HOBART

JANUARY FICTION DELUXE

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HOBART

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FICTION DELUXE

Guest Edited by Joshua Hebburn

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FEATURING

BONUS-STUFF

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KAYAK

Debra Jo Immergut

I posted a picture of my rarely used kayak on Facebook late at night. I could sell this on Craigslist and make some cash, I wrote, but I'd rather see it bring joy to a friend. Then I slept. By the morning, fourteen people had responded saying they would love to have it—dear companions, plus two people I'd worked with once. But I woke up with a premonition. Whoever took this kayak would die in it. I rescinded the offer and left the kayak sitting under the trees in the yard for the rest of the fall. It acquired a coat of yellowed pine needles and wet brown leaves. Before the ground froze, I dug a huge trench behind the shed and buried it under thick dirt, and in the spring, sprinkled on grass seed and straw. It became a small hillock, forgotten. Eventually all my friends died anyhow, and so did I. Two hundred years went by, a few more, and some people, building anew, dug and hit the plastic shell in the earth. They dragged it out and set it in a meadow and used it to gather rain. The next year was very stormy and a flood came and torrents took it. It floated down to the river and then into the sea. It now drifts, spinning in and out of riptides, along the coast. I'm out here, watching, still fearful that some misguided hoping human will climb aboard but also wondering if maybe now is the time for the joy.

DATES WITH CHARLIE

Julie Goldberg

The farmer's market is open all day, everyday, but it's best to go on Tuesdays at 11am because this is when it's quietest and you can really take your time perusing. I peruse with a very serious face and my cousin Charlie with his one albino eyebrow, just one strip of him already grown old, resigned, the eye it crowns looking on at the world with wisdom while the other isn't "looking on" with anything but rather just simply devouring.

I'm giving plums gratuitous squeezes while he haggles the price of medjool dates, never content to accept life as it's stipulated to him, a persuasion I used to see as evidence of some real, red-hot interest in life that I was so pathetically lacking but that I now resent, seeing (clearly, this time) that it's actually the result of some silly insatiability, a need to make the world bend to his will because he doesn't have his own world inside his belly. The lack is in him, not me. He is trying to stuff his lack with medjool dates, the wax paper bag of which he is now flourishing triumphantly in the air. I hate when he gets a deal.

But this doesn't mean I don't love him. Or feel towards him what

was, at some critical moment when my head was raised from the dirt, announced to me as love, L.O.V.E, from a banner on a blimp.

People sometimes think we're boyfriend and girlfriend. Sometimes we play along, holding hands or whatever. Charlie runs his thumb over my cheek, like he's trying to brush away the freckles. People might think we were brother and sister if we looked like brother and sister but I'm all pale-skinned redhead Sicilian and he's all whatever-he-is, some Sicilian and some something-else (Albanian?), dark everywhere except for the eyebrow. We don't even look like we're from the same planet, never mind the same family.

And no, this isn't my way of saying I want to kiss Charlie and no, we didn't touch each other's privates as kids. There was no I'll show you mine if you show me yours. That is not where this story started nor where it is going. We were professional little children, too busy ironing out the details of the appendix to the constitution of our Society for Girls and Boys Intent on Digging a Hole to China by the End of the Year Two-Thousand and Five to think about taking our pants off.

Meanwhile the Iranian man with whom Charlie haggled wants to give me a bag of halva for free. This happens a lot. When you're skinny people assume you could devour entire grocery stores if given the chance, the invitation, trimmed with lace: you are formally invited to eat every item in COSTCO.

Boys express worry that they will break or snap or "obliterate" you. They're not really worried; they like that you're breakable, and you

like it too. Your favorite plate on which you eat every meal is fine bone China, which when you pick it up whispers careful,careful,-careful, which is exactly what you did the first time a boy — no, not Charlie! — tried to put his dick inside of you.

Well, it's true: sometimes all one needs is a formal invitation.

I'm not saying we're any better than those constitutionless kids who did take their pants off. I watched a movie last week with a main character whose main character trait of very-smart-girl was established by an offhanded reference by her mother to the fact that she was reading Kafka at ten. I call bullshit! shouted Charlie, which made some other people in the theater mad — grumps! The way I feel about it is that the smart kids were not reading Kafka the smart kids were scaling water towers and fucking their cousins and flying blimps.

If we — Charlie and I — are ever going to do something drastic to each other's bodies it will be murder, not sex. And not a sensuous murder either. Something affectless, like a simple gunshot to the head, like let's just get this over with. Charlie would never cannibalize me; he'd have nothing to eat. And I would never cannibalize him because well you may be catching onto the fact that I don't eat.

But I'm not like those other girls who don't eat. I was never smart, I was never a figure skater, I was never anything. Once I sang a solo in choir and felt like I was (maybe) something. But nothing ever came of that. Life just kept on happening. Then they kicked me out of youth group, which was more than fine with me.

The main thing I did in life was hangout with Charlie, and this cleared up more time for that, for which there was not and never will be enough. I can't believe I ever sat in a church basement and ate pretzels, can't believe I used to go around asking myself WWJD and then doing not-that, because it seemed like cheating, imitating what a good person would do instead of just doing it because you yourself were a good person. It's easier, now, to not even ask what He would do.

"Aren't dates a laxative?" says Charlie, as if to entice me, even though he knows I hate shitting and more importantly have nothing to shit. A laxative loosens you up, which is not what I want. In medicine, they call this a "cathartic."

Charlie has his old eyebrow cocked at me, waiting for an answer. I have fat eyebrows. I've been told it's not fat, it's muscle, built up over many years of eyebrow raising, but I'm not sure. I think it's fat, the kind cardio surely won't kill. There are some things you can only fix through incision, by getting in there with a scalpel and doing the obvious thing, removing the problem. The practicality of surgery has always shocked me. Everything I assumed was carried out via intricate and opaque processes actually turned out to be more crude than I could have imagined. I thought bodies would reject the kinds of random objects doctors are stuffing them with but it seems like, if you really wanted to, you could slowly convert yourself into a robot. I mean, if you break your head they just staple it shut and if you break your hip they replace it with metal in the shape of a microphone and if you break your heart they put a little plastic one in its place and I know it's temporary but I can't believe they put it there at all.

It's like, you can do that? It's like when I was fourteen I wished I could just scrape my acne off with a knife and I was told you couldn't do that and then later I found out you actually could do that you just had to pay a lot of money to have it done right.

I don't have acne anymore, just freckles. I watch myself and Charlie in the shop windows, not with just a glance but with a real, unwavering gaze, so I can see how we look when we're walking, which I hope is like the people in a perfume commercial.

I don't know if we're perfumey or not. We look so different in every frame and it's like meeting myself over and over again. Charlie doesn't even notice; he always looks straight ahead. The people in the stores see me looking and look back and I like to think they keep on looking after we've walked past, moved on, conquered the world.

We will conquer the world but first we are going to eat our dates on the big lawn next to the church. We're not in Chicago, or Boston, or Cleveland. We're in some place you've never — I promise — heard of.

We find a patch of grass at the top of an incline, affording us the commanding view we are owed. We survey the landscape and eat the dates. Or he eats the dates, and I eat a date, slowly, like if I finish it a bomb will detonate and Charlie and I will never make it to that party later, which would actually maybe be fine, 'cause the party seems lame, or terrifying, or both. In youth group a party was Twister and Kool-Aid and Twister felt more like sex than any of the sex I've ever had.

Charlie gulps the dates down one after the other, barely chewing before swallowing, as if he wasn't just calculating the cost-per-bite a few moments ago.

"You might enjoy them more if you paid full price," I say.

"What?" He says. "No. What? No. It's the opposite. Totally the opposite." He shakes his head. He can't believe me sometimes.

A bunch of boys my age, all with little heads and fat bellies, walk by and look me over with their hungry eyes. Charlie gives them a look like don't-you-dare but I'm not sure what he'd do if they did dare. It's okay; I appreciate the intimation of a threat even if all it does is intimate. Charlie isn't a tough guy, per se, but I'm way farther from being a tough guy than he is, so who am I to ask him to be different?

Charlie's other eyebrow is black. Charlie always has this look like he's just spotted a friend across the street. Charlie's favorite phrase is "get the fuck over it" but he can't seem to get the fuck over lots of things, which makes me think he talks only to other people, not to himself. I imagine Charlie looking into the mirror and shouting GET THE FUCK OVER IT but I can't really, actually imagine him doing that. When I imagine him doing that I actually just see myself doing it.

Charlie wants to see me better. "Why?" I say, "so you can fatten me up for the slaughter?" Then I make oink-oink noises and run around like a chicken with its head cut off, which he finds off-putting but I find funny. He laughs, finally, but makes it clear that it's

at me, not with me.

When I'm with Charlie, I take big bites out of life. It's like my jaw doesn't open as big when I'm with anyone else. It's like when I'm with Charlie, the world is my oyster. A big, fat juicy one, about to burst like a heart.

He cradles two dates in his palm and jiggles them in front of my face like you would with grain to the goats at a petting zoo. I shake my head. I can't believe him sometimes.

"I can't," I say, leaving out the or I'll die, or the sky will fall, or I will fall, like down a hole to China, so fast I won't even know it's happening.

He catapults his last date pit into an impressive parabola, down the incline towards where the group of boys, who I think are actually men, much older than me, are sitting.

"You got spit on me," I say. "You got spit right in my eye."

He looks at me hard, half wise and half devouring.

He says, "Get the fuck over it."

LIEBMAN: So that excludes other people. I get so involved with my children sometimes—we light the fire, especially on the weekend. That's when I don't have to run around. We watch TV, or I put on the stereo and the kids run around and the dog barks. I get so involved with the kids that I nearly exclude my wife from having anything to do with them. Not in a mean way, but just because I'm so involved. (*During the course of this conversation, Miriam has been eating her lunch spontaneously without being involved verbally with the therapist or her parents.*)

MOTHER: I don't feel as though I'm cold. I feel as though I'm strict.

LIEBMAN: That's understandable.

MOTHER: I feel that my idiosyncracies are what Mimi is talking about when she says that the house is stiff, because I'm compulsively neat. Physically, I feel better if the papers in the living room are stacked up and there aren't any papers on the floor and clothes are neatly in the drawer. I know that it's like a neurotic kind of thing.

FATHER: But who's there, who's there to see it?

MOTHER: It's me. It's the same reason that I get up on a Saturday when there's not a person around and just put my makeup on before I go have coffee. I know it's a neurotic kind of thing.

FATHER: You're a fastidious person, that's all.

LIEBMAN: That's a neurotic kind of thing? I disagree with you.

MOTHER: Well, that's what everybody says.

LIEBMAN: Who says that?

MOTHER: I say that it's neurotic to want everything to be neat.

Having noted that as long as he holds parents' attention, daughter will eat, therapist continues to track conversation and build on the content provided by parents. Parents are able to triangulate therapist instead of daughter, freeing her to eat. Therefore, the content is used to keep the process going in the session.

screencapture courtesy of Julie Goldberg

Letter 63: MISS CLARISSA HARLOWE TO MISS HOWE

Tuesday, three o'clock, March 28

I have mentioned several times the pertness of Mrs Betty to me; and now, having a little time upon my hands, I will give you a short dialogue that passed just now between us: it may, perhaps, be a little relief to you from the dull subjects with which I am perpetually teasing you.

As she attended me at dinner, she took notice that nature is satisfied with a very little nourishment: and thus she complimentally proved it—For, miss, said she, you eat nothing, yet never looked more charmingly in your life.

As to the former part of your speech, Betty, said I, you observe well; and I have often thought, when I have seen how healthy the children of the labouring poor *look*, and *are*, with empty stomachs and hardly a good meal in a week, that Providence is very kind to its creatures in this respect, as well as in all others, in making *much* not necessary to the support of life; when three parts in four of its creatures, if it were, would not know how to obtain it. It puts me in mind of two proverbial sentences which are full of admirable meaning.

What, pray, miss, are they? I love to hear you talk when you are so sedate as you seem now to be.

The one is to the purpose we are speaking of; *poverty is the mother of health*: and let me tell you, Betty, if I had a better appetite and were to encourage it, with so little rest, and so much distress and persecution, I don't think I should be able to preserve my reason.

screencapture courtesy of Julie Goldberg

SHAKE-N-BAKE TIME

Tom Walsh

During fire training, we listened with rookie bravado.

Our instructor held up a fire shelter—a sheet of foil meant to provide last-gasp protection if you're overrun by a wildfire. We laughed when he called it a "Shake-n-Bake," but then looked nervously around the room; the crew veterans weren't laughing. Four firefighters died during shelter deployment near here a couple of years ago.

All spring we trained. We learned to troubleshoot chainsaw problems while standing on a steep hillside, or at night, by headlamp. Check the spark plug. Clean the filter. Sharpen the teeth. File the rakers.

We worked our bodies—running, lifting weights, building fire breaks. We developed a Marine's relationship with our hand tools: Without me, my shovel is useless. Without my shovel, I am useless.

We learned to take orders, to work as a unit.

We got nicknames. I was Red, naturally. My hair. You were Blue. We were inseparable. We kept the secret from most of the crew, but those with eyes could see. Unwritten firefighting order #11: Your fellow firefighter is like your brother.

On days off, we rode our motorcycles through the Sierras. We stopped at mountain lakes and dared each other to jump from high cliffs into freezing water. You never said no. I laughed until my sides ached when you kept falling down Echo Pond's slimy banks.

On our first fire, the adrenaline was high. Another crew carelessly knocked a boulder loose. It flew past, missing your head by inches. You were mad. We were all mad, but we maintained focus. Sawyers cut the trees and brush, you and the other swampers tossed it aside; Pulaskis chopped and grubbed roots; Mcleods scraped to bare dirt; me and the other shovels put out spot fires and dug out smoldering roots. Twenty-four hours with barely a water break, then home.

The calls came closer together, the fires more intense. By July, there were no more days off. Fire season was relentless as we traversed the Blazing West. California. Oregon. Washington. Idaho.

We were Hotshots and walked into fire camps ridiculously full of ourselves. Seven days without a shower was a badge of honor. Dinner in fire camp was two steaks and a potato. On the fire line we smothered our c-rations in Tabasco.

We climbed the steepest ridges loaded like mules, or rode in by

helicopter, like gods. When Dre broke his leg, you and I carried him two miles to the road.

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We're overrun, entrapped. Desperately we clear ground in a "safety" zone, listening to the roar as the firestorm comes our way.

When hot ashes fall from the sky, the super yells, "Deploy shelters! Stay low, nose to the ground. You will die if the fire catches you off the ground!"

We don't panic, outwardly.

"No matter how bad it gets inside the shelter, it will be worse outside! The heat will sear your lungs in one breath."

We deploy side by side, together but alone in our foil saviors.

"Red! This is the real shit, Red!" I hear you yell. A black hail of ash and embers clatters off the shelters.

"Stay low!" I scream back. "Stay low!"

A sound like a freight train overtakes us. The wind blows heat.

"Don't panic!" I yell, knowing you can't hear. "Short shallow breaths! Protect your airway!"

Terrified, I sense a tear at the edge of my shelter, my fingers char. When did I lose a glove?

How many more seconds, minutes? When I emerge from my foil, will you be there?

It's dark, hot, and loud. Then quiet.

"Hotshots! Leave your shelters!" the super barks, his voice raw.

Outside, I'm more scared than I was inside. I look for you in the smoke.

"Dare you to do that again," you say, sneaking up from behind. I'm laughing and crying. I punch your shoulder.

An Interview with Tom Walsh

What drew you to firefighting? Why did you stop?
I joined the California Conservation Corps when I was 19, and wildland firefighting was one of the duties. The teamwork, friendships, adrenaline and overtime pay combined to make it addictive for me. Plus, I've always loved watching fire. I stopped because after 10 years of seasonal forestry work I took a job as a reporter.

Where were you a firefighter, and how long for?
I was a seasonal worker in California and Montana for about 10 years, and on dedicated fire crews for about 5 of them in the late 70s into the 80s. While we were pretty busy, the nature of the job today—with fires spurred on by global heating to unheard of size and intensity—must be much more intense. I have a lot of respect for today's fire crews.

images courtesy of El Dorado Hot Shots

Can you describe some of the tools you used, ones you remember vividly?

Like most of the crew, I started out wanting to run a chainsaw, as it was the power position. While we all trained for it, rarely was I ever a sawyer on an active fire. Over time, the fire shovel became my favorite tool. You would often be called to different parts of the fire line because you could scrape away ground vegetation, dig out burning stumps and roots, toss clumps of dirt at hot spots in trees, and more. And, it was just the right height to lean on but still look like you were working.

Did you ever have to deploy a fire shelter?

Thankfully, I never had to deploy. Only one time did our crew retreat to a "safe zone" with that possibility. I hope people understand that crews risk their lives every time they go out on the line; one of the many overlooked dangers of global heating.

images courtesy of El Dorado Hot Shots

WHILE THE MEN GO HUNT THE SHARK, MRS. BRODY MEETS HER LOVER

Megan Pillow

She is always good with the sendoff. The decoration, the dramatic turn: the hoops that glimmer in the sunlight, the tear-laden kiss, the run across the dock as the boat begins its slip across the waves. Now that the Chief is off on another hunt, the eye of the camera has left her. Here in the house at the edge of the ocean, it is her, and the children sleeping, and the silence, and she gets to choose how to fill it.

The flick of a match.

The crack of the window.

The deep suck of smoke into her lungs.

The zip and whir through the numbers on the rotary phone.

Out on the dark of the ocean, the camera is watching: there the boat, its little light bobbing on the surface like the light of a person lost in the woods, like the light of a person shaking, searching for a path. The three men sit in the galley. They compare their scars

and sing that absurd little prophecy. The shark wears the barrels they tagged him with like rubies on a string. He burrows deeper into the water beneath them as if burrowing into skin.

But here, in the house at the edge of the ocean, there is no camera, and so Mrs. Brody awaits her lover. This time, perhaps, it will be the medical examiner. Maybe instead it will be Mayor Vaughn, and she'll have the pleasure of ripping him out of that ridiculous anchor sportscoat. She sucks her cigarette down to the filter and waits. And then he is there in the doorway, silhouetted. She sits in a wicker chair on the shadowy edge of the screened-in porch and she beckons him, the ocean at her back, crashing, crawling towards her. When he is close enough to almost make out his features, she points a finger to the floor, and he knows what to do: he gets on his knees, and he crawls to her too. She lights another cigarette, spreads her legs. He lowers his face between them. She leans into this gift. She props her legs on his back and rocks against his face, raises her hips when he puts his fingers inside her. She watches "Welcome Back Kotter" while she comes. It's all so easy, this. There is always a man on Amity willing to prostrate himself for a taste of pussy. The island is a-bloom with them, and Mrs. Brody has plucked the lot because the rest of the women on Amity are all too preoccupied to fuck. All the rest have mourning veils to fashion. All the rest have fists to stuff between their teeth to keep from screaming.

But Mrs. Brody, post-orgasm, is immune to the fear and the blood and the bad bad advice. She sits with her lover between her legs on the porch at the edge of the ocean, and it is as if she is the only one on the island at peace.

But Mrs. Brody has seen the way and the light, Mrs. Brody has seen behind the camera, and it is a revelation. The whole of her life, played out on a reel for an audience: her, in a horrid swimsuit and a fabulous hat. Her making fun of New York. Her coming onto her husband: wanna get drunk and fool around?

But the bigger revelation is the way the shark threads it, the way the great gray hulk of his body ticks through the years of her life like the hands of a clock. She knows well enough now to stay out of the water. She knows that once you dip in even a single toe that the shark can hear the tick of your blood under the surface, that the shark will sound you out. She knows, too, that it is both too late for her family and far too soon: the death of her people is years away. It will be a heart attack, not a shark, that will take the Chief in ten year's time. It will be a shark that will take Sean in 15. And Michael will go too someday, but generously beyond the reach of the camera's lens, and that is its own kind of safety.

Mrs. Brody runs her fingers through her lover's hair.

Out on the dark of the ocean, under the eye of the camera, the shark explodes. He billows blood like a ship on fire all the way to the ocean floor.

Under the eye of the camera, something bigger, bigger.

Here, she thinks, is the deepest secret nobody knows, the teeth of the teeth and the blood of the blood and the bite of the bite or however that poem goes:

The shark eats people because after he took a hand inside him once, he wanted to feel the hand inside him again. Because he didn't want to be alone.

Here, she thinks, is another: better than forcing the hands inside you is becoming the thing the hands gravitate to.

One day, years from now, it will be her in a boat and him beneath the water. One day, just the two of them, out on that ocean alone. The knowledge makes her older. The knowledge makes her want to take all the knowledge away. Here, between her legs, a distraction. Here, next to her, a tumbler of bourbon. Here, one more chance to go blotto.

She leans over and puts her tongue in her lover's ear.

You belong to me, she whispers, and she spreads her legs again. He, of course, obliges.

For a while, she lets her lover's tongue and fingers blot out her thoughts. Afterwards, she nibbles her lover's ear. For a moment she thinks of drawing blood. Not today perhaps. But one day soon, she'll have to practice. After all, the only way to beat the shark is to become him.

(Deleted Scene)

The shark contemplates the girl in the watery dark like one of those white winged ones that dives beneath the surface for fish, the ones that taste of salt and air when he pops them like twigs between his teeth. From within the skins of our hairless bodies, from the couches and recliners where we played video games and click over to the adult channels while our parents sleep, we watch. We watch while the blue wash of the television makes our faces glow. The great gray hulk of the shark's body ticks through the water like the hands of a clock.

Tick goes his tail as he moves closer to her wavering legs. Tick go our hands, tick our erections. We see him mouth her away from the buoy. We imagine him splitting the gristle, denuding the bones, but then the cut away before the money shot, and we are left to wind our clocks alone. We shut our eyes as we do it. We ignore the blood and the screams and the way the girl goes to quiet beneath the water. All that matters is that in the end, he gets the girl.

Deleted Scene courtesy of Megan Pillow

Jaws screenshots courtesy of Megan Pillow

CULLER RELEASE PROGRAM

Joshua English

Usually I'd just as soon look away from cruelty, but Lemuel flung that chicken square at my face and my first instinct was to swat her, fretting her clipped wings and shrieking like a raspy old woman, down on the heads of the others. Simple reflex.

And so was the powerful desire to stomp a mudhole in Lemuel's ass. But that one I countered. Impulse control, that's what I'm all about now. When the chickens spook at the foam that's spreading over them and they set about tearing each other apart in a frenzy, I know just what they're feeling.

That nattering and clawing rising up in me again when I come back from the shitter and there's Lemuel doing a pretty spot on impersonation of me reacting to the half dead chicken he pitched.

They all laugh. Even Marcus, who's my roommate. And I get it. We're free so we're laughing. But me and Marcus put in longer stretches at the penitentiary than the others and understand you don't go around shit talking your cellie.

Our foreman sees me pause at the edge of the bar and gets up.

"Let's grab a smoke."

Tildon's ok. Knows he's got a bunch of assholes with authority issues under him and he accepts that. He's not out to reforms us – that was supposed to have happened before we got hired on. And if he has a problem working with a bunch of cons, he doesn't show it.

"Everybody seems to be getting along pretty good." He tips a filtered from his pack and I slide it out. "Even after that business with the farmer's family."

I nod. I can see how that'd be hurtful for him. Them cussing us and spitting as we taped the cuffs of our Hazmats, pulled booties on over our sneakers. Like we were the one's got the birds sick.

Me and the others have all been coached on being dogshit. Even Kenny, who acquired more ink than lost time in prison. Tattoos on his face to tell the outside he isn't one of them anymore.

But Tildon's still part of the world. His virtue matters.

"In their minds, we robbed them of their lives," Tildon says.

He sends his butt sparking through the dark and we let the silence batten us in. Empty fields stretch behind the roadhouse Tildon decided on for us. The bars he chooses always far out of town, trying to keep us anonymous, our whereabouts unknown.

Couple hours later, Marcus has to just about carry Tildon, his boot toes dragging in the parking lot gravel. Basically broadcasting tonight's a good night to rip-off the bossman.

But somebody beat us to it.

Little cubes of blue-green glass like bunting ringing the van, all the windows broken out.

I push ahead, the smell familiar, so I'm not surprised by them all mounded up on the three rows of seats, piled on the dash, their feathers cleaned by our foam so that they look young and fresh, their deaths an injustice too far.

Next day, a new farm. It's noon when we get out there, but the van the FDA wrangled for us from the nearby forestry department is bigger and has better AC.

I volunteered to go to the station with the police last night, and I know that puts a mark on me for Lemuel. He's going to pull some shit again today. I'd tried to get a new partner. Hung over as he was, Tildon wouldn't go for it.

But if I punk Lemuel first, it stops. He's skittish today, the thought of the law and of the folks from the community all watching us itches him under his skin, his head darting around as we suit up.

"Something the matter, convict?"

"Let's just get this over with quick."

I make a point of admiring the farmland, the distant blue hills. You need to keep the advantage with guys like Lemuel.

We take the chicken shed furthest from the others. I toe through the broilers inside while Lemuel sets up the generator and fills the pool with water outside.

He passes the end of the hose with the aspirating nozzle through the window to me, which I clamp high on the ventilation sill, hundreds of chickens around me flustering and patting themselves like they can't find their keys.

The genny kicks on and foam blasts from the nozzle, right in the middle of the congregation of chickens. The one's there suffocate quick.

Or I guess what they're really doing is drowning, drowning in a cloud.

Most are too sick to do much panicking, and they cluck around as the foam, like a giant, yokeless egg, consumes them.

I wade in. Any second Lemuel's coming through that door. Imagine him coming into an empty shed. Only one door, he knows I must be somewhere, and in my white Hazmat, he won't spot me crouching in the white fluff growing in the middle of the floor.

I walk over the lumpy carpet of already dead chickens. When I leap out, I'll have a couple in hand and start pelting him like I'm stoning the damned.

But one shivers, squirms feebly under my foot, and like that my hands are up to catch myself as I drop into the cloud.

Breaking the surface cushions me, holds me, little bubbles popping in my ears like a thousand dry lips parting.

The light in here reminds me of the time I passed out in my car during a blizzard and woke up buried under two feet of snow. Less than a year before my first night in lockup. I was just a pissed off kid with nowhere to go, and even pinned down under a Kentucky winter, there was so little to me, if I held my breath I could fly.

Horse Country

When winter comes on, we put on headlamps and keep running. Now we chase discs of light, spotlighting mulchy mounds of shit.

"I'm going to die," I say.

"There is no end," Greg says, just a voice beneath the light.

The field was once an equine farm, donated to the city and permitted to be ignored. Weeds became trees. Ivy overgrew the stable. Our steps echo in empty irrigation pipes underground.

The hills around the park bloom horses like black orchids that steam in the pre-dawn gloom. When the path steers us close to a neighboring farm, horses watch over fences, some of them wearing bright socks.

We wave as we go by.

The first dead horse is in the pond. The water frigid up to our waists, we guide her back to land. Pond scum on her front shoulders, oily crystals in her eyelashes. Her wounds are ghastly. The shotgun pellets drilled pulpy holes in the burl of her hock, her withers pealed back on the genius machinery of her.

We sprint full out to the cars and call the cops. She's carried out on the scooped bucket of a skid steer.

story courtesy of Joshua English

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"Bet on him," I shout as we pass the spectator horses the next morning. Their flashy socks remind me of the bright stirrups the softball girls wore in high school. Their ponytails and freckled noses and foul language. "I'm gonna die soon. Don't bet on me," I say.

"Bet on him," Greg says, his light making them squint as we pass by. "I can't visualize the end. My imagination fails me. Don't bet on me, horses."

We nearly trip over the second horse. It sprawls in a trough of shadow.

This time the officer questions us closely. He smells our hands. He rummages through our cars. He calls our wives. We tell him to come by our homes anytime. We tell him we will keep an eye out.

***

There's no more talk the next morning. A band of grey light broadens in the east, but the trail never brightens.

I sprint ahead and stop at the horses at the fence. I pet their rounded jaws, their coarse manes. Greg joins me.

“This is the one I’d ride into battle,” I say.

“This is the one I’d have march over my enemy’s bones.”

There are in fact many paths, a circulatory system of paths. But we have been running at the park for so long, and we have been the only joggers for so many consecutive mornings, that we think of our path as the only path.

But this isn’t so. One of them conveys the horse killer.

“Is it an heir of the people who donated the land?” I brush a moth off the shoulder of the gray horse I’m petting. We’re careful to distribute our affection to each of them equally. They’ve been watching us for so long.

“He feels snubbed and now wants to turn his family’s land into a killing field.”

“That’s possible,” Greg says. He looks up at the last stars hived together in the brightening sky.

“I wish I had some sugar cubes or a carrot or something.”

“Tomorrow,” I say.

“Tomorrow.”

***

story courtesy of Joshua English

And the next morning we run with backpacks on. Baked oats with honey from me. Carrots and apples from Greg.

“Have you noticed that we never get into better shape?”

“I think I’m even fatter than before we started.”

“I think you are too.” Greg spits in the frost-crisp grass. “By kind of a lot.”

“This is nice, though.”

The fog of breath expands and deepens as they eat. Their eyes find ours through the clouds. We stop speaking.

***

Brake lights draw us off the path, off into the pathless wilds. It’s still winter, so the tall grass has fallen, but thorns tear at our bare legs, branches slap like switches across our faces and necks.

The lights blink once more. The engine coughs and quits. We cross one path and leap into the overgrowth again. A door slams ahead. The moon looms low, the sun still at least an hour away.

We hurl ourselves at a wall of rusted woven wire fencing. Dried out vines thread through it, one end grows out from the trunk of a broad tree. I scramble up, my belly chafing as I roll over the top. Greg’s climb is far cleaner. We stop on the other side, listening.

Silence. No crickets, no birds. This end of the park is new to us, a corner our path never took us to. No trees, recently bushhogged. It's possible we've left the park. We click off our lights.

The grating sound of a heavy weight sliding over metal. A thud so heavy I cringe.

We take off, striding high over the dark field. Leaping.

"I'll kill the motherfucker."

My heart pounds, I hear it rumble over the paddock.

A horse gallops up beside me. Pink leggings up to her knobby knees.

To my left, the gray mare pushes just ahead between Greg and me.

"Let's kill the motherfucker," I say.

The truck hacks to life up ahead. Transmission grinds, the engine revs.

This is what we trained for. This is why we learned to run.

GHOST

Emma Hodson

Do you think she's a ghost? I ask you, and she keeps walking steady in front of us. Decisive footsteps in the sand. I had first noticed her earlier, as we walked toward the beach. We had coffee in hand, my heart slumped inward. You were saying something like, I don't think I can give you what you need. But what I need is so little, I thought, but did not say. Or maybe I said it, but you did not hear. Please, I thought, or maybe, said. Then, I thought of, but definitely did not say, all the ways I had contorted myself to fit into your life, folded myself like a neat origami crane. You sipped your coffee and we kept walking toward the foggy horizon. I saw her in front of us then, and she struck me: white parka down to mid-calf meeting white Ugg boots, white hood drawn over head. The clothes weren't really white, or they were, but looking closer they were worn and browning, like old newspaper.

Still, she reminded me of snow.

Do you think she's a ghost? On the beach I ask you about her and you look, at best, distracted, and say, what are you talking about?

I say, she gives me an energy. You hate when I say things like this, say it makes me sound "woo-woo." Then, suddenly, she sheds her parka, kicks boots off, reveals her body, white-brown-snow-dirt bikini and an icy shaved head, tan muscle and soft stomach. You say something about how you're sorry if you haven't been more transparent, and I say, look at her! Do you see? She runs toward the frigid winter water, grey and menacing against unremarkable sand. But she is powerful and unafraid, ephemeral, her body melting into the whiteness of the fog. Her bikini is ill-fitting, it sags behind her, she does not pull it up, just keeps running until she's in the ocean, waves slapping skin, she's under, and then up again, and smiling.

HOLD MUSIC

Zac Smith

Greg ordered a pizza. The pizza had a suicide note in the box, lying loose on top of the pizza. It was signed by someone else named Greg. Greg called the pizza place but the connection was bad. He tried to tell the guy that there was a suicide note in his pizza box but the guy thought Greg was trying to place an order. Greg kept saying No, No, Listen, but the guy sounded really distracted and mad. Greg looked at the clock and saw that it was probably really busy at the pizza place. The guy asked Greg how many orders of breadsticks he wanted. Greg hung up and called back but the line was busy. He hung up and called back and the guy answered and put him on hold. Greg listened to hold music while rereading the suicide note. The Greg who wrote the suicide note felt deeply concerned for his girlfriend. He speculated that she would not handle his death well. The Greg who wrote the suicide note was trying to ask the pizza place to give his girlfriend money to help her deal with the aftermath of his suicide. Greg wondered about the kind of relationship this other Greg had with the pizza place. He wondered how the note had ended up in his pizza box. He listened to the hold music. He read the suicide note again. He liked how the Greg who wrote the suicide note sketched out how exactly he

planned on killing himself, which didn't seem normal for suicide notes because the people who find them usually also find the body. He ate a slice of the pizza while listening to the hold music and re-reading the suicide note. The music was pretty good. It was classic hip hop. He thought maybe using classic hip hop for hold music was illegal somehow – he couldn't think of any other reason other places would use generic hold music instead of classic hip hop. He also thought about how he liked how the Greg who wrote the suicide note wrote f and t with a squiggle for the little crossbar thing instead of just a straight line.

Barn Poem for Chris Dankland

took my metal detector back out to the desert
dug up old barns
barn after barn after barn
stacked them in a loose pile as the sun beat down
i sweat through my clothes digging up barns
i drank all of my water digging up barns
my mind was empty
my arms were sore
the barns all grimaced against the dunes –
an ever-growing pile of skulls
no, wait, they were barns
i got heat stroke but
i'm pretty sure they were barns

Barn Poem for Alec Sugar

we follow the sludgy doom riffs out of town
louder and louder

the weed stink also louder
(is that why they call it 'loud'? i don't know anything about weed.
except the smell – i know that)

the drums rumbling through our bones
the riffs – sheets of viscous rain

(i don't like similes in poems
so i rewrote that line to be a metaphor^^)

the growl, the lick
the doom tongue lapping us up

oh yeah, babbyy
maybe we're high already

we hold hands until we don't
it felt nice but i don't need to talk about it if you don't

you still ask where it could be coming from
like you don't know, but we both know

we've been to that barn before
and we'll be there soon

and we'll come back again
ok. it's a promise. pinky swear.

BARN POEM 48

barn carving a wave instead of nestled on a hill
black surfboard and a lit cigarette

when i was a kid, i had a bowl cut. the barber called it a surfer cut
so of course i thought it was radical

maybe i still do
(or maybe i don't)

but when i think about barns doing sick ocean stunts
none of them have bowl cuts

SOME LOST DOG?

Dana Liebelson

Simone is waiting to pee at a gas station in Mills County, Texas. Her boyfriend Mack is buying cigarettes, Reds. On the wall by the bathroom is a black-and-white photograph of a dead jaguar. Two dapper men in hats, their white shirts spotless, crouch near the body, their rifles crossed. Two hunting dogs are beside them, one severely tuckered out. The last jaguar killed here, the caption says.

The cat was shot snarling, or maybe its jaw was later arranged that way to appear more terrifying. Simone imagines — grace, a blur of rosettes, baying, gunfire. She looks away but can't get the photo out of her mind, like gazing at the sun, an electric blotch. She researches the picture on her phone. In Texas, jaguars are believed to be extirpated, the government reports, meaning: totally destroyed.

Come here she tells Mack. It's so horrible. What, he says, not moving from the line. He's tall, and his white t-shirt stretches across his back like a freshly-laundered sheet. Forget it, she says, going into the bathroom. The toilet seat is stippled yellow. Mack pisses too and she buys a fake cake.

We are extirpating the whole world, Simone says in the car, collapsing cake down her shirt.

Mack lifts a crumb from her boob, places it on his tongue.

They are on a road trip through Mack's home state, heading back to college in Denver. They've seen friends, Barton Springs, bats, but not Mack's father, who he does not speak about. Driving north through Texas, they pass towns folding in on themselves, fields of sorghum, futuristic turbines.

On a ranch, a hand-painted sign by the highway says: Whoever shot my dog will burn alive.

Why do people revenge dogs but not jaguars, Simone says.

Mack is shaking his head to the Buzzcocks, ancient history.

You never talk to me, she says.

Do you want Wendy's or Popeyes? He asks.

I'm talking about the death of a species.

They eat fried chicken at a rest stop, hunched over the lattice table, heat and flies, stripped bones piled in cardboard containers. The bright fast food packaging, with its happy promises, makes Simone want to cry. She leaves and does a TikTok dance in the parking lot, no music, sneakers chirping on asphalt, semis rumbling by. The sun is draped in red. Mack is looking at his phone.

I'm dancing, Simone says.

It's from the fires, Mack says, pointing at the sky.

Why didn't we see your dad?

Mack crosses the lot. He starts dancing too, his face sangfroid, skinny limbs flailing in all directions.

Simone laughs for like 4.5 billion years.

That night, it's late, Mack is driving past a copse of pecan trees, the window rolled down so he can smoke. Simone is sleeping. A trail of spit glosses from her mouth. He wants to lick it like a salt lick but he doesn't want to wake her up. A radio station fuzzes in and out. A billionaire is having a party on a Greek island, the radio voice says. It's not always easy or fun or pleasurable … the crow is sitting on a dead monkey … then everything went silent. Ahead, an animal appears along the road.

Mack brakes. Simone makes a dream sound. Before the animal shadows back into the trees, Mack catches the eyeshine, too intense, wild for a deer or a cow. His heart is pounding from nicotine and Red Bull. He wants to say things to Simone. Like he's seen that photo in the gas station before and the light-eyed hunter in the back looks like his father when he's just won a fight. The last jaguar killed here might mean other jaguars alive. And he cares about everything so much he is —

It was probably a dog, he thinks. Some lost dog.

The truth doesn't change anything, the radio voice says.

The Last Jaguar Killed Here

Homer Brown, left, and Henry Morris, right, were credited with the killing of this big Jaguar in Mills County sometime about 1904. D. W. Hooks, Mills County Surveyor, can be seen in the background sitting on the courthouse steps. This is the courthouse that burned in 1912.

(Photo Courtesy of Kenneth "Gum" Shaw)

image courtesy of Dana Liebelson

DEAD DOG SPOT

Cory Bennet

We used to go out to the country to spray paint trains and smoke weed. I remember the smell of a garbage dump. The landscape was a flat dimension, no mountains or hills. Farmland and ramshackle homes that looked like collages, you could see the years in them. Past the garbage dump smell it cleared into something I cannot describe but is related to that time that place in my mind. Maybe all farm areas smell the same way, or maybe it's only in the Sacramento—San Joaquin River Delta. I don't associate a lot of smells to memory. I don't pay w to smells. There are a few. The jasmine my mother grew that creeped around our home, the way Elizabeth smelled, grip tape, and this place we called the dead dog spot.

Posted up, one of my friends came upon a garbage bag, one of those industrial ones, stuffed full and flies buzzing around. It smelled weird to him and he said as much so we all went over. I immediately knew it was rotting flesh because all humans recognize that smell without previously experiencing it. I said "that shit is dead in there." One of us said, "what though?" We looked at each other. Juice said, "we gotta open it, right?" There was Disagreement,

why? “What if it’s a person ya know?” “It ain’t no people in there”, I said. Jmar said, “could be though, big bag, stuff a body in it.” Sean laughed. Matt smoked a joint. We stood in a circle around the bag. Juice said, “fuck it.” He covered his mouth and nose with his shirt and leaned down and he poked the bag, a squishy poke. “Why’d you do that?” Matt asked. Juice looked up, eyes only, mugged him. Refocused, and in one motion, instead of untying the bag which would have taken longer, he took those large hands of his and tore the garbage bag. A mix of blood and skin and bones and tendons and muscles spilled out. All of it clumped together by tufts of hair. We stood back and said what the fuck. Juice got away quick and stood next to me, his shirt collar stretched out, and breathed heavily, his eyes wide. Parts continued to ooze out, blood dripping into the dirt. It was like Juice had torn a gaping wound into the bag.

Jmar said, “shit, it’s a dog.” and Sean said “looks like dogssssss.” I couldn’t take my eyes away. I puked bile and spit and rested my hands on my knees. “The fuck wrong with you?” I spit. I spit. I spit. I stood up straight and looked in all of their faces. They knew. But I said it anyways, “someone fucking cut their dogs up, dead or alive, and dumped them out here. There is absolutely no other explanation.” Bobby spoke up for the first time, “What if it’s like, a young serial killer, because they usually start out murdering and butchering animals.” We all ignored that because it didn’t matter. We moved farther down the tracks but the mood was sour and grim.

We left, and when we passed by the piled plastic, flesh, we said nothing but looked ahead, got in the car. A week later Sean came into my room and asked, “wanna hit up the dead dog spot?”

And I said, “let’s do it.”

A Cat Named Louie

I had a cat named Louie. He was orange and weighed around 14 pounds.

He showed up in our backyard during the winter. My mother placed a jacket on one of the chairs outside for him to sleep on.

We had another cat, a black one, and Louie often backed his body up to the sliding glass door as if to show her his balls. They were quite impressive.

Gradually, he became our cat. Then, he became my cat.

He slept on my bed and I let him out every night around 2. I removed the mesh screen so he could leave easily. When he wanted back inside, he stood beneath it and howled.

Louie showed up just around the time my mother was getting out of a relationship with a tweaker. It was her first real boyfriend since her husband had died. That man is dead now, too.

We didn't have a name for him until my mom was walking in Costco and looked at her Louis Vuitton bag and decided to name him after the designer. At the time, I was in Europe having a nervous breakdown. This all makes us seems wealthy but it is not what it seems. Knock off purses and blood money.

Louie would often put his paw under the door and pull and thump thump thump, it was like The Shining.

story courtesy of Corey Bennet, first published on Neutral Spaces

He had a loud meow and made himself known when entering a room. My Rottweiller, Ozzy, didn't know what to make of him.

They sometimes slept together on my bed with me and the memory is a good one.

Me and my brother used to blow weed smoke in his face and his ears would relax and become straight, lying flat on his head and we would crack up.

I read books with him on my lap and he'd have enough of me reading and climb onto the book. I'd poke his belly until he got annoyed and we would play and he would eventually draw blood.

He came and went as he pleased.

Before I moved to Fremont, I researched how much Benadryl to give a cat to calm them down for travel. I doubled it and stuffed it down Louie's mouth. It only made him angry. He howled the entire drive. I had to stop in Pittsburg because he had pissed and shit all over himself. I felt so bad for him. I tried to calm him down but nothing worked.

I let him out of the house three days after I moved into my father's house and that was the last time I saw him. I miss him.

Me and Jmar sat on the stoop, passing a blunt back and forth under the night sky. We saw a couple owl's from the nearby cemetery fly overhead. Jmar said, "You know, I don't really like cats that much, but Louie, man, I loved that cat."

story courtesy of Corey Bennet, first published on Neutral Spaces

GENIUS LOCI

Brittany Ackerman

On the first day of her residency, she unpacks her bag in the space that will be hers. There's a main house on the property and a cluster of three small cottages a few hundred feet away. Her cottage has no electricity or running water. It's named the Library House. Theo, the residency's intern, informs her that a group dinner is set for 5:00pm. She throws a sweatshirt on over her outfit and takes off her baseball cap. The drive was long, but she feels good about being here. She's come here to write her novel. She will take walks in the forest and participate in yoga. She will give back to the property by milking the goats, watering the pepper plants in the garden. She will, she imagines, drift into a peace that comes with being in the right place at the right time.

Her ex-boyfriend, Charles, always talked about ecstatic truth. He was in recovery and seemed to know everyone in the city. He told her that he once went to a woman's house and watched her clear someone's energy. "She reads your bars," he had said over pizza one night, back when they were still together. "She didn't even touch the woman she was reading. It was more like she could feel her, manipulate it, tune it like a guitar."

After they broke up, she applied desperately to residencies all over the country. She was willing to uproot, to completely change everything. A writing residency in the Redwoods of California got back to her first saying she could come. Her parents didn't think it was a good idea, but she thought it might be the answer.

She had resigned from a teaching position at the high school where she worked right after Charles called it off. She left those kids right in the middle of the year. Charles broke up with her the night before New Years Eve. When she returned to class in January, she just couldn't do it. Another teacher, with whom she shared a classroom, got engaged over break and was showing off the ring, a teardrop shaped diamond set on a gold band.

"All this because of Charles?" her mom asked. "You are young and healthy and have your whole life ahead of you. I think you're just trying to find a way out of yourself."

Charles wasn't ready for a future. She had wanted so badly just to be with someone, have a family of her own, to go grocery shopping and have a real job and cook dinners and make the bed. She tried to envision what it would be like at the residency, somewhere new, somewhere she could start over. She imagined walking barefoot across the grass in the backyard, sitting in the hammock and reading that book her teacher from graduate school had published. He had done a reading once and read the story about the boys who set the old movie theater on fire and drive away from the city. The image of that burning theater had stayed with her, the way it didn't deserve the boys' violence, but how it suffered anyway, all the film strips curling at the edges until they disappeared.

There are four other writers at the residency: a screenwriter, a memoirist, a poet, and another novelist.

She wishes there wasn't someone else at the residency writing a novel, but then again, it might be helpful to have some friendly motivation.

The novelist likes to give updates on her work at dinner, "100 pages in," "I did four hours of research."

While washing dishes, she asks Theo if there is anywhere in town she could buy cigarettes. He's been working at the residency for almost a year, watching people come and go. She assumes he must know his way around Santa Cruz.

"We're not supposed to smoke here," he says. "But I can take you after curfew."

Theo looks Sephardic. He has tan skin and a full head of curly, black hair. He wears glasses and dresses simply in all black. He wears a puffer vest at night, she notices. The drive into town takes twenty minutes. It's a straight shot down the mountain, but in the car it's difficult to maneuver. Theo directs her to a convenience store. She buys a pack of Marlboro Reds, the same kind her brother used to smoke. She waits outside and bangs the pack against her palm a few times, flipping it over and over. She smokes and waits for Theo. Theo comes out eating a powdered donut from a box.

"Have one," he says, offering her the box.

"I'm not hungry," she says.

"If we're going to be bad, we should be really bad," he tells her.

She plucks a donut from the box, her fingers smelling of smoke, and eats the donut. She hasn't enjoyed anything in weeks. The powder is all over her fingers so she licks it off.

"What brought you out here?" she asks.

He eats another donut and considers the question. "I'm from Nevada. Not Vegas, but close enough. I've been working at this veterinarian's office for a few years, my girlfriend is a painter, but it's just not going anywhere."

"The vet or the relationship?" she smokes and licks her fingers
.
"All of it. I think I just needed to get out of there. Just let it go for a while, release it."

It feels good to listen to another human being. It also feels good not to be writing, or thinking about writing, or being underneath the pressure of constantly having to write or think about writing.

"The more I think about it," Theo goes on. "I just need to clear out my life, take the space and gain some presence."

"Have you ever considered keeping a dream diary?" she asks.

"That's not a bad idea," Theo says.

"Or some grounding rose quartz…"

"Come on," Theo laughs.

"You just remind me of someone I used to know." She thinks maybe it was this thing about men of a certain age, their incapacity to think about forever. She thinks of a piece of string, the length of someone's life, and how every time you lost someone or had to say goodbye to a person, your string gained a knot, making it shorter, just by a little, little bit each time.

She had met Charles at an Al Anon meeting. She was going because her brother was using again and she needed some tools to help her get through it. She didn't want to enable him this time, or deny that there was a real problem, like her parents did. She found out because her brother had left a suicide note on his girlfriend's kitchen table and hid out on the roof for three days. He had a backpack full of black and white speckled notebooks filled front to back with journal entries. He didn't eat or sleep, but stayed awake on pills and cigarettes. When she heard this news, she drove to his girlfriend's apartment and waited for him to come down but he never came. His girlfriend eventually called the police, who came and took him to a hospital.

She shared all this at her first meeting, possibly an over share, but she felt the need to get it off her chest. Charles came up to her after and told her that he understood. He was the alcoholic brother, though, and his little sister had been through the ringer. She had

hoped to meet Charles' sister someday, but she lived in Arkansas and did arts and crafts for kids with Down syndrome. Charles showed her pictures of his sister. She stood in some grass holding the hands of children and smiling sweetly. She thought they might get along, both of them with brothers they weren't able to help.
She started going to the same meetings Charles attended. Even the ones that were strictly meant for alcoholics, she went anyway. She wanted to be around him as much as possible, someone that understood. She searched the rooms for his ragged hair and scruffy face; a face that would look even more handsome clean-shaven, but his way was a little rough around the edges. He had brown eyes and he always wore khakis and a t-shirt with flip-flops. He gave her a mini Alcoholics Anonymous book on a keychain, out of the blue, one day after a meeting.

After a month, Charles stood up at one of the meetings and gave her a little white poker chip. "Welcome to the club," he said and they hugged. That night was the first night they slept together at his apartment, which was nicer than she had expected. It overlooked a quiet street, and when she couldn't sleep at night, she'd sit out on the terrace and watch the cars go by, wondering where they were off to so late. She had a new life with Charles, and it felt like she was progressing, getting over her past burdens, finally leaving some of the baggage behind.

***

She is facing a problem at the residency. She can't really get any writing done. It isn't a lack of peace and quiet. It isn't that she doesn't know what to write either, because she does.

There are spiders. She has never seen so many spiders concentrated in one area. When she goes to the main house to bathe, they congregate in the folds of the shower curtain, on the windowsill, on the ceiling, the floor, they even seem to be on knobs she has to touch. She has to take a broom in the bathroom and swat it around like crazy before she can even step inside the shower. Spiders hang above her bed at night. She spends most nights awake— another big issue, lack of sleep— and finds it easier to rest during the day when the spiders seem to retreat to another location. She isn't exactly sure where they go, but they definitely move elsewhere. She begins, instead of sleeping, instead of writing her novel, going to the main house's living room and sitting on the couch all night.

She starts cataloging her losses, beginning with Charles. She thinks about her parents in their apartment on the beach, how they watch television; shows about people singing in masks and shows where lower rate celebrities dance on stage and audience callers have to phone in and vote on their performances. She thinks about how she no longer makes them proud, but instead, makes them worried. She thinks about her dignity, how she feels like all she has are enemies, even herself, how everything feels so heavy and urgent and impossible.

She tries to picture Charles, her parents, her brother, out there somewhere in various apartment buildings, how none of them can hurt her anymore, but yet here she is, on a couch thousands of miles away, hurting. She texts Charles and walks outside to the back porch of the main house. He doesn't respond, so she tries calling.

"Hi," he says, and her blood turns cold.

"I'm in California," she says, as if this might mean something to him.

"What for?"

"My writing. I'm writing a book."

"That's great."

"It is. This place is amazing. You'd love it. "

"It's late here. Can I call you back tomorrow?"

"I'm pretty busy tomorrow, but I just wanted to make amends."

"To me? Okay, go ahead. I'm all ears."

Her body shakes, not from the cold, but from anxiety; the internal, shivering kind of shake that she can't control. She brings the sleeve of her hoodie up to wipe away tears and blot her nose, which is dripping. She is grateful Charles can't see her, that she is so far away from his view, but that his voice is right there with her.

"Thank you. Thank you for breaking up with me and letting me go, setting me free." A ball of mucus clogs her throat and she chokes on the words as they come out. "You let me live a life outside of my life."

She knows it isn't an apology, but it's truly the best she could do.

***

Theo asks if she wants to go into town that weekend and visit the farmer's market. He's responsible for cooking meals and she offered to help him. This time he drives her down in his truck and she gets to enjoy the scenery, the green mountainside and tall trees, the old houses and their beautiful painted mailboxes. Theo walks around the market gathering herbs and spices for dinner that night. He shows her how to check the freshness of the mint and basil, how to pick the rosemary from the stem and rub it between the fingers to test its scent.

"I want to go into psychology," Theo says. They stop at an ice cream vendor and sample a few flavors. Cherry and chocolate, hibiscus bloom, strawberry basil. "I've always loved people."

"But what about the animals?" she asks. She orders a cone of strawberry basil and it's so pink it looks fake. It's the color of a lipstick she had when she was too young to even wear makeup. Pastel pink.

"Penelope's family got me that job," Theo says and makes a gesture towards her cone. She hands it over and it's obvious that he wants to share. They start to pass the cone back and forth, bite for bite, lick for lick. She feels something in her gut, her loins. It feels like a weakness, a buckling, a dull ache. She says nothing.

Theo goes on about the girlfriend, the ease of her life, the way everything is decided for her, marked out. The path ahead "mapped,"

he uses that word. She's the kind of person that things just happen for. She's lucky. She's blessed. Her parents are wonderful people but they don't have a zest for life. Theo wants to travel the world and learn everything he can. He wants adventure. He wants something wild.

She's quiet on the drive back. Theo asks to bum a cigarette and she gives him three. He puts two in the pocket of his shirt and smokes one, driving up the winding mountain road. She picks one out of her dwindling pack and smokes one too. She likes the feeling of reclining as the truck climbs up the road. The sun is starting to set and the fresh herbs rest on her lap, fragrant, promising.

When they arrive at the house, he parks and she asks if it's safe to use the pool.

"Cleaned it this morning," he says.

She puts her bags down on a lawn chair and jumps into the pool with all her clothes on. She hopes to God there are no spiders in the water.

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The screenwriter left after the first week. The residency is supposed to last two weeks, but it's become a game of who will stay and who will go. The memoirist lives an hour south and wants to go home to her family, the family she is currently writing about. The poet suggests he could teach a yoga class to whoever wants to participate. In the foyer, it's the poet, the memoirist who wants to leave,

Theo, and her. The other novelist has cracked the code to her novel, and cannot make the gathering. The poet leads the group in a standard yoga flow, but it takes a turn after sun salutations A and B. The poet has everyone lay on their backs and comes around with burning sage. She wonders if he's allowed to burn something inside, but no one stops him. He seems to be going around to everyone individually and giving them specific stretches to practice. The memoirist is in a reverse warrior and Theo is in pigeon pose. When the poet gets to her spot on the floor, he puts his hands on her shoulders and lifts her up so she's folding over her legs. He moves close to her ear and whispers, "Release the demon." Before she knows it, she is hysterically crying and everyone is gathering around her asking if she's okay. The poet seems angry with her. Theo has his hand on her back. The memoirist leaves the next day.

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San Francisco is an hour and a half north. She thinks she can get a hotel on one of those last-minute deal websites and drive up the next morning. She calls her mother and her mother wants to know what will happen to the money she paid to be there. "But I didn't pay to be here," she says. "It's free. They feed me and everything." She wants to go to the airport and go home. She is ready to admit failure. She packs her bag and finds Theo in the garden.

She notices a pepper plant that Theo's been watering, how the droplets seem to bounce right off their bodies. They're so brilliant, so vivid, bright orange and red and yellow.

"I want to give you something," she says, and takes the white pok-

-er chip out of her cardigan pocket.

"What is it?" Theo asks.

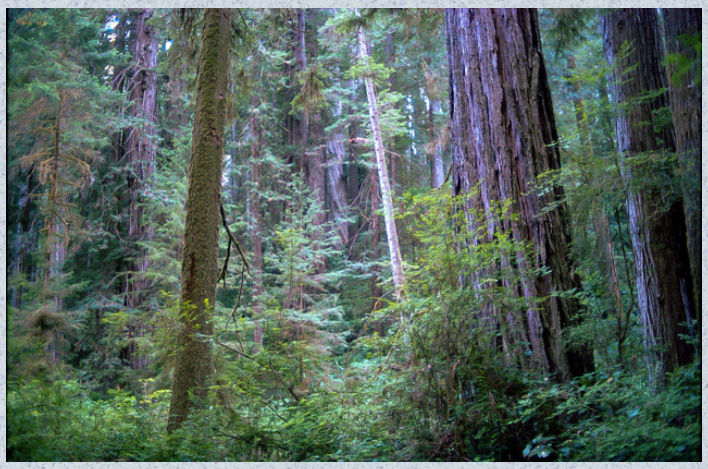
"I'm not sure anymore. Maybe it's a token to get into heaven or something. I just think you better keep this."

She gave Theo the poker chip and watched as he held it in his palm, considered it, like maybe it truly was a token to another world, or perhaps that it was just another thing he'd have to carry with him, another item, another thing, another piece of evidence that he was really here and that his soul belonged to his body on earth. She looked beyond Theo and tried to see out past the tree line but everything seemed to blur into a brownish green that made her dizzy.

"You know, heaven is what you make it," Theo says.

She wonders if she's having a spiritual awakening, but in the next moment, she's driving off the property, passing the rainbow of mailboxes. Tall trees are giving way to roads, and eventually she's back on the highway, driving north this time. She takes a deep breath, imagines pushing all her feelings forward, out in front of her. She thinks about her brother, his pain, his suffering. She feels guilty for being the sister, the one who has complained of carrying such a heavy load, when really it was he who suffered most. Her mother calls, a hopeful sign, her checking in, concerned, still loving, still caring. "How are you doing?" her Mom asks. She feels chipper all of a sudden, lighter, maybe even happy.

"You know," she answers. "Still praying for that miracle."



images courtesy of Carl Bird McLaughlin

RENO

Daniel Burgess

When the ground thaws and the air grows thin, the boys come crawling out of the valley to your doorstep at the foot of Mount Rose. You first notice them on a Tuesday after volleyball practice, when you are standing in the kitchen adjusting your ponytail and staring at the time blinking on the microwave, and the first one finds the courage to knock. You spot him through the frosted sidelite in the entryway. Behind him is a small line of them, each dressed up in wide-leg jeans bunched at their feet and striped button-ups half tucked at their belt buckles. When you open the door, they offer you gifts. A small stuffed bear on a keychain. A lavender soap set. A geometric cedar frame made in shop class.

Over the next three days their numbers increase. They appear only when your parents are out. They introduce themselves and ply you with silver pendants, celebrity perfume, charm anklets, or sleepwear branded across the backside. Hopi petroglyphs appear as a frequent design element, as do pairs of rolling dice. You try to appear fresh and showered when you receive them, hair straightened and new eyeliner more or less in place, though you do not

often keep the gifts. Most of the offerings end up hanging from your little sister's pink toy vanity or stashed in the trash bags set aside for Goodwill.

You are certain the new interest the boys have taken in you will soon fade, until the following Monday, when they discover the sliding glass door out back that gives directly onto your bedroom. They knock on the glass and try to peek between the floor-length curtains. They do this even when your parents are upstairs, as late as eleven thirty at night. You decide to fake sick to avoid leaving the house, but the boys start to Scotch tape their offerings directly onto the glass. Private diary pages. Printed instant messaging conversations about lessons learned at milestones. Collages of peaceful nature scenes with favorite quotes pasted into the foreground.

By Friday of the second week there is only one remaining patch of uncovered glass in the papered surface. You are wary of the patch. But Sunday afternoon you bring an eye to it and discover a lull between visitors. This is a narrow window of opportunity to jog to the gas station for a root beer without being detected. You count to three, pull the slider, and only make it as far as the edge of the backyard before a crowd of them forms around you. Didn't you know there are more gifts to be given? They begin to back you through the shrubs past the property line, and your shins start to itch with sagebrush. The backs of your hands are dry. You try awkwardly to keep your hair in place as you accept as many gift bags and wrapped boxes as you can carry and teeter into the canyon, muddying your sneakers.

You follow the creek bed, only realizing when your quads start to burn that you have been walking for some time. The boys from the valley are nowhere to be seen, and the light is beginning to fade. You sit down in the dirt among the latest: little creative acts born of idle time. Folk mix CDs. Charcoal sketches in your likeness. Urgent confessional poetry about tears and bedsheets and the nature of the heart. You stare at the gifts, and come to understand what your admirers want. What they want is for you to produce a catalogue of their collective efforts, a record of your gratitude.

In the shadows of Mount Fuji, one writes on the back of a postcard from Zion National Park, lies a forest called the Sea of Trees, where thousands have traveled over the years with intent, inspired by Japanese folklore about senicide, to end their lives. For some reason I want so badly to visit there. I want to survive the journey and touch the volcanic earth.

Does it ever keep you up at night? another has decoratively scrawled into the margins of a pamphlet about genocide in North Africa. *What can we really do?*

You come across a poem in aquamarine gel pen that includes a common refrain at the end of each stanza:

And you always look so soft.

The poem is nearly three pages long. Shuffling these, you look up at the rim of the canyon high above you. You return your gaze to the earth, and breathe in sharply when you find the poet himself has appeared before you. He is wondering if you would like him

to read the poem to you aloud. It is almost dark, but you can make out bright blue jean shorts extending nearly to his ankles. Your socks are soaked through to your skin. He coaxes you into the space between two needled branches of an enormous larch and coughs into his fist. He absently touches a small scar on his chin. He puts both hands behind his back, closes his eyes, and begins to recite.

woodblock by Katsushika Hokusai

THE BEST A MAN CAN GET

Steven Arcieri

Shaving his neck to impress all his exes at the high school reunion,
Jim nicked his jugular and died.

SENIORS

BETTY HENSELEIT "Betty"
"If I had a brain . . . what would I do with it?"

Girls Glee Club 1; Chorus 2,3,4; Music Festival 1,2,3,4.

JENNY SCOTT "Jen"
"The more I see boys the more I like women."

Trees for tomorrow; N.H.S 3,4; Forensics 1, 2.

DONALD KLEIN "Donny"
"He puts his troubles in a pocket with a hole in it."

Ind. Arts Club 1,2,3; Science Club 1.

LINDA KOENE "Lindy"
"She out-foxes everyone."

F.F.A. 1; Library Club 1; Art Club 3.

JIM VOSKUIL "Champ"
"Collecting A's is my business, but collecting girls is my diversion."

Class Pres. 2; Student Council 1; N.H.S. 3,4; Pres. 4; Track 1,2,3,4, Homecoming King 3; Prom King 4; Football 1,2,3,4, Basketball 1,2,3,4; Baseball 1,2,4, Soccer 1,2.

PHILLIP BERTRAM "Phil"
"He was nearly killed when a train of thought ran through his head."

CHAIT '21

image courtesy of Sarah Chait

KISSING COCO

Emily Lowe

Kissing Coco was my dream. I dreamt of us together underwater, floating and undefined, feeling for each other, reaching and kissing. I dreamt of us rolling around in grass or in a basement I've never been in. I dreamt of her even when she slept next to me. Coco with her dark eyes and darker hair. With her too long nails that she cried over when her mother tried to cut them, that always scratched when we'd play tag and she was it.

Coco my first kiss who stood in front of me when we were five, with her hands on her hips, and said best friends kiss, so we gotta kiss and leaned in and smushed her face against mine and both of us crinkled our noses. Coco the Valentine's baby who got her name because her mama wanted to call her something sweet.

Coco who picked me first for her relay team at her tenth birthday party, who made me a candle at sleepaway camp with my two favorite colors—lime green and lemon—and danced with me at the Sadie Hawkins dance because I hadn't asked anyone and her date, Tommy, could wait.

Coco who could talk to me like I wasn't pretty with my wide nose, wasn't skinny as her so why would a boy like me, after she heard the rumor that Tommy wished I had asked him to the Sadie Hawkins instead.

Coco who, for parties, stole my skirts that hugged her hips better than mine, skirts that kissed the creases of her knees, the small of her back. Skirts that I slept beside when she gave them back unwashed—because Coco didn't wash things—weeks later—because Coco would forget.

Coco with a gap in her teeth that she hated. Coco with hairs between her eyes she had me pluck sometimes at sleepovers, and eyes that opened me up like I needed fixing. Coco with arms that won the 200 butterfly at state two years running. Coco with a beautiful back that wore everything backless and sleeveless. Coco with a round face and rounder lips I decided one night I could kiss over and over.

Coco who kissed Dean. Coco who kissed Jasper, and Ade, and Jarvis, and Santi. Who kissed Ben once but then saw him kissing Hannah. Coco who kissed a girl at a party as a dare as a way to get Ben to notice her because Ben likes when girls kiss girls. Coco who laughed as people chanted Coco kissed Kate, Coco kissed Kate and bit her lip when Ben said hot.

Coco who crawled into bed most nights at 3 or 4 a.m. while I pretended to sleep, and curled into my body; whose skin warmed me in pricks like ants set free in the space between my stomach and my thighs.

Coco who told me she loved me and had me say it back though we meant different things. Coco who, that one night, brought me close in the backyard of a party and pulled me in and kissed me and my heart stopped, and I leaned in and the lights came on and Ben whistled, and everyone laughed because Coco kissed Kate.

Moskva

LJ Pemberton

It was one a.m., Moscow time, which meant five p.m. in New York. None of us were thinking about New York though. We were thinking about how our feet hurt in these stiletto boots and how goddamn cold it was, and whether we would be pretty enough to get in the door. We'd read in a tour book that the Moscow clubs had shoe and face policies, which meant your shoes had to be killer and your face had to be hot, and so we put on our sluttiest best and prayed our American-accented Russian would make us seem exotic—the kind of bar candy that anyone would want in 2003, even in a Cold War bomb shelter cum dance club, even on a Friday night. The guy at the door was dressed in all black—black cowboy hat, black vest, black shirt, tight black jeans, black belt, black cowboy boots, with silver accents where a straight American white guy wouldn't dare—a draping wallet chain, an embellished buckle, his front tooth. He leered at Anna when she approached ahead of us. The alley was dark but I caught a flash from his tooth in the doorlight after she bumped into him chest first. Izvinichye, she smiled. He waived her by and she turned to hurry us on, the ragtag stragglers, slamming our heels like ice picks along the frozen and icy road. We were dumbass college students playing hooky

from good sleep for a chance at—I don't think we knew. We believed two things absolutely: that surely Russia was different than America and that our youth would protect us. We weren't wrong, exactly, on either count, but we had no justification for our faith.

I'm just going to say da to everything, said Mel, as we finally arrived and the man in black muttered something in Russian that none of us understood. Da! she said, da! and he sneered and waved us in and turned to block the way of the locals who had arrived behind us. The way in was a door and then a staircase that became a ramp. The walls were close and the only light was a periodic and soft green that filled the darkness in plump and overlapping circles of illumination. Like all of Moscow in winter, it was HOT. Stifling and humid from the citywide boilers. We pretended we weren't scared. At the bottom of the ramp was a small foyer with a coat check, and we peeled ourselves down to our nearly naked dresses and took our tokens and stumbled further into the complex. A door, two, three—restrooms, we surmised—and then to the left: a small bar, packed from ledge to wall, and to the right, a dance room, where the music—unheard from above—was a deafening electronica with a sure beat as regular as a heart.

I want absinthe! I screamed at Anna, who was more fluent than any of us, and she pushed her way through the young and bored bar crowd with the startling and hateful surety she had learned from her immigrant mother in Sheepshead Bay. She returned to our huddled group with five drinks balanced in her hands. We drank in the strange and tight underground with the reverence of supplicants before the iconostasis. Things like the iconostasis and the Revolution were now things we knew about because we were

to see the artifacts of the literature and history and theology we had studied. The day before we had stood in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, rebuilt on its original site—where a public swimming pool had, for decades, replaced it in the Soviet Era—and listened to our guide gesture at the icons with careful slander: how Italianate they were, how unlike the divine vision of Rublev. What is lost cannot be replaced!, he said, lamenting the destruction of the original building under Stalin, and we nodded, just as we had nodded at Fallen Monument Park, staring at statues of Lenin, when a different guide had said in serious and stilted English: the past is broken.

Mel finished her drink first and lunged into the dance room, gyrating with abandon beneath the periodic strobe and lazer spotlights. A Russian boy—or man, they all looked so young—joined her and they communicated with their eyes and bodies, no words necessary. Lust as inertia; muteness as perfection. By two-thirty they were making out against the wall by the restroom doors, pressing harder against each other every time someone passed. Of course, said Anna, with her usual jadedness—because of course Mel danced and met someone first, of course she was sloppy with a stranger, of course she was better than any of us at enjoying herself, come what may. The others, Sarah, Ellie, and Jenn, had stationed themselves in the bar room, practicing their Russian in scream articulation with a bemused and attentive coterie of bookish-looking young men. Anna and I hung back in the hub, still sipping our absinthe as though we had had absinthe before and pretending that nothing about the night was new.

images courtesy of LJ Pemberton

My mother always said Moscow was such a shithole, said Anna, and I said, this isn't so bad though? and she said it was probably different in 1975, and I said, no doubt. We didn't have any profound insight to deliberate over. Conversation was hard in the noise and there was little we could offer by way of comparison. The few Russians we had met seemed to think of Communism as this strange and short blip in their history—what comprised the totality of most of America's understanding of the country was barely worthy of their judgement. Less than a century, said one older merchant woman, you Americans have no sense of time. Meanwhile, to emigrants like Anna's mother, Russia had become frozen by memory, stuck in those decades when the Soviets were America's greatest enemy. What we had found on our trip was a combination of the past and present existing simultaneously; high rise edifices topped by statuettes glorifying Bolshevik workers stood alongside Imperial architecture stood alongside new 24 hour grocery stores and nightclubs full of coke-addicted oil barons. Store windows offered consumption, but the cultural takeover of the market was less complete than at home. Name brands and luxury goods were novelties, and like all novelties, they offered only a temporary diversion from the long slog of living—a truth we Americans seem to have forgotten before we were born.

You feel anything? I screamed over the music as we bottomed out and Anna screamed, nothing! And I said we should drink more—and she said she would be back. I wasn't a club kid in New York, even though I had been in New York clubs on rare occasions—dragged there by more social friends—and so I had no script for how to behave. I bobbed my head. I avoided eye contact with anyone. Anna came back with a bottle of vodka and laughed at me

when I raised my eyebrows at her. She handed it to me and I threw it back like a professional alcoholic and soon the floor was swaying and she was laughing and we were both grooving on the dance floor like surfers finally catching a wave. Who knows what time it was? We danced and twirled and shimmied. The music was more German diskotek than House or London dub and there were no steps to follow and no one knew us and we had given in to easy oblivion and pure dilated feeling and then Jenn came up, right in my face, angry—we have to go! she screamed—and she grabbed Anna too and dragged us through the hall where Ellie and Sarah were extracting Mel from her temporary lover and then there were dropped roubles on the floor and then wadded roubles stuffed into the tiny hand of the coat check attendant and we were pulling on our coats and wrapping scarves around our necks as we stumbled into the cold February morning, still before sunlight, and Ellie was PISSED. They fucking asked if the color rubs off, she said, referring to the dumb utterances of the boys down below, and Sarah said they only said stuff like that because they had never seen a black person before, and Ellie said what the fuck? are you making excuses for them? And Mel went immediately to Ellie and laced her arm into her side and said I love you and I'm glad we left.

We closed our coats more carefully and pulled up the edges of our scarves to shield our ears from the intense and truthful wind. I was still drunk and I was grateful because I didn't want to feel my feet or understand how cold I actually was. Somehow, we had to make it back to the Rossiya in time for breakfast lest we be considered unaccounted for and lost. Anna saw a pod of parked cars at the end of a wide median and ran up to get us cabs. She came back and said they were asking more than market rate because we were

tourists but she didn't give a fuck and maybe it was time to call it a night. Sarah said she wasn't done—how often am I in Moscow, anyway? she said—and so after yelling and some apologies and a few drunken offerings of love, we decided (at last) to hit up one more club. The winner was a multilevel behemoth complete with different genre dance rooms, a bowling alley, and randomly placed stripper platforms. Topless, neon-thong-wearing young women walked around offering lap dances to seated patrons at tables with bottle service. Black light gave our own club dresses a hyperglow in the muted darkness. We were surprised when one of the nearly naked strippers grabbed a man's hands and put them on her chest. No 'no hands' rules here.

Feeling protective of Ellie after her encounter at the underground, we slipped into a bitchy and suspicious intolerance of everyone around us. Anna volunteered as our drink liaison again and Sarah, Mel, and I listened attentively as she ordered us a bottle with beer chasers to split. Our cruel disinterest gave us a new camouflage—many men who attempted conversations as we drank together were surprised to find out we weren't Russian. None of us wanted to bowl and the heady drunkenness of the previous stop had broken into an uneasy, tired alertness. A stripper came by. She was petite and beautiful and her puffy nipples were nearly invisible in the black glow. It didn't seem fair to think so, but I wished for a moment we could know her, and then I reminded myself that's the rub—all the smiles, all the interest, is feigned—it's all part of the uniform for the gig. After Anna told her no dances, she moved on, and another young man approached, sitting in the booth before even speaking.

They said you're Americans, he said, in a competent but foreign English accent, and we said we were, and he nodded and sipped from the metal cup in his hand. How do you know English?, asked Sarah, and he said his mother defected from England before he was born, and we laughed and said no, really, and he said she wasn't as famous as the Cambridge Five, but most people don't know how many Brits and Germans and Americans actually chose Russia. Fair, I said, and he introduced himself as Ivan, and we went around and were equal parts drunk, tired, and interested, making small talk, asking what Moscow was like in summer. Anna was watching him and sipping with suspicion or lust—they looked so similar at this hour—and then suddenly she pushed her drink aside and handed her purse to Jenn and stood beside the table, towering over him. Tants—, she started, and he interrupted: da.

They left us for another room.

We settled into conversation, mostly sure that the other people around us couldn't understand what we were saying, not that it mattered. What's the itinerary tomorrow? asked Sarah, and Ellie said, SLEEP, and Jenn said, I think we're supposed to tour the Armoury at the Kremlin?, and I said fuck, I'll have to live on Nescafé—we had seen no other coffee, anywhere—and then Ellie said what we were all thinking: you know she's going to bring him back with her. We knew she meant to the Rossiya—not New York—and Jenn said she wished she had that kind of gumption. It helps to be fluent, I said, and she said sure, but Mel wasn't and she still did what she wanted, and Mel perked up at the sound of her name and leaned forward. Jenn, she said, almost slurring, I get hurt as much as I have fun, she said. It's all down to cost/benefit analysis, said

Ellie, and Jenn said just once she'd like to know what it felt like to not be afraid.

Yeah, I'll drink to that, said Mel, and we all bottomed up what was left in our glasses before topping off again. Our heads were swimming. Jesus, I think I'm fluent enough to order bottled water, said Jenn, and waved the attention of the server. It was so loud. I sipped the water and moved as little as possible to avoid feeling as drunk as I was. Looking towards the back booth of our room, I watched two middle aged men getting simultaneous lap dances from two nubile young women probably the same age as us, maybe younger. It was hard to tell. All the Russian women we had seen were young or babushka. There was no in between. They gyrated over the men, who ran their hands up and down the sides of the women's bodies. The men slipped roubles and American dollars and euros into the strings of the women's bright bikini bottoms. When the song ended, the women dismounted as if from horses, and walked away, gathering their bills together and counting, before disappearing into a back room. After they were gone, the men drank and reenacted what had just happened in pantomime next to each other, moving their hands in the empty air to recreate the excitement—share the joy of consumption. They laughed and smoked. They reminded me of men in New York.

Anna came back more sober than any of us. Shaking your ass will do that. Let's go, she said, and we gave her cash to pay up at the bar. Ivan, her new personal attaché, joined her, and we saw both of them yelling at the bartender when he tried to overcharge us. We re-costumed for the cold and emerged with the first hint of morning, like a threat, on the horizon. Anna and Ivan procured cabs

for us and we packed in tight and quiet, watching the city become the domain of bread delivery trucks and street vendors. At the hotel, we stumbled in smelling of booze and sweat and cigarettes. Ellie asked if she could stay in me and Sarah's room for the day because she knew Anna was going to want some privacy. I said sure, and she came up with us. Jenn and Mel traipsed off to crash. I showered first, laid down for half an hour, and then put on new clothes. I looked like hell but I didn't want to miss the tour.

Mel showed up at breakfast too. We picked through the room temperature meats and cheese and pickles. Avoided the room temperature juice. Nescafé, Nescafé, Nescafé. Some bread. Okay now some cheese. The alumni on the trip were chipper and rested and attempting small talk with us between knowing glances. We told the group leader that our absent friends were accounted for and then retreated like vampires to the darkest corner we could find. Willed ourselves sober. On the tour bus we crashed, only to be roused awake five minutes later as the tour guide announced we had arrived. The museum was just on the other side of Red Square. Hell, said Mel, joining me off the bus. Indeed.

In the Armoury, our group was incohesive, breaking off into twos and threes to peek at the displays. The museum was full of national treasures and royal gifts from the pre-Bolshevik era. German silver from the 1700s. Full suits of armor. A carriage, with mica windows, that had once belonged to Catherine the Great. Next to it sat a miniature carriage, sized for the royal children. How novel. The tour guide wrangled everyone back together at the Fabergé egg display. He was speaking, something about Easter gifts— I was barely awake. We filed by and I stopped at a silver one. The shell of

the egg was engraved with a map of the Trans-Siberian Railroad. On display in front of the egg was its toy surprise: a tiny, working gold train, windable like a clock with the key included. I smiled, imagining being small enough to enter its carriages and travel around, barely noticed at everyone's feet. Mel stopped with me. We think of ourselves as so modern, she said. I guess money has always had access to invention, I replied.

After the tour, the group stood around in Red Square, taking turns getting pictures in front of the church we all recognized from Tetris—Saint Basil the Blessed. A line of people had formed at Lenin's tomb, preparing to file in one by one. We kept moving to stay warm. It was weird to be at the Kremlin of all places, the Kremlin!, that had featured so prominently in news broadcasts from our young childhoods. Little had we known that almost every town in Russia has a Kremlin—Kremlin is just the word for the central citadel where the government offices are housed, hardly different from the medieval walled cities common throughout Europe. Mel and I convened and decided to walk back to the Rossiya on our own. Neither of us had the legs for another museum nor the patience for more group small talk.

As we approached, the Rossiya was gray and Soviet and immense. In the daylight it had half the cheerfulness of the night before. We entered and hardly spoke. Parted to our rooms. I took another shower and slipped into bed next to Ellie, hugging the edge, and was soon fast asleep on the square and divine down pillows. When I woke, Sarah was trying to open our floor-to-ceiling window without falling out, just to make it a little less stiflingly hot. She's alive! said Ellie as I sat up. She was eating crackers and drink-

-ing wine. A little hair of the dog?, she offered, and I did not refuse. Has anyone heard from Anna? I asked, and we decided then, to bombard her. In pajama pants and oversized tshirts and above-all, comfort, we paraded through the hall to Anna's door. Ellie knocked boldly. A kind of joy excited us—it was so fun to be annoying.

Anna opened the door with her facemask pushed up onto her forehead. Unlike the rest of us, she'd brought a silken peignoir set to sleep and lounge in. In New York, we had attributed her tendency towards luxury—caviar, unrepentant and small cruelties, a refrigerator that was never without champagne—as pretension. In Russia, in situ, I suppose, she was appropriate, and we, now gathered in front of her, were naïve children. So? asked Ellie. SO, said Anna, breaking into a smile and throwing the door open for us to join her. We piled in.

Outside it was dark again—sunset happened in mid-afternoon this time of year. A frigid, but welcome wind blew in through her cracked window. We lounged on the beds, snacking on the bags of potato chips Anna had bought at a grocery store some afternoon on her own. We were as close and intimate as a slumber party back home. I had always known that countries were places people lived in and visited, but I hadn't realized until now that countries were also places we carried with us. I thought about the small Russia that Anna had grown up in, so far away from Moscow, and yet more Russian than this room at the Rossiya now, so full of our American expectations.

He was more British than Russian, she said, and laughed like this

should explain everything about him. We giggled with her, pretending to understand, as though we all had deep wells of experience with men from other countries and could compare their differences with precise insight. Come on, out with the rest, said Mel, and Anna poured herself some wine and finally indulged our rabid curiosity:

Okay it was nice, she started. We got back, and we were making out you know, along the wall to the bed, and honestly, he was a decent kisser—not too much tongue, but playful, cocky, I like that (she smiled, remembering)—and then I put my hand on his chest and told him to hold up so I could go to the restroom, cause you KNOW I had to clean myself up after all that dancing, and so I did and then downed like a whole bottle of water—I don't know, it's always so hard for me to get wet when I'm dehydrated from drinking—and then I came back out and he was sitting on the bed. I handed him a water and sat down next to him and then we started kissing again and I pushed him against the pillows and it was getting good, so I move to go down his chest and take his pants off but when I get down there, he taps me on the shoulder to stop.

She took a sip, left us hanging. She looked like she was deciding what she thought now about what had happened then.

So I laid my head on his pants with his dick, like, right there but like still in his pants (she mimicked the proximity), and that's when I realized he wasn't hard. (She paused for effect and then started in again.) Oh my god, SO. He didn't say anything. I didn't stay anything. I kinda rubbed him a sec, but then I stopped when he knocked my hand away. He did this thing where he pulled me

up to him and then I laid in the crook of his arm and that's when he told me he wasn't used to women being so willing? And then he was like, no, I like it, but it also weirds me out a little because I don't know what to do. He said he was used to being the driver, I guess? Anyway, when he said it, he sounded scared, like he was expecting me to be mean to him for it, but I just told him it was okay, I guess, although I said I didn't think it boded well for his future partners if he needed them to always pretend like they didn't wanna fuck—and he laughed and said, yeah.

Fuck, said Mel. Jesus, said Sarah.

Yeah. We kinda laid around after that and I thought, maybe, we'd try again, but we didn't. I don't know, I think my whole deal turned him off? Too confident? Too American? The irony, jesus. After like an hour he left and I took a shower and went to sleep.

She shrugged.

Honestly, shit like that makes me wonder if men even like women, said Mel. I mean, not like-to-fuck, she said, I mean LIKE us. Like, want us when they see who we are.

So you didn't get to see his dick at all? said Sarah.

Anna laughed. Not this time, she said.

At least he was honest, said Ellie. We agreed. She got up and pulled some yarn and a half-finished crochet project out of her suitcase. It wasn't clear what the knotted yarn was going to be yet, but it was

already serving its first purpose as a way to keep her hands busy.

Anna asked, then, about the Armoury and what she'd missed when she was sleeping and Mel and I did our best to describe the highlights. Fuck, I wish I'd gone, said Anna. Outside, snow had begun to fall. Sarah was flipping through channels on the tv. We all made small talk and Jenn said she was bored. No way in hell I'm going out again, I said, and Mel backed me up. Sarah settled on a Russian-dub of the first Star Trek series and slowly our attentions drifted to it. The contrast between Leonard Nimoy's gravitas and William Shatner's excitability was decidedly less distinct in the Russian. We congregated on the beds and on the floor, watching the tv stars of our parents' Cold War childhoods bristle against the Klingon empire.

Tomorrow we would take the train to St. Petersburg and none of us would ever see Ivan, or Moscow, again.

Three years later, the Rossiya would be demolished—too costly to renovate, too Soviet to fight for. I looked it up online and there's a park there now. Anna is a lawyer in Hollywood and Ellie's bouncing between adjunct roles in poetry at various colleges in New York. Sarah's married with two kids and three cats in Jersey and Mel's doing improv and standup on the open mic circuit. Jenn moved out to Long Island and I've never visited because her finance bro husband made a pass at me at their wedding. I'm older too, divorced. It's been more years since we were in Moscow than passed between the end of perestroika and our visit.

Sometimes in winter, I remember the bone cold of Moscow in

February, and wonder about what must be changed now, what must be the same. A kind of war continues between our countries. For all I know, Ivan is on Twitter, pretending to be a pro-Trump housewife in Florida. When I feel nostalgic, I take the train to Sheepshead Bay and buy jam from the Russian market just to listen to the women ask for different cuts of meat from the butcher. On TikTok, kids are dancing to the sounds of Molchat Doma. Dobre utra, I say to the morning.

We passed through Moscow the same as time. It was 7 p.m., Moscow time, which meant 11 a.m. in New York. Star Trek had ended and Sarah was flipping through channels again. It was our last night in the city and we would spend it quietly, in the hangover of our previous adventures. Outside, the snow had dampened the noise of the city to an eerie stillness. In the courtyard of the Rossiya, hotel employees were smoking below us. Mel watched them—I watched Mel. Ellie said she was hungry and Jenn said, me too. Anna suggested we order room service, that if we picked out what we wanted, she would make the call. She pulled out a menu and started translating. We could have a feast if we pooled our money—salmon, marinated mushrooms, cheeses and pates, roasted potatoes, pickled vegetables, bread, beef stroganoff, beer. She became theatrical, exaggerating her pronunciation of each food. We could eat better than the Romanovs, she said.

So we did.

GHOSTS

Matt Greene

We lingered in the yard, each holding our beers, trying to look as if we hadn't forgotten one another. Brian said he was adjuncting, a few places. He said it was a bit of a commute, Palo Alto, San Francisco, but it was worth it. As it turned out, that was my story too, elsewhere. He shifted his weight from his left foot to his right. It was weird seeing him without a hair wrap, without roller blades, his uniform in college, weird seeing him instead in a pastel button-up. It was late spring or early summer, warm in that way of bursting. I looked at him and then at the palms, always the palms, their fronds ready to drop. Everyone knew someone who knew someone with a shattered windshield, a cousin's cousin crushed just as they had begun to turn their life around. I said the adjunct game was no good, but that you had to accept it for what it was. I said I liked teaching. I liked my students. I told him I forced my composition classes to write about ghosts, to write what haunted them. He was from the northside of Chicago and had, seemingly, lived these whole other lives, but I knew him first as someone who rolled through your open dorm room doorway at two in the morning, talking Nietzschean eternal recurrence and, later, with his sledgehammer, his rage, insatiable, suburban life bottled and

shaken, frustration bursting across a rusting sedan frame, a cactus shrub reduced to pulp. I wanted to ask why he was so angry, how it was he had ever made me so angry. I wanted to ask where he got his sledgehammer, but it was as if I both knew and had no interest in hearing the answers. What I wanted was to study his reaction as I did the asking. He said he'd had a few Skype interviews, but no campus visits. Philosophy grad school I could picture only as hapless spit-talking, fisted assertions about Whitehead, about Spinoza, about aboutness. And he must've thought the same of an MFA. I asked about publishing, and noticed that the others had drifted elsewhere in the yard, us over here, them over there. We were in town for a funeral and that had happened and now this was the reception. I shifted my weight from my right foot to the left, sipped. He looked down at his beer and then back up at me. The breeze was thick with smog like you might chew it, but warm, warm like you ought to take off your shirt and lay in the grass, a ladybug crawling across your face. I wondered if he too wanted to lay in the grass. Once we had wandered through a dry riverbed we called The Wash, smashing yucca, pinto gneiss, etc., meaningless debris, forms and un-forms, new forms, sweating in the heat. And now, if we so pleased, we might stroll a few yards and find ourselves in the cement trough of the L.A. River. I found myself telling Brian that before they poured concrete the river migrated seasonally, that twice downtown Los Angeles had been washed away and rebuilt. He said, What? I said I wondered where those downtowns had been. He looked at his shoes, said, Is there water in the L.A. River? I hated white wine but talking to Brian made me want it bad. I almost said, Somewhere an adjunct is being crushed by a palm frond. I said, Excuse me, and drifted toward a folding table spread with beverages, carrot sticks, chunked melon. I was

going to drink white wine, cheap shit, lurking on ice in a blue cooler. I was going to place snacks on a plastic plate, my motion toward the table implying infinite futures, infinite worlds, and yet all the while I had the strange sense that somehow all of this had happened before, that whether I got in my old Accord, long since totalled, junked, and drove home to the mother-in-law studio I'd once rented in Pasadena, or drove to the beach in Playa Del Rey, where the passenger jets skimmed gracelessly above on their way in and out of LAX, whether I took the Expo Line to Union Station and its grand atrium, permanently scented Wetzel's Pretzels pizza dog, or the Gold Line in the brilliant light of the Arroyo Seco, the Red Line deep underground, where the unthinkable could happen, happened, where I'd seen fist fights and, once, an eyeball dangling by the optic nerve, where mostly it was a calm and piss-stained place to stay warm, or cool, if you had nowhere else to go, gliding from downtown to North Hollywood and back again, again, again, suspended, invisible to the grid above, that whether I became somehow tenured, whether I didn't get classes next semester, whether I was waiting tables at an outdoor patio in the shade of unsteady palms, whether I was still puttering in the muck in north Seattle, among the Evergreens, unsure how long it'd been since my mom said, Be home soon, it made no difference, because my actions weren't quite my own, it wasn't exactly my own life I was leading. I returned to Brian, fresh drink, fresh plate, my whole life ahead of me, and he said, Do you believe in ghosts?

images courtesy of Matt Greene

Geocaching, 2008

We went up the mountain searching for the act of searching. We went to a lake with a ghost town and a steamboat, a lake with a Bavarian village, a lake with ducks and a walking path. We went to a diner where the waitress mumbled, Sweet potato fries, as if stuck in time. Wherever we went we removed loose bricks and plucked magnets from fence posts, signed our names in hearts and buffaloes. We went down the other side of the mountain and found a dam and a boulder pile and rattlesnakes. Whatever we found was not enough. We slept under power lines and in pools of broken glass and in donut shop parking lots. In the L.A. County Fairgrounds there was a bowling pin the size of a house encircled with barbed wire and horse shit. The tip glowed red and buzzed so loud it was hard to think, hard to know in the wheezing orange dusk if there was a difference between what happened and what happened next.

story courtesy of Matt Greene, previously published in Spillway

TEAR A LITTLE TWIG

Mersiha Bruncevic

Staggering through the humdrum act of tidying the kitchen, I wash cups, stack pans and lay down forks in a drawer. While humming some tune, my thoughts scatter and a teaspoon goes in a zealous sweep with the onion peel and bits of paper towel. In a similar way plates disappear too, cleared away by accident inside a pizza box late at night when the mind is no longer operating wakefully. Everyday objects like that are often brought along to other rooms — or the porch, or maybe on a picnic.

Not a chef's knife. It's too bulky to throw out absentmindedly. And you have no use for it on a picnic. I can only think of a few occasions where you might need one of those outside the kitchen. Besides, I don't even like knives. Ever since my surgery I find them offensive looking. Any one of them could potentially cut you open.

It's funny, they cut me open to take out the thing that was making me ill and I still feel bad. No, I'm no longer sick like I used to be. Now there's a different type of hurt. The bad feeling isn't located anywhere. It sort of moves around in the parts of me that have no distinct material form, a kind of rustling malaise. You can't re-

-move it with an incision.

My doctor suggested recovering somewhere quiet. I chose this place, the woods, a nice little cabin, tall trees that breathe, a sparkly lake a reasonable walk away. The location is practical; it is secluded without being too isolated, which could unsettle a city soul like me. The nearest town is about half an hour away, less when I speed.

There isn't much there, but the locals are friendly, they have really good pizza and an okay supermarket which, thankfully, stocks my favourite cookies.

The thing is, I haven't even used that knife much. At best, it came in handy a few times to cut pizza. They make them thick and sort of chewy here, you need a good knife to make a clean cut. And because of my post-op weariness of sharp things, I wouldn't use it to chop vegetables. There's an old food processor for that, where the blade is safely contained inside a plastic bowl.

The thing is, it looked expensive and I'm worried that the landlord will take the deposit at the end of my stay, to teach me a lesson. The knife probably doesn't cost as much as the deposit, even though it must be pricey. But this is his property, and he gets to decide the relevant value of things for him. A designer knife is part of the woods-chic vibe promised to guests. His anger would be justified. Think about it, replacing one, or a couple of items in that price range after every guest would pretty quickly reach a deposit type of amount, maybe more. Without even factoring in the effort needed to constantly replace things. It is fully understandable, he

is trying to run a business. I'm the one in the wrong here.

Had I broken a vase, it wouldn't be as bad. Events like that are outside of reasonable control. Anybody can slip and trip over a vase. The removal of a large knife requires premeditation. You would need to have something specific in mind and bring it along for whatever.

Did I use it at some point to fix something in the house? No, nothing has needed fixing. Did I take it out to the porch to cut a pizza? No, the wobbly table is way too small to fit a pizza box and a big knife on it. It would be impractical. Did I accidently stash it away in one of the cupboards or a drawer where it doesn't belong? No, I've checked. I even looked under the bed.

There was another possibility, although it did not feel all that probable. Maybe, maybe, I brought it along on the hike in the woods yesterday. I couldn't recall planning to do it, or intending to do it. But many of my decisions are spur of the moment. Many of my actions happen while thinking of something else entirely. And often I won't even remember what I was up to until seeing some proof of it, like – oh look the bed has been made, an email saying "thank you for ordering book such-and-such from business so-and-so", a text proving I had invited someone to come over in a fit of mopiness.

I left the kitchen to check my backpack, which was in the living room. There was nothing inside it. For good measure, I also checked the old wood burning stove, which didn't work. The knife wasn't in the stove.

With a sigh, I headed out to the porch. These woods are old. The trees are tall with roots that knot and drag along the ground. Their trunks are thick with years and their crowns shut out the light in a conspiratory manner. A dense vault of branches keeps the soil permanently humid and sticky.

Aspen, beech, birch, linden, oak, Serbian spruce – the pamphlet that came with the house lists the local flora alphabetically. Before, I knew next to nothing about trees. Now, thanks to the handy brochure, I am learning: "The Serbian spruce is a medium growing evergreen. It never drops its needles, which are dark green and silver in colour. One of its most striking features are the unusual purple seed cones. The Serbian spruce is an efficient windbreak tree." And so on. An entire section of the booklet was dedicated to the main attraction in these parts, the rare box elder trees which are native to the area and the oldest in the forest. I went to check them out for the first time yesterday and probably brought along the knife?

I laced up my hiking boots, put my phone, a water bottle and some granola bars in the backpack and headed back to the elder grove to see if the knife was still there. At this point, it wasn't even about losing a deposit, or an uncomfortable conversation with the landlord, it was more a matter of not leaving a blade in the woods. Some poor animal could really get hurt if it stepped on it, or something.

It took a good while to get back there. There is no specific trail leading to the elders and you need to be patient with the GPS, because the signal is patchy up here, at best. Also, I tend to get stiff and crampy around my scars. It takes me longer to walk than

somebody perkier, who is still in mint condition. Climbing along a rocky tract, I half-muttered to keep myself company: "a vintage action figure, missing my ray gun or galactic shield or whatever. No longer a complete set. No one would want to collect me."

I probably haven't been a collectable for a long time, maybe I never was. And not because there is a part missing here and there, scuffmarks of scars and all the rest of it. It's more that thing moving inside me. Even when I was a kid my mom would say "Leave Sunny alone, she's a little moody today, a little blue." And everybody would leave me alone.

Back among the box elders there was still no sign of the knife. Although, there were signs of other sharp objects. These trees are known for the blood red stain of their wood. If you carve beyond the thick, craggy bark you can reach its scarlet flesh. People come here with all sorts of knives and things to carve initials and hearts into the bodies of the trees. In the souvenir shop in town they sell burls made from it. The blocks look like marbled slabs of meat.

The longer the cut is exposed the more it fades. Only fresh gashes give the startling thrill of seeing a wound. Somebody had cut two thick branches off one of the elders, making it look like it was surrendering, meekly raising hands with bloody palms.

There was nothing there. I sat down on a rock, doubting that the knife was ever here to begin with and failing to think of anywhere else to look. If it had not been me to take it out of the house, then someone must have come in and taken it. The thing is, there were no neighbours for miles. "That's that. The knife is gone, buddy." I

said patting the surrendering elder. The tree was a tree and I was me, and we had both given up.

I returned to the cabin and watched the day end from the porch, black pointed treetops against a pink sky and a single iridescent star staring at me from above. The knife's importance loosened its hold on me. Worrying whether I had lost it or someone took it seemed laughable. Other things demanded my attention. There are so many noises around here. Each thing, whether lake, tree or rock, has a voice of its own – creaking, sighing, squeaking, howling. A forest is far busier, day or night, than any city I have ever lived in. It is more invasive too. Here, winds walk through the walls easier than a ghost.

A Selection From Proust

Modern Library edition of In Search of Lost Time. The translation is by C.K Scott Moncrieff, Terence Kilmartin, and Andreas Mayor, revised by D.J. Enright.

"I had just seen, standing a little way back from the hog's-back road along which we were travelling, three trees which probably marked the entry to a covered driveway and formed a pattern which I was not seeing for the first time. I could not succeed in reconstructing the place from which they had been as it were detached, but I felt that it had been familiar to me once; so that, my mind having wavered between some distant year and the present moment, my surroundings began to dissolve and I wondered whether the whole of this drive were not a make-believe […] I looked at the three trees; I could see them plainly, but my mind felt that they were concealing something which it could not grasp, as when an object is placed out of our reach, so that our fingers, stretched out at arm's-length, can only touch for a moment its outer surface, without managing to take hold of anything. […] I sat there thinking of nothing, then with my thoughts collected, compressed and strengthened I sprang further forward in the direction of the trees, or rather in that inner direction at the end of which I could see them inside myself. I felt again behind them the same object, known to me and yet vague, which I could not bring nearer. And yet all three of them, as the carriage moved on, I could see coming towards me. Where had I looked at them before? […] Were they not rather to be numbered among those dream landscapes, always the same, at least for me in whom their strange aspect was only the objectivation in my sleeping mind of the effort I made while

A selection from Proust courtesy of Mersiha Bruncevic

awake either to penetrate the mystery of a place beneath the outward appearance of which I was dimly conscious of there being something more […] Or were they merely an image freshly extracted from a dream of the night before, but already so worn, so faded that it seemed to me to come from somewhere far more distant? […] And meanwhile they were coming towards me; perhaps some fabulous apparition, a ring of witches or of Norns who would propound their oracles to me. I chose rather to believe that they were phantoms of the past, dear companions of my childhood, vanished friends who were invoking our common memories. Like ghosts they seemed to be appealing to me to take them with me, to bring them back to life. In their simple and passionate gesticulation I could discern the helpless anguish of a beloved person who has lost the power of speech, and feels that he will never be able to say to us what he wishes to say and we can never guess. Presently, at a cross-roads, the carriage left them. It was bearing me away from what alone I believed to be true, what would have made me truly happy; it was like my life."

A selection from Proust courtesy of Mersiha Bruncevic

BILLY JAMES HENRY & PEACHY

Connor Goodwin

Billy James Henry

Billy James Henry told me this island was made of fallen angels. “I could show you right now,” he said. Nodded toward the mountain.

He could show me everything. Latin in the shells. Giants in the trees. “Fallen angels in the very spot you’re standing, yessir.” He’d seen it all.

Half his head was shaved. Greased wisps of hair ponied up, a tight sheen. He peered over his shades, eyebrows raised, like a presiding judge.

Billy James went into his truck and brought over a bag of jumbo cottage cheese.

Showed me a moonstone he found.

Told me the trees were rotting from the inside.

Showed me a pipe he made.

Told me all the shells were cracked. “See,” he pointed.

Billy James did not speak, he whispered. Made you lean in. He talked fast, too, like a cattle auctioneer, and he never stopped. When he turned to walk away, he only made it a step, maybe two, before whirling around to say something else. “I’m telling you, man.”

“Everybody says they know where the king is buried, but I actually, really do,” said Billy James and pointed at his inked wrist. King of Spades.

He said Latin was everywhere: in spiraling shells, in eyelids, in nutritional facts. “Do you read Latin?” I asked. He shook his head no. “But I’m learning Hebrew.”

“This is the tallest mountain in the world,” said Billy James. And right then I might’ve believed anything and everything. Because, you know what, it was the tallest mountain in the world. Twice as tall as Everest. And it only seemed right that angels would fall onto the tallest mountain and that the tallest mountain would be half-buried by the largest ocean in the world.

Next day I was grilling some dogs, when I heard a voice. “Hope I didn’t scare you last night.” And there was Billy James.

He hiked up his shorts which sagged below his knife bone hips and bent down to plug something in. Maybe he was shaving, I thought to myself. But no, it was a power tool. He revved it and

smiled and then really revved it. "Never know round here." I didn't, but Billy James knew.

Billy James knew everything under the sun, but acted otherwise when I told him about Nebraska: how it used to be an ancient ocean, how today's farmers harvested clicks more than corn, how a century-long drought marooned the last king on a faraway island, how every August, angels dusted the crops.

Billy James listened to my story, the first I'd ever told, and then we were quiet. The silence between us felt long and sharp, neither of us courageous enough to shed it. Then Billy James stood up, dusted off his bum and invited me to dinner. I was touched.

It was a wonderful dinner party. To my left was a Dead King with kelp for hair. To my right was a Fallen Angel on crutches. Across from me, a robed Latin Scholar debated Billy James' interpretation of a shelled prescription. I looked out into the ocean, saw monster waves batter the coastline, and realized where I was.

Peachy

The plan was to go to the river and drink all the beers.

"But first," said Peach. "I gotta fix my brake pads." Peach jacked up the van and shimmied un-der. I worried about his white jeans. Well, once-white. I went into the discount grocery store and bought us a case of beer, a bottle of tequila, and a pound of strawberries. I cracked one, two beers and stooped around while Peach jiggered the pads into alignment or whatever.

Peach lived out of his van, drank Coors light, and worked on pot farms. It was dry season so there was no work to be had. But Peach wasn't bothered none.

Before I could finish my first beer, Peach said, "Fuck it" and skated off to wash his hands. His mask, once mountain dew green, was as dirty as his white jeans. Both were immaculate and cool as shit.

* * *

I first met Peach Christmas day. Each winter, Peach sojourned from buckets of sunshine out West to his family farm, a dozen or so miles outside of town.

Anyway, there was a house show in a basement not far my friend's and that's where I met Peach. His getup was unforgettable. He wore a grimy all-white track suit crusted with lord knows and a white KC Royals hat with a mangled brim. He wore his hair long and his nails long-er. A strong look.

4am and I was still dancing with Peach and I may or may not have been in love.

I saw him again, to my delight, at karaoke a few nights later. He was wearing the exact same thing. He didn't remember me.

* * *

We hopped in the van, river bound. Peach fished out a screw-driver from the glove compartment and jammed it in the side of the driver's wheel and shifted out of park. "Let's take a quick stop by American Cancer," Peach said and humped out of the lot. American Cancer was a thrift shop, but I wished it was American Healthcare: mangy and cheap. I bought an oversized button-up, perfect for barbecues. I was ready for the river. I was ready for all the beers. I was ready for something to end.

En route, Peach told me about a town called Samoa he once called home. Samoa was where someone famously captured Big Foot on camera: mid-stride, head cocked to meet the photogra-pher's pro-truding eye.

Peach told me his Samoa neighbor was a bounty hunter and Big Foot was on the top of his list. Asked if he believed in Big Foot, Peach said, "Oh yeah, he's out there. He's probably every-where."

"But the best part about Samoa, is it's too small to have a cop." And to that we cheers'd and downed another road soda.

* * *

Down by the river, a fat, squinting chihuahua sauntered by. "Hello, Gordo," said Peach. "Gordi-to, mi amor." Gordo's tongue was way too big for his mouth and hung out the side, like a loose cigarette. Gordo was an old pup. His tushy was nearly bare of hair and his tail was feathered with slight wisps—a beige peacock in winter.

Peach was good with dogs. I asked him how. “It’s simple,” he said. “I’m a dog recognizer. I’m a dog. You’re a dog. Let’s go.”

Let’s go.

NIGHTCAP

Mingpei Li

What they wanted was a drink after dinner. It was a long, lush meal, paid for with a corporate card. They had taken up four of the ten seats in the sushi restaurant, and the smallness of the room made them serious and giddy, as if they were being admitted to a secret. Because none of them spoke Japanese, they nodded at whatever the chef placed in front of them, self-consciously tried not to take too many pictures, and gestured for a steady supply of sake. Nominally they were toasting a successful week of meetings, but in truth it was the open expanse of a Saturday night away from home with someone else picking up the tab.

She didn't want to go out and suggested a nightcap at their hotel instead. Her body still conformed to the phantom constriction of her dark suits, and although she took care to dress more casually for dinner, her jeans were starting to itch and she wanted to take a hot shower and change into pajamas. Her coworkers outvoted her easily, and one of them suggested the Park Hyatt, not too far from their hotel and where, he reminded them, Lost in Translation was filmed. He heard the rooftop bar had amazing views of Tokyo, like what they'd see in New York, but also, you know, different.

The reservation for dinner had been made for them by their business partners, and their lack of one for drinks was slightly worrying. But haven't we all talked our way into bars before, her coworker offered. She pursed her lips. Technically when they crossed the International Date Line over the Pacific Ocean, they had each gained a day, but the afterglow of indulgence and the warm October night air made it feel like she was shedding days instead. She glanced at her coworkers and could see it was the case for them too.

Yes, alright, she said.

On the way to the Park Hyatt, she looked up and saw round, stony blank faces staring out from the top of a tall building. Or maybe satellite dishes? Backlit alien aircrafts? She couldn't tell, and for a moment, the disorientation felt particularly acute.

They were told to head to the New York Bar on the 52nd floor, and the irony of the name didn't escape them – of course they had flown fourteen hours to go to a bar named after the place they had just left – but it didn't deter them either. How do we look, they asked each other, and in turn, they looked at themselves in the mirrored walls of the elevator. The unavoidable pallor and paunch of office people speeding towards middle age looked back at them.

Quick, we need a backstory, she said, suddenly struck. Who are we? We should pretend we're –, she paused and considered. Two of her coworkers wore button-down shirts, but one of them had on an oversized hoodie and the garish sneakers he acquired that afternoon in Shibuya.

You, she pointed, you are a…up and coming rapper, and we're going to be your entourage.

Ok, but don't I need a rapper name?

Yes. You should have a Li'l in there, like one of those Soundcloud rappers. Something weird. Li'l Pumpkin? Li'l Grate?

They were all laughing now.

She thought about the dinner they just had. Li'l Clam?

Fine, and are you my manager? Wait, here. Li'l Clam reached into his pocket, pulled out a pair of sunglasses, and popped them on his face.

Well, no, I'm your publicist. But they can be your manager and driver. Ok guys, that's the story. Let's walk out there and say we're with Li'l Clam, he's in town for a showcase but only for tonight. Their expressions equidistant between amused and ambivalent, Li'l Clam's manager and driver nodded. She looked at herself again as the display flashed 51, feeling undercover.

The elevator dinged. She pushed Li'l Clam's manager to the front. Hey, remember – , but before she could finish, she could already hear his polite inquiry with no mention of Li'l Clam and see the host's studied apologetic headshake.

Wait, but, Li'l Clam, she said, rolling the name around like a mantra. Li'l Clam, meanwhile, stood at the back in his sunglasses,

glancing out at the clusters of bright skyline. No go, his manager answered. They're booked solid.

Let's just go back to our hotel, Li'l Clam's driver said, even though he had advocated strenuously for the Park Hyatt. Maybe we'll meet a Scarlett Johansson type, he had said.

But she, rising on the effervescence of make-believe only a minute ago, felt strangely let down. You sure we can't have even just one drink at the bar, she asked no one in particular, a rhetorical question with no need for an answer.

On their way back to the lobby, they joked about getting drinks from a convenience store and making a dash for it into the bar, all swagger, security be damned. Li'l Clam seemed to wake up from his detachment and was now acting like he was drunk, requiring his entourage to hold him up. He stumbled and said he wanted to lie down. The spectacle turned their laughter sharper and a little breathless. As your publicist, Li'l Clam, I'm not sure I can advise that. She found herself slipping back into the same low clipped tone she used during the negotiations as if it were a favorite robe.

Li'l Clam walked over to a couch and lay down in front of it. His manager wheezed out, what are you doing, get up. Why not, she thought.

On the carpet, she closed her eyes and took the fingers of her right hand to her sternum. She pressed hard with three fingers, until she could feel the ridges of the bone. Breathe, she thought, as she forced her fingers down and her lungs to expand.

Breathe before someone walks over and says, Excuse me, ma'am.

Namur

Which body had I been squatting in? I had an idea to molt
myself somehow into another, and for my escape I chose jetlag,
a fifth, a perpetual motion machine. No more friction, I swore,
as trains ground against their tracks, wheels against the tarmac.
It was a confluence I looked out on from the immodest hill
of the citadel, backlit, casting my shadow. Alright, I thought, perfect
feng shui. I was all in on risking frostbite to glimpse Banksy coppers
on a side street, the arches of Pont de Jambes ghosting me in the dark.
Was that the surrender I was looking for? Back home, we drove
past a hand-painted sign with "Snow Farms" on it as I told you
about Namur. You said, look, a fawn, just like that sign warned us.
You mean - ? Slow, fawns. Oh, right. What else is like the pleasure
of being known except being known? Prayer flags of the monastery
in the woods whipped in the wind, hidden and unhidden.

Poem courtesy of Mingpei Li

HEIDI & BOB

Jon Lindsey

Tonight, Heidi is wondering if there is such a thing as ESP. She is thinking that when you make love, your brain opens, and everyone knows what you are thinking, and you know what everyone else is thinking, so your husband knows what you are thinking and can control you. Yeah.

"It doesn't sound like you're doing well," Heidi's caseworker says.

"Oh," Heidi says, into the phone.

"I think you should come in."

"Okay."

* * *

Now, Heidi is in inpatient. Not much for her to do here. Eat. Walk hallways. Sleep.

Heidi likes to sleep. She is good at it. But Heidi is sleeping too much.

"The more you sleep, the more you want to sleep," the doctor says, and gives her a motivation medication.

All the medicine does is make Heidi worry. Is everyone she loves angry because she will never not be ill? She shuts her eyes and squeezes until she feels her skull. Opens and sees colors.

* * *

On Valentines Day, Bob visits. He is learning to do for himself. Laundry, dishes, sloppy joes.

Heidi wishes she could cook healthy recipes for Bob. But he says, "I'm a meateater."

Anyway, the 99 Cents Only only carries canned vegetables.

* * *

The hospital won't let Heidi have Diet Mountain Dew, but will allow Dr. Pepper. What's the difference? The difference is Heidi is a Diet Mountain Dew person. In a day she can drink a whole two-liter. But she knows that can't be healthy. Bob's favorite is Pepsi.

Heidi wonders how she got her mental illness. Mom? Dad? Mom's mom? God? Someone or something else?

Sometimes, Heidi thinks she isn't ill. Just susceptible.

"I don't want to pressure you," her caseworker says. "But you need to socialize more."

Heidi wishes her leg would quiet.

"Heidi has two sisters," Heidi says.

"Hmm, are you disassociating?"

Heidi knows the voices she hears aren't whole people. "I have–"

"Good. When was the last time you talked to your sisters?"

"But one died." Heidi keeps forgetting.

* * *

Out of the hospital, at home, Heidi's kitten hunts the laser. Claws the wall to kill the red dot. Runs when the phone rings.

"You got hired!" the caseworker says.

"Great," Heidi says, and shoots the laser at the floor.

"Aren't you excited?"

"Yes."

Heidi will have a paycheck and an employee discount. She shops at the store so knows the layout. Where things go. What they cost. The store carries cleaning supplies and Kotex and almost everything.

For weeks, Heidi waits to say nine words, "Hello and welcome to the 99 Cent Only Store."

Bob unloads trucks at the Salvation Army. Lifting furniture is hard on Bob's body. But he wears a brace around his back and belly.

Surprise! Bob bought a new loveseat. New to them. "Gently loved," Bob says.

Soon, Heidi and Bob are moving out of Bob's dad's house and into their own cottage. Heidi likes the miniature house with its many windows, but why can't she keep her kitten?

* * *

On their first night in the cottage, icebergs grow on the meat in the freezer. Heidi and Bob sit on the loveseat and watch the Grammys. Bob holds Heidi's hand. Her hand fits in his.

Heidi loves Bob. Bob loves Heidi. That is enough. Isn't it?

* * *

Heidi is forced to socialize when her neighbor visits. The neighbor has two children so the government gives her extra. Heidi heard the government used to sterilize people like her and her neighbor. She wonders if they want to do that anymore.

The Bible says that women are saved through childbearing.

The caseworker says, "Do you want your children to go through what you've been through?"

"No," Heidi says.

But does that mean she won't be saved?

* * *

Tonight, an ambulance took Bob to inpatient. His thoughts were racing themselves. Because his doctor changed his sleep medication. Because Bob has addiction problems. And sleeping pills are hard on the liver. And Bob has problems with his liver.

The new medicines overwhelmed Bob. He couldn't put on clothes. Or shower. He was urinating in a plastic bottle because he couldn't walk to the bathroom, and when he tried, he fell. He was going in and out of conscienceness … conchusness … consciousness.

They were supposed to celebrate Heidi's birthday at the manmade lake.

* * *

Heidi zones the freezer so her manager thinks it looks organized. Her fingers sticks to frozen burritos.

“What a deal.”

“What?” Heidi turns and sees three women holding Easter eggs.

“I said, what a deal,” the three women say, sniff in unison, then wipe wrists across noses and become one woman.

When Heidi wakes, the paramedics say, “Relax.”

What did Heidi eat for breakfast?

A banana.

If Heidi does not eat enough she will pass out because of her anti-depressants.

Okay.

The paramedics give her chocolate M&M’s from the shelf she zoned.

“Um, okay,” her manager says. “But only just one pack, okay?”

No thanks, Heidi doesn’t want to go to the hospital. She wants to become someone who belongs at work.

For dinner she has lasagna, corn, and Diet Mountain Dew.

* * *

On the walk around the manmade lake, Heidi and Bob enjoy sugar-free candy. Chew slow, the licorice is expensive.

On the boardwalk, people move both ways, on skateboards, on rollerblades, on foot. On the lake, people ride peddle boats shaped like swans. Heidi sees ducks and geese and a pair of real swans too.

When it gets dark, the stadium shoots off fireworks. Heidi looks up and watches the sky change colors. She gets dizzy and sits.

* * *

"Dad died," Rachelle says.

"Okay," Heidi says, into the phone.

Heidi isn't crying or upset. Her dad was a bad person and she wonders if she could, or should, blame him for the bad things she has done in life. Partly, yes. Still, she wonders if she should feel bad about not crying.

Heidi is worried about her sister. Lately, it's Heidi who watches out for her sister.

"In group," Heidi says, "The counselor said, 'Suicide is a perma-

-nent solution to a temporary problem.' And I believe that's true, Rachelle."

"Have you heard from anyone lately?" Rachelle says, at last. "Mom or anyone?"

* * *

The electricity goes out in the storm and Bob lights candles. They are having a lot of rain, which is good, he says, "So in the summer we don't suffer famine."

They try to keep the refrigerator closed, but the icebergs melt.

* * *

Tonight, Bob was robbed. A street person stole his money with a knife. But Heidi doesn't understand why Bob was downtown around the other manmade lake, with his paycheck.

Bob doesn't want to talk. He wants to watch music videos with Heidi on the loveseat and not talk. He holds out his hand for her.

Heidi likes to clean at night when it's hot weather, but also, she is wondering how they will pay rent.

In the morning, Heidi knocks on the frame of her neighbor's screen door. The kids are in the living room in their underwear, eating cereal, on the floor.

"Mommmmm," the boy says. The TV is loud. "Hey, stoooopid."

"I said don't call me that," the neighbor says. The wheels turn and bring her chair to the door.

* * *

The other day, Bob had a procedure called rubber banding. The hemorrhoids are tied with rubber bands to cut off the blood flow. They choke and shrink and die. For some reason, Bob couldn't breathe through his nose, so they couldn't give him anesthetic. He had nothing and it hurt.

The doctor isn't sure about the knot on Bob's throat.

Hope for the best.

* * *

Next week, Bob goes for chemo. Today, the entire outpatient group is going to a baseball game. Heidi is happy because Bob is happy. But when they reach the seats, Bob says, it's nosebleeds. Heidi squints to see the men on the diamond. Instead of the game, Heidi watches seagulls land in the stands and fight for her bun and dog. She didn't know they were meateaters.

"There won't be any fireworks," someone says. "It's a day game."

* * *

Happy Birthday! The card from Heidi's mom says. Sorry I'm SO late, again!

Heidi uses the birthday money to pay back her neighbor in installments.

* * *

Bob is back home and acting different. The doctor changed his medication because of the cancer. Now, most of Bob's day is spent in the recliner, listening to music loudly and watching videos that don't make Heidi happy.

* * *

So far, this year, Heidi and Bob have had three Thanksgivings. At group, at the Salvation Army, and a private dinner in the cottage. Tonight, they are having another with Bob's sister and her husband at Sizzler. Bob's sister owns a house in Texas, but isn't happy with the tenants who pay rent for awhile and then stop. She says if Heidi and Bob move to Texas and pay rent for five years they can own the home.

Heidi and Bob decorate the cottage, but don't buy a real tree. Outpatient group has a Christmas party and in a raffle Heidi wins a wallet. But it's empty.

Heidi and Bob are spending New Years Eve at the neighbor's. Champagne pops. Bob smokes pot with the neighbor's boyfriend. Someone says, "Rent is going up in the new year." No one can af-

-ford it, but they all have to.

Heidi is cozy at the cottage window, watching rainfall. In the living room, Bob watches his porno videos.

* * *

At work Heidi gets dizzy. She sits in the aisle of canned goods and the shoppers shop around her.

Her manager says, "I need to see you in my office, okay."

Heidi still has Sizzler hidden in her teeth. Her pointer finger picks at steak. She will own her own home.

"Okay, I'm sorry," the manager says, "but we have to let you go."

"Okay," Heidi says. "Where?"

* * *

In the hospital, in the X-rays, Heidi's intestines are completely stopped up. Some psych meds do that. Now she is drinking plenty of water instead of Diet Mountain Dew. The doctor says the dizziness could also be caused by stress. Luckily, there is the man-made lake. Heidi and Bob walk around in the evening. Sometimes twice. She gets to see all the ducks and geese who live there. No more swans.

* * *

Tonight, Bob wanted money for meth and Heidi would't give it to him. There was only a little leftover for laundry, bus fare, and whatever else. They were in the courtyard of the cottages, so the neighbor heard Bob hurting Heidi. "I'm calling the cops," the neighbor yelled through the screen.

Now, Heidi is here in the shelter for women.

She wonders where Bob is, and how he will get his nighttime medicine.

Heidi knows it was a long time ago that her dad called her brain donor, dummy, and jerk, but it affected her. So when Bob talked about how he was neglected in his youth, Heidi understood. But Bob admitted to Heidi that he had a prostitute give him oral sex. He borrowed the money from Heidi and didn't even bother to pay her back. And when she was in inpatient the only time he came to see her was when he wanted money for meth, but Heidi didn't know that at the time.

When they had sex sometimes it hurt, and he would say, "No it doesn't."

He would constantly watch his videos and try to get Heidi interested. He was constantly masturbating and when Heidi told him to see a doctor, he refused. He blamed all the problems in his previous marriages on his wives, and Heidi is sure he will blame her too.

But Bob did help Heidi when she was homeless. After they met in

inpatient, he brought her to live at his dad's. But then he constantly got on her the way her dad did.

* * *

Heidi's new apartment isn't walkable to the manmade lake, but there is a church and library. Heidi is reading a book that her bus driver recommended called, Never Be Sick Again. She likes it so far.

* * *

Heidi visits Bob in jail.

He stopped taking his medicine, took meth, and stabbed a woman in a motel.

Now he wants a divorce.

* * *

Today is Sunday, so Heidi walks to church. Although her wardrobe is still wanting, her leg is feeling better. She walks with her muscles now, instead of on her bones. Does that make sense?

Tomorrow is group. This week they will walk a wildness trail.

* * *

Today, Bob's dad and brother visited Heidi's new apartment and dropped off the loveseat. They said the government offered Bob a plea deal. Thirteen years, but he won't take it. He is going to plead insanity.

* * *

Heidi is on a vegan diet and making an effort to eat less food. She has decided she will no longer drink Diet Mountain Dew. Or any soda. Soda seems to mess with her memories.

* * *

Lately, a cat has been coming around that reminds Heidi of her kitten. She is wondering what to name the new cat. When she was young she watched a cartoon named Felix the Cat about a cat in a black and white tuxedo.

* * *

Heidi goes bowling with someone from church. She bowls a seventy something. The guy from church is supposed to be a friend but keeps putting his arm around her and asking, "Are you ticklish?"

After that night, she doesn't hear from him again, and she's glad.

* * *

Bob gets sentenced to 12 years in prison. Heidi doesn't know how

to feel, but wishes someone had asked her opinion.

* * *

Heidi tries to call Rachelle another time, another time, another time, but only gets busy signals.

* * *

Heidi ends up in the hospital too many times and her caseworker moves her into assisted living. The food is sometimes healthy, but everything is always changing. They like to keep you guessing because they want you to learn to cope. But Heidi thinks routine helps mental patients.

* * *

Heidi's new roommate is helpful. She lets Heidi talk. There is so much to to say, but sometimes Heidi still settles on, "Okay."

Her roommate is 86 years-old and doesn't remember everyday things, just the past. There are a couple of older ladies like that here. The younger people are all mentally ill.

Sometimes Heidi doesn't think she is mentally ill, just unable to defend herself against doctors.

Her roommate assures her that isn't true.

⋆ ⋆ ⋆

In the dining room, they wait for cake. The musician strums his thumb down the strings of his acoustic guitar, lays it on its back in the box, and snaps the locks. The ambulance lights change colors in different ways on the window.

"When I was in San Diego," Heidi says. "I had a vision that hospitals were gateways to hell."

"God works through medication," her roommate says.

Heidi isn't sure she believes that.

At the Ocotillo

Our room overlooks the pool at the Ocotillo.
We make porno in a k-hole,
our outré interview
for the gram, the cloud
of lives other than ours.
First there is the word, a
romance language, a
tongue. First God. America
First. First us.
But what becomes of us, the one of us,
who dies
last?
Inside and outside the Ocotillo,
Palm Springs eternal.

Poems courtesy of Jon Lindsey

Life Writing at the Locked Gates of the Self Realization Fellowship

Then just as I was dragging Flaubert the dog
through the hills to the precipice
of dysplasia, the wind whipped music of the animal organ
at Dodger Stadium came across the canyon, the freeway,
the vast divide of body and memory,
  self and story,
promising a party.

Then it was my birthday and I hired a mystic,
the type who ties balloon knots in coyotes.
At the seance there were whispers from the woman a boy wanted to be,
and a baby's spirit was summoned, crying
out from inside a girl fucked with regret.

Then realism was the choker
and romance the leash.
Now all my former lovers are realtors
constructing lives in these hillsides
where stranglers dumped
me and I and he and she and we.

People ask me where to live in Los Angeles.
I feel like a different person with others and within myself.
I say I buried my dog in the downs of Mt. Washington,
I'll never go back.

Poems courtesy of Jon Lindsey

Returning to Surfing Following My Mother's Suicide

I am surfing
but the ocean is not willing.

Still, the lineup at County Line fills.
Malibu kooks
slinking like something kicked
across a dying summer
swell, celebratory on the face of it,
                the wave—
drama, denouement,
dissolution.

I am thinking of my first kiss,
the lip
    of the wave,
curling, and how there is no cure
for life,
only the sorrow of knowing
the lesson of larger, deeper living.

My first kiss
was my mother,
who was not willing.

Yes, only, living:
adversary of everything.

Poems courtesy of Jon Lindsey

THE SNOW WALL

Greg Tebbano

Taylor was driving in for the night shift, the storm just tailing off, when his headlights fell upon the snow wall. It was four feet high and spanned the width of a suburban street.

"This is genius," he said to no one.

Watching from the wings would be its makers, boys crouched in bushes or spying from bedrooms, boys fiddling with radios until Jim Morrison whispered clearly: We shall go on playing, or find a new town. Or it would be girls—girls in coats puffy and purple, their lips the gentle blue of exposure. Girls tucked in close behind the wall, clutching snowballs until their fists turned them to diamond, until they could only dazzle, or destroy.

There were no ways around. There was reverse, but that was its own failure.

The snow wall was the sort of monument he and his crew would have built as kids. To tease drivers, to lure out their worst urges. At the bus stop before school they used to put treasures out for the

city bus to flatten—juice boxes, jelly donuts. There was a driver who got off on it. By year's end year the sum of their offerings had congealed into a fresh piece of tarmac atop the roadway. Apparently all you needed to make new road was enough of anything in quantity, expose it to heat and cold and darkness and light and fleeting, tremendous pressure. Conveniently, the same recipe would make a man.

Taylor let the truck idle in that snow globe scene—the porch lights in their frosted glass, marshmallowed awnings, every edge blunted. If he drove the suburban labyrinth long enough he would inevitably come to a place where the high beams would flare and mirror back at him, where the truck's bumper would tink against reinforced glass.

This wall is here for you to break it, he thought.

A wall kept out conquerors. But also, it dared them. Like all traps, it contained an invitation.

Taylor would have preferred to stay on the wall's far side forever, defending that realm's impossible structures, passageways that led only inward, downward, like the spiraled surface of a shell. If there was a boy opposite the wall, Taylor knew him. He was scrawny and shy and waiting desperately for this: for ramparts to buckle and tires to climb the wreckage, for headlights to tear a hole in the dark.

images courtesy of Greg Tebbano

images courtesy of Greg Tebbano

Listen

Squadron Dogs by Kite Person

A waste to catalog your keepsakes
If the fire is in the fire safe
We'll burn when the good wood is gone
City folk sing a country song
Cut the razor let your hair grow long

It'll break your heart
It'll break your home
It'll break you whole
You're an ancient ruin to their rock n' roll

You say you're calm
I don't believe you're calm
No will is a stone when the moon comes on

You learn to find the scent and then the trail
Your civility needs repair
Chase the lines back to their chalk
Tonight we run with squadron dogs
Cut the power kill the lights

It'll break your heart
It'll break your home
It'll break you whole
You're an ancient ruin to their rock n' roll

You say you're calm
I don't believe you're calm
No will is a stone when the moon comes on

Tonight we run

song requested by Greg Tebbano

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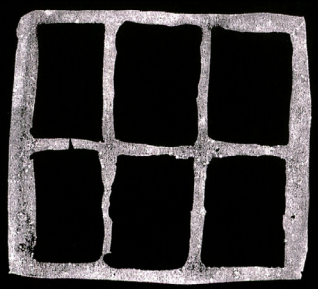
HOBART
FICTION DELUXE



BLUE ARRANGEMENTS