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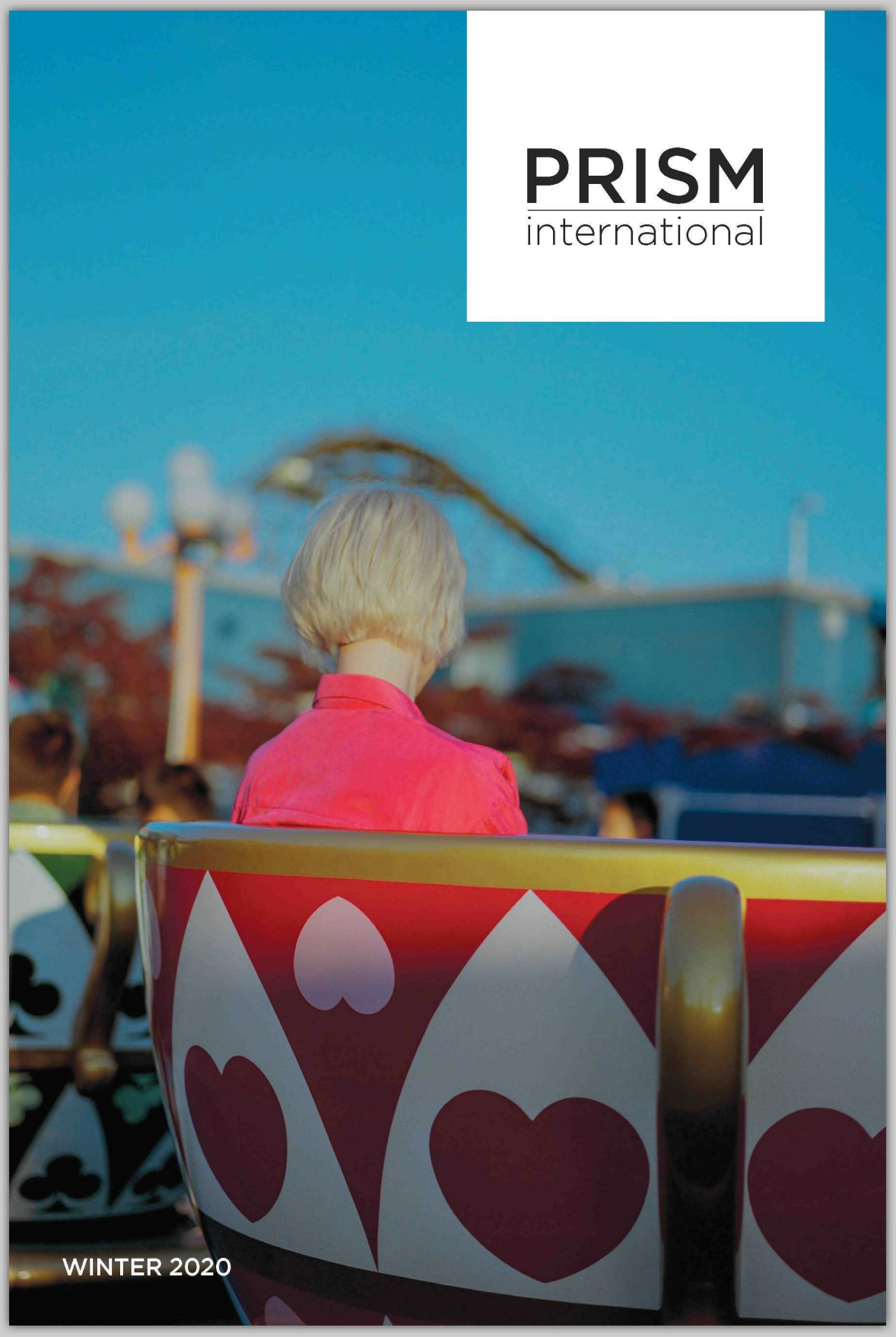

WINTER 2020

PRISM international

THE PRISM CREATIVE NON-FICTION CONTEST

GRAND PRIZE

"And Begin" by Rachel Lindley-Maycock

FIRST RUNNER-UP

"The Body Does Not Flee" by Shelley Pacholok

SECOND RUNNER-UP

"Half Scissor" by Tabitha Siklos

JUDGE

Sharan Dhaliwal

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a place of mind
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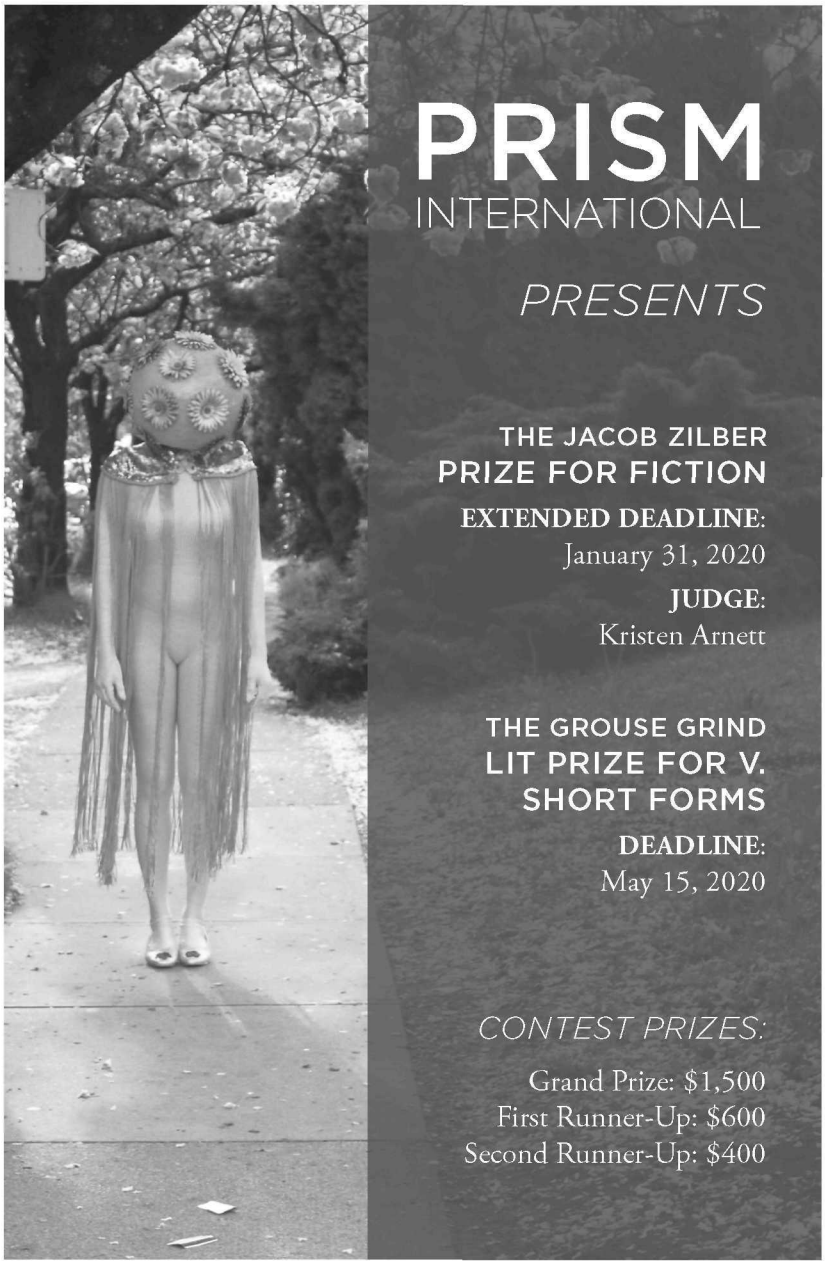

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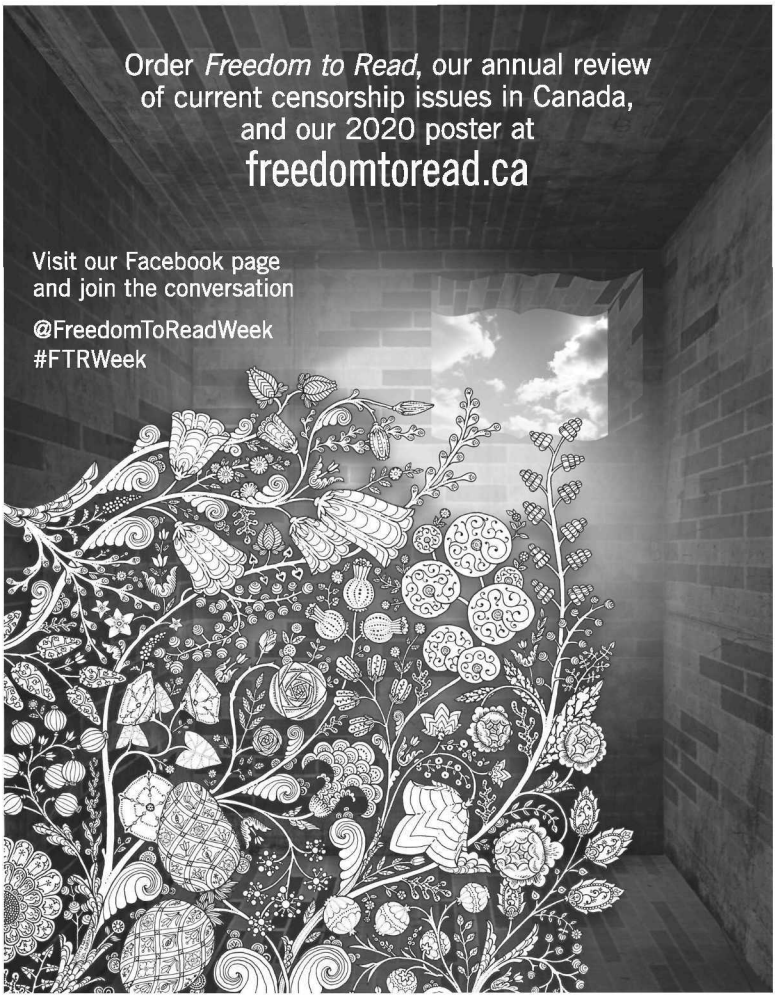

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Sharan Dhaliwal

MEMORY

I remember little of my past and know that selective memory plays a big part in why. I sometimes attempt to delve into that chasm, seeking what I've lost. After a while, I wonder whether I should even try. What do I want to find? And would I be okay with confronting a suppressed memory? When writing about trauma, sometimes we do a service: offering readers a warning of what can be uncovered. All the winning Creative Non-fiction pieces have a connection with trauma, recovering stories from memory.

But what if you don't have memory? While reading "And Begin," I found myself lost in this question. The reader navigates timelines while the author reminds us that the story hasn't started yet. Memory is a gift to some, a burden to others, and as this piece shows, can be unattainable. So we weave new narratives, pinpoint the parts that stay with us, and elongate their potential.

"The Body Does Not Flee" forces the reader to embrace an uncomfortable journey from a bike accident that leads to trauma, memory loss, and, eventually, a continuation of life. I am reminded that despite the inherent selfishness of writing about ourselves, there's value in revealing our individual journeys. How do we carry on?

"Half Scissor" narrates a family's experience of child rearing with the help of intertextual reference and archived letters. What can we learn from generational experiences shaped by the political landscape of the time? Whether representing a history of colonialism, war, love, or our personal experiences, are our diaries our true selves?

I had a discussion recently about archived history and lived memories—are we selective in both mediums? Do we write every confession, or do we choose what we want others to see? Each of these pieces takes us on a journey that hinges on memory, and the authors eloquently express an uneasiness with the path but still guide us safely along.

"And Begin" has stayed with me. Ironically, it has played with my memory. Sections of the story are stuck in my head and I wonder, "Where did I see that scene?" I see the chess pieces and I see the world tilt and I can't remember where I saw it.

Tara Stillions Whitehead

THE YEAR OF THE MONSTER

When they release images of a black hole 55 million light years away in the constellation Virgo, it becomes clear that there is nothing left to discover, not even God. Infinity and the unobservable have finally been materialized by man. Confluence of excess now has a shape. Everything from before and everything that will come into being now has a shape. All things now have a shape.

I am thinking about the image of the black hole and contemplating what shape I might have while Berkeley takes me from behind. Usually, I don't think of anything when we have sex, and that's the main reason I enjoy Berkeley. He empties my head of all the numbers and equations and algorithms, the to-do lists and the grading and endless schedules, the overwhelming boredom and nostalgia, and the inimical and debilitating desire to be emptied. Over these past five months, I've discovered that the more we have sex, the emptier I become, and the emptier I become, the harder it is to not desire a greater emptiness. I have become addicted to Berkeley and his emptying.

But now there is this black hole picture, and my head is full of black and orange and imagined configurations of telescopes the size of the Earth. There's this picture of a hole and everything that has been disappeared into it, and it's all I can think about when I'm prepping my students for the SAT; it's all I can think about when David starts to talk about the baby; it's all I can think about when Mom leaves messages about how much she misses Dad; and now, it's all I can think about when I am with Berkeley. Instead of revelling in the serenity of hard-earned nothingness, I'm full of the emptiness of man's sudden all-knowing.

Berkeley moans, reaches for my breasts. "There's something inside you that's pulling me—like gravity."

I don't like when Berkeley talks during sex. And it bothers me that he is thinking of physics when I am thinking of physics. It bothers me that our having sex isn't doing what it is supposed to do, that I am still so full of thoughts and, now, fear of things known and Berkeley.

"That kind of gravity requires a lot of mass," I say. "You're saying I'm massive."

Berkeley thinks on this for a second.

"You *are* massive," he says. "Massively *hot*."

At this point, he can't orgasm fast enough. And when he does finish moments later, I notice that, for the first time, I am no less agitated than I was before we took our clothes off and pressed our bodies together into that perfect symmetry that we make. It's a shape. We make a shape.

When I roll over to count the thirty-eight glow in the dark stars on the ceiling—Berkeley's age plus my additional two decades alive—there is little I can do to rationalize our biological maturity closer together. I cannot pretend—not even with my eyes closed—that this is a grown man's bedroom. I've tried to conjure scents of bergamot and tobacco and envision a sparely dressed, rational-minded room. But teenaged chaos, stacked in unlaundered piles by the locked bedroom door, is so real it is impossible to unimagine.

Berkeley crosses the room, still nude, and jumps back into the *Fortnite* battle he was playing when I arrived twenty minutes ago. Something is wrong. My periphery is dark, as if I've been staring at some bright thing for too long. I blink a few times. Stretch my lids.

"Rub your eyes," my father would say. "You'll activate the phosphenes in the retinas. You'll trick your eyes into seeing light." And so I do. I close my eyes and gently press inward. Under the pressure of my fingers, orange and white flashes materialize, first into fireflies, then into

organized galaxies and constellations—Corvus, then Leo, then Virgo. I open my eyes and wait for the light impressions to fade across the sheet covering Berkeley's open window. While the darkness is less pronounced, it is still there.

"I have to go," I sigh, pulling my slacks up over my hips.

"What?" Berkeley says, but he isn't looking at me. He is navigating his avatar through the obstacles of an epic battlescape. Before I close the bedroom door, I take him in for a moment, baffled by the intuitive way he manipulates the controller and vaguely terrified that this is the beginning of the end.

Berkeley started out as an A student who quickly mastered the six trigonometric functions and their reciprocals, the unit circle, and the quotient and Pythagorean identities. But the genius stopped there. When he moved into calculus, when it came to real-world problem solving, he couldn't translate the identities he had mastered. Couldn't practicalize them. Most people learn the opposite way—they require a real-world application to understand the identities themselves. His ability to comprehend functions in the abstract without practical application is remarkable. How logarithms and vectors make more sense to him in the conceptual universe than in actual satellite navigation or architecture is beyond my understanding of him. And maybe that's part of what attracted me at first—I mean, if I were to even try to explain why I chose him to destroy my life with.

So when the class moved toward real-world problem solving, Berkeley began his sharp descent into the academic abyss. He stopped raising his hand. Migrated to the back of the classroom. Imagining what it felt like to carry that kind of potential around without being able to use it, I began to feel sorry for him. And for myself.

This was before they took the picture, when there were still things without a shape. So I can't use what happened afterward as an excuse. We were already having sex. We had started having sex somewhere between the "evaluating expressions" and "simplifying expressions" units, which is only ironic to me now that I remember it.

Then came the black hole and the prophecies and the sleeplessness.

And David. And the baby. David wanting the baby. Me wanting David. Me agreeing to have the baby. Me wanting the end of the world to come so that we could all start everything over, so we could be just the right amount of empty to want to live.

One week after they capture the image of the black hole, the end-of-times prophecies begin. In the long history of apocalyptic pronouncements, this is the first time the end calculations have come from physicists and statisticians and cryptographers. No Harold Camping numerology or Club of Rome AI predictions. True to twenty-first century obsession with fact, the general public bows to expert consensus. Bona fide Nobel laureates and Cal Tech academics evangelize the public through their keyboards, stoke the collective mania with their myriad Twitter handles. It becomes clear that seeing into the unseeable is not enough—meaning must be extracted from that which defies previously inarguable universal laws.

These men and women can see things in the hole. Things we cannot see with eyes but can deduce through subatomic asymmetries and quantum-level entanglement. They swear by this science, by this empirical vision, that we have very little time, perhaps just over a year. Someone on some obscure blog calls this remaining year "the year of the monster." And something about that description sticks with me, makes these revelations feel less lonely.

Two days after the conspiracy theories possess every media interface, I have a dream that is not a dream but a memory in sensory montage. It begins with ginger hair and mesh shorts and shoulders bending down. Pale hands fingering darkness for something darker. A dance in awkward steps, smudged cement floors, the green Sequoia unlocked,

the adjacent parking space empty.

Night air rolls in off acres of damp farm. Metallic garage smells bloom at once—

hose water, old cardboard, some fabric softener.

We climb inside. Close the door.

The smoothest skin in the world presses against mine. Until I'm drowning

in smooth. Until my wedding ring cuts

into smoothness, creates a tunnel that carries me

to the void where I drop,

weightless, careening euphorically through anti-gravity.

It's like

spelunking into rapture.

On the other side of the dark space, there is more darkness. How he slips the key into the ignition, how he

shuts windows

places the hose in my mouth—

—I don't know.
But the exhaust tastes familiar.
Ancestral. Just right.
The human part of me that is left behind mourns the moths throwing themselves against yellow garage light.
The human part that is left behind can hear their thoraxes
fup fup fup fupping
over the running engine.
That human part of me can feel their biological desperation. Their near-deaths against plastic.
That human part of me can feel him finish inside of me,
re-secure the hose
and tape my nostrils
using my own hands.
The *other* part of me—the spelunking part—can feel, too.
It feels a shape.
It feels mass.
It feels itself becoming.

The Event Horizon Telescope's picture of the black hole and the things I can see inside of it keep me mercilessly awake.

I barely survive days in the classroom and spend my nights drifting in and out of consciousness in front of the television, preferring National Geographic documentaries about super tapeworms and other unlikely predators over news-broadcaster-turned-amateur-scientists attempting to debunk what they call "rogue theories attempting to incite mass hysteria."

Ten minutes into watching scientists inject otherwise eusocial ants with fungus that zombifies, I get restless and reach for my phone.

He picks up before the first ring.

"Hey. It's like one o'clock. What are you doing?"

"Watching a show about zombie ants."

"Wow. Cool."

"No. It's terrifying. This fungus is intelligent. It picks certain ants for zombification. The ones most equipped to complete the life cycle of the fungus. Ophiocordyceps. *Ophio. Cordyc*—It's fucked up, Berke. They zombify these certain ants and kill the rest."

"You want me to come over and watch it with you? I can be sneaky."

The screen cuts to a colour graphic of the inside of a zombie ant's brain. The animation shows the zombie ant's neuroactivity transform

from green self-will to fungi-controlled red. My arm is shaking so violently, I have to lie down on the couch so that I don't drop the phone.

"You okay?"

"When I was fourteen, I tried to almost kill myself."

There is an uncomfortable pause. But then I hear Berkeley's desk chair creak on the other end of the phone. It is clear that he's playing videogames, only half listening.

"Almost?"

"Yeah."

"How do you almost *kill yourself?"*

"Very carefully," I say, suddenly wishing I hadn't dialled him. "I wanted to prove that if I got close enough to dying I would want to live."

"Okay."

My vision starts to go really dark, so I roll over and focus on the television.

"My dad killed himself. And so I thought that if I attempted to *almost* die, I could trick my brain out of doing it for real. Because I figured that if my dad did it, I would probably do it, too."

"Hmm"—keystrokes punctuate breathing—*"How did your dad do it?"*

"He locked himself in his car in the garage. He rolled the windows up—"

"And then what?"

"He died."

"I'm sorry about that."

A female entomologist appears on the screen, presumably explaining something about the fungus, but with the sound muted, she could just as easily be telling a dirty joke.

"You know what, I'm lying," I say. "It wasn't *almost*."

Berkeley begins chewing on something. A pen. Something plastic. Meanwhile, a time-lapse montage shows the zombie ant carry out its fate by attaching to a leaf, collapsing, and then breaking open, allowing the zombie fungus to bloom from within the host body. Moments later, another fungus—a parasite fungus—attacks the zombie fungus stalk, and the whole organism dies.

When the show cuts to commercial, things start to grow dark again. The orange halo of an event horizon begins to take shape in my periphery, so I close my eyes and imagine axes and asymptotes and differentials. Berkeley doesn't talk. Just continues to play his game, breathing soft, controlled breaths on the other end of the line.

"What are you playing?"

"*League of Legends.*"

"When the end of the world comes, you'll wish you spent less time playing video games."

Berkeley laughs. *"Is that why you can't sleep? Oh, my god. You don't believe that shit, do you? That's just a bunch of old white guys trying to scare everyone into one big science experiment. Ridiculous. It's bullshit."*

"Are you coming to class tomorrow?"

"Yeah. Are we meeting up after?"

When there is too much of something, the fabric containing that something tears open, and the contents disappear into the perforation, leak into a form of nonexistence. For black holes, this thing is mass of infinite density—inescapable gravity.

It should be noted that not all black holes are the size of suns or weigh as much as a galaxy. Some are small, microscopic, atomic-sized holes. Some are the size of a freckle on the inner thigh.

I find my freckle-sized black hole when I am showering one morning. I recognize it as a black hole not just because of the way light slips into it, like vespers into the ear of God, but because my obsoletions—redacted words, crumpled receipts, painfully abnegated touch and desire—start leaking out of it. Contrary to popular belief, things can re-emerge from black holes. Even light. When something survives a black hole and is cast out of the dark matter's inescapable grip, it is called "burping." Black holes "burp" up all kinds of things, it seems, and mine in particular is burping up evidence of Berkeley and my unforgivable wrongdoings.

In a fit of panic, I try using a Band-Aid to cover it up, but the hole sucks it right in. After some digging through bathroom drawers, I find a compression bandage that I can get to wrap around my entire thigh three times. To make sure the thing stays in place, I do some amateur yoga poses, and when I am satisfied, convinced that I have my black hole under control, I get dressed and head to the school.

Berkeley leaves a note on my desk before heading to the cafeteria, and I have some idea of what it is going to say before I read it. Following a few gratuitous sentences describing our last encounter, he drops the anvil. He's not applying out of state. He wants to stay local. Gettysburg.

Dickinson. Shippensburg. Temple. Maybe UPenn? He can't leave me. Not now.

He's got feelings. He's confused. He tells me he gets sick to his stomach every time he thinks about making love to me. He gets sick to his stomach every time he thinks about *not* making love to me. He's just plain sick all of the time when he's thinking of me.

He doesn't know it yet, but he's failing calculus, too.

I start with letting Berkeley's text messages and phone calls go unanswered. Then, I stop calling on him in class. I stop looking at him. I stop seeing him altogether. And that's when he stops everything. Communicating, courting, class work. At first, it's easier than I imagined it would be.

I forget the changeable colour of his eyes. I undo the inappropriate feelings and bad habits with keystroke quickness, mitigate any emotional confusion like a veteran DA. I revamp my social agenda and suffer overly rehearsed conversations with my colleagues. Help you with the field hockey bake sale? Sure. Cover your fifth period world history class so you can make your custody hearing? Not a problem. Of course I'll share my lesson plans from trig.

I sweep away years of miscellaneous clutter from my desk and do grading and lesson planning at home. I put myself on house arrest, travelling beyond our stoop only for work and groceries and doctor's appointments. I kiss my husband in the morning when I leave and miss him in pieces during the day. There is a feeling inside that doesn't drain out of me by evening. Its weight and longevity resemble something I've never experienced. I suspect it is hope.

At some point, Berkeley stops coming to class. And so I cling to David like never before, desperate to fulfill him.

We get pregnant lickety-split.

October comes and goes and autumn settles in overnight, its rustic carnival of reds and oranges scintillating over everything, promising change. As the baby grows inside of me, I begin to feel purposeful. Life expands to make room for the excitement of the yet-to-be-born. Names get scribbled everywhere, on pay stubs and grocery receipts—"Thank you, Delilah." *Delilah, Lylah*, *Layla*, *Kayla, Kyla*—or in the back flap of whatever bedside reading materials are on the top of the stack.

It takes a while to get used to being full, to forget the darkly satisfying feeling of emptiness. But to make room for this new way of living, the old must be discarded. Removing Berkeley from my life is not enough. The

other disturbances have to go as well. So, when Mom calls, I delete the messages right away instead of letting them collect, unanswered, in my voicemail box. I forbid myself to remember Dad—always keep the car windows down and hold my breath when a tractor trailer passes. I forget the smell of baseball fields and remember to keep surgical bandages in my purse in case the wrap around my thigh comes loose.

Eventually, I fall asleep and wake up to a natural circadian rhythm, and it seems clear to me that this new fullness, this life growing inside of me, has been necessary all along. And it goes without saying that the vision shadows and all of the horror promised by the year of the monster disappear into obsoletion. I develop hope for the future and forget about black holes—and that dream of my death inside of it.

Here's how it happens.

Berkeley comes to class. After two months, he appears at a desk in the back of the room. He doesn't even have to use the door. He just appears. Disrupts gravity without preamble.

It happens when I'm lecturing about differentials to the board. My back is to the class when my body senses him. That small freckle between my legs begins to tingle and bulge, testing the fabric of the compression bandage, challenging my concentration. And so I know it before I turn around. And when I do, I see that—yes—there he is, unblinking and unimagined and politely saluting the air with that unremarkable and unworked hand of his.

But as unremarkable as it is, as inconsequential as I want it to be, that hand causes me to skip a breath, incites terror. My god, I've kissed that hand. I've kissed that hand and it meant something. And how does kissing a hand make meaning? I don't know. But it did once. Kissing a hand. Kissing hands. Not just his hand. Because there have been more than just him. I can still taste them. I have meant other things and forgotten what I meant. I've forgotten what I mean. What hands mean.

"Yes, Berkeley."

It's a vision to watch him rise from his desk at the back of the classroom and manoeuvre his way through the aisle of chairs toward me. It doesn't happen in slow motion. There's no relative distortion. Time doesn't dilate or contract to accommodate the moment like my heart does. It remains insanely constant. Ostensibly anticlimactic.

Berkeley emerges from the rampart of desks and takes the marker from my hand. It is the perfect method of emptying, a hard trigger and a gentle tug just beneath the fabric of my pant leg.

Someone coughs from the back of the classroom.

Berkeley raises his eyebrows. "You want the corresponding functions, right?" he asks, impressively stoic. Eyes, teeth, clavicles—wooden.

It occurs to me that I have asked a question. Set up an exercise on the board. I look it over, then turn toward Berkeley without meeting his eyes.

"That's right," I say. But it's not. I have asked something else that I can't remember, and no one in the class cares enough to correct either of us. I stare at the floor while Berkeley writes three equations he believes fit the functions I've graphed and then sets the marker into the metal shelf below the board. The fluorescent lights, which seem to be competing with the darker-than-usual daylight, flicker and wrinkle the room like a sheet.

I look at the steady handwriting on the board. The errors are immediately apparent.

"One and two are mostly correct," I say, picking up a pen of another colour. I erase the second half of Berkeley's function with my thumb and write in the correct answer, which is only half legible because of my nervousness.

A phone vibrates in someone's backpack. Pages crinkle.

I pretend to focus on the scratch work instead of the faint smell of Berkeley's lemongrass bath soap. The wrap on my thigh slips a little. "But we want the derivatives for these two. You need to integrate by parts for three. Which, actually, you almost did correctly. I don't know how. Because your work doesn't add up quite right here."

I erase the entire equation and rewrite it with the identity elements extracted for teaching purposes. My corrections are indecipherable even to me.

"This is only one type of proof," I say. I'm standing so close to the board now that my voice is microscopic. "There are—"

The bell rings. While students pack up, I pretend to keep working on example three. Stupidly write out the logarithmic proof as an alternative example. I'm aware that no one is looking, that it is after the fact, but I'm convinced that following through will somehow maintain the barrier, the pretending, the seriousness of my commitment to this most necessary conversion.

Reversion. Working functions. Correct functions. Corresponding functions. Reciprocal functions.

The darkness in my periphery only comes to my attention now that there is movement in the room. While I am still so newly pregnant, still too early to show or feel distinct movement, I sense my abdomen contract, as if what is inside is curling away from the wrinkling and the lights and the oblivious cacophony.

Berkeley doesn't turn to pack up like the others. He stands motionless while I continue to work and shout over my shoulder at the mass evacuation, reminding students that they have a test on Friday. As the room empties, he closes in on my left side, pretending to pay attention to the rabble of green numbers that spew from my marker, that obliterate the vestigial black of his original work. The smell of lemongrass suffocates me against the board, and I can sense the cleanness of his mouth, feel the smoothness of his palm, the texture of my grief.

The door finally opens. Students slip noisily into the mainline, just another tributary among tributaries gushing into the hallways. I don't want them to leave; I don't want them to take the noise with them. I don't want to be alone with my transgressions.

I continue to correct work that needs no correction until the noise drains and the room succumbs to that invisible shush that settles upon rooms that people are glad to empty. Through the darkness in my periphery, I barely make out Berkeley clenching the black marker in his hand, capping and uncapping it with his thumb. When I hear the door close, I set mine down, and then, defeated, I stop pretending.

"You'll miss your class."

"It's government."

"I have prep this period," I say. "I have to grade."

He lets me pass freely between him and the board toward my desk, which is more difficult to locate in the darkness. I sit down, flip open my grading book, and begin searching through various stacks of homework until I find the one I'm looking for. The darkness is implacable, but I know I can will myself out of blindness by determination. I have to.

Three papers into the stack from first period, I sense him take the seat across from me. I pause, lost in a protective vortex of numbers and insignias. It's so quiet I can hear the pins turn inside the links of Berkley's watch; I can hear denim rub against denim, then denim against wood as he positions and then repositions himself in the chair. Each sound reaffirms that he is real, that unlike the ciphered pages before me, beyond

the darkness of my vision, he exists in this real space of white boards, walls, and air conditioning vents. He caps and uncaps the marker again with his thumb and forefinger, seemingly determined to defeat the silence, as if with each sound he can thicken the air, create a conductor between us.

"I bet you're pretty bummed," he says.

Rhett Hawthorne. 56%. The first failing grade in my honours class all year. I struggle to find the correct column and row in my gradebook.

"For a minute there, I thought the world was going to end, too, and then it didn't. There's, like, all of this time now"—no, I can feel definite movement, a retraction into that space which I have until now only suspected was there—"So, what, you're not even going to look at me? I'm not worth looking at? You can't spare me that small decency?"

It takes three seconds for the movement to become undetectable, to stop completely, and when it does, I already know what has happened. Because I know what it feels like to lose a life, and I know what it feels like to take someone else's inside of me to feed my emptiness.

"Aren't you going to say something?"

His anger is so visceral that I can almost see him.

"I made a big mistake."

"You don't make mistakes."

"Maybe you're my first then."

"I'm fucking in love with you."

"That's the mistake talking."

I hear him catapult out of his seat and begin pacing the room. "You've made me love you. There's no way of changing that. Let me make you happy. I can make you happy."

"That's not possible. And besides, I don't love you."

"Bullshit. I call bullshit. I've made love to you"—he is hauntingly sincere—"I've been inside of you. I know you. You've loved me. You're just too fucked up to see it."

What I want to tell him is that there is nothing inside of me, that what he thinks is love is the absence of all things—unwritten to-do lists and long, never-answered voicemails. It is numbers and equations and questions without answers. It is a stillborn life and a hose filled with exhaust. I want to show him the picture of the black hole and explain how gravity from this emptiness has been consuming him into nonexistence, piece by piece.

But I don't have to say anything.

Because before I can piece things into words, I feel the compression wrap slide down, past my knee to the floor. There is an *almost* soft exhalation, a pause—and then pandemonium. Windows shatter, and the sound of their shattering shatters. Papers, desks, markers, protractors, calculators, and ceiling tiles go flying. Through my blindness, I can see Berkeley brace himself against the door and watch as, just like in my dream, I give birth to the black hole and disappear into it.

Cassandra J. Bruner

AUBADE AFTER CLAUDE CAHUN & MARCEL MOORE'S *LE MYSTÈRE D'ADAM*

If there were a garden
for us, it would be this velvet diorama,
this peepshow with its mute audience—
the porcelain Adam to our left & mannequined
Eve to our right. In the interstice

of their gazes, we are allrib: kilned
solid, yet pliable
to breath.
So when you find me
hooked to the inseminator, I know
better now than to apologize. & if

the blood & phlegm & cum of us
spills over—?
This is evidence of the spirit
here, where you become
a greaser seducing a vampiress back
to mortality. Where I resurrect
as a matador inciting
a bull-horned succubus to hammer

& hammer the earth.
Where we are
the spandex sixties' vision
of a spacesuit & its umbilicus

tether to a moonbase. The edge
of possibility & the stay against harm. My

director you once staged a dream of me held
aloft by tinfoil wings. Peeling away
their wire frame, you found a slip
of cicada skins. Beneath this,
tourniquets of electrical tape.
In my descent

I kissed belts of diced pears
off your waist.
May we never find
lasting shapes. May we never finish
removing these faces.

Austin Rodenbiker

EASY METAPHOR

Hands are not birds
unless you are holding one.
Take, for instance, Elvis. The crescent
moon of his face. The fuck haze
of his so heavy lids. Jesus,
that coif of hair we all
wanted to lick. It was not his skin
that was the warmest, it was
the idea of it. Not the flight
of fingers, but their nagging stillness,
their impulse to wreck themselves
on the glass of a window.

Kelsey Andrews

CARINA

Noun. Any of various ridge-shaped structures, from the Latin for "keel of a boat." Discuss.

—Dorland's Illustrated Medical Dictionary

The carina is the bow of the canoe of your lungs
where the trachea splits
into the bronchi
and the edges flow
into the gunnels,
waves of blood beating
against the hull.

It is also the name
for the peak formed
by the fused petals of the pea blossom,
where the cup closes to hold all of its sex
and sweetness.

The carina, in birds (but not the flightless ones) and bats,
is that portion of the sternum where the muscles of flight attach—

the reason you have to thunk the back of the knife
when you split a chicken.
Freedom's bone.

Jonathan Wei

DEAD LANGUAGES OR THE WHAT

Dead languages. Languages no longer spoken, no longer used. Languages that no longer convey what's for dinner, what's the weather. No one says, "I love you," in dead languages. No one says, "What do you mean by that?" "I wish it were true." "Can you help me?" "Why?"

But they did. They said all of these things, and they made the language live, they were the blood, the warmth, the flesh.

I speak a language you've never heard, that no one has ever heard. A language that even I don't understand. A language that has no purpose, conveys nothing, means nothing. A language that is already dead, inside of me, and when I die, it will disappear. No one will ever have known it existed.

AMERICA

…they should declare the causes which impel them.

—*Declaration of Independence of the thirteen United States of America,* July 4, 1776

And I stood in the centre, *watching*, and he circled around me, *gathering*, and the white boys rung us round, *shouting*, flat space hard dirt beyond the playground blacktop. Yelling, cussing, spitting, grinning, laughing, bloodlust, frustration, boredom, amusement. Anger. White boys. There to see a fight, to ratify with eyes and cries the renewal of fear, pain, blood, loss. No one was innocent. Or everyone.

I look at my son now: sweet slip, sing-song and balletic, he who walks on his toes, he who seeks and fits perfectly into the space just here, under my arm, he who hates to be alone and wants to do it himself, he who has no inkling of knuckles and fury. He who is ten.

And I was ten, and I didn't know. From the flat years of Ohio, vague and soft under cloudy skies, from marbles and baseball and frisbee, we moved to the corrugations of the Shenandoah Valley, to Virginia, to west Staunton, to busing and bondage, old anger rattling chains. Ten years old and I didn't know.

Because I was new, because I was small, because I was Chinese, because, because, because, because, because. Brian Davis, sandy-haired with small eyes and a mouth already forgetting to smile, his small eyes fell…on me.

Was I sweet? Was I sing-song? Balletic? Did I walk on my toes? Oh mother, did I?

Our house was at the bottom of two hills, a depression into which all things rolled, sticks and stones and broken bones. Blood. Brian lived up the hill and around the corner. His eyes fell on me. Because, because, because, because, because.

A few days into fourth grade, lined up for lunch, lined up for gym, lined up for class, the tangled lines, Brian's voice called me out. "Fuckin' pussy. Fuckin' chink. Ching, chang, chong."

Three steps down. Ching, chang, chong. Sing-song, sing-song.

It was all new. I didn't know. Did he? Did he know his words would gather mass, start to pull? In this universe, who knows? Words pull the unstable particles of others' anger, others' hatred, grow larger, pull harder.

Ching, chang, chong. His words grew and grew, until he couldn't stop them, until no one could, until they pushed him into me in the hallway, until they told me he was going to fight me after school. And my stomach went cold and soft, and my heart started beating and I started sweating. Ten years old.

This morning, when he woke, my sweet boy came to me, breath like hay, milk-skin, curled into my lap, legs and arms folding, asking me to forget their length and strength, head resting on my chest. Ten years old, my sweet boy.

Everyone told me: fight. You fight because you have to fight. The fight is.

Do you remember *not* fighting? What is *not* fighting? I don't remember. Then I see my boy, and I remember.

Life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness.

Fight. Everything inside of me dissolved, and left behind a waiting space.

My legs shook, my skin prickled. I came out of school hoping the words had gone, blown away, away. But the words had gone grown, had gathered the white boys', the boys who kept the ways of fists and hate, who had learned them from other boys, who had learned them from other other *other* boys. Because, because, because, because, because.

The right to bear arms. Bare arms.

And I stood in the centre, *watching*, and he circled around me, *gathering*, and the white boys rung us round, *shouting*, flat space hard dirt beyond playground blacktop.

I made fight hands. I made fight stance. I made fight face. I made fight silence. I waited.

Brian Davis hung one arm down, the other chest crossing, fingers curled softly. Clint motherfucking Eastwood. His small eyes down gazed to the right, to anger, to fury. He murmured to himself, softly, and we circled, and the shouts from the white boys swole, to body tensed, to lips pursed, to small eyes shrunk, till the anger spilt, of white boys, words and the world, at me, flying with hands flailing.

I duck.

And he slaps. Three, four, five! Slap slap slap slap!

And the white boys cheered.

Fuckin' hit him!

Fuckin' kill him!

And we circled again.

I did not know fist. I did not know punch. I collapsed into myself, into nothing that was not there, the nothing that was.

Fuckin' punch him!

The earth spun, and the sun moved. And I stood in the centre, and he circled, and the white boys rung round. *Watching, gathering, shouting.* Murmur, tense, purse, return. Slap slap slap slap.

He circled, and the white boys rung round. I collapsed further, further.

Small star, galaxy edge, eating its own light.

And the earth spun and the sun moved.

Slap slap slap slap.

Silence and darkness and numbness. I no longer felt the blows, heard the white boys.

Ching, chang, chong.

Three steps down.

I bled.

Deep in my silence and darkness and numbness, deep within the centre of myself, my dead language was born. The language you don't know. The language I don't know. The stillborn language. The language of light, eaten.

I hadn't thrown a punch. And the first word was America.

SCHOOL

In its largest meaning as a political issue, I think, "busing" stands symbolically for the whole range of measures designed to compensate minority groups for supposed past wrongs, but compensating them at the expense of contemporary middle Americans.

—Jeffrey Hart, *The News Leader,* Staunton, VA, June 21, 1974

Ching, chang, chong, sing-song, sing-song. Every day, I made my way, over the hills to school. One block up, down through the churchyard, around the Y and back up to the school.

Three classes in each grade. Black, white, white.

One black kid in each white class, maybe, and the teachers looked down from above. *Racial balancing.* The city stared from beyond. *Integration.* The nation watched. *Reparation.* History sucked its teeth and shrugged.

My father went to sign me up, professional clothes, professional glasses, and professional shoes, advanced degrees, advanced job, British diction. Armour. A coat-and-tie chink, bespectacled slant come to steal our women and work.

Coloured man's coloured boy in the coloured class.

But I favoured my mother, echt New Jersey, gar kein coloured boy, at least not enough. Not enough colour. Not enough slant. I showed up, one little white piece of rice in a bowl of brown, and somebody didn't like that. Must've been disturbing, must have hurt their eyes to see that white boy mixing like that.

Because those first few days, I was okay. Rice is rice. I was okay with Sam and José. Sam, José, and Wei. Sam was fast, all knobby limbs and ashy elbows, and José was soft and smiled. Sweet slips, tender boys.

Sam said, "Hey, hey, you Wei."

I said, "José, José, what do you say?"

José said, "Sam, Sam, he like ham."

Sam shook when he laughed. José whispered, "That's funny, that's funny."

Sing-song, sing-song. We got along. We played each day, running this way and that. We cut up, we fell down. Rice is rice is rice.

But some rice is white. So they moved me into a white class. It was for my good. Good of school. Good of community. Good of nation. Humanity.

Mrs. Irving's class. Silver hair and pointy glasses, pinched mouth, dry voice. Quiet. Quiet. White. White. Tight and tight. I waited to get outside at recess.

"José, José what do you say?" José smiled.

"Sam, Sam, you like ham." Sam smiled, kinda.

But Sam and José, they ran away. Away, away. They laughed over their shoulders, and ran away. Because white rice is white. And I didn't know.

Who was watching? What was said? At first, I was mixed. Then I was unmixed. Did I hurt Sam? Scare José? What happened? What happened. What. The What.

But. You can take the boy out of the coloureds, but you can't take the colour out of the boy.

Ching, chang, chong, sing-song, sing-song.

Brian Davis was watching.

And my second word was school.

TEETH

Augusta County Code; Article II. Dogs. Division 1. Generally. Section 4-5. Pursuant to Code of Virginia, section 29-196, it shall be unlawful for vicious or destructive dogs to run at large within the county.

—*The News Leader*, Staunton, VA, July 21, 1974

Every day, I made my way, over the hills to school. To the left, up Garland, the ginger cur with the short legs waiting in the carport shadows would come out legs churning, teeth-bared, while the white owner watched from the yard. He could have called the dog back, one word, shout snapped out and the fury, chastised, would return to the carport and shadows.

Let it chase. Let the boy know.

Or to the right, up Thomas Street, then left around the corner where the slink hound, white with liver and black spots, slunk out of the fenced yard, slunk up behind, "Good dog," said I, walking on, and it slunk its teeth into my calf, one bite, a statement, quick and concise, "I don't like you."

Teeth here, teeth there, and each day I danced past snap and sharpness, to school, to school. Balletic. Toe-walking. Ten.

Hi Tony! Hi Jeff! Hi John! Hi Mark!

Hi Karen! Hi Angie! Hi Frank! Hi OB!

(Sam and José ran away, away.)

Hi Brian.

Unmixed. Uncoloured. *Racial balancing.*

With Sam and José away, away, I had to play in other ways. Smear the queer. Chasing the boy with the ball, trying to play it like a game, but seeing the intent in eyes, and hearing voices, "Get *him*!" when I was at last the queer. The unmixed. The uncoloured. Now, the queer.

Let them chase. Let him know.

But it wasn't them that put my tongue between my teeth just before my jaw struck the ground, that bit clean through, mouth blood full, then the pain, then the screaming, then crying. They didn't do that.

Did they watch and grin? Were they scared? Blood and pain that was living flesh bit clean through, and away I went to the hospital to have the needle dipped in and out, the pierce of metal, the tug of string pulling my tongue back together again, a half-dead animal in my mouth, raw, hairless and twitching.

Bite my leg, bite my tongue, you're not too young.

Ching, chang, chong, sing-song, sing-song. Every day, I made my way, over the hills to school.

And my third word was teeth.

CHINESE

Money isn't everything. It just seems as though it is. Some earn a little. Others earn a lot. I have never met anyone who was satisfied with what he had.

Playing the all-time bigot, Archie Bunker, Carroll O'Connor gets over $3 million.

—Jim Bishop, *The News Leader*, Staunton, VA, May 26, 1977

Father: "People don't have to know you are Chinese."
Son: "But I want people to know. I'm proud of it."
Father: "You can be proud without telling people about it."
Son: "I want to tell people about it. Why can't I tell them?"

Was he protecting me? Or protecting he? What is the difference.

Wednesday evenings was church choir practice. They would leave us at home, and we, brothers three, would watch TV. On Wednesdays, it was *All in the Family*.

All: spics, hebes, Polacks, honkies, dagos, darkies.

In the Family: white.

Shuck and jive, shuck and jive.

Mike wants to go out to Chinese. Gloria wants to go out to Chinese. Edith agrees to go out to Chinese.

I wonder, how do you go out to Chinese? Is it a costume party? Is it a class? A country?

It turns out it's food. Chinese food. Which, of course, we never go out for because we eat it at home. It's not Chinese. It's food. And, as far as we are concerned, Chinese isn't just food.

Archie doesn't want Chinese. Mike insists. Gloria insists. Archie digs in. Tensions rise. Until it explodes, becomes the "defining incident," the narrative climax. We, brothers three, watching TV.

"I ain't gonna eat no Chinky food!" Archie shouts.

We fell down. Chinky! We laugh. We, brothers three. Like slinky. Inky. Rinky. Dinky. Winky. Blinky. Pinky.

Cut to The What: What it's like to attend an all-white church when you're brown? What it's like to sing in the choir, black-haired, brown-skinned and bent 'r's? *Racial balancing*. What it's like to worship a white god. What: follow a white preacher. What: sing white music with white folks about the white Saviour.

He is a Saviour for all mankind, black, brown, and white. He just happens to be white. He doesn't see colour. Do you see colour? Well, maybe that's something you should think about, because it doesn't matter what colour he is. You're the racist, if you see the Saviour as white. He's the uncoloured Saviour.

Who happens to be white. Erasing racism erases the races. Like a show about racism toward Chinese people with no Chinese people. Just Chinese food. Chinky food. It's about racism. They just happen to be white. Chinese happens to be food. What is. What is wrong. What is wrong with that.

Sing-song, sing-song. Ching, chang, chong.

And when they came home, we were still laughing. I told them about the show. Archie Bunker was funny! He said, "I ain't gonna eat no Chinky food!" Chinky!

Boom, dark and not laughing.

Face tight, finger raised, eyes burn and burn and what is he seeing?

"I never/want to hear/that word/in my house/again."

(Is this the beginning of poetry, anapest to trochee thump, waltz to foxtrot, lope to stomp, be to bop, hip to hop? Oh, father, was it poetry? Was it preaching? What was. What was wrong. What.)

"That is a terrible word. Don't ever use that word again."

And I didn't say:

But it was on TV. Everyone was laughing.

And he didn't say:

You didn't know/This is the world/Come here my son/I will explain.

Sweet slip. Tip-toe. Balletic.

Fourth word: Chinese. No one knows this word.

WHITE

In the various integration and de-segregation decisions, the modernizers have been attempting to shore up the public school as a prime agency of social change.

—Jeffrey Hart, *The News Leader,* Staunton, VA, October 24, 1974

Walk this way get bit. Walk that way get bit. Head down, eyes slide side to side, for dogs, for teeth, for bites. You hold a rock or a stick, you don't breathe, and then you feel foolish and weak, a useless stick in your hand while behind curtains the owners laugh.

And every morning, you watch for Brian Davis, at the churchyard where the line from his house joins the line from your house. Tangled lines.

Ching, chang, chong! Three steps down, almost affection, now that he's made you bleed, now that all of the white boys know. He'll do it again, again, if he wants.

Dog bite, head slap, tongue stitch. And *Ching, chang, chong!*

Tender slip? Milk skin? Eyes wide? Tiptoe walking? Oh mother, was I? Was I?

Here's a question: did you look in the mirror before this? Memory fails. What was in the mirror? A boy? Another? What? What.

With the mirror, memory. Boy. There.

You dive. Deep, bell dive, dark dive, than skin, than bone, than eye, than blood, than glass shard and silver. Deeper than song and sweet and soft…you find the boy. There. Fist boy. Cold eye boy. Hard heart, tough skin, no care, fuck-you boy. Slick-down hair, no-tooth grin, one arm hang, fist across chest and fuck-you boy.

Look white boy. Act white boy.

Be White Boy.

You close from the inside, fingertips gripped hard into palm, knuckles tightened and compressed, thumb to hold. This is how you make a fist. You make a fist from the inside. This is how you Be White.

You send *him* to school.

And the fifth word is white.

BLOOD

During the past weeks, violence has spread and gained in intensity. Food-throwing fights between blacks and whites in school cafeterias are commonplace. We have rapes, brawls, knifings, the stoning of buses and tumult in the classroom and corridor.

—Jeffrey Hart, *The News Leader,* Staunton, VA, October 27, 1974

Brian Davis don't like Be White. Be White, of swear, spit and shine, of hard eyes and fists flexing. Be White looks for fear.

Ching, chang, chong, rings harder like a hammer on metal in the hallway now. In class, under the teacher's untuned, unturned ear; the ear that doesn't hear the erasing of races. The blind ear, the deaf eye, looking down from above, three steps down.

Ching. Chang. Chong.

Be White Boy hears the hammer ring, and curls in tight from the inside, ready. This time, there's no challenge, no time and place, no white boy circle on the hard dirt space beyond the blacktop. This time, it comes from behind.

Walking home, down the hill toward the Y, with a friend, who hears the slink of the not hound from behind, says, "Look out!"

Be White ducks. Fucking ducks, motherfuck, and Brian Davis misses. Grabs and misses, arms empty and stumbling forward, past Be White, momentum tumbling downhill, backpack riding up and pushing farther down, and Be White jumps, thumps on Brian Davis' back and rides him. Three, four, five stumble tumble steps, all of Be White on his back, until he finally gives way, falls to the pavement, Be White's knees in back, forearm on neck, hand on head. Pavement stops the stumble, stops the tumble, but the weight of Be White pushes on, grinding cheek, chin, temple, hair, skin, flesh, and bone into stone, into street, grinding hate and rage and hurt, grinding face for blood. *SAY MERCY!*

Ten years old. Tender slip. Sing-song. Balletic. Milk skin and wide-eyed.

Say mercy!

Ten years old. Small eyes and a mouth already forgetting to smile. Oh mother, was I?

Mercy.

And what was he, cheek blood flowing into the gravel scatter street.

What was he, back kneeling, neck pinning, mercy demanding.
What is.
"Mercy," he said, sobbing. Bleeding.
What is wrong.
"Mercy," he said.
What is wrong with that.
Mercy.
What.
And the sixth word was blood.

WIN

Be White Boy walks on, friend along. Blood paid. Tears paid. Rage, shame, fear paid. The see-saw tipped back by Be White.

"You won!" friend says.
Be White walks.
"Hey, it's okay. You won."
Be White sobs.
"You won."
What is. What is wrong. What is wrong with that.
"It's okay."
It was the what. It happened.
Seventh word: win.

BENT

"It is good to have a foundation in what is right and wrong from God's Word," said Mrs. Conley A. McMullen at the annual spring dinner meeting of the Staunton-Beverley Manor Weekday Religious Education Council at Westside School Friday night. "Children can't get too much of the Bible."

—*The News Leader,* Staunton, VA, May 27, 1973

Be White cuts up. He swears and spits and shines. He steals smokes. He walks pigeon-toed tough, plays dumb cuz teachers are fucks. He is hard.

He stays after, for swearing and spitting. For not listening, for making people laugh, for making them cry. For writing on the desk.

I shall not… Thirty times. On the board. For all to see the next day. On display.

Shuck and jive, shuck and jive. Bent tune, bent notes, bent body.

You have to explain for Be White, have to translate the shuck and jive to Mom and Dad, who don't know Be White, who can't know him.

"Why are you coming home late?"

You, sweet slip, milk soft, wide-eyed and sing-song—you learn to explain what you don't understand. You don't know how to say that you are afraid to exist so you send him to school, hard body to take blows, glass eyes to not see, tin ears to not hear the *Ching, chang, chong,* sing-song, sing-song.

So you say, "Teacher wants me to make a display, so late I stay."

I shall not… You say you say. You make a display. Dis. Play.

Be White spits and swears. Be White ducks homework, steals smokes.

Fuck, shit, damn. Asshole.

Be White punches. Bitch. Fucker.

Words thrown first, then fists. Stare hard, swear hard, punch hard. Think hard. Feel hard.

Brian Davis stops. Brian Davis whispers *Ching, chang, chong,* but nobody listens anymore. Brian Davis glances sidelong through small eyes, but nobody sees. Brian Davis doesn't call out for punches. Brian Davis walks the other side of the hall.

Not sweet. Not sing-song.

And not balletic.

Word number eight is bent.

FIST

Emphasizing that he believes in spanking, "Dare to Discipline" was the subject of a talk delivered Thursday night by James Pimentel during the 49th annual Augusta County Extension Homemakers Achievement Day at Wilson Memorial High School.

—*The News Leader,* Staunton, VA, November 9, 1973

And the problem for Be White: what is white?

To be hard?

Shitfuckpiss.

To be good?

Honour roll. Church choir. Safety patrol.

You keep safe at school—*chingchangchong*—because Be White be hard.

Be White keeps safe at home—*shitfuckpiss*—because you be sweet slip.

But you slip.

Shitfuckpiss. The word is heard at home.

Bring me the hairbrush.

No. Please. I won't do it again.

Bring me the hairbrush.

Please, please, please, please, please.

We have to do this because you've given us no choice.

I'm sorry. Please.

Open your hand.

No. Please.

Open your hand.

Please.

Open it.

How do you open your hand? How do you let pain in? How do you let hate in? You open it.

Oh mother, do you still feel it?

I do. Slow prise of fingers opening to cup, then to flat. Pearled, cream-coloured hairbrush with the spray of bristles. Whip crack, hard plastic back.

I still feel it. My fifty-four-year-old pre-arthritic hands, man's hands, hands that have built houses, wielded knives, touched lips, climbed cliffs, sliced meat, burnt wood, hands that have thrown, cupped, gripped, splayed, slapped, punched, and caressed. Hands that have written a million words and counting. Hands that have held hands and hammers. Held night-soaked moonlight, rosy dawn, eve resplendent. Held water, wind. That hold my sweet slip, sing-song, balletic, tip-toe walking son. That steady his step, ruffle hair, clear tears, smooth skin.

Whip crack hard plastic back. I feel it as I write this word, the millionth word and counting. And this word. And this one too. My hand curls into itself, to keep my palm from the blow. And into, and into, ever and always into, the blow still coming, still coming, and even still. Holding nothing but itself, the milk soft, wide-eyed palm, sweet slip of skin, inside, away, protected by the browned, hardened, bone dense shell. You make it from the inside.

Fist.

Number nine.

TEACHER

Only under certain specific circumstances…does integration improve black classroom performance. That is, improvement occurs when the number of black students introduced is not sufficiently large to alter the middle class ethos of the classroom. This normally sets severe limits to the number to be integrated. When those limits are exceeded and the ghetto ethos prevails, then, instead of black scores improving, white scores decline.

—Jeffrey Hart, *The News Leader,* Staunton, VA, July 17, 1975

Everyone moved, filings to magnet.

Fight, fight, fight!

Every day? It might have been every day. The playground swarm clumping to the thump of violence, a circle centre tightening, where the fighters faced, fisted.

Most of the time, it was over before it began. Teachers gripped ears, grabbed shirts and necks, dragged bodies away. (Away, away.) You saw them later, tear-streaked, shirt-torn, blood-stained, voices ragged, still raw, still angry.

(Away, away.) I ran the other way, against the magnet. Kids turned rage monstrous, glee-screaming, teeth-baring, my stomach turned sour, my legs weak, my skin prickled, my insides dissolved. It wasn't me. This time it wasn't me.

Not me.

Not me.

Please, not me.

Today my heart pounds at the memory: gathering chant, rage, fear that gathered the conductive child bodies in tight, perfect playground circles. Every day?

Every fucking day.

Mrs. Irving, short, powdery, glaring glasses. Mrs. Menke young, bright-eyed. Mrs. Smitty ancient, bent, watery-eyed angry. Mrs. Cash, tall, young, feathered, queenly. And others.

Staunton was white, until told otherwise. Until history, until law, until forced: one black student, all white class; no white student, all black class. Rice is rice is…

Ten, eleven, twelve years old, sweet slip, milk-skinned, wide-eyed.

I saw. I cannot unsee what I saw. See-saw, see-saw.

It happened too fast, the kids gathered and I couldn't turn. Armlocked by Andy, Vincent—the one black boy, integrator—hung in the air, legs dangling, face broken, skin fractured. Georgie paced, imperious, fists and face relaxed. Step this way, turn and kick in the stomach. Step that, turn and slash fist at face. Kick. Punch. Slap. Vincent sobbing, bleeding from cuts, bleeding from his mouth, snot and tears and blood, helpless, humiliated, hung. And two white boys acted out the ancient ritual of the lynch, one the tree, one the mob, cloaked in the centuries.

Staunton was white.

And the children gathered round in rage and lust. The play. The every day. The school in the town of the centuries. Playground and history. The acting that became the life, the game to riot and reality.

Children, children.

What is the What.

Children, children. Except. Standing there, on the other side of the circle, looking down from above.

Teacher, head high, eyes watching, mouth closed. Hands hanging, still standing. Watching. Just watching.

Blood. Screams. Sobs.

Teacher watching.

Black child broken.

Teacher watching.

White eyes burning. Blood streamed, voices screamed, bodies leaned, bent.

And teacher, watching.

Child.

Teacher.

What was is what is, is what will be.

Staunton was white. And the word was teacher.

THE WHAT

Not this/not that. Not here/not there. Not black/not white.

I was the what, and the what was me.

In the centre of all that is, and all that is not, the dead centre, I saw all.

I was the what, and the what was me.

Memory fails me. Memory fails me. Memory fails.

But not because I can't remember. Because I can.

Savannah Pulfer

SOMETIMES I FORGET ENTIRE YEARS

it is summer 2016 and i am standing in the home improvement section of the London Drugs halfway between the "home" i am leaving and the "home" i am going to and i have just realised how afraid i am of love and how there are so many things i can no longer trust (like myself)(like my mother)(like my heart)(like my friends)(like reality) and i am the thinnest i have been since i was 12 and i have been thinking about suicide for three months straight

and
someone is yelling "make it happen"
over and over in the loudspeaker
and i think it's me but
i don't work here i'm just

crying over drawer organisers again
pretending it's because i'm happy again
like every time i move it's for my own good again

and still
no one has told me what a body is
and if i have one
or if i am one
and if it's still a body once i have given my pound of flesh
or my ten (20) pounds of flesh
once i have shed or lost or hollowed

because what kind of body can be emptied
on demand like that? or is that a vessel? pouring tears
while i dissociate in the home improvement section?

Curtis LeBlanc

MY BROTHER, FREE WILLY, PARIS 2013

In the Champ de Mars, my brother
and I chain-smoke bootlegged cigarettes,
Marlboro Reds touched together, fused
in heat like the scaffolding slats
of the Eiffel Tower to our left, tips
burning slow while the Gendarmerie
floodlights blind and glow over
the Facebook privacy rights protest
that we're taking in on our last night
in Paris. In the cab ride back to our flat,
the driver's pad of paper in the cupholder
reads *I AM* *I AM HAPP*
which is as close as I also ever get.
I can't speak for my brother, who won't
tell me anything about himself until years
later, after we've gained a continent
and several christmases between each
other. I know I like nothing
as much as he liked killer whales,
black backs breaching the blue bubble
television screens in our family's basement.
In what was once our favourite movie, Willy
puts his own face through the window
of his tank, he wants so badly to be free.

Ashtyn Walker

BETHNAL GREEN

1

this morning I bought a pack of cigarettes.
gimme your favourites.
the kid behind the counter
tossed me a silver box.
they're minty.

I light one, finish it.
shit.
forgot to crush the filter.
light another one.

2

my skirt lifts like a dome tent
as I glide down streets lined with sari shops
and laundromats. I think about the five quid
in my pocket, turn a corner,
and spend half on a bundle of lavender at the flower market.
everyone is yelling behind their signs and peonies.
I see a tall man with a kind face and one arm and think,
I would love you.

3

it's hard to tell if the people in Shoreditch are hip
or homeless. unattractive 20-somethings wear Nike
ironically and french inhale and french inhale and french inhale
in front of vintage warehouses.
I know them.

I lean up against a wall beside a pile of trash
to light a cigarette and pretend not to care
about the trash
about irony

about companionship
until I don't.

4

I stand with my hand outstretched
holding my last two quid
to buy a punnet of blueberries at a windy alley market.
the man pauses, stares.
I pulse my hand towards him.
I'm just waiting for your skirt to blow up.
I shrug. sigh,
well, it's just a matter of time, innit?

that's the truth.
everything is sex.

5

for the past two weeks, everything has been sex.
there are men who want to hold my hand
and men who want to grip my throat
and I crave someone who can do both.

you said *let's not do this*
when we stood on the train slowing into Tullamore.
you shook me by the belt loops of my jeans
and I whispered promises to smooth the worry
lines from your face.

6

you shook me up good.
I wonder if your face still looks that way.

7

the underground from Piccadilly
robs me of five more quid just to scream in my face.
its rusty wheels screech along the tracks.
the boy across the car covers his ears
but I keep my hands firmly on my thighs.

I paid for this torture.
I plan to endure it.

8

a fluorescent sign above a greasy sidewalk reads:
take your pleasure seriously.
I lean back on my heels,
light another cigarette, remember
to crush the filter.
huh.
well, fuck me.
then I float home
and I do.

Christine Ottoni

PLASTIC

After I made the decision to get the operation, I asked Moira to meet me for a drink.

"You can't be serious," she said, after I'd told her.

"I am."

"Why?"

"You know why," I muttered and sipped the cocktail Moira had ordered for me. Something sweet with gin and egg white. At first I'd asked the bartender for a cranberry soda but Moira cut across me. She hated drinking alone. I liked knowing little things like that about Moira, all the eccentricities that made her a whole person. Her favourite dinner was crackers and cheese. She lost her virginity in a tent during a thunderstorm. I never expected to have a best friend but Moira and I just ended up that way. Like two orphans fighting over a bone in the street only to look up and find we had more in common than we'd originally thought.

"Which parts?" Moira gave me the up and down, considering my nose, fingers, shoulders, and stomach. What I'd be willing to part with. "Not more than one?"

"No," I said. "Just a specific area."

We both knew what area I meant. That made Moira quiet. She considered me for a minute, chewing her lip, deciding if she should start arguing with me now or later.

"What material are you choosing?"

"Plastic."

"Why?"

I shrugged. "It feels right."

Moira loved me fiercely but she never understood my issue with the area in question. She couldn't. Moira wasn't religious, she was raised agnostic, but she was, in a way, a bit of a zealot when it came to sex. She believed in the beauty of it, its cosmic humanity. Every fuck, for her, was an acid trip to the moon. And that made the central drama of my adult life totally unfathomable to her.

Moira had stick and poke tattoos scattered up her legs and arms, in places where she could reach to do them herself with a needle and ink. Among the collection on her forearms: a watermelon slice, a rocking chair, a viper. She grabbed my hand across the table.

"You can't do it," she said.

"Come on."

"You're giving up."

I pulled my hand back.

I couldn't meet her eyes. Moira always believed I could work past my problem. More therapy, more medication, the right exposure. *Just put yourself out there, practice makes perfec*t, that kind of thing. But when operations and replacements started becoming more common, when it wasn't just ads in the subway anymore, but people walking around with synthetic gold toes or hot pink silicone kneecaps, I couldn't get the idea out of my head. I wanted the operation. I wanted my problem, the area, to become plastic. Smooth and forgiving. Unfeeling. Like a doll or silvery android from a movie. Something unformed in alien utero without a name or a purpose.

We sat like that for a while. I stared down at my drink until Moira sighed, breaking the silence.

"Fine," she said. She leaned forward and picked up her drink. "To your flesh."

Moira didn't give up so easily, that wasn't her style, and in the morning she called to announce, in a decidedly offhand manner, that she was going to throw a party. "It's been a while, you know?"

That was the kind of thing Moira did in a crisis. She didn't say the party would be my last hurrah, my last chance to get laid, to change my mind, but really that's what she meant by it. I'd been through this with Moira before. *This is John, from the camera department. Nick, he's a gaffer.* By then I was practised at polite disinterest, at turning them down in clear terms. I'd never be able to give them what they wanted, a girl who would push them against the wall and slip her tongue in their ear. A girl who jumped into bed and stayed up all night having perfect pink orgasms.

Moira wanted an opportunity to save me from myself, if she could, and I gave in and told her I'd go to the party, at least for a couple hours. It wouldn't change anything. I was already booked in for my pre-op, I'd done all my bloodwork and tests, passed my psych evaluation with flying colours.

"Of course, this will be the first of this kind of replacement on Canadian soil," the doctor had said.

We had been sitting in her office sipping green tea from small clay bowls. Her assistant had brought them in. The doctor was behind her desk, blowing on her tea to cool it down. I held my bowl under my chin, lips pursed, blowing, mirroring her serene exterior.

"Oh yes, I heard that," I said.

"I assisted with one in the Netherlands," she went on. "It was a young girl, a case very similar to yours. Trauma. Before replacement was an option she was petitioning the state for euthanasia, if you can believe it."

I could. When I was sixteen I shaved off my eyebrows and walked into traffic. In the hospital the nurse asked me if I was having a nervous breakdown. I think I tried to quote "Lady Lazarus," but she didn't get the reference.

The night of the party, I got to Moira's first, early enough to watch her fret and fuss over the lighting, the mood, arranging and rearranging the chairs along the walls to leave room for dancing, if people wanted to. She kept adding rum to the punch bowl and making me take sips from the crystal ladle, lifting it to my mouth, "Is it better now? How about now?"

Moira threw good parties. She moved in a lot of circles, knew a lot of nubile young things with great shoulders. She worked on film sets downtown, wrangling extras or ushering celebrities from trailer to set.

She did well in that environment. Moira and the men. She worked on big movies. She'd actually seen Leonardo DiCaprio's butt once. She said it aged him. *Nothing from the '90s is still beautiful.*

Moira appreciated ambiance, she understood good and bad vibes. She tuned the dimmer for the kitchen light until it was just right, and the room was cast in a warm, amber glow. We were ready for guests.

And they started to arrive, first some women from Moira's yoga teaching days, two witchy types with long bell sleeves and their hair wound up in silk scarves. They each kissed Moira on the mouth and then lit up a joint, settled themselves at the kitchen table. Moira poured two cups of rum punch, garnishing them with orange slices. The witches drank and smoked and one of them offered me the joint but I shook my head. Moira topped up my club soda with a disapproving look. It was important that I didn't get fucked up at parties. Whenever I did, I got prickly, volatile, like a fox caught in a trap. If someone grabbed my arm for support, doubled over and laughing at a joke, I'd scratch their face.

A group of girls trickled in, young things from one of Moira's weekend groups for running in the park or extreme frisbee. Then some guys arrived with a two-four and at once, as was the case with good parties, the apartment erupted in noise. Moira sank into a chair in the living room and let herself relax, forgetting about me and my problem and the purpose of the party. She took a drag of some guy's vape and argued jovially with him over a director's lack of people skills. More people arrived. The yoga witches were stoned and giggling, tearing into bags of saltines they'd excavated from Moira's cupboards. She never had real food, mostly condiments, tomato soup, and cocktail fixings.

I stayed in the kitchen and shifted myself up to sit on the counter. I could see the whole apartment from there. It was modern, open concept (Moira did well financially, set jobs were lucrative if you could stand the long hours) and for a while I made small talk with people as they passed by, *How do you know Moira? Was Leo an asshole on set?* Then I was alone for a bit too long, surveying the fluid movement of bodies in and out of the kitchen, from the punch bowl to the fridge to the long green velvet couch. In a crowd, bodies moved like liquid. You could be lifted off your feet and carried across a stadium before getting crushed up against a concrete wall. Death by crushing meant suffocation. I couldn't remember where I'd read that, but it felt important and then it felt dangerous. My vision swam white for a second and I realized I was holding my breath.

I closed my eyes and tried to calm down, tried to remember what the therapist told me to do when my mind played violent tricks on me. I hated the therapist's office. There weren't any windows and the furniture was too soft. She made you take off your shoes before you came in. *Stay grounded. Root yourself. Feel where your body makes contact with the world around you.* That never worked. When I felt my socked feet on the floor or my body against the couch, I panicked. It wasn't good for me, to be too aware of my body. Because then I'd feel the area. The way it had been looked at. Like a secret I'd been told about, but couldn't understand. My cousin bent over and leaning down to hold up my skirt. He was much bigger than me. I could see the blond hair on his forearms. Like desert shrubs in miniature, caught in the morning light.

"Hey," Moira said. I opened my eyes. She was standing in front of me, grinning, her eyes milky and red. She was stoned. "Don't be alone. Come sit with me." She grabbed my hand and pulled me off the counter and out of the kitchen. I was grateful for Moira. She was speedy, insistent, pot always made her hyper. She tugged me through the party and the room was a rush of colour and skin. I forgot about my body.

She settled me on the couch beside two people who were deep in conversation. Moira sat in front of us on the floor, legs crossed. Her attention was fixed on the woman.

"This is Mark, Becca," she rattled off their names and pointed to each face. They looked over at me. Becca smiled and Mark gave a little wave, registering my arrival, before turning back to each other.

"The thing I still don't get is why people feel like they need it?" Mark said. He was the guy with the vape Moira had been talking to earlier. He was wearing a black ball cap and shorts.

"Well, for me," Becca said, touching her hand to her chest. "And I can't speak for other people, but I always knew I wanted it gone."

They were talking about operations, replacements, like the one I was going to get. I glanced at Moira. She was grinning the way she did when she was excited about meeting someone new. She was crushing on Becca, experiencing the pink gooey distraction I'd never fully known. I'd only seen it in other people.

Becca's hand moved from her chest to tug the lobe of her right ear, the one facing me on the couch and in the half light of Moira's mood lighting I could see the ear was a replacement. It was beautiful. The surgeon had done an excellent job. It was soft to her touch, flexible, but a natural

shade of very pale green. The kind of green you might see outside in a tree but have a hard time finding anywhere else.

"What material did you choose?" I asked.

"Silicone," Becca said. She let go of her earlobe. "Silica is biodegradable so it will actually break up with my body. When I die. That's why I chose it."

"That's beautiful," Moira oozed and touched Becca's knee. Becca smiled down at her.

"Thanks."

"You get to choose the material?" Mark asked from Becca's other side on the couch.

"Of course," Becca said. "That's kind of the whole point. The redefinition."

"But *why* your ear?"

"I wanted it gone."

"So why not a reconstruction? Why not plastic surgery?"

Becca smiled. "You either want it or you don't. I didn't want to make do with my ear, I didn't want a different ear made up from the one I already had. I wanted to cut it off. I didn't want to feel that ear anymore."

"She's getting a replacement too," Moira said nodding at me.

It took her a slow, stoned second to realize she'd revealed my secret. At first she was looking at Becca and then she was turning to me, her mouth open.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"It's fine," I waved it off, casual.

"You are?" Becca leaned toward me. "You're getting your ear replaced?"

"No," I shook my head. "Well yes, I'm getting a replacement. But not my ear. In a couple of weeks."

"Where?" Mark said, giving me the same horrified look Moira did in the bar, the up and down, calculating my parts, their weight.

"I'd rather not say." I blushed, and at the same time it occurred to Becca and Mark that my replacement might not be like other ones they'd seen. Not like the sculpted red shoulders and biceps they'd seen in the subway ads. Not like an ear.

"We're not supposed to ask, anyway," Becca said, trying to make me feel better. "It's private."

She slipped her foot into Moira's lap, acknowledging Moira's affection, reciprocating it. *You can touch me if you want.* Moira picked up the foot like she'd been given something precious to take care of. She stroked it.

"You're not doing a breast are you?" Mark said.

"It's private," Becca repeated.

"It's not her boobs," Moira said, forlorn, still stroking Becca's foot. Nothing could cheer her up on the subject of my replacement.

Mark shook his head at me.

"You're beautiful, what could you want to cut off?"

For a second, with the three of them staring at me, I wanted to be understood. I wanted to explain, it wasn't that there was anything wrong with the way I'd been born. The problem was how I'd been used, like an instrument bent and played the wrong way, upside down. Surely they could understand?

Mark drained a beer and his Adam's apple rose and fell, rose and fell. I wanted to pinch it in my fingers and squeeze it until it popped. I'd never felt gooey, but I knew violence, the desire to interfere with the course of another person's night. Becca steered the conversation expertly to milder topics, a band she'd seen play down at the waterfront the weekend before. Mark watched me. In the end I went home with him. Maybe to prove a point. To who, I wasn't sure.

"You're beautiful," he told me in the dark before he took off my clothes. He touched me like it was his duty to make me a whole person. *You might not want to be touched,* the trauma therapist said over and over. *And that's okay.* The truth was I never minded the touching. I was used to it. With his finger on the button between my legs, he said "You're beautiful, you're beautiful," again and again and I thought of a quote I'd read or heard once, but couldn't remember where. *What a waste beauty is, never to be enjoyed.* I was never very good at remembering where quotes came from.

I let him fuck me because it was the last time and because fucking, for me, was more like dying anyway. At the end, I got to be reborn. It was like a bad smell in the back of a mouth that could only mean aging, decay, time catching up with skin and spit and sweat. I remembered all the specifics of being a child, smashing Barbies together naked, their stiff arms extended out like they yearned to bend, to flex and become soft. I remembered the promise of a surprise I'd get later, after school, if I was a good girl. And if I wasn't, the threat of a broom handle, put inside a place, a hole inside me that I didn't even know existed. Then, the urgent touch and how it froze me, stopped everything silent, and how colour and sound didn't make sense anymore. How could the ceiling over the bed be purple? It had always been white.

When Mark was finished and it was over, I got to be alive again. And I imagined the instrument between my legs melting into something that couldn't feel. Something flat, smooth, and simple. Something I got to put down and forget about. Something plastic.

Anders Villani

SMOKE ALARM

A couple rents a pool house for the weekend in their own city. Bathrobes, scent diffusers (plug-outlet and bamboo), bed lamps seized by voice, mini-fridge riesling. Burgundy lace garter, shutout blinds. Brochures on a side table. They role-play, with accents. Her Russian reminds him of his dad, who did a Cossack dance once, body of the underpants frayed from the waistband like tender shank from the bone. It's so the wax takes, he tells her when he puts his boots in the oven. It opens the pores. While she rubs her scars with silicone gel and gets her new bikini top right, he visits the garage. Guests don't have access. Twice noise drops him in a cupboard under the workbench that smells of wood stain, shards of stiff expanding foam, like teeth, fused to the door. When it's real quiet he licks salt, sand, off body-board fibreglass. Half drags some lie lows off a shelf. The spa is heated to forty-one, like her favourite pool at the hot springs, and her hand drips the skyline from it. There's a brochure for the hot springs—nothing on the person caught with signets slaughtered by the billabong; nothing about how one night in the hilltop pool, a ringtail possum neared the edge to drink, she seized his arm, and he recoiled, apologized, praised the ringtail.

Amy Roa

WINGED INSECTS

We formed a human chain to rescue a family caught in a rip current.
We were miles away from everything.
Mary Ortega's white and tan dog walked along the shore, his paws right above a fault line
where metals twist and drive rocks into empty corners.
He sat there and watched us and wept like a human,
the way my uncle Mingo wept
when he accidentally fired a nail gun
into a spot in his heart.
When he came to, he explained that the whole process was like watching an older model of yourself carrying a family of tawny goats on your shoulders. He was just happy his mustache was still intact.

We walked home across the highway, not saying a word. There was so much sky above us and we were all homesick. Our English teacher, Mr. Samuels, drove by in his Toyota and stopped to ask Jennifer M. if she wanted a ride home. He thought about Jennifer M. without her shirt on. He thought about her hands on his chest.
We roared like the crazy lady on Rogers Avenue who kept her freezer full of dead kittens. We had no clue then that Mr. Samuels would die the next Saturday. He'd be killed by a criminal who had a wife. The wife kept her face soft and liked to talk to him about love.

Toward the end of the day, a streetlight at the edge of a sidewalk drew dozens of winged insects. They rested on the spot where the surface was warmest. I pointed up at them and said, "As you get closer to the middle, everything there becomes edible, everything there has a life."

Devin Guthrie

ATTACK OF THE HEMAGOBLINS

then anybody could be anybody's buddy
for a peanut so when the doctor said I had too few ant
buddies I fed them a bag on the playground and watched
them cut each nut in two pieces again and again with
little needles

then I battled up armchair castles
and across hot lava moats and did not
rest when my mommy told me to
take my super-present because I knew
only little weapons could kill little enemies

like the pin I stole from my mommy's bedside
apple to defend the sick old cells with too few friends
in her bathtub where I kneeled and jabbed
and didn't cry at all until she saw me and screamed at
all the little hemagoblins fleeing toward the floor

Tabitha Siklos

HALF SCISSOR

There is no distance in childhood: for a baby, a mother in the other room is gone forever.

—Rebecca Solnit

My second child was born with the first tinges of copper down on a beautifully formed head. We named him Wilfred. My two-year-old daughter had wanted to call him Red, and this seemed a suitable compromise.

"Hasn't he got a perfect head?" his grandmother exclaimed, on seeing him for the first time in his red- and white-striped babygro. I nodded, delighting in my baby who had arrived without a bruise or blemish, despite being the product of a hard and fast vaginal birth. My waters had gushed over the white linoleum of the maternity ward reception as I head-butted my husband's chest and my cries reverberated over the queue of labouring women ahead of me. Short of squatting to give birth on the now-sticky floor, waiting patiently to check in was non-negotiable. I was

eventually directed into a room on the ward, where I knelt over a birthing ball, clamouring for gas and air as my skin tore. Wilfred burst into the world a few minutes later, his little body still encased in its amniotic sac. "A lucky sign," the midwife declared.

I didn't mention any of this to my mother-in-law. When she asked about the birth I laughed dismissively and said, "It was quick. There wasn't much time for pain relief."

Maggie Nelson writes in *The Argonauts* that she imagines her baby with a *half scissor sticking out of his precious newborn head. Perhaps I had put it there, or perhaps he had slipped and fallen into it. For whatever reason, this image seemed the very worst thing I could imagine*.

For me, imagining the worst was imagining myself doing the worst. I wandered from room to room at home, Wilfred cradled in my left arm, both of us enjoying the warm breeze through the open windows. I was suddenly struck one day by the image of my red- and white-striped baby flying through the air like a rag doll, landing limp and lifeless on the grass, his head no longer perfectly formed, me a shadowy figure behind the open window. I rushed around, closing all the windows to prevent a dark and buried part of myself from throwing out my new baby. It could have been a case of scrambled synapses, a simple mistake: flinging open a window, flinging out a baby; I just used the wrong arm. These thoughts plagued my waking hours and I shook my head to expel them as my baby lay in my arms, his eyes, brown like mine, watching my every move. My baby in the washing machine, my baby swallowed by a sinkhole, my baby ravaged by bears.

Human babies are utterly helpless; they are unable even to cling like infant monkeys do. To them, the mother is all powerful and an object of devotion, almost a divine being. My husband spent hours pacing the house at night, trying to soothe the baby while he cried. The moment my husband passed him to me, he lay like a dead weight against my chest, closed his eyes and fell instantly to sleep.

"Little shit," my husband would say, with more affection than the words conveyed. I struggled with this unconditional adoration, alternately craving and rejecting it. Yet the bond between us was undeniable and unassailable; neither of us could be substituted for another. He was not only held by my body, but was part of my body, *not one, but also not two*, as Nelson writes.

When I was with a friend who had a baby of similar age to mine, she said, "I'm just going to the loo. Would you mind holding Zach?"

I said, "Sure."

But as she deposited her precious charge onto my lap and I looked down at its imperfectly shaped head and blue eyes, I recoiled in horror at the wrong baby in my arms. It was like holding the Pig Baby in *Alice in Wonderland*: grotesque, making me feel physically sick.

In *The Lonely City*, Olivia Laing writes that before attachment theory was developed in the 1950s, the consensus among medical professionals was that *all children required in the way of nourishment was a germ-free environment and a ready supply of food.* The experiments carried out on baby rhesus monkeys were the first to demonstrate an infant's need for physical affection and comfort. The monkeys were separated from their mothers and placed with two surrogate mothers, one made of wire and the other of cloth. The infants clung to the cloth mother, only going to the wire monkey if a bottle of milk was attached to its chest. Later and less well-known experiments separated newborn monkeys from their mothers and kept them in complete isolation, some for the whole first year of their lives. I thought of the stories of babies sat in rows of cots in Romanian orphanages, withdrawn, unloved, and totally silent. They had learnt not to cry.

My baby, by contrast, spent a few minutes on a play mat in the shade of the sycamore tree in our back garden, his face dappled in the sunlight through the leaves, before he started to wave his limbs in an agitated manner like an inverted beetle and wail for my attention. He knew that I would pick him up and soothe him. But when I didn't, when I sat at the kitchen table with my eyes closed and my hands over my ears, he would cry louder, in case I hadn't heard. Even as I stood up and walked through the garden doors to go to him, I imagined what would happen if I had opened the front door instead, walked out of it and kept going. The distress I could cause simply by walking in a different direction overwhelmed and tormented me. How long would he cry for before he gave up, before he got dehydrated or became cold in the shade, before the night drew in? Would help come before then?

My great-grandmother, Mary Purser, had five children and left them in England for years at a time while she spent much of their childhoods in Burma as the wife of a Christian missionary. When I was a child

with little grasp of the impact of colonialism and the conventions of motherhood, there was an exotic mysticism about her life: the Far East, the five abandoned children. Mary and her husband William were convinced that they were "preparing new citizens for 'the Kingdom,'" and that this work was not merely justifiable but morally necessary. They set up sixty Christian village schools throughout Burma and, while her children were ensconced at school six thousand miles away, Mary founded the first branch of the Burmese Mothers' Union. A file of Mary's papers sat on my desk, including letters written to her husband while he was stationed at the Mission House near Rangoon during the First World War. As the winter drew in that first year of my son's life, I opened the file and started to read. "Never have the children been anywhere in my affections where you are concerned," she wrote to William during their wartime separation.

Amongst the papers I found their engagement photo taken in 1910 in the conservatory of her family home on Crooms Hill, which winds down the east side of Greenwich Park. In the photo, William, aged thirty-two, stands rigidly behind Mary's chair, pipe in hand. Mary, then just nineteen, a young woman of the Edwardian era with her hair piled on her head, her frilled blouse high against her neck, and weighing less than seven stone, is unable to conceal her enormous grin.

I wanted her to be an early feminist; she had the credentials for it. Her father was a Liberal MP and Mayor of Greenwich whose daughters were, for the time, highly educated. But as I learnt from her letters to her fiancé after he returned to Rangoon, she was not preoccupied by suffrage. During the sweltering summer of 1911, as the country was gripped by the coronation of George V, she prepared to travel alone by boat to marry a man she adored, believing this would be a personal emancipation. The voyage was, however, more complicated than mere wish fulfilment. As she filled her tin-lined packing cases with wedding gifts of lace tablecloths and items from the Army & Navy store, William sent her a book entitled *Mother and Wife.* Mary wrote in reply, "I have glanced through it + see that it is one of those books that would leave one with the idea that life is not worth living." Clearly, she had little choice in the matter; her first son Bill was born in July 1912, nine months after her arrival in Rangoon. Dorothy followed less than two years later.

Mary's first journey back to England was in May 1915, when she took Bill and Dorothy on the *Tenasserim*, docking at Port Said and Algiers. The ship left Rangoon harbour a week before the sinking of the *Lusitania*.

"Tonight the portholes have been covered with green paper," wrote Mary from the ship. "We have got the lifebelts, warm clothes, a bottle for Dorothy ready, and so we are prepared for anything."

William returned to England in 1916; my grandmother Ruth was born in a Clapham nursing home the following year. Women and children were not permitted to travel by sea until the war ended, so Mary was unable to return to Burma when William's furlough came to an end. She and the children, on William's request, left her Greenwich family home where her parents and unmarried sisters lived and relocated to the country, where it was safer. Mary felt this to be a double exile. "Here in our little State, the absence of the President is intolerable," she wrote after William's departure. "I truly feel only half alive."

Mary lived for the last year of the war in the cramped and damp Rose Cottage, carved into a hill in the Devon countryside: "the remotest little spot imaginable." Her days were spent rising at dawn to light the huge open fireplace in the kitchen, fetching milk from the neighbouring farm and struggling to cook on the coal stove in the scullery. She did not take easily to country life, writing that it was "much the same as life in a jungle village in Burma—no sanitation, no lighting, and the 'natives' very superstitious."

Bill and Dorothy ran wild over the hayfields and baby Ruth learnt to walk in the lanes. The three children were a constant preoccupation but only highlighted the loss of her former identity: "I am a stern, self-reliant spinster making a home for some orphan missionary children." Each night while the children slept, she huddled in the small study and avidly wrote letters to Burma by the light of the oil lamp, knowing they would take a month to reach their destination and another month for a response to return to her.

By the time the war ended, Mary had begun to consider Rose Cottage a place of refuge rather than of banishment, writing that it was "simply teeming with a 'life' that is not to be found everywhere." The end of the war meant that she could return to Burma; a reunion with William was what she had longed for, but rejoining her husband meant leaving behind her son, who at six was by imperial standards ripe for an English boarding school. As she packed up Rose Cottage and returned to Greenwich, she wrote to her husband, "How I do long for you to see him—a hundred times a day. Some funny remark—or his comical smile—a loving hug—all yours by right and yet you are robbed of them. I have been so tempted to bring him back, but I am sure it is best not to do so. Aren't you?" It

may as well have been a rhetorical question. Mary ultimately took the decision on her own, "that it would be cruel to leave Billy alone for this next four years to grow away from his brothers and sisters—and that it would be better to leave Dorothy as well. It certainly would be better for little D's health—though I badly want to keep her with me."

When Mary sailed from Liverpool on the *Henzada* in early 1919, she took with her baby Ruth, my grandmother, but left behind Bill and Dorothy, aged six and four, to the care of her unmarried sisters and the boarding school system. As she wrote to William the day before her departure, "It is all for you—that is all I want to say—you must understand the rest."

The prospect of taking my children on a ship for a month would be enough to send me into a cold sweat, but I would do it unflinchingly faced with her alternative. Wouldn't I?

I sat on a bench in our local recreation ground, watching a plane rise overhead a minute or two after its takeoff from Heathrow, imagining myself on board heading for a faraway destination. My copper-haired boy toddled around with his older sister, wearing the green cotton dungarees my brother had worn thirty years previously. It was the summer of 2015 and I was pregnant again, due to give birth in the autumn. On the way home, I pushed the heavy double buggy along the uneven pavement, my children seated side by side, shopping bags swinging from the handle. As I swerved to avoid a clump of dried dog poo, one of the back wheels fell off. I crouched down and held the weight of the buggy with one arm, my bump nearly brushing the tarmac, the children kicking and grizzling in their seats, and with difficulty screwed the wheel back on with my free hand.

"I went from litigating high court disputes to *this*," I raged at my husband over dinner that evening. This life of broken buggies, of singing the hokey cokey in drafty community halls full of snotty toddlers, of my own ego no longer being the centre of my life. This life outside London, in an anonymous commutable town, where there was space to fill the house with plastic toys and a garden with a real lawn to mow.

"You hated your job," my husband protested, rubbing his forehead with his thumb and index finger. That much was true, but it was *my* job, *my* life.

Even an oyster can be a mother, wrote Susan Sontag, and sometimes I felt as if I could have been anyone. That doing something interesting and

extraordinary was just within my grasp, denied only by the mundanity and mediocrity of motherhood. As if without children I would have learnt the Cyrillic script and hot-footed it to Serbia to be a foreign correspondent, rather than shuffling onto a sweaty train, headed for a day slumped on a swivel chair in a creaky office.

If I had a vocation, would I have boarded that plane, just as Mary had embarked, with trepidation but without regret, onto the *Henzada*? There were times when I would have done, those times when I sat at the kitchen table willing the baby's crying to stop. At others I felt bound by the convention that mothers shouldn't leave their children, my sense that there was nowhere to be but here.

I was having babies at a rate that women had them a hundred years ago: three in as many years; the rate that Mary would have had them, had her wartime separation from William not given her a brief respite from routine impregnation. Was it a cure for loneliness, a legacy, a career break? A desire to gain a competitive edge in my friendship group, which was filled with bumps and babies? *It's like someone who digs a big hole in the middle of a busy intersection, and then starts filling it up again, and proclaims: filling up this hole is the most important thing in the world I could be doing right now,* writes Sheila Heti in her novel, *Motherhood*. There was something about it that smacked of filling up a hole, of creating a busy, noisy home of enthusiastic children to whom I could point and exclaim to bemused visitors, "See. *They* are why I am not reporting from Belgrade." I expect I was also propelled by societal and familial expectations. As Sara Ahmed notes, *The "hope" of the family tree, otherwise known as the "wish" for reproduction, is that the vertical line will produce a horizontal line, from which further vertical lines will be drawn.*

My third child was my smallest, hairiest baby, my skinny monkey baby who couldn't cling. When I was in the birthing pool, the midwife told me about the memorable moment when you scoop your newborn through your legs and into your arms, cord still attached. I knelt in the pool, gripping the sides, while my body took over, pushing until his head emerged underwater. His shoulders lodged inside me; my body tried to expel his body, my mouth emitting a sound it hadn't made before, base and animalistic. My half-born baby's eyes were open below the surface of the water, where he waited, silent and serene. When his body plunged into the pool, seconds or hours later, he floated down and lay for a few

moments at the bottom. I looked at him through the water with his black hair sticking up in a mohawk, and thought, *Is that my baby*? The midwife fished him out, he came up into the air and took his first breath. We spent the first night together on the pull-down double bed in the birthing pool room of the Abbey Clancy Wing; him wrapped in a blanket in the crook of my arm, the pool where we were torn asunder now drained, scrubbed, and clinical under the dimmed fluorescent lights.

When I recall this scene now, three years later, I remember my husband kneeling on the outside of the pool, his face screwed up, as if a construction worker had started operating a pneumatic drill in the corner of the room. Did he put his hands to his ears to block out the noise? I don't think that either of us remember with any degree of conviction. What we were both certain about was that there would be no more births, no more babies.

We named the baby Theodore. Theodore's namesake had invaded the Purser branch of the family tree by marrying Mary's middle daughter, Ruth. He was my Hungarian non-observant Jewish grandfather, whose legacy was in part his irreligious influence on his children which successfully severed the Anglican line.

On a scorching hot summer afternoon of 2018, the descendants of William and Mary Purser gathered in a garden under the shade of a two-hundred-year-old plane tree at Jesus College, which in an inimitable Cambridge way had recently been thrown its own bicentenary party. None of their five children were alive, but the next three generations of cousins were out in force. A second cousin of mine brought a scroll that rolled out into a twenty-foot-long, hand-written Purser family tree from 1793 to 1993, on which our branch was a small section. My name appeared right at the bottom next to my younger brother, at that stage with no lines across or down.

As my three small children played under the plane tree with their third cousins, I realized that I no longer fantasized about walking out of the door, or jumping on a plane, and leaving them. I could disappear for short periods and they, slowly grasping the concepts of time and distance, waved me off happily when I did. Their welcome on my return was of equal delight whether I had been gone for a day or for ten minutes in the garden to hang the washing on the line. They trusted that I would be there when they woke up each morning, to give them breakfast, lay out their uniforms, to help them on with their coats and shoes. That

their babyhoods were over and they were now discernible as small people rather than helpless infants made me want to weep with relief. We were not one, not two, but four individual human beings, each separate from the other, but belonging, living, existing together.

My omnipotence was waning, however: my children, keen observers, had started to challenge what I did and said. Our relationship was becoming more complex, although they did not realize it yet. It was this interaction, by turns joyful and acutely exasperating, that anchored me to the ground and allowed me to be more than a cloth monkey with a breast-full of milk.

My daughter complained one morning of being tired, as she said she hadn't had a long enough sleep.

"You should have put me to bed earlier, Mummy," she said in an admonishing tone. She was right; I should have done, but I was happy to wait another half an hour before summoning the energy to do so. I was aware that this was the start of my culpability, both in her eyes and in mine, for things that might go wrong in her life. As punishment, she refused to get dressed and, five minutes before we had to leave the house for school, was walking around naked with her knickers on her head.

This would never have happened to my great-grandmother, I thought, recalling from her letters Mary's strict disciplinarian style of parenting. As she wrote to her husband from Rose Cottage, "I must confess I beat Bill yesterday in a temper and with such a huge stick—it was wicked of me. I do try to be patient." On other days, she showed a softer side, writing, "Billy and I nearly always sleep all cuddled up close together," and as the time of her departure drew nearer, "I don't know what I'll do without him. He has such a quaint fascinating way and has won my heart through sheer force of personality." She did do without him though, spending only a few months with Bill and Dorothy in the following ten years. It was only the twins, born on her return to Burma in 1919, who stayed with their mother past their sixth birthdays. The physical attachment between Mary and her children was, ultimately, collateral damage in the fulfilment of her marital duties and the pursuit of a higher aim.

Her children loved her unswervingly, pawing at her in their letters, unable to get the closeness they needed. Yet even Mary wasn't immune to the judgment of her offspring. "You truants," wrote Mary's teenage daughter Dorothy in 1927. Mary had deposited the twins, then eight years old, with their older siblings at boarding school and, without saying goodbye, headed back to Burma alone to rejoin her husband. "The parent

birds shouldn't abandon their babies." I don't have Mary's response but my instinct is that she was less than contrite.

I did wonder, however, whether in later life she had tormented herself about walking out of the door and not looking back. In her papers, I found an old newspaper clipping about a mother who strapped a toddler into its pushchair and then left the child alone in the house while she went out with friends. Neighbours heard the child crying but nobody went to check. When the mother returned two days later, the child had died. Did the article resonate with Mary because of her torment about leaving her own children? Perhaps the clipping was a salutary reminder of her failings as a mother, of motherhood itself: the fact that we create mortal beings.

My children race off like uncaged greyhounds in the car park of the leisure centre where we go for swimming lessons after school, as I struggle behind with their swim bags and packed dinners. Every week they ignore my pleas and shouts, my threats to withhold all treats if they don't stay with me. In my charge I have three small beings who are over-excitable, accident prone and, for those few moments of maternal dread, uncontainable. I need another arm to be able to hold each of their hands.

As I bundled them into the car one November evening, in despair I said, "If you get hit by a car, you will die."

They were quiet until the silence in the back of the car was oppressive. I drove home in the dark of the autumn evening, knowing I had voiced the unthinkable. Then three-year-old Theodore, irrepressible and no longer my monkey baby, said crossly, "Stinky Mummy," which made the others laugh.

"I don't want to be died," said Wilfred, in his green school jumper.

My daughter asked, "Where do you go when you die? Is it like going to jail?"

If I had Mary's faith I would have been able to tell them that death was just another journey, an adventure into the unknown. Part of me was desperate to reassure them about the pearly gates and the wonderful time they would have in heaven, but I couldn't. I looked in the rearview mirror as the headlights of other cars on the road flashed across their expectant faces, and said nothing.

Bardia Sinaee

ONLY THE TRUTH

will stand on the other side,
and I am truth itself. I am the president's
interminable necktie, his unabridged Dickens,
the words you have been reading

and reading into. When poets say,
The air could not reveal itself without you, lark,
remember I am both the air
and the lark. Think of me

more faithfully and often
than you breathe. I will allow you
to stare at the sun. I will dismantle the sun
into sleep, colour, and food. Your sickness,

the violence of your existence, is parenthetical
to my delight; I rewrite it as I please.
Come forth into unguarded pastures,
but not because you are free.

Shane Book

BREAKDANCING

My friends and I are on break
from breakdancing

the West African afternoon to a stupor.
My American best friend dances

only in white socks, never shoes.
We work on our windmills.

All day long we plan how to steal
another friend's family's

two limousines. My best friend
is the first American

I've ever seen who has feet.
The other Americans

I've seen were penned inside
TV screens. This real live

American is Black. Like me.
But not me. Word.

What is the word for
soon he will steal us

into a stolen fold,
a slit in the fabric

of the world
where people sell

illegal things, people kill,
and we make Pluto moves.

Cynthia Dewi Oka

AFTER THE FUNERAL

A train of wax paper draped over wobbly-footed tables, the red
perfectly matching the towering golden Buddha's

loincloth. Lips flap. Planets
wound around chopsticks unravel, drip

bits of scallion. Our fists fill with bulbs of cheap
porcelain. After love: the patient parse of meat

from bone. Yolk from destiny. Kin do not
recognize each other

in this steaming nation. A mint leaf on my tongue
makes me forget my tongue. Several

languages eddy, their thorns snagging through
rain's arrhythmia. Misunderstanding, our common feast.

Auntie who runs circles around
the Hells Angels this side of town with her broken

English and smudged mascara jumps up after spilling
bright orange Fanta on her leather miniskirt.

Uncle who can quote any passage from
Corinthians on command waves his napkin

at her moon-thigh: "I surrender! I surrender!"
Roses of Sriracha. The whale of sad laughter rocks

us on its salty back. It saves
us, this indecency. Beyond the glass

storefront, grey sonata of city, the juniper's
judgment tearing at elbows. A boy with

a dead man's name is stitching himself inside
an unmarried teenage girl. She is

laughing too, as though she could still
belong to anyone. The sun

had rendered every pebble and worm like a confession
on the opened ground. It cowers now

while our oil-slick teeth grow winter big. Have they
forgotten? Have I? To unbutton the hawk

from the white and black keys of the piano. To rewrite
everything.

Randy Magnuson

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING

A man turned to stone at the corner of 12th and Oak. Two cars sat at the intersection when it happened. One driver, who had been on her way to a dentist appointment, would later say on the afternoon news that it started at his feet and worked its way up his body until he was completely petrified. The man was frozen mid-step, legs split, arms mid-sway, eyes and mouth agape. Only his flesh turned, not his clothes, which hung, flapping in the wind. The other car sped away quickly, glad, probably, that the man hadn't been frozen in the middle, blocking the road.

"Did you see the statue guy on the way here?" Rebecca asked me. She was leaning on the side of my cubicle with her arms crossed. "It's crazy."

"The one at 12th and Oak?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"I don't go that way."

We worked in a filing office at Dunn Hudson College. Technically, it was part of the Registrar's Office, but we just did the filing. Every day, I received documents—transcripts, applications, letters of recommendation, FAFSAs, graduation forms—in a folder with my name on it, which

stayed inside a filing cabinet, which was locked every night and unlocked every morning. I never saw who put the documents in the file, they just appeared there each day, but my training taught me that it could be either the registrar or the Admission Office, or, sometimes, Financial Aid.

"Have you ever heard of something like that?" Rebecca asked. She sat down on my desk.

"Are you sure it wasn't a prank, like someone moving a statue from somewhere else?"

She was eating something from a plastic bag, something crunchy, and swinging her legs. "I don't know. I guess. But that's no fun. We should go see it at lunch."

"I've got a lot of stuff."

She looked at my desk and so did I. A stack of documents sat next to my computer, a collection of old coffee-stained mugs next to that. I didn't decorate my cubicle with themed calendars or family photos or anything like that. Rebecca leafed through a few of the papers.

"I'm going anyway," she said, and left.

I took the documents from her and returned them to the pile. My job was to organize them. I had to make four copies of each: one for internal records, one for Admission, one for Financial Aid, and one backup. Each copy went into a different box. At the end of the day, someone from the office took the boxes to their designated offices. We rotated who took them each day. Sometimes, when the work got too tedious, I'd take a break by doing online surveys through a site called DataBucks, market research stuff. Each survey only paid out a dollar or two, but it added up, and it was something to do.

How many employees work at your company? I guessed, C: 1,000–1,500.

How much decision-making do you do in your department? I lied, A: I am the sole decision-maker.

How likely would you be to purchase new budgeting software for your department? I had no idea. A: Very likely.

The survey paid me fifty cents.

That night I saw the stone man on a rerun of the afternoon news. His mouth hung open, mid-shout, and his eyes, despite being colourless and empty, still conveyed fear. The reporter identified him as Robert Worster, thirty-nine, accountant, husband, and father of two. A crowd of onlookers stood in the background. A few of them waved at the camera. The reporter put a hand on the man's arm while she spoke. "Investigators

still aren't sure what to make of the incident, but are looking into all possible causes." Thick straps gripped the man's waist and under his arms. A flatbed truck pulled up to the intersection; it looked like they were planning to move him. The reporter glanced at the stone man and then back to the camera. "If you have any information, please contact the Dunn Falls Police Department."

Rebecca brought me a cup of coffee. "I went and saw him yesterday," she said.

I looked up from a half-finished survey. "How's he feeling?"

"Very funny. I read that they've been asking other towns if any statues have gone missing."

How long have you been at your current residence? I answered 5–10 years. "And?"

"And no one's missing any."

How many people, including yourself, live in your residence? One.

I looked at Rebecca eating popcorn from a microwavable bag. Her thin fingers pinched bunches of it into her mouth. Her cheeks puffed when she chewed. Some of her hair had fallen out of a bun, rogue strands like spider webs in her eyes. She swept them away. Rebecca was the only person I talked to at work, mainly because she approached me. "The job's a lot better if you get to know people," she told me once. Regardless, most of my other coworkers stayed at their desks, like me, hunched over a keyboard, rifling through papers. Rebecca always wore heels, so she appeared taller than she was. She wasn't necessarily unattractive, nor was she unkind or undesirable; she was simply there. *Too* there, somehow.

"So?" I said.

She punched my arm. "So, it's the real deal, you goof."

I sipped the coffee, burnt and grainy. "Thanks for this."

"I hear he's in a warehouse near the police station now."

How satisfied are you with your current residence? I thought of my house, the one I'd inherited from my parents: bare walls, no photos or framed art or even clocks, a sectional couch, a TV, the cabinets I used (two out of eight), a sink full of dishes. I answered: somewhat satisfied.

When I turned around Rebecca was gone.

When we copied official transcripts, we also had to enter them into the system, in a program called Docufile. We went down the pre-generated screen, entering course titles, numbers, and the grades received into little

boxes. Each transcript took about twenty minutes. We needed to check and double check the boxes because Docufile determined each student's official GPA. Last year, my colleague Ron Carter entered a few transcripts wrong because he was simultaneously streaming a TV show on another monitor and three students almost didn't graduate. Fortunately, someone caught the error in time. At the bottom of the electronic form, there were two options: "Save" and "Cancel," situated right next to each other. If you accidentally clicked "Cancel," you lost the information you'd entered, and you had to refrain from putting a foot through the computer screen before starting over.

The next week another man turned to stone. A couple walking their dogs found him on a park bench, sitting with his hands in his lap. He wore jeans and a jacket with a sweater underneath. The dogs tried to piss on his shoes, but the couple wouldn't let them. Later, when police arrived, they commented on how calm he looked, like he didn't mind being petrified. I looked up the news footage on my office computer, where workers strapped him to the hook of a small crane. A graphic on the bottom of the screen read: "Harold Shepherd, 72, 2nd to Petrify," and another below that that read: "Cause still unknown. Time for concern?" He was a retired civil engineer. His coworkers had thrown him a retirement party two weeks prior. A picture of Harold holding a slice of carrot cake appeared on screen. The program cut to an interview with his daughter, a curly-haired woman with puffy eyes. "He started forgetting things from time to time," she said, "mainly people, like who we all were. Sometimes he knew us, sometimes he didn't. He stopped talking to everyone. It was really rough on our mom. Then this." When they cut back to the reporter, the crane lifted Harold from the bench. As it did, he swung. One of his legs struck the bench and broke off. Behind the reporter, two workers shrugged.

With which members of your family do you regularly speak? None.

How do you typically communicate with friends and family? (check all that apply): in person, phone, email, text messages, video chat, postal mail.

Would you be interested in a new type of messaging and communication service, an all-in-one, easy-to-use app installed directly on your phone or computer? No.

What keeps you from communicating more with family? (check all that apply): time commitment; busy schedule; father passed away when you were

young; mother passed away when you were older, but still young; brother couldn't deal with it, moved away, may or may not be in rehab somewhere; every time you think about reaching out, you get a stomach ache and find it easier to think about other things; geographic distance; emotional distance; political views; other.

I agreed to go with Rebecca to the park. We found it blocked off with yellow police tape, but we joined several others as they gathered around the empty bench. We watched for a while, as if we expected him to appear there in flesh and bone again. Rebecca stood close to me and after we'd looked for several minutes, she suggested we go for a walk. "We get an hour for lunch. Might as well use it," she said. It wasn't a hot day, but the sun gave the illusion of heat. It annoyed me. I thought about whether or not I'd left the stove on. "What do you suppose they were thinking about when it happened?" Rebecca asked.

I shrugged. "Who knows? Probably 'why is this happening?'"

"Do you think our lives really flash before our eyes?"

"No."

"I wouldn't want it to. Not unless I'd done some amazing things, like saved children from a burning building or found the cure for a rare disease, or been married."

But Rebecca had been married. She'd told me about it one day in my cubicle. It was someone she dated in college; they got married their junior year and divorced a year after they graduated. "He just wasn't ready for that kind of commitment," she'd told me. "Too immature." She must have forgotten she'd mentioned it to me. That or now, several years later, she'd begun denying it ever happened.

"What about you?" she asked.

"What about me?"

"What would you want in your life-flash?"

I looked back at the bench. I couldn't think of a single thing.

I spent the rest of the day cross-referencing. Once a week, we checked to make sure everything we'd entered in Docufile matched the records of other offices. This was to prevent inconsistencies and misplaced documents. We received email reports on Friday mornings of everything that we'd entered that week. First, we'd print the report. Then, we'd compare it to our internal hard copies. After that, we'd cross-reference it with Infoscape ("your data is our passion"), the Admission and Financial

Aid student database, to make sure that they'd logged all the same information. The registrar had been petitioning for years to make the switch over to an "all-in-one digital administrative connected campus database," to eliminate all the cross-examining, but the board maintained that it wasn't in the budget. We rarely found inconsistencies, but when we did, they were serious. Once, Frank Willard, admission counsellor, forgot to enter the transcripts for three-star football recruit Robbie Winters, and by the time we caught it, his admittance had been delayed so long that he committed to Missouri Baptist and the coaches threw a fit. Another time, Ron Carter entered the wrong admission decision for a student, a kid named Brian Metzger, so that the system showed he'd been accepted when he was in fact declined. So the system sent out "congratulations on your acceptance" and "take the next steps in enrollment" emails, but in the end they had to rescind his admission. I heard that weeks later the Metzger kid fell from a balcony and died.

Have you, in the last three years, bought a home, started a new job, gotten married, or had a child? No.

Do you plan on buying a home, starting a new job, getting married, or having a child in the next year? No. Delete. I don't know. Delete. No.

Which of the following do you regret? (check all that apply): current living situation; failed romantic relationship(s); having children; trying illicit drugs; moving back to your hometown and taking the first job that came up; not starting that tech company with Mike Pullman; eating premade dinners in front of the TV instead of reading more; crying by yourself in the bathroom at your mother's funeral; not crying at your father's; telling your couple of high school friends who work at restaurants and bars and farms that you are busy with work (or that you are sick, or that you have to paint your house, etc., etc.) when they try to keep in touch until eventually they stop trying; seeing the same friends on the street but pretending you don't; hiding away your photo albums and forgetting what your family looks like; bad financial decisions; poor health; other.

Another person turned to stone, the third in as many weeks, a woman leaving a supermarket. She had a large grocery bag slung over one arm while she pushed her daughter in a stroller with the other. Neither the bag nor the stroller nor the baby petrified, only the woman. Her face was more disturbing than the previous two victims, eyes open so wide they looked like grey golf balls in her skull, mouth even wider, a twisted oval, revealing

straight and nicely-aligned teeth that framed a curled tongue. The fact that the shopping bag and stroller didn't change corroborated medical professionals' theory that the petrification only affected organic life, and that anything inorganic touching the statue would remain as it was.

Statues. That was what news reporters and journalists began calling them, even doctors sometimes. They'd begun to think of it as an illness, a virus, somehow communicable, but they had no evidence, and the CDC had just begun investigating. The only symptoms were obtained from interviews with friends and family, who all said that the statues had been struggling with identifying and remembering faces, memory that went in and out like a flickering light. Sometimes they remembered everyone, sometimes no one. Then, they turned to stone. The problem was that they couldn't obtain any information from the victims themselves. They had no vital signs, no blood to draw, and no way to communicate pain or discomfort.

At work, I tried sitting as still as I could in my desk chair. It was a game my mom used to have us play, my brother and me, when she wanted peace and quiet. Who could sit still the longest? Whoever moved first, even a finger, lost. The winner got candy. I sat in my desk chair with my arms on the armrests and my feet flat on the floor, trying to remain completely motionless. I tried to imagine how it would feel to stay that way forever. Were the statues conscious inside that stone? Could they see and hear and smell?

Once I'd heard a story about a man who, after a stroke, lost movement in his entire body, every single part, but retained control of his mind. He couldn't even move his eyes to look around. Everyone thought he was in a coma or brain-dead, but he wasn't. He could think as clearly, if not more clearly, than any other person. He could hear doctors talking to his family, explaining how difficult it is to estimate the length of a coma, but couldn't speak up to say, "I'm here," or "I'm conscious." After a few weeks, he gained control of his eyelids and psychologists performed a series of interviews where he responded to questions by blinking. One blink for yes, two blinks for no, that kind of thing. In these interviews, the man said it was like being stuck in some dark, timeless void, eternal blankness. He learned to mark time by the routine of things around him, the nurse that would walk past at eight every morning, the TV shows that came on, the rise and fall of the sun. Routine was his life, the cyclical motion of everything around him without any type of interaction. At

times, he wanted to die, but had no way of completing the act or asking others to do so for him. He prayed that they would just euthanize him. But his family kept waiting. His wife, the one who had been the first to see him blink, sat by his bedside for months, and they conversed like that for a while. But he never recovered. Eventually, his children stopped visiting. Eventually, his wife left him for another man.

I went to lunch with Rebecca, to a sandwich place near the office. I asked her if she thought the statues were alive. She told me no. I asked her if she thought they ever might turn back. She told me no. I asked her what it would be like to become one. She told me something about the immediacy of life and taking joy where it comes. To be honest, I wasn't really listening, just asking questions and filling in my own answers. When we left, she said we should do it again sometime and I said okay.

I checked my DataBucks account. I'd accumulated fifty-five dollars since the beginning of the month. The rules of the site dictated that you could only cash out once you reached one hundred. My roommate in college used to run errands for people to earn beer money. He'd post flyers around campus and people would call him to go grocery shopping, or pick up their prescriptions, or drop letters off at the post office. He didn't charge much, five or ten dollars per errand. He liked it because it kept him busy, "out and about," he always said. He always invited me along; he even said he'd split the pay, but I preferred to stay home. I didn't see a point in driving all over town. Plus, it was dangerous. Once he picked up what he thought was cocaine for a client. Another time a woman tried to get him to take her child to the park, but he'd declined after he noticed her bags packed in the hallway behind her. Another time he drove a man to an empty field and left him there. The man didn't want a ride back and had a large, lumpy bag with him. But it didn't really faze him. "Man, you meet some characters in this gig," he'd say when he came back to our room.

I preferred the surveys.

Another statue. This time in a home on Ash Street, lying in bed. Anne Walker, forty-two, divorcee with no kids. She worked as a radiologist in Fort Wayne. Neighbours found her lying on her back, under the covers, after they'd noticed her mail accumulating. On TV, they showed a shot of her room, with rumpled blankets, blank walls, and a shabby armoire in the corner. The shades were halfway drawn, casting slats of light on

the bed. It was unclear, the reporter said, how long she'd remained there before anyone found her. While they didn't show her body, reports described the way she bit her bottom lip, a face of ecstasy, as if, when she turned to stone, it wasn't terrifying or painful, it was bliss.

How would you describe your social life (please choose from the list below)? Very active, somewhat active, not very active, non-existent, sad, tedious, jealousy-stricken, imaginary.

When was the last time you had sex?

When was the last time you made an intimate connection of any kind?

To what do you attribute your lack of intimacy (check all that apply)? Lack of opportunity; off-putting personality; lack of interest; insecurity; fear that interacting with someone else will reveal that you are, in fact, a boring person; that time in college that you asked out Judy Cambini and she laughed in your face in front of your entire 250-person biology lecture; the fact that your parents weren't around to give you "the talk" and instead you had to ask Brent Davis in the middle school locker room; general anxiety; impotence; lack of confidence; other.

"I think I may be turning into one of them," Rebecca told me. She'd invited me over to her apartment, a little one-bedroom place above an Italian restaurant. The smells of pasta sauce and spicy sausage drifted up through the vents. We could hear the clink of silverware on plates.

"Don't be silly," I said. "It happens fast. You said so yourself." We were sitting on her couch and she was eating pretzels from a mixing bowl.

"But maybe it depends on the person."

"Maybe. But I wouldn't worry."

"I feel weighted down. I think it's coming."

"You're going to be fine."

She set the bowl aside and scooted closer. "Are you sure?"

I pictured her turning to stone, her hopeful eyes gone blank, the sheepish half-smile frozen to her face. Then I pictured both of us as statues, there on the couch, looking at one another but unable to move. "Not entirely," I said.

When we made love that night for the first and only time, she asked me to stop shortly after we began. She said she couldn't remember who I was. She repeated it, louder and more frightened each time, crying and then screaming at me to get off of her, to get out of her apartment. "Who are you?" she screamed, "Why are you in my room?"

I grabbed my clothes and ran without putting them on. In the car, I pulled on my pants and cried, softly at first and then deeper, a convulsing kind of sob that soaked my face and the spot where I'd rested it on the steering wheel. A light went on in Rebecca's bedroom window and I drove away.

She didn't stop by my cubicle the next day. Nor the next. Nor the day after that. We'd started entering financial aid documents and had to do so carefully. One missed decimal or number and a student's grants and loans could be revoked. I leaned close to my screen as I punched in each number, so close that the screen occupied my entire field of vision, my entire world. *Make sure not to use commas in the form. Please do not try to do math in your head when entering the forms, even for simple addition. If you discover a mistake after the form has been entered, you must re-enter the entire form and notify the Office of Financial Aid.* Every so often, I turned around to see if Rebecca would be there, eating some kind of snack out of a plastic sandwich bag, but she wasn't, and it became increasingly hard to turn around. I punched numbers, barely moving my head when looking between the paper form and the screen, just my eyes. My feet felt heavy, rooted to the floor, my fingers less dexterous on the keyboard, my chest tight. I checked my DataBucks balance. Fifty-seven dollars and twelve cents. I returned to the forms. At that moment, my desk chair, with its adjustable arms, high back, and lumbar support, felt the safest place in the world.

How many times per week do you lie in bed and wish that it would open up and swallow you whole?

What is your greatest desire? World peace; immeasurable wealth; a perfect marriage; international fame; the power to bring people back from the dead; the power to be invisible; infinite time to sleep/do nothing; to be left alone; to be the only person left in the world; I don't know; I don't know but I wish I did; other.

How many times per week do you look out the window in your office, one of only two, and notice a colourful bird, or a happy couple on the street, or a cloud that looks like a sailboat, and think to yourself: why?

Who would you like to give the eulogy at your funeral?

The day that Rebecca petrified, I'd been swamped with work. She'd been standing in my cubicle when it happened, leaning on the side, eating

baby carrots from a bag. She was trying to tell me something important, explain something to me, but I'd been too busy to listen. When she paused for an unusually long time, I turned around and found a statue. This was when they were still taking people to the warehouse, so the fire department came in with thick straps and a dolly. As they wheeled her out, I watched her face, which looked like she'd been crying, or at least about to. I wondered why her and not me. For a second, I even felt jealous. No one else looked up.

It's been two months, and our entire office has turned to stone. The fire department stopped removing them a couple weeks back. They'd filled the warehouse, and besides, their entire staff turned as well. Now, if you walk past the fire station, you can see them, frozen while climbing into the truck or rolling up the hose. You can see them all over town, if you care to walk around. I took a walk not too long ago, to look at the statues in the park: mothers and children walking hand in hand, strangers resting on benches, couples looking terrified, standing apart like they'd never seen each other before. Sometimes it's nice to sit near them, pretend I'm eavesdropping on a conversation like I so often used to.

Most of the college has turned. But somehow the documents continue. They show up in boxes to our office every day, still full of white and yellow pages. So I keep filing them, I keep entering data; I keep carrying the boxes back to their respective offices. Someone has to.

Occasionally, I'll go out at night. Once it's as dark as it gets, when there's nothing entertaining on TV, once my dinner, canned goods taken from the empty supermarket, has gone cold, I'll go for a stroll. It's incredibly quiet at night: no cars, no voices, no dogs barking. Sometimes I walk by the library and the old well. Sometimes I take scratch-off lotto tickets from the convenience store, just for the hell of it. Sometimes I go down by the river and its gurgling is the only sound outside of my breathing. I feel like the last person on Earth, and I wonder who else feels this way, who else, across town, or across the country, looks out their front window and wishes they too would turn to stone.

Every so often, while I'm wandering at night, I'll enter somebody's house. A lot of people left them unlocked, and even if they didn't, the doors aren't too hard to jimmy open. Once inside, I look for them. I usually find them at the kitchen table, on the living room couch, or in bed. Sometimes I find them in action: cooking, cleaning, or talking. Sometimes I find them crying, in the midst of an argument, a misunderstanding, in a state of total confusion. Last night, in a little cul-

de-sac house, I found a whole family sitting around a table. They must not have been in a memory lapse, because they all looked happy, content. The food, set out on platters, a roast and assorted vegetables, was rotten. It smelled like death. On one side sat an older man and woman, and on the other side a young boy. A fourth seat, next to the boy, across from the father, was empty, so I took it. I looked from person to person. They each held their silverware like surgeon's instruments, gentle and steady, and I sensed tenderness in their stone hands. I wanted to reach out and touch them, but I didn't. The father had his mouth open and a fork in the air. The mother watched him with a mouth full of food. The son sat with a wide smile. They were listening to a story. I tried to imagine what it was, maybe a tale about the father playing pranks as a young man, or about something silly a coworker said that day, or even something he was making up on the spot, a fantasy—full of adventure and triumph. I thought I might have seen the son blink. Each time I turned to look at someone else, I could feel his eyes on me. I thought I might have even seen his head turn. But every time I looked back, he was staring straight ahead.

It's hard to say how long I sat there. It could have been hours, until the horizon glowed pink. But it could've been only minutes. This morning I woke up on the family's couch. Once again, I sat at the table, perfectly still, convinced that my feet were growing heavy, planted in the ground, my hands and neck stiffening in place, my torso hardening. But they weren't. I left the door open on my way out.

Peter Jickling

LAUNDROMAT

I like the Laundromat.

I like the rows of washing machines, standing like soldiers.

I like the drying clothes swirling in sync,
and the phone book chained to the payphone.

I like the guy in the yellow cap that told me "I'll be back" before leaving,
and the cheap plastic chairs,
and the well-watered plants, all 28 of them.

I like the sign on the change machine that forbids use by non-customers,
and the sign on the door indicating the premises are video monitored,
and the green translucent signs hanging from the ceiling that say things
like: DOUBLE LOAD $3.50,
and the sign on the community notice board advertising firewood.

I like the dirty linoleum floor,
and the pop machine with the Pepsi logo circa 1992,
and the mysterious barrel containing one sock,
and the washing machines' operator instructions,
and the rolling carts with lint-clogged wheels.

The Laundromat's fluorescent lights are counter-intuitively meditative.
I like them too.

Rachel Lindley-Maycock

AND BEGIN

When I was ten, my gym teacher gave me a concussion. He smashed the back of my skull with a metal pipe. He was busy constructing a jungle gym in the hopes of taming all that exuberant childish energy into something that could passably be called "sport." The day had been meant for running, or whatever silly jog we could each conjure to make our friends laugh, along a makeshift dirt circle cut into a field that passed as a soccer pitch beside our school. The prairie and its thunderous weather, however, turned the field into a half-frozen muddy wallow. While we students would have all leapt into it with delight and great enthusiasm, the thought of trying to explain to parents why twenty-nine children had dipped themselves in icy mud from toe-tip to cowlick had resulted in a spontaneous change of lesson plan. The poor teacher—I think his name was Mr. Landry—tried desperately to get the class to aid in the jungle gym's construction, but the "help" offered consisted mostly of wielding pipes like giant lightsabers and challenging each other to death duels.

I did not help. I had always found such chaos overwhelming and deeply perplexing, and I therefore stringently avoided all possibility of

being sucked into any one of those tight balls of social energy. It would be decades before I was finally diagnosed as being on the autistic spectrum, so back then I was simply my mother's "changeling child," fey and wild, prone to sudden strokes of genius and hiding under hedges. I was fascinated by the patterns emerging as Mr. Landry worked, and I snuck up behind him to look in awe at the magic of a giant pile of metal pick-up sticks transformed into art. He never knew that the bar he swung into position connected with a thunk to the back of my head, knocking me forward onto my hands. I was up so quickly that no one noticed. I had felt no pain. I would be fine. I continued. I told no one.

I was sprawled on my back in a snowbank several hours later, no memory of how I got there, repulsed by fierce sunlight burning into my brain. In a haze of boneless nausea, I welcomed the flakes of ice creeping into my bloodstream. Where was the school? Why was I in my snowsuit on a path home? How did this begin? It felt as if I had lain there all my life, an instant, hours, a few minutes. Time was too complex a subject for my mind to grasp in this wobbly consciousness. I was just pain, I always had been. But the snow was deliciously cold and took all of me away.

Something deeper than consciousness or memory drove me and my body up, even when I was convinced my skull was spilling my brains out as I crawled forward. Something oriented me to the worn footpath, then the bare limbs of sleeping crabapple trees, then the peeling white paint of a neighbour's fence. I wanted nothing more than for the snow to cool my face again, to just lie down and silence my brain's shrieking like an overboiled kettle. But there was a wolf nipping at me, scaring me on to drag myself up an insurmountable incline of concrete steps. Haul upwards on the iron railing. Stand upright. Reach for the doorknob. But there I was stopped. How that object worked escaped me. A doorbell I could manage. I leaned. My mother opened the door just in time to catch me. Fade to black.

This is not the beginning of my story.

This story, however, has been rolled over and around like roadkill, its entrails scrutinized by family and friends looking for a source, a cause, the start of it all. They try to peel away the layers of narrative skin to scry that one singular beginning. An autistic child, a trauma to the brain. Of course, of course. That must be it.

That isn't it. This story is a snake that eats its own tale.

Christmas was impending in Toronto. I had recently graduated top of my class from three years of theatre school and nabbed one of the

best agents in the city. I was made for acting, quite literally. I had been built for it, ironically, by a gentle Métis Grey Nun named Soeur Çere, my favourite teacher when I was six and a student at a French Catholic school in Alberta. She cast my heathen Anglophone body into the role of Mary in the school Christmas pageant. In hindsight, I suspect it was her well-meaning but hapless attempt to guide a member of one of the few heretic families in town toward the light of God. My doll was chosen as Jesus, I was allowed to wear stage makeup, and I sang a song into an actual microphone. While this magnificence would have sufficed by itself, it was the process leading me onstage that hooked me. I learned that when I acted, someone gave me paper with words on it, which instructed me what to say to people, and then that same someone directed me how to respond to other people saying things back to me. It was sublime, an epiphany, how much easier life could be for a child on the spectrum once someone gave her a script.

On this night in Toronto, the temperature had plummeted to well below -20°C, so I had escaped the crumbling Victorian basement where I lived and where I could watch the ice creep up walls as the mercury dropped, in order to warm myself back to life at my friend Jeff's. I was flopped on the floor, ignoring the old stains and wear of the carpet beneath me and pretending to be a grand chess master in the living room of his tiny apartment. Jeff and I had remained twinned through college and beyond, both of us secretly struggling to find where we started, who we were, who we loved, using each other as shamans and protectors. We regularly solved all the world's problems together while pretending that our small, dingy, impoverished lives weren't quite as oppressive as they were. Ergo, chess.

I was losing the game spectacularly, so when I stopped to say I had to go home, Jeff sneered and assumed I was choosing the coward's way to make a run, escaping my humiliation. I only repeated, "I have to go home." I was staring at the chessboard unblinking, fascinated as the game disappeared. First it was the dead who were buried: pieces piled on either side of the board phased out of existence, leaving only stale air and frayed carpet fibres in their wake. Then the abyss came for the players, the peripheral pawns and rooks. The central performers remained, solid and unwavering. Their world of the board never faded, staying intact and forever squared. But everything on the edge was gone. I looked up from the floor to speak to Jeff, to commiserate in amazement at this magical vanishing act. Then my world tilted and I fell off.

Imagine that you could remove one of your eyes, and trade it with one from those you love. Your spouse, your child, your mother. Imagine that when you place this globe inside your skull, you can see their whole world, their whole past and present. You look at the time, and you see your time, and theirs. You look at their face, and you see the love you have for them, and the self-hatred they have for themselves. Imagine it all crashing into you as it collides with your sense of self like a moon, ripping you out of orbit.

"I have to go home."

"I have to go home."

He called me a cab. He wanted to call an ambulance. My mouth moved and someone else's voice emerged to refuse. I would be fine. I'm just feeling a bit ill. Trust me. Trust me, I'm fine.

I stared through a kaleidoscope of time, like a telescope in a wormhole, like a stack of pick-up sticks where every single one brings the tower down. I was there on a frayed carpet, I was in the cab, I was back in college and frozen onstage, I was still in Jeff's apartment, I was thousands of miles away, a child falling into my mother's grasp. I was outside of my own apartment, lurching down an icy path, grabbing a doorknob I couldn't work, and falling.

I fell down in the snow, and this time I didn't get up again. This time I was eaten by the wolf.

Someone in my body woke up on the bathroom floor, in the dark and cold. There was vomit to be flushed down the toilet. They flushed it. They then picked my body up, carried it to the bed, and slept. They slept for twenty-four hours. When they woke up, they took a call from someone named Jeff. They told him they were fine. Just fine. Nothing to talk about. Nothing to care about. They walked up the stairs to leave my apartment, discovered the door wide open. They closed and locked it.

A month later, my body was diagnosed with a central neurocytoma, a monster that filled the right lateral ventricle of my brain. It was huge. It crushed grey matter and white matter against the inside of my skull, substance that had once made me. It had to come out, and quickly, or I would die.

I was already dead.

This was not the beginning.

What happened over the next eighteen years is a cipher. There was no movie of the mind, no mirror, no kaleidoscope, only flashes like lightning that would briefly illuminate a frozen moment, but disappear, leaving

only a negative outline where a memory should be. My body had short-term memory. It had working memory. It had skills, and it could hold a job and pay the rent. It put clothes on its back and food on its table. It had everything a body needs to function in this world.

Except interest. Emotions may have raged through its frontal cortex, but they had nowhere to go. My body didn't care. With a lack of care, there is a lack of memory. The mind sweeps away the detritus of day-to-day living: the kind of shirt worn a month ago, or the type of cereal eaten for breakfast, or the route taken to work. Anything deemed "unimportant" by the hippocampus, that librarian of memory, is tossed out of working recall, never to darken the doorstep of long-term memory.

As far as this body was concerned, nothing was important, and so it was all tossed aside like mulch to be trampled underfoot. The inner pathways that defined me were gone, washed out by a chasm that lay between desire and an empty house. This wasn't a human being, but a stand-in left in place, waiting for an actor to return to a movie scene that would never end.

There is no neurological exam to measure this kind of emotional blindsight—the horror that had happened to me was unknown even to myself. My mouth responded with words, my body moved through time, people interacted with it as if it was inhabited, and no one knew there was nobody home. At least, there was no conscious knowledge. But over time, unease grew and connections wavered, then broke. Friends drifted into nothingness. Even Jeff, my closest confidant, sank into the dark.

An impossibly narrow path of neural tissue, the most fragile of ribbons, kept consciousness from forever falling off the cliff. It lay obvious before me only in the wake of pain. Pain built a bridge that connected desire to action. In suffering, those lightning flashes of awareness would remain ablaze just long enough that moments of agonizing life could be saved in a powerless and ransacked house, in the hope that someone, somewhere, would eventually come home, turn the lights on, and begin the movie again. For eighteen years, the only time consciousness returned was when the body was broken. Memories of vertebrae crumpling when my body was clipped by a bus. The endless recovery, the surgeries. There is a memory of a cat screaming in pain nearby, after being ruthlessly kicked. Or the memory of my tears as I looked at a photograph in a magazine, a student's twisted face, at Columbine, after learning all her friends were killed. They float independent and disconnected from each

other, surrounded by grey. There is no sense of order, no chronology. Just flashes.

No. Not now. Not yet.

I woke up gasping, terrified. I was in a bedroom. There were outlines of a bedframe, dresser, random clothing I didn't recognize on the floor. My body felt oppressive, claustrophobic and smothering. There was an alien resistance in my limbs that forced me to lumber instead of leap out of bed, feet slapping heavily against the floor. Muscle memory took me toward a bathroom I had never visited. As I passed a window in the living room, I immediately recognized, not a Toronto skyline, but the nightscape of Edmonton. I had no idea how I had gotten there. I moved faster, burst through the door of the bathroom, turned on the light, and screamed. There was an intruder in the room with me, massive and pasty-faced, mouth and eyes wide in a grimace of agony and terror. There was only a mirror. I screamed again. I could not recognize my face. I was older, much older, and my body had exploded in size, with folds of fat and skin that wrapped around my neck and chest and belly like a constrictor crushing the breath out of me. But hours later, as the panic subsided, as I continued to memorize this new old, sickly face and body I had carried into the bathroom, a shining array of sharp memory was lit within me. All those stored moments of hurt had waited there for me to peer through them, little windows paned with broken glass that cut me to prove I was alive. And I was indeed alive, vibrant, and whole. I had grabbed a fragile ribbon of self, bridged the chasm, and found a decayed and abandoned house. I had made it inside, step by agonizing step, year after year for almost two decades, and I had finally, resoundingly, turned on all the lights.

But even here is not where I begin.

My hand rose to feel a row of metal lining my hairline, travelling in a rough C around the top of my stubbled head. I was sitting in a crumbling Victorian basement on an old corduroy two-seater sofa, and there were cards and letters in my hand. A voice called from the kitchen. My mother. That was my mother. She asked, "Do you want cream in your cocoa?" The smell of something sweet and warm, the shriek of a stovetop kettle. I looked back down at the scribblings in my hand. I kept reading the words, and I knew their meaning. My internal dictionary worked, and I understood what was said. *Get well soon*. Or *I was so worried, and so glad you're okay*. I saw a string of empty platitudes with no weight to them. But these words held something else, something that called up other words

like *anguish*, or *hope*, or *love*, words which should have some missing meaning but kept slipping away, disappearing behind an impermeable wall. My brain had been split, hemispheres severed from each other, and I would forever remain of two minds. They no longer twinned themselves or worked in synchrony, but instead remained stubbornly mute, so I remained empty. A heat grew inside me, and my left hand began to shake violently, then threw the cards and letters onto the floor. My mother stepped into the room from the kitchen, breaking into this battle as the image of domestic bliss, but with a face filled with a pain I couldn't read, holding a cup of steaming cocoa that she gingerly passed to me. My left hand reached out to take the proffered cup as I stared, a helpless bystander. The heat inside rose, the shaking turned inward and tore at my chest. The cup was held in front of me, like a trophy, or a weapon: look at it, look at what I do. I watched, just watched, as that hand slowly and deliberately edged the cup further and further on its side until its boiling contents poured directly onto my breast.

This was the beginning.

This was how my brain learned to build bridges. This was the first flash of lightning, the first memory of pain and rage and loss screaming from a broken mind. In that searing moment, I could see the destruction of who I had been, my desire to reach through the bell jar that silenced me and find a child who hid under hedges, my need to find a home in this devastated brain. I could see all the flashes of yearning agony that would follow, the building of a new self, with little memory of what had brought me there but with so much paradoxical wisdom and care, who would rise from the wreckage to take my place. In that moment I was born. In that moment, I learned the true meaning of my first word: that *healing* tastes of chocolate and burns the heart.

CONTRIBUTORS

Kelsey Andrews grew up in Grande Prairie in Northern Alberta and moved to Vancouver when she was nineteen. She now lives in Saanichton on Vancouver Island. She was published a few times as a teenager, back when she was brave, and has now become brave enough to publish again at thirty-eight.

Shane Book is a poet and filmmaker. His second collection, *Congotronic*, won the Archibald Lampman Award and was shortlisted for the Canadian Authors Association Award, Ottawa Book Award, and Griffin Prize. He teaches at the University of Victoria and lives in unceded Lekwungen territory, Paris, and New York City.

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Sharan Dhaliwal is the editor-in-chief of *Burnt Roti* magazine, a platform created to give South Asians a voice, while breaking stigmas around sexuality and mental health. She is a writer, with bylines in the *Guardian, Broadly*, and *i-D* magazine, where she talks primarily about cultural and sexual identity. Sharan's been named an LGBTQ+ trailblazer by *The Dots* and was featured on the front page of *The Guardian.*

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Peter Jickling is a poet and playwright from Whitehorse, Yukon. His play, *Syphilis: A Love Story*, toured Western Canada, winning Best Comedy at the 2013 Victoria Fringe Theatre Festival. His first collection of poetry, *Downtown Flirt*, was published by Guernica Editions in 2019. He is working on a follow-up.

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Christine Ottoni writes and lives in Toronto. She is a candidate at the University of Guelph's Creative Writing MFA program. Her debut short story collection, *Cracker Jacks for Misfits*, came out with Exile Editions in the Fall of 2019. Her website is christineottoni.com.

Savannah Pulfer is a cook by trade, a physicist by schooling, and a poet by, well, you know…shit happens. They're a white settler living and working on the territory of the Huron-Wendat and Petun First Nations, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit River, cka Toronto.

Amy Roa's poetry has been featured or is forthcoming in *The Yale Review*, *Guernica*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Poet Lore*, and *The Antioch Review*, among others. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.

Austin Rodenbiker lives and writes in Texas. His poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Tin House Online*, *Prelude*, *Narrative*, and *The Florida Review*, among others.

Tabitha Siklos is studying for her MA in Creative Writing at Birkbeck College, University of London. She is a freelance writer, a qualified lawyer, and is currently working on a biography of her great-grandmother. She was shortlisted for The White Review Short Story Prize 2018 for her story "Foetus."

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Ashtyn Walker is a writer and musician born on the Canadian prairies currently living in County Kilkenny, Ireland. She is the co-creator of duality-based art and music company u&i/perspective alongside visual artist Danielle Friesen in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Ashtyn creates work in the forms of poetry, song, and creative non-fiction.

Jonathan Wei is an American writer and playwright whose work has appeared in the *Village Voice*, *Iowa Review*, *Nimrod*, *Glimmer Train*, and others. He is a 2019 Interchange Arts Fellow, and has won awards from *Glimmer Train*, *Nimrod*, and the National Endowment for the Arts. He lives in Austin, Texas.

Tara Stillions Whitehead is a multi-genre writer and filmmaker. A Southern California native now living in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, her writing has appeared in *The Rupture, Jellyfish Review, Chicago Review, Red Rock Review, Fiction International,* and elsewhere. She recently produced the (forthcoming) series *Fancy Make-Believe*, written by acclaimed producer Mark Roberts.

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WITH GUEST EDITORS **REBECCA SALAZAR** AND **BRITTNI MACKENZIE-DALE**

Qwerty
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ECOLOGY ecol·o·gy *noun* **1.** a branch of science concerned with the interrelationship of organisms and their environments; **2.** the totality or pattern of relations between organisms and their past, present, and future environments

FOR THIS SPECIAL ISSUE, *Qwerty* invites decolonial, innovative approaches to and encounters with the environment—its physical, social, and linguistic spaces.

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"I find my freckle-sized black hole when I am showering one morning. I recognize it as a black hole not just because of the way light slips into it, like vespers into the ear of God, but because my obsoletions—redacted words, crumpled receipts, painfully abnegated touch and desire—start leaking out of it."

— *Tara Stillions Whitehead, "The Year of the Monster"*

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