PRISM
international

FIGURES

FALL 2019

PRISM international

2019 EARLE BIRNEY PRIZE FOR POETRY

PRISM international is proud to announce the 2019 Earle Birney Prize for Poetry. This prize is presented annually to one outstanding poet selected from our outgoing poetry editor's volume. This year's winner is Michelle Poirier Brown for her poem "Wake," which first appeared in *PRISM* 57.1: *DREAMS*.

Earle Birney established UBC's MFA Program in Creative Writing in 1965—the first university writing program in Canada. The Earle Birney Prize, awarded annually, is worth $500. Special thanks to Mme. Justice Wailan Low for her generous ongoing support.

THE GROUSE GRIND LIT PRIZE FOR V. SHORT FORMS

GRAND PRIZE

"The Patron Saint of Butchers is also the Patron Saint of Surgeons and Abortions" by Dessa Bayrock

FIRST RUNNER-UP

"The Half-Life of Swimming Lessons" by Traci Skuce

SECOND RUNNER-UP

"I Swallow Creatures Whole" by lue boileau

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a place of mind
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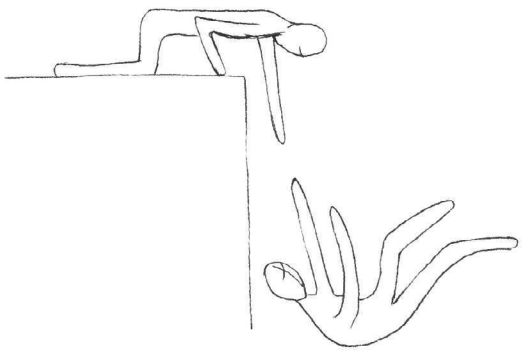


LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Reader,

When we put out the call for submissions to *PRISM*'s FIGURES issue, we had the inky curves of Danielle Friesen's artwork in mind. Friesen's sketches remind us of Zadie Smith's description of two rowers: "their muscles seem outlined by a fine pen."[1] So we began looking for defined, muscular writing that offered nuanced representations of the body and the spaces we inhabit, that grappled with the complex relationships that form us. We asked work to animate the inanimate, to give us secrets, shadows, and ghosts. Spoiler alert: we found it! In the following pages, you'll find stories and poems from emerging and established writers who show us shapes that manifest, charm, defy, and arouse.

FIGURES haunt and vivify each of the four parts of this issue. In CORPOREAL, they manipulate time and space, challenging the meanings of reality and embodiment. NUMERAL records the daily fixations, accumulated moments, and complicated coordinates of our relations to one another. Things get metaphysical in INANIMATE as resonant objects loom large; they have voice and hold us aloft, as hidden lives—both real and imagined—play out in domestic spaces. Absent figures populate ETHEREAL: spirits and ancestors, the beloved and the vanquished, all demanding our attention.

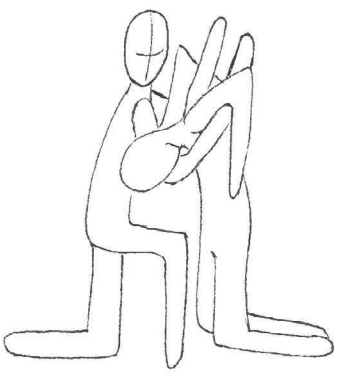
What each of the pieces in this issue have in common is their ability to transcend the earthly container, to transform mid-air into something wholly unexpected, and to reinvent themselves on every read. We thank all of these artists for their craft, their honesty, and their trust.

Warmly,

Emma Cleary and Molly Cross-Blanchard

1 Zadie Smith, *Feel Free* (New York: Penguin, 2018), 49

CORPOREAL



Anne Stone and Wayde Compton

ANTIQUING IN VERMONT

Alain's old shed has all but collapsed. But there, half hidden by a sheet of corrugated tin, I see the 1959 Karmann Ghia convertible. Robin egg blue. The original paint. And the car is mine, gratis, no strings attached, free. And so are we, even if Euclid isn't half so excited by the idea.

"He gave you a car," Euclid repeats, pulling aside the tin roofing.

"Gratis. Free. No strings attached," I say.

Euclid frowns. "Nobody gives away a car," he says. "Nobody gives away a car for free."

"I told you, my ex isn't ... materialistic." I try to explain Alain, the way he thinks when it comes to objects, things, how Alain doesn't really get yours or mine or the lines between, but Euclid frowns deeper.

"For all I know," I say, "he'll take it back in a few days, so let's enjoy it while we can. We'll go antiquing in Vermont."

"Antiquing. On Halloween." Euclid shakes his head.

"We can drive south to the ocean. See the wild ponies at Chincoteague," I say. "There are barns all over, and they're just filled with old stuff, and books, thousands of old books."

Euclid's got the look of a person who's being sold a three-dollar bill, but at the mention of books, that look softens a bit, and I know he's in. Together, we push the car out of the ruins of Alain's shed.

I brush off the driver's seat and hop in. When Euclid climbs in next to me, I lean over and give him a kiss. There's something I want to tell Euclid, but not here, not in this place. Maybe in Vermont or the Carolinas. Somewhere on the coast, I'll find the perfect spot.

"You look good in the car," Euclid says quietly, and I grin.

That night, on the southern edge of Vermont, we pull up at the address of the B&B I booked us into. This house shares an outline with the one I saw on the internet, but it's a lot shabbier, more like a working farmhouse than any B&B.

As I'm pulling up the long drive, the Ghia's high beams come to rest on a little ceramic figure by the front walk. The lawn ornament is wearing white pants and a white long sleeve shirt, and over that, a bright red vest. But that's not the problem.

His face and hands are painted jet black, and his lips are ruby red.

But that's not the problem.

The problem isn't the figure's blackness, but who placed him on this lawn and why. The problem is in how all of this signifies.

The problem is that I am a twenty-two-year-old white woman and Euclid is a twenty-five-year-old black man and we are in Southern Vermont, in the dark of night, in the middle of the goddamned countryside, and in the twelve hours since we left Montreal, we haven't seen another face remotely like Euclid's, aside from this one—and that is arguable. This problem is not small, and I don't know if there is a solution.

Euclid isn't saying anything right now.

His breathing has gone quiet, and his eyes are focused on that figure in white pants. I'm surprised that the thing hasn't crumbled to dust under the pressure of his gaze.

"We can't stay here," I say under my breath.

Euclid turns, looks at me, and raises an eyebrow in a "you don't say" kind of expression.

I blow out a breath of air. Two. Then I start, laboriously, to back out of the gravel drive, but halfway through the three-point turn something hits me.

An inspiration.

"Hold on a sec," I tell Euclid and smile. Slipping the car into park, I pull the cable and pop the front trunk.

There aren't a lot of places to stay, not on this road. And the road is dark.

I am driving down a two-lane highway, my fists gripping the steering wheel, and it's creeping up on midnight, and every now and again our high beams light up a pair of glowing eyes. Whenever we hit a pothole, something heavy bumps around in the compartment under the hood, and it's the night before Halloween, and all of this is as creepy as hell.

"Tapetum lucidum," Euclid says, like he's composing a sound poem.

I glance over at him for a microsecond, but then my eyes fly back to the road.

"That's what the reflective layer is called," Euclid says. "Those animals, the ones with the glowing eyes, that's what they've got. It's like a second chance, that's what it is. They catch the light in their eyes at night, and whatever their eyes don't catch the first time? Well, it hits the tapetum

lucidum—and gets a second chance to be seen. Animals like that, the ones whose eyes glow, they see twice at night."

"Second chance eyes," I tell Euclid, and then I tell him I'm sorry. Because I am, more sorry than he knows.

"We'll find a motel," he says, "that's all."

I nod, but I want to cry.

I want to cry because I should've known better than to have taken anything from Alain. I want to cry because I've never seen a black-faced lawn ornament in my life—not the way I saw one tonight. I want to cry because I have put Euclid in this old convertible with the promise of books and me, and he is welcome to all he wants of either, but I don't cry—because that would be infinitely worse.

I am sure we'll find a place in Poughkeepsie, but the rhythm of the road lulls Euclid into a deep sleep long before we get there. And somehow, I just keep driving.

I make a few stops, sure, but they're no better than the first. By the time the sun rises, the roads have become rougher. Every time the car hits a pothole, it sounds like the front compartment of the Ghia is going to fly apart, like a tectonic shift is underway involving the chassis of our car. One of these tiny earthquakes wakes Euclid from his slumber.

With a deep breath, he yawns into consciousness, and blinks around at an alien landscape. "Where are we?" he wants to know.

For that matter, so do I.

Euclid rummages around in the glovebox, maybe looking for a map. I tell him that there were a bunch of old papers in there, along with the original owner's manual. I remember glancing through the manual when we first got into the car. A document of the ancient past, like an automotive Dead Sea scroll. Images of men with flattops and skinny ties, smiling while they check the oil. But Euclid ignores the manual and pulls out a slim volume. As I drive, he leafs through its pages, using the little LED from his keychain to see. "Theosophy, the Thule Society, and Hyperboreal Physics," he reads.

My eyes are on the road. There's something up ahead. "What?" I ask.

"The book," he says. "Alain's, I guess. Is he into this? Atlantis, Stonehenge, that kind of thing?"

I get it now. "Yeah, sort of. He's an engineer, but he's also a sucker for tarot cards, crop circles, New Age stuff. A study in contradictions. It was sort of charming."

"Charming," Euclid repeats. Like hearing it a second time might convince him.

I pull up at a little gas station—right beside an old-style pump—and I see that there's some kind of a diner out back.

It's one of those old sweet ones, with shining silver lines, the kind that used to roll across the countryside. But now that it's been converted from a railway car, that silver bullet just sits there, promising eggs and sunshine on Formica counters, home fries done up from real potatoes. If the place has other promises to make, I'll need my reading glasses to see those.

"I'm starved," I say and lean in to give Euclid a kiss.

He smiles, shifts in his seat, aiming to take me up on that kiss, but a moment before we connect, he pauses. A shadow has fallen over the two of us.

Outside of the car window, a gas station attendant looks down on us with a queer expression on his face. I glance at the sign, the price of regular—but it's hard to do the math from litres to gallons. Still, the price seems absurdly low. I roll down the window. "Fill her up," I say and smile up at him.

"You got cash up front," the attendant says.

"Of course," I say, like this is perfectly normal—like I've ever had to pay for gasoline before it went in a tank. I come up with a credit card, offer it up to the attendant, standing over us.

"What's this," he says.

Wildly, I begin to wonder if credit cards don't translate into American. "This is a credit card," I say. "You know, a card that gives you, uh, credit."

"You drive truck?" the attendant asks, though his expression says that there is no universe in which I could possibly "drive truck." I guess he's willing to ask for the pure entertainment value.

"Cash, then," I say. "How much?"

The man leans back, takes in the Ghia and frowns. "Maybe three dollars, if you're empty," he says. "You fill a tank before?"

"Of course I have," I tell him. "I drive truck, remember."

All this time, Euclid has been quiet. Really quiet. Too quiet. But now, he fishes ten American coins out of the ashtray and slides them to me. His eyes are fixed on the dash of the car. I can see him thinking, thinking hard. I hand the change to the attendant, and he looks over the silver in his hand. "Two dollars fifty, then."

"Just however much that'll buy," I say. Because like Euclid, I somehow want out of this conversation.

When the receipt is written out by hand, and our tank is as full as two dollars fifty will allow, I turn over the ignition. But first, I lean out and ask this man one last thing. "Where are we, anyway?"

The attendant tilts his head, but the smile he gives is not for me. He's smiling into the distance. "You're a long way from home, little lady. A long, long way from home."

We sit at a window booth in the diner, our car shining in the sun just outside. From here, the Ghia looks as new as the day it rolled off the assembly line. If they had assembly lines back then, though they must have. The menu is a simple sheet, pinned upright by a fancy metal coil whose base forms a stand for a salt and pepper shaker. There are little black dots seeded in the salt.

Pepper, I hope.

"Odd sense of irony," Euclid says under his breath—I follow his gaze to the main counter, on which tiny settings, just like ours, have been laid out. And held inside of the coil salt-and-pepper dispenser, raised up on the metal spike, are little cards, not like ours, because in a sans serif font these exclaim, "White's."

"It's gotta be the name of the restaurant," I say, and look around.

Because that's got to be it. There's an apostrophe, after all. Still, I can't help but think of the price of the gas and the uniform of the waitress and her bouffant hairdo and the liberal use of apostrophes I've seen on the menus of a dozen little places like this. Then I spot the calendar by the grill—the thing is open to October of 1959.

"There," I say and nod at it. "This is a Halloween thing." The calendar isn't old, I can see that. The paper is crisp and new. A reproduction of some kind.

"Is there service here?" Euclid asks. "I feel like we've wandered into some kind of art performance. Is there an art school near here?"

"Where the hell is here?" I wonder out loud.

I wave to the waitress with the bouffant. Eileen, her name tag says. She looks back for a long moment, leans down, and says something to the man at the counter who, a beat later, glances our way. They're taking this whole performance a little too far, I think, and turn to Euclid. I notice that he's brought the book from the car with him. He sets it down between us. Books: that's what I promised him, to make this trip sound like a good idea. Now I pick this one up. I don't like that it's here with us—between us—but I open it to a random page and read the first

heading I see: "Germanic Volkish Rites: Unlocking the Secrets of the Hidden Elect." Alain's New Age interests have gotten weirder since we broke up. Since Euclid.

I look up from the book to face my love, and in that instant, I see the couple out of the corner of my eye.

There. Just outside the window. On the Ghia.

A short-haired woman is sitting on the hood of our car, and a man with a shaved head, her boyfriend presumably, has stationed himself in the driver's seat. The man is bony, and he looks rough. His skin is marked with the kind of pox you get from a bad case of the measles. The woman is lounging on the hood, her blond hair as short as her skirt, her lipstick battle-station red. She's got the same expression as the driver. Both look hungry and wary. A cloud of restless anger seems likely to follow them wherever they go.

There's something about the way they hold themselves, the way they stare at us so openly, that tells me all I need to know. These are not the kind of people I'd pick a fight with, usually. But then, one of them is in my car. Still, that's not even the worst of it. Even with the smiles on their faces, I know what I see in their eyes: a cold hate—a hate that has aimed itself, for some reason, at Euclid and me.

"The hell," he says.

Euclid is already raising himself from his seat—eyes intent on the man, the one who is smiling our way, all the while going at my ignition with a screwdriver.

A bent cigarette dangles from the man's lip.

"Easy," I tell Euclid.

"Oh, no doubt," Euclid says, and I hear it, the danger in his tone.

The diner goes quiet. Stone quiet. And I can hear the sound of a spoon, dropped. The dark liquid tamps down the sound, but I hear it, the clink of metal hitting ceramic. And I can feel every eye in this room swivel toward us.

I take a deep breath and raise myself up, because I am not just going to sit in this booth and let this whole thing play out two-on-one. Already, I've slid one hand into my purse. Already, I've gripped the Ghia's ignition key between my fingers. The top of the key is shaped like an isosceles triangle and tucks up between my middle and index finger.

"Easy," I say again.

But Euclid is already at the door of the diner. The diner's name flashes in the morning sun as the door swings open. As soon as the door opens I

hear the Ghia's ignition, and answering that call, the blond nimbly leaps off the hood and slips into the passenger seat. The driver oh so casually reverses—and the convertible comes to a stop a few feet from Euclid.

I stumble out the door after him.

The blond, turning, bumps a look of contempt our way and waves, and then the car slowly rolls on—so slowly, we might even catch up. Euclid makes a dash for it.

He gets within about five feet of the car, but the driver rips into second then third and leaves us in a cloud of dust.

I turn back—looking for someone to help us. In the diner, the waitress with the brown bouffant pauses over a black forest cake, her knife about to bury itself. She takes us in; a smile spreads across her face and, laughing, she flicks a glance to the gas pumps, where the attendant pointedly rubs his nose, hiding his own gap-toothed smile.

I don't know what state we're in. I don't know what town we're in.

But now, it finally occurs to me to ask what world we're in. Not ours, not anymore. Then I remember the gas station attendant's words, when I first pulled in.

"A long, long way from home."

For an hour, we walk in the direction of the Ghia, chasing the ghost of Alain's car.

Thankfully it was headed north. As are we, in any case. It occurs to me that we might end up walking back to Canada and, if so, I wore the wrong goddamned shoes. My cell phone is a brick—I haven't seen one telephone booth—and the only house we did pass featured two ornaments, each stationed at the foot of the drive, each the size of a four-year-old child, each staring out of whitened eyeballs specifically manufactured to ward the two of us off. I haven't slept, I haven't eaten, and approximately fourteen hours after being given a car, I've managed to lose it in a country that grows more foreign by the hour.

On either side of the two-lane highway, there are two identical tracts of barren land.

A few acres of scrub, like a landing strip, have been clear cut into the forest that once must have grown here, and just beyond that obliterated place, there is a distant line of trees, and beyond that, too distant to see clearly, there is a hint of a softer green. Now and again, the scrub gives

way to a farmer's field where yellowed stalks of corn have been broken off at the stems, the corn harvested for bourbon.

After the twentieth farmer's field, I know where we are. Exactly where we are. The place we are in the middle of. "You know how they say in the middle of nowhere?" I ask Euclid. "Well this is it. This is what they're talking about. This is nowhere. And we're in the middle."

"Your shoes holding up?" he asks.

"My shoes are holding up fine," I say. "My feet are the problem."

"Want my socks?" he asks, and I love him, I love him fiercely, but no, I will not take his only pair of socks. If it comes to that, I'll make a new pair out of his shirtsleeves.

It's then, when the sun has all but disappeared, that we spot it. Peeking out from between a pair of deciduous trees, up ahead. What has to be an old hunter's shack. Deer antlers nailed up over the door. Neither of us know if there will be anyone there in this part of the season, but the dark is coming on fast, and we have no choice.

The two of us approach carefully, peering through a small window next to the door. The glass is rippled and distorted with age, but the shack is empty, one small piece of luck in a night that seems otherwise cursed.

Inside we find the basics: a table, a chair, a cot, some old blankets; a desk containing a copy of *Field and Stream*, some candles, matches. Euclid leans the chair up under the doorknob—our only defensive measure. There's no lock.

We're exhausted and this will do, I think, as we hold each other close for warmth in the cot made for one.

I joke that this is it, the B-sans-B I promised. Euclid smiles, but it evaporates as fast as it came. His eyes roam around the room, probing the shadows at the edge of the candlelight.

"Read to me," I say, and hand him the copy of *Field and Stream.* This issue is from the late '50s and has a fox on the cover. A fox makes for as good a bedtime story as any. But Euclid sets the issue down, opening Alain's weird book instead. Before I can protest, he's reading aloud:

> While ancient astronaut theory suggests that Blavatsky's "Hidden Elect" are a race extraterrestrial in origin, it is our opinion that Hyperborea, the domain ascribed to them, is extra-dimensional, and accessible through greater than natural means. What Blavatsky and other theosophists got right was that we descend from the Elect, and that our

> destiny is to return to our origins in a cosmic cycle as old as time itself. They are pure energy, just as we will become again someday, and so they can move freely through time, unlike us, their material progeny. And though most have described the Elect as pale in form and feature—the "Great White Brotherhood," in many phrasings—the theosophists did not go as far as we do, toward full Aryanism. It is clear to us that race-dilution is what keeps us from reuniting with the Elect, and that they signify the inevitability of a total—and final—racially pure future. Experimental programs led by the Thule Society in WWII Germany were on the verge of accessing cross-dimensional energy, though it is said that such power could cause unspecified distortions if used incorrectly. Had these programs succeeded, the Third Reich would not have been defeated in the 1940s. It is our hope that this book may aid those who wish to resume that research, and this greater cause, in our time.

Euclid stops and closes the book.

"*Field and Stream* might have been less of a downer," I say.

Euclid is staring at the chair propped against the door, but he doesn't say it, doesn't put it into words, the impossible thing that must be happening. That time might have been used in this terrible way against us. "When Alain gave the car to you, he knew you were planning this trip?"

I nod.

We lie in silence, then try to sleep, and finally manage it a long while later.

In the morning, hungry and exhausted, we start north again.

Eventually, the road changes. In the distance, I catch glimpses of a new world in which pavement flows up and down a series of hills and, as those hills rise like mercury, they cut our view of the world into tiny chapters, so we can only see a little ways ahead. Now and again, we rise to the top and take in a vista. The alternating crops and scrub by the road are a thing of the past. Here, the forest crowds close to the road.

We come to the crest of the hill. Looking ahead, Euclid spots it, our car, about half a mile before us, there, a little patch of robin egg blue.

The couple must've abandoned the Ghia not far into the woods. I breathe for the first time in half a century. "Small goddamned mercies," I say.

"We'll see," Euclid answers and nods at the tree line.

We approach the car from within the forest, slowly. Our eyes scanning. It's hard to be quiet when you are limping through dead leaves and over broken roots in a pair of worn pumps, but I do my best.

When we get close, I see that the Ghia isn't abandoned so much as crashed. The bald man is in the driver's seat, moaning, his head slumped over the steering wheel. A crust of blood covers one of his eyes.

The blond is nowhere in sight.

"Shit," Euclid says, and I heartily agree.

Then I see drag marks leading away from the car, toward the road. A blood trail on broken stems. I point and we follow. As we get closer, I hear it. The woman's quiet moans. She is lying on her belly in a ditch, ten feet from the side of the road. It looks like someone has emptied a bucket of pig's blood over the back of her head, and that blood has begun to crust, to dry.

Euclid lets out a low mournful whistle, and the woman raises herself on her elbows and slowly turns her head.

Judging by her ashen skin, by the trail of blood she's left behind, she's been crawling for a while. Her unfocused eyes rove the length of the tree line, and then she catches sight of us, and her pale green eyes fly wide and focus in.

Her hand reaches out.

This isn't about stolen cars or stupid cruelty or a joyride anymore. All of that falls away like so much playground bullshit. I hurry over, kneeling on the ground before her, my knees pitting with gravel as I search my bag for anything that might help.

"I'll look for a first aid kit in the car," Euclid says and jogs off.

I find three maxi pads, which are only in my purse because I haven't gotten around to cleaning it out. They'll do, I guess. Staunching the flow of blood is their job, after all.

The woman is reaching out for me, but her pupils are huge, and she squints against the sun, as if it's difficult to see. I lean in and press a maxi pad against the worst gash there, on the crown of her head.

"You are going to be okay," I tell her. I don't know if I believe it, but I tell her anyway. "You are going to be okay."

The woman makes a sound, and at first I mistake it for a moan. But no, it's a low laugh. An ugly one, at that. The woman's lips, pale as drowned worms, lift on one side into an expression of utter contempt.

The woman scowls, names me for who I love, and I hear a roaring in my head. I know what she's said, I know, but it's like I can't hear anything over the landing strip that's just materialized inside of my brain. My hands are shaking, the maxi pad has fallen into the ditch, beside her, and I feel cold, so cold.

I stand up and take a step back. I have an overpowering urge to kick this woman, to kick her in the face. To do it again and again, until that mouth is swollen shut.

"Ease up," she mutters. "What are you going to do, shoot me?"

I hear Euclid's footsteps, feel his hand on my side. When I tear my eyes from the blond, I can see he doesn't have a first aid kit, but he's found an old towel—one that looks to have been used as an oil rag. He stands there, wringing that towel, his eyes on the hateful blond.

The blond, meanwhile, has worked her way to her knees, though it's clear that one of her arms is badly broken. The tip of a broken bone emerges from the twisted forearm. She lurches forward, her vomit hits my shoes, and when she throws her arms forward to steady herself, I hear that bone crack.

"There's something wrong with her," I tell Euclid, backing away. "Let's just leave her there."

But Euclid shakes his head. "We've got to do something."

"We'll call them an ambulance. At the first stop we see." I take the oil rag from Euclid's hand and toss it to the ground beside the woman. "Here," I tell her. "You can wipe yourself with that."

Then I turn and pull Euclid back toward the car.

The seat belt must have gotten jammed during the accident—the man with the shaved head is pinned and neither of us can get the belt off. What's worse, the blond with the broken arm is screaming at us to leave him alone, and dragging after us from her place in the ditch.

"I don't like to see anyone hurt but," Euclid says, and his words trail off.

"These people aren't normal," I tell him. "They aren't right."

I pull at the seat belt, but it's no use. Finally, I think of the screwdriver popped into the ignition and use it to pry the belt loose from its socket. I'm working the belt off when I feel the man in the driver's seat stir

against my neck, his face on my throat, his hands on mine, wrenching that little tool from me.

I leap back like I've touched a live wire.

In that moment, Euclid puts himself between us and tries to talk the man down, his palm flat against the man's chest, holding him at arm's length. Euclid is trying to be reasonable, but his voice is cracking, and I can see the stress lines on his face. And then the man lunges forward, planting the screwdriver in Euclid's arm.

As I watch in horror, Euclid stands on unsteady feet, that screwdriver planted deep in the muscles of his left bicep. I dash to the front of the car, looking into the compartment—surveying the dozens of lawn jockeys I've collected on this hellish road trip.

I select the one from the B&B.

There's nothing particular about this choice, except that this one has an arm extended—so I can wield this lawn jockey like the goddamned hammer of Thor. I take the ornament by its arm and head for Euclid.

"I'm okay," Euclid is saying. "I'm okay." But his right hand is hovering over that screwdriver, and in the front seat of the car, the man with the shaved head leans his head back to laugh.

Somehow, I don't think. In one moment, I'm holding the ornament by its arm, and in the next, the weight of that object is swinging round, knocking the man in the back of the head. "So how do you like them apples?" I ask.

I stare at his slumped form in the driver's seat of the car, and then all at once, the fear and anger passes from my body and I'm just tired. So tired I could sleep on my feet. Finally, I turn to meet Euclid's gaze. He's standing there, the screwdriver in his arm, but he's still, perfectly still, and by the way he's looking at me, you'd think I was dangerous.

You'd think I was some kind of animal.

He's looking at me like he isn't quite sure who I am. He's looking at me not like my Euclid looks at me, though yes, it's my Euclid's face and eyes and voice, but the way he is looking at me casts me as a stranger.

"I'm pregnant," I blurt.

This isn't how I wanted to tell him. I pictured a cherry-red sunset. I pictured the wild ponies of Chincoteague nibbling at the scrub in the sand dunes. I pictured his brown eyes glowing in the setting sun, taking his hand in mine, and then and there, telling him about the ordinary, everyday miracle that was happening in our lives.

I did not picture a man slumped in the front seat of our car, concussed. I didn't picture a blond, swearing at us from a distant ditch, propped up on bloody elbows, eyes filled with hate. I didn't picture the afternoon sunlight streaming through deciduous trees, or our car's bumper cracked near in half.

This I did picture: Euclid takes my hand into his, and without breaking eye contact once, he kisses my fingers and smiles.

And then the moment breaks.

The man in the car turns and, snarling, calls Euclid by that name and Euclid, my sweet fierce Euclid, he takes up that lawn ornament and, when he is done, the man is quiet, and Euclid leans down once more to offer me his good hand.

"It's a straight shot to Canada," I say, though I'm not sure I believe it. The last of the sun's rays disappear under the horizon, and once again, we are cast in darkness.

But we're close. I have to hold onto the fact that we are close. That everything will be different there. That in only a few hours, we'll travel fifty years. We'll travel across time and space.

We're driving through the White Mountains, across softly curving roads that rise and fall like lines on a giant's chest. The arms of enormous trees beckon to us. Euclid's arm is bandaged in one of my old maxi pads, bound into place with one leg cut from my stockings.

We are alone—we have been for most of this drive—until the moment we're not.

At first, it is a single light, behind us.

And then a second and a third.

Soon, there are a dozen motorcycles—swarming us—two on our left, one to our right, and another half dozen in the rearview. At least, they seem like motorcycles, their lights zipping past. But they are incongruously quiet, their engines barely a hum.

The roaring lights come, swallow our car in their midst, in a light that is oddly golden, and then they move on, disappearing into the darkness ahead.

I give out a long sigh, I'm so relieved. Because, no, there is just no more room for bad. Euclid and I have had all of the bad we need in one lifetime and now we've paid our bill for whatever small blessings we share, and we get to just move on.

And then, as we start around the next gentle curve, I see a light. And then a second and a third and a fourth.

Because the motorcycles have turned around.

They've turned around and made a blockade of their machines. My only choice is to slow down or to drive through. And I can't willingly drive into the scene of an accident—making that choice not once, but three times, and perhaps fatally for all of us.

As I slow to a stop, Euclid reaches over, takes my hand. Squeezes.

Everything is in that squeeze. His love. His hopes. Everything that might have been, rendered as one small touch, here, at the very end.

"I'm sorry," I say. "And I'm not sorry too."

"I know," he tells me. "Me too."

A shadow breaks off from the dozen human figures and walks over to our car. He pauses, leans on my door, looks in. And in that moment, I see it.

The man's eyes are all wrong.

In the soft glow of our dashboard lights, I can see there is something strange and wonderful about his eyes. I am reminded of the eyes of certain animals, which glow in headlamps. Of reflective membranes, which allow for a second chance at sight.

I don't know who or what he is, this man with the softly glowing eyes and white clothes. But I don't sense anger. I don't sense that irrational urge for our demise that has been everywhere else this day.

I sense pity.

But that's not necessarily a good thing either.

I reach for Euclid's hand once more and hold tight.

When he finally speaks, the stranger's voice—like his eyes—are seconded somehow. It is as if he is speaking to us from another time. His words come to me enveloped in their own echo. "This car," he says, and he takes it in with appreciation. "This car is not meant for you."

A flood of gratitude washes through me. The car will go away, I think. This was all meant to go away. I nod at him, wordless.

"I'm afraid you have something else of mine, as well," he says, and Euclid looks up at the strange man, and I see the glint of challenge in Euclid's eyes.

I squeeze Euclid's hand once more—to reassure him—and then I'm reaching out, sure I am right, sure that everything is about to come out

the way it was meant to be. I offer up the keys to Alain's car, and after a beat, I offer him the screwdriver too.

The man takes all of this from me. When he does, I see his hand as it hovers above mine, his impossibly long and slender fingers, his skin the colour of burnished brass. He takes the keys and the screwdriver, and I realize, somehow, that they will be visiting Alain. I ask, "What will you do to him?"

"An imbalance now needs to be restored," the man says. "Time spent in the future will correct him." Then he points at my forehead: "I'll also need just a little of *your* time."

For a fraction of a moment, I picture myself in Euclid's arms, in a small bedroom awash with light. I picture the rental car we might have taken, the B&B we might have found. I am kissing my love, who is asleep, head askew in my arms. And everything is as good as this light, like it is the absolutely perfect day for antiquing in Vermont.

And then, all at once, those lights brighten, until I can see all of the energy in the world reflected in the strange man's pupils, projecting us forward, projecting us home.

John Elizabeth Stintzi

WHAT IS A BODY IF NOT

What is a body if not
an empty backyard.

What is a body if not
the middle of a story.

What is a body if not
tomorrow, grinning.

What is a body if not
a cup of yogurt
expiring
in a thirty-year-old
fridge.

What is a body if not
a failed experiment.

What is a body if not
a forked road
without signage
overgrown
when you forgot
your machete at home.

What is a body?
Why have one?
Whose clay is to
blame for this
depression?

What is a body if not
a crumpled
paper flower

or a rhetorical question.
Don't tell me
the secret.

Don't tell me my body
is everything
or nothing.

What is a body if

What is a body if not

It is essential

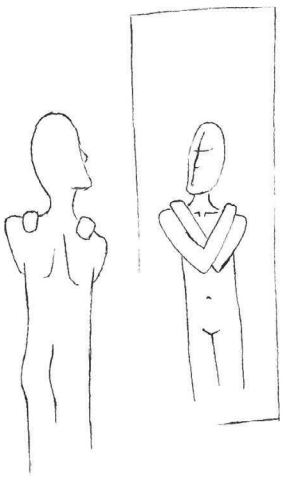
just as it is essential

I am inside of it?

fire blamed
for its hunger.

to have a body

that I remain
the ghost
astride it.



Dessa Bayrock

THE PATRON SAINT OF BUTCHERS IS ALSO THE PATRON SAINT OF SURGEONS AND ABORTIONS

Tell me the story about the chef who cuts off his own leg and eats it, Darcy says, and I don't know what she's talking about, which means she wants me to make it up. *Pairs well with a nice chianti*, I say, and she laughs. *You know nothing about wine*, she says. And, for a while, I think that's the end of it.

Tell me about the boy born without knees? she asks, the two of us bundled in our parkas and nudging up against each other like Michelin Men. I tell her: *Nobody pegged him for a long-jump champion, but here we are.* She snorts. The landscape whizzes by outside the window but then it slows, and stops, and it's Darcy's stop. *See you later, Michelin Man, love of my life*, and she grins before the door shuts her out and she becomes part of the landscape blurring by, just like everything.

What about the woman who drowned her children, she asks, her hands turning to the last plate in the sink. I can hardly hear her over the running water. I hesitate. *She faked their deaths,* I say. *Sure*, Darcy snorts, and slams the plate on the rest of the stack and leaves the kitchen.

That night, long after she's asleep, I curl myself around her. *He only cooked his leg because he didn't have anything left to feed his family*, I whisper. *And the patron saint of butchers took pity on him, and traded the leg out for a leg of lamb, and let him forget how the knife plunged into his body like a terrible dream.*

But what did the knife dream about, she asks, and I see that her eyes have been open all along. But for this, like everything, I have no answer.

Nicole Melanson

SMALL TALK

Let the ice cubes melt in your Scotch
if a shy brunette
with disastrous breasts
asks for the time.

Every hourglass is wearing a corset.

It's what a woman lets loose
that counts.

Hannah Green

LATE NIGHTS

I

I've been meaning to phone my mother.
But I want to dance, won't you dance with me
in my vintage clothing? Look at my chest, held in
the cotton cups of another era. Look at my waist, small
like a little bitch. There is a reason for this, I swear and/or help me god.
The sun sets early now, there is not enough daylight
to contain me. The 1970s cannot contain my chest. Can anything
contain me, my breasts? Look at me dancing,
uncontained. In my heart, *uncontained* autocorrects
to *in containers*. The 1970s are a container with floral curtains.
I am a container with many moods, none of which smell
like cinnamon. Little bitch, little bitch, let me in.
I swear I can't be reasoned with.

II

My mother calls but I do not answer.
Instead I drink, drink from my vintage glassware.
Look at me buzzed on the balcony, my breasts in containers.
Look at the cat in the alley, swishing her tail and wishing
for rodents. I'm a lot of things but not even a little bit drunk;
I'm a liar with hiccups and what of my chest, heaving?

I'd like to tame her, the cat. Like Sylvia Plath, what do you think

of *that*? And what do you think of these records, this dancing?
I'm afraid to admit, this is the only song I know
how to sing; I'm afraid to admit there is a correlation between wild
things and the price of tuna. My heart tries to spell *correlation*
but it comes out *coral room*. I have been so far gone that nothing
can save me. Not even autocorrect and/or a sale on tuna.
Hiccup, hiccup. I'm a little bit drunk
and a lot of other things.

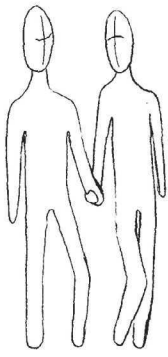
III

The 1970s cannot keep the darkness
from my breasts. Evening, what nice teeth you have,
all the better to bite my nipples with. *Hole* and *soul* rhyme
so when I am drunk I can write poems like a tender little bitch.

How else am I to understand vacancy signs? There is a hole
in the soul of the hotel across the street. Look at me in the light
of the vacancy sign with a splatter of neon blood on my face.
A hotel is a container with floral bedsheets; a chair is a container
for unholy souls who can't sleep. Soon, I will forget the only song
I know how to sing. Goodnight, sleep tight! When the moon
comes for me, I swear to god I'll let it bite.

IV

My nipples are sore, I've had enough.
I am a tender bitch with my breasts in containers.
Containers sounds like tame her. Tame who, the cat? I don't know
what Sylvia Plath would think of that. I don't know
what to think of the words rough and tough. Without rhyme
or reason, does it rhyme for a reason? Reasonable. Cords pull
the 1970s shut. The floral curtains are covered in dust
and I must remember to clean them. But I want to dance,
won't you dance with me with nothing on? I have removed
my containers and inside my head the voice
says nothing can contain her. I should really phone
my mother. I can't remember what the reason is.



NUMERAL

Stefani Nellen

THE MOMENT

(1) Joe Kinski's teammates dismissed his fall as "a case of nerves." Joe knew better.

(2) In the weeks leading up to the race, Joe had been training like an animal. Which animal is anyone's guess. He would get up at four in the morning to run, and go out again at midnight.

(3) In his mind: Roger Bannister crossing the finish line at Oxford in 1954, in a uniform white enough to burn away the drabness of the day. The first time the mile was run in under four minutes.

(4) His reality: dashing into downtown at night on the cracking, still-warm concrete plates of the sidewalk, bathing in the headlights of oncoming cars, the smell of air vents and thunderstorms. Joe Kinski, a solid but mortal distance runner.

(5) A former track star had moved into town to train close to campus. *The miler*, Joe called him in his mind, never his real name.

(6) The miler broke his ankle in a cross-country race in Mombasa once, and had to be carried off the course. The medics froze and huddled as the chase pack bounded around them, the miler between them on the ground, his legs caked in red earth, his face grey. Now he was working on a comeback.

(7) The miler was flat and reptilian. His feet touched the ground quickly, like lightly punching a sandbag. He could run as fast as Bannister; he had already done so.

(8) When Joe tells the story, he wants his listeners to feel at ease with him. He says: I had friends and a life. I partied until late and ate takeout. But no matter what, I went out there at midnight. The miler was out there, too. We raced each other in the dark, and we never exchanged a word.

(9) It sharpened my life, so I could cut into the future, cut out who I was.

(10) At the first outdoor meet of the season, I lined up for the B-race. The miler was a late entry in the A-race and still warming up. In daylight he was small. He crossed his arms behind his back and pushed out his chest, his eyes on me. He smiled.

(11) I went for it. Sub-four pace, fast enough to destroy the small chance I had of sneaking a win. I did it to stop him from smiling.

(12) I summoned a magic I did not have.

(13) I lost control over my body with a lap to go, fell hard, and rolled across the track. My head crashed against the ground. I lay still. The taste of blood, the smell of grass and rubber. I couldn't move. A warm stream of saliva came out of my mouth and ran down the side of my face.

(14) "Speak to me. Is anyone home?" The miler was kneeling next to me. I still couldn't move, and thought he would watch me die. He stared into my eyes, willing me to breathe. I had to throw up, and my body turned away from him, finally unlocked. When I was able to sit up, he was gone.

(15) After that, I stopped running.

(16) But I sat next to the window at night wanting to spawn a second me that could melt through the glass, solidify outside and continue the race.

(17) The paralysis I felt on the track after my fall was still there. It was a dark blue liquid stuck in all my bones, and it would spread if I upset it by moving too much.

(18) As a middle-aged man, I could run a turkey trot. What I could not do was run with abandon until I burned up and died. I still had a solid life, no big deal. And I drank carton milk, good for the bones.

(19) I chose a career in developmental and cognitive psychology, between the hard edge of behavioural science and the soft edge of computer science. A compromise, like jogging.

(20) Then I met Barry.

(21) It was at a conference on Intelligent Systems in Edinburgh. He was brilliant; I was meat in the room. The lectures involved code like weaving patterns and box-and-arrow diagrams where all the arrows pointed inwards. He and I were talking a lot at first, and then we tried different types of silence.

(22) When the conference was over, we were all trying to catch a cab or a bus to the airport at the same time. Barry was walking ahead of me without knowing I was behind him. He pulled a suitcase with one hand and carried a yellow jacket over his arm.

(23) I wanted to kiss him in view of the world. Not a social peck on the cheek but his lips on mine, the yellow jacket on the ground, the people around us inconvenienced because they had to walk around us, like the runners who had to run around the miler in Mombasa.

(24) Barry was thirty-five. I was forty. He said he looked forward to being fifty, or to whichever age that would give him the feeling of being complete.

(25) His mother was American. She killed herself and in his memory it erased almost everything else she did. His father was from Curaçao. He had a genetic defect that destroyed his memory. When Barry was twelve, his father said, "Who is this? Is he laughing at me?"

(26) Barry lived off a series of research grants that rewarded the quality of his mind. He had degrees in linguistics and computer science, and in dating situations he referred to himself as "a generally curious person."

(27) He looked like an urban professional, but he did not identify with this label. He said once: "I'm too cerebral. I feel semi-transparent and vaguely repulsive, like a seahorse or an embryo." And I said, "An embryo is a good place to start."

(28) I promised him that, unlike his father, I would always recognize him. He would never get a late-night phone call about me, the way he had about his mother.

(29) My academic career, a summary: no intellectual fire, but not bad enough to let go.

(30) We had a long-distance relationship, with waypoints that changed with every new job Barry took. He travelled after the most interesting research, I stayed put with mine. I took pride in the overnight flights, my burning eyes, my glasses sliding down my nose, the smell of lemon air freshener in my clothes.

(31) We pretended to have less time than we did. We took a room at an airport hotel, did it, left, told each other on the phone or in writing what else we would have liked to do, if only we'd had more time. And we meant it.

(32) He asked me whether the miler and I had ever done it. "Yes. Every night. We were running in the dark."

(33) Always embarrassing: sharing your obsessions with a real-life lover. My obsession with Bannister comes from the moment and the thing he is doing, not from the objective truth of his real body. Take a closer look at the famous picture of him breaking the four-minute mile: his fingers are long and spidery, his hair too thin, and his grimace too dramatic. And yet.

(34) Barry collaborated with a researcher who published sexy articles about tool-making crows. The researcher lived in controlled wilderness with the crows. Once a month, she travelled to the nearest outpost and sent Barry a movie he could compare to the movie he had made of his simulated crows. Usually, the real ones were smarter.

(35) I became passionate about fitting different models to the behaviour of children who are in the process of learning how to tell a lie.

(36) We moved in together.

(37) I still dreamed of my fall. In my dream, I stay on the ground, and end up in a hospital, connected to machines. Tubes as hard as branches go up my nose and down my throat and keep my breath going. My heart is beating. It's out of my control. In my dream, I never sleep.

(38) Our new neighbor, Felicia Ricci, was upset because our moving van was blocking her driveway. "I know it's a small driveway, but it's mine. I don't like it blocked. What if I have an emergency? Or my husband does? That's two possible emergencies right there, both made worse by your van."

(39) Her husband, Rick Ricci, came around the corner, jogging at the easy pace of those who want the world to know they can go much faster. He was solid and sweaty, his teeth white and long. He wore cobalt blue running shoes, the same kind the miler had worn years ago.

(40) If shoes could talk, these would have said, "Hello."

(41) Rick said: "I always get my miles in early, down in the park. Does that sound like fun?"

(42) I said yes.

(43) Felicia left for work early and came home late. I never saw Rick outside of our morning runs.

(44) We kept our pace slow and conversational. We mostly talked about how much we enjoyed taking it easy. We controlled our breath, added bounce to our steps, and took care to keep our true effort a secret.

(45) A scar ran across his forehead and disappeared behind his ear. A line so thin it could have been cut with paper, but in the right light it looked like a crack, as if his skull had been glued together once. As if you could shift the halves when you touched it.

(46) A few weeks into this, I saw him run alone late at night and far ahead of me, on a trail we never ran together. He was fast, and his shirt was white, and dirty, as if he had fallen badly and gotten back up.

(47) I tried to catch him. I couldn't. At home, my right leg was numb. Then it felt as if a swarm of ants crawled up from my heels to the underside of my ribcage. I sat down on the bed and kneaded my calves. The leg looked fine from the outside.

(48) I spied on Rick. He always did his solo runs late in the evening. Mondays on the trails, and Fridays on the track.

(49) Soon, I could estimate the remaining time of his workout by the sweat pattern on his shirt.

(50) Barry scratched his left palm with the fingers of his right hand. "How far is this going to go?"

(51) I said: "I need to stop these dreams."

(52) The pace of our morning runs became faster. Rick must have been on to me.

(53) It was night-time logic: Outrun the blue shoes, catch the one who wears them, and become him. In retrospect, it might have been a symptom, a psychotic episode. Selective obsession with a meaningless detail. Maybe it was simple desire. Whatever its cause, I was out there at night, running.

(54) The night uptown was warm like the air behind a fridge. Music from cars shook the membranes of my cells. I was running past a mural of pigeons eating people. Ahead of me was Rick, all in white.

(55) In the old newsreels you only hear the starting shot, a cheerful tune, and the voice of the announcer. You don't hear Bannister's steps on the cinder or his groans when he collapses into the arms of the crowd. He is distorted and beautiful at the end, as if what he is doing is too much for the human shape. The miler was the same, and Rick was the same. The crevice between his shoulder blades covered in sweat. I almost caught him.

(56) The tiles gave under my feet and I crashed on the pavement. Much later, when I was cold, an empty bus lurched past with the sound of a broken wave being sucked back into the ocean.

(57) Later, I was limping through the aisles of a pharmacy. I grabbed a can of coke from the fridge and tore it open. When I lifted the can I saw my melted reflection on the top.

(58) Someone at the pharmacy called Barry, whose number was on a wristband he had made me wear.

(59) On the way home in the car, Barry said: "It's not even that you scare the shit out of me right now, even though you do. It's worse."

(60) He was in love with the crow researcher.

(61) "She makes me feel as if I'm the only human she can talk to."

(62) Now for the final act: he paces across the living room, and pushes his shirtsleeves up to his elbows. "You were this person for me. You were my human. Because of how weird you are."

(63) "I'm not weird."

(64) "Yes you are. Or what are you calling this?"

(65) Then, even more upset, but quiet, he said: "They called me in the middle of the night. They woke me up to get you because you were stealing soda at a pharmacy at the other side of town, and you were dripping blood. I got calls like this about my mother. Not just the final one, but others like it. Too many. You promised I would never get a call about you."

(66) "Your eyes, when I came to get you..." he said.

(67) We were renting. He could leave easily. In a moment of bitterness, I said, "I'm not your fucking parent." He threw what looked like a piece of bone into his suitcase. "Guess what, I don't want to be yours, either." Not our best moment.

(68) They say that when one door closes another one opens but that didn't really happen.

(69) A few days later, when I came home from work, Felicia lingered in front of her house and ran over to me as soon as I got out of the car. "I haven't seen Rick for days." She sobbed. "Maybe he's dead this time." I

did what anyone would have done. I asked: "What do you mean, this time?"

(70) "He got lucky once," she said. "Hit by a drunk driver while he was out on a run. He should have died, but he didn't."

(71) He fractured his legs, his ribs, and his skull. His teeth and memory were gone. He only remembered how to run. At first she didn't let him.

(72) He sat at home with his white new teeth, his hands in his lap. All he did was breathe, and use the bathroom. She decided to let him run after all. "It was the only thing he had left."

(73) I might as well stop there.

(74) About a year later. Joe Kinski is living in the same city but in a different place. His late-life gift is his neighbor Claudia. She's a long-distance runner, around sixty years old, with weather-polished apple cheeks and a body like a whip.

(75) The symptoms, as he calls them, have become more frequent, like children who are tired of hiding and spring a surprise, saying, *we've been here all along, and it's time for dinner*. He writes the symptoms down so he can track their increasing frequency by looking at the number of lines on the pages. Loss of balance, wobbly legs, hands losing their grip, burning crawling angry stupid insects inside his limbs, and problems finding the right words for stuff.

(76) Weeks of nothing, followed by weeks of nothing but that.

(77) To the neurologist, he wants to talk about all the airports with Barry, about the blue shoes, about the pharmacy, and about Roger Bannister.

(78) The neurologist starts typing on his computer. It's the first dominoes falling. At the end, there is the answer.

(79) Joe takes the bus home. He sits on the bench in the back, in the middle, with nothing to lean against. A plastic bottle rolls between the seats when the bus makes a turn. Most of the time, his mind is a blank,

and he keeps counting the other passengers, all five of them, all of whom have been in here before him and stay in after he gets out.

(80) He waits for Claudia on the porch. She finally comes home from her run, a welt on her cheek where a twig has slapped her. "Do you want to sit with me for a bit?" she says. "Let me get dressed first, or my legs will freeze off, and we don't want that."

(81) The cold is good for him. In the winter, he still goes for a run now and then, and comes home exhausted and satisfied. With stiff, gloved fingers, he opens his jacket. His warmth escapes into the room.

(82) Shortly before Christmas, he stumbles and slips on a patch of black ice and breaks his leg.

(83) The cast will come off long before summer. "This is good," Claudia says. "Sweat inside a cast is the worst."

(84) In the hospital, he wakes up in the middle of the night and finds the miler next to his bed. The miler is wearing a dark red tracksuit with white stripes on the sides. His body is as flat and reptilian as ever, but crippled from being as great as he is at this useless thing called running. He is in constant pain now, and it makes him attractive; you wonder what you could do to make him forget. He is eating noodles out of a box with a pair of uneven chopsticks.

(85) When he notices Joe is awake, the miler picks up the remote control for his bed, and the mattress buzzes and shapes itself against Joe's back. Joe has never seen the miler's face so clearly. He has full lips, widely set eyes under black, asymmetrical eyebrows, and an unfortunate small chin.

(86) Joe says: "We're both fucked. Is it different for you, or do we feel the same?"

(87) The miler says: "It helps having had a moment." He means his victories, all the moments when he beat all-comers and came out on top.

(88) He leans in, but before anything can happen, Joe falls asleep again. The next morning, the other bed in the room is empty.

(89) The summer is bad. Joe has difficulty talking. His tongue is acting like a hungover teen, and most of the time Joe decides that whatever he was going to say is not worth the effort. Claudia takes his hand. "With the new meds, you'll get better. We will talk again."

(90) She's right. He even goes back to work. He walks with a cane and uses the university shuttle service. He teaches sitting down, and it tires him so much he needs a nap after each class, but he's working.

(91) He tells Claudia about Rick Ricci, who did come back after an unexplained absence of one week. What did he want from me? Joe wonders. Who was he? "Maybe he was a ghost when you met him," Claudia says. "Maybe he was a zombie." On her porch, no idea is taboo.

(92) Joe and Barry meet again when Barry is attending a conference hosted by Joe's university. Joe is in a good spell, as he often is in the winter. Barry descends the stairs to the computer science lobby with ease, the faint wrinkles around his eyes a welcome addition. He can't speak because of a severe throat infection that still needs to heal. He communicates by typing on a device designed by the company that currently hires him. They have arranged to meet for a coffee at the cart in the lobby, and now they are both nervous. Joe says, "You look good." Barry writes: *You do, too.* He adds: *I mean it. Nice cane.* Joe has to laugh. People standing in line at the cart turn around. Two men, one device, half a dialogue: your entertainment while you wait.

(93) When they have their coffee, Barry types: *Are you still into Drywall, I mean Bannister*? "We're still good friends, but we don't see a lot of each other these days," Joe says. He doesn't ask about the tool-making crows or the scientist. They finish their coffee and have early dinner. All evening, the old thing is still there: the desire to leave, undress, make love. In Joe's bedroom, when they are already naked, Barry hesitates. With effort, he whispers: "I'm not sure what to do. I don't want to hurt you. Is this okay?" Joe by now is the master of his disease. He takes Barry's hands and says, how about this, this is good. And this. That's right. Later, Barry whispers, pausing after each second syllable to let his throat recover: "I was so afraid of this. But I want to stay." Joe says, "I want you to stay, too, but I don't want you to see the end."

(94) All right then, so here's what happened—how the rest of the story goes. I knew my prognosis would cross out many things, and that it would be ugly. Barry said he didn't care, that he didn't want to run away. How could I make him leave—for his own good?

(95) I tried to put up a brave front. "We all have to die, right?" It was very much not working. He let me get it out of my system without comment.

(96) Then he rolled onto his back and made a hollow in front of his eyes with his hands, and pretended to watch a movie in there. He imitated, in a whisper, the voice of the Bannister newsreel announcer: "And it is Joe Kinski who bursts away from the lead pack and charges for the finish line. He is truly," he paused, then lied through his teeth, "striding magnificently."

(97) What would have happened if I'd had a shot at my moment? For instance, by racing Rick Ricci?

(98) Take off your TRACK shirt and be naked. Toe the starting line. Many people come to watch. Everyone wears black.

(99) In the fog up the hill, people are spreading their picnic blankets.

(100) Lines are forming in front of the restrooms.

(101) "On your marks."

(102) We take a step forward and freeze. As if the precise angles of our elbows and knees decided over loss and victory.

(103) The morning after our reunion, Barry had to leave early to attend the first conference session. He left me a letter. In the letter, he wrote: *I wanted to become a scientist after I discovered my parents lied to me about dying.*

(104) *At first they told me that people don't really die, and that I shouldn't worry. When my grandfather "passed away", the story became more complicated: people and animals fall into a kind of coma when they are old, but after that, they get better. But they have to live somewhere else, where*

the air is fresh and where they can have special food. A "funeral" was a kind of sombre send-off party. (Still true!) I remained suspicious, but my parents could be very convincing.

(105) *This* [an arrow pointed to what was lying on the desk next to the letter] *is a piece of bone. It's from the shell of Pete, my pet turtle.*

(106) *He died in hibernation. I was maybe six or seven. I still remember digging in the spring, how cold the earth was. I used my fingers because I didn't want to split his shell with a shovel. When my fingertips hit something hard, I knew what it was. Pete's head was hanging out of the shell like a marble in a leather sack.*

(107) *I took Pete inside. My parents were still asleep. I woke them up, lifted Pete, and said I knew the truth now. I buried him again, and when there was nothing left but the shell and some bones, I smashed the shell with a shovel. I wanted a piece to remind me that I could observe things and find out the truth. That's how I became a scientist.*

(108) Observe things and find out the truth. If he wants to observe me, I can give him that. I myself will observe for as long as I can.

(109) Observation A: one lap into the mile race, I'm thirsty. This race, like all of them, will be a matter of liquids.

(110) Rick Ricci turns to me, a gash in his head, most of his teeth missing, his eyes dead. "How are you feeling?"

(111) "I probably won't win," I say. And then I speed up.

Tanis Franco

THE FOURTH REGION OF A VENN DIAGRAM IS THE UNOCCUPIED REGION

There have been episodes after futile attempts
of commingling with the city where I've cried
your name while half aware I was walking
to an empty home. You don't have to feel great
all of the time for me, you whispered. Humming,
I'd draw circles and inside was your repeated
name. Will I look at this later and know
what it all meant is what I asked the margins
in my notebook. What is the intersection of
your absence and not knowing what absence
is, is it eternity? My hands plunge in
the dishwater and somewhere, a knife. I have
three X variables and no way to solve. You
cannot speak, yet your voice cautions me
through the streets of London, Paris, and Tokyo.

Traci Skuce

THE HALF-LIFE OF SWIMMING LESSONS

Yesterday my seven-year-old daughter found raisins in the public pool. Floating near the filter flap of the shallow end. Her instructor hailed the lifeguard and the lifeguard, sure it was fecal matter, blew the whistle. Kids shrieked and their parents, overheated and stunned, looked up from phones. We'd all hoped for thirty uninterrupted minutes to text or scroll, or stare into chlorinated space. Was that over?

Kids hoisted themselves onto the deck, or exited via ladders or shallow-end stairs. Screeches echoed off the high ceiling and choppy water. The kids lined up along the far wall. Skinny ones with baggy bathing suits, chubbier ones crossing arms over their pudge. My daughter waved and mouthed *ewwww*, and then pinched her nose in dramatic disgust.

The lifeguard and swim instructors scrummed and strategized. No one wanted to scoop the offending turds into a net.

The woman beside me, a frizzy-haired mom with squinty eyes, said, "They should get a mom to do it. A mom could handle it. Shit in a pool." I laughed, and agreed. Still, she didn't move, and neither did I. We twisted the corners of our daughters' beach towels. How many times had my hands dipped into toilets? Scrubbed solid waste from diapers? I felt lightheaded, almost nauseous at the thought of another baby. Shit and sleeplessness. I'd skipped a period and hadn't told anyone.

The whistle blew again. An all-clear. The lifeguard announced with giggles and apologies that lessons could resume. Earlier, a fruitcake had circulated (against all rules) amongst the aquafit crowd. One of the ladies had picked her cake free of raisins and left them in the corner, amidst Band-Aids and stray hairs, hoping the pool filtration system would carry them all away.

Maggie Burton

TRANSFORMATION GAG

After the festival, I rake a field confettied
with 50/50 tickets, admission bracelets,
barf. I scoop everything into big black bags.
Pop cans will never be bicycles
here—no chance of the transformation gag
our tourists and townies call recycling. But
the beer tent folds in on itself, packs away its principles
like a fitted sheet. The porta potties get out
of line, trickle their wares into a stream
that meets the sea. Hiscock's Wedges Wagon
throws a tantrum, spits squished fries, dressing, gravy
on the grass in resistance, bawling like a child
refusing to leave. The chance the soggy white patch
I scrape off my shoe was once a potato, roughly
50/50. Charlie's Moose Burgers moans
as a band of men tear into its long legs, buckling them
into the back of a pickup truck, breaking down
the concession for another time. Going home
I walk next to my bike, sweater around my hips. I sneak
a finger down my thigh to check on the blood
just found in the porta potties, where I shed tiny
livers as if I were a chicken, on the run
from becoming a woman.

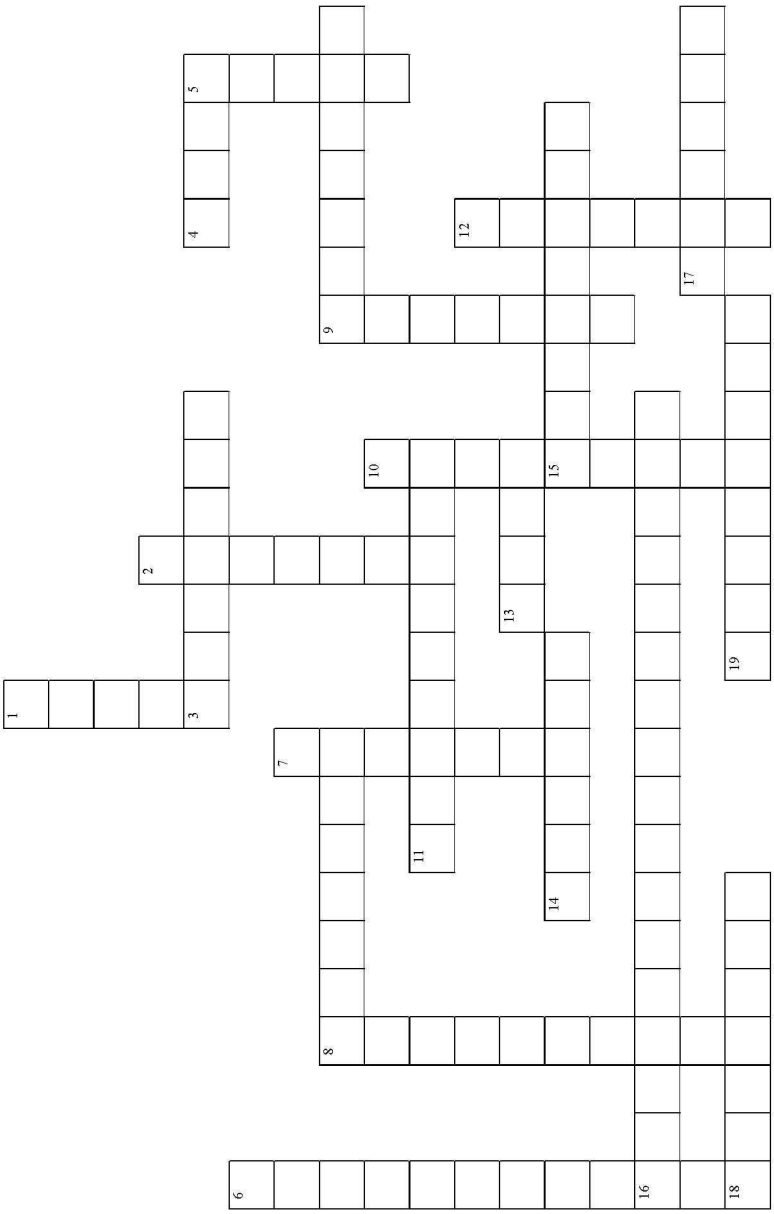
Graeme Bezanson

I MARCH IN THE PARADE OF LIBERTY BUT AS LONG AS I LOVE YOU I'M NOT FREE

Some poets have wings and those are the worst ones
You were born at the start of the long summer the ceiling wept
You walk home through the inoculated city until you are in love
    and standing in Chinatown holding a bunch of thumb-sized bananas
At first you think that people are sketching the old church but in fact
    they are completing some kind of difficult form
You call her because what has been said already is not enough
    or is not right
So you pay x amount of money and major in folksongs
You begin to believe in impermanence and stardust
You think that once you've found the origin you must fling yourself from it
You bare your soul to your neighbour the respectful drummer
The following months are spent attending to your troubled skin
The sidewalks seem to fill up with high-waisted women
The feeling of being far from something swells like a bead of rusty water
You drift off wishing you contained enough energy to make
    something stable something new
You are awakened by a clattering at the window and a purple figure calling
You, boy with the gold tooth, take me to this building's circuit breaker
The next day you buy lotus pods but forget them on a crosstown bus
While you are stretched out in the park a band of dark-haired children
    evaporates with your belongings
A discharge of nameless particles
Coins fall from your body in the shower
What are you going to do with all that money
What are you going to do with that money

Charity E. Yoro

OUR LADY OF 'IOLANI



DOWN

1 ___ islands in the Hawaiian archipelago, not one of them named Waikiki
2 Shipwreck, now a monument, USS _____
5 The apostrophe that is not an apostrophe that like so many words, the hundreds of names for wind, does not translate well
6 What tourism feels like to a local
7 The only royal palace on US soil
8 Maunakea, home of the largest telescope in the Northern _____
9 Naval airfield on the bay, home to the best breaks on the eastside, where the boys run from MP, get caught stealing sunset swells
10 The person who appears first when you Google "Hawaiian monuments": Captain _____ _____ [two words]
12 [See 19 across] The morality of the act committed against Queen Liliu'okalani and the kanaka maoli. As in _____ house arrest. As in stolen lands, also _____

ACROSS

3 Surpasses sugar and pineapple as the dominant driver of the Hawaiian economy
4 [See 10 down] He was not, in fact, _____, fertility god
8 Don't let its soft pronunciation fool you, this is no paradise
9 Responsibility, yours and mine
11 Leprosy, exile
13 What tourism feels like to Hawai'i
14 Ali'i, or the _____ class
15 [See 10 down] He brought the gift of _____
16 What Hawai'i feels like to a tourist
17 Pearl _____
18 Offshore landowners
19 The practice of greeting and welcoming, Hawaiian hospitality (how the kingdom was overthrown?). With a honihoni on the cheek, slippas at the door, an invitation to stay, but not too long, bumbai we get sent to live at the California Hotel on the ninth isle

Key / Coordinates

The *okina* in *Hawai'i* is often misspelled, replaced with an easier punctuation. Or *tourism*. Speaking of *displacement*, don't you hate how *Lono* autocorrects to "long," as if the erasure of another deity is necessary, *illegal* body navigating the unclaimed pacific *hemisphere* by star, naked eye. Our streets are named after *thieves*. Start with *Kaneohe*. Start with *James Cook*, who centuries later, a dying language thanks for *syphilis*. Now, when someone tells me, unwarranted, about their *expensive vacation* on my home island, explains that it was their "least favorite" of the *eight*, goes on to say how they'd rather spend Christmas in Mexico next year, I want to ask, as cultured cultural curators, *ruling* spectators, bearers of this postcolonial currency (passport stamps), you must know *ho'okipa*. That the world is an island. That this particular island is a *harbor* of matters unsettled, perfectly positioned to settle all four branches of the US military. Territory of the land of the free of *rape* charges. I want to say, before you leave to spend the rest of the year back in *Arizona* or Ontario, please pay respects at *'Iolani* Palace, learn about *Kalaupapa*, understand your *kuleana*. Instead, I warn you not to leave with lava rock in your luggage.

INANIMATE

Catherine Seton

HOW DO THEY USE YOU?

My ex is wrong. I'm not a savage.
Now under everything I own,
I put a doily. Fancy the place up
just the way she'd like it. She set
a classy table. Mason jars wrapped
in doilies, tied in raffia, became
daisy vases. Dainty doilies under
cucumber sandwiches. Doily-stencilled
cakes. Doily-bundled cutlery.
Doily-cupped muffins. Tussie-mussies.
Right classy. Some nights I carry doilies
room to room. Hold them over lights.
Force shapes, fold, retreat, sway, loom.
I give them voices.

Liz Harmer

DECISIVE ACTION

An American election year, a time of slogans. At home in Canada, Linda followed it on the radio, where all filtered through the smug amazement of the CBC. No one could believe what was happening to America. And there was something in it about the internet and social media, so that even she, Linda, looked at her daughter Danielle with some suspicion, whenever Danielle, a graduate student, wielded foreign nomenclature, each word unhinged from the meaning Linda herself knew, words like *gaslighting* and *alt-right* and *toxic masculinity.*

Now, in her car, passing through the border and on her way down to the States, she felt the difference. Slogans pasted everywhere. Derisive nicknames. The atmosphere tensed with disagreements. The customs officer looked at her Permanent Resident card and her passport and then eyed her. "I have oranges in my purse," she blurted out, when too much of this eying had gone on. "Is that okay?"

"No, ma'am, that's not okay. You'll have to pull up there and throw away the oranges."

"They're clementines," Linda said. "They're—they're stem-and-leaf clementines."

"Even so," he said, passing her documents back to her and indicating where she should pull over. He had communicated all this via invisible subterfuge, so that without apparently having been alerted, his colleague emerged to direct her to the parking spot.

"In here, ma'am."

One hated to be ma'amed. "I'm American," she said, throwing four lovely stem-and-leaves in the bin. She kept two clementines in the purse and no one checked it, and spent the first hour of her travel on the interstate freeways of New York State thrilled as an escaped convict, and then exhausted by the adrenaline, the very pettiness of her crime.

Even the NPR hosts were tossing around the words *insane* and *corrupt* and *demagogue* and *crooked* and *bigot*. At a rest stop—she adored rest stops and no one was watching to judge this or her—she saw the sorts of Americans Canadians felt smugly toward. Soon she would cross to New Jersey, butt of many jokes. Linda knew better than to draw conclusions about an angry sticker on a rusted pickup truck, about a white guy

wearing a red ball cap, but she drew them anyway. This was no year for empathy. She glared.

The visit would only be four days. Four days was plenty. Four days after eight months as a widow. She would buy her aging parents a new recliner and then return the way she'd come. Here she was, experiencing the woes of the boomer generation, a group of people who had once unbelievably marched for civil rights, for the rights of a young man not to be forced to march off to war, and also just for the rights to hang out and make love and get high and all of the other catchphrasey verb-preposition, verb-adjective combos of the time. Now a person was forced to reckon with liver spots and brain aneurysms and that took all your time. Liver spots, really, were oversized freckles, and when Linda looked at the ones dotting her once-pretty, now-veiny hands, she wondered whether such a difference made any.

It was only the first full day, and she had taken the initiative to go to the furniture store to start the process. Her sister Nancy had shown her that there was a whole enormous store devoted only to recliners. "Good," Linda said, with both verve and oomph, "I'll start there."

Widowhood had precipitated all sorts of actions she had not known herself to be capable of. A week ago, she had chased a prowler into a neighbour's backyard where she told him to halt and that she was calling the cops. "I don't know what got into me," she told the officer who had arrived at the scene. The would-be thief had not actually stolen anything and was only charged with mischief. "I've never chased anyone before."

"Maybe I should just send them a big middle finger," she said to Nancy. Now she was in the showroom and having second thoughts. "Like a wood carving or a photograph."

Nancy laughed charitably, but would soon turn bossy. Nancy's job as a Blissology spokeswoman for shakes, workouts, cleanses, and Blissology paraphernalia kept her too busy for errands in the middle of the day. "Here's what you need to do," she said. "You need to stop overthinking everything. Don't worry about the colour—décor-wise, the apartment is already a disaster. Don't worry about the cost because Nathan is footing the bill and you know he's flush now. Just choose any of them. At total random. Just choose one, I promise, the first one you see, and have it delivered."

But time stood still in the recliner showroom. It had to do with Linda's much-discussed neurosis. Here came a flare-up. "I suffer from a lack of direction," was how she usually put it.

"In the '60s, we would have been protesting this gun stuff," she said into the phone, to Nancy, picking up the thread of a conversation from breakfast. "We would have shut things down. Institutions. Remember how Reagan was teargassing everyone?"

"In the '60s we were barely teenagers."

"In the '70s then. Now it feels like people get incensed and things flare up and die off just as quickly. They have plenty of words for things, that's for sure. It's because of the internet."

"Linda," Nancy said.

Nancy's breathing was rhythmic and fast. In the background there was a distant sound of an aerobics video, though they had a different name for this now. Not aerobics. Four more, three more, two—you got this, come on, come on.

"Look, we can talk all you want about gun control at dinner," Nancy said. "Just buy a goddamn chair. It's not a big deal."

"It's not."

"It's just a chair."

"I'm just a person. I'm just a human life."

"I'm not following."

"It's not just a chair! It's a recliner commemorating their move to the home, and it's supposed to be our grand, kind, housewarming gesture."

"We already decided we'd get a recliner. All you need to do is pick one."

"Fine," she said, and pushed the red "end call" circle on the phone.

A sign had been affixed to the back wall: "All Recliners Are Not Created Equal." Linda pondered this for a long moment. In the row where she stood, all the recliners looked pretty much the same. Poofs of headrests, two wide arms, the hand crank, the footrest to fly up as needed. One in olive green velveteen, one in leatherish brown, one in a hideous cornflower blue, and so on.

An hour had dissolved, time falling through a gap, sand in a timer. She was no closer to choosing one than she'd been an hour ago. A ping sounded distantly but was not distant. It came from her phone, her sister: *just shit or get off the pot!* Another ping. *In this case, just take your shit already!*

She chose instead to get off the pot. She'd come back to the store tomorrow.

Her parents kept insisting that they'd gotten the most spacious floor plan, but it was nearly as tiny as a studio apartment. A bedroom to the side, a breakfast nook, a balcony, a small carpeted clearing that would serve as a living room. The washroom outfitted with all manner of metal handles arranged diagonally, vertically, and horizontally, specifically designed for the aged with their low muscle tone and bone mass. One comes down in the world, had been Linda's thought. She wasn't too sure about the air quality, either. All these many old people breathing recycled air while heat threatened them outside. And then it would be cold threatening them outside.

"They have people who do the mowing and shovelling for you," her father said when she arrived. One's eighties were a time of non sequiturs. Then he started laying into her mother about the toaster, a terrible unwarranted purchase that rendered bread either under-crispy or burnt. "No delicacy," he said. "No dial!" he shouted to his wife, who was only a few feet away. "This is the big one," he said. "This is the way they get you." He was posed in his metal bistro chair as an off-duty puppet would have been, hands hanging from the armrest, head drooping. "What kind of president allows TVs that listen to your conversation?"

"Well," Linda pointed out. "You don't have to buy one."

"Smart TVs," he said, waving his hand as though waving away Linda's point. Their TV was enormous, one of those pre-flatscreens whose backsides hung out, unseemly. (You weren't supposed to think this way about flab, Danielle had told Linda. It was fatphobic.) The TV still made those sharp snapping noises when it was dialled on.

"You know Nathan told me they can hack into your camera," her mother said.

"Who's they?" Linda said. "And not *your* camera."

Linda's mother refilled his cup of water. That her father was no longer supposed to drink his ginger ale made Linda feel a pang she didn't feel in the face of his other frailties. His lips were slack when they tried to find the straw, like a worn elastic waistband. Two-day-old stubble sat white on his face like dried drool.

Meanwhile her mother was still sharp in good ways and bad. She was still able to detect even a single pound of weight gained or lost by Linda. ("I come by my fatphobia honestly!" she'd protested to Danielle.)

Without asking anybody else's opinion her mother had sold the beautiful wooden dining set and ordered this bistro set, which, with its painted metal and plastic, belonged outdoors. "Stop dithering," she said to Linda, who was just standing there minding her own business.

Her father was probably afraid that someone had been listening in for all those years, and not a being that would forgive him, not God. God whom he claimed to love while making sour complaints about Linda's lack of beauty and talent. "Hope you can find a man to love you with all that," he'd said once, when she was fourteen—she'd felt her face grow fat and red and then it seemed to Linda to turn inside out and never look the same again. But Jake *had* loved her, had believed it was not a crime not to be beautiful or talented, though he sometimes pretended she was. When she took up folk art, all those tiny pricks of paint on wood, for example. She'd forgotten that phase, its optimism.

This was, perhaps, how mothers and fathers operated, though Linda could never decide for herself how she should be and then had discovered that Danielle was twenty, was twenty-five, was nearly thirty and Linda had not yet figured out how to punish or reward, how to structure a family or let it run itself. This was, perhaps, how fathers and mothers from her parents' era operated, with all their unspeakable historical traumas. Her mother explained, now, in the hushed voice she used to convey juicy gossip, that any fixation of her father's could be a symptom. A symptom of what, though, was unknown to Linda, who wouldn't ask, and who had been told only that he suffered from the regular problems of advanced age. And anyway, every tic was proof of some underlying condition. Everybody wants a diagnosis or an excuse. That this was one of her father's pet phrases did not mean it was not true in his case.

A little knock sounded on the door to the communal hallway, which her mother insisted on leaving ajar at all times because she was afraid of losing the key, though there were good-humoured service employees all over the place who could easily let her back in. Nancy arrived in the only kinds of clothes she ever wore: tight black stretchy pants and an exercise shirt loose enough to show her black bra and the skin around her armpits and ribs. All of this skin was loose, like Linda's was, but not fleshy like hers. "So?" she said.

Linda shook her head.

Linda's disorder was evident to everyone but had no name. She would insist that she was not *incapable* of deciding on a recliner, it was that

she was too aware of possibilities and disliked risk. Maybe it was mere perfectionism. Or lack of faith. The folk art phase had fizzled not for lack of talent but, just—how did you know five days from now you'd still believe this to be the right colour? In any case, no one needed to stage an intervention about her having lived for twenty years with a couch she mostly hated and had gotten for free from a friend who'd been moving, because she'd been unable in all that time to find the perfect couch and buy it. There were plenty of other examples. She wasn't in denial. Jake had been irritated by her inability to choose pants or shirts, to settle on a paint colour for the dining room, to decide where they'd go for their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, which, as it happened, didn't get booked until they were almost to thirty years, and then, because fate had impeccable timing, had never happened at all. Jake had died from one of those undetected brain aneurysms and the trip, though nonrefundable, had not been taken.

"I thought it was just as fun, really, looking through the brochures," she said to someone at the funeral home.

"Jesus, Ma." Danielle had been livid. "Who needs to do something when we have our imaginations! Why do anything at all."

Linda had sat down at that point, and shook sympathetic hands from there while Jake's body lay sallow as wax in its formaldehyde. The smell of high school dissections. It created a small rift between them for a while, a rift repaired as it sometimes was in this mother-daughter horror show, by more fighting. A thick scar that pulled open sometimes and, when it healed, healed badly. But really, it was true. You might as well imagine a thing as to have it, and what was wrong with that?

Danielle had sometimes accused her of enjoying funerals. She had once called Linda "goth," and believed she was macabre. Linda felt the ghost of this accusation more clearly than she felt Jake's ghost, because it was still difficult to acknowledge it was happening, her bereavement. Am I enjoying this? She kept wondering, thinking back to the many times she'd been the sympathetic visitor. And this led to the obvious question: is this my fault?

In the morning, she headed out to buy the recliner. Now she had spent two days in Nancy's guest room, with its view of a centre courtyard with a pool. Though everyone teased her for being the good girl all her life, Linda was the only one of her three siblings to have left her parents' zip code, then their state, then their nation. Outside, the septuagenarian

man swam lengths in a Speedo, hair mask, and goggles, the same man who'd swum yesterday. Compared with the people at the home, he looked young and virile. Maybe he *was* young and virile, and she was only assuming that he was old because of the texture of his face. Maybe he'd smoked for too many years, or had suffered a terrible illness, or oversunned himself in his youth.

She said hello to her sister and headed into the kitchen. Her sister would already be in the bizarre get-up that was, somehow, her business: a headset with a mic, some version of the same Spandex (today it was floral pants, lavender tank), her big monitor, papers, and cylindrical containers on the table, her shake bottle. "No, no, darling, no," she was saying, Linda assumed, to the headset.

There had been another mass shooting in the early hours of the morning. She turned the radio in the rental car way up. In Canada, she became so tired of the sweet, smug CBC hosts, but now she missed their familiar voices, the long o's of their pronunciations. Twenty people injured, four people dead, a nightclub. More details were still emerging. When she got to the furniture store and entered the showroom, no one was behaving as though this catastrophe had just occurred. Lives had been shattered and lost but that was no concern to us, and Linda knew she was having a naïve thought, because the world had always been this way and would always be. An anthill over there explodes but in the anthill over here the ants carry on walking their prescribed paths, picking up their doubleweight crumbs and returning to the nest, mating and tunnelling, whatever ants did, and the ants didn't ask questions. What could an ant do in the face of the world's immensity, about which they barely had an inkling?

She wandered around the showroom. Touching fabrics, considering girth. She sat down in a chair to see how it felt. Comfortable, a large mechanical hand holding you aloft. Why did she herself not have a recliner? It was like the wire monkey-mother the babies look to for comfort, which they need more than food, those infant monkeys clinging to it because it seemed furry and mother-like.

"How are you making out here?" Not the thin salesman with the cigarette legs from yesterday but a young woman with bangs and a wide smile and a blouse just tight enough to pucker at the buttons.

"Pardon?"

"You like this chair? It's one of our most popular models."

An absurd thing to say. On all sides sat rows and rows of identical models, all only different in sheathing. "It certainly is comfortable." Now reclined, she was in the posture of a patient awaiting dental treatment. Or it was gynecological, since the footrest recalled stirrups. "But it's for my father and he's very particular."

"Uh-huh." Sitting there so long, Linda was probably beginning to raise flags. She'd been the bane of a realtor's existence, once, so she'd been told. And when she was helping Danielle buy her first car the salesman told her he'd never worked so hard for a sale: days of trial drives and two visits from a mechanic. Maybe she looked, here, like a madwoman who had wandered in for a little nonsense.

"My parents have moved into a home. This will be a gift for them. For my father, mainly. He's having a hard time," she said. "From me and my siblings," she added, needlessly.

"Does your father like technology?"

"He's eighty-eight years old," she said.

Of course this woman knew when to paste the smile. Other Americans knew how to use their salespeople as captive audiences, to shoehorn political and religious beliefs into these interactions, whereas Linda couldn't even timidly manage a little small talk. She felt fat and low to the ground.

"The reason I ask is that we have these, like, smart chairs, and they're just incredible. Kind of half butler, half Fitbit, half chair."

"Oh, half butler?" Linda said, to be polite, trying to heave out of the chair without too much obvious effort. "I don't think my father will like that."

"Who wouldn't, though? I know, most of my clients are skeptical at first, but let me just show you. Does he have an iPhone or an Android or…?"

"He's eighty-eight years old," she said again. Her father didn't even have an email account. Linda knew for a fact that he would hate this chair. But she followed the salesgirl anyway, and the salesgirl did not look back as she kept talking about features, so confident was she that Linda would follow.

At the home, after lunch, her parents were watching one of many reality shows about hoarders. "How awful," her mother said. She was always standing, just as her husband was always sitting, which might have been

the reason for her good health. Her mother was not afflicted by any impulse to hoard. Her pet phrase was "good riddance."

"This is where it gets good," her father said, mouth working the words like a hard piece of candy. "This is where they find some raccoon's been dead for a month in their oven." The oven in the hoarder house was hidden behind piles of newspapers. Linda thought maybe these were the rebels of the age, testing fate to see if they could get away with hazardous behaviours around fire, with hoarding themselves to death, and discovering that fate did not care to punish them. Anarchists.

"How on earth did a raccoon get in the oven," said her mother. "I sometimes wonder about this show."

"What do you wonder," Linda said.

A man on the TV made a comment about how hoarding is really a symptom of this particular stage of American consumerism.

"No shit, Sherlock," said her father.

"Language, Pete," warned her mother.

Jake never would have watched this show. And he'd loved life. It was as though her parents' coldness and harshness were cryogenic, as though they were shielded by it from sudden death. "At least it was quick and painless," people kept saying.

"He had a good life," her mother had said over the phone. They'd been unable to travel for the funeral. And what did she know about a good life!

"The good die young," her father said, and later she was glad he'd done so, because it was the first thing that made her angry enough to slam down the phone and to really cry, without thinking about it first, to pound the floor and sit down for hours, unmoving.

A woman was in tears. "I can't stop buying fishing tackle. Ever since Daddy died."

"Idiot," her mother said.

They went out to have breakfast for dinner at her father's favourite diner. Her brother Nathan, who was flush, and his wife Betty were already sitting at the round corner booth when they got there. Their three grown children and seven grandchildren lived elsewhere in the state and none of them could make it. Danielle, the eldest of all the grandchildren, was in Montreal for the summer. "It's nice to see you two together," Linda said to Betty.

"What do you mean by that?" Betty had an abrupt staccato laugh and an abrupt staccato way of speaking, and if her face had a sound you would call it abrupt and staccato, too. Her nose tapered too soon, her mouth was small and thin-lipped, her eyebrows were two short dashes, one above each small eye. It made Linda wonder how much of one's looks are related to behaviour, whether it might be her own soft roundness that made her slow and dithering, or whether her tendency to slowness could possibly have led to her having large round features and a bulbous nose. Maybe your personality grows around your face, like a trained tree. Linda had always liked those old theories of the tempers, knew that despite them having been debunked, she was melancholic and Betty, for example, was choleric.

"Oh, I didn't mean anything by it," Linda said. "I only meant it was nice to see you together."

"That is what you said," Betty said.

"Yes."

"Implying that you weren't expecting to see us together?"

"Marriages are falling apart all over the country," Nancy said. Nancy could be counted on, always, to come to a person's rescue. "That's just a fact. It's why I never got married, to be quite honest. Nothing personal, right Linda?"

Had they forgotten about Jake? Before Linda could find words to respond, the waiter was at the empty edge of the table asking if they were ready for drinks or to order. Her father ordered ginger ale and her mother undid this order. Nancy ordered black coffee, and everyone else ordered juice and water.

"Maybe we should talk about something less contentious," Nathan said. "Like politics. What do you all think about gun control?"

Everyone laughed, knowing Nathan.

"Tell Linda what's happening with the kids," her mother said. "Do you know that Andrew is going to be given an award?"

They discussed the grandchildren and the children and the accomplishments. Linda bragged about Danielle's French, which they, being American and having been through the aughts with French-hating Dubya in charge, met with suspicion. "You've been in Canada too long," her mother said.

Linda was used to being scolded and criticized. If she was that frog in the boiling pot she not only did not notice herself approaching death by burning but she relished it. She only felt comfortable when being

teased or when people took a slightly bullying tone. Even the salesgirl that morning had been irritated with her—and, Linda thought now, spreading blackberry jelly on her buttered rye toast, she was purposely inviting this treatment.

"I like Canada," Linda said. "Anyway, we don't have mass shootings more than once every five years."

Her father, slowly chewing, looked up. "So you wanna take away everyone's Second Amendment rights because of a few bad apples?"

Betty and Nancy were talking about something else, their voices humming in the background.

"Yes I would," Linda said. "I would like to take away everyone's Second Amendment rights."

"I don't like everything he says, but I like that he has the balls to say it," Betty said to Nancy. "And we really shouldn't have so many illegals. What good is that doing for anyone?"

"That's how I feel about the guns," Linda said. "We should rather build a wall and put all the guns on the other side of it."

"Where would you build that wall? Florida?" Nathan said.

"Let's make it a tower, like the one you'd put Rapunzel in. A ziggurat," Linda said. "Round and sealed and high as heaven."

"And then what," her mother said, a challenge in her eyes.

"And then we put all the guns in it."

"So any terrorist can just come in and take them," Betty said. "Better that they stay in the hands of ordinary Americans."

"Maybe I'll run for office," Linda said. "I'm shrill! I can tell it like it is! Guns are bad! Guns kill! Build a wall!"

Around them was a slight rustling. Patrons at the other tables becoming aware of this outburst like small animals of a possible predator. Like Linda could take away their guns. She took a sip of grapefruit juice, too sweet, and puckered her lips. Jake was not here to laugh at this, and they'd all forgotten. She wanted to pull out her phone and to call Danielle, who would be on her side. Who would tease her but be on her side. Danielle would scoff so much about Americans and the Kool-Aid of their patriotism, their persistent agility when it came to certain amendments to their constitution, that Linda might even feel defensive for her homeland. Did Canada even have a constitution? But Danielle wouldn't answer her phone, and Linda knew that it would only make things worse if she pulled the phone out to text her. The print so large that everyone at the table would see what she'd written.

"What's gotten into you," Nancy said.

"What, you gonna run a presidential campaign from Canada," her father said.

"I think I will."

"She's not serious. She's being silly."

"I'm not being silly. I mean it. I'm a single-issue party," Linda said. "That or I'll sign up and move to Mars."

"No offence, but you'd be a terrible president. A president needs to make decisions," Nathan said. "A president needs to be capable of decisive action."

"No, no," Linda said, though she was hot in her cheeks now. "What we need is a president who will dither."

Well, and anyway, she *had* ordered the chair. She wasn't a ninny. She wasn't a nincompoop. She had used Jake's strategy, though for him it was a means of fighting with her. "What if you had a gun to your head?" And the salesgirl had convinced her. Why did people respect the jumping on bandwagons, the quick wrong reaction, the trigger-happiness, the capacity to be seduced by strong leadership? Linda affected her pose of suspicion. Not buying things could be a radical, a good thing to do. Not so much in this case, though: she just had to make up her mind. So the salesgirl with the puckering top told her that the smart chair would collect data and be responsive. "What kind of data?" Temperature, weight, caloric expenditure, pulse, blood pressure. It could be programmed to call for an ambulance. It also knew how much TV you were watching and what. All that and it was only five hundred more than the average recliner!

"Could I have this data sent to my phone instead of my father's? Since he doesn't even have an email account?"

"Of course. That's up to you."

The chair arrived the next day. Linda, in Nancy's guestroom, hadn't slept all night. It didn't matter how sure she'd been when signing the paper. The same thing that always afflicted her afflicted her, the sense that she had made a huge mistake. She knew it was out of proportion—the sort of feeling one had after having committed a crime—but it felt that way all the same. She was a good girl but she'd been punished too much. She had learned this much in the bereavement group classes. All the good girls had been punished too much, and she knew that fear made her freeze. There was flight and there was fight and then there was her.

Shortly after she arrived at the home, a bell chimed and her parents left to have their breakfast in the dining hall. This was prison or school. All Linda had eaten for days was toast and scrambled eggs, a few prunes. Those two stem-and-leaf clementines. She awaited the chair, the delivery of which was indicated on her phone. She could track the position of the truck on a map. Two men walked the chair up in a box tied to a dolly. "It's in a box," she said. Her signature on their machine was enormous. Time elapsed freakishly quickly, had jumped ahead by many minutes every time she snuck a glance. Normally, as Jake said, as Jake used to say, she let time pour over her. But now she had to rush against it. It's okay, she told herself. Calm down, calm down. She tore into the box like a child, ripping it open with slashes of the box cutter. White packing peanuts poured out. She had to find the instruction manual, she had to set up the connection to her phone, she had to do it all before her father found out. The word SMART glowed in digital blue on the arm next to a small screen and some buttons.

Soon her parents would finish their prune juice and decaf and would walk back down the hall. Already she could hear coughing and voices. Her mother entered. Linda began to halfheartedly put the squishy peanuts into a plastic bag, hiding her face. When you feel guilty, every gesture reveals your guilt. The walker came in behind her, her father grasping its foam-handled arms. He didn't lift his eyes to her but beelined faster than she expected he could to the recliner and hoisted himself into it. He pushed a button on the arm and it reclined. He reached for the remote, and it appeared in his hand by way of his wife, and the TV sharply sounded on.

Linda's phone started to ping, and she ignored it. "Do you like the chair, Dad?" she ventured.

"Huh?"

"Do you like it?'

"What?"

He looked at her like she was an idiot.

"I guess that means he likes it," she said to her mother, who was trying to pick up packing peanuts. "Stop that, Mother. I'll do that." Her phone pinged again and she pulled the screen out of her mother's view. His blood pressure was low. He was dehydrated. His heart rate was only 50 bpm. This information drifted into the cloud. She collected each piece of data and swiped it out of view. Her sister texted her with a mock-congratulations and demanded a photo, but Linda did feel deserving of

praise. Or at least the feeling of criminality had pulled away. The hoarders were at it again. Her father was held aloft by the mechanisms of a chair. Maybe what she felt was quieted. Time slowed and so did her heart rate. Even without measurements she could tell. Her mother resumed collecting peanuts. No matter how much care you took to do the right thing, no matter whether you were punished or praised, you still ended up feeling how small the accomplishment had been. What a letdown it was, what a letdown everything was.

Hege A. Jakobsen Lepri

SPOON

to Emanuele

In our next house, I
want things
to be simpler. Fewer
drawers that jam. We
can do without
so much of what we have.
Less corners
and nooks where
things get lost. Little
cutlery.
In our next house, I
want nothing
but spoons. Food
will be softer there. We
will not need
the pickiness
of forks, the sharpness
of knives.
In our next house, we
will eat our soup
slowly, lap up
the last drop
from the bowl. The spoon
licked clean. A curved
mirror where we see
ourselves the way
we were. Spooning.
Clean sheets. Your chin
resting on my head. Your
knees bent in prayer
around me.

Geoff Anderson

PLANTATION

after Natasha Trethewey

I apologize to the knots of Spanish moss,
yet a part of me feels unbalanced, less
to sway my shadow. The front door
I apologize to the groom for coming
diamonds on her freckles. I apologize
a person belongs to another. I apologize
I nearly collapse to the dirt
aflame in my palm. I apologize
engrossed in a portrait, the
shirt. I apologize to the floorboards
the parlour rooms I am allowed
for dancing, the tent doused in brown
behind me. I apologize to strawberry
from a molar, the second slice of cake
myself for smiling to the camera when
my smile, how it hoists each cheek as
the weight not even bowing live oaks;
than a faint breeze enough
I never open, the wedding out back;
late, to the bride for the heat, sweat
to the exchange of vows, the belief
to myself. I apologize to the table
to relieve myself, a fallen candle
to the toast I miss in the powder room,
owner's gold cufflinks on his cotton
my heels plow in the foyer, through
entrance. Mostly, I apologize to myself
bourbon, the hulking manor pale
seeds my fingernail cannot pick
heavy with vanilla. I apologize to
it finds me, or I find it. I apologize to
a limousine whips tin cans in the dark.

Jonathan Glenn Travelstead

DARK FOREST

Wanting answers to questions Stephen Hawking says we're not
ready to ask, I remember crawling through the casement window
(wormhole) onto my parents' roof (space elevator).

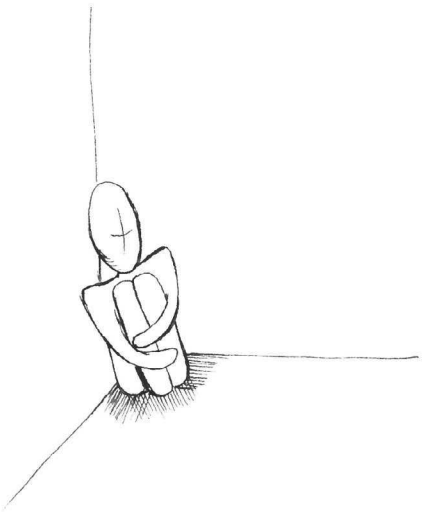
Reclining on the shingles (launchpad), I pinched the red planet
between thumb & forefinger, then slipped it in my pocket.
Now when I lie on my own roof I think about mortgages.

How we say we own things that outlast us, though it's really
the other way around. I think about what's out there
& who watches this lamp flickering in the dark. Whether

they've seen the television we've transmitted into space
for over a century. Episodes of Amos & Andy whose actors
wore blackface. Cowboys & Indians. ET.

If they come, they should know we're already afraid of losing
our jobs. If they call first, I'll tell them we won't know
if they're dangerous until we catch them all.

ETHEREAL



Jennie Chantal Duguay

HIDE & SEEK

1

the absence of your voice
in a room full of tongues

god has touched
memories of yourself as a child

in a church basement
wrapped in velvet curtains

your magical thinking—
if I can't see, I can't be seen

the parents take turns fainting
when they wake up you get a cookie

2

god is always watching, they say
he has a plan

anxiety marks the strain of your smile
where the child tore away

everything about you is clench
grind, clench & grind

dissociation a shadow you pull closer
to hide from all your sins

lust, pride, envy
hardened into burning knots

bright proofs of where god sought
        your body & your body

& your body
        but you would not be found

3

the child sits beside you now
        so young & gay

little one, there is no such thing as sin
        no plan you cannot refuse

it's safe, with me, to speak
        the proof of who you are

you have never been a girl—
        it's so obvious now

& you are not a boy
        your tongue is still yours

your body
        your body

decades collapse like curtains dropping
        you can see me

says the child
        yes, hallelujah, I can see you

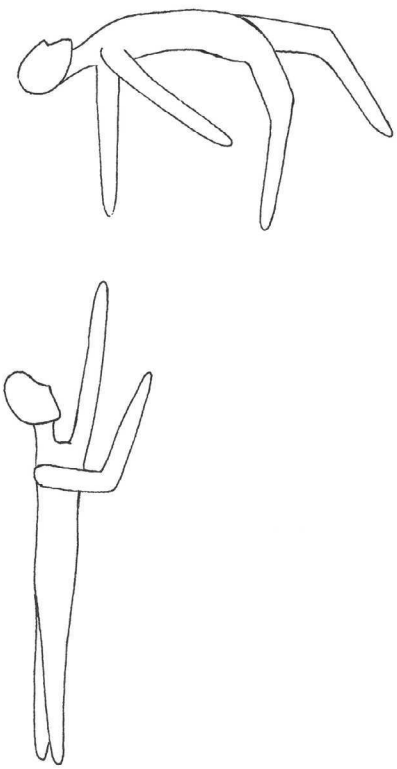
Amanda Merpaw

DURING THE SERVICE AT ST STEPHEN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

what else did you want
i drove 8 hours
the road rose up to meet me
a fist to the face
a finger on the heart
i don't know why everything
isn't on fire yet
there's too much singing
all the coffee is bitter
i might piss myself right here
sleep comes in a parking lot
is it the right time to shop at target
i buy purple tights to honour the legwork
it took us both to get here
i drink dark beer
dark malt brown mud sludge
i feel close to you
cheers
your mother is right
to fear coyotes
in this pew we all cry for her
i'm sorry to tell you i love you
here
where else
there's a photo of us with our eyes closed
it is the only one
it makes sense
i never saw you in ireland
but i remember you there
the most
the lightness
i'm sorry i brought mezcal back from mexico
gestured to a worm in the bottom

instead of holding you
i can't even remember your mouth
on the bottle right
j says i misremember you
into so many moments
inventing so much of you
do i do i
i see you more than i speak your name
finally i am here
in your hometown
i know i could have seen this river sooner
i know i could have taken the train
i know you asked nicely
i wish i knew your family better
they're holding so much weight already
i can't remember the last time i said
i miss you
i know i did the whole time
all these slow years
i've written too much
and too little
happy birthday isn't an act of atonement
do you forgive me now
do you do you
i am kneeling at this altar
i am drinking this wine
i am kneeling at this altar i am drinking
this wine and i believe this is your blood
i am kneeling at this altar i am drinking
this wine i believe this is your blood and i believe
this will save me do you do you
will i learn to bury you
again each year
will i know how it sounds when it's time
day of the dead days of the dead
will i send your mother a christmas card
do you know do you do you
the apocalypse descends
i have such debts
this is a thing with horns

this is a thing with claws
this is a thing with fangs
this is november
this is you still dead



Alysa Hullett

A RESPECTFUL LETTER TO THE LIVING

You felt me float away but I reemerged: apocryphal
as any tale. Deep in your silken sheets, sprawled
on your velvet couch.

I don't know why no one expects a ghost
to stretch, have a seat, use the footstool.
Rituals envelop death

and life, just as atlas and axis form lines
of neck and spine. Maggots squirm
while some soul recites the same unwaning chant:

a little earworm. It loops and loops
till I can't hear it anymore. True, hair and nail
decay but you may find kinship

in this: if the larvae clung long enough, eventually,
we'd both just get used to them.
I too grow so tired of being inside myself.

I press the button,
recline till I'm flat on my back.

lue boileau

I SWALLOW CREATURES WHOLE

I lie till my belly feels like it's bout to bust. "What's that on your face!?" Mama screaming at me. "What's that in your mouth!?" She got my head tilted back, staring down past my teeth into my throat hole. She got one eye closed and the other staring wide. My brown throat scratch, and my belly set to rumble.

"Lord, this child been swallowing creatures whole!" she say.

Mama look deep deep down into my belly and see: judges with they white powdered wigs on, they hooved feet and long fingers scratching for the verdict. She see social workers with pickney sacks, and they crawling limbs that reach into windows to snatch up a baby. She see red and blue sirens, falling deep down into the darkness, they colours calling out and trying to clamber onto the walls. She see this child swallowed up the mayor, he wife, three kids, and the mistress.

Mama looking down my throat hole, at them clamouring for air. And me holding belly rumbling, set to burst.

Mama go to the fridge and take out the ginger ale. She spin it till it flat. She hand me a glass. She kiss the top of my head.

I been swallowing creatures whole.

Jacob M. Appel

ATTACHMENT

In her final hours, my mother has us take down the dolls:
ragged Clarabelle, and one-tusked Sylvester, and Mr. Macaw,
who appears to be a toucan. What life they have witnessed—
fleece-swaddled inside grandmother's hat boxes, conducted
from home to home with the Hummel figurines and the china.
How fragile they look on their keeper's deathbed. How precious.

Ever the head-shrinker, my mother lectures us about the dolls.
Not hers, but those the Jewish toddlers lost along the ramps
at Chelmno and Sobibór, outside the crematoria of Auschwitz.
Transitional objects, she explains. Nazis burned their clothes,
crushed and milled their bones, but clumps of rag and stockinet
cut deeper than hair or flesh. *They'd had their own once, you see.*

And these were yours once? I ask. *Your transitional objects?*
These? My mother, indignant. *My transitional object was you.*

Senaa Ahmad

THE WOMEN, BEFORE AND AFTER

Little girl, whose face I have not yet witnessed, whose beating heart I have known since its first gurgle. These nights you swim inside me are marshy and dim. We keep each other company, you and I, speaking in made-up languages. Me in the drumming of my fingers, you in the warbling of your unborn limbs as you shift and turn in your grotto. Finding your place in the world again, then again. If you reach out your hand, you can push your way into this life. We are here, just on the other side. We are so close.

The ghosts say to me, *Drink a teaspoon of chicken grease every night, that's the trick. Look how many babies I had, wasn't I rolling in children?* Or, *You must not worry. It poisons the child, it makes her dreamy and ill-tempered.* On sleepless nights, they gripe and prod on the other end of the telephone. These long-gone women of mine: the sister of my grandmother, the one with the pinching fingers. A cousin I never met, who disappeared off the family map when she married the wrong person. Aunties from across the ocean. Women I would hide from, when they came to visit.

It's never Noor. No, that would be too easy.

I say to them, *She's there, isn't she?* and they always get cagey and peevish—sometimes they pretend to get disconnected, but I know they're just making those sounds themselves. It's what we get for having a landline. Still, they're company in those hours after midnight, while your dad sleeps in the bedroom, and the whole house clutches its breath in wait of day. You make the most of what you're given.

I've never met the person on the other end of the phone, but she says that she knows me. She says to me, *I remember the day you were born. My knuckles were already starting to turn purple. All those lotions and potions, and still your hands look like dried-out turnips. Are you sure you don't remember me?*

She doesn't seem to hear when I say no. *I'm your great-grandmother. My god, you made so much noise. I hope you're not as much trouble now, because I need your help.*

We drive down to the lake, you and I, because my great-grandmother's ghost tells me to. My grandfather, her son-in-law, your great-grandfather, bought this cabin when he was still alive. *Such a foolish man,* she said on the phone. *He loved it best when everyone knew how much money he had in his pocket.* That doesn't sound like the person I knew, who was sad-eyed and soft-spoken, if a little aloof in the way of his time. When he cried at Noor's funeral, it was the first time I'd ever seen him cry. He was the kind of man whose body didn't know how to cry anymore. It was horrifying, that grinding sound of anguish. He really did like her, though.

It's just you and I on the lake this spring morning. The ground slips beneath my feet. "Careful," I say to you, like you are the agent of your own world, not the fragile recipient of my every lurch and jostling uncertainty.

Here's what I think: if ghosts are real, then where else would Noor be but here? She loved the stillness of the lake, my grandparents' adoring attention. Noor on the deck, a *National Geographic* spread across her knees. Me turning cartwheels in the grass, waiting for everyone's heads to turn. We were so commonplace to one other, me and her, I don't think we could have noticed each other if we tried. And now, this. Here I am, trying to catch one last glimpse, her shadow on the shore, her face pressed against the window.

The cabin was sold years ago, but I have it on good authority that no one's here. And no one is. Everything is as it used to be, a museum for no one, visited only by absence. The cracked plastic chair on the porch. The key in our old hiding spot. I try not to look inside, but the best intentions are made to be broken. It looks like the inside of a stranger's house, of course it does.

The box is where my great-grandmother says it will be, lodged behind a loose brick on the porch. Almost forty-five years, and it's still here, this small piece of her. When I crack the lid, the smell is overwhelming. The potent right hook of hardwood gone sour, mothy old papers stiff and sharp. I snap the box shut. This is what I came here for, yes, and yet we both know it isn't.

Little love, there will come a time when you will live in a haunted house of your own making. I don't know how to tell you this part. How not to take up residence in your own regret. I was thirteen, Noor was seventeen. Some days, the thought of her makes it hard to breathe. What would she be doing now, who would she be? She could have grown up, acquired the face of an adult at last. She could have moved to France

and never spoken to us again. She could have sat on the steps of our parents' crumbling bungalow for the rest of her life, and it would have been enough.

Most of all, I want to remember. I want to close my eyes and catch her. Because that is the other part: your haunted house is yours until it is not, until the roof turns to pulp and the walls sag around you, until the erosive forces of time and faulty memory peel away the final memorial of your love and loss. I want so badly to see her smile, to see her frown. To see her, not the girl on the edge of the frame.

But there is nothing here. Just the glitter of the water, the wispy trees reflected in its mirror. There is no one here but us, me, hands chapping, toes turning slowly blue.

I found the box, I say to her. *It's where you said it would be.*

You opened it, didn't you, she says. *I suppose you want to know the whole story, but it's none of your business, frankly.*

That's very gracious of you, I say.

She'd folded each letter twice to fit into the box, back when she was alive. The leaves stick to each other, yellow and gummy, indecipherable at this point. Of course I try to read them, isn't it only fair? When I burn them in the fireplace, they go fast. All that's left at the bottom is a small jewelled bird, its plumey torso made of gold that's gritty to the touch.

What do you want me to do with the bird?

The bird? my great-grandmother says. *Oh, the ostrich. Keep it. Sell it. Use the money for your daughter's wedding. I don't care. I got over it. Didn't I get over it?*

Beautiful girl, I wonder if you will look like her. I see Noor's twins everywhere, even now. At the train station. Walking home from school. Noor at sixteen, Noor at forty-two. I lose her again in the moment they turn their faces to me.

But you don't have to look like her, I promise. You won't live in the shadow of an aunt you never knew. If I look for her in you, it's because I look for her fingerprints everywhere, in everything, trying to see what was touched by her, and why.

Parvez is my father's sister, your great-aunt, and I remember her in short excerpts. Her hands, darker than mine, fraying damaged cuticles. The hair of a queen, blacker than sin, completely at odds with the slight,

tense, absolutely unmythic person we knew. At the viewing, I thought if I saw her in the rental coffin, exquisite and rested as she never looked in real life, it would be easier to let go. But the woman in the coffin was not her, rested or unrested. It was someone else's version of Parvez. They cremated her, only a few hours later.

On the phone, she says, *Oh, my sweetest girl! It's so good to hear your voice. We have to catch up. But, first things first—I just need you to do the smallest thing. I can help you, too. I promise.*

Even though she was my father's sister, Parvez was always closer to my mother. We used to go to the mall, the four of us, Noor vanishing the instant we stepped through the sliding doors. Like she might catch fire if she was seen with us. I nursed a fantasy, that we would just leave without her one day. She would try to look for us but too late. We were gone and she'd be stuck in the mall overnight, licking leftover pepper packets to stay alive.

Can you help me find Noor? I say now.

There's a long silence on the other end. I want this so badly, I have to hold the phone to stay still. It's a hideous one from the '90s, rescued from the bottom of a plastic tub at a garage sale, big bubbled buttons, snaking black cord. Your dad wanted a telephone so he could always call his relatives in India. He's a good son. He's the kind of good son they make maudlin ballads about.

Oh, she says at last. *I meant that I could give you advice or, you know, words of wisdom. If you want them. There's a lot that you realize when you're just sitting around for a long time. Maybe it could help you.*

Okay, I say. The phone bites into my hand. *Sure.*

People love to tell you everything you won't regret later in life, but I could fill three lifetimes with everything I wish I did. Don't make mistakes like I did, okay?

That's the advice?

You didn't like it? I have more. Loads more.

I try to sound like someone's idea of a patient and reasonable person. *Wouldn't it be easier just to let me talk to Noor?*

Look, sorry, Parvez says. *Maybe we can talk some other time. I left something behind and I need you to deal with it. Remember how good I was to you? Those double-fudge sundaes with extra caramel? Those long nights without a bedtime? I just need a little help, okay?*

Is she listening to me? I try to tell her. *I'm seven months in. This is the farthest we've ever come.* Me and your dad, we feel like the first people to

discover fire, coaxing a flame to grow. We have left room for nothing else but you, you and this calamitous optimism.

Parvez says, *Maybe you don't remember, it's been so long. It will be in your parents' house.* She adds: *Please hurry. Sorry. I don't mean to be rude, but—I've been waiting a very long time.*

Your grandparents don't live together anymore, not after Noor died. They were already hanging together by a strand, and maybe she was that strand. Because after the funeral, after people stopped showing up for visits, bearing more foil-wrapped food than our poor fridge could manage, after a year, they sat your uncle and me down at the kitchen table and said, *We have been trying very hard, so hard. You know that, don't you?*

Your grandmother owns the house now, with her husband Hassan, and they sit dozing on the couch with their hands clasped like shy teenagers. It's hard to think we were afraid of making her sad. I feel like I am walking across a continent just to see her, and still she is not completely there.

They bring us into the dining room for hot tea and digestive biscuits. They touch my belly, trying to grasp you. My mother speaks to you with a gentleness I thought she had aged out of, long ago. "Hello, my little darling. Hello," she croons to you, with eyes full of everything she has lost. She knows, she knows how brittle it is to love something. She of all people knows that life is one clumsy step away from falling off a cliff.

I excuse myself the first moment I can, snooping in the cupboards on my tiptoes while you rumble inside of me, waging a small, unknown battle. I'm not sure what I'm looking for until I find it. A plain cardboard box marked in my mother's flowing script: *Parvez*. The edges are rumpled and mildewy. In the box are my aunt's tapes. We sit on the ground, you and I, dust bunnies scurrying out of our way, and I slot a tape into the shabby little tape recorder, and together we resurrect my aunt as I never knew her.

Her voice is rasping and quiet, but she sings like a movie star. She sings the sort of lyrics you find in corny songs: nightingales unfurling, rose gardens untended, the beautiful women she loved. She sings with such dignity, it makes my hands go cold for an instant.

If you told me this was Parvez, I'd say, *Parvez who?* It's as if I had another aunt I never knew about, an occasionally scandalous aunt, cucumber-cool, already concocting her next sly escapade. Her voice is the only instrument, and it is enough. I wonder if anyone knew.

"Of course I knew," my mother says with a laugh, when we have dinner. "How do you think those tapes got in the box?"

"Did she want to be a singer?"

My mother shrugs. "How should I know? You remember how Parvez kept everything so close to the chest. I think she was just embarrassed that things wouldn't work out."

"I was going to ship her ashes back to India," I say. "I think she would have wanted that."

"They're just ashes. Pregnancy is making you awfully sentimental." My mother squints at me. "Are you getting enough Vitamin C? You should be eating guava. When I was pregnant, your dad used to have to beg everyone we knew to bring guava over from India. Now you can just buy it on the internet. You don't know how lucky you are."

Later, we pass Noor's old room, now a study, with her portrait hanging over the desk. Her smile is enormous, hard to look at. It says, *I want to be anywhere but here.*

I do what Parvez asks. I mail the ashes to a distant cousin who still lives on the family property near Darbhanga. He's baffled, but he agrees to do it.

She said to me, *Can I tell you something? You promise not to say a word about it? I hated living in this country. I'm sorry. I know you're not supposed to admit it, but there you go. Bless your mother, I don't know how she of all people got stuck with my ashes. But if it's my fate to live on her shelf for the rest of my afterlife, I might haunt you every day as long as I have it in me.*

I did it, I tell her now. *Just like you wanted.*

She sighs, and it seems to me you reach out and sigh back, a feeble flutter, a small bird making an unquiet nest in my abdomen.

I touch my stomach. I say, *Will you put Noor on now?*

Look, here's my advice. It's the best advice I have for you. Throw out the phone. Get a hobby. It's unhealthy to be so obsessed all the time, Parvez says, and then she adds, *No offence, dear,* and then she is gone.

Oh, it's you, says the voice on the other end. It's so distorted and scrambled, it doesn't sound like the voice of a relative, but the voice of something rising from a long sleep. *I knew I'd have to talk to you eventually.*

Noor? I say.

Who? Noor? No, not her. No, you don't know me. I can hear her rustling on the other end. *You wouldn't think your wrists would ache so much when*

you die, but ah well. It's a woman's lot in life to suffer. Why should it be any different when you die?

They don't have Tylenol up there, I guess? I say. She sounds so worn out, I want to make her laugh.

Ah, yes, the voice says. *That's why I didn't want to meet you. Is it so hard for you to imagine that I lived my life differently than you? You know, I never left my village? It used to be, that was something you could hold on to. You're a soft girl, so you don't know. Pain makes you sharp. It lets the world change around you, without changing you.*

When I was a child, my mouth moved faster than my head. No common sense, that's what my mother would say. Now, I know that there is no point with women like this. Better to stand perfectly still, so they can take as much oxygen as they want.

I had four girls, beautiful girls, eyes like rain, and they all died before the age of ten. I had boys, too, but it wasn't the same. There are two different worlds, the world they live in, the one we live in. You could see it corrupting them as they grew.

I'm sorry, I say quietly. *That's so sad.*

Have some imagination. You are a child in the grand order of things. I saw your great-grandfather once, but he was a little baby. And now where is he?

She waits for an answer.

He's dead. I never met him.

That's right. Look, when I was still alive, a woman gave me a trick for bringing back my girls. I was too afraid to use it while I was still alive, and I wish I had been a little braver. I want you to do it for me.

How does anyone answer to a request like that? I say, *What do you need me to do?*

You'll have to dig up their graves, but I think you'll be fine. We couldn't afford to bury them properly back then, so we buried them in our yard. When you dig them up, you'll find a little jar beside them. You'll need the blood of a chicken, too. It can't be a cockerel, it's going to have to be at least a few years older—

Wait, I say. I can't listen to this anymore. *I can't do that. I can't just stop my life and fly to India. I can't—go digging up graves.*

Ahh. She sounds a little happy, a little angry. *Of course. I knew it. You're just too soft.*

I want to hang up, but I say, *That's not fair. I've lost a lot, too. Maybe after the baby comes, we can look for the graves.*

But that's a lie, and we both know it. *If you're going to be cowardly, at least have the courage to admit it,* she says. *I knew you were the wrong person to ask.*

Everything that happened to you—it's horrible, I say. *I wish I could give you what you want.*

I can almost hear the gears turning in her head. She says, *I just need it to bring back my girls. When you're done, you could use it for your sister.*

In this moment, yes, maybe I am a little cowardly. Because suddenly, I want to stay on the phone. I want to hear what she has to say.

Instead, I hang up.

I have a nightmare that I pick up the phone after midnight, and you answer. I wake up, halfway through a panic attack, and find myself in bed with your father sleeping beside me. We sit together, you and I, while I wipe my tears and count my breaths. I whisper, "Hey little girl," hoping you'll answer. I tap my fingers against my stomach, but you're quiet. I say, "Stay with me." We are so close to the end, you and I. We are so close to it.

We never talk about Noor, me and your father. It seems simpler that way. It's the way my parents were. Always, I have hoarded memories of Noor for myself, a diminishing stockpile. I think there are questions he wants to ask. Maybe if he asked, I'd answer. There are days, even years, when I stop thinking about her. But somehow, she's always around the corner, always biding her time. This loss, it's a skyscraper at night, occupying mass and density, shuttered without light.

I haven't told your dad about the ghosts, either. Not yet. I haven't slept most nights, cold and bleary as they are. If he doesn't hear the voices on the other end, maybe he will think I am losing it. But more likely, if he does hear them, it means this is all real. And then what?

I don't want you to do anything. Just listen, the woman on the other end says. *I wanted to die fighting but I didn't know how to fight. It happened so fast. It was awful, it was fucking awful. Probably you heard about it, from your mom or your sister or someone. I didn't want to die. No one wants to die like that. I wanted to be better, sharper, but I wasn't. I was just me. Isn't that the worst thing you could ever be?*

One night, I pick up the phone, and there she is.

Hi, she says. It's her, all right. I could pick her voice out of a lineup.

Noor. Oh my god. She's finally here and I don't know what to say first. *Are you okay? Are you happy?*

Uh, I'm not alive? What do you think? she says. There's a crackle on the other end, like she's clearing her throat or laughing, but I'm pretty sure it's neither. She says, *I guess that was a little mean. Sorry. They told me that you wouldn't stop asking for me. Yeah, I should feel flattered but it's also kind of annoying?*

I'm sorry. I just wanted to hear your voice.

I get it. But I don't have anything you want. Like, what do you think I'm doing? I'm stuck at seventeen.

Seventeen's not the worst age to be stuck at, is it? I say, which is so inane, such a trivial thing to tell her, but I want her to stay and talk to me. I want to tell her that I think about her all the time. I want to tell her that there's a gap in the universe for everyone who loved her, right in the space below our ribs, a small hole in the solar plexus where you could look through and see the place she used to inhabit. I want to tell her that grief makes you a time traveller, who is forever living outside of the present: you walk through the years before and you live in a past that is not quite the past, but the one you have held on to, inflexible for how carefully you preserve it, you walk through the years ahead and see the cataclysm of loss, how it has altered the shape of the world. But all I can say is, *You know how much we miss you? You know how much we've missed out on?*

I know you're trying to make it better, but you're not doing a very good job. I know you're fine. You have a job and friends and a house and an Xbox. You have a whole entire life. And you know what the funny thing is? I don't even think you liked me that much, in real life.

That's not true, I say, trying not to cry.

I've had more time to think about it than you, you boob. But like, if I were still alive, would you think about me this much? Probably not, right? You're starting a family. You're moving on, and there's nothing I can do about it. It just happens. I think I'm supposed to be happy for you, but. Well, it's harder than you think.

I'm never going to move on, I say. *You think I could ever forget?*

You're the older sister now, she says bitterly. *Isn't that weird? You're older than I'll ever be. Stop crying, it's okay, it's not like you chose this,* and I realize that she's right, that my face is covered in snot.

Will you ever talk to me again? I say. It is the only thing I want to ask. In this moment, I've never felt more like I was thirteen again, never more like the plaintive little sister I was.

Maybe. They didn't want me to talk to you. Did they tell you that? They said it's never a good idea. I think that's probably right. But, you know, there's sort of a finite amount of activities anyone can do here.

I'll do anything you need me to, I say. *Do you want something? I can pass on a message. I can get Mom on the line. Anything.*

That sound again. A burst of static, like she's sighing or laughing or just trying to find her voice. I know every strange sound she used to make, but I don't know this one.

Don't name your kid after me, I swear to God. Nothing would piss me off more. There's a silence, and I'm afraid to breathe, and I think maybe she's gone, but she's not.

Drink turmeric milk, she says at last, begrudgingly. *That's what the grandmas over here say you should do. You already have so much. It's stupid to want you to have more. But I hope she's a good one. I do. Oh well, what do I know. I'm a ghost*, and that's it, the line goes dead. And then it's just you and me, little bird, as it so often is.

It should be so easy to say something. To tell someone, anyone. I could just wake up your father one night. I could say to him, "I need you to hear this." We would stand in front of the telephone in solemn silence, so ordinary, its shine long worn off. I'd pick up the plastic receiver. Pass it to him. I'd watch his face transform, unclench, the shock of discovering that the ground beneath his feet does not stay still.

But little girl, I am not strong enough to share Noor. She is mine, my secret, my cataclysm. If we never speak of it, if it just occupies space around us, so be it. To give her to someone else is to know that something can exist after grief, and where do we go from there?

For now, the ghosts are my secret and they are yours, too. Me and your father, we lie awake in bed together. Holding each other, holding you, holding between us what can't be said. Full of this, this calamitous hope.

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"What is the intersection of
your absence and not knowing what absence
is, is it eternity? My hands plunge in
the dishwater and somewhere, a knife."

— *Tanis Franco, "The Fourth Region of a Venn Diagram is the Unoccupied Region"*

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