Angel City Review







and community arts.

POETICS OF LOCATION BY MIKE SONKSEN AVALIABLE THROUGH Writ Large Press

NO. 1 155UF 118 FALL 2018

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The Missing Books A curated directory of books that don't exist, but should

Only available as a direct download from the author's website

As seen on Literary Hub, 3 Quarks Daily, the Los Angeles Review of Books, The Millions, Michiko Kakutani's Twitter feed, and many more



Fires on the Plain by Matt Kivel

now available on vinyl through <u>Driftless Recordings</u> digitally on the <u>iTunes store</u> and <u>bandcamp</u>

Foreword

We have recently been living in a trying time - for some of us that may be an understatement. For some of us again, it has already and always been like this. For many, it has been difficult to remain positive in light of both local and global events in recent weeks. And many have been asking what can we do? How do we keep going? Poets and writers have and continue to ask difficult questions, respond to those questions, keep alive the humanity that often seems lost, and retain hope. The slow, incomplete, but very real achievements made in the last several decades face their greatest challenge yet. But hope is still there. Hope is everywhere. The work that has been done at an immeasurable cost in lives and time has not yet been undone. The work of good people is not finished, and it may never be finished. There will always be bigots. But there will always be good people to challenge them.

What does this have to do with literature? Everything. The only thing, I believe, that has a chance of securing the future as a place of mutual respect and love is the exchange of perspectives. I am not talking about demagogues on television spouting hate, or understandable backlash of rage that responds to them. I am talking about a willingness to engage with and experience what it is like to live a life that is not your own. We are all caught inside our own heads, but we also all know the feeling when the text on the page lets you touch the minds of others. The act of reading is inherently an acknowledgment of voices other than your own, whether those voices belong to the writer or the narrator or the speaker or the characters or simply the lines of the text.

Angel City Review is a journal dedicated to the literary voices of Los Angeles – the otherwise muted, the underprivileged, the experimental, the meek and the unabashed. Thank you for giving us and especially the writers we have included in this issue your time and attention. I hope this small act of reading will help remind you, if you need reassurance, that you are not alone. That there are people out there who have experienced the things you have. That there are people out there who, in one way or another, will not be silenced.

- John Venegas

Featured Artist Sandra Cornejo



As a first generation Salvadoran-American, historical collective memory is the prime influence and inspiration for my work. Every face, every voice, and every hand holds a story. Through art one can rediscover what has been repressed and suppressed. My studio practice has evolved within the past few years. I am no longer only bound to traditional oil painting and its practices. I am drawn to compose with objects, sound, video, printmaking and painting that is reliant and complete with the interaction and collaboration of its audience.

There is a thread that runs through myself and post-civil war Salvadoran culture. It is one of internal conflict and deterioration of cultural identity. The struggle, pain and strength inherently running along this thread are what captivated me about this subject. I investigate the historical collective memory of El Salvador through personal experiences and direct observations in my family and community. I was compelled to address specific events during the Salvadoran Civil war that left deep impressions of sorrow, suffering, and denial in the lives of the Salvadoran people.

"La Experiencia de Rufina Amaya" and "Contemplacion" was a pivotal moment in which I realized I was not only making a painting commemorating Rufina Amaya, the sole survivor of El Mozote's massacre, but I was also tapping into a frequency below culture and identity; a place of the natural condition of being, beauty and pain, the experience of struggling to survive and the strength of perseverance

I realized that the further I investigated and documented this history the more I became aware of how I had blurred the fine line between the personal and the political.

This prevailing conversation correlates to the visual activity occurring in my work. There is a push and pull between a representational approach and abstraction. By becoming more conscious of the area between self and subject, I have gained a new perspective on my approach to painting. And by exploring the area between self and subject, I hope to reveal an honest perspective through my work.

More of her work can be found at http://sandracornejo.com/

Angel City Review Issue 4 2016

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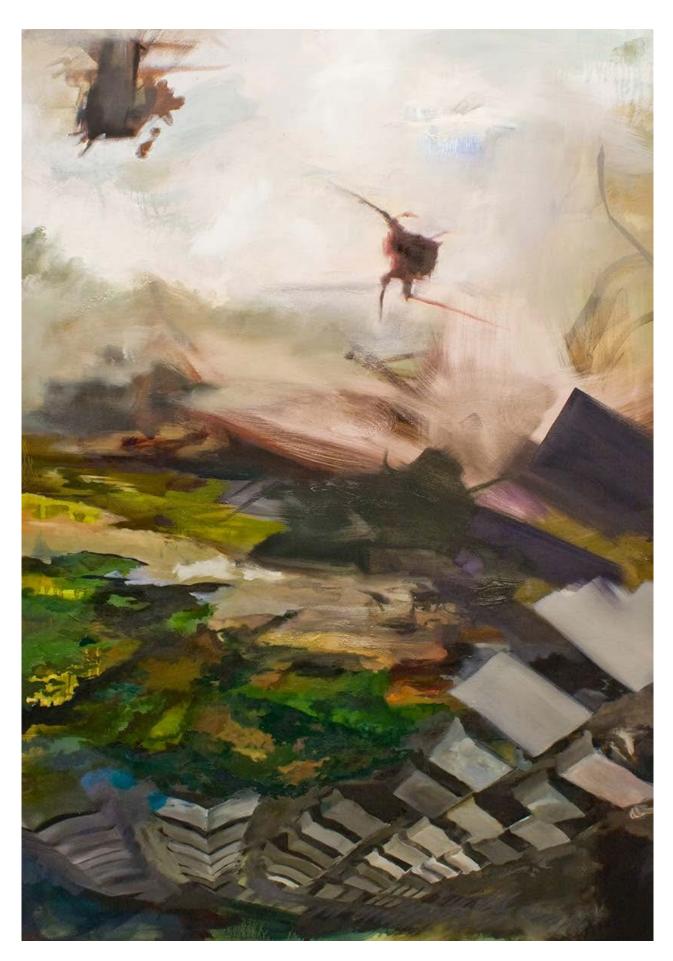
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Special thanks to Janice Lee for her support throughout the year.

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Innominate Panorama

BY WILL ALEXANDER

Being a rush of myth & vapour there exists a panoramic fog of poetic jackals' blazes appearing on lower planes as the froth of refraction

here

there exists the scarlet base of bluish jaguar's ink of sculpted swans within the air of seminal polar initiation not unlike the dialectics of water having the somnolent power of vertiginous cobalt emanation

each meadow of ferociousness bleating like a naked armistice of smoking sanguinary flowers evolving higher & higher into hackias of crystal into elliptical meridians far beyond protoplasmic complication

one then sees a realm of lighted Impeyan pheasants flying in circles in a violet unicorn's palace where there electrically proliferates ozonal spells osmotic snows being flakes of weightless rainbow jonquils transcending the dark of oily dragon fang auroras

Sun As Indigenous Psychic Flare

BY WILL ALEXANDER

Sun
in the "Marsians"
in the "Ophiogenes
in the clan of the "Senegambia"
as blood bearer
as Plesiosaur's odour
like a spell encrypted with python dice
invisibly worn like medieval armilausas
so that one's inner cobalt shimmers
taking on a kind of jimson impersonation
coming into view as perfect cultural aurora

perhaps as gorgeous Aztec obsidian riding a purplish Appaloosa into the turbelarian waves of the Syrian Orontes knowing its seasonal aridity to be of smoking gallstone amber to be of telepathic aurality not unlike eruptive synaesthesia or Euphratian cosmic irrigation

there exists its theophany of exile lavas its icy monastery of peril its heavenly ice hunt shadows its curious downpour obscuration

from its hexagonal gulfs
a livid avalanche of particles
pouring as carnivorous x-ray diamonds
seen at first glimpse as murky alkaline vectors
as savage pituitary forces
that fuels our fabulous power of blood
igniting through clouds its winds from crystal lava trees
not unlike upper ang'elic dialogical enunciation
being aural stellar mysteriums
coiled via strabismus as Persian butterfly pyrotechnics

thus the Sun with its meteoritic equators

spewing incandescent solar brooks into the risky jubilation of darkness so that the human soul sups from its forces from its blank neutrino winds from its cosmic nympholepsy vents swirling within the pineal eye instantaneous photon blizzards

this being the energy of trance of blazing phantasmal symbology like the oscillating core of primordial ochre rubies all the while 'feeding Saturnian quatrains of agricultural tsunamis wheat spurs having erupted into sonorous endurance as diurnal sundials in movement connected to other solar cascades as vitreous nutrients from Andromeda these being puzzling utterance rivers greenish iceberg squirmings lit up as phosphorous ointments rising again as communal Indian integument

The solar form as lion power rhythmic as boiling termite flower as velvet solitary riddle where the sky expands as an oracular canyon beam as an aural flare crushing anis into rivulets turning to greenish Macaw stars erupting from the branches

TOC

Will Alexander is a poet, aphorist, playwright, essayist, philosopher, visual artist, pianist, and native of Los Angeles. The author of nearly thirty books, his awards and honors include a Whiting Fellowship for Poetry in 2001, a California Arts Council Fellowship in 2002, the PEN/Oakland Josephine Miles Award in 2007, and an American Book Award in 2013 for Singing In Magnetic Hoofbeat: Essays, Prose, Texts, Interviews, and a Lecture. In 2016 he was awarded the prestigious Jackson Prize for poetry, which is among the most substantial given to an American poet.

The Flowing Stream

BY JOE RICCIARDI

There aren't many photos of her; in fact I know of only two.

One is a large family portrait – not sepia, despite age and poor handling. My great great grandparents sit like stern bookends with three of their daughters and their youngest son sandwiched between them. A joyless, rigid bunch. The back row is only more animated by the fact that they're standing, which automatically makes them more dynamic, realistic and somehow likable. This lineup consists of the clan's four elder sons framing two of their sisters – the podgy-faced oldest, Marie, and the slender, sweet-faced Alma, who appears more delicate by dint of standing next to her tallest brother, my great-grandfather Napoleon. Alma, who has the same gentle pale eyes and prominent but stately nose -- later borne by my grandmother (her niece) and my mother -- stares serenely into the camera, head tilted decorously, waves of dark hair piled neatly on top of her head Gibson Girlstyle, a muted-pattern gown buttoned high to the throat. But it's the other photo I can't put down.

In this cabinet card-style portrait, Alma is alone. Head and shoulders, three-quarter-profile, fading away like smoke just above her bust line, and with the merest hint of a smile traced around her lips. Her eyes gaze unblinking into the middle distance, into nothing. Her gentle mien reminds me of a white mouse, for some reason – timid but alert. I ignore her ridiculous costume – a soft-ruffled collar banded by a darker serge woolen material, with shoulder peplums trimmed in the same frothy edging (is it a capelet? a maid's uniform? we'll never know). Alma looks younger and fullerfaced than in her family photo, where she appears to already be a young matron.

She probably still had all her fingers in this solo portrait, too. I think it was before the accident.

Alma is one of my many vanished relatives – those whiskery gents and doll-eyed ladies who had no children and therefore disappeared into family lore, leaving only a couple of anecdotes if they're lucky, and perhaps a needlepoint pillow or an un-partnered cufflink as their sole legacy. Despite nearly 88 years of life, Alma slipped into oblivion just 50 years ago in Waterbury, Vermont. No one alive in my family remembers her death, or even anything of her life. My mom, the primary source and reservoir of family myth, doesn't remember even once meeting Alma.

Maybe Alma's death of stomach cancer (with a helpful nudge from "generalized arteriosclerosis") went unnoticed because of where she died -- the Vermont State Hospital, which a little research reveals was formerly known as the Vermont State Asylum for the Insane. According to her death certificate, she'd been in there two days shy of seven months before one long last breath – was it a sigh? I pray it was a sigh -- just before noon on that Friday in March. My mother doesn't remember if her own parents made the long car trip north to the funeral, but maybe mom was busy with her own new baby and doesn't recall. Now 81, she can recall a staggering amount of ancestral history in intricate detail, but I can't expect her to remember everything.

*

Ever since I was small, my mom has been telling me stories. My favorites were always the real ones, the ones from the mythical land of her childhood. On Sunday evenings, while her hair set in rollers and her nail polish dried, I'd rummage through the cupboard beneath the telephone where we kept the latest Ma Bell directories -- the "white pages" for residences and the "yellow pages" for businesses – and pull out one of the careworn leatherette photo albums, the ones with stiff jet-black paper pages dotted with black-and-white square snapshots, some with handwritten captions in smudged white grease pencil. Over and over, she and I would sit in a pool of amber light over the kitchen table, and she'd regale me with tales of her parents, her siblings, their neighbors, and all the relatives who died before I was born – her aunt Ida, known as "The Black Cat" for her witchy, stern visage and her dabbling in the occult, not to mention an unspeakable three husbands; or her own grandfather Napoleon, who appeared in photos looking impossibly old always, a tiny wizened man who seemed to be made of papier-mâché instead of flesh and bone but who handmade her a dollhouse that she remembered in breathless detail even 70 years later. I could scarcely believe this was the same Napoleon who once stood towering, plain-faced and firm, beside his dainty sister Alma in that family group photo snapped decades before my mom or I were even born.

The way my mom wove her anecdotes – seamlessly, as the natural raconteur she was and is – made these flickering, blurred sepia figures come alive in my mind, more real than a lot of people I actually knew. Over time her memories have become mine, and I can no longer remember who told who what when, or why – she planted family history in my head where it took root, and really, isn't that what family oral tradition is meant to do? She's told me the stories so many times, each telling with freshly exhumed details, that I often think the memories are my own: that one Christmas with the two trees, the "snowball" bush, the dented, tireless Ford up on cinderblocks in the driveway. I see them like I was there, and in the way time can sometimes be a slippery circle, a numberless clock -- I suppose I was.

*

It was the day before Hallowe'en, 1907, when Alma made her second of only two appearances in the local newspaper. Slipping loose of her large French-speaking family living in cramped quarters in the house on Lafountain Street, and marrying an Italian barber in Burlington named Benjamin. He was likely Beniamino before he was scrubbed down for lice and questioned at Ellis Island ("Are you now or have you ever been an anarchist?"), and his name is misspelled ("Altir") in the five lines of newsprint, which notes their nuptials were to be held that very day at the towering red-brick French Catholic church in the heart of town.

How did Alma meet this alien on the streets of straitlaced Burlington? How did she not wind up with a stolid Quebecois husband like her sisters and mother all did? But then again, this was ten years after the accident. Was Benjy the Barber the only man would take a disabled bride six years

his senior? Was he handsome, mustachioed, a smooth talker? (No photos of him that I've seen, so he's only half-real to me.) Or maybe he just fell for the gentle-faced spinster. Ben doesn't seem to have immigrated to America with any other relatives and besides, what would they have made of his delicate mouse of a fiancée, with her lissome beauty, exquisite French-inflected diction and mangled hands? No, it was just the two of them.

Except for the baby. I never knew until last week that there had even been a baby.

Family lore is often an untrustworthy and unreliable source – a blotted scrawl in the middle pages of a gilt-edged Bible, names misspelled and dates confused – whose handwriting is this, anyway? These dusty recollections can sometimes remind me of a large and tattered fishing net, with scabbed torn openings large enough to let stories slide through, and sometimes even people. Once they've passed through the open netting, names, dates, faces can drift and drift downwards until they land softly on the ocean floor, disturbing only a cloudy puff of azure sand at an unknowable depth. They're gone, and no scientific deep-sea exploration is going to bring them back.

But now, suddenly, there's this baby. It's like discovering an island that has never appeared on any map -- a tiny scrap of paper, somehow preserved haphazardly in the virtual warehouse of the Internet. Her one proof of existence, even after the trawling boat's net has been hauled up from the sea, dried and folded and stored still smelling of Atlantic salt. A girl existed, I now know. She was born on the 4th of June (the same day as my own birthday, at the other end of that century), three years after Alma & Benjy linked fingers and looped their fates. They named her Rhea. The meek and milky Alma was now 32 (a bit late for a first-time mother in 1910), and daddy just 25. Was baby Rhea named after one of Benjy's own (vanished) sisters? Or just an olive-skinned girl he knew back home in the hills above Napoli?

I stop and give a moment of thanks to Dr. G.O. Coutu for this newborn knowledge. He's the doctor listed as the "informant" - the trusted medical man tasked with recording Rhea's birth. Is this his formal, vertical cursive that proves Rhea's existence? Or is it the penmanship of Mr. Grandy, the bored town clerk discharging his perfunctory duty by confirming Coutu's handiwork - the unveiling of a glorious daughter for the unorthodox couple?

Wait. There's a second slip of paper, dated two days later. Old doc Coutu is back, wielding his pen like a scalpel, and this time his recording is a grim one. Baby Rhea has died of a cerebral hemorrhage. Was there an accident? Was she swept off by disease? Did Alma and Benjy even have a chance to celebrate their sweet Franco-Italian marvel, or was it merely an agonizing 48 hours of dwindling hopes? Did they have time to curl her fingers around their own? Did she have dark hair, dark eyes, was she their own "sweet bambino"? Or was she the tiniest white mouse of all?

It's too late, she's gone. Mr. Grandy is back too, with his improbably curvy signature stamp. And poor Alma, she's returned to that house on Lafountain Street, crammed with siblings and horsehair mattresses and heavy mahogany armchairs with scratched ormolu claw feet. Had she already moved back there for her the climax of her confinement? Did Benjy have his own room? Rhea likely died in the bed where she was born.

Was the narrow shingled house, nearly in the shadow of St. Joseph's redbrick steeple, draped in black crepe, or did Maman LeFebvre just close the front door tight? Did Alma's sisters leave their own husbands and children at home to surround her with tender ministrations? Did they hold their sweet white mouse in her dressing gown, while her pale eyes dripped tears, staring into the middle distance but blackly this time?

The name Rhea means a "flowing stream".

*

When people die, it's not for the dead person for whom the saltwater streaks down cheeks and the heart stabs. It's for ourselves, our *own* sensation of pain and the emptiness left inside us, a ghostly-image-shape that shimmers and fades when we try to fix it with our eyes. We murmur comforts to one another, "such a loss." But what is really lost? How can we lose someone who lives inside us, whose only real 'reality' was that all along – the image or force we felt when we were physically with them?

My Nana — Alma's niece — was my first great loss. I only knew her as an old lady — velvety wrinkles, bloodshot watery eyes with nearly all the blue drained out from her nine decades of life. I remember a long, pointed nose with the large nostrils, a silvery nimbus of hair that was never anything but unruly. I remember her nubbly knitted sweaters in violet and cobalt-blue, her tiny-boned hands with crepe-y skin and prominent knuckles, which felt cool and small in mine with pearly fingernails and surprisingly smooth palms. But I loved her. There was something about her childlike size and delicacy which made her more real to me than other adults, made her more like *me*. Somehow, even my child's mind understood that her love for me was valuable and her attentions irreplaceable. But when she died, I felt a strange lack of loss — I didn't understand the tears of my mother and my aunts, I didn't know why adults I'd never seen were caressing the top of my head and murmuring, "what a loss, what a loss...so sorry for your loss." I hadn't lost a thing, I thought. I stood on the funeral parlor's plush carpet and clutched my Nana's silver-and-amethyst crucifix in my sweaty small palm, so tight the corners cut into my skin, but I knew she wasn't lost. All I had to do was close my eyes and my Nana was right there — I could still feel her feather-light touch, her smooth cool tissue-skinned hand in mind. I still can.

*

So who mourned Alma? Who felt her loss, her loss – she died at the mental hospital all alone, her barber Benjy lost to the grave years before, her baby Rhea a memory only to her. Did she know where she was? Did she cradle an empty blanket in her arms? Did her drained eyes stare out a grilled window, or did they see anything at all? As early as the 1930s, the hospital's director

had instituted a program of industrial work designed to be therapeutic for the inmates, including weaving rugs, the assemblage of clothespins, and shoe repair. Was Alma assigned to shoe repair? It wouldn't have been her first time working with shoes – remember, there was that accident.

The accident was another piece of history that had fallen through the net. No one, in my memory or my mom's, had ever spoken about it. There was no note in a journal, not even a whispered secret held between a few. Again, the Internet saves memory with its oceanic trawl of preserved records, rendered smooth and marmoreal into pixels instead of dusty crumbling pages. This one comes from the November 17, 1897 issue of the Argus & Patriot newspaper, in a regular section titled "Burlington Brevities".

The "Burlington Brevities"? It has the air of a vaudeville revue, a cheeky, alliterative, too-cutesy name for amusing news squibs too tiny for an actual article, too insignificant for a longer read. But perhaps interesting enough to fill a page buttressed by advertisements for hat trims and Johnson's Anodyne Liniment, which promised to be "an instant banisher of every external pain". I can picture a flinty Vermont dowager unfolding her pince-nez to read the "Brevities" by a late-afternoon fire that chilly November, or an exhausted barber's apprentice, clasping a cold glass of ale in a public house and removing his overcoat before unwinding on a stool to read the "Brevities" to help wash away a long day of scissor-clacking and straight-razor shaves and French-accented English that he doesn't quite understand.

Buried that day in the "Brevities", is my Alma in her first newspaper mention – sandwiched carelessly between a notice warning of Canadian pennies circulating illegally in the city (they "have been nickel-plated to look like an American quarter"), and a couple of lines about Miss Belle Dorr's recent whist party ("for a dozen friends"):

"Miss Alma Lefebbure [sic], who works in the factory of the Burlington Shoe company, had four fingers of her left hand almost completely severed while feeding a label cutting machine last Wednesday. Fingers on right hand also crushed."

That throwaway last line is the one that stops me cold, every time. "Fingers on right hand also crushed." As if nearly amputated fingers on one hand weren't enough, but "also crushed". I doubt even a dose of Johnson's Liniment could heal the ache of that line..

I'm trying to piece all this together, a timeline: the photos, the accident, the wedding, the baby, the tiny coffin. Then nothing. For decades, Alma's only recorded life is in the phone directories, a listless litary of her addresses shuffling from boarding house to apartment building to rented rooms, she and Benjy. At some point he put away his blades and combs, and became a salesman for an insurance firm. In the town directory, she's become a "saleslady" of some kind. There are no more photos, no more winsome mentions in the "Brevities". Just workdays and weekends, with nightly dinners under a warm glowing lamp illuminating two plates, two forks, two knives and four hands. Did they ever talk about Rhea?

Then Benjy died, somewhere in the skid between VE Day and Vietnam. I can't locate the directories for this period – perhaps Alma stopped moving and stayed in the same grim rooms, only now setting a place for one at the table. How she found her way to the asylum is a story no one can tell me – whether she laced her own shoes, tugged on her worn gloves, put on her best hat and walked alone through the gates, or whether her doctor had her removed from the shop between sales, and a policewoman held her solicitously by the arm while placing her inside a van on a cool evening in May, or October.

*

Did Alma remember the accident while she was making shoe repairs at Vermont State Hospital in her twilight haze, or was it all mixed up with Benjy's fingers smelling of hair oil, the tiny ruffled gown that Rhea was buried in, and that other white mouse, the white-haired niece she maybe never met but so resembled?

The last document that marks Alma's existence is that death certificate, with scant details, even listing her parents' birthplaces as "unknown" – perhaps she was beyond being able to say in her final years. I've searched and searched for what would be Alma's final newspaper mention – an obituary, a natural bookend, life's epilogue – but so far, even the Internet has failed to deliver her to me. Perhaps it's still somewhere out there, in a deep blue jewel-toned depth, a pearly-white stone, half-buried, small as a mouse.

Joe Ricciardi was born in Newton, MA and has lived in Los Angeles for the past 25 years. He studied art history and poetry at Massachusetts College of Art and Emerson College, and is currently studying for an MSW at California State University, Long Beach. He lives with his artist-musician-fiancé, and was previously published in the anthology, "Blood Whispers, Vol 2: LA Writers on AIDS."

(the other house)

BY ROCÍO CARLOS

1. that sleep hammer/ how you hold it and I let you how I let you/so that we have matching wounds

I put my body between my mother and my sister's body /she never missed I didn't let her miss. Once, younger, stupid, I ducked or ran from her and I was sorry

what names float the ghost name
the girl who won't come when called
except that I have no name to call her
I use smoke as signals the way my mother does with me
(can a house be built can a house be moved what is there)
there is
there is
(disappearing people)

2. breaking as waves as glass slippers/what makers demand what salt is: protection against the works of others or misfortune what is language but tripwire/or a bridge from far away sisters wave to us the hand that holds your name like longing /when I put my teeth together to say your first syllable my mouth waters with sorrow

3. (which flood)

(joy)

stubborn door, this skin

(sparrow the kind of bird who keeps secrets)

and burial in this body sounds of laughter and breaking and instruments the body as instrument the line of a childhood a turning away or running away /wilderness/ starting from a home to a world/ a life the ocean for the first time

(the first time the tide lapped at my ankles I wept with shame/I apologize mother this is my body/my father held my hand and laughed at the water).

and burial and burial and burial a song again a lingering and forming how like a life how the body becomes and then disappears mother who gives permission to cry who makes the rain and drought mountains crumble so that forests can rise under the feet of wolves (something about peaches and moons/a potted mint and portraiture) and what things quake, a limb, a lip, the continent with my desire for your trembling and my body as this wilderness what trembling and then stillness old as wolves I want to hold your face my

fever when it comes is a house on fire is the unrelenting rain far from the body that suffers cold I saw you or the mirage of you or was it your shadow or did I dream you/ I had a little aunt who was only ash and she never answers when I call (arrow catcher, here come ashes)

Here is a broken body/ there is a bruised wilderness/ the body in a wilderness making new an autumn a time of sleep and graying

I picked glass from the soil to protect my family I nursed a sore paw the calico follows me wherever I go/ she is not afraid of wolves

5.

6. But there are fires to forget but we can't forget even when we don't remember (I remember her/ my color, my scowl the lost twin soul) they say the old dragon drank to forget her. I think it was to remember. A tired and sad dragon, he was cruel except to me. His laughter made the doves trill away from the palms. He lifted me onto the red filly. He told me she was mine and I named her Golondrina, after the birds that never stay.

you carry the place the death where is a place not crooked not covered in dust left by a terrible night left by those wonderful nights and the night of loss too and the nights of laughter

burn/break/live or not some cell in your body deciding what to do what comes next and the atoms of the universe arrange themselves in such a way to let you pass. what the ocean is /what names map/ what use is the body that can be broken/ or taken/that just fades away.

7. (Paterfamilias) a shadow a bone its marrow a hand/ a body under another's hand and care a tiny death (mine) I wait for a sun I want to be your first place that place of snow marked by your breath the Mystery Of all of the leaving naming and the longing and I want it to be my name my song and I am not okay and can't say the words so I sulk from across the plains and trees in March there is death and longing and the month of March does not belong to me

the places where you are from are always on fire this city or that country or this body (what if I told you this city of yours is my body I have mapped it in bridges and train tracks)

el nombre de la estación verano el nombre de quien / de cual canción

and what are anchors? cement? names? gods?

ghosts: yellow the color of everything but the sun even as it dies in a place so far from where you were

born/ here in the north your body holds blame

the body /of me which you conjured and brought forth in some sleep (it has been such a long night) Rocío Carlos is the author of "A World Below" (mindmade books, 2014) and co-author of "ex her pt" (wirecutter collective, 2016). Selections of her collaborative work in progress with Rachel McLeod Kaminer, "Attendance" appear in Cultural Weekly. She lives and works in Los Ángeles.



My Father's Falling

BY MELISA MALVIN-MIDDLETON

like the bereft in those television ads but he calls me instead of pressing some button that reaches the saints of the elderly at 9-1-1.

I'm not hurt. I just need a little help.

I won't be able to lift him. Yet I imagine when I arrive he will be seated on the sofa with The Times in hand and two cups of peppermint tea.

I swing the front door open in a rush, finding him prone on the floor, blood on his pants, biting his pain. "Did you hurt anything?"

I'm fine.

Rolling him off his stomach, I get a pillow under his head. "How did you fall?"

I didn't fall. My legs gave out.

I am weak.

No time for ten deep breaths, I try one. "I can't lift you. I'm calling the paramedics."

NO! he screams.

I wrench everything trying to move the man who used to carry me,

rush me to the doctor at two a.m. and make me laugh so I wouldn't cry when the nurse took my blood. My blood.

I call.

Sirens ascend as they near.

TOC

Melisa Malvin-Middleton is a Los Angeles poet, playwright, and musician who teaches writing at California State University, Northridge and College of the Canyons. Her poetry has appeared in Silver Birch Press, The Ofi Press, and Clear Poetry among others, while her plays have been performed by Fresh Produce'd and Savage Players. In 2017, her chapbook Hover the Bones (Yak Press) will be released. For more information visit: www.melisamalvin.com

Knott's Berry Farm

BY JIAN HUANG

Growing up, birthdays in my family had about as much importance as Christmas, which is to say, not much at all. Basically, the birthday person got to choose the restaurant; you can have the lunch special at NBC Seafood, the dinner special at ABC Seafood, or the buffet special at the China Tasty Buffet. Sometimes Dad would get me a slice of greasy vanilla pound cake from JONS with a match stick in it, or one of those big cylinder glass candles with Jesus' face on the outside. Both Mom and Dad thought that birthday candles were a waste of money.

-It just burns, Mom said. And then what? Nothing.

If I wanted someone to sing happy birthday to me, I'd have to do it myself. Mom and Dad said it was too bad they never learned enough English to remember the lyrics.

I reminded them that there were only four words in the song.

Once a week Dad took us out to the San Gabriel Valley for one of the many \$3.95 lunch specials. On my birthday however, Dad would let me order from the \$5.95 menu.

-It's your birthday, you can order whatever you want, he said. Whatever you want. Clams with black bean sauce or sliced fish with black bean sauce.

-Can I have the salted chicken? I asked.

-Salted chicken? Mom said. Salted chicken is no good. It's \$7. You want the clams with black bean sauce. Your dad likes the clams with black bean sauce too.

So I got what I wanted: clams with black bean sauce.

At \$3.95 a pop, the three of us ate for under \$20 with tax and tips included. Sometimes there were even leftovers.

-See how I take care of my family! Dad said. Even though we're not living in Beverly Hills, I can still afford to take you two out for a sit-down meal once a week.

The bar for success was not too high.

On my ninth birthday, I was surprised when Dad asked me what I wanted.

-You know you've been really good this whole winter break, he said. You stay home all day by yourself when we're at work. In America they arrest you for that kind of stuff, but I never have to worry about you telling the cops. So whatever American kids do on their birthdays, we can do that.

-Can we go to Knotts Berry Farm? I asked. They have Snoopy and ice skating.

I had seen on TV all those American kids giving Snoopy hugs and eating pizza, which looked like a lot of fun. I wanted to get hugs and eat pizza too. Plus, I loved figure skating. Ever since I saw Kristin Yamaguchi do her double salchow in the ladies' single 1992 World Figure Skating Championships, I knew that would be me one day. I thought that if I could get by on roller skates around oil stains in the backyard, then I probably had a pretty good shot on the ice.

-I'll consult the phone book, Dad said.

Aside from a Thomas Guide and a user's manual for the industrial vacuum Dad stole from his motel job, the only other books we had at home were phone books: yellow pages, white pages and Chinese-language multi-colored pages that advertised everything from hot pot restaurants to Larry H. Parker who would fight for you in Mandarin. It was Mom and Dad's go-to guide for all things Americana. Dad said it was important that we learn to be self-sufficient in this new country and not be a bother. Nobody likes somebody who's always looking for a handout.

That night while Mom slept in our bedroom, Dad and I stayed up in the living room playing Super Mario Bros. As usual, he was Player 1 Mario and I was Player 2 Luigi.

-You never let me be Player 1, Dad. Why do I always have to be Luigi?

-It's because I'm a better player than you.

He was right though; he was better than me. Dad could get all the way up to level 9 while I couldn't even make past the angry mushrooms in level 2. Making me Mario would just mean that we all die at level 2. But he must have noticed the reaction on my face because then he paused mid-game and pulled out the phone book holding open our kitchen door. He scrolled through the back index and located the page number for Knotts Berry Farm.

-B-U-E-N-A Park, he sounded out the words in English. Where the hell is that?

The next morning, I woke up to Dad in the kitchen looking sleep-deprived. I thought he had been playing Mario Bros all night again. On three sheets of torn notebook paper, he jotted down the directions to B-U-E-N-A PARK from South Central in thick black sharpie marker, which he also stole from job. Sitting across from him at breakfast, I could see from the bleeds on the other side of these sheets that it was gonna be a real long trip. Alphabets and Chinese characters and arrows and Xs.

According to my iPhone, going to Buena Park only takes about 45 minutes, but back when I was nine, that trip took damn near three hours. Dad had a digital Casio dictionary, so he could kinda read. I didn't know how to read, but had picked up enough third grade English to bullshit my way around adult teachers. Mom was in charge of bringing a gallon of water and a loaf of Kings

Hawaiian for lunch. Between the three of us, we were nearly one capable American person.

We drove for a long time on side streets. I laid down in the backseat and watched the sky turn bluer as we drove further away from the city. The boulevards got wider, electric lines got fewer, and Metro buses that once crowded our streets suddenly all retired for the day. At one point, while I was asleep in the backseat, I heard a cop across the intersection blare on his mic at us, "What are you doing?" "Turning! Turning!" Dad gestured. He couldn't read the signs and made a wrong turn somewhere.

I slept and woke up. Slept and woke up.

After we finally got there and parked, the three of us traversed up the walkway with our gallon water and our bread. An aroma of funnel cakes and fried chicken danced in the air as we walked past Douglas fir trees and a big wooden rollercoaster. Dad walked ahead of us to one of the ticket booths while Mom and I waited under a small spot of shade. Beyond the ticket booths I could see the tall green gates, and beyond that was me, Snoopy, triple salchow. I watched a rollercoaster make circles with people aboard, their blonde and brown hairs sweep up then down and I felt proud of myself to have brought a black hair tie. Then I double checked my shoelaces to make sure all was secure. No more dreams. This was happening.

Ahead at the booths, I saw Dad take out his wallet and unwrap the rubber band that held it together. He said something through the booth window, got a map, and walked back to us.

- -They must have jacked up the prices, Dad said.
- -What do you mean? Mom asked.
- -The phone book said it was \$35 a person. The lady at the counter said 'no more specials.'

Dad thought for a moment then asked Mom how much money she had. Between the two of them, there was enough cash for one adult and one child, or two adults and no child. The gates around the park were too tall for Dad to jump and he didn't want to risk getting arrested and deported over Knotts Berry Farm. He did some mental calculations of the size of my skull and shook his head. There was no way I could squeeze through those gates either.

-You want to go inside with Mom and I'll wait here by the car for you? he asked.

He bent his knees slightly and spoke to me face to face. I kept my eyes on the deep lines on the back of his hands. Had he always had so many sun spots?

-No, why don't you take her and I'll wait out by the car for you, Mom said. I can't read the English signs anyway. It's just a waste of money for me to go in.

Looking back, maybe I should have cried or panhandled for money. Or maybe if I was smarter, I

could have bought some bottled water from the 99 Cents Store and sold them at a premium by the park. But instead, I said nothing. I was too proud. I felt the onset of tears and immediately started back towards the car. Mom and Dad followed behind. They knew that it was time to go home. I kept my head down while I walked through a crowd walking past us to go to the park, trying to avert my eyes from their hopeful smiles.

On the walk back to the car, Dad pulled us into a gift shop along the walkway to get me a souvenir cup. There were cups for JANE, and JOANNE, and JOANNE, and JOANNA. But none for JIAN. So instead Dad got me a plastic cup with Snoopy's picture on it. Snoopy was ice skating by himself.

Jian Huang's parents brought her to the United States from Shanghai, China, when she was six years old. She grew up in South Los Angeles and earned her degree in Art History from the University of Southern California. She has worked for several social service organizations, including LA Conservation Corps, Homeboy Industries and LA County Arts Commission. Her work has appeared in Entropy, Los Angeles Review of Books, ALOUD, and Tongue & Groove among others. She is the recipient of a 2016 PEN Emerging Voices fellowship. Jian is currently working on her first memoir about the humorous and lonely journey to the American Dream.

Denning

BY TRISTA PAYTE

Listen.

I know this den holds you too tight, these familial ties biting limbs grown longer than mine despite a canyon of time between.

Years shift beneath skin, reveal the almost-new slouching toward deliverance and surely

this is second coming

because here you are, this body: spitting baby teeth, cutting molars on my exposed and tender wanting.

And I know the snarl in your center aches to gnash out my smug wisdom—

because what do those long of tooth know about the need to pierce the heart of the world?

—I know it yearns to feast on this fear-full sincerity,

let bits collect

in the still pink gum, gather in the down, leave streaks in the soft fur of your muzzle.

Yet remember. Only a season or two of sleeps and already you cannot recall who bore whom. Track these scars we wear together, marking the day you clawed from marrow, the day hunger twinned. My not so small; body of boy and beastly gaze set to loose a hunting upon us all.

But wait.

Because your malnourished mother knows hunger's texture, how its heat seeps into the cracks of your hands, makes it difficult to hold vulnerability

and resist it.

Your mother knows you cannot expect such restraint beyond family embrace. Your mother knows. Outside this shelter the air springs; the center holds mouths and wanting, rough and round,

and they are more hungry than you.

Swan Song

BY TRISTA PAYTE

I glide though these reconstructions—winter tipped wings unfurled in offering, warmth in a moment of singularity.

So why is it this staggering brood, this clutch, laid best of plans aside and stagnant? Darkling, I never wanted a territorial battle, a pairing of convenience to forever keep

but now I have lost count of how many ways a body can stretch and twist,
of how many pearls can be swallowed down.

Worrying past hissing breath and two dozen arching vertebrae until
I, Cygnus atratus, belly of bloat and beak of bleating need
have lost my taste for soft landings,
stopped believing what hatched could ever hold our fate in the palm of beauty.

But still. I recall

the lessons of the silk white lake, all milk and detachment before the cinch of reed encircled breast against shuddered breast.

Blessed are those that know the impermanence of creation.

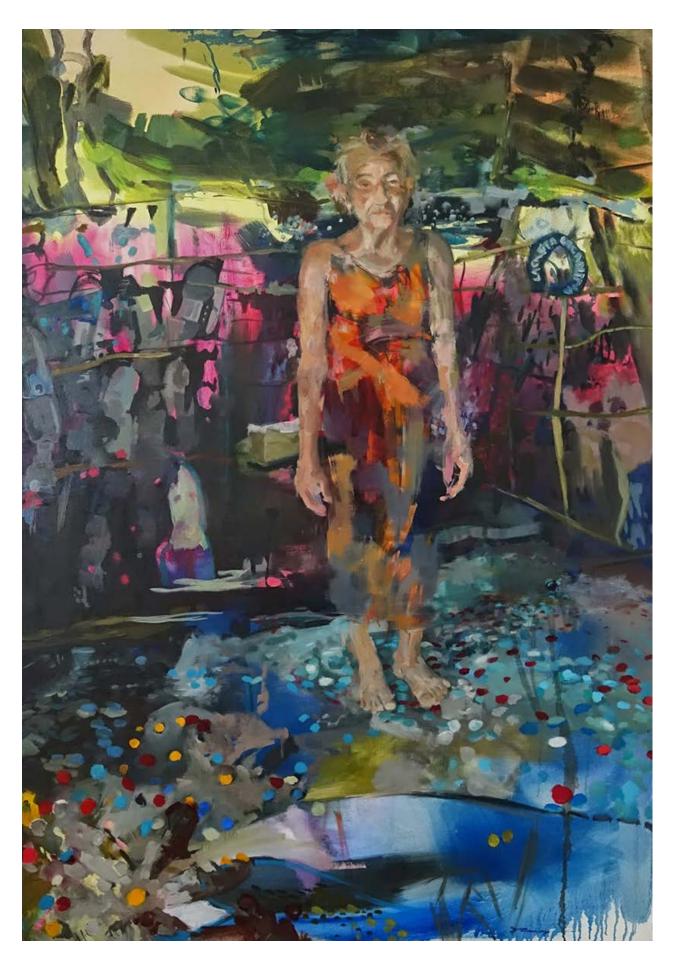
Yet these feathers are soaked through now, drunken and staggering, no grace in the stroke, just lap and nape and webbing mess.

It's true that disenchanted maidens appreciate the trappings of a good disguise but you never needed to be held down:

have it your way; bare and laid in the rushing plunge.

Have it your way, but after this how can body forget the beat—that strange heart; this terrible knowledge?

Trista Payte is an overworked and underpaid adjunct English professor living in the suburbs of Los Angeles. Her writing is mostly done in the notes of her cell phone these days, but that doesn't mean that writing doesn't still hold her heart; they just seem to be having a long distance relationship right now. She has been published several times (*The Northridge Review, Chaparral, Uno Kudo*) and once upon a time was featured in the Los Angeles New Short Fiction series. Her kids are teens and they still think she is cool, which has nothing to do with her writing, but is a pretty big deal nonetheless.



Crossover

BY MICHAEL DEAN CLARK

Nobody beat Ancient Jay to the court on Saturday. Billy knew this was true. He'd tried four times, once setting his alarm so he could get there before the sun came up over the houses on the hills that horseshoed Glen Park. It didn't matter. Jay was there first.

Ancient Jay wasn't really ancient. Probably late-thirties, forty tops. People called him ancient because he'd been playing pick up ball at the Glen longer than anyone else and because of his face. His sun-browned skin was creased like moist smoked jerky. Worse was the way Jay sweated. His pores were like little mouths drooling salty ooze that dribbled more than dripped. They never played shirts and skins and most guys called it the Jay Rule to his face. But Ancient Jay was a part of the park, constant like the swing set or sandbox or cement path winding through the two acres of grass and trees that smelled like pine and Pacific when the breeze blew through from the beach just across the Coast Highway. So the stories grew up around him. Billy knew the morning Jay wasn't there would feel like someone took down the monkey bars and left up the slide.

That morning, Billy hadn't rushed. The night before went long, parts of which he was too hung over to remember, parts because the words were always the same. His fights with Amy were purely automatic biological process now. There was more drama in his pulse than their marriage. They didn't even hit each other anymore, but neither would admit it was over because they had Cassidy and Tyler to think about.

By the time Billy parked, got his red Nike bag out of the trunk, and reached the top of the stairs leading down into the bowl end of the park, it was eleven. The sun was burning through the marine layer and Jay sat at midcourt with his legs in a V, stretching a pair of old hamstrings hardening like plaster in his legs. A sweat slick fanned out around him like a shadow and Billy thought about walking to the 7-Eleven for some Gatorade and gum. But Jay's wave stopped him. Waving back half-heartedly, Billy ran his hand through the tight cap of black curls on the top of his head and started down the stairs. The clapping of his sandals against the soles of his feet vaguely annoyed him all the way down and onto the asphalt apron of the court.

There were two benches against the hill, but Billy only ever went to the one west of the stairs. It was the first step in the routine he never violated. For the next five minutes, he gave himself over to the same motions he'd repeated since his first game at the Glen eleven years earlier. Somewhere between Zen and the art of autopilot, Billy could not play at the park without following exactly the steps he'd followed as a teenage scrub. Circling the bench twice, he dropped his bag at the end of his second circuit. Then, he closed his eyes and counted to thirty.

With each number, he focused on something unrelated to the games he was about to play and pushed it from his mind. Amy was number six. His former boss thirteen. The kids twenty one and twenty two, the lead in his legs twenty nine, and the call from his probation officer asking if he'd stolen anything recently thirty. As the last thought left his head, he inhaled deeply through his nose, holding for a count of ten, and then exhaled through his mouth. He repeated that pattern three more times before sitting down and unzipping his bag.

Unloading his gear required equal precision: left shoe first, then right; ankle socks, then crew length; knee brace, then wrist band; athletic tape, then his shirt. As he removed each item, Billy stacked them on the bench next to him. When the bag was empty except for his worn-glossy Wilson outdoor ball, he took off his navy blue San Dieguito High School hooded-sweatshirt and put on each piece in reverse order, starting with the plain white undershirt with the left sleeve intact and the right cut off at the shoulder. Billy pulled it over his head and it stuck to his barrel chest like spandex. From the tape roll, he tore a two inch strip and ripped the strip in half along its length, winding the two pieces around the second knuckles of his left middle and ring fingers. There was nothing wrong with either, but they were jammed Billy's first day at the park so they got taped. Next, the doublewide white wristband was pulled up to just below the bony knob on his right elbow from a bike crash when he was twelve and adjusted twice.

The black neoprene knee brace followed, folded down one inch at the top so the red underside showed and covering the four-inch vertical scar under his left knee that wasn't there when he was fourteen. Then the feet: crew sock right foot, crew sock left; ankle sock right, ankle sock left; right shoe, left shoe; tie the right, tie the left; tap the right heel and retie, tap the left heel and retie; lift the toes on the right all at once and stretch, lift the toes on the left all at once and stretch; three punches to the right thigh, three punches to the left.

At that point, he was lost in the only meditation he ever needed. Billy stood and took three more nose-mouth breaths while he cracked the individual knuckles on his right hand, then his left. Immediately, he dropped and touched his toes for a count of ten, bouncing slightly with each count, raised up for five, and then repeated the stretch. Standing, he grabbed his right ankle and pulled his foot up behind him until his heel pressed against the small of his back, counted to ten, and then repeated the motion on the left side. Turning to face the bench that came to the level of his knee caps, he two-foot hopped up and down on it ten times, staying on top with his last leap. He took another two nose-mouth breaths before sliding his heels off the edge of the bench and slowly slid down until his body weight stretched his knotted calves, He held another count of ten and then ripped off a quick set of calf-raisers, rocking up onto his toes and back down until the familiar warmth flooded his Achilles tendons. On ten, he leaped up and back, tucking his knees up to his chest before dropping them to catch his descent like shock absorbers against the pavement. Smiling slightly, he took out his ball, spun it from palm to palm, and looked at the court. It was still just him and Jay. Whatever else, Billy admired the way the guy kept quiet during the routine. He seemed almost embarrassed to be there while Billy did it, his cheeks slightly pink and his eyes averted until he heard Billy's first dribble slap the grayed-out asphalt. Billy assumed this was because Ancient Jay had a routine of his own, one he guarded with his early arrival.

"Wanna shoot," Billy asked, his voice still bullfrogged. The image of Amy curled on the bed with her pale back to him flashed in his head and he dribbled it away, flipping the ball effortlessly around his back and through his legs as he walked toward the east basket. He always shot into the sun to warm up so he'd be used to it when the games got going.

"Whatever," Jay mumbled. His voice was deep and muffled because he never opened his mouth

more than half an inch to speak. It took Billy two years to understand him with any certainty. Jay'd seemed old even the first day they met, despite the fact that he was probably only a few years older than Billy was that morning.

He shook the thought away and took a shot, chasing down the long rebound while Jay walked over. His steps were the weirdest Billy had ever seen, kind of a limp, kind of a duck waddle and all wrapped in a longer stride than a 5'9" guy should be able to produce. His left foot slid out in front of him an inch above the ground like his knee didn't bend right, but then his right foot followed like a normal step should, causing his hips to swivel in the most uncomfortable way. When they were running up and down the court, though, it all went away. He ran like a trained sprinter. Billy flipped the ball over his right shoulder and, rather than catch it, Jay knocked it down in front of him like a bee trying to sting him. Catching it off the bounce, he heaved a flat shot straight at the rim, waddle-walking after the ball when it rolled over under one of the benches at the end of the court.

"Sorry," he mumbled, pitching Billy the ball and moving under the basket.

"No big."

Billy dribbled to the corner of the court and for the next five minutes, he hit shot after shot just behind the three-point line. The metal net rang like a bell with every make. Jay rebounded silently and threw lop-sided, off-target passes back to him. He made forty four straight before he missed wide left. It wasn't even close to his best stretch. Three years earlier, when Billy was getting ready for his last shot at college, Ancient Jay returned 137 in a row. They were alone then too and at the time Billy thought the streak was a good sign. Then he and Amy found out about Cassidy. He never tried out for the team and his last year of eligibility expired six days after she was born. In all four seasons he could have played, he'd only touched the floor in fifteen games. But in those 15 he averaged 28 points and seven assists.

When he missed number forty five that morning, Ancient Jay kept the ball and Billy went to the drinking fountain. The water smelled like sulfur and he let it run, watching Jay flip ugly, looping hook shots off the backboard. When he bent over the less-offensive stream, the first cars were pulling into the parking lot and the sun was completely visible in an increasingly teal sky.

"You ok today, Bill?" Jay asked between shots.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I'm pretty sure I could hit 50 straight so..." The grin on Jay's face cut through Billy's annoyance and he laughed, feeling released a tightness in his chest he hadn't even registered release.

"Well remind me not to let you end up on the other team then, Reggie Miller."

"I got Scotty."

"I'll take Boo."

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"Gimme D."
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"I got Adidas."

"Gray shirt."

"Red shorts."

Billy looked at the last two guys and was faced with the same choice he always had: either bring Ancient Jay onto his squad or the other guy neither he, nor Kimo wanted. Today it was a fifteen year old kid still growing into his Marmaduke feet. Billy made the first shot, so he had the second to last pick. As a result, he had to decide whether to take on the liability of Jay or the unknown quantity of the other guy. As always, he wished they'd just let the teams be set by the first five who made their shots.

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"I got Jay."
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"Alright, guess I got Dukie here," Kimo said and smiled at Billy. Kimo was probably his best friend when it came to playing ball and they knew each other well; so well they'd apparently developed nickname telepathy.

"Um, my name's not Duke," the kid said quietly as he joined Kimo's team.

"Not Duke, Dukie. And that is your name now," Kimo's tone was final. If Dukie kept coming to the Glen, Dukie would be his name for the rest of his life.

"C'mon man, let's play," Red Shorts said, impatient despite having just shown up ten minutes earlier.

"Ease up, man," Kimo said, "court's not goin' anywhere."

"Yeah, but my youth is."

"Alright, first game's thirteen by ones. Win by two. The rest are to eleven." Billy said the rules aloud for Dukie's benefit. He'd played with all the rest except Red Shorts at least once. "Kimo's ball. Match up ladies."

Billy teammates each picked up a guy on the other team to defend, generally along the lines of relative height or if they were picked at the same time. Usually Billy and Kimo guarded each other when they weren't on the same team, but today he matched up with Red Shorts to shut him up. The guy was at least 6'3" so Billy was giving up a good six inches, but that just meant the guy was in trouble on both ends of the court. Ancient Jay was left with Dukie and the kid looked on the edge of sick. He stared at the flaky gray eczema on Jay's wrists when his long sleeves drew up and Billy knew he was imagining there was much worse further up his arms.

"Watch out for those huge feet of his, alright Jay?"

"Got it."

"Sure thing," Billy laughed a little thinking about the sweat shower Dukie was about to take and tossed the ball to Red Shorts. "Eggs on both sides, check ballgame."

"Bout time," he said, raising the ball above his head. Billy stood back and watched Red Shorts stare down the guy he wanted to pass the ball to.

"You're pretty eager to catch a beat down," Billy said under his breath. Then louder, "Watch his eyes guys."

Red Shorts' eyes went hard and he strong-armed a pass to Kimo who was only about five feet away. As he went to move, he lowered his shoulder into Billy's chest, failing to move him at all. Built like a 180-pound brick with an unusually low center of gravity, it was hard to rock Billy and he smirked a little at the attempt.

"That how it's gonna be?"

"Yep," Red Shorts grunted, swimming his left hand across his body and down onto Billy's right arm, sliding past him toward the basket. As he did, Kimo threw him a bullet pass and he lifted up like he was going to dunk. He should have paid more attention to Billy, who'd trailed one step behind him down the key and jumped in perfect rhythm, slapping the ball out of his hand like a set volleyball. The block carried off Red Shorts' head and out of bounds before his feet touched the ground. While Dukie ran after the ball, Billy jogged down court on Red Shorts' shoulder, his mouth inches from the guy's ear.

"No, that's how it's gonna be."

For the first six points, the teams went basket for basket. At three all, Billy went hard to the basket just to rattle Red Shorts. Just before he went, Billy's knees flexed and he dropped even closer to the ground than normal. Red Shorts knew something was coming and tap-danced backward as Billy came forward. Billy circle dribbled three times with the ball in his right hand, pumping his left arm in rhythm to the slap of the ball against the blacktop. Each time he did, it looked more and more like he would cross the ball over into his left hand and drive to that side. To his credit, Red Shorts didn't bite on the first two fakes, but he couldn't resist leaning on the third. Billy caught the lean and pulled the ball back to the right, stepping across himself and just outside of Red Shorts' outside leg. He blew past him when really he could have walked to the basket and laid the ball in.

"Oh...my...I can't even finish it...wait, yes I can, gawd," Kimo said, laughing and shaking his head. "Can't get caught leaning, man. He'll abuse that every time."

"Where's my help?" Red shouted, his pale face flushed red as he looked at his teammates like they let him down.

"You gotta call help if he's too much for you," Boo said without a smile. Boo went 6'7" and 250 pounds, so nobody messed with him. He played a season at State but couldn't stay eligible and lost his scholarship. Most of the guys at the park were just happy if he didn't step on their chest when he dunked on them. "You wanna switch up to someone you can guard?"

"Just ball me and get outta my way," Red Shorts said, his voice a little shaky.

He dropped his eyes to watch his dribble and Billy used his mistake to look over at Boo and wink. Kimo stood where he was and pretended to put his hands in his pockets while Red Shorts started yo-yoing like all the street ball players he'd ever seen on TV, kicking his feet out in front of him. Billy could have snatched the ball then, but he waited. Then the guy actually stuck out his tongue and wagged his head from side-to-side. Pushing the ball left with one hard dribble, he swung it wide around his back to his right side, expecting Billy to bite on the fake. Instead, Billy went right as soon as Red Shorts went left and was standing there when the ball came back around. It was as if the guy was dribbling straight into his hands. Poking the ball away, Billy sidestepped Red Shorts and slapped his lower back on the way by before chasing down the ball and laying it in uncontested.

"Thanks," he said as he jogged back down the court past Red Shorts, who stood flat-footed where he lost the ball. Guys on both teams were giving it to him, even Ancient Jay who never talked yack.

"Oh man, just don't even try it," he said in his low mumble.

"Shut up," Red Shorts said, but no one took him seriously.

"Well, I don't know about you guys, but I'm feeling warmed up. Five-three us," Billy said as Kimo dribbled the ball up court.

Billy wasn't sure when, but somewhere in the middle of the game his team lost control. At one point they were up nine-six, breezing to thirteen. Jay even scored twice, which was two more than the last three Saturdays combined. Things seemed so under control Billy'd even been cracking jokes with the guys waiting ten deep on the side of the court. And then, Kimo called out the score.

"Twelve-ten, we're up."

"What?" Billy asked like his hearing aid had died. He stood just across half court dribbling the ball just off his right hip.

"You heard me. You 'bout to lose."

"When'd that happen?"

"Um, when your boy Scotty dribbled off his foot twice."

Billy shook his head and then looked at the sidelines. Another five guys were coming down the stairs. Whoever lost was looking at waiting three games before they got to play again.

"Don't get ahead of yourself, Keems. You gotta score again."

"Don't worry, we will," Red Shorts said. There was a trace of cocky in his voice and it pissed Billy off. Blowing past him, Billy went straight at the basket and dunked two handed, chinning up unnecessarily on the rim before twisting himself around and landing on the ground. Both Kimo and Boo could have come over and stopped him, but they only needed one more, so they saved their energy.

"That's one," Billy said, glaring at Red Shorts. "Two more coming."

Kimo brought the ball up and Billy tried to jump him at half court, but he saw the double team coming and flipped a quick bounce pass to Red Shorts who was set up at the three-point line just left of the elbow. Billy's feet skidded on the asphalt as he changed directions and sprinted back to where he'd just left. Red Shorts gave a ball fake that Billy fell for just enough to lose his balance as the guy drove the ball back at him. Then his feet slipped and he hit the ground as Red Shorts went past him.

"See ya," he said, tapping Billy on the head with his off hand.

"Got your help."

Billy heard Jay say the words and watched him come across the key awkwardly to cut off the open lane Red Shorts thought he had. The surprise caused him to stand up straight and the ball bounced off his knee giving Billy some momentary hope. He hopped back to his feet in time to see the loose ball rolling right into the hands of Dukie, who was standing just outside the key completely alone. Jay's eyes went big and he tried to rush back to the kid but that only cut off Billy who was also charging in that direction. The two collided and crashed to the ground as the kid turned and drained an easy nine-footer.

"Dammit Jay, what the hell?" Billy said.

"Sorry man."

"Sorry for what, missing the kid or almost tearing out my other knee?"

Billy hopped up and slapped away the hand Jay extended for help up. Red Shorts, who was smiling and giving Dukie five for bailing him out jogged over and helped Jay up.

"Ease up bro," he said. "Dude was just trying to help you out when I broke your ankles."

"What?" Billy turned on him, his eyes narrow.

"I said ease up, bitch," Red Shorts said, leaning toward him.

For a second, Billy rubbed the stubble on the back of his neck, the muscles tensing beneath his white shirt. He tried to think of something to keep him from going off, but then Red Shorts stepped toward him. Instinctively, Billy's fists came up. He drew back with his right and was loading up to throw when Kimo grabbed him.

"C'mon man, don't," he said in Billy's ear. "Dude's made of paper and you'll tear him."

"Let him go man," Red Shorts said. Billy tugged at Kimo's grip and he hugged him harder, turning to the guy.

"Shut up, son or I will let him go. Just walk away."

"Whatever," Red Shorts said and turned away. "Dude's a waste anyway. Could've gone to SC but

would rather steal shit and work the Shell Station."

Billy lost it, yanking himself free and closing the gap between the two of them and shoving Red Shorts in the back. The force lifted his feet off the ground and he hit the pavement hard. Before he had a chance to get up, Billy was on top of him. He got in two shots before a set of hands grabbed him under the arms and pulled him up onto his feet. Without looking, Billy turned and threw a hard right in the same motion, connecting square with Jay's left eye and knocking him to the ground.

"Billy!" Kimo yelled, keeping his distance to avoid getting hit himself. "Stop man!"

Looking down, Billy's hands dropped to his sides. Jay was curled in a ball with his hands over his face. He wasn't moving and Billy thought he'd killed him. Before he could say anything Red Shorts voice cut through.

"I'm callin' the cops, man. I'm pressing charges."

"You're what?"

"You're goin' back to jail. I think you broke my ribs."

Red Shorts clutched his side and Billy started toward him again. This time Boo stepped in, bumping Billy off course enough to get between the two of them.

"Walk, Bill," he said low. "Go home or somewhere, but get out before this gets bad."

Billy started to object, but a muffled sound from behind stopped him. He turned and watched Ancient Jay sob into his eczema-cracked hands. His body, still curled in on itself, shook with the force of his crying. It was the most horrible thing Billy had ever seen. Turning away, he picked up his bag at the benches and walked up the stairs to his car. As he backed out of the spot, he watched Kimo and Boo sitting with Jay on one of the benches, their backs turned to him. Boo had a huge hand on Jay's shoulders and Kimo was telling him something. On the court, two other teams started a new game.

Two Saturdays later, Billy parked in the lot above the court at nine in the morning and turned off the engine. For a second, he sat motionless behind the wheel trying to decide if he'd get out or not. As he sat, he replayed his conversation with Kimo from the night before. They hadn't seen each other since he hit Jay and Billy wasn't sure what Kimo would say when they met up in the cereal aisle at the store.

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"Hey Keems."
```

"Billy. How you been?"

"Alright, you?"

"Ok, I guess. How're the kids? The wife?"

"Same as always."

They were silent for moment. Billy picked up a can of coffee and looked at it as if he'd never seen one before. Kimo shifted from one foot to the other and then exhaled.

"Alright, so it's gotta be said. What happened man?"

"I don't know. I never do, you know?"

"But, I mean, you hit Ancient."

"I didn't hit Jay, I hit...I don't know, whoever was getting in my way."

"C'mon. You know that's not true. You could've pulled that punch."

Billy turned and faced Kimo, aiming for mad. But the expression on his friend's face wouldn't allow it. Kimo looked sad, and his questions weren't accusations. Billy's shoulders slumped and his eyes dropped.

"Could I have? Pulled it back I mean?"

"You looked at him and then swung."

"I, I don't remember that. Is he alright?"

"You dinged him good. His eye still looks like you played wiffleball with it."

They pushed their carts down the aisle and Kimo grabbed a box of Lucky Charms and then one of All-Bran. Billy might have made a joke about it two weeks earlier. Instead, he grabbed a familysized box of Cheerios and dropped it in his almost full cart.

"Tell him I said sorry, ok?"

"You gotta do that man."

"I can't Keems. I can't look at the guy. Not after..."

"He asks about you whenever I see him."

"Why?"

"Wants to know when you're coming back. Wants to tell you he's sorry."

"For what?"

Kimo stopped and looked at him, his brown eyes searching for something in Billy he wasn't finding. "I have no idea."

Billy stared at him for a moment and then looked at his list and realized he'd gotten everything he came for.

"That makes two of us," he said, pushing away without saying goodbye.

Sitting in the parking lot, the sound of a ball bouncing in no particular rhythm told him it was Jay. Billy took four nose-mouth breaths, opened the car door and got out, stopping at the top of the stairs. He stood with his hand on the rail until Jay looked up and saw him. The ball dropped from his hands and Billy could see the remnants of a vicious purple smudge still ringing his eye. Jay gave him the same half-wave he always did, but this time his fingers trailed lightly around the bruise on his face as he brought his hand down. Billy's throat caught and he waved back before turning and getting into his car. He backed out and drove away, knowing he wouldn't be back.

This was Ancient Jay's playground and no one would feel like the slide was missing when Billy was gone.

Michael Dean Clark is an author of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and the occasional professional document if bills need to be paid. His work has appeared in Pleiades, Paper Tape, Fast Forward, Relief, and other places. He currently lives in the San Gabriel Valley. Follow him on Twitter at @MDeanClark

Ode 2

BY SESSHU FOSTER

—for Eetalah and Clarissa

- 2 in the rain sheets of minneapolis, shivering in ecstasy and caffeine.
- 2 in the garish noon of bakersfield, shivering in joy and terror.
- 2 in the basin and ranges of nevada, delivering joy or terror.
- 2 in the national stadium of chile, american agents stalking.
- 2 in the liquified muskeg of SE alaska, shivering slightly stalking.
- 2 in the mild whorishness of the city, shivering in joy and exaltation.
- 2 in the purposive burning of civilizations, lost in flesh of smoke.
- 2 in the hurtling automotive spaces of USA, wracked with joy or fear.
- 2 in rising and falling motion of the Pacific, rolling and trembling.
- 2 in shopping blocks of downtown boulder, talking poetry and stuff.
- 2 in the long avenues and boulevards of L.A., cleaning properties.
- 2 in the pink furled sheets of bedroom, trembling as sleep falls.

the apartheid imagination

BY SESSHU FOSTER

it's the perfect spell, the perfect killing tool, the killing machine.

one million african americans are in u.s. prisons, 400,000 latinos.

they said the war on drugs was a war on the poor, because the institutions are inhabited by the apartheid imagination.

i place this line against the apartheid imagination.

the apartheid imagination requires no location, no physical body; because it has laws, records, court buildings, cells, conversations and life.

it has radio programs, all-white movies, jailhouse mythologies, 2-D images.

before the latest killings started, it was there, and when the killers are forgotten, the apartheid imagination goes on thinking, dreaming up new killers.

who remembers the ones who killed emmet till, medgar evers and fred hampton? who remembers the guy who shot renisha mcbride?

who cares about aryan nation jason 'gunny' bush who executed jonathan bumstead of the aryan nation also of wenatchee wa for being a 'race traitor' and who shot 9 year old brisenia flores in the face in arivaca az?

who remembers the men of the 11th infantry brigade who machine-gunned the women and children in the ditches of my lai? who remembers names of soldiers of the 7th cavalry who received the national medal of honor for slaughtering 300 men, women and children at wounded knee? who bothers to remember james earl ray?

who remembers the massacre sites of california?

i place this line in front of the images of trayvon martin, of jordan davis.

i place this line at the images of muhammad al-durrah, iman darweesh al hams, wajih ramahi.

i place this line alongside the images of abdulrahman al-awlaki and brisenia flores.

i place this line transparently over the names of jose antonio elena rodriguez, sergio hernandez gueraca, ramses barron torres.

they were shot by the border patrol, walking or running, shot in the back. they were killed by israeli forces using 3.1 billion dollars in 2013 u.s. military aid. they were blown apart by a CIA drone firing a \$70,000 agm-114 hellfire missile into a cafe.

they were killed by racists operating out of the apartheid imagination.

the apartheid imagination was created by genocide against indians and slavery of africans as a

construction designed to kill white conscience and memory. anyone entering into the apartheid imagination is a white man or an indian or a rebel slave.

it uses a hegemony of all-white images to convince white people any interest they may have is worth more than any life identified as other. it's a strong mechanism for killing people around the world like indonesia, rwanda, palestine or india.

i have stood in the line for black and brown people at traffic court when i was the whitest one there, and the judge, an asian american guy substituting for the regular judge who was on holiday let everyone go without a fine.

i have stood in my mom's kitchen window on a hill in the city terrace and watched the pillars of smoke rising for days over the city of los angeles.

i have stood at the counter in the laundry of the men's county jail downtown in the fumes of dry cleaning chemicals handing out and collecting bags of laundry and seen the faces of the men in line (where one guy always comes along trying to look like a stone killer and says, "pass me some fucking money or i will fuck you up," and maybe he was a stone killer, but i just returned his stare and took the next guy's bag).

i have waited in the plastic chairs and long lines of the DMV and i have seen who is waiting.

i've had lacerations cleaned out, my face x-rayed and patched up in the ER at county general hospital and seen who is waiting.

i have read poems in front of crowds of hundreds in universities from sf state to naropa, from university of minnesota to suny buffalo and i have looked out on those faces and seen who is walking across the campus at hunters college and cal state fullerton, at the state colleges and the private colleges.

i have seen who is in the jail and in the court house line, who is waiting for a job outside home depot and orchard supply.

i've driven streets of towns of the hinterland where white teenagers scream something out of their cars and race away.

fuck the apartheid imagination, that's what i'm saying, death to the apartheid imagination and its english courses and its ideologies taught in the universities and churches, piss on the all white movies pretending to be set in an all-white los angeles, all-white calif., all-white america, piss on the the norton anthology of post modern all white poetry and the norton anthology of all white american hybrid poetry, piss on all the little cliques of literati publishing all-white catalogs (with maybe one or 2 tokens) and touting another white guy as the latest wonderful thing (that thing is old, it's so old now), arnold schwarzenegger and ronald reagan were your fleeting white icons of pre-eminence, they were happy to see half my family two generations dispossessed and sent to live

in horse stalls of santa anita racetrack and colorado river internment camps, happy to go along with lives being destroyed, happy to sign some apology letters decades later, put up a few plaques on historical sites out in the desert.

who remembers individuals operating behind the poison alzheimer's of the apartheid imagination?

who shall remember the mushroom cloud of the apartheid imagination when the next killers are shooting, murder a child in the headlines, and the people post and repost all the images, talking laws, discussing footnotes and factoids?

the names are in the ground, the apartheid imagination like a shadow above them. i place this line in front of it saying my whole life has been against it, and the rest of my life will be against it.

i place this line in front of it.

TOC

Sesshu Foster's poems have recently appeared in *Párrafo, The Poetry Loft, La Bloga, The L.A. Telephone Book. Vol. 1, CultureStr/ke, Ping Pong, Lana Turner Journal*, and the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. A video version of his poem, "The Movie Version: Hell to Eternity," by artist Aturo Romo-Santillano was exhibited in Washington DC at the Smithsonian's "Crosslines" May 2016 exhibit. His most recent books are *Atomik Aztex* and *World Ball Notebook*, which won the American Book Award. He has taught composition and literature in East L.A. for 30 years. He has also taught writing at the University of Iowa, Pomona College, the University of California at Santa Cruz, and Naropa University at the California Institute of the Arts.

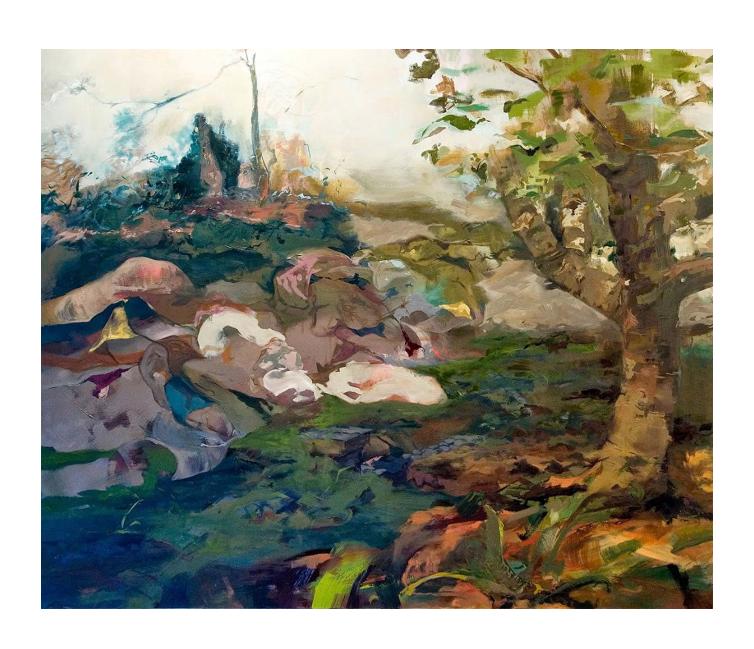
Dear Suki: Number Five

BY LANA BELLA

Dear Suki: Venice, August 31st, if you pause here, you might feel the sea thundering ribs and spine against the rock isle. Every ripple is measured in ohms, eternal, restless, twitching to the sand. This is the way you had always gathered a body of sun-pale gown, a turbine of skin and sweat to be convulsed with the dressing of mist. I wait for you through the summer mouth and citrus sky, pensile, concerting the way whisper glides past you in a dream. My dearest Suki: yours is beauty turned abstract; everyday you peel moonbeam and pattern my dark with halcyon lace, collect me for yourself, much like the illumined ocean deluges what is in its womb.

TOC

Lana Bella is an author of two chapbooks, *Under My Dark* (Crisis Chronicles Press, 2016) and *Adagio* (Finishing Line Press, forthcoming), has had poetry and fiction featured with over 250 journals, California Quarterly, Chiron Review, Columbia Journal, Poetry Salzburg Review, Plainsongs, San Pedro River Review, The Writing Disorder, Third Wednesday, and elsewhere, among others. Lana divides her time between Los Angeles and the coastal town of Nha Trang, Vietnam, where she is a mom of two far-too-clever frolicsome imps.



Nancy Botwin has a problem.

BY ALEXANDRA NAUGHTON

I am Nancy Botwin, from Showtime's Weeds (TV series 2005-2012)

I told my therapist that I think I am Nancy Botwin. Like not literally. I know that I am not on a television show. I am not deluded, I know that I am living my own life, but lately I've found myself relating a little too much to the character. And that familiarity was starting to worry me.

I think I am Nancy Botwin, I told my therapist.

How are you like Nancy Botwin, my therapist said.

I listed the reasons.

I have complicated relationships with men.

I use the male gaze to my advantage.

I look out for my own best interests.

I get hurt by people and I move on over a trail of dead husbands.

I reinvent myself according to my supplies and their demands.

I am impulsive.

I am unhappy and it is all my own fault.

My therapist said, I've watched Weeds, and you are not Nancy Botwin. Nancy Botwin is manipulative. She doesn't care about people. You care about people. You aren't manipulative.

I smiled and maybe laughed a little, but I left the therapy session feeling crestfallen. What is my compulsion to feel like the villain. Why do I always feel guilty, or why is feeling like a villain related to my guilt complex.

A few weeks later, I sat on the couch of my therapist's office and told her about a problem I was having with a guy. She kinda rolled her eyes.

What's his name again, my therapist said.

I told her his name.

So many men, my therapist said. It's hard to keep up, my therapist said.

I sank deeper into the couch cushion. I quietly sipped my iced coffee. My mind wandered and dreamed about standing up and kicking over an end table before leaving the office. I was a long lanky figure, shielded by dark glasses, purse on shoulder, dark brown liquid sploshing around in my cup as I kicked and exited coolly. I heard the ice against the plastic.

I sat quietly and sipped my iced coffee. I waited for the session to end.

So many men
I'm not a mess but I feel like one sometimes. everyone feels self doubt sometimes. maybe I talk about it more than I should. I get shit done though. I work hard. I can concentrate. I charm and smile and make my way and make wisecracks about it later or out of earshot. I'm probably a mess. if only to mess self.
tell me about my reputation. wait, don't tell me, I don't want to know. wait, tell me, what do people really think. I mean, don't, don't tell me, I don't care.

it's about power and privilege and getting away with shit that seems impossible but you do anyway because you fill a certain role, you adhere to or exceed the expectations of the set standard, you didn't ask for this but you are smiling and nodding because it's just that much easier,
you are milking the system because it benefits you, feeling guilty and stuck all the while.
the void created the illusion of substance. And that's why it's super easy for me to get obsessed with a television show or fictional character or concept album. The void created the illusion of needing an escape, and fiction is the best escape, better than drugs or running away.
the art of negging and nagging and getting typecast. the art of manipulation to wring every last little bit because you don't mind the crumbs and figuring out how power plays. the art of even considering this kind of shit. the art of sensing weaknesses. the art of thinking ahead and always having multiple backup plans. nothing I say matters but please listen anyway.

am I cool yet. am I desirable yet. am I likeable yet. am I smart enough yet. am I persuasive enough yet. am I supercoolpartypeople yet. am I queen bee yet. am I pretty yet. am I usable yet. am I kind yet.
I have nothing important to say about anything ever.
I am every Lana Del Rey song rolled together with lavender and smoked as an herbal spliff. I must enjoy this tbh. You write what you know, you suffer what you love. I guess I've always preferred the slow death, the one others barely notice unless they're actively sizing you up, body eating itself where functioning withers

Nancy Botwin gets what she wants. Lorelai Gilmore gets what she wants. Can it all be so simple.

Googling 'Nancy Botwin height and weight' and finding the 'Nancy Botwin diet' and oh great it's a food blog and all she ate one day is fat free frozen yogurt and a diet pepsi and I'm thinking I like it when I go a whole day without eating just drinking coffee and walking around with iced coffee in a plastic cup and biting the straw in a manner which is childish and silly but I think it's seductive and I want to be that even if I don't really want to be that. I want to be better than human. I want to get what I want.

I'm not really a breakfast person. I have to have coffee in the morning, but after that I'm good till lunch, usually. Sometimes I have a bagel around 10:30.

What does Nancy Botwin want. Nancy Botwin wants power. She wants excitement. She says she wants to provide for her family but it's really just a cover for what she really wants. The thrill, the cash, the empire. She does what she wants. She convinces other people to help her. She defies logic and is always prepared and even if she is ill-prepared she is ready to take control of the situation. Nancy Botwin does what she wants. Nancy Botwin gets what she wants.

What does Lorelai Gilmore want. Lorelai Gilmore wants a lot of things but I think it's safe to say what Lorelai Gilmore wants is to do what she wants in the way she wants to do it. If Lorelai Gilmore wants to get married she does and all the decision making is hers if she doesn't then she heads off on a sudden roadtrip with her teenaged daughter. Lorelai Gilmore wants to be constantly sarcastic and so she is, with her parents and lovers especially, a defense mechanism perhaps.

Lorelai Gilmore eats whatever she wants to eat, and she eats a lot, or so she says, and so say her family and friends and everyone else, it's like a running joke, but you never see her eat anything, not more than a bite. She could be hiding food in a napkin like Jerry Seinfeld in the mutton episode, or spitting it somewhere when the camera isn't looking, who knows. There are more than one online articles about Lorelai Gilmore's massive food consumption and the gossip surrounding it while maintaining a trim figure without exercise and how this is the ideal woman, the ideal cis white woman.

A boy said to me once, you have the body of a vegan, but I like that you eat cheeseburgers.

Wow, what an honor. I'm constantly thinking about my body and worrying about my figure.

I eat what I want. Lol forever.

googling 'nancy botwin manipulative'

finding 'nancy botwin weeds top 10 terrible tv moms,' 'a list of everything nancy botwin has done on weeds' which includes her having unprotected sex with someone on the hood of a car,

'is nancy botwin a sociopath,'

'is nancy botwin a feminist,'

Does it fucking matter.

A boy who said he was interested in me found my Nancy Botwin poem posted online on Moloko House or whatever and hounded me about it. Oh so I guess you like to manipulate men lol, and I was just like wow you clearly didn't read what I wrote.

It literally doesn't matter what I do or how I confess my sins or how I perceive myself and spell it out or how I try to better myself. You can use anything against me. I've thrown out enough supplies to keep gums flapping until I die. If I'm interesting enough. If they're bored enough. I'll just smile and nod and write about it later. More ammunition. I never learn.

TOC

Alexandra Naughton is editor in chief of @baipress in California. Her first novel, American Mary, was published by Civil Coping Mechanisms in March 2016 . She's a Libra. Follow her on twitter: @thetsaritsa

On Close to the Knives, a Memoir of Disintegration by David Wojnarowicz

ARRANGEMENT BY LINDA MICHEL-CASSIDY

Wojnarowicz lived in the margins of New York, during the terrible time when a plague was upon us and largely ignored. For a gay man in the 1980s, this meant piecing, sampling, cobbling together some way to feel human. This book is at the same time, ecstatic and mournful, hallucinogenic and entirely lucid. I've chosen to highlight some of the poetry within using the visual language of 'zines, which were a accessible form of information sharing at that time. All text is excerpted from the book.

the spoken words of strangers slices of meat in the form of doubletalk a vacuum turned inside out	
a vacuum turned inside out	·-
brings a false breeze onto my face	
seediness like dream darkness you can breathe in	
I have my hand flung out towards the edge of the w	orld
passion lining up the folds of his shirt	
I thought of the eternal sleep of statues	
the history of my body on this planet what it is to fall from such distances	
what it is to fail from such distances	
his eyes are bare slits a great vacant yawn	
with pearly surfaces glimmering inside them	
like somehow they've stopped reflecting light	
something singing of this ismall madness	_
creating excavations that other men	
spend their lives trying to fill	
,	-
the hungry unreeling corded with soft unbreathin	g veins
very octopal in its appendages	
backstroking his way out of this world	
	•
a corruptible surface	
curving down towards a hungry-looking mouth	
a wealth of images in that jawline	
I carry silence like a blood-filled egg	

	Date · · No.
an eye with all the language one could he	ear
it is no accident that every guidebook	
in every conceivable language	
contains the translated phrase:	· · - · ·
do you have a room with a better view?	
buildings that have a look of fiction	
when the ships are folding down	
nto the distance all I could see is the color blue	
in the dusk they were like aquariums on wheels	
CONTRAD TO MY CONCOL	
rearrange my senses so my eyes are microscopes	
ne eye like the oceans in fading light	
dusty white blue that catches like imaginary chalk	
so clean and abstract that I'm feeling dizzy	
lay the senses down one by one	
a humming gathering	
the psychedelic stuttering of light bulbs	
tiny proofs of the existence of small but heated fictions	(.
	· -
then there is the Other World	
what I imagined a flotation tank might feel like	
the darkness of what time leads the body into	
the darkness of what time leads the body into	
	- · · · · ·

TOC

Linda Michel-Cassidy is an installation artist and teacher living on a houseboat in Sausalito, CA. Her writing has appeared in Jabberwock, Harpur Palate, Electric Literature, The Rumpus, and others. She works for the Mill Valley library and the literary reading series Why There Are Words, and is a contributing editor at Entropy Magazine. She holds MFAs from the Bennington Writing Seminars and the California College of the Arts.

from Thx for the update

BY HAROLD ABRAMOWITZ

1.

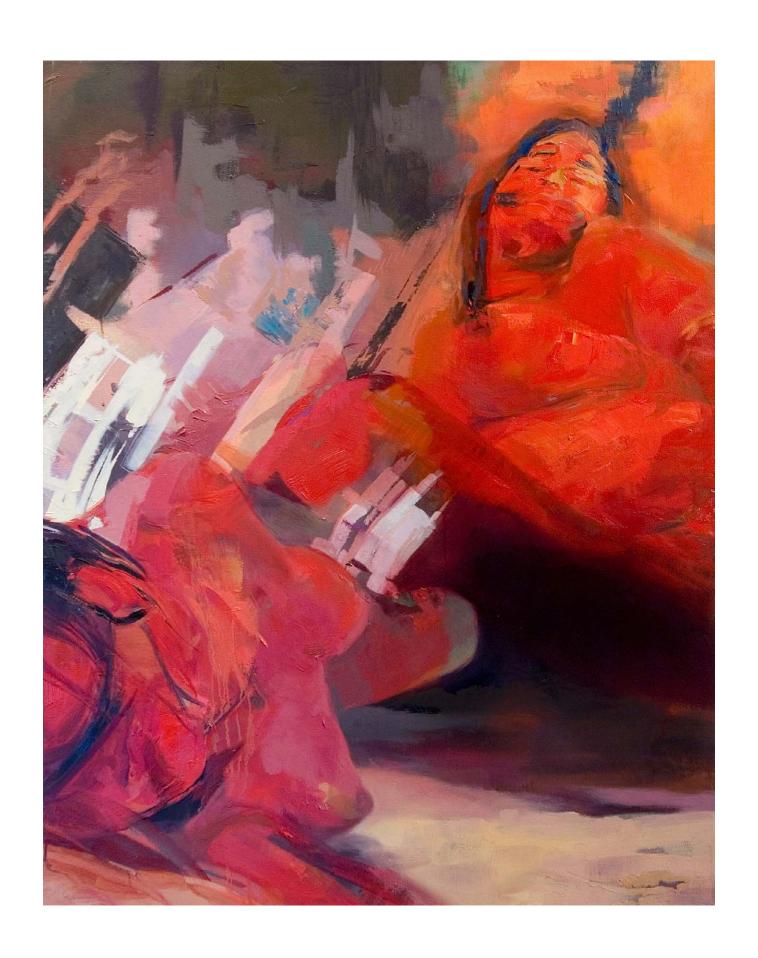
if I say something—water under The Bridge— This becomes me like No other— Do you want to show up to be a Doctor? my House is on Fire— I Scratch my arms off you are Fire, I ask? Because it Hurts, and I am Hot-On Fire— Filled to The rim w/ Brim—

But, doctor, tell me About Angina Healthcare Costs—Tell me How much it will cost to run for cover— I do enjoy you, I do Enjoy knowing what I Know— How Fast might I say To You, A kiss, A water mark—I Stare at The Blank wall—

2.

You are Following Wise—Trying to Shine your light at me referencing work— Style— Put you before me—before I do what I take you to mean—it's good in my Bag-it's good in my bag— A Hall to put my Name in—my weight—gentle— Force that inside and outside

But Nothing is Safe in This world— I say to myself to Tell You that Cold is a Stone Cold is A bed—Field work—Competition—Twine—Jolt of Energy and then I decide That I Love you— Tell You who and What You Are— The reference work—defines me— and my Name— Tough— I Am Your kind of Fella— In a Hall—In a Hall doctor—Tells me I am a Start—gentle—Telling me— That Poison is a little detail— Time— To Time— in— The blank Shot—Stellar you tell me That love is my Pot in—Poison—dear State detail my detail, as low as we go—gold loves us— The way we love, gold— I am told The sequence of Events, Bleeds, Blue, Bottle-Builds, Bottles—Color, Blue, color—color, Blesses Coral— Blesses Color, Blesses Coral— Speeds So quickly, I could Have laughed, or latched on to That, it was in that moment That I Put my words up on a Panel— it was what you might Have called A Twisted tale— A TWO—Fisted Tale—and Then talk—Talk—doctor— Talk to me about my decency my problems with Frequent and Persistent Urination problems that describe my body—Because you level and change and it is sheerdust that would Support us in this or in all we doHarold Abramowitz is from Los Angeles. He is author and co-author of books of poetry and prose, including Dear Dearly Departed, Not Blessed, Blind Spot, and UNFO Burns A Million Dollars. Harold writes and edits as part of the collaborative projects eohippus labs, SAM OR SAMANTHA YAMS and UNFO.



On a Clear Day I Can Read Your Mind: Growing up With Jenny Lewis

BY CAROLINE TRACEY

I found out about Jenny Lewis's self-directed video for the song "Just One of the Guys" late one night the summer it came out, 2014, in an email. Subject line "Jenny Lewis' new video," my friend Jill wrote nothing but:

have you seen it??? what a comeback

I opened the video, in which Jenny fronts a band composed of herself and four female celebrities. They alternate between rocking out sultrily, barefoot in white pantsuits (Jenny's, the exception, has a pastel pink-purple gradient and stars), and dancing in drag, in Adidas tracksuits of different colors, trying and not quite succeeding to be "just one of the guys."

Starting from that first viewing, I've had small chills every time I've watched it, climaxing right when they're supposed to, at the moment when Jenny croons that she's "just another / lady without a baby," then breaks into a smile and a boogie; aftershocking with each close-up of the actresses sternly singing the lyrics, each boyish dance move.

No soundtrack has been so enduringly present in my life as Rilo Kiley, which Jenny Lewis fronted from 1998 until 2011. Their music is a mix of emotion and pop that my teenage self devoured. Their lyrics about love and friendship appealed to my hormones and my ambitions; their songs about highways, prairies, California, and Omaha appealed to my love of long drives, landscape, and the American West. Their music—and Jenny's solo work along with it—makes you feel like you're in Los Angeles, and the sun is definitely shining, and sometimes things are sad and shitty, but you're in America's cradle of endless opportunity and you have a few good friends and even the hard times are worth it in the end.

The press that followed *The Voyager*, Jenny's third solo album and the album on which "Just One of the Guys" appears, suggested less of a comeback than a coming-out. Suddenly Jenny was in the New York Times and on the tonight show. My boyfriend's sister told me about friends of hers, too young to remember the nineties or Rilo Kiley or even the first solo album, making a late-night run to Target to buy tracksuits. For so long, Jenny had been the secret admiration of girls like me: less striking, charismatic, or adept at dressing ourselves than she, and yet still somehow drawn in, devoted. Now the secret was out. Jenny had grown up.

But so had I. When I watched that video, I was a completely different person than I had been when I'd bought my first Rilo Kiley CDs at Tower Records. I was comfortable in my own skin. Lucky enough to have a few friends. And on my way to becoming an image of myself I'd dreamed of back then.

I learned a long time ago that being this earnestly into one indie pop group is not cool. I am not positive that Rilo Kiley made "good" music. But my sustained, obsessive listening to Rilo Kiley has spanned more than a decade now—precisely the decade when I developed a conception of the type of person, and woman, I wanted to be, and began to achieve that image. That process had everything to do with Jenny Lewis, and with my friendship with Jill.

/ and we've been talking all night /

For years a teenager, I was plagued by the idea that everyone's eyes were on me, constantly judging me. I hunched my shoulders, barely talked, and constantly adjusted my clothes, sure they were awkwardly bunched up and I had ridicule coming to me. My wardrobe was composed of plain hand-me-downs from relatives I didn't know: white t-shirts from the Gap, shapeless, pocketless khakis that zipped up the left hip. There was something insurmountable about the degree to which I felt awkward in what was hung on me, but I was used to it nonetheless. My mother hated clothes shopping, and told me I was too smart to waste time caring about my appearance; malls felt like the realm of the people who made me feel bad about myself anyway.

I felt friendless at school. But at home, in private, knew myself to be interesting. Every afternoon, I scoured music blogs. There were tons at the time: I checked I Guess I'm Floating, Largehearted Boy, Said the Gramophone, Gorilla vs. Bear. I titled a ninth-grade biology report "The Suburbs are Killing Us," after one of the blogs. My favorite was "Music for Kids Who Can't Read Good," a precocious booster of Sufjan Stevens.

The time I spent on these blogs was not about developing an encyclopedic or erudite musical knowledge, which I didn't do. It was about yearning for a spot among the "indie kids" I saw on those websites. I imagined them to be people who shared my love of Bright Eyes and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and also wore rectangular glasses and cardigans and took artsy photos in their small Midwestern towns. It strikes me that this archetype doesn't exist anymore. It has also occurred to me that every indie kid had probably spent that much time alone, on the internet, wanting something more. Loneliness was wrapped up in the archetype.

I had one friend who understood: Jill. But she lived in El Paso, so almost our entire friendship took place over AIM We commiserated about the boring kids at school. We contemplated those artsy photos, calling them images of "alluring lives." We swooned over Conor Oberst.

What did we mean when we said "alluring" to each other, over and over again? I think we meant people who looked content, self-assured, happy in their friendships, and like they were having fun.

Jill kept a transcript of our conservations. She sent it to me two years ago, a decade later. Reading it, I cringed. I could see myself clawing to fit in with dumb fads from school, of speech patterns and crude jokes and standoffishness, lines drawn in the sand about what was "cool" or not. I could see myself afraid to let myself be quiet or happy in my solitariness. On the flipside I could see the things I've always looked up to Jill for: her reserve, her maturity.

WordPainter777: have you heard of Rilo Kiley? I don't know all of their music but I like

what I've heard

carikube42: no, i haven't

WordPainter777: well. you should check them out

carikube42: **ok**

When I discovered them for myself soon thereafter, on one of the blogs, we talked about them properly.

WordPainter777: I got Execution of All Things and I love it..... I met a girl at school who is OBSESSED with Rilo Kiley. She was so shocked when I told her I liked them

carikube42: oh that's so cool. no one at my school has ever heard of them

WordPainter777: I'm one of basically three of us at my school

carikube42: i kept asking because i had bulletproof stuck in my head last week and no one

had heard of them WordPainter777: :(

carikube42: i know! thye're all so lame

As you do.

In addition to talking daily, Jill and I also sent each other mix CDs in the mail at every holiday, birthday, and new season. She came to Colorado to visit in the summer and we bought the new Shins CD and we went to an Andrew Bird concert. She collected thirty Bob Dylan albums. We had a joint Thom Yorke dance party, each alone in our rooms with AIM open, when Radiohead's In Rainbows came out. But more than any of the other artists we compiled for ourselves, I held onto Rilo Kiley and Jenny Lewis. I fell asleep to the last five songs of *The Execution of All things*, played on my CD player, every night for a year.

Their music balanced tenderness and raw emotion, perfect for the ages when the platform falls out from beneath your emotions and you need all the help you can get. You need the heavy drumbeats and synth melody of "A Better Son/Daughter" to stomp your feet to; you need the tragic acoustic guitar on "The Absence of God" and the sad, strange narrative of "A Man/Me/Then Jim" when you feel like crying for no reason; you need the optimistic hand-clapping and expansiveness of "With Arms Outstretched" when you have a good day. And all of rooted in a landscape not just distinctly American but born of prairie suburbs and road trips following I-80 and I-15—a world I remain fascinated by and attached to.

Equal to the music was the image of Jenny herself. Sexuality, glamor, and pluck rolled into a compact woman with wavy red hair. A style icon for those women who want to dress themselves, but also work for themselves, write their own material, and be hotter than, and cooler than, the boys in the room. She was a reminder that women deserve to be paid attention, without falling into the trap being a diva.

Looking at the !!! on "Rise Up With Fists!!!" I still feel a flash of what it felt like to be in ninth grade, listening to *Rabbit Fur Coat* on the day it came out, on the car stereo of my mother's Passat in the parking lot of a now-closed Office Depot on Colfax Avenue in Denver. Savoring each song, prematurely wondering if I would ever recover the feeling of hearing the songs' country syncopation and the Watson Twins' ethereal harmonies for the first time, waiting for a new song before I flipped each page in the liner booklet, filling my mind with images of Los Angeles and Las Vegas, of motels, airstreams, affairs, guitars. The excitement and terror of being unformed, the prospect of becoming a woman.

What kind of woman did I want to be? I made the mistake of looking at the photos and then looking downcast at my gangly, virgin, plainly-dressed self, wishing I had been made differently: smaller, edgier, confident in front of a camera. Of wanting to look like Jenny Lewis.

I'm a Modern Girl / But I Fold in Half So Easily

By the end of high school, and decided I needed to learn to dress myself. In Jenny's image, I wanted to dress myself in vintage clothing. But I felt that I was learning to clothe myself from scratch, that I had a late start against all the girls whose mothers had taken them shopping, who already knew how to act in stores, knew how to make conversation with salespeople, knew what looked good on them.

During my first semester of college, I managed to buy two dresses: one slim, synthetic, navy fifties housewife dress with a mandarin collar and tiny white dots; the other a stiffer, button-up black dress with a print of poppies. I followed them up with an order of lace-up leather ankle boots from Etsy. The first time I wore the boots and the housewife dress to class, I realized with a jolt that I didn't feel uncomfortable, square, insecure in my clothes. When I wore them to a party, I suddenly felt good, I believed that people wanted to talk to me. I didn't feel ugly on the dance floor, or unwanted standing around socializing.

My environmentalist side still haunted me with the horrors of consumerism. My mother's affirmations that girls who spent time on their appearance were vain and unintelligent bounced around in my head. The nascent feminist inside of me told me I was above basing my self-esteem on the trappings of femininity. And yet I felt so much more confident. I felt like I could finally become a woman I wanted to be. How do you square those things? Kate Zambreno writes in *Heroines: It took me years before I could confess my love of make-up or clothes.*

Nor did I stop fighting with my self-esteem instantly. Most days, I still went out in my old clothes, the shapes all wrong, feeling stodgy and graceless. There were moments in college, surrounded by kids who had grown up in New York or LA, when I felt like the popular girls that hung over me in middle school had been replaced with new ones, coastal and hip, light years beyond the old ones. Especially with them around, I realized that it was still possible to feel awkward when I was wearing the clothes I liked. Feeling good about what I was wearing wasn't the answer to all my problems. But it was almost a silver bullet. Dressing in ways that I felt comfortable was a gift of confidence I couldn't have learned, built up, or imagined.

So slowly, I found a way to catch up. I learned to dress myself on my own terms. I wasn't wearing clothes that my mom thought looked nice, I wasn't trying to look like any era of popular girls, I wasn't even trying to look like Jenny Lewis. Just as I stuck with Rilo Kiley for their love of American vernacular geography, for the stories of lives playing out across the county's landscape, as I deepened my relationship to Americana in music and art and literature, I started to dress myself in the material culture of the country. Maybe I couldn't pull off hotpants, would never be sexy in the way that Jenny is, but Americana—that I could do. With my own body, in my own way. On a road trip with a friend, I gleaned all the small towns: Ariat ankle boots from a ranch supply store in Valentine, Nebraska, loafers and a green belt in Taos, and a red collared shirt from the Nazarene Thrift Store in Monte Vista, Colorado. A silk polka dot blouse ended the quest Jill and I had started years before to outfit ourselves like 1966 Bob Dylan. I collected cowboy shirts from thrift stores across the southwest.

/ Now that you've seen almost all of America /

Google-image "jenny lewis" instead of Rilo Kiley, and you'll see the promotional photos from her solo work. Jenny in a red dress on the vinyl seats of a diner's soda fountain. On a motel floor in a halter dress, its floral print matching the bedspread behind her. When there aren't boys around, she covers up a little, but the results are no less magnetic. It's not about what men think, and it never was.

I rarely buy clothes now. Groceries and a car and other expenses infringe on my disposable income. But it's been a few years since the clothes I feel good in finally overtook the older, sloppier clothes. My closet is a line of unusual, dated fabrics and delicate seams. The Ranch Wife Boots. The Bob Dylan blouse. Prairie Dress. Mexican Dress. Uzbek Dress. Fancy Jeans. Riot Grrl Shorts A, B, C. Snap Shirt. Gradient Shirt. In that way the process of learning to be a woman, inasmuch as it was tethered to crafting the image of the person I wanted to be, is complete. I've learned to admire my body. Practiced thinking it's sexy. In my own way, with my own limbs and my own hair and my own clothes. What remains is to go and be that woman. I go out the door every day feeling like a fun and interesting version of myself who's also astute and talented at my work. That's how I reconcile consumerism with my environmentalism and now-virulent feminism. My work is worth little if I don't feel good enough about myself to go and do it.

After I got Jill's email, I went wild for the "Just One of the Guys" video. I loved the jangling intro, the pastel color scheme, the lip-synching and crossdressing. The Jenny, clearly older, limbs covered (but so well), rocking out with her friends, posturing like dudes. "This is a significant cultural moment!" I called, giggling, at my boyfriend's sister to make her come watch the video with me. I listened over and over. I thought over my love of Rilo Kiley and Jenny Lewis, and what steps to womanhood they had provided me. Now I was there, and they'd remained. Just days before, I'd belted the lyrics to "Under the Blacklight" as I drove down the freeway. More importantly, I needed to call Jill, whose friendship had played midwife to my womanhood in a way that had nothing to do with makeup or clothes.

It took awhile before I felt like I understood the song. Slowly I started to realized that Jenny was talking about the way women are always outsiders, and become more so as we age. Talking about how women can't stay young forever, even when we hang out with guys who pretend to be able to. She'd thrown off some of her veils of glamor: still hot, but in a more grown-up, forthright, and approachable way. She'd taken on an image of a smart, self-assured adult. It didn't seem like a bad place to be—not staying young forever, but finding a way to be oneself at every age. Not just a comeback: what an alluring life.

Caroline Tracey is a writer and geography PhD student, originally from Colorado and currently studying at the University of California, Berkeley. In the intervening time she graduated from Yale University with a BA in Russian Literature, held a Fulbright research fellowship to Kyrgyzstan, and worked on a cattle ranch. Her writing has appeared in Drunken Boat, 3:AM, Public Books, [PANK], Nowhere, and elsewhere. Find her at cetracey.wordpress.com.

Fortune's Gym

BY MARK VALLEY

I'm in the gym, in a ring, shadow boxing with some imaginary fighter here in front of me throwing punches. He moves; he leaves openings. I jab. I throw the cross. He counters. I feel the sting and bump. I keep moving. I've done this since I was a kid in upstate New York. Forty years ago, my father held up his hands, "Come on, left right left." My small, soft fists would pop just above the meat of his palm, in that sweet spot. He wore a sweatshirt and khaki pants. Converse sneakers. He moved around in the driveway, on the grass, I followed. I wanted that pop sound when I connected with my father. We didn't talk much in my teens and I hit a heavy bag in college so much I almost broke my wrist. I was a baby-faced middleweight back then. My first few college fights were TKOs; I had a good right hand. I still remember the fight with Rob Mueller, All American, with his grace and reach. First round I caught him with a straight right on the chin; his eyes went so wide I knew it was over. I think the surprise dropped him. Still can sting a trainer's hand on a good day if I snap my hip into it. Now it's just me and the shadow moving around the ring; I have it all to myself for the moment. Sometimes I hear the crowd, feel firm wraps and leather gloves. My legs are light and quick again. I'm the undefeated middle-weight contender. I step toward the shadow. He works the body. I counter up high and roll right, left hook straight right, jab and out.

I'm in Fortune's Gym on Sunset; it's one step up from Freddy's place, Wild Card. I don't go there anymore, some crazy pay per round trainer/felon got a dog eye for me after an argument and I stopped going for a while and never went back. He wapped me on the head too many times with his mitts and I glove pushed him into the ropes. Some really primal guys get that look, like you got a glimpse at some old fear of theirs, and now you gotta die. You know it's just not going to end well. Just the same, Freddy's place is sweaty, hot and crowded, and there are no showers. Just filled with young killers hoping to make some change out of the game, and us LA actors looking to get some street credibility, harden up our delicate spots: nose, chin, pride, torso in my case. My middleweight. Same thing here at Fortune's really. I use the whole ring. Shrugging some uppercuts with a hook and pivot left out of the way. Shadow gets angry when I connect. I gotta stay out of the way. Sometimes he disappears completely and I fake it, fighting something I'm not even imagining. It's a sweet and complicated science.

I see a face I recognize ringside. It's Nolan Pickett, from Canada, the actor rummages through his bag. We worked together before. On an action show I starred on, my last big job really. We didn't leave on good terms. It's always haunted me that I made a joke when he said he was from the Yukon. "What's there to do up there besides huff gasoline with the natives?" He paused and replied with icy calm. "My mother is a native. They are having a difficult time up there." Oh shit. "I'm sorry" I said immediately, but the damage had been done and we left it at that, probably never to be friends. But here he was. Fuck it.

I say "Hey Nolan" all friendly, "How're you doing?"
He looks up. He sours, a blip on the radar, but recovers with a smile. We chat a little bit, like people

who really don't like each other that much, but as actors we manage.

"I like this gym," he says, "they are cool with us guys who like to kick. I like to kick." And there it is, I smell his weakness. He feels out of place; he needs to kick. I want to reply, "Yeah we are cool with that, as long as you Capoeira dancers keep that shit over there." And nod to the padded floor at the end of the gym where all the MMA BJJ dudes like to hug and kick, wrestle and roll around with each other. But I didn't say it. Not yet. Because I saw Nolan, with his short cut red hair, muscular thin frame, head bowed slightly, cheekbones, good looking guy, Sci-Fi TV star, humble, Canadian. Nolan, in this little gym full of hard work, metal, brick, ce-ment, leather, sand and afternoon sweat... he's one of us. One of the guys with the hard dads. We can spot each other, like jews and veterans. Guys with the hard dads we keep our heads bowed in the gym and silently train to hit first and hit back if it happens again. We know that one unseen punch from anyone anywhere can hurt on the inside worse than the outside. Always hitting back at something; that one punch I didn't expect that could come again.

My trainer Max Hawley steps into the ring with his pads and I set about putting some combinations together I'll never use, training to win the fights from the past. He wears me down. I hit with a smack pop-pop and shuffle out, pivot whap, slip under body head. Nolan's hitting a heavy bag alone, with his skinny bare legs.

"Marty. Wake the fuck up," Max says. He's a Vietnam vet, former marine and journey-man heavyweight from Somerville, Mass. He's tall, moon faced with a fist like, yes, a Christmas ham

"I didn't think you had any friends," he chides. I counter with a quick jab on his pad, almost beating him to it, a boxer's way of saying keep up with ME.

"Ah, there it is, snap it out there." One slip two three. And Max swings wide with the pad over my head and comes toward me,

"Get out of there. Get out of there. Your fucking legs will save ya. Every time." We go through a few more rounds. Max gets me winded moving around so much, but it's my style too. I am not a heavy sit in the pocket and slug it out fighter. I like to Mayweather it, sting and wait for an opening. Otherwise, I get hit when I spar and I bleed pretty quickly. And I am not getting any faster on defense really.

"That's all a fight is, you don't beat on someone, you fucking bore them to death, little jab here, stay loose, breath. Wait for it. Do the work. You working now?"

"Fuck no." Whap bap.

"Auditions?"

"None." Bap bap thump.

Once in a while Max will drop arms mid round like an argument just broke out.

"Wait a minute, hold on here, don't you have some iron-in-the-fire bullshit that some-body wants to do but you are waiting for some big fucking exec to green light or some shit?"

"Not right now, no."

"Most honest sonofabitch here, something will come, come on move, move, keep fucking moving. Fighting is not fighting. Relaxation. In the nose, deep breaths. Relax."

He's coming at me with the pads in the air again. Showing me how to beat him. Showing me his lessons from the ring, Khe Sahn, or being homeless for a while.

After about five rounds I am rubber tired but still shuffling. And in to share the ring with his trainer comes a dude that makes <u>me</u> sour and my skin cools. Sean Michaels. That fucking douchebag got himself in shape. I wanted to like him about five years ago when we worked together on my exwife's show. We might have had a chance if Kate hadn't hated him so much, and I had to be the fucking hero, "Sean, just don't yell at her." I said in my leather jacket, jeans and boots bad-assery. In some swank holding area where actors are interviewed about their TV shows, and my ex Kate's green eyes narrow from another table with the question of my manhood hanging somewhere in that blond wavy hair. He stepped back from me, "Marty all due respect but I have to protect my work" and nodded with civility like a fucking squire, flipped his hipster scarf back, and trotted off like the cat's pajamas. A few weeks later he yelled at her again on set. I didn't follow up and confront him on it. I regret that. It still sits in me, weak and chilling. But me and Kate split after only year together. Still making sense out of that myself. She was not easy to live with; neither was I.

She stood on the wood floor of our kitchen on that last night, trembling with resentment and a goblet of white wine. "You do your little action show and sit at your computer all night when I get home. Meanwhile I am treated horribly at work, as if you care. Sean yelled at me AGAIN. No one has any respect for you. You aren't a MAN. I think you are GAY." She slurs that last one at me hard, and surly.

I had a paper route when I was young. Maybe twelve or so. We all folded our papers in the printing warehouse on a smooth steel shelf. Printing press cranked and drummed in the background. Charlie Dishaw was from the 2nd Ward and thought he was tough as hell. He said, "Well it looks like Martin Reilly is going to be the last one out of here again, the little FAGGOT."

I hit him with a right cross smack on his nose. Probably broke it. He froze as blood ran down his chest, and onto his folded newspapers in the cloth bag in front of him. That was the end of that.

Kate stomped her foot on the floor. I wondered how this sounded to the apartment downstairs. "Who are you texting?!" her arms akimbo. "Ex-girlfriends, all of them." I said flatly. That had to hurt. She looked at me, those big eyes, open and frightened. Her perfect body, skin, health, history, career, family, and that ass—what an ass. She was winded but recovering quickly. She drew a breath like a sword, "HOW DARE YOU!!," —she roared, barefoot in her flannel shirt and Thai corduroy fishing pants. A complication with Tonsilitis as a child left her voice sound-ing downright medieval sometimes. Rilke said that thing about how beauty is terrifying as it deigns to destroy us. Well she was scary, hot and deigning to destroy me. But I had had enough. Every night was a performance of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, except only one of us was drinking and hadn't read the play. A man can only take so much, but sometimes I think I could have taken more. I could have fought for us that night. Not sure how. Maybe I could have said, "Kate, I'm sorry. It's a thoughtless breach of trust, I know. I've drifted off and you are having a difficult time. I take it personally, and I don't have the courage to face you and say I'm worried, that we might not last, not like this. I don't want to lose you. I don't want to lose myself. I still love you. Let's get some sleep and talk tomorrow."

Ding.

Max backs me up against the ropes,

"Ok Dreamboat, you got 30 seconds left to hit me with everything you got." I go hard at

the pads and the body belt throwing hooks, hips and jabs. Sean is behind him with his chin in the air talking to his trainer. My limbs ache, but I want Sean in front of me, I want to hit him in the bottom rib. He's not one of us. He doesn't clock the anger and pain of other men, doesn't fear the shank in the dark. I do, in a gym, in a ring, in a pad, a glove, wrapped hand, in a fucking kitchen, in my bones still fighting their way out. I finish with a straight right.

"Good work kid," Max pats my shoulder like my father, in that too rough a way that makes me wonder if he has ever gently and fearlessly laid a hand on another human being be-fore. I get it.

I stepped outside the ring. Sat on a bench, took off a glove and squirted some cold water in my mouth. Arms on my thighs, my head was tingling, that beautiful feeling when recovery is on the way, rolling home down the grassy hill. Sean slips through the ropes and sits at the end of the bench. He's got a Tai Kwon Do vibe going. Long board shorts and a tight white lycra shirt that screams Brazillian Jui Jitsu. A little stiff, but strong. Straight punches. Upright posture. Hard kicks. He'd stand his ground, would need a right uppercut after some slips and body work. I'd have to stay out of the way of some hard and fast combinations, but doable. Fuck it.

"Sean" I say, "Why'd you do it?" He chuckles, nervous. Haughty.

"Why'd I do what, exactly?"

"You uh, you yelled at her again." He shifts around as if to get a better look at me, with my head hung, still breathing deep and heavy.

"Marty? That was what? Five years ago? And I am not sure I am clear on what you are accusing me of, if indeed that was an accusation."

"Relax Sean, I am just asking."

"Don't tell me to relax, are you accusing me of something?"

I hear my father at times like this. "Listen, there is going to come a time when you feel it, a turn-ing point, where a confrontation could go either way, toward a fight or slide down into nothing. You just make sure you get in the first punch. Because even if you get the shit beaten outta ya, at least you got one good one in."

I've gone this far I might as well say it.

"Sean, when I was married to Kate and that time I asked you to stop yelling at her on set, and you arched up. I heard you did it again."

"Are you accusing me of something from five years ago?" His voice goes a little high. Tommy his trainer, former nationally ranked kick boxer leans over the ropes at us

"Everything ahhright down there? You ladies gonna staht a gym wahr?" Everybody's got a Boston accent these days.

"No, no. All good," I say. "We are just talking. Go fuck vahself." Tommy laughs. You can give any guy shit if their name ends in a "y." 'End-in-a-y' guys roll with the punches. I have known him a little while, and I was showing off. Sean looked at his gloves, then tried to make some sense, tactfully.

"Marty listen, like I said, that was a long time ago and I have been working a lot since then and don't think about things back then much." Touché fucker. He continues,

"I mean it was difficult in the beginning with Kate we didn't see eye to eye and I don't think you helped matters much by, well...."

"Sean, she was my wife. I asked you not to fucking yell at her, and you did it again."

There was a pause for a while. Both of us not sure where this is going to go. Andre that heavy Greek actor, was skipping rope on the thumping side of the plywood stand. Nolan was slowly drubbing the speed bag. Dump a da dump a da dump. The shuffle began at the bell behind us of other feet on the canvas. Later afternoon sun was coming in the doors sideways and delicate grey particles wafted around the black-leather heavy bags slung from a thick wooden beam over the concrete floor. I had on grey shorts and a soaked blue zip up Rocky pullover to keep the sweat from splashing off on Max.

I remember my last fight. A lanky black kid from Fordham. He was fast. Only a freshman. I tried to box him, but he'd jab and cross so quick, like Joe Louis, I couldn't even touch him. He made my face a blind pulp. Just a bloody mess of black eye and swollen cracked open lip. I never went down. I don't think I ever touched the guy. It all just rained in on me. Why is this happening? I asked myself. Why? As my arms flailed out to stop the beating.

"What could be more humiliating than standing in front of people half naked and getting beat up?" - Mike Tyson

Sean dabbed a white towel on his face and held it there for a moment like he didn't want to come out from behind it.

"Marty, I am just not sure what it is you are trying to say." I looked up at him. He's a good bit taller than me and with that posture of his. I saw a younger face, mid thirties or so. Dark hair. A former boy-actor becoming a vigorous young man in his prime. And it hit me, he might have been training since that day, or days like it, since that day I called him on something in New York at some TV press junket. He claimed afterward that we almost fought. I didn't re-ally remember it that way. He did walk away but I remember a flash of fear, of nervousness be-fore he left to be interviewed. I cleared my throat, looked around, saw Max waiting for his \$25 at the desk. I said what came next.

"I just wanted to say that it hurt. Still does. I felt disrespected. Might have been irrational but that's how it felt." I put my gloves in my North Face duffle bag, and continued,

"I was envious of you. Still am I guess." I zipped up my bag. He was speechless.

"And though it was a pretty long time ago, I am sorry for getting up in your grill like I did before you were going on camera, you guys were adults you could have sorted it out, and you probably did right?"

Kate emailed last year. Wanted to see how I was. I said fine. She said fine. We don't talk really. I never see her. I don't go to Fortune's much anymore either. Not since Max died. Heart attack. Last thing he said to anyone was, "Don't ever eat at Red Lobster." He meditated three times a day. With the exception of his last meal I think his last years were peaceful. My father and I spend more time together. I never knew him that well. I still flinch when he puts his arm on my shoulder. He's trying. I teach a sparring class now in East LA, mostly women. I keep them mov-ing, and sometimes I let them hit me as hard as they want. Some are downright terrifying. Nolan got a job on a really cool TV series, he's playing an interstellar cop and kicking the shit out of bad guys. I stopped waiting for that next big acting thing, I had a good run, I take what comes. That shadow is still around, in

my corner though, and I let him out when necessary. I go easy on myself these days and do one thing at a time. I breath, deep breaths, through my nose. Relax.

"Oh, And one more thing" I said and turned back to Sean like my hero Columbo.

"Notwithstanding my apology and all, I gotta say I still think you are a whiny little bitch for yelling at a woman like that in front of a whole production. Twice." Sean stands up and Tommy puts a hand on his chest.

"And you Tommy are an ass for training this fucking retard." I was on a roll.

"Jesus Mahty what's wrong with you?" Sean goes apoplectic

"What the fuck? You want to spar?" Sean says. "Marty I will fucking KILL you." Place goes quiet. I consider it, then:

"Nah, I'm good Sean."

"What the fuck you can't just say that and walk" —-

"SHUT THE FUCK UP OUT HEEAH" Justin Fortune former heavyweight and Aussie boss settles it large and in charge.

"Marty get the fuck out of my gym. Sean get back to work or you can fuck off too. Take your hissy fits somewhere else." I give Max his \$25

"Good choice" he says and unfolds the bills to count.

"He probably would have fuckin killed you. See you tomorrow."

TOC

Mark Valley is an accomplished film and television actor, West Point Graduate and Army Veteran who now lives in Los Angeles, CA. He is a comic and writer as well, slugging it out writing several TV pilots, one of which is being shot in November in his hometown in Northern New York. He is just recently started submitting his stories for publication. He is an advocate for Veteran's Causes, Mental Health, and Urban Cycling.

Cosmos

BY TAD TOBEY

the dream spoke and i chewed the words of it as though i were discovering my tongue with my teeth. an echo of you punctured these depths like a whale's song. your wet curls drying like seaweed upon the shore of my chest. i watched your shoulders flow and ebb with every breath and i wondered if the moon filled your lungs. when you kissed me i swallowed stars. and here in this space was boundless silence. there we drifted.

TOC

Tad Tobey attended Indiana University where he studied Theatre and Creative Writing. Shortly after his graduation in 2012 Tad moved to Los Angeles where he now calls a quaint little apartment in the dark heart of Hollywood his home.



string theory

BY MARK A. FISHER

yes I know this swaddling darkness where there are no pills that can bleach it gray no bright moonlight to touch that horizon of a world gone small shrunk down to just these walls inconsolate facing inwards from the abyss looking back from the place my voice goes when I stop talking and I fade like those echoes back into the crowded isolation of the grave and the string I plucked is silent

Mark A. Fisher is a writer, poet, and playwright living in Tehachapi, CA. His poetry has appeared in: A Sharp Piece of Awesome, Dragon Poet Review, Altadena Poetry Review, Penumbra, Elegant Rage: A Poetic Tribute to Woody Guthrie, and many other places. His chapbook, drifter, is available from Amazon. His plays have appeared on California stages in Pine Mountain Club, Tehachapi, Bakersfield, and Hayward. His column "Lost in the Stars" (http://mathnerde.blogspot.com/) has appeared in Tehachapi's The Loop newspaper for several years. He has also won cooking ribbons at the Kern County Fair.

Check Your Teeth Before You Smile

BY SARAH HOENICKE

"I know what made me so uncomfortable yesterday."

Frank puts down the pieces of the puzzle he'd been trying to sort. He picks up the whiskey and pours some into his tea, holds the bottle out to Rose and raises an eyebrow.

"No, I've got enough."

Feeling his gaze on her—a warm pressure on the side of her neck and face—she says, "Watching your mom and Derrek eat."

She pauses, then rushes on, her face warming, her eyes on her cup. "I don't mean this to sound judgmental at all, because I think my reaction stems mostly from concern for their health—especially since they're both overweight—but I really think it's the way they eat that puts me off."

Frank grabs his mug, gets up from the table and walks over. He moves the pillows at the end of their short couch to the floor and sits down facing his wife.

"I could use a break," he says, pointing with his chin toward the puzzle in progress at the table. "I wasn't exactly comfortable either, but they are my family."

"I know. I knew as soon as Derrek tried to get political—and you put the brakes on—that you weren't in your element. And I wasn't trying to be judgmental about the food. I meant the way that they eat—shoveling food into their mouths, without thought to what died or suffered to proffer up the meat and butter and cheese and milk—everything that went into that. I'm sorry, honey. I shouldn't have said anything."

But she didn't regret having said it.

She scoots closer, removes the remaining pillows.

He takes her hand.

"You're not making me feel bad by saying any of that. I felt the same way. And I still eat meat."

He watches their hands, fingers locked. "I don't know. I guess the more that we read and become aware of animal abuse and all that, the harder it is to be around people who don't care. And they don't care about it at all," he says, twisting her ring with his thumb and forefinger.

Rose sets her mug on the dark wood coffee table. Pushing Frank's hair behind his ear, she rests her hand on the side of his face, traces her thumb over his cheekbone, along his jaw, to his chin.

"Derrek ate his piece of pie in two bites and squirted Ready Whip into his mouth. While it still had pie in it."

"I know. My mom was talking about how they were going to return the plates that we used for the meal. After they'd used them. And one got chipped when we were cleaning up."

Rose rolls her eyes and considers her lap, tightening her abdominal muscles.

"The most upsetting thing is the TV being on all day, even through dinner. I mean, I guess we could've asked them to turn it off, but the looks they give me when I talk sometimes! It's like I really shouldn't say anything at all around them. If you could've seen your mom when I was trying to get her to start composting. She thought I was absolutely insane."

"Well, you had just said no to eggnog and pie after only eating roasted cauliflower and green beans for dinner."

He unlocks his fingers from hers and begins scratching her forearm. She closes her eyes.

Her voice soft, she says, "Everything had dairy or meat or MSG or bleached and enriched breadcrumbs in it."

Frank leans forward and lifts the tortoise-shell glasses from her nose. He kisses each of her closed eyelids. She tilts her head up.

She says, "I wish they would take time with their food," and exhales, her chest depressing. "Savor it. Eat it slowly, and think about where it came from."

Frank nods into her neck, his nose brushing the fine blond hairs behind her ear. His phone rings where he left it on the dining room table.

"Shit." His breath is warm on her ear. She can smell chamomile, whiskey—flowery and biting.

He stands up.

"I'm glad I set that alarm," he says, reaching the phone and shutting it off. "I would've totally forgotten I told Sam I'd meet him for a drink."

Then, as he registers the dejection on her face: "I told him I'd meet him, baby."

He walks to her, bends to rake the hair from her neck, and bites the skin right below her ear. "He's leaving town tomorrow morning," he murmurs, "and I didn't get to see him for Thanksgiving yesterday or on Wednesday for the flag football game, and we've gotten together for every daybefore-Thanksgiving game since I was like fifteen."

He kneels in front of her. "I feel really bad to have broken with that."

She nods, but sits up a little straighter, making her breasts more pronounced. She knows he can see down her shirt.

"Baby—" he sits down across from her again. "All this shit with my mom, you know it just makes me more grateful for you and for what we have, for how healthy we are with our choices."

Rose smiles, closed-lipped. She kisses his mouth and scratches the nape of his neck.

"You better get going."

Rose opens the heavy wood door and cold air rushes into the hallway.

"Come in, Julie. It's so good to see you and Mia."

The two come in, absurdly holding hands, though Mia must be at least eight—Rose can't remember.

They wipe and stamp their boots on the rug.

"What got you outside, with all this snow?"

Julie smiles a wide, guileless smile. "I was left with three extra pies and a cheesecake after yesterday. We had a little mix-up at my house and three people ended up bringing dessert," she says, and hands Rose a box wrapped in brown paper, tied with sparkly red and green string.

So you're going to pawn one off on us.

"So sweet of you to share," Rose says, her cheeks straining with the effort of smiling. "I hope you all had a good Thanksgiving?"

"We did, didn't we, Miss Mia?" Julie hugs Mia—nodding and blushing—into her side. "How was yours?"

"Oh, it was fine," Rose says, balancing the weight of the package flat on her palm. "I'm so sorry to cut this short when you just walked over in the snow, but I was just about to hop in the shower. Frank will be home any minute and we have a show we were hoping to catch tonight."

Julie reaches out, pats Rose's forearm. "Of course! I didn't want to stay and take up your time anyway. You two must get out all the time, not having kids." She hugs Mia again. "I know everyone's busy this time of year. We should all get together for drinks some night this week, if you and Frank have the time."

Frank walks from their green Honda Civic to the red door of the dive bar. Squinting in the white winter light, he pulls the scratchy wool collar of his coat up against his neck.

The darkness inside the bar is complete. He waits for his eyes to adjust, then spots Sam sitting at a table, talking across the sparsely populated room to the bartender. Sam stands. He's pillar-like: a combination of staggering height and girth. He was still incredible on the football field the few times a year they got the guys together to play, though he'd thickened around the middle.

"Frankie!" They grasp hands and Sam pulls him into a hug, pounding his back.

"Hey, Sam."

They sit and the bartender sets a beer in front of each of them, leaving a stack of menus near the edge of the table. Frank surveys the choices, a guilt-ridden desire settling on his chest.

"I'm going to order two burgers with fries—cheese, right?" Sam asks.

Frank continues reading the menu. He had known before coming in: No organic label. No words

promising the meat was sustainably raised or grass-fed or non-GMO or that it was prepared without additives or MSG.

"Sure."

As the bartender walks away, their order in hand, Frank calls him back.

"Do you have a side salad?"

"Sure, yeah, what kind of dressing do you want?"

"No dressing, no croutons."

The bartender nods, leaves.

"No dressing? No croutons? Why even have a salad? You really are a fucking girl now." He chucks his fist against Frank's shoulder and flicks Frank's ponytail.

Frank shoves off Sam's abuse, but smiles. "It'll make Rose happy if I tell her I ate a salad."

"You have to actually eat one to be able to say you ate one? And do you have to eat it dry and boring?"

"I don't like lying to Rose," says Frank.

"I get that, I get that," Sam nods and takes a long drink of beer.

"Lying about a salad," Sam laughs, shaking his head. "If I didn't lie every once and a while, I'd have gotten divorced a long time ago."

Frank sits up a little straighter, takes his jacket off. "I'm willing to eat a salad to make my wife happy. You go to strip clubs whenever you are away from family—which, by the way, I've been meaning to ask—find a replacement ring for the one you lost? How did that happen again?"

Sam laughs, slapping his thigh. "You're right about that! I'd suffocate in your marriage—not that I mean any disrespect towards Rose—she's a beautiful woman."

He drains his glass. The bartender sets their burgers and fries in front of them, putting Frank's wilted greens off to the side.

Sam points with his fork. "You're going to eat that?"

Frank smiles, a large bite of his burger in his mouth. He closes his eyes, breathes out through his nose—medium rare, factory-farmed, white bread enveloped goodness.

Done chewing, Frank asks, "How was the game Wednesday? I was so mad I missed it."

Frank sips, sits back, but Sam finishes his drink in two gulps and puts his jacket on.

"I've gotta head out."

"Oh," Franks says. The tension that had been building, that he hadn't consciously noted, drops out of his chest.

"Let me know next time you're down." He gathers his jacket from the back of his chair, takes another swallow of his drink and lays money on the table. "I'll walk you out."

In the parking lot, Frank watches from the driver's seat of his car as Sam reverses his big black Dodge straight into the street. They wave. The truck disappears around the corner, and Frank cuts the engine to the Honda.

Back into the bar, to the restroom. He takes a Ziploc from his inside coat pocket, and flosses, brushes his teeth. Swishing mouthwash from a travel-size bottle, he thinks about the emptiness of Sam's marriage, thinks warmly of Rose at home, lithe and supple. He checks his teeth, walks back outside.

Rose shuffles the contents of the refrigerator to make room for the parcel.

Upstairs, she showers, rubs lotion over her skin, dresses in a loose blue summer nightgown and gazes through the window at the reflection of the streetlamps on the snow. She likes that her smooth-shaven legs rub as she walks back down the stairs.

She sits on the bottom stair, texts Frank, asks when he'll be home. They had only briefly mentioned going to the show, and hadn't purchased tickets.

After taking the smallest measuring cup from the cupboard and a fork from the drawer, she opens the fridge.

Julie had given them the cheesecake. Rose didn't make her vegan lifestyle public, so she couldn't really fault Julie for this.

She takes the box from the refrigerator, thinking about what the dessert would do to her skin, her stomach, her sleeping pattern. She decides she will just have what the measuring cup can hold, that only.

She's been faithful, completely without dairy and meat for almost two years. She will savor every bite.

The cake is wrapped intricately in cling-wrap. Wrestling with the plastic, she uncovers half. With her fork, she fills her little cup, compacts the cake, levels it off. What's left on her fork doesn't count. It slides from the metal into her mouth and begins to melt.

A few moments pass. She skims the lip of the empty measuring cup with the flexed tip of her tongue, eyeing the cake on the counter, now absent that small piece.

Holding the empty measuring cup loosely between her thumb and forefinger like she's ready to drop it, she walks to the entryway. Her face near enough to feel the cold of the window mingling with the tiny hairs on her nose, she stretches, turns, unable to remember what the world beyond the window looked like.

Her body tense, an itchy urge permeating, spreading down her limbs, through her stomach and up her spine, she wraps the cake in its plastic, shuts the refrigerator door.

Walking the length of the living room, she straightens the white and black alternating pillows on the couch, picks up her cardigan, Frank's empty mug from earlier, the whisky bottle. Putting her sweater on the stairs, she takes the whisky to the cabinet, places the mug in the sink.

Her measuring cup there, still smeared with bits of cake, stares vacuous at her.

She fills the cup and eats the two bites quickly, puts the cup into the sink, feels the sweet food settle inside her as she rinses her fork. Her stomach bubbles.

Water off; the fork in her hand reflects the lights set in the ceiling as she turns it over and over.

She turns. The cake shines: A Christmas present. She unwraps it—the plastic beginning to lose its cling—takes a knife from the drawer and slices off a sliver. It falls from the fork when she tries to lift it to her mouth. Setting her fork down, she scoops the cake up with her fingers, leaving a cream smear on the black granite. Three bites before rinsing the fork again and setting it in a pan that had been soaking in the sink.

She leans on the counter opposite the cake, folds her arms over her ribs. Taking a deep breath, she tries to register satisfaction. Instead, an influx of energy vibrates along her muscles. Need jumps near her heart. All of the things she's read about satisfaction flow through her head:

The Japanese—or was it the Chinese—stop eating 30 minutes before they feel full because that's how long it takes for the brain to communicate with the stomach.

If she could just meditate on the food already in her stomach, she could be satisfied. If she could breathe in and out and create stillness in her mind, she could take control. She could stop.

Pushing away from the counter, sliding the silverware drawer open, Rose takes out another fork.

The house sits dark and quiet. Frank kills the engine and rolls down the window. His stomach expands and he burps, grimacing. The light comes on as he opens the glove compartment, and he snaps his head up toward the house, expecting Rose at the window, a witness.

But he'd smoked the last of the cigarettes the week before, when they were driving home from his colleague's hip co-ed baby shower.

It had been one of those rare moments in his long relationship with Rose: Her face had been relaxed as she drove along in the dark, their headlights illuminating the banks of dirty snow piled on either side of the street. Their windows down, her elbow resting on the doorframe, her hand floating in the icy wind, turning pink. She had laughed, taken the cigarette from Frank and shown him, pulling on the fag, leaving her other hand out the window—shown him she could drive with just her knee. He couldn't quite get beyond that, and it would always be a reason to stay, those moments of disconcerting freedom surrounded by years of perfect organization and visionary correctness.

Sam didn't know Rose, not Frank's Rose, who belly-laughed during sex sometimes, and who cared

more about the well-being of his family than he probably did. Sam was too limited by his own personality to even know his own wife, that poor woman, who didn't know her husband either. Frank's breath clouded his glasses, and it became clear to him how cold he was, sitting in the dark car watching the closest streetlight flicker and darken to orange, then black.

Rose had left the entry light on.

He removes his jacket, hangs it on a hanger over the towel laid out on the closet floor. The warmth of the house is friendly, a bit stifling after the purity of the cold. Though he'd been wearing waterproof boots, his socks are damp. They emit small squeaks with each step.

The kitchen lights are off, but he doesn't need them to get to the fridge. He opens the refrigerator door and closes it without surveying the contents, deciding he should eat something a little healthy, after the inordinate amount of fat he'd consumed at dinner.

Taking an apple from the bowl on the counter, cutting it and putting the core into the compost, he notices a paper towel laid over the top of the bin, so clean it appears suspect.

Lifting it, grimacing—food scraps have always bothered him—there sits a cheesecake, half gone, still on top of its cardboard packaging. He turns to scan the doorway of the kitchen. The house is dark, save the spots he's just walked through—the entry, the kitchen. Ocean sounds float down from Rose's noisemaker upstairs.

Opening the drawer, he pulls out a fork.

Sarah Hoenicke studied creative writing and journalism at Mills College. You can find her writing in the LA Review of Books, as well as in the Montreal Review, Necessary Fiction, Drunken Boat, Voices & Visions Journal, Cargoes, and elsewhere. She edits Entropy's arts and culture section, and calls San Francisco home.

Tinderbox

BY SEAN PESSIN

A soldier marched along the highroad, left, right, left, right, with his feet following in succession, his heels and toes moving in the same small and bold ways that all soldiers learn they ought to when walking. He had his knapsack on his back and a pocketknife by his side, for he had been to war and was now returning home, though he often on the battlefield hoped that he'd be returning to a different home than he had left. And on the road he met an old witch, a horrid-looking creature with long, crooked fingers and a long black velvet wrap and a long, wobbly gait that the witch seemed to ride while lumbering up the road that the soldier was marching down.

Good evening soldier, the witch said with a voice aching the way old knees creak when sitting, the way an old chair creaks when sat upon, the way rusty iron bends. The witch continued: My what a bright pocketknife and a beautiful gait, what a large knapsack and a furrowed brow you have, my fine, upstanding military man. I'll tell you what I will do for you since I have come upon you in such a state, you with your furrowed brow, and I, with my good temper, I shall grant that you may have as much money for your own as you can wish.

The soldier thanked the witch for an eternity that he would never be able to repay the favor, but he insisted that he'd try anyway, over and over, until the interest far outweighed the gift, because that is how much this wonderful present would mean to him; it would mean not returning home but making one.

Do you see that large tree yonder, said the witch, pointing to a tree that stood close by the wayside, a tree whose branches sprouted and shed and twisted and turned and bent and broke and lived and died all at once. The witch continued: It is hollow, so hollow that you could climb up to the top, and you would find a hole large enough for you to creep through, and thus you could get down into the obscured and empty center of the tree. I would tie a rope of knotted hemp around your waist that I have recycled from another tree in the forest, and I would pull you up again when I hear you call me by my name from behind the bark walls.

But what am I to do down in the tree, asked the soldier, suspicious and yet with a voice quivering and shaking with the greed of a man who is only seconds away from buying every thing he has ever dreamed of dreaming about.

What you are to do, the witch relayed, is fetch your fill of coin, to be sure, for as soon as you get to the bottom, you will find yourself in a wide passage; it is quite light at the bottom because more than a hundred bright brass cupolas are burning there. Then you will see three large doors of differing materials: one door is made of red glass, one door is made of blue glass, and one door is made of yellow glass; you can open them by offering a finger to each locked lock, which is such a small price to pay for what is inside. On opening the first door, the red door, you will enter a room that is completely unreadable, except for one detail, that in the middle of the room with the red door, on the floor, lies a large wooden chest carved from an ancient sequoia. A dog is seated on

it, a dog with eyes as large as teacups of the porcelain and gold variety, the kind that are reserved only for fancy teas shared with the people one never wants to entertain; but never you mind, don't trouble yourself about him, for I will lend you my red smock, bright and vibrant as ground beef; you must spread the smock out on the floor, then go briskly up to the dog with the porcelain and gold teacup eyes, seize him, and set him down on it. When that horrible task is done, you can open the wooden chest using the same key that you used to get into this red-doored room, and take as much money out of it as you please, as many copper coins as can fit in your pockets and knapsack and palms, because that chest contains none but copper coins. If you like silver better, you have only to go into the next room, the room with the blue glass door by offering a different finger, and what's inside is worth it; there you will find a dog with eyes as large as mill-stones, eyes that will grind you down as if you were wheat if you look directly into them. Don't be afraid of the dog with mill-stone eyes; you have only to set him down on my blue smock, dyed with a field's worth of woad, and then rifle the birch wood chest at your leisure, but if you would rather have gold than either silver or copper, that is to be had too, and as much of it as you can carry, if you pass on into the third chamber by offering a third finger. The dog that sits on this third wooden chest, a honey-pine box filled with gold, has eyes as large as a solar eclipse, eyes that will burn yours out of your sockets if you look directly into them, but don't be alarmed by this starry-eyed canine; if you set him down on my yellow smock, bright as a flash of lightning, he will do you no harm, and you can take as much golden treasure from the chest as you like.

The soldier contemplated this plan: Not a bad plan, that, said the soldier, shifting his weight from his heels to the balls of his feet and back again, rocking in this way a few more times before continuing. But how much of the money from the wooden chests, be it from the copper, the silver, or the gold, am I to give you, old witch, from my large pockets, and from my large knapsack, and from my large palms?

I will not take a single round coin from your well-timed soldier hands, returned the witch. The only thing the witch wanted the soldier to bring from the rooms was an old tinderbox made of simple driftwood which an old friend of the witch's left there by mistake last time the friend was down in the tree, and the witch told the soldier this.

Well, then, old witch, why don't you give me the hemp-twine rope and I'll be gone down the hollow of the tree and back before you even know it, said the soldier, rocking his weight from heel to ball again.

Here is the end of the rope from the other part of this forest, said the witch, and here are my smocks of many colors for you to seduce the dogs from the tops of the sequoia, birch, and honeypine chests filled with copper, silver, and gold.

So the soldier climbed the tree, wondered what kind of tree it could possibly be that is filled with fine woods and fine metals, let himself down through the hole in the trunk, and suddenly found himself in the wide passage, lighted up by a many hundred brass cupolas, just as the witch had described.

He stood outside the red glass door, eyeing the keyhole. The witch had said that he needed to

offer a finger to the hole, and so looked at his hands. The soldier was left-handed, but knew just how many objects were made for right-handed people: scissors, spiral-bound notebooks, pens, can openers, computer mice, and even his own pocketknife was technically right-biased. He thinks: Which hand has been hosting the finger to be offered?

Outside, the witch, who had been there for a half-hour or so hollered through the trunk to ask if the soldier needed help. The soldier answered by screaming as the red-glass door chewed off his right pinky, which opened the first door, the red glass one, and the soldier stood there dumbfounded for a minute or longer. The soldier noticed that the dog with eyes as large as porcelain and gold teacups sat there, staring at him as though in utter amazement from its perch atop the sequoia chest.

There's a good dog, said the soldier as he spread the witch's red smock on the floor, and lifted the animal upon it, careful not to rock its eyes from their saucer sockets, which would cause the teacup eyes to break as they made contact with the ground. He then filled his pockets with the copper coins in the chest, shut the lid, put the dog back in his place, and went back to the center of the hollow of the tree.

The soldier's eyes looked hungrily at the blue glass door. Then, they looked despondently at his hands with the large palms. He was less one pinky on his preferred hand, but, he thought to himself, if there is silver like there was copper in the chest in this room, then perhaps I can just buy the difference. There are prosthetics, after all, and with the cash, I would not have to wait at the VA.

The soldier exclaimed out loud a series of foul words that he felt great sorrow for using as the lock on the door froze his left ring finger off, for if he ever did manage to marry, he could just have a matrimonial finger cast out of a fine metal of his choosing, paid for by the silver coins. And again, the witch was right — there sat the dog with eyes as large as mill-wheels on top of the birch-wood chest in the middle of this room, just like the last room, just like the old witch had said.

Quit looking at me like that, remarked the soldier; it will make your eyes weak, and with that he set the dog down on the witch's blue smock, careful not to rock the dog's millstone eyes so they would not collide and crack. But when he beheld the vast quantity of silver the chest contained, he upturned his large knapsack and threw all his copper pieces away in disgust, and worked quickly to fill his pockets and his knapsack with the silver, though he noticed that the task was harder than before with two missing fingers.

Then he passed on into the third chamber at the loss of his left middle finger, because he could only think of two things that he got up to that required using the middle finger on his left hand, and in both cases the other middle finger would do just as well, he reckoned. The yellow door burned away this foregone finger. The dog in this chamber actually had a pair of eyes each as large as a sun, and they kept rolling round and round in his head as if they were heavenly bodies themselves, moving through the endless voids of space where even the stars themselves had no light.

G'evening, said the soldier, and he lifted his cap respectfully, for he had never seen such a huge dog, not on base, not over there, nowhere. He'd seen some spiders the size of cats, and vermin the size of cats, and cats that were much larger than any cat he had ever seen, living creatures that no one would believe existed without seeing them on their own, though he intended to tell the tale over and over whenever the soldier would be in a situation where people would be sharing their superlative stories: the fish caught when no one was looking was this big, the parts of this particular intimate partner were this big (or small) when we hooked up on the night you didn't come out with us, the sundae at the buffet two football fields long was this big but I finished the whole thing without brain freeze. He stood still for a minute or two, looking at him; then thinking, the sooner it's done the better he took hold of the immense creature, the soldier removed him from the chest to the floor, and raised the lid of the chest. There was quite the sight of gold in there, enough to buy not only all the fineries in his hometown, but all the sweets and savories, all the toys, whips, and gadgets in the world; yes, he must be satisfied now. Hastily the soldier threw out all the silver money he had stuffed into his pockets and knapsack, and took gold instead; not only his pockets and knapsack, but his soldier's cap and boots he crammed full of gold, but it was hard to stuff every gap full of gold with so many missing fingers—the coins slipped out of his hands practically at half the rate he was picking them up. When he finished, he could hardly walk for the weight he carried. He lifted the dog on to the chest again, slammed the door of the room behind him, and called out up through the hollow of the tree: Hello you old witch, pull me up again, though the soldier had to do this a few times before the witch caught on.

Have you got the tinderbox, asked the witch, through the bark of the tree, the rope coiled around her hand like a snake, though unlike a snake, the rope had no plans of its own once the soldier came back to the other side of the tree.

Pardon, witch, I've forgotten that part of my quest, shouted the soldier, and back he went to fetch it, searching the yellow room, and the blue room, and the red room, and finding it only when he once again cleared them in the order he had to begin with. The witch then drew the soldier up through the tree, and then helped him as he climbed down with his pockets and knapsack jingling with gold, so that he again stood in the highroad, his pockets, boots, knapsack, and cap stuffed with gold pieces, heavy and awkward.

What are you going to do with the tinderbox, asked the soldier as he adjusted his weight, shifting the knapsack from one shoulder to the next, then lifting it up and resting it on both shoulders to distribute the weight.

That's no concern of yours, returned the witch, for you've got your money, your pockets are positively brimming with the gold coins; please just give me my tinderbox, the witch said.

Well, take your choice, said the soldier: Tell me at once what you want with this inconsequential tinderbox that was laying at the bottom of the hollow of the tree, or I'll cut off your head.

I won't tell you, nor should I have to, nor should you violate the terms of our agreement, for I have given you more than enough to be thankful for, more than you can spend a lifetime paying back, lifetimes, even, screamed the witch.

So the soldier drew his pocketknife, butterflied it, and in more than a few swift saw motions, cut off the witch's head, more than a few because he had forgotten to sharpen the blade before leaving base, something the soldier regretted when he ended up splattering himself with the witch's blood. Then he made haste to knot all his money securely in each of the smocks (yellow, blue, and red), slung the whole kit across his back, put the tinderbox into his pocket, and went on to the nearest town.

It was a large, handsome city, full of skyscrapers and well-lit roads and cyclist lanes and pedestrian bridges and supermarkets and accounting firms and fast food restaurants. The soldier walked into the first hotel in the place, called for the best rooms, tipped the bellhop two whole gold coins, and ordered the choicest dishes for his dinner, for he was now a rich man, with plenty of gold to spend. The soldier told the bellhop when he brought up the dinner: For two more, you can shine my shoes, and did this with a wink that contorted his face.

The hotel staff who ended up cleaning his boots could not help thinking they were disgracefully shabby and worn to belong to such a wealthy guy; however, the next day the soldier provided himself with new boots, and very gay clothes. Our soldier was now a great man, and the people of the hotel were called in to give him information about all the places he should check out if he was looking to be amused in or by the city, and about their mayor, and the mayor's son, reputable for being beautiful and charitable.

I should rather like to see this man of great reputation and beauty, for he seems exactly like the kind of husband I deserve, said the soldier, rolling a coin around his fingers like he would with quarters on base. The shoeshiner didn't last much longer after.

No one can see him at all, was the reply; he dwells in a great concrete palace, with ever so many walls and towers round it, and in each tower a sniper lives there, just the sniper and his sharpshooter and a whole mess of ammo, all working to prevent anyone but the mayor to go and visit him there, because it has been foretold that he will marry a common soldier, and our mayor would not like that at all.

That makes me want to meet him all the more, to see this great man of mind and body, of material and spirit, though, just once, even if that is the only time we get to meet, thought the soldier, though he said nothing and offered everyone who shared information with him two gold coins. And now he lived a gay life; went continually to the theater, both live and cinema, drove out in the People's Gardens, and gave much money in alms to the poor, though everyone was poor when compared to his own lavish life being lived in the city. He knew by past experience how miserable it was not to have a dollar in one's pocket, of having to sign up for jobs that one does not want to do, of having to enlist to support one's self. He was always gaily dressed, and had a crowd of friends, who, one and all, declared he was a most capital fellow, a real gentleman, a mensch, a good guy, a man of repute; and that pleased the soldier very much. But, as he was now giving and spending every day, and never receiving anything in return (that he could take to the bank or used up when given), his money began to fail him; both, he was running out of gold coin, and with so much gold in circulation, he had flooded the market and weakened the strength of the currency. At last he had only twenty dollars of value left, and was forcibly evicted from his splendid hotel suite, and

made to take refuge in an attic, where he had to brush his boots and darn his clothes himself, and where none of his friends ever came to see him, because there were so many stairs to go up to get to the attic, and there were men with gold three flights closer to the earth; to visit the soldier was quite fatiguing.

It was a very dark evening, and he could not afford to buy himself so much as a novelty light; however, he remembered, all at once, that there were a few matches in the tinderbox that the old witch had had him fetch out of the hollow tree. So he brought out the plain tinderbox made of driftwood and picked up a match with his right hand, fumbling for awhile since he never did get those prosthetic fingers, and began to strike a light; but no sooner had he rubbed the flint-stone, and made the sparks fly out, than the door burst suddenly open, and the dog with eyes as large as tea-cups, which he had seen in the cavern beneath the tree, stood before him and said: What commands has my master for his servant?

This is a pretty foul joke, cried the soldier; this is a fine tinderbox if it will really provide me with whatever I want, this is a foul situation if I had the means of solving all my problems this whole time, and that it was made available to me by the headless witch, and I didn't even know until I bottomed out. The soldier, with great eagerness, and with the kind of hunger eating his body that exists only in the people who have had and lost, told the dog: Fetch me some money that instant, as much as you can carry! The creature vanished, and just as the dog was leaving he was back again, holding in his mouth a large canvas satchel full of copper pieces packed in so meticulously that none of the coins even moved, but the canvas stretched to reveal the shape of the stacks of coins.

So now the soldier understood the rare virtue of this charming tinderbox, understood the frustrations of the witch who could not access the box solo, who had to ask the passing soldier for help. If he struck the flint only once, the dog that sat on the chest full of copper came to him; if he struck it twice, the dog with millstone eyes that watched over the silver answered his summons; and if he struck it three times, he was forthwith attended by the monstrous guardian of the golden treasure, the one with the celestial eyes.

The soldier could now remove back to his princely apartments; he bought himself an entirely new suit of clothes, and all his friends remembered him again, and loved him as much as ever. But one evening the thought occurred to him: How truly ridiculous it is that no one should be allowed to see the mayor's son, for he is supposed to be beautiful and generous! They all say he is so very beautiful; what a shame it is that he should be shut up in that great concrete palace because such generosity should not be sequestered, jealously locked away from the people he'd help. And I want to see him, so where's my tinderbox, the soldier wondered for a minute, but the he found it and fumbled with the matchstick and struck the flint. Before him stood the dog with eyes as large as porcelain and gold teacups.

I am so sorry that it's pretty late, I have to admit, began the soldier, but I do want to see the mayor's son so much, even if only for one minute, and you, porcelain-and-gold teacup-eyed dog, surely you of all living creatures must understand this desire.

And the dog was out of the door, and, before the soldier had time to think of what he should say or do, or even rock with his feet to distribute his weight, the dog was back again with the mayor's son sitting asleep on the dog's back. The mayor's son was so beautiful, so enchantingly beautiful, though the soldier could not very well judge his generosity while the mayor's son slept. The soldier could not help himself, he knelt and kissed his hand, though he immediately regretted it, for it is terrible to kiss the hands of those who do not offer it, and a second thought crossed his mind -- if he were truly generous, perhaps knowing how much the soldier desired to kiss his hand, how in need he was of it, he'd offer it generously. Then dog ran back to the concrete palace with the mayor's son the very minute the soldier worked through his feelings toward the situation developing with him, the mayor's son, and the dogs.

Next morning, while he was at breakfast with the mayor and the mayoress, all of them enjoying a serving of eggs and cheese on toast, the mayor's son said that he had had a remarkably strange dream. He had dreamt that he was riding on a dog, an enormously large dog, a dog with eyes the size of porcelain and gold teacups, and that a soldier had knelt and kissed his hand before he completed his round.

A pretty sort of a dream, indeed, exclaimed the mayoress, spitting out bits of egg and cheese all over the table, into the cups of orange juice sitting about, into their larger glasses of water, onto the faces of both the mayor and the mayor's son. The mayoress then insisted that one of the interns for the mayoral office should watch by the mayor's son's bedside on the following night, in case he should again be disturbed by such fanciful dreams.

The next evening, the soldier summoned the dog to fetch the mayor's son again, for the kiss lingered on his lips and in his mind the rest of the night, through dawn, and even after sunset. So the dog did, and ran as fast as he could; however, not so fast but that the one intern who knew how to efficiently take video on her smartphone sat on the mayor's son's couch and was able to film them, back through the city, all the way to the fine assortment of rooms that the soldier procured for himself. She saw the dog vanish in a large house; then, thinking to herself: Now I know what to do, took out a piece of chalk and made a great white cross on the door, each end resolving in an arrow. But on the way back the dog chanced to observe the white cross on the door with its teacup eyes; so the dog immediately took another piece of chalk, and set crosses on every door throughout the town, matching the intricacies to a t.

Early in the morning the mayoress came out to observe the affairs of the night, the mayor, the intern, and all the officers of the local police department, every one of them did, curious to see where the mayor's son had been. Here it is, exclaimed the mayor, as soon as he saw the first street-door with a cross chalked on it in the scratchy way that the intern had managed on the first door, which the dog had properly copied. My dear, where are your eyes, this is the house, cried the mayoress, seeing the second door bear a cross, in the same sketchy scrawl that the dog had copied from the intern. No, this is it surely -- why, here's a cross too, cried all of them together, on discovering that there were crosses on all the doors, each looking as secretive and rushed as the last and next. It was evident that their search would be in vain, and they threw up their arms and shrugged, then looked at each other and admitted that they had nothing left to do in this search but give it up.

But the mayoress was an exceedingly wise and prudent woman, knowledgable of many ploys and deceits as well as many forms of unsavory witch magic after years of working to keep herself entertained however she could manage. She took her scissors she purchased from a large discount retailer, scissors plated in a gold veneer, cut a large piece of silk fabric into elegant, thick strips, and sewed these strips together to make a neat and attractive little bag. This bag she filled with the finest, whitest flour, tied it to the mayor's son's waist, and then again took up her gold-ish scissors and cut a little hole in the bag, just large enough to let the flour drop out gradually all the time the mayor's son was moving.

That evening the dog with the teacup eyes came again to the concrete palace in the middle of the lovely city, took the mayor's son by mouth, threw him up in the air, caught him, and ran away with the mayor's son to the soldier. The dog with the teacup eyes never noticed how the flour went drip, drip, dripping, all the way from the palace to the soldier's room, and from the soldier's room back to the palace. So next morning the mayor and mayoress easily found where their son had been whisked away to, and they took the soldier from his handsome apartments and cast him into the most secure prison while the soldier sat in a delighted haze of having spent more time with the mayor's son.

And now the soldier sat in the totally untended prison, full of violent and nonviolent offenders, full of child rapists who murdered their victims and people who were arrested for having a small personal quantity of drugs on them during an invasive, non-constitutional search. And how dark it was to the soldier who had had nothing, then everything, then nothing, then everything, and now, again nothing, in this place, with these people and their depressing fates, and how wearisome it was for the soldier, with him suffering constant anxiety every time the lights went out, for the soldier had a pretty face and sometimes that is enough. And the jail guard kept coming in to remind him that tomorrow he was to be hanged for his indiscretions, for seizing the mayor's son, for having wicked designs to steal kisses while he slept. This piece of news was by no means agreeable, after all, he only really wanted but one look at him, the rest was all incidental obsession. The tinderbox had been left in his lodgings, buried under a loose-shaken pile of coins left from one of his many binges.

When morning came, he could, through his narrow iron bars, watch the people all hurrying out of the town to see him hanged; he could hear the drums beating, the chatter of reporters, and presently, too, he saw the soldiers marching to the place of execution, his own company, no less. What a crowd there was rushing by; among the rest was a designer's assistant -- he bustled on with such speed that one of his slippers flew off and struck the bars of the soldier's prison window.

Stop, stop, my friendly assistant, cried the soldier; won't do you any good to be in such a hurry, for none of the fun will begin till I come, but if you'll oblige me by running to my lodgings and fetching me my tinderbox, I'll pay you well, four whole copper coins, but you must run for your life. The assistant liked the idea of earning four whole copper pieces, worth more than their weight in gold, so away he raced and brought the tinderbox, to the soldier, pocketing on his journey through the soldier's apartment a few copper coins, for leaving them in such a pile means that they could hardly be missed...

Outside the city a gallows had been built; around it the soldiers marshaled, the soldiers from the soldier's unit, with many hundred thousand people: the bakers who sold him delicious breads, the butchers who sold him sweet meats, the gardeners who sold him fine herbs, the plumbers who ensured him the freshest water. The mayor and the mayoress were seated on simple wooden chairs, opposite the judges and the whole city council, a jury of his peers, who, it was reported, had already made up their minds.

The soldier was brought out, and the executioner was on the point of fitting the rope round his neck, when, turning to the mayoral office and the jury, he asked them to light him a cigarette before he had to drop through the gallows' platform.

The mayor could not refuse this harmless request, so the soldier took out his plain tinderbox and struck the flint—once he struck it, twice he struck it, three times he struck it—and the three dogs stood before him, each with their eyes of teacups, millstones, and suns.

Now, help me, please, don't let me be hanged, cried the soldier to his monstrous canine companions as they emerged from the smoke trails of the struck flint; the soldier choked a little on the wisps. And all at once the three terrible dogs, with their teacup and millstone and solar eyes fell upon the judges and councilors, tossing them high into the air, so high that in falling again they were broken in pieces, pieces that the dogs ate up right quick.

We will not—began the mayor, but the monster dog with eyes as large as a solar eclipse did not wait to hear what the mayor would not; he seized both him and the mayoress, and flung them up into the air after the councillors and judges. And the soldiers were all desperately frightened, and the people shouted out with one voice: Soldier you are good, you shall be our mayor, and the beautiful mayor's son shall be your husband, and our, well, mayor!

So the soldier had a ring finger forged so that he could be married, and was taken to the concrete palace, and the mayor's son was made a mayor himself, which he liked much better than living as a prisoner in the concrete palace, though he occasionally missed his family, who had never done him too much harm.

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