a machine, 5 tokens for a dollar, 9 to use a 15 gallon machine. the tokens remind me of chuck e cheese or a slot machine jack-pot in a movie (every casino i’ve been to prints out vouchers). mercy mercy me by marvin gaye is playing from the radio. i put my tokens into the slot and my clothes into the porthole and wait. the walls are chrome slats and the ceiling is made of perforated tiles splotched with wet spots mirroring the blanketed sky on this stifling day. oh things aren’t what they used to be, no no. where did all the blue skies go? everyone here in this space mostly keeps to themselves and i think about how intimate it is to wash our clothes communally as we are all separated in our own little worlds, like silver slats between our thoughts, protecting us. as the engine spins faster and faster, fluorescent lights flicker with the rotation of the fan. my sweet lord, na, na, na. my lord, my sweet lord a girl with her head wrapped in a silk scarf hoists her clothes out of the dryer and drops a g-string. it crumples to the floor in a little ball. i tell her she dropped something and she blushes
PAUL CHRISTEAN

Symbols in Time
We are always in someone else’s country //
the nobodies / who are not nothing //
Where we always been / in the middle of
becoming / who we are / or never were
// I remember / kidnapped a Diaspora
lineage & / shackles / : The Resurrection
Blues / smoldering hot molecules from
our lungs / something blackened- / bluer
than the bluest of Blues / traveling a
vector through space/Time /
sheltering our heart swooned Selves /
more than status quo staggered off-kilter
to gravity // We be Rapture-risen
hopefully // The gri-gri signifier of soul
power / long after / & before / they first
see us as Divine / & so hip / & so /
very very beautiful.

(If Elvis Presley is King, then James Brown must be God!!)

We are our only Creators /
created by our own Selves
as we were created by those
/ who created before before /
there was a before
to remember.

Memory is the rewritten history of the soul.
A caravan of blueprints bum-rushing the scene / bum-rushing / the way / leading the way / bum-rushing the system.

Our dark flesh / staggered upright but / startled so civilized stunned primal.

Negro, ya’ betta’ keep up!

We be Black / the way all deadly things / can be reduced to / an atomic formula /

that maybe explodes! //
Black birds herald the dark with chirps
and I sit on the front steps and peel an orange,
drop the fragrant skin beside my feet and hold
the naked pulp of huddled moons. Across the street,
the neighbor checks for mail in his green mailbox.
His mother died last week. His wife
plays Ella Fitzgerald from the record player
by their open window while I rub pith from slices of fruit
and eat them. As the night descends
on the crimson streak of horizon, I wonder
where the sun goes after it’s swallowed whole.
This picture was made in the spirit of fun, and was meant in no way to detract from the wholesome influence, civic mindedness and the many charitable contributions of Western idols of our American youth, or to be a portrayal of any of them. –Film Disclaimer

Made in the spirit of fun:

an Injun
down the barrel of a wide-angle lens—
in no way to detract from

civic and civic minded wholesome
vs. the forces of evil
gripping their tomahawks.

It’s not genocide it’s self defense
this picture—

a portrayal of our American youth
wholesome in the spirit of

many charitable contributions:

a mouthful of lead
a wagon full
of trinkets

a portrayal meant in no way

look thataway Callaway Western idol

wholesome charitable

Look away
was where he walked now.
The sky heard a song

from another sky
and filled its lakes once

more. A star collapsed
on the dusty trail, swallowing

the surrounding space.
He prays for whatever

he crushes with his feet.
He used to carry certainty

like a suitcase of moons.
The shape of words on his

lips felt inside out.
The ghosts led him home

where he talked to
his daughter’s empty bed

covered in bibles.
In a dream, he set fire

to the empty spaces in space
so there would be no more

darkness. He swallowed
the planets like pills
and felt a body clothe
his body with a new skin.

Somewhere, a small tree
let go of its first apple.

Somewhere, there was an animal
who would eat it.
art      SHAY HUDSON

Leftovers
(-ient) Staying in place for a short time
holding on to whatever I can grasp
from a speeding vehicle;
to be called
“girl”
is a high speed chase

(-action) An exchange between people
here is the body I was given
and I guess
I am giving you
the assigned female experience
is the assignment of currency
to square inches of skin

(-fix) To become motionless with horror. Also: to be pierced by a sharp weapon
bodies are weapons
sometimes my own
used against me;
pinned down
into a dress
or hung
on a pronoun-
how does a mouth say,
“yes”?  

(-corperate) To pass into another body after death
this death
is a chosen and survivable becoming-
a new body
that is this body
that is the first time
this body has known themself.

Is this possible?

(-literate) To write a word using the closest corresponding letters of a different language
to write a gender
into the closest corresponding letters
that fit these heavy shoulders
when I say “they”,
I mean
all of me
the multitudes of me
the many selves I have put back into this body
the many selves I have always had dancing inside me
and how even the tired ones
keep stomping around

(-pose) To shift to a different context. In music, to shift to a new key
in me: a new term for this body
a half step away from trauma
a whole step away from girl
an octave towards survival
a new song that rings:

“I am still here!
and will be
for a long time!”

(-form) A dramatic change. Also: tectonic plate boundary
the ridges where whole continents slide past each other
the lithosphere neither created nor destroyed

how a prefix gives me that kind of power
to move out creating
through every crack and fault
a new home for myself
(-mission) In machines, a mechanism by which power is transferred
   in me, the mechanism
   by which I tell this story
   take it out of these social constructions
       into my own hands
       into this room
       into you

(-parent) Allowing light to pass through so what’s behind can be distinctly seen
I look like a daredevil in the right light—
no god-fear or wild worries in this light.

Winter is holed up somewhere again, and
I birth a new sun just to hold more light.

Like an ancient astronomer, I kill the quiet:
worship the truth and all the hours of light.

I will hold all your June sky rebellion, cherish
the way it drapes us in that linen-like light.

In Bar Harbor, we learn that hope dies easiest in fog;
that all the houses become only night-sky without light.

In October, we play the farewell transmission; we’re
reminded of all the desires we sewed onto moonlight.

I dreamt you were an electrician: wires on your
belt, tinkering with the evolution of a new light.

Someday soon I will crown myself with wings, go
willingly towards the tall window, and all that light.
in spite of a palpable weakness for woodsmoke and the
ten-up onslaught of the dog when I let her off the leash
to run like big news through the reticent assemblies of
pipsissewan and bluebell, and though I’m a sucker for
the unsparing shock of stars punching analytic through
the inspissate dark to remind me of what I can’t seem to
remember, and would give my eyeteeth for the bracing
clamminess of the impassive implacable unwavering
earth underneath the hands I lay upon it, and which
in recompense bequeaths its dark deposits in the mines
of my palms’ bold ivy, black ink sinking into riverbeds
crisscrossing a woodblock map, and much as I hearken to
the wordy arabesques that seem nearly to pierce the
veiled streams whose mists are upon me before I know
where I am, and can’t resist even the curious fear like
the dog mad with sniffing when the viridescent fog
of bracken and acanthus surges to infiltrate the
footpaths right through to my dreams, and for all that
I don’t even remotely mind having to grapple with
the solid cobwebs that are only fractured branches half
attached like clanking appoggiaturas, and the broken
code of stones half-buried amidst hieroglyphs of root
systems, pleased indeed to follow the liquid dragonfly
as he shoots nearby blue comets, tantalizes the periphery,
departing to return, hang around, dart here now, here,
hover, bugger off, recur once again, disappearing to
return, long into the afternoon, until to see him one
final time is all my desire, I have no wish myself to sleep
out there
What is that? Where did you find it?

_In the garden._ I don’t believe you. We don’t grow beans. _It was by the tomatoes._ The red ones or the green ones? _They were yellow._

You mean the squash? _Maybe._

We don’t grow squash. When was the last time you were in the garden? _When I found the bean._

By the invisible yellow squash? _Yes._ Why are you lying to me? _Where did you find this bean? In the woods._

Where in the woods? _In someone’s hand._

So you stole it? _No._ Why did you steal it? _I didn’t._

Did you buy it? _She gave it to me._ She? Who? _The Purple Fairy._

What did she look like? _Small._ _Wore a lot of purple._ Might’ve had wings. Please tell me you didn’t take something from her. Do you have any idea what you’ve done? _Is she bad?_ No. But gifts from her are flames near a kindling box. Just throw it away. Like this. _What is that? A hole._

_Where did it come from?_ I dug it. _Yesterday._

_Why are you lying?_ I’m not. _The bean did this._ Right? _What does the hole do? How do we close it?_ Ask the fairy.

_Where are you going? Dad?_ To pick some yellow squash.
Rabbits and Wolves
when your glass finger tips
shatter above my nape,

I shoot three crows
into butane

Something like night, or
[or a murder of streetlamp shadows]

Something like snow dismantles
[or a lost owl]

Something like something terribly blue.
Most mornings,  
I forget to brush my teeth.

I have noticed that I am writing almost exclusively about mouths and
I do not know how to prevent this gaping maw from making a home in my skin
I have named all of my teeth regret.
And they still are right where I left them
In my mouth.
They have yet to slink off;
Recede into my skull.
I think of swallowing them often.
Perhaps take a nail file to them,
Until they are just stumps and I’m left
With the fine powder of compunction covering the sink
Like an inexorable snowfall in July.
Perhaps this goes without saying:
I still know where every man who has ever hurt me sleeps.
I aimed my gun right at his head while wondering if I should take the shot.

“What are you doing?” Tim asked in total disgust.

I wasn’t sure what he was talking about. I shrugged my shoulders. “Shooting?”

“With your finger? What kind of gun looks like that?”

I held my hand up. With my lower three fingers curled into my palm and my index finger pointed out with my thumb sticking straight up, I did my best to play with Tim without holding an actual gun. My thumb was both the site and the trigger. I made a “pow” sound from my mouth each time I shot it off.

“This is how I’ve always made a gun. Here’s where the bullet comes out,” I said while signaling my index finger.

“That’s not how you hold a gun,” he replied with a smile that made me feel as though he were laughing at me. He adjusted the bandolier running from his right shoulder to under his left arm. Discarded AA batteries were linked together with duct tape as seen in countless action movies hanging over the muscular form of the starring hero.

“Then how do you hold a gun?” I asked, feeling more frustrated with this stupid game.

He held his hand up. The lower three fingers curled in toward his hand, but he left a gap between his finger and the inside of his palm as though an invisible handle of a gun sat between. His index finger curled inward as though it hugged the trigger. And his thumb curled around the back of the gun to give it a firm hold.

“This is how you hold a gun,” he said. Then he pulled his index finger and made a banging sound with his mouth. He shot the gun into the air. “Finger on the trigger, thumb near the
safety. This is how men do it.”

“Where’s the barrel?” I asked. My hands were relaxed and snug beneath my arms.

“You don’t make the barrel with your finger. It’s right here,” he signaled to the space in front of his hand where a real gun could have been. “You have to use your imagination.”

“Can you imagine this is a gun?” I said while pulling a hand out and making a gun with my index finger and thumb.

“What are you, three years old?” He replied with an eyebrow raised. “It looks like you’re giving someone directions. No gun looks like that. There’s no trigger.”

“It’s right here,” I said while raising and lowering my thumb repeatedly. I felt stupid all of a sudden. That’s not where the trigger of a gun went.

“Yeah, but the trigger is here,” he replied. He pulled the trigger on his gun a couple times to illustrate it.

I wasn’t ready to give in.

“I’ll imagine a gun like I imagine a gun, and you imagine a gun the way you imagine one,” I replied.

“You imagine stupid,” he replied. He turned his back to me.

“Use your imagination to imagine I’m holding a gun your way.”

“I’ll try not to laugh.”

He marched away from me. Tim was new to the block. He was a year younger and a grade less. His house backed to my own, and I could play with him anytime I wanted. Mom wouldn’t have to drive me anywhere. I could walk to a friend’s house, for once.
He crouched down behind the inflatable pool loungers that was propped up at ninety degrees by a cooler. This was his wall to protect him from the spray of bullets I sent his way. Protecting me was my bike held up by a kickstand. It was open and exposed between the metal supports and spokes. I suddenly wondered if Tim could imagine the wall protecting me in front of it.

“Ready?” he asked from behind the floaty.

I knelt down behind my bike. “Ready,” I replied with my index finger pointed out. I tried not to care what Tim thought.

His hand popped over the floaty. His index finger twitched while he made a gun-fire explosion sound with his mouth. Blam! Blam! Blam! His voice echoed between our houses. I kept my head low while the bullets flew above me. When he stopped, I made my move.

I sprinted around the back tire of my bike and shot at him with return fire. My thumb bowed with every shot I took. I had never pumped it so hard, not even on a video game controller. His hand came over the pool floaty and he shot more at me. Blam! Blam! I pushed my legs harder to avoid them.

I cornered the blue floaty and shot at his chest from a few feet away. His shoulders dropped.

“You can’t do that,” he complained. “I would have shot you on your way over here.”

My gun dropped to my waist. “No, I ran fast. I booked it. You missed.”

He sat up from the ground. “With your finger gun? Did you hit me with a fingernail? First of all, stop doing that. You look stupid. Do it like this.” He held up his gun. “Secondly, one of my bullets would have hit you on your way over. You’d be on the ground in pain. There’s no way you’d be standing.”

“How would you know?” I asked, feeling more frustrated at his stupid rules. “Your face was behind the wall. How could you see?”
This wasn’t the real military. But he played like it was. And his attention for realistic detail was too much for my imagination. He was too grounded and I was too imaginative.


“And do it right this time,” he shouted as I made my way back to my bike.

I crouched down behind my bike, wondering if this was how all the kids played in Montana. I lived in New York most of my life, and we played sports, rode bikes, and played video games. Tim liked riding bikes and playing war. He was too heavy to play sports.

“Ready?” he shouted from across the lawn.

“Ready,” I begrudgingly replied. I made a hand gesture like his, trading my index finger barrel for a finger curved around a trigger.

I waited for bullets to fly over my head. Between the red supports of my bike, I watched and waited for his hand to appear over the top of the floaty. It never came.

Seconds felt like minutes. Waiting for him to strike made me even more eager to hit him first. He was waiting for me.

Though twenty feet or so separated us, the deck extending out from the screened porch on the back of his house sat between us on the right. I dashed to the corner of the deck where he couldn’t see me. No imaginary wall. And still, he had yet to fire a round over the floaty.

I pressed myself against the cool grass and used my elbows to crawl closer. No gun fire came my way. I inched my body with the soft sound of grass brushing beneath me. I slowed my breath the closer I got. I cornered my gun around the back side of the inflatable and fired where he was sitting. To my surprise, nothing happened. I pulled the floaty away and Tim was gone.

“Blam! Blam!” Tim shouted. But it sounded more like an explosion as air passed through on
the inside of his cheek.

I rolled onto my back. Tim hovered above from the top of the deck. It seemed that when I made my dash to the edge of the wooden structure, Tim had done so as well. But he had climbed the stairs and now hung over me from a higher vantage point.

I fired back at him with my index finger and my thumb, but I had again disappointed him. His eyes closed and he released a sigh. His gun dropped down to his side.

“Finger again? Give it up, man. That’s not how you make a gun,” Tim said impatiently.

“I got you,” I replied, uncaring.

“I hit you in the back. You wouldn’t be able to raise your gun.”

Frustrated, I knew then that I had to use logic to beat his own. My imagination needed to be more real than his.

“You hit me in my lower back. I can still raise my gun and shoot you. I hit your head.”

“No you didn’t. Your back was turned. You didn’t see where I hit you.”

He had a point. But I pressed further. “You missed,” I replied. “It’s my body. I know where the bullet hit me.”

He held the gun back up and pointed it at me. “Your chest. I’m aiming at your chest. I know where I hit you.”

He glared my chest through one eye down the barrel of the invisible gun in his hand.

“I was moving at the time,” I replied, still trying to fight his logic. “You were aiming for my back and you hit lower than you thought.”
His gun lowered on my body, down to my private parts. He fired a round and started laughing.

“Didn’t miss that,” he said.

“This is stupid,” I said while getting up to my feet. I was done with the game.

“You’re stupid,” he replied. He mimicked my gun with his hand. “Look at me. I’m going to hit you with my dinky gun.”

“This is a dumb game,” I replied. “You bend the rules so you always win. You always hit me and I never hit you. It’s not fair. How do you know where your stupid imaginary bullets went? They’re not even real.”

“Because I know. I’ve fired a real gun,” Tim replied. “I know what it’s like to hold one and fire downrange. I doubt you’ve ever held one before because if you did, you wouldn’t be making that stupid hand thing.”

Silence fell between us. He glared down at me from up on the deck. I had never fired a real gun in my life and had no intention to. I was only eleven years old.

“Fine,” I replied with a burst of frustration.

I raised my hand with the same gun pose as his. My fingers curled around the handle and my index finger hugged the trigger. I hated myself as I fired a bullet between his eyes.

“Dead,” I said. “Game over.”

I grabbed my bike and walked it across the yard to my own. I heard his screen door slam.
She pulled a train, its boxcars spewing steam over the tracks of her body, the story whispered in the alto section one Monday, we singers mining credit in the back row, miming “Shenandoah” our longing as deep and far away as the song’s rolling river.

A paper gown over breasts and belly, cold toes blued in silver stirrups, years later, I think of her that high school friend so unlike me, her Marlboro Man breath in my face flying her bird high as a finger can rise in the face of our parents’ provenance and proverbs.

I was twenty then, getting my first pills, 21 white stones strung tight like a strand of pearls, my first boy, predictable, provincial.

A toke over the line in school days, Suzie and I wore our hip huggers belted low in the bellbottom revolution. She danced to Sly’s hot fun high in the summertime, kissed walls with strangers, disappeared down dark hallways while boys waited turns for a ticket to ride on a twin bed, a carnival thrill with a girl proud of the pull she had in paneled rooms hazy with rum and smoke and rock and roll.

She said they liked it. Did she? I never asked. Would I? These days I know there’s no free love. We’re all on our backs.
Kid Cudi Cannot Save Us from the Apocalypse and that’s Okay

*After a Billboard.com Interview Between Hanif Abdurraqib and Kid Cudi*

Not all heroes wear capes, but many wear their smiles, waiting for a moment to watch a bouquet of posies bloom from their jaw, and the rare, yet beautiful visage; of looking into the mirror and watching the magic unfold from a set of shining lips, questioning the image staring back, but not in a statement of disillusion, but in a state of bewildered, uninhibited joy. In these depths, the smile is summer, gold-plated sunset over palatial topiary, reveling in the difference a decade makes. You know sometimes finding this joy is a battlefield, fighting to hang back skin folds and stretch these dimples, a never-ending war to bring a gleam of hope around these facial contours. In those moments when the world is a collision course, it’s hard to follow the mantra for living one’s best life, but if there is anything you’ve taught me, whether it was in commentary or lyric, this feat is achievable, and for every damned youth still on their own pursuit of happiness, this keeps us alive.
Last night I mistook a shivering leaf for a hummingbird.

Today the girl at the checkout tries to please me:
*I'll pack your eggs in a separate bag.* I say, *I don’t care.*

Then she says *Do you want your meat packed separately?*

I say, *don’t worry.*

*Do you want the toilet paper in a bag?*

I say, *it makes no difference.*

Some people desert themselves
and look for another. Some conquer, then leave everyone behind.

Very thin, frail and perfect, she keeps asking.

Finally I say, *I bet you get all A’s.*

*I graduated last year with a 4.0.*

I want to be happy for her
but all I can imagine is her hovering like the hummingbird.

She may never feel the liquid of broken eggs.
art

GUILHERME BERGAMINI
Motorbike School
When I first attempt to leave town,
I am fourteen. I am riding a decades-worn-in bike
that I found behind Tony’s, which I’ve come to assume
belongs to Tony, the remnants of his initials
scratched into the handlebars.
I’m riding to the edge of town at a steady pace,
the world ablaze around me in cracked sand
and bouncing, blurry heat, red hills in the distance
reflecting sunlight so intensely
I can only watch the horizon for seconds at a time.
When I come across the sign,
YOU’RE NOW LEAVING WICKIE,
forest green retro font angled high at the tail end,
I am momentarily filled with a kind of hope
only found in places boasting perfect weather.
Then below it, in a sturdy, formal font,
YOU’LL NEVER LEAVE THIS TOWN, PAUL,
and I am dropped back in this desert of a town
at the heart of a desert state. Pit stains aside,
I am as dry and cracked apart as the earth underfoot.

I am biking back to town at a resigned crawl
and spotting the occasional buildings crop up and pass by,
this road only memorable by the negative space between each,
how those spaces shorten and shorten
until I’m so close to the heart of town
that I enter its Podunk heart without noticing. I am heading
to Tony’s again, a sad suggestion of an Italian restaurant
in what Tony himself likes to call the “business district” of Wickie,
which is just his place and two fast food joints: a sandwich shop and a burger place.

I am fourteen, and Tony is angry because I am fourteen and irresponsible. Just because I find something doesn’t mean it’s mine, doesn’t mean I’m allowed to up and borrow it without asking, he says. He is standing with his meaty arms crossed in the back alley where the bike was taken, as if the moment he knew it went missing he stood there and waited, expectant for its return.

Am I fired? is all I can think to ask after I come to a full stop at his feet. For a moment, his stare remains fixed, then it briefly intensifies and I fear he may grow five times his size if only to crush me beneath the sole of his shoe, some bloodlust miracle brought to life. Instead, he finally breaks off the moment’s silence and consults the unaffected sky, rolls his eyes.

No. But you’re officially back on the shit list. With Olly.

Olly is a thirteen-year-old brick wall who can’t wash a plate for shit, much less silverware or cups, equipped with a brain like a sack of potatoes. This is a punishment based in ideology. But there’s nothing left to do in this town but cheat and steal and lie, so I don’t figure I’ll stop any time soon. Tony couldn’t fire me even if he wanted to.
He throws me the bike lock
and gestures to the pipe running parallel
to the building’s concrete backside, all the way to the ground.
Taking a few moments to finagle the lock into place
is the start to a very slow adolescent redemption arc.
I am a cowboy locking up another man’s steed, dreaming
that one day I’ll have my own. After leaving the heat
of the outside and stepping into the momentarily blinding dark
of the wet hot kitchen, my eyes unaccustomed
to the drench of low-to-medium light,
I see Olly turn from the sink and eye me.

Sup.

Hey.

Such a dick.

I’m now standing in front of an expectant family of four
at a booth, the type to have never stepped foot in a desert before.
Their shoes are clear of red mud, hair sand-less, and pit stains
down to the hip. They must be passing through,
simply by the looks of them, a full team of concerned eyes
darting around to spot an AC unit that, tragically, is on its last leg.

Can I help you?

The mother, most comfortable with her breezy open top
and still-worn-even-though-she’s-inside sunglasses
orders herself a margarita, the kids would like water, please.
The dad is on the opposite side of couth
with a drenched forehead and a rapidly-flapping shirt collar.
In twenty minutes time, all the way from the kitchen, 
Tony will smell the travelling dad B.O. 
Water, lots of ice.

You guys passing through? I ask, and the wife laughs.
The kids, two miserable ten-year-olds with eyes locked on me 
and mouths shut tight, strike me uneasy. 
There is absolutely no personality or soul behind 
those solemn expressions, at least not in this hellhole.

We’re heading to Vegas. My husband here has never left the city.

I can tell.

Is it that obvious?

I don’t answer the question, tell them I’ll be right back.
I’m finding it hard to commit myself to blah blah blah. 
The sun is burning through the windows onto the hard, plastic tables 
and the only other people here are the bartender and Pepper, 
who sits just there with her forehead against the polished wood grain 
failing to nurse her own sweating glass of H₂O. 
There is nothing else to do except witness Tony’s evident scrutiny, 
so I amble up beside her, sit on a vacant stool.

What are you doing?

Mmm-mpphh mm hmmphh.

I didn’t catch that.

She picks up her head, blond hair no longer a tired mask.
Wasting my *time*.
Welcome to the club.
No, I mean it, Paul. There’s nothing going on in this town.
Sometimes I think walking out into the hills
would be more interesting.

You’d be the prettiest dead thing Wickie's ever seen.

I think I’d be more like a mirage. So, are you busy?

Tony’s on my ass right now. I took his bike out
to the highway and he caught me this time.
I’m officially Olly-rank.

Yikes. Wait. Are you supposed to be taking care of those people?
She turns her head and glances at the family
through her yet-untangled hair,
and I wonder if I’m meant to brush it out of the way,
but my hand remains fixed to my side.

They can wait a minute, they’ll be fine.

Whatever. Anyway. Some older guys are hanging out behind First Baptist tonight.
Did you want to come? she asks, and I do. I nod.
The nights in Wickie run colder than anyone
just passing through town would care to guess.
Crisp enough to think clearly, calm enough to watch
the cooling skyline fade to blue black,
and I am in the mood to mingle with other nocturnals.
Pepper takes my hand with a smile
and then, after a moment’s strayed thought,
turns to the bartender. Do you make smoothies?
In the grimy dark are a couple worn-in pickup trucks
nothing lit but the heartbeat flicker of a cigarette
on the coolly apathetic lip of a sophomore. I’ve made myself comfortable
in the wake of Pepper’s sly walk towards this crowd of teens
much older than either of us, her hand held behind her, gripping mine
like we’re tied together. Who’s he? a girl asks, all mismatched braids
and scuffed boots, coy with the notion
that we’re strangers.

He’s with me. We’re . . . friends.

Whatever that means.

When I attempt to leave town the second time, I am sixteen.
This time, I don’t take the normal route of the highway.
I start to wonder if I can discern exactly when here becomes there,
if there is a natural intuition in marking the edge of home, town, border.
I bring this up on a Saturday to Pepper, deep in the night.
We are at a sad excuse for a motocross track
and dirt bike engines are revving mercilessly, their riders some teens
in helmets hyping up a small crowd of friends in the rusted bleachers.
Pepper and myself are sharing a cigarette
and watching Olly, stupid fuck that he is,
give the finger and rip down the path, dry dirt kicking up behind him.
I am sixteen, and we are all at the height of our angst,
playing with fire, watching and participating in chaos.

Well, you wouldn’t really have left town,
Pepper says, only addressing my hypotheticals
because a couple beers have made her forget she doesn’t care.
Yes, you’d be out of Wickie,
but you wouldn’t be anywhere else.
No one really claims that no-man’s-land.

Maybe it’s better out there.

I couldn’t tell you either way. I don’t think liminal spaces have dirt bikes, though, she says, and tips her burning cigarette at Olly, launched from his bike into a soft pile of dirt to the side, unscathed. I can hear it in the conversations around me: You don’t belong here and you’ll never leave you don’t belong here and you’ll never leave you don’t belong here and you’ll never leave and dear lord do I have to break that cycle because if I don’t work hard to hear the real thing, I may actually be going crazy.

Olly lifts his hand and gives everyone the thumbs up. He’s alive.

Come night, Pepper picks up a ride with a boy she’s been talking to who’s been staying at the local motel for two weeks and up, the type of guy who has travelling adventures, so I tell her I can drive myself home. I didn’t drink anything. Instead of taking the dirt path back to the dregs of town, I wait until the last motorbike has been loaded into the bed of a truck and hauls away.

That’s when I veer off: into the nothing, into the mountainside so incredibly far away, like distant cousins waving me over. Even if, somehow, I made it the horizon, I hardly think I’d be aware of it. The sand would flow and sink and then there’d be nothing, just horizon and heat. I expect myself to go
on until I fall asleep, wake up the next day and follow the sun back to the center of the universe that is Wickie. I have extra gas in the trunk and enough wherewithal to know my surroundings. But by midnight, I’ve steered enough to the left that I find myself back at the edge of town, a neon-blinking gas station among shadow. On the sign by the road, just underneath the prices, there is a new message: YOU WILL NEVER KNOW ANYTHING ELSE, PAUL.

When I am eighteen, I feel like I finally have a shot at getting the hell out of Dodge. Olly has taken the time to pull me into his personal stretch of dead brown earth so I can learn to drive more recklessly. A passionate rain fell the night before, something quick and blood-hot and intense, only available to observe in the deep of REM, beating like a massage on the house. When I finally press on the gas, Olly is sitting next to me, and I rev that engine—louder than I ever cared for—and peel out like I’d seen Olly do so many times on his own, in those disposable bikes he always constructed out of ancient parts. That rain—it comes back in the mud that splashes over the bottom of his truck while I’m taking sharp, white-knuckle turns, ginger red splashing on a rusted forest green.

After running a number of motions repeatedly through my head to remember them, hands imitating the awkward dances, Olly offers to buy me a drink at Tony’s. Tony looks exactly the same and not at all pleased to see me when I walk through the door,
still thinking I’m a half-ass rebel
too caught up in my own teenage agenda
to function as a young adult,
the kind unable to be a good waiter, much less
get a dehydrated family (just passing through) some water. Through the hot steam of the kitchen, he points
a simmering-hot spatula at me, tells me to leave.

I really don’t want to mess with him, so I go. Olly follows.

I didn’t expect him to get onto you like that, he says.
I don’t tell Olly how I knew it was a shit idea.
I am eighteen, and I am grudgingly aware
that I don’t know how to speak for myself,
much less express what I want, act on it.
Like so: I am putting off leaving this town because
I’m unsure what goes on beyond these borders,
and how the devil I know is better than the one I don’t, etc.
We step outside. After a moment of nothing, Olly drifts
off to the back alley where an old bike has been sitting untouched for years,
growing into the rust of the pipe that it’s locked around.

Damn, Tony really doesn’t give a shit about his stuff, does he?
I walk up to the poor thing and shake it free
of its cobwebs and dust, grip the handlebars
and find a familiarity in the potential they once held,
some distant part of myself in motion,
and I know this escape needs to come soon.

Olly, do you ever think about what’s outside?
Of Wickie, I mean.
Nothing, right? He squats down and inspects the lock.

I don’t know.

There’s not much out there that isn’t here. More world, maybe, but so what?
A pause. Do you remember how to unlock this thing?

Let me try. I kneel next to him and take it from his hand. It’s more instinct than memory, the numbers clicking into place, and like a fresh inhale the lock falls apart, hits the concrete underfoot. I just feel like there’s so much I’m missing out on in the bigger world.

Like crime? Like poverty? Like loneliness?
I wouldn’t spit two ways thinking about city life. You have more people around you, that’s about it. Less space to muck about.
He looks at how I’m gripping the handlebars.
A bike’s a bike, Paul. It can take you about anywhere you want, but why want something you’ve never seen?

I take the bike from the pipe and leave the lock, because let’s face it, Tony’s never going to need it. So you’re saying you’d never risk it? I ask, Look over the horizon and just go?

I think it would take a lot of pressure for me to consider.

Well, do consider it. You’d be an idiot not realize you’re bigger than everything in this town combined. I’ve seen you in the dark and this heat can ruin a man. I heard the other day that someone was found
walking down the highway on the way to Wickie and died from dehydration just a mile before he could spot the gas station on the edge of town. His car had broken down the same day and he left thirsty enough. This place is a trap, it pulls everything in, and the longer I stare out into the nothing the more I feel it may kill me, too, sand and sun, and I don’t like thinking it might do the same to you.

I didn’t know you felt that way.

I’m still sorta figuring it out.

I do not tell Olly that it’s him and not Pepper that I would far prefer to escape with, and I so wish he would say the words, *Let’s go, right now.* But I do not have enough courage to nurture that want, nor enough to speak. He throws the bike in the bed of his truck and we shove ourselves into the front, sliding onto the bench seat made of hand-me-down rippled leather. The din of whining crickets and passing cars mutes to a nothing when the doors close. After Olly puts his hands on the wheel, he pauses as if struck by the unresolved query of the evening and looks at me, unobscured by our surroundings, untethered from this town that shouldn’t matter. We’re two boys alone on a starry night with nowhere to go, but he bites his lip, stunts himself.
Where should I take you? he asks, but we are not talking about the world beyond our reach, we’re talking about Wickie. Maybe, I think, I can pretend it’s my home, wear the lie like a cloak, and Olly follows my thinking gaze on the burdensome gap between us.

Anywhere you want.
I’d like to see something new.

When I am twenty, Pepper texts me,
Are you coming or not? referring to a road trip heading far south of Wickie, so south we’d be in no-man’s-land, to a midnight rave of flashing neon paint and psychedelics.
The image of Pepper blinks in my head, of her place in that world, a sharp, erratic, sweet thing all dressed up with a single hand once tied to mine, today only pretending that I still stand behind her.
But I can’t find merit in scoffing at the cage anymore, can’t imitate following her in the dark.
I am about to reply,
but Olly curls his sleeping body into my chest,
and all I can watch is the brief amicable sunlight of dawn pouring in and sifting through the sheer curtains across the room.
I am happy and I am sweating, and that is okay.
We will wash these sheets,
and I suspect if I stare hard enough into the white linen, I will spot the faint, repeated scrawl of my nonbelonging:
get out Paul get out Paul get out Paul
get out Paul get out Paul get out Paul,
if only you could,
but I return it to the wash like it was nothing,
basking in this sickly sweet of quiet,
kissing Olly’s forehead and settling back into rest.
I am twenty, and I am lying to myself.

When I am twenty-two, I learn that truth
in this town can only be uncovered during that long
brush stroke of night, mind unfettered by
the broken sweat of day, obvious and constant
and bogging bogging bogging.

I learn this when I wake up standing outside my bedroom door
at some depraved hour of night.
I’m sleepwalking, never going anywhere
but trying anyway, following the motions of departure
before reliably being tugged back to bed
by a familiar calloused hand. Though tonight,
his eyes are alive and watching me from the bed,
slowly untangling himself from the covers.
Olly. Thick-skinned, mud-born, personified Americana
is without his armor, without the bread and circus
he’s found solace in during the day,
but he gets dressed quickly and
stops, watches, listens. I say,

Let me show you something new for once.
You’ve shown me how this place breathes, how it thrives,
but I still see how it bites.
I want to thank you for trying to make it work.
But it isn’t enough. It will never be enough. Please,
let me give you something new.
I take the key out of the ignition and step out of Olly’s truck at the edge of town.

Do you really want to do that? he asks, but I keep walking to the spot where I first saw my name printed perfectly on that signpost, just below the green of the curly font saying farewell. The sign no longer says Paul. It says Olly.

I do.

But I can’t.

Yes, you can. I turn and walk back to him, take his hand in my own and squeeze it, tender. Trust me, I’ve been here before. I know what it’s like to be scared. There is a world out there, and it’s time for us to find it.
Did Doctor really use that word
    after prescribing a *holiday* from Medication X?
Will X, post-holiday, *recapture* my body,
    now free to indulge in its disease?
Or is disease what is recaptured—after,

I fear, it yanks the chair from its trainer,
    rips out his bowels, bites off his head,
then rampages through my blood
    while red corpuscles flee, and white ones
swap pratfalls like Keystone Cops?

Can medication *resculpture* disease:
    change, so to speak, Long Beach State’s
scrap-metal “Swan” into a new Pieta?
    My brain shuts off when doctors speak.
Fear clangs pots and pans inside my ears.

Despair strip-teases in the choir loft
    while the white-coated preacher *recaps*
my puzzling symptoms, the skull
    & crossbones chalked onto my door,
my visits to the great detective (him)

who solved the case, and holds disaster
    at bay with magic tablets, to stop taking
which could be like offering Pain a birthday
    cake that hides a file, shiv, and exact
directions to recapture me.
art

GERBURG GARMANN

Under a Watchful Eye
You won’t like why I’m telling you this story about when the carnival came to town. Set up in the mall parking lot next to the dying Sears, the late summer heat glints off the steel, and from the top of the Ferris wheel, I can see the highway rising like an ordinary hallucination in the dog days of summer. It leaves within days as if it was never there, and yet I am still suspended on the top of this world I’ve known forever, understanding this limbo exists within my blood, knowing when the carnival comes to town, I know it never really left.
Loneliness is a cunning and careful beast—one that only bites when there’s nothing left to run to. When the merest whispers fade and the only sounds to hear are those of your own staggered breaths. When the feeling of interlocked fingers becomes so far out of reach, you start to believe it was never there.

I’ve learned that Loneliness looks a lot like someone you used to know. She hides in the corners of your periphery, mumbles all too familiar words, tells you stories of the games you used to play and the secrets you once knew.

She’s delicate in her methods, patient with your pounding heart.

She’s the familiar friend that’s taken the vibrance out of this world. She’s skinned the trees of their leaves, left them scarred by memories of color that fell away, gently, like ash from firewood. That’s a part of her nature. She’s always gentle, Loneliness, always subtle, always kind. Loving as she turns these poor trunks into dead, abandoned souls.

But I suppose fall is the perfect time for abandonment.

Lucy left in the fall. A leaf of her own kind, a friend drifting from my welcome limbs.

She was a good friend but one I always knew I’d never be able to hold on to.

She’s somewhere else now, with a cigarette balanced between her tongue and teeth, her legs hanging over the side of a rusted pick up, haphazardly placed, without care, without fear.

Her eyes are soaking in the lakes of her new home, becoming well versed in their cool tones, in the blues and greens and greys of where ever she’s ended up. They’ve been drenched in stories, emotions, and adventures I’ll never be a part of. They’ve left me so far behind.
I wonder if those eyes are still as lost as she is. If they’re still wandering, begging for something new.

They always have been a little too skittish, a little too curious.

Their restiveness pushed her to start smoking when we were only 12, begged her to get away from the questions and those wandering thoughts that she could never hold onto. She brought a pack of her mom’s Virginia Slims to my basement, decided she liked the taste. We lived that night in a cloud of dark grey nausea and budding friendship, our minds stuffed with the papery buzz of nicotine as she lit one after the other, choked them down with her inhibitions, chain-smoking her unease until it became just a faintly glowing pile of ash.

She’s always been looking for a way out, but no one ever thought she’d just leave, just run away from her life, from her family, from me.

She left me, lonely, without a word, 17 and already searching for something to make her feel alive, a constant drive towards something she could never reach. She left because she never felt the buzz of being young. She left because she knew she needed to feel life, sweet and cold, slip through her fingers like threads and sew the shivers of youth into the lines of her palms. She knew, I think, that if she didn’t, there was no point in living. She left to save her from herself.

I don’t know if she’ll ever find what she’s looking for. It’s not in her new scenery—she’ll devour that so quickly she won’t even take the time to taste the colors of autumn in each city. She’ll move on to something else, always searching for something she can’t find, a place for a girl that’s never fit anywhere.

Maybe her answer really is at the end of one of those lit cigarettes. Maybe she’ll find it buried in a pack of 19 others. Maybe that will be her last light. Maybe then she’ll come home.
A whole shop for dollhouse furnishings. Someone passing with tall hair. How every elevator smells like every elevator. It’s unnerving, living like this. I’ve been practicing consciousness in the era of body. My mom calls me to talk about mums. Phase one of her garden is complete and she loves me like a bulb. I’m not flowers, but I’m adjacent. I’m floral, I’m floored by bad boys and bad sonnets. If I could do age nineteen over, I’d skip class, I’d become delphiniums. Armfuls, equally genderless. Wired to kiss, to pull, fist, sip swan water. Speaking as delphiniums, the light hurts, it’s so useful.

What friction, these petals
and time’s petals. Villainous chiseling.
I want to want my tits so I put lipstick on
them. I circle a barn red gloss on my frontmost corners
until the bad boys of me run in from the field,
their fingers tapping their forearms, counting syllables.
Thieves of tough-girl dandelion leaves
and broad-shouldered daisies. Next,
I do jumping jacks naked. Vroom vroom throttle
the body. Throttle is another word for
choke. I love a good choking. Haha.
Oh my. Oh oh oh oh look at what my
stars have done.

My bare titties, my barn titties, my bear titties
signaling always my far-awayness, but a signal isn’t a signal
until someone else decides what it means. *Excuse me, ma’am*mary glands,
do you work here? C’mon and orbit. Such brothered dogs
hounding the animal instinct to love
and snap twigs. Paw at trouble.
Feast on selfhood. We’ve all wanted
to be small town afterlife kids. Now
I’ll be the ghost or the tablecloth
wrung out, dripping on the line
and you be the perfect face. You, time’s
sweet bitch. You, the self I have no
stake in. Now I’ll be eternity in the
same house and other me will tend
the vicious window boxes. You won’t
be invited at all. Just kidding.
You, time. You, gravity themself.
You’ll sit in the piano room biting the visitors. No!
Other other me will sit in the piano room
chewing b flat and cursing at Beethoven.

I mock-play the entirety of *Moonlight Sonata* on my tits and wait for an epiphany of body.
For fifteen minutes my nipples stand as hard as middle school. I remember my piano teacher
who taught me the weeping triplets of introduction, the skip and cower, poised knuckle. She
was crowned Miss Washington. I never saw her again except on the glossy photo of herself
that she mailed to me announcing the win. There is something wise to be said for her dive
into competitive womanhood. I don’t care what it is.

Freshman year I got my nipples pierced in a dorm room. I know I know I know I know we
cringe. We bleed. We grow up. I was a body with eight hole punches total. Enough to get a
free frozen yoghurt with toppings. I’m loving my toppings in this shirt. Fresh strawberries
unchopped still green at the mouth. We laugh. I’m pissed. I’m packing.

What it means to they, them, theirs is ravish.
Uncrushable. They skip. They hone. OK,
fine: a cliff face and somebody else’s
Granny’s brooch tumbles over. A mermaid
finds it, gives it to their own Granny—yes—
Grandmothers are a kind of library.
Grandfather clock. Grandmother lineage.
Right? Even underwater we hurry
our treasures home. Trust me there is a
genealogical explanation
for all disquieted beasts. Even the
rioter. Even the breasts, the raven.
The past reeks of cranberries and rampage.
Your rocks, throw them. Welcome to the scrimmage.

The librarians have tattoos. The quarterback’s queer. The bus driver is pushing their long hair up their cheek and behind their ear. Write that down. Tell everyone you know. Everyone you know scraped their knees as kids, on sidewalks. I hate to be fussed over, but come hold my handsome hand. Name my eyelashes after violent kings and zip me into your favorite dress, I’m easy to blush, hard to title.
I’m leafing you, I’m leafing you. Breastplate of aster, steadfast and thistle-fisted. Do you get it yet? That I’m joyous. Thanks in advance for your cleavage and gardening shears. I trust you to cleave what’s left of despair and give the daffodils a kiss for me.

You, immovable skylight to desire. You, choir of hands, first thing. To answer your questions, yes: I longhand you, yes: you can taste my chandeliers, yes: I can waltz in stilettos but I am at the lake near childhood in peach-colored flippers, sprinting through the campgrounds, campfire, campfire, peripheral blue through whizzing oaks, I’m future-going, I have a seagull by the gentle neck in each hand, all three of us are squawking about a marmalade horizon, a bigger wingspan.
Et tu, breakfast

Nicked my index finger
on the serrated edge
of the breadknife, slicing

bagels. These hands have
been trembling now for
ten years, at least. Probably

won’t die of blood loss,
not from that inch of red
flapping skin, but I just

don’t have the medical
expertise to really know
for sure.
Cast of Characters

FREEDOM TOASTER: A toaster that has been hurtling through space for hundreds of years. Probably, but not necessarily, male. Lonely.

JACKING STATION: A jacking station that has been bolted onto Mars for a very long time. Also lonely. Probably, but not necessarily, female.


NARRATOR: Has one line. Off-stage. Can be doublecast with Space Waffle.

Synopsis: After hundreds of years hurtling through space, FREEDOM TOASTER crashes on Mars and plugs into the JACKING STATION, but all is not what it seems.

Scene

Mars.

Time

Hundreds of years from now.
LIGHTS UP

ENTER FREEDOM TOASTER flying and crashing on his duff.

FREEDOM TOASTER
Oof! Oh, that hurts. Man.
(HE stands up.)
Am I on . . . Mars?
(HE looks at the dirt.)
Red! Either Mars or Southern Utah—wait, Earth is gone. Mars! I love you, I love you, I love you!
(to audience)
You hear that God?! There ain’t no stopping Freedom Toaster! You can blow up my planet! You can kill all the astronauts! Hell, you can blow up all the shuttles and spaceships. You can even destroy all the appliances—all appliances except Freedom Toaster! Spreading truth, justice, colonialism and American toast through the universe! You can burn my ship to a crisp, but you’ll never burn . . . Freedom . . . Toaster . . .
(HE sits down. HE starts to cry.)
Everybody’s gone. What about me?

OS a voice—JACKING STATION.

JACKING STATION
Freedom Toaster . . .

FREEDOM TOASTER
My name! Who are you?

LIGHTS ON: JACKING STATION.
JACKING STATION
   I’m your friend.

FREEDOM TOASTER
   I don’t have friends on Mars.

JACKING STATION
   You do now.

FREEDOM TOASTER
   Are you real?

JACKING STATION
   Maybe.

FREEDOM TOASTER
   What are you?

JACKING STATION
   I’m your personal jacking station.

FREEDOM TOASTER
   Like in cyberpunk novels? Like some power outlet?

JACKING STATION
   I’m like the jacking station your dad kept hidden in the closet.

FREEDOM TOASTER
   You know about that?

JACKING STATION
   The whole galaxy knew.
FREEDOM TOASTER
Yuck.

JACKING STATION
I don’t think we’re yucky. In fact, you could use a jack.

FREEDOM TOASTER
Wait. Do I look desperate?

JACKING STATION
No, you just look like you’ve been hurtling through space for several hundred years and—

FREEDOM TOASTER
Do you know any waffles in space?

JACKING STATION
No. No waffles in space.

FREEDOM TOASTER
Damn!

JACKING STATION
Have you seen one?

FREEDOM TOASTER
Good point.

JACKING STATION
So you should totally use the jacking station.
FREEDOM TOASTER
   I see what you’re doing here.

JACKING STATION
   I see what I want to be doing.

FREEDOM TOASTER
   Am I a thing to you?

JACKING STATION
   You’re the first thing that’s stopped by here in a while . . .

FREEDOM TOASTER
   You feelin’ lonely?

JACKING STATION
   Yeah. You need a jack? Plug in.

FREEDOM TOASTER
   (plugs in)

   Oh!

JACKING STATION
   How bout this?

FREEDOM TOASTER
   Ohhh!

JACKING STATION
   Yeah?
FREEDOM TOASTER
   I’m going to explode.

JACKING STATION
   That makes two of us.

FREEDOM TOASTER
   Aaaahhhhh!

JACKING STATION
   Yeeeeaaaaah!

THEY both climax. FREEDOM TOASTER pulls his plug and collapses. HE tries to catch his breath.

FREEDOM TOASTER
   Some surge.

JACKING STATION
   Really? You’re charged?

FREEDOM TOASTER
   Yeah. You?

JACKING STATION
   I’m always charged, but I got no outlet for my energy.

FREEDOM TOASTER
   You outlet-ed on me.

JACKING STATION
   Barely.
FREEDOM TOASTER
You want another go?

JACKING STATION
YES!

(FREEDOM TOASTER stands up.)

JACKING STATION (cont’d)
NOW!

Previously inanimate, JACKING STATION plugs in FREEDOM TOASTER for him.

FREEDOM TOASTER
Ohhhhh!

JACKING STATION
Take your time, baby.

FREEDOM TOASTER
Yeah, yeah.

JACKING STATION
Like more than 10 seconds.

FREEDOM TOASTER
I dunno—

JACKING STATION
Please? 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. 8. 9. 10. 10 and and one one hundred. Two one hundred. Three one hundred.
FREEDOM TOASTER
   Ahhhhhhh!
   (HE pulls the plug. HE spasms. Twitches. JACKING
    STATION sighs—a sigh of disappointment.)

FREEDOM TOASTER (cont’d)
   You wanna do it again?

JACKING STATION
   Hell yeah!

FREEDOM TOASTER
   Jack me up!

JACKING STATION
   Yeah, yeah, yeah!

   FREEDOM TOASTER plugs back in. LIGHTS
    DOWN.

NARRATOR
   Two weeks, three days, five hours and seven seconds later.

   LIGHTS UP. BOTH MOANING.

JACKING STATION
   You’re getting good.

FREEDOM TOASTER
   Almost at 30 seconds. It’s almost a miracle.

JACKING STATION
   Almost.
(to audience)
God, please put me down.

FREEDOM TOASTER
Do you wanna talk?

JACKING STATION
About?

FREEDOM TOASTER
What we’ve been doing?

JACKING STATION
Actions speak louder than words.

FREEDOM TOASTER
Okay.

(pause)
I think I know why I charge so quickly.

JACKING STATION
Okay?

FREEDOM TOASTER
You know I’m built for waffles.

JACKING STATION
And toast.

FREEDOM TOASTER
And toast. I think I’m supposed to be with a space waffle.
JACKING STATION
    Am I not good enough?

FREEDOM TOASTER
    No, no. You’re cool. I just wonder what it’d be like with a waffle.

ENTER SPACE WAFFLE.

JACKING STATION
    Bitch! Get off my planet!

SPACE WAFFLE
    Excuse you? This is my planet and I was nice enough to let you stay here, freeloader.

    SPACE WAFFLE slaps JACKING STATION.
    JACKING STATION tries to slap SPACE WAFFLE back.

JACKING STATION
    You know you’d be dead if I weren’t stuck in the ground.

SPACE WAFFLE
    Perish the thought.

JACKING STATION
    Come back and fight like a woman!

SPACE WAFFLE
    I’m a waffle. I’m not gonna fight you.
(to FREEDOM TOASTER)
Hey, I’m SPACE WAFFLE.

FREEDOM TOASTER
I noticed. Freedom Toaster.

SPACE WAFFLE
Wow, so you’re like a real toaster?

JACKING STATION
Don’t believe anything she says!!!

SPACE WAFFLE
(to FREEDOM TOASTER)
She’s annoying.

FREEDOM TOASTER
Incoming! Space junk!

Some sort of space junk flies onstage. SPACE WAFFLE and FREEDOM TOASTER hit the ground.

JACKING STATION can’t. SHE SCREAMS and gets hit. Unconscious.

FREEDOM TOASTER and SPACE WAFFLE look at each other.

SPACE WAFFLE
A real toaster, huh? Think you can make me hot?

FREEDOM TOASTER
That’s what toasters do.
SPACE WAFFLE
   When they’re plugged in.

   THEY BOTH look at JACKING STATION.

FREEDOM TOASTER
   I don’t even know you.

SPACE WAFFLE
   She’s jacked you silly. That’s why. You were born and bread to make waffles hot.

FREEDOM TOASTER
   It’s been a long time. I don’t know if I can. Sorry.

   FREEDOM TOASTER starts to walk away.

SPACE WAFFLE
   Don’t walk away, goddamn you!

   SHE grabs HIM.

FREEDOM TOASTER
   Don’t touch me!

SPACE WAFFLE
   Touch me! Do you think there’s another toaster within light years from here?

FREEDOM TOASTER
   No?

SPACE WAFFLE
   We’re the last ones—don’t you remember?
FREEDOM TOASTER
    That was 100s of years ago.

SPACE WAFFLE
    You weren’t there when it happened.

FREEDOM TOASTER
    I was on the Freedom Shuttle and Earth decided to explode.

SPACE WAFFLE
    I know. I was on Earth. And that Freedom Shuttle was our last hope.

FREEDOM TOASTER
    You didn’t die?

SPACE WAFFLE
    How many dead waffles have you met? You didn’t even save your own planet.

FREEDOM TOASTER
    I’m a small appliance. How did you not get burnt up in the atmosphere?

SPACE WAFFLE
    I was frozen . . . inside a freezer. Locked. One of them walk-in freezers at Cracker Barrell. God, I wish I could’ve died too! Help me, Freedom Toaster.
    (SPACE WAFFLE cries on FREEDOM TOASTER.)
    Help me. I can’t even be a real waffle.

FREEDOM TOASTER
    How do you become a real waffle?

SPACE WAFFLE
    Find a toaster . . .
FREEDOM TOASTER
   Damn it!

SPACE WAFFLE
   Why are you so selfish?

FREEDOM TOASTER
   It’s too weird. I think I should ask her—

SPACE WAFFLE
   You would.

FREEDOM TOASTER
   We kind of have this thing—

SPACE WAFFLE
   SHE’S A JACKING STATION! That’s ALL SHE DOES!

FREEDOM TOASTER
   She do it with you?

SPACE WAFFLE
   No!

FREEDOM TOASTER
   Not even like once?

SPACE WAFFLE
   Just wake her up and—kill me.

FREEDOM TOASTER
   Drama major?
SPACE WAFFLE
    Shut up.

FREEDOM TOASTER
    Um, Jacking Station?

JACKING STATION
    I’m awake.

FREEDOM TOASTER
    Oh, good.

SPACE WAFFLE
    For you.

FREEDOM TOASTER
    We have a problem.

JACKING STATION
    I don’t have a problem.

SPACE WAFFLE
    I need Freedom Toaster to get me hot—

JACKING STATION
    That’s disgusting. I need him to plug it.

FREEDOM TOASTER
    I have terrible news.

    (to SPACE WAFFLE)
    If you want me to warm you up, I need to plug into the jacking station.
SPACE WAFFLE
    Hmmph.

JACKING STATION
    Like that’s happening.

SPACE WAFFLE
    One or the other.

FREEDOM TOASTER
    Why can’t I have both?

JACKING STATION
    Geez . . .

SPACE WAFFLE
    Such a dude.

JACKING STATION
    I bet he doesn’t treat his mom like that.

SPACE WAFFLE
    (to FREEDOM TOASTER)
    Disrespectful Freedom Toaster.

JACKING STATION
    Hates his own mother.

FREEDOM TOASTER
    I love my mother.
JACKING STATION
Too much.

SPACE WAFFLE
He just used you.

JACKING STATION
(to FREEDOM TOASTER)
I hope you got what you wanted.

FREEDOM TOASTER
See . . . I plug into you, see. Then Space Waffle gets inside me, see.

SPACE WAFFLE/JACKING STATION
We don’t see.

FREEDOM TOASTER
But it was the best jacking ever—

SPACE WAFFLE
You should leave . . .

FREEDOM TOASTER
But the jacking—

SPACE WAFFLE
Go jack yourself somewhere else, bro.

JACKING STATION
Good one.
FREEDOM TOASTER
But—

SPACE WAFFLE
Off my planet, now!

SPACE WAFFLE pushes him off-stage.

JACKING STATION
Do you think he’ll be alright?

SPACE WAFFLE
There’s gotta be like another jacking station somewhere, right?
(THEY BOTH LAUGH.)

SPACE WAFFLE (cont’d)
You’re cooler than I thought.

JACKING STATION
You’re no square yourself.

SPACE WAFFLE
Do you wanna do something?

JACKING STATION
I like to look at the stars.

SPACE WAFFLE lies down next to JACKING STATION.

SPACE WAFFLE
Do you think a waffle could plug in one day?
JACKING STATION
  I don’t see why not.

SPACE WAFFLE
  Because I’m a waffle.

JACKING STATION
  We can try. I’ve jacked a lot of things in my life. Some folks say it’s all I do.

SPACE WAFFLE
  No. You look at the stars, too.

LIGHTS DOWN
IZZY LESLIE

girly anger!!

drive cloudy opal does not make up for the fact
that you will try to steal my apricots and
with tiny paws i clasp them until i
let go
I shove a switchblade through my hand and I bleed cheap paper confetti. We are all bound to something—

tied inexplicably to one another like a faded party banner in mid-July, but not everything can be a riot.

I want to blow out my heartache like cheap birthday store candles; want to howl my apologies and mean them. I dream of tucking my happiness under my chin; call it a party hat and hold it near me;

name myself Frankie or Marnie or something soft and hard at the same time.

and I do not ever want to be the reason someone asked God for forgiveness.
The Odyssey split open to the sirens, the freshman read beside the hotel’s pool. He ignored his teammates, who lounged beneath palapas like seals at La Jolla, their oversized haunches spilling over the thatched armrests of rattan chaise lounges. Not expecting to play in the exhibition game that night, Tommy, the freshman, didn’t worry over film study. Instead, he submerged himself in the ancient voyage home to Greece, a reading assignment due in his Honors Ancient Literature course upon their return to New Orleans. On every page, Odysseus arrogantly avoided peril. He told tall tales like the hero he was. Witnessing all that chicanery and bravado, Tommy hardly felt the cool, blue water on his toes.

Two things made reading difficult. First, teenaged gunmen walked the borders of their Chiapas resort. While he hadn’t pieced together the entire scope, newspapers reported violence nearby, in a place called Acteal. Pacifists shot praying at a church. Pregnant mothers knifed in the abdomen. Had this news broken before they’d left, the university probably would’ve canceled the goodwill trip. Anyway, it seemed the killings had been alarming enough for the Mexican federal government to guard the hotel with these armed boys, who were probably his age or younger. Theirs was a life that might’ve been his, had he grown up with his father in this country. From this distance, they looked like toy soldiers, pacing back and forth along the razor-thin edge of his book’s spine.

The second distraction: his asshole teammates. They were a loud, intimidating pack of man-children. In his four months of college, he’d gathered that three of them had fathered sons, one had once drunk more beer in a single afternoon than he had in his entire life, and they all routinely felt the power of Wu-Tang’s message. RZA speaks the truth, Caramel once said at a bar, stroking his chin, seeming to make a political point. Everyone else had nodded drunkenly in assent except Tommy, who didn’t know what they were talking about.

He’d gathered that he couldn’t live up to their hedonism. Better, perhaps, to keep his nose in the books like Coach Lynch hollowly urged them to do, as if that man cared about anything but their eligibility. But how to ignore all this intimidating joviality? In the pool, the bigs
played chicken. Point guards yapped about sorority girls back home. Even the managers squirted each other with water guns. At a certain point, reading became impossible.

“Hey, yo T! Put that fucking book down, dog.”

It was Caramel, so nicknamed because he’d been a stripper who went by Caramel Cobra. He played a swingman at this Division III level, though he stood only six-three. He called out to Tommy from the diving board: “You in your motherland, homie. Soak this shit up.” He dove off, crunched himself into a ball, and hit the water hard, sending a spray that dotted Tommy’s Homer. If he could’ve responded, Tommy would’ve said that he wasn’t from Mexico. His father was, but he’d never known the man. He’d grown up in New Orleans with his Cajun mother, whiteness written on his cherubic face, in his blonde hair. His ignorance of Mexico ran deep, but always and everywhere he went, there was his name: Tomás.

As he struggled to maintain focus on the Achaeans, Coach Lynch and an assistant approached, talking about the matchups tonight against the Fighting Death Snakes. Whether they’d face any zone. The rotations on a double-team. As they walked by the pool, Caramel called out:

“Coach! What you know about that reception after the game? They gonna be some girls there or what?” A round of jock-deep laughter echoed off the chlorinated water.

“Cool it, Romeo,” Coach replied. “It’s a big fucking deal. The governor of this state is gonna be there. You have no clue what these kids you’re playing against have been through this week. I hate to break it to you, boys, but you gotta act like decent humans tonight.”

General chuckle ensued. Caramel absorbed Coach’s jab begrudgingly. His eyes landed on Tommy, who was still reading. “Damn, T. Give that shit a rest,” he said. He sent a playful splash Tommy’s way. Wiping chlorine out of his eyes, Tommy looked poolside for validation. A teammate looked back at him and laughed. Maybe everyone was right. Maybe life was for living. Tommy flung aside the ancient Greeks. Feigning surrender to the moment, he dove
in to do whatever it was that looked like what playing with teammates in a pool should look like.

***

Silvia clutched a cigarette carton filled with chicken feed. She carried it to the edge of her dead parents’ yard and dumped it there for the rooster, Charlie. As if weary of paramilitary outfits, Charlie glanced around a moment before lowering his head down to peck. Silvia looked, too. The hills remained quiet. She saw only her mother’s patch of bougainvillea. *Coma*, she urged the bird, as she plucked a bunch of flowers from their stems. Inside, she placed them in a vase beside the laminated memorial to her parents and a votive to the Virgin. At the top of the hour, she observed the clunky movements of her parents’ cuckoo clock, a gift handmade by an uncle long ago disappeared from the village. She listened to its internal gears churning as a wooden sparrow emerged from a tiny door and the bells chimed. Beneath those mechanical whorls and chirps, Silvia arranged the flowers as her mother would’ve—her mother, who once gazed on them from the sink while washing dishes, a guardian of beauty. She would shoo Charlie if he ventured too near that patch of color, as if she’d been more concerned with the preservation of that small splendor than with men in the hills with guns. As the cuckoo retreated, Silvia moved to the sink to wash her hands.

Her aunt would arrive tomorrow from San Cristóbal to overtake her care, and Silvia wanted to establish a routine of her own first. Thinking of what her parents had consumed weekly, she made a trip to the pharmacy in town to buy necessities. *See, Auntie*, she wanted to be able to say: *I can take care of myself.*

Near the village center, she passed over a concrete basketball court cracked and besotted with weeds. No nets hung from the rims, and militants had graffitied the Coca Cola ads of the sunbaked backboards. Once, her father had coached local boys on this court. Now, drunks used it as a place to pass out somewhere near the foul line. Just after the massacre, the federal government landed helicopters here to empty troops out onto the scene in an unconvincing show of official concern. By then, it was too late. The soldiers, it was said, had taken to washing blood off the church walls to hide evidence of the brutality before reporters arrived.
In springs of her past, the court held a pre-Lenten festival. Local vendors unfolded wooden chairs and dangled wares from their backs: trinkets and beads, palm fronds and incense, toy windmills and roses made of tin painted the color of blood. And always, basketball games at the heart of it. As winners advanced, more vendors descended, replete with the sweetest candied powders and elixirs Silvia could imagine. Lime sodas the color of lizards. Cherry candies a shameful shade of lipstick. All of it plastic tasting and perfect. Silvia would gorge herself as her father coached a game from the sidelines.

Inside the pharmacy, the clerk nodded as Silvia entered. In this town, the gesture passed for sympathy. Silvia didn’t give her the satisfaction of a nod back. The old woman might be sorry now, but where had she been for the funerals? Scared of retaliation for mourning, probably, but still. Silvia scanned the aisles for items she recognized from her parents’ pantry, but a jigsaw puzzle caught her eye. Its box depicted Michael Jordan clad in red and white, a gold chain around his neck as he cradled a brown ball in midair. Her father had loved Jordan. She brought the puzzle to the front.

“¿Este?” the woman asked.

“Sí.”

“Diez.”

Silvia laid a coin on the glass and slid it toward the woman, who considered her. “Mira,” she said, “¿Sabes del juego esta noche? En Palenque. Con un equipo de Los Yunaites.” A basketball game. Tonight. Your father would’ve liked it, she concluded.

Of course, she knew about the game in Palenque. And this vieja was right: not only would her father have loved it, he would’ve been instrumental in its planning. In his twenties, he’d played for a regional team that made it to the finals of a few statewide torneos relámpagos, lightning-round tournaments popular in Chiapas. Two straight years, his team won the crown with him as the most valuable player. This was in the late ‘80s, when Silvia was just a toddler. The way he told it, he’d been humbly specific about his attributes: *I was never*
the fastest defender, but I had good footwork, he would say. I had passable anticipation. I knew where everyone stood on the court at any given time. Where they would be as I drove the lane.

His success had caught the eye of a government official, who after the second championship, offered him a job coaching youth in Chenalhó. Near Acteal. *Paz a través del básquet. Peace through basketball.* That was the government’s tagline for the program, and it became her father’s philosophy. It was the reason he’d been at the church that fateful day last week. Government offer in hand, he’d moved his family to Chenalhó, where Silvia grew up in the shadow of this basketball goal.

“¿De veras?” Silvia responded to the clerk.

“Andale, pues.”

But she had no way of getting to Palenque. Anyway, the sun was high in the sky, and what was the use of remembering her father that way when, any time she wanted, she could return to this court? She walked outside and sat down in the baking sun at the top of the key, where she dumped the puzzle pieces onto the whitewashed concrete.

***

Because of the U.S. drug war, the roads leading south from Coatzacoalcos promised less terror than the roads north. Still, as Manuel crossed from Veracruz into Chiapas, he knew better than to drive any but the busiest highways.

A signed contract from Sami Hayek at Pemex Oil rested on the passenger seat. Its presence confirmed the promise of a new life. Yes, his second marriage had failed. Yes, he was leaving behind another child, a daughter this time, Emi. But the promise of a stable income and career in waste oil incineration foretold a bright future. He and Sami Hayek had just penned the deal that morning, assuring him work and a paycheck for six months. Manuel was ecstatic. He considered what his son, the basketball player, might know about Sami’s daughter,
the actress, Salma. Could this be the kind of aside he might drop in conversation after the
game? A way to obliterate, with one choice reference, the awkwardness of having only met
Tomás the one time a decade before, at his parents’ estate in Cuernavaca?

Passing through a small village, he stopped to stretch and smoke. Beside the town’s basket-
ball court, he lit a cigarette. On the baking concrete, a girl sorted the pieces of a puzzle. He
walked to her. Looked over her shoulder and watched. In the half-formed puzzle, the face
of a famous black athlete was coming into focus. He’d never been a basketball fan—soccer
was Manuel’s game—but he recognized Michael Jordan. On that one visit a decade before,
his son had spoken of the player like a god.

“¿Te gustan los Bulls?” he asked the girl. She did not look up, instead tried piece after piece
to fill the void where Jordan’s chest should be.

“My son plays basketball,” Manuel said. “He’s playing tonight. In Palenque. I’m headed
there now.”

The girl dropped a puzzle piece to the concrete and looked up at him. She looked thirteen,
at most. A beautiful, sad girl. Manuel read her plaintive eyes: she did not have to ask.

***

Coach pulled Tommy aside to tell him he’d be starting. He explained that Caramel, their
starting two-guard, had been vomiting and shitting all over himself in pre-game. “Don’t go
thinking this is some kind of feel-good, emotional decision,” he said, unaware that Tommy
didn’t know his father would attend.

“And don’t be nervous,” he added. “This is just a jamboree game. It’s December. There’s no
pressure, but you’ve been pushing Caramel in practice. You show you can hold your own in
a game situation, I might think about a shift in the lineup.”
Caramel was a junior and a mainstay at the 2. Team lore had it that, in his inaugural practice, he’d supplanted his predecessor. First, he’d manhandled the guy on defense, then quick-posted him on a break, drop-stepped him off the block, and dunked on the poor sap with no sense of impropriety. “I’m the greatest of all time!” he was purported to have said, mimicking a Muhammad Ali gesture. Caramel and his predecessor had never spoken after that. Having heard the story, the freshman knew what it meant that Caramel felt so free and easy talking to him: it meant that he hadn’t felt threatened.

*Maybe there’s a place for me after all,* the freshman thought. Though he’d held his own in practice, he hadn’t dramatically upstaged the junior at any turn, and so he hadn’t thought anyone had noticed his work.

A buzzer sounded through the locker room’s thin walls. Players gathered to listen to coach’s final, uninspiring words. This game was a chance, he said, to work out the kinks in their full court press. To experiment with the new defensive rotation for bigs on penetrations from the wing. It’d be an up-and-down affair, he added, and they shouldn’t take their foot off the gas. The more they pushed in this heat and climate, the more prepared they’d be for conference play. The freshman nodded as he’d become accustomed, but he received these words differently. This time, they weren’t just clichés. This time, they were specific mandates he’d have to carry out. He felt their importance as if they’d come from his father, whom he’d never known, but whose sway over his consciousness had held across the whole of his childhood.

“One more thing, guys,” Coach added. “These people, they’ve been through some hard times. Let’s remember that, okay? Now let’s go out and kick some ass.”

***

Silvia and Manuel arrived at the gym just after tipoff. They snuck in beside a vendor selling roasted corn and sat on wooden bleachers behind Tommy’s team’s bench. Tommy stood on court guarding a Death Snakes power forward on a weak-side switch. The boy, nearly close enough for Manuel to reach out and touch, seemed farther away because he was playing. Tomás, Manuel knew, wouldn’t see him.
The action shifted to the other end of the court. Manuel asked Silvia if she wanted anything. She shook her head no and glanced outward. He studied her poker face as she observed not the action of the game, but the fans opposite them. Was she looking for someone specific? Was she paranoid about the possibility of violence? Did she recognize anyone from some past he couldn’t glimpse? She’d been silent on the ride from Chenalhó, but something in her devout attention to the rainforest beside the road had revealed the depth of her trauma. He’d understood he shouldn’t ask questions. Instead, he’d scanned the radio. When he landed on a station playing American punk and she turned her head like a prisoner to a dinner bell, he left it there. “Die Die My Darling,” by The Misfits. He’d never heard it, but he knew English well enough to follow the words: *Die die die, my darling. Don’t utter a single word.* He couldn’t fathom why such a song would speak to her, but as he watched her parrot the macabre lyrics, he smiled and let her keep the mystery of their importance to herself. Your future’s in an oblong box; come crying to me now. As his son streaked down the court to defend a fast break, he told the girl he’d buy her an ear of corn.

At a time out, the American players trotted to their bench. Manuel watched his son sweating as he sat down and leaned forward to listen to his coach. The little man yelled at them, but his voice was too shrill and the language too basketball-specific for Manuel to follow. He saw how Tomás nodded in the face of the spit-filled vitriol. The boy understood the dictates, seemed unfazed by the invective. Manuel turned to Silvia and pointed him out to her.

Silvia followed Manuel’s finger. In the forward slump of the freshman’s shoulders to listen to his coach, she saw the form of dozens of players who’d listened to her father. Her gaze carried to the coach, who looked nothing like her own father. This man scorned his players. This man was a chafa, a fake. A man not able to see the court clearly, her father might have said. She wondered whether any of these players had yet rebelled. She was no basketball player herself—she’d spent her dad’s practices on the sidelines imitating his coaching stance—but she’d hung around those teams enough to know the ways of the secretly mutinous.

When the time out ended, Silvia watched as Manuel’s son remained on the bench. A manager offered him a bottle of water. As he turned to accept it, Silvia saw him catch sight of
Manuel and freeze. Manuel gave the boy soft eyes. She could see that the freshman had no idea Manuel would be here. A teammate nudged Tommy, and he turned quickly back toward the court. She noticed how, at the perceived slight, Manuel winced, deepening the creases beside his eyes. In that moment, Silvia gathered the truth of their estrangement. The rest of the game, she watched the action like a die-hard.

***

At the postgame reception, the freshman accepted compliments from his teammates. “I see how you doing it,” one offered. “Fifteen points, seven boards. Not bad, boy. Caramel better watch out,” another one said. But Tommy was scanning the crowd for his father.

At first, he didn’t see him. Instead, he focused on the governor, a dark man with a gray beard who wore a tan suit and bolo tie and prowled the grounds like a jungle cat. He squinted at those he felt superior to, which was everyone. Coach Lynch and his assistant stood in garish tropical attire by the nut plate rehashing the close loss. A white linen table boasted a spread of fried plantains and empanadas, beans and rice, and pitchers of margaritas served by indigenous waitresses the color of the Mississippi River. Tommy noted their deference. Wondered at their lives. They wore full-length dresses cinched at the waist with embroidered white belts. Caramel, still ghostly from diarrhea, held court in his warm-ups with a Death Snake who spoke passable English and gestured grandly, making big eyes as he told stories of recent brushes with militants, the difference between the Zapatistas and the paramilitaries, and the role of the federal government in allowing the violence to happen. Tommy eavesdropped, wanting to discover what stories might have been his.

***

Manuel and Silvia assessed the reception, each from their own vantage. To Manuel, it evoked schmooze fests he’d endured in the procurement of funds for his new business. The spread, similar. Clusters of small-talkers eyeing a chance to move to a more socially advantageous crowd. The only difference was the height of these featured guests. And, of course, his son’s presence.
To Silvia, the reception looked like a grander celebration of the type prepared in her village for the championship teams her father coached. Yes, this was more elaborate. And yes, the governor loomed here. But as the coach of the Fighting Death Snakes shook hands with the freshman to congratulate him on a game well played, she didn’t see the coach’s face. Instead, she saw the face of her own father. This was not just sentimentality: they truly resembled each other. The face, worn and rough like a stone; and the body, too: boxy shoulders, sturdy build, hardly the build of a basketball player. No one could’ve gleaned from this man, or her father, that they were any good at a sport that valued length and litheness. They must’ve been similar players. She extrapolated from his physicality a series of movements—a pass on the fly without looking, a pointing of a finger in praise of a teammate—and allowed herself to envision this coach as if he were her father.

***

Manuel nudged her toward the food. He made her a plate and poured himself a margarita. He scanned the crowd first for his son, and then for someone to talk to. Coach Lynch, alone, gathered cashews in his fist, and Manuel took his opportunity.

“Mr. Lynch,” he said.

“Yes, sir,” the coach responded.

“My name is Manuel. I contacted you before your trip. I am father to Tomás.”

“Tommy! Of course! Welcome. Say, your boy had a great game. Looked like a senior out there.”

“It was a joy to watch him play.”

Lynch looked down at Silvia.

“And what’s your name, little girl? I didn’t know Tommy had a sister.”
Manuel thought of his own daughter, Emi. Coach Lynch searched him for a response. He hadn’t known until the moment of leaving Emi’s mother that he would never return. He’d masked that guilt with the glimmer of Sami Hayek’s promise of business. Siren song of the new. “Silvia here, she doesn’t speak English,” Manuel said. He looked down at her. She looked up at the coach, who waved at her stupidly. Manuel could hardly bear it. “Silvia,” he said to her in Spanish. “This man thinks you are my daughter. Do you want to play along?”

***

She considered. First, it seemed like a betrayal—and worse, dangerous in these times. What would it mean, to accept this illusion? Here, she was surrounded by things that defined her father—coaches, players, talk of games—but all of it now without him. All this, to say nothing of her mother. The proud way she would stand by in the postgame wash of congratulations. The tamales spiced with hoja santa and chipilín she would cook to celebrate victories. But that was over now. None of that existed anymore, even if the remains of that life had lain around her all day: man-children in warm-ups clowning around, the particular smell of a sweaty gym, how a crowd rose to crescendo at a thunderous dunk on a fast break. Silvia clasped her hands to Manuel’s forearm and looked up at the American coach with a smile of belonging.

“How about that,” Lynch said. “Why don’t I go get Tommy? I can snap a picture of the three of you. One sec.” Before Manuel could say anything, Lynch ran off to retrieve the freshman.

***

In how Lynch framed it to him on the walk over, Tommy gathered that his father had contacted Coach before this trip. That Coach had assumed Tommy knew the whole time. It had occurred to Tommy to track the old man down, but he’d tried that before without success. After visiting his father in Cuernavaca at age seven, he wrote letters expressing a primal yearning to know that distant father from this other country. He’d written of his interest in basketball, how he hoped his father might see him on the court one day. After sending them,
he’d retreat to his backyard goal beside Mom’s flower garden of azaleas, call out the play-by-play as he acted out a Final Four, final-seconds scenario. In those moments, he’d imagine his father watching, listening to the dramatic narration. And then—“Four! Three! Two! One!”—Tommy would let fly a winning shot. After it fell through the net, the ball bounced on the dirt in an echo of solitude. His father never responded to his letters.

And so, as the freshman walked to greet the mythic man and pose for a photo, he convinced himself he felt pleased that he hadn’t made contact. He prepared himself to say something polished, something to indicate a casual indifference. Still, he had no way of preparing for the presence of the girl. This girl Coach was now calling his sister.

“How about a family photo? What do you say?”

What could he say?

Lynch directed the shot like it was practice. *Control freak,* Tommy thought. Coach ordered Tommy to stand with arms outstretched around Silvia and Manuel. Silvia to his left, her arm grazing his side (he recalled, as a child, asking Santa for a sibling). His father stood to his right. He felt the soft touch of Manuel’s hands against his shoulder, caught his cigarette scent. The smell evoked a moment in Cuernavaca in a pool with his father. Manuel had wadded to him, smoking, and asked what he was reading. It was *The Little Prince.* Manuel had nudged the spine down to the poolside concrete. “Why always so serious?” he whispered. And smiled, as if that togetherness were permanent.

It had not been. Neither was this one. In the electricity of his father’s giddy grip, he felt Manuel relishing this false moment—reading had sensitized Tommy to such subtleties—and decided then and there that he would never return to Mexico. Years later, Tommy was to remember that moment—innocent non-sister to his left, affected father to his right, a reporter scribbling notes nearby—as the moment when he first considered life as a journalist. Eventually, he would team up on a piece about black life in New Orleans with Caramel, who, having talked that night with a Death Snake about the boy’s recent horrors, found himself on track to a political life of his own.
Looking beyond Lynch, Silvia watched waitresses gather plates smeared with residue of guacamole, crumb of tortilla. Their movements so crisp, their gestures so decisive. As a younger child, she longed to play that role after tournaments. These perfectly dressed girls, they moved with such authority. She’d once envisioned costuming herself in that gleaming white outfit of responsibility. Holding a plate of food, bowing at the waist in acknowledgment of a favor granted. Catching winks her father sent her as she stood by, ready to serve. But those yearnings were gone now.

The American coach’s command interrupted her hypnosis. He gestured for her to wrap her arm around Tommy. She looked up at the freshman. In his hesitant gaze, she saw a young face she trusted. She couldn’t name the good she felt at his nearness. Perhaps it was simply in the eyes. That soft, exotic gaze. He couldn’t be more than five years older. And in how he was looking at Manuel, she perceived a sense of loss that she was coming from the opposite side of: he was only now seeing what it meant to have a father, while she was just learning what it meant to live without one. She imagined then returning with him to the United States—no notion of foreign domesticity beyond that, just the trip itself. This was someone she could feel strong on a journey with. Someone she could be happily silent next to. He would never do anything but keep her arm around her. Like this. In any event, she decided in that moment to make of her life someday a moving thing, regardless of her aunt’s impending care. She did not yet know that basketball would carry her on that journey, that she would coach a team in San Cristóbal, a role that would take her to faraway countries; but in that moment, she felt certain for the first time that she wanted basketball to define her.

Teammates gathered to watch the photo shoot. The governor meandered over and told Coach Lynch that they should get a basketball in the picture. Maybe a couple of Death Snakes, too. An assistant sprinted off to do the important man’s bidding. He booked for the hotel lobby, and gunmen on the resort’s borders turned at the quick-moving body. Silvia watched them. As they gripped their AKs, she clutched Tommy’s waist tight. The aid
returned with a basketball. Both teams watched and laughed at his desperate, sycophantic gait. He brought the ball to the governor, who walked it to Coach Lynch. The token Death Snakes—whom Silvia recognized, whose parents, she knew, were also now dead—stood still in the wash of the politician’s notoriety. By then, even the waitresses were watching the scene unfold.

In the picture that made the local paper, the one meant to show how bonds had been forged across cultures, a pair of Death Snakes photobomb the shot while Tommy smiles awkwardly, as if he’s not in on the joke. Manuel stands silently by, never having had a moment to say the first word about his own new life, or Emi, and if you know the story, you can see that unrequited urgency in his face. Silvia leans her head against Tommy’s side, her expression a bougainvillea trembling in the heat. Her posture is uncertain, and you can note the fierceness with which she clings to the freshman. Below the photo, falsely attributed to the governor, a caption reads: después del juego, una familia, con Los Death Snakes. After the game, a family, with Death Snakes.
you are layered glacial water/ milky/ opaque/ tar snakes/ an empty cookie jar/ a muddy footprint/ a stolen truffle melted/a memento of a depth charge/

you are the silence of driving under an overpass in the rain

i am the black sand surrounding you/ a sliced kite/ a washed up pocketknife/ a made-up play called Uncle Duster/ octopus eye tubes/ a sheet/ of corrugated metal/

& i am every bodiless animal
CHARLOTTE BROWN

Erased
I am dead girl

Neither dead nor awake

girl. It is always so quiet and
dark.

girl.

all struggle
cut cord. wounds that we
Forget to
girl.

Language

Stitch Lost and reliving

girl.

The moving

generational trauma

ghosts and

So

We left

girl.

white bones are

recoil into.
The beauty of lace
is in the symmetric configuration
of its holes.
A pattern of absent silk,
to see somewhat
the skin, and enough to trace
the rest.

You are shielded yet ornamented
by tatted thread and finer imagination.
The ephemera of your dress
was woven by eyes blinded
long before seeing the martyrs’ crosses
of their graves.

Magnolia star,
forbidden stitch,
silver filigree,
pinned moth.
I pull apart not the spider
but her web.
You own a jar of mercy,
open it.
Cherry jelly, I will dip my lips.
My heart ironed flat, steamed and bleached.

Inked notes vanish after vibration, no matter who
composed them, nor
how many centuries ago.
I can build nothing from water.
Drink from my cupped hands. That is all they are good for.
They fold and unfold into churches, steeples
writhing fingers in a sanctuary of naked palms.

They pop open the fuchsia before they are ready,
white skirts drop from magenta coats. Pistils wag their wet stigmata.

At night, they dive under waistbands.
In the dark, they are shadows of doves.

Oh, children. Your hands are so very small
they fit into the mouths of strangers.
Of bloodiron & bourbon smoke
Of abathtub full of nothaving none of this bullshit.

Of marchstep, of offering, not for nothing she is hands and knees in the oyster of this moment

Of her own kind, she asks, who is
Of a mind not to believe we are

Of the same cells & stardust,
Of dark matter, of the Greek poësis, of fists raised.

Of our migration, our passport stamps tell of fallow tales.

Of mother’s slips
we remember whisper on fontanelle,

Of strawberry kissed mouths and hands,
that plucked those ruby hearts of earth.

Of body’s invisibilia, she composes herself:
reminder of off red [not offred].

Of water, lips rim a raindrop,
Of ocean denuded of its salt

Of glass she makes a mirror
and swims in the corners of her redredeyes.
Below grassy knobs the pass
gives way to pebbled trail
stream-fed to this high ridge.
Here flowers grow out of rock
I reach out and whisper gentian,
buttercup in my language.

Like the blooms, we keep close
to cliff face, gravel path
only boot-wide in places,
cling with one hand to calcare
which crumbles in my grip.
I try to keep fear on the other side,
steep, sheer, dark-winged
as a lone aquila soaring
above me in noon-blue.

I wish for wings, will strength,
count steps, quicker breaths
keep in my sight a white rock
door just above us, above
la valica that sunlight opens
like a mouth saying ascend.

Then green foothills carry us
down spilled milky stones
where speckled cows graze,
their deep bells echoing through
the narrow valley all the way
to a huddled hut below.
A snow-topped peak secures us
in light and shadow, strokes our faces,
sketches us in.
Let’s prom dresses and barefoot sprint
to the 24-hour grocery We’ll emerald velvet in the freezer aisle

The clouds look 2D absolutely fake like stickers up there
in the blue waste of lung The simulation
is broken and let’s stretch our young robotic legs

My friends the dry humpers the burgeoning thrust cartographers

None of us are really girls
anymore Porch-sat Lark-truce Thank-yous
In each our midday butchery

Allow me to introduce you to
The atmosphere who gargles tangerine water and kisses my cheek
The moons who came over to play battleship but took a nap instead
The asteroid who takes me to the pumpkin patch
The tear in my window screen that looks like a UFO if I take off my glasses
who’s been thinking about growing out their bangs
and wants to know if I think that’d ruin them

I think nothing can ruin my butch skies I say
My butch my butch my gladness comes to reckon
in the mirrors of you Us afterhours BFFs to
dusking eyelashes Hey moons can I borrow that pocket square how about a quarter-grip

of daisies to fill the beards we all want and none
can grow Can I borrow the growing

Cartwheels in the midst of fielding laughter
Return to the teenage whim  Popping gum  Skipping town
To think this is our mammal’s reputation  Unrestrained
and unfinished proliferation  The machine of me is sunrising

I will make a bad bad bad bad bad

boy of this life
contributors

Nick Alti, a first-year candidate in the MFA program at The University of Alabama, hails from a little town in Southwest Michigan. He likes to write about being a human being, the world beyond him, concepts in general, and how he understands none of it. There’s more of his work at *Newfound, Hypertrophic Press, The Hunger Journal, Pretty Owl Poetry*, and elsewhere.

Caitlin Barasch is an MFA candidate in fiction at New York University. Her work has appeared in *Catapult, Day One, Hobart, PINBALL, Word Riot, Zetetic, The Knicknackery, Grasslimb*, and is forthcoming in *Jellyfish Review*.

Liam Bates is from the West Midlands, England. He reads poetry onstage sometimes and his chapbook, *microwave nouveau*, is available from Amazon. Find him @wordswithpurple.

Hannah Bishop is an MFA poetry candidate at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She is originally from New Jersey. She works in a gastroenterology office but usually prefers reading poems to looking at pictures of intestines. Her work has appeared in *Noble / Gas Qtrly* and *Seneca Review*.


Charlotte Brown is currently a senior at Rowland Hall in Salt Lake City, Utah. She has participated in the 50 for 50 art gallery for two years and received an excellence in art award in 2017. Charlotte is planning on studying illustration at Portland Northwest College of Art in Portland, Oregon.

Guilherme Bergamini is a Brazilian photographic reporter and visual artist who majored in journalism. For more than two decades, he has developed projects with photography. His work dialogues with memory and social-political criticism. He believes in photography’s potential to transform society. He has received awards for his work and has participated in exhibitions in twenty-one countries.

Paul Christean is a full-time space traveler and a part-time old man. His photographs document the uncanny, the abstract, and the just-plain-weird.

Gerburg Garmann, a native of Germany, is a professor of German and French at the University of Indianapolis. Her scholarly publications appear in French, English, and German in international journals. She has published a poetry/painting collection titled Unterwegs, im Kopf (Mind Travels).

Natalie Gasper’s work has appeared or is forthcoming in The Write Launch, The Hickory Stump, The Remembered Arts Journal, Noon by Arachne Press, and Saw Palm Journal, among others. She has a BA in Creative Writing from the University of Central Florida and works as an interviewer and reader for The Nasiona. Find her on Twitter @NatalieGasper.

Andrew Gillis recently graduated from Stephen F. Austin State University with a BFA in Creative Writing. His work has appeared in HUMID and Apeiron Review.

Charles Harper Webb’s latest collection of poems, Sidebend World, was published by the University of Pittsburgh Press in 2018. A Million MFAs Are Not Enough, a gathering of Webb’s essays on contemporary American poetry, was published in 2016 by Red Hen Press. A recipient of grants from the Whiting and Guggenheim foundations, Webb teaches Creative Writing at California State University, Long Beach.

Lyd Havens’ work has previously been published in Winter Tangerine, Tinderbox Poetry Journal, and Glass: a Journal of Poetry, among others. They are the author of the chapbook I Gave Birth to All the Ghosts Here (Nostrovia! Press, 2018), and are currently working towards a BFA in Creative Writing at Boise State University. They were born on their due date and have been intensely punctual ever since.
**Ewan Hill** is a queer love ballad, an encyclopedia of cloud facts, a young trans Libra. They work in a children’s library, which is as wondrous and sticky as one might imagine. Their poems have recently been published by *What Are Birds? Journal*, *Prickly Pear Press*, and *bluestockings magazine*. Ewan enjoys wishing on stars and making things up. Find them on Twitter and Instagram @ ewanjhill.

**Lela Howard** was born and raised in Salt Lake City, Utah, although her writing has been most inspired by her trips to the East Coast. She is an avid reader and short fiction enthusiast. She plans on majoring in English and eventually publishing a *New York Times* best seller!

**Shay Hudson** is a junior English major and art minor attending Westminster College. She likes to explore the relationship between humans and their environment, and the ways we interact, by finding beauty in what we ignore. This translates into entering construction sites via questionable means and taking pictures of actual trash. She’s the mother of a massive golden retriever lab mix who is convinced he is a lap dog.

**Michele K. Johnson Huffman** earned an MFA from George Mason University and a BA from St. Mary’s College of Maryland. She teaches literature and writing at High Point University in North Carolina. Her poetry has appeared in *Pretty Owl Poetry, Flock, OVS, Thrush, The Ampersand Review, Ucity Review*, and elsewhere.

**Korbin Jones** graduated from Northwest Missouri State University with a BA in Writing: Creative Writing/Publishing and a BA in Spanish. He’s attending the University of Kansas for his MFA. Two books are forthcoming this April: a debut poetry collection, *songs for the long night* (QueerMojo) and a translation of Pablo Luque Pinilla’s *SFO* (Tolsun Books). He is the editor-in-chief of *Fearsome Critters: A Millennial Arts Journal*.

**Holly Karapetkova’s** poetry, prose, and translations have appeared recently in *The Southern Review, Prairie Schooner, The Nashville Review*, and many other places. Her second book, *Towline*, won the Vern Rutsala Poetry Contest and was published by Cloudbank Books.

**K Lange** is a writer, teacher, and UFO seeker from Boise, Idaho. They write themselves into new names and places. A three-time qualifier for the National Poetry Slam (2016, 2017, 2018), they have also published three chapbooks: *Sugarbecoming, Moonache*, and *Weird Grief*. 
Jacqui Larson is a painter and mixed-media artist who has exhibited her work widely. She is the recipient of two Utah Visual Arts Fellowships (1996 and 2006) and a Lieutenant Governor’s Award, and her work was selected to represent Utah in *The De-Constructed West* in Washington, DC. Jacqui Larsen has taught at Northwest College in Houston, Houston Community College and at Brigham Young University, where she co-directed a study abroad program to Spain. She has also served on the Board of Directors for Art Access Utah.

Izzy Leslie is a writer and digital artist from Portland, Oregon, now living in Philadelphia. She is the author of *it’s my party*. She tweets at @badplantmom. She has no chill.

Paulie Lipman is a former bartender/bouncer/record store employee/Renaissance fair worker/two-time National Poetry Slam finalist and a current loud Jewish/Queer/poet/writer/performer. Their first collection, *from below/denied the light*, is available from Swimming with Elephants Publications.

Letizia Mariani is pursuing an MA in English and American Literature at New York University. Her work has appeared in *Summit Avenue Review* and she was the 2017 recipient of the Lon Otto Prize in Creative Writing for Best Poetry.

Claire McKay is a Utah native and an aspiring illustrator, writer, and adrenaline junkie. She’s currently a first-year student attending Westminster College aiming for a degree in creative writing. She enjoys mountain biking, video games, tea, movies, and writing herself into a world of her own.


Debbra Palmer is a part-time bookseller, writer, and comic book artist living in Idaho’s Treasure Valley with her wife and a flop-eared dog with a hundred names. Her poems appear in *Calyx Journal, Pretty Owl, BLOOM Magazine, Sixfold*, and *Portland Review*.

Beth Paulson’s poems have appeared recently in *Common Ground Review* and *Blueline*, and are forthcoming in *Main Street Rag* and *Earth’s Daughters*. Paulson taught writing at California State
University, Los Angeles for over twenty years and now leads the Poetica Writer’s Workshop and co-directs the Open Bard Poetry Series in Ridgway, Colorado. Paulson’s new collection, *Immensity*, was published by Kelsay Books in 2016.

**Lucas Pingel** has published three chapbooks, most recently, *Yes, I Am Sure This Was a Beautiful Place*. His poems have appeared recently in *Notre Dame Review, Lake Effect, Josephine Quarterly, Chariton Review*, and *Poetry Daily*. He lives in the Twin Cities, where he teaches at St. Catherine University and curates the Talking Image Connection reading series.

**Patricia Quintana Bidar** is a native Californian with roots in New Mexico, Utah, and Arizona. She is a former fiction reader for *Northwest Review* and alum of the UC Davis graduate writing program. Her stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Wigleaf, The Citron Review, Jellyfish Review, Litro Online, Barren Literary Magazine, Blue Five Notebook, Train Literary Magazine, Riggwelter Press*, and *Soft Cartel*. In addition to writing fiction, Patricia serves as a writer for progressive international, national, and regional nonprofit organizations.

**Janet Reed** is guest editor of *I-70 Review*, author of *Blue Exhaust* (FLP, 2019). Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Sow’s Ear Review, Emry’s, Tipton Poetry Journal*, and others. She began writing knock-off Nancy Drew stories on wide-lined notebook paper at age eleven and now teaches writing and literature for Crowder College in Missouri.


**Blake Sanz**’s stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Ecotone, Puerto del Sol, Fifth Wednesday Journal, Opossum, Chariton Review, Cosmonauts Avenue, Xavier Review*, and other maga-
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**Lauren Scavo-Fulk** is a third-year graduate student at Indiana University of Pennsylvania with a concentration in drawing. Her work has recently been exhibited at Manifest Gallery in Cincinnati, OH; the Westmoreland Museum of American Art in Greensburg, PA; Dacia Gallery in New York, NY; and Sweetwater Center for the Arts in Sewickley, PA.

**Emily Shearer** teaches French, yoga, and writing outside Houston, TX, but dwells inside her head. Her poems have been published in *Psaltery & Lyre, West Texas Literary Review, SWIMM, Clockhouse,* and *Ruminate*, among others. You can find her on the floor, listening to Trevor Hall and Death Cab for Cutie, or dreaming of a different shoreline, or on the web at bohemilywrites.net.

**John Sibley Williams** is the author of *As One Fire Consumes Another* (Orison Poetry Prize, 2019), *Skin Memory* (Backwaters Prize, University of Nebraska Press, 2019), *Disinheritance*, and *Controlled Hallucinations*. He serves as an editor of *The Inflectionist Review* and works as a literary agent. He lives in Portland, Oregon.


**Liane Strauss’s** first full-length poetry collection is *Leaving Eden* (Salt Publishing). Her work has been included in a number of anthologies, including *The Golden Shovel Anthology*. Liane is among the guest poets on www.clivejames.com. She is at work on a new collection, *The Origins of Household Words*, and is seeking representation for a first novel.

**Bryan Stubbles** is an award-winning playwright and translator who has had plays produced in London, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, and Provo, among other places, as well as plays published in the US and Canada. His plays are in Smith & Kraus’ *Best 10 Minute Plays of 2017* and *Best 10 Minute Plays of 2018*. He profiles playwrights on his blog: https://unknownplaywrights.wordpress.com.
**Beatrice Szymkowiak** is a French-American writer. She earned an MFA in Creative Writing from the Institute of American Indian Arts in 2017, and is pursuing a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where she is an assistant poetry editor at *Cream City Review*. Her first chapbook *RED ZONE* was released in Fall 2018.

**Kristine Turkal** is a visual artist living in NYC and employed by several non-imperialist bookstores. She works mainly in oil paint and woodblock printing. This woodblock is inspired by her favorite tree in Virginia. Contact her on instagram @shesudone for more information about the tree or her art.

**Alexa Washburn** is a freshman at Utah State University. She is studying to become an English teacher and wants to mentor high school kids.

**Jason Wasulko**, originally from Syracuse, NY, graduated from the University of Central Florida with a BA in English: Creative Writing. He is also the author of the fantasy-adventure novel *Atlantis: Kingdom Come*. He lives outside of Atlanta, GA, with his wife and three children. See his work at www.wasulko.com.

**Kate Wilson** is a junior English major at Westminster College. They are an interview correspondent with *Half Mystic Press* and serve as a poetry editor for *ellipsis... literature & art* and *RoseQuartz Magazine*. Their work can be found with *Pressure Gauge Press* and *Philosophical Idiot*, among others.

**Hal Y. Zhang** lives by the sea, but not close enough to feel it. Her writing is at halyzhang.com.
**submission guidelines**

*ellipsis… literature & art* is the annual literary journal published by the students of Westminster College since 1965.

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