

STORM CELLAR

VOL. VIII NO. 2





Jaina Cipriano, *Think About Your Food* (2019)



Jaina Cipriano, *Solids* (2019)



Jaina Cipriano, *Home Again* (2018)

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raunafronter
raunafronter

The Importance of Air

A few months back, my son asked me if I knew what a ramjet was. I didn't, but I figured that anything with "jet" in the word must have something to do with air. "It *flies*?" I said, making the motion of a bird in flight. Since then, I've been subjected to random instances of him waving his arms and saying, "It *flies*?" whenever anything remotely applicable occurs. So when I asked my farmer and the son to name the first thing that came to mind when I mentioned air, Son said, not unpredictably, "It *flies*?" complete with flapping arms. But Farmer, studious fan of fifty shades of esoteric engineering concepts, stated succinctly, "Laptop (Apple Air), Jordan (Air Jordan shoes), and aircraft." Neither mentioned the things I thought they would, namely barometric pressure or air quality or, simply, breathing.



I've been trying to understand air pressure and sound, how they interfere and interact. Smell and wind, emanations and atmosphere. It's like attempting to unravel some of Dickinson's toughest poems, or unpuzzle the proverbial rocket science, but in this case, aerial shenanigans. Various sites do their best to simplify, but I beg them to *please try harder*!

From what I glean, an important part of animal movement tends to be low sounds (infrasonic), inaudible to the human ear but heard by some animals, sounds brought on by lightning or even volcanoes or hurricanes. Barometric pressure is another factor which motivates animals to move or eat more or find a sheltered place to stay. They know when something's happening in the heavens; they can sense the changes. It even affects us: more childbirths occur during times of atmospheric change, men's sperm counts tend to be lower, we suffer more aches and pains, moods and migraines—all this when the barometer fluctuates, all when the pressure changes from high (clear) to low (cloudy or rainy or stormy), or vice versa.



It's an Easter morning full of atmosphere. Midwest churches pulse with song and a peerless dawn sun. The breath of life has returned: air in a dead man's lungs, this miracle or madness, this revolution in ingenuity. Where goes Easter without air? Will the same old songs be sung—some of them good—or has someone finally gotten creative? (My farmer used to sing louder.) Speaking of creativity, where are the triangle-headed purple-faced humans who procreate by having sex with their eyeballs? Variation is the creed of God, for she's big enough to swallow diversity as surely as she gulps down breath and spews it out again for us to breathe in.

★

Loricifera are small multicellular animals that live in the depths of the Mediterranean Sea. They thrive in the mud of that harsh and extreme place, happily going about their daily business without taking advantage of a single oxygen molecule, presumably even after they've played a game or two of ocean floor hockey. Similar to mud dragons and penis worms, one must wonder how they reproduce—no gasping allowed, no sudden intakes of air; just lay there and flap those tendrils all sexy-like.

★

The darn heifer got out. Six-hundred-pounds of Dolly stood in front of me, tame enough to let us pet her, let us feed her by hand, but she got out and I wasn't happy. I'd have to wrangle her in by myself. Ten year old Son simply wasn't big or strong enough at the time, and the farmer was doing his work thing in town. So I stood straddle-legged, for firm footing. Grabbed each of her ears, for control. Began pulling her toward me, for dominance. But she wasn't about to be had, so she lowered her head and drove it between my spread legs, splaying me out on top of her, backwards. She ran ten feet or so before I slipped off her slippery hide and crumbled to the concrete driveway, scraped, bruised, and air knocked out of me. Son ran up and hunkered over me, laughing ridiculously loud and long. My air gone, and his too unpalatable.

★

Ours is the only planet we know of that can sustain life. Were the others once inhabited too, but human stupidity led to annihilation, as will surely happen to ours? Then coldness (like Mars) or excessive heat (like Venus), a complete collapse of the atmosphere.

Say it ain't so while tossing that plastic bottle in the trash.

★

My current adventures include navigating muddy pocked dipsy rural roads heaved by winter's deep freezing and spring's inevitable thaw, and the farm fields are heaving scent. It's a thing called geosmin. When it rains or the ground is disturbed, the geosmin bacteria are released into the air giving it that beautiful earthy tang we smell after rain or in early spring, even while digging in the garden. The smell of thawing earth. Musty and slightly sweet. It's what happens here about mid-March.

We know spring is upon us when the watery ditch noises drown out the grinding of the diesel truck's engine. It's loud, that endless roar of a castanet army. Spring peepers have thawed and are glad to be chirruping the world again.

★

Assuredly, fast is what this world has become, swirling globe of texture, sound, and air. Full, jammed, breathless. But that pink house is odd. You can set your course by it, a chop of rainbow along a horizon of corn.

Anthony DiPietro

Possession Diary

after Marie Howe

The first devil was my craving for salty snacks.

Second, a habit of dashing off emails in anger. A twenty-four-hour cool-down period is always advisable.

Third, I could see the future.

Fourth place, I could never decide how I felt about procreation.

Fifth was not a specific song, but the fact that melody never left my mind. I was always hearing music, even when I wasn't listening to it. Whistling something or other. Or sometimes holding my lips in the shape of a whistle but sucking in air, a shrill imitation of wind. And in my head, fat brass, soaring strings, chiming bells, the whole bit.

OK the first was I would eat anything put in front of me, just because it was there.

The second was how I always believe I'm right. Not simply in matters of fact, but emotionally right. Right to love this person or hate that one, even when compelling evidence says I should not, and that belief in my rightness leads to righteous anger, that skin-burn from a hot stove.

Third was I thought I had reversed the aging process.

Fourth was my fear that the worm which fed on my father's brain for twenty-seven years also lives in me. That a loud enough POP, as from a balloon, might waken it and make it hungry.

Fifth was I too much enjoyed the smells of my own body. The smells of my body had their own melody.

Sixth was I could not love men, only wolves.

Seventh, severe halitosis. No doctor, chemical, prayer, or spell could cure me. As a child, I went to school with dead fish breath and my hair always sticking up, even if I had combed it and brushed my teeth. Finally, I learned to cut all my hair off.

There was no comparable solution for my tongue.

Maybe that was my first and original devil.

The second was that patience eluded me. Children try to chase the moon, but it never gets any closer. I wished for patience like the ocean wishes to be less restless.

The third was that I knew things, like: that it took eight minutes to walk to the train stop, which meant I needed to leave my bed at seven-fifty, which meant the latest I should ever go to sleep was one-oh-five.

OK. The first was I ate so quickly I bit the inside of my mouth. And when the soft scar was still healing, I'd bite there again. That happened so many times.

The second was I blatantly disregarded stop signs inside parking lots.

Third was that I believed nothing ever happened, nothing could, exactly the way I imagined it. In this way, I prevented many disasters, and a few happy outcomes.

Fourth was I was a chronic masturbator.

Fifth was that I could have been a great actor, but I got stage fright as a five-year-old playing The Wizard in The Wizard of Oz. I spent all the rest of my days trying to be invisible.

Sixth was martyr syndrome, also known as doormat disease, which I inherited from my mother. People who make themselves doormats, especially for their mates, I considered angels. Also I believed in the virtue of living in poverty. Stupid, stupid.

Seventh was indulgence. I never masturbated in my grandparents' house, until one day I felt it would kill me to wait. And that day forward I let myself do it there, but only in the basement bathroom.

Everything in my life was like this. A want that became a need. A bad thing that became a habit, until I couldn't distinguish right from wrong.

The truth is there were many more than seven devils. The truth is I ordered them a car. I cleaned my body while they drove to meet me. I placed a mirror by my bed, hid my wallet, unlocked the door, and let them do whatever, whatever, whatever they wanted to me.

Scrounge

The dog survives. The people dwindle, trekking through sun and rain, streams and muck, the smell of decay clinging like a pest. She watches them break from a tangled and complex group into greying loners who leave in pairs or fall one by one by the wayside, until the man who smells like trees, crickets, tobacco, motor oil, and smudges of grime under jagged fingernails is her only companion. They travel together, sharing what food is left. He gives her the dregs of cans and she licks them clean, careful of their rippled edges. He smells like hunger, but not the hunger the dog knows means trouble. That hunger wears masks, has tried to come for her in different faces and bodies, thinks her missing leg makes her an easy meal. But she's too quick, made swift by what seems to make her less.

She'd had a pack, before. Rescued barely more than a wobbly pup, all she'd known was her humans' apartment, the hardwood floors she slipped across when excited—a scheduled life contained by fences and stairs. And yet: the world so much bigger now, so full.

She'd sensed something coming, similar to how she felt the approach of storms. One day, ripe with distress, her humans leashed her to the legs of the dining room table. She whined and shimmied, tongued at their sorry hands: why was she being left, why wouldn't they let her soothe their worry away? Her humans choked on her name, propped open the doors, and disappeared.

She chewed the leash and tried to follow, but their familiar smells vanished on the street. She couldn't remember ever being packless, and roamed the strangely quiet city, following flickers of the familiar. Humans yelled, gave chase or chased her off. Her own kind trapped indoors, crying out from high windows, snarling in parks.

Finally, instinct urged her out, to the suburbs and hills. She proved adept at scrounging: crunching dead birds on the cracked asphalt, soft furred things in the scrub. Blood tasted electric, like memories not hers. She took up with a group of humans shuffling the frontage roads, approaching cautiously: her desire for touch and self-preservation so often at cross purposes. She didn't know how long she'd been alone, only that it had been long enough. She wears time differently.

At his end, the man is kind to her. She watches him stumble, pant for breath, and knows what's to come: she smells it on him and in him. He stays still too long, slumping against the guardrail as he grunts the sound she recognizes he thinks means her, herself. She pushes her head against his hands, he becomes empty.

She sleeps in the curve of his cooling body despite the excrement, and a ghost moves between them: a dream of the sea. She dreams of the pale blue overhead, the reek of salt, and agrees to meet him there. When she wakes, there's a new scent on the breeze, or one she's only just noticed, she's been too close to the man's dying. She lingers awhile nosing at his body, until his scent fouls and she knows enough time has passed: he will not return.

She sets out after the aroma of water, hopping past splintered farmhouses, rubbing herself into meadows to get at that itch, returning to the roads pinned with castoff pine needles. She smells the marks of other dogs, dull and faded, and leaves her own response in kind. She hovers over smells like puzzles to savor, flees the ones that smell thick and greasy like threat.

Having a purpose is the not the same as a having pack, but for now it's enough. She pulls toward that new scent as she travels, and it deepens, like a maze expanding, bent and winding corridors that overlap in her senses—earth, concrete, grit, flush, scale, lime, blood, rust—until one day the smells pop so loud she hears them, she sees the crash of waves. She races from the drab shadows of the greenery to the sand. She prances and snaps at the curl of the noxious sea foam, sprinting after and from the gulls that dive to nip, the cormorants that rush with wings half-spread and beaks parted in want. She paws at the grainy silt, chasing the sand nits that bite at her fur, and snatches up a crab whole. The smelly excess of kelp, the rank tang of dead things, makes her giddy.

The daylight leaves slowly, the crab aches in her gut. She sleeps in a nook high in the rocks, shielded from the wind, missing the man's smell.

The next day the same: chasing, rooting, glutting herself on what lodged in the sand overnight. Paradise, perhaps. Each day awash with newness, ecstatic with difference. Blue skies and grey, once a large fish left by the tide, meatier than the dog herself. She fights the birds for it, burying her fangs in their necks as they bloody her flanks.

More days pass. The birds leave her alone, bobbing on the waves, streaking through the sky in crowds. She patrols the beach from end to end, smells the edges of something approaching. She cries into the night, and the waves cough in response.

Sometimes she leaves the shore, scrambling from trail to

treeline to sniff at the passing of time. But the wind so light and empty, carrying only dampness and decay, the tickle of pollen. Sometimes the smell of death catches her attention anew, rot growing so full and thick with itself that it breaks and things sprout in the gaps. She dreams the man will return, that her owners will appear at the trailhead, will carry her up stairwells and into rooms.

She thins and bores of the things the ocean brings her.

Then one day, from behind and suddenly, almost obscured by the scouring wind, she hears the gruff call of barking.

Her heart stands still: the world aflame, burning with taste and odor.

Lindsay Reeve

Cake

Long ago, when I was still in my 20s, I worked in a café that served a famous cake. *The New York Times* had featured this cake, and people came from all over the city as well as from outside the city to try it. One day, a man walked into the shop and asked how many calories were in the cake. “I can’t say exactly,” I said, “But probably around six hundred and fifty per slice.” Actually I had no idea. I made that number up.

“Six hundred and fifty a slice,” he said, “That’s a lot, right?”

“Well, it’s not—”

“Good. I want to eat something indulgent. Go ahead and cut me a big piece.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, “But each piece needs to be the same size, quite thin. It’s important to get the right amount of air in each bite, to balance out the richness.”

There was icing between each layer of the cake, you wouldn’t want it to be cloying.

“Air?” said the man, “I’m paying to eat air?”

That’s how stupid some people can be. But I remained patient. I explained that he was not paying for a little flour and sugar but for perfection: for my boss’s expertise, her sensibility, the development of her palate.

“Ah, cut the crap. Blah blah, I’m so important, look at me.” He interrupted himself. “That piercing.” He waved his hand in my face. “When’d you get it?”

“My piercing? My parents did it when I was little.” I thought he meant my ears. I’d forgotten my nose was pierced.

“I don’t believe you.”

“You—”

“I don’t believe they’d do that to you. You look like you have nice parents.”

I wanted to ask, what about me looked like I had nice parents? But I preferred not to get too close to his vision of things, in case it started to affect my own. That happened often. Other people had such strong and appealing points of view—sensibilities, like my boss.

The man leaned over the counter. “Look,” he said, “I didn’t mean to offend you. Actually I think you’re cute. Your eyes are like perfect little almonds. I could eat them up.” He tried to wink at me, pulling the corner of his mouth toward his cheek, revealing one gnarled rotted tooth. It twisted up into his wine-red gums, into his leering face, and after he closed his lips it was still there, I could not un-see it.

That day I decided what I was going to do with the rest of my life: I was going to be a dental hygienist. People could insult me all day long, but I’ll have seen into the secret interior of their mouths. Seen evidence of their wanting. Taken their heads in my lap.

Lee Anne Gallaway-Mitchell

Combustion

If you want to scatter someone's ashes in a body of water it helps to release the cremains with de-stemmed flowers. That way, your eyes have something to follow. Bright gerbera daisies are fine floaters and can be tracked the longest.

My anticipatory grief has its own research methods.

★

I attend a conference on war the week after my dad requests hospice care. At the conference, a Vietnam Vet and I talk over coffee, and when he finds out my dad flew Hueys in the war, he gently touches my arm with his finger, asking, "Your dad still around?"

I hesitate. I can still answer yes. He holds his finger until I can give an affirmative. It stays there above my elbow for a beat longer than it should, a comfort.

My dad, now dying (and still) for as long as my seven-year-old daughter has been alive, told us years ago, "Just burn my ass up; throw me in a culvert."

But he also wants to be scattered in the Gulf of Mexico.

"Just take me to the coast."

My sisters, our mom, and I want pieces of him here and there, wherever we may live.

★

In the past year, I've told my dad goodbye at least five *final* times.

One of these farewells he yelled at me over some small thing

then spat out, “Y’all better travel while you can. Don’t get fucking old.”

★

Dad’s skin is dry; his cells slough off. I will eat them in the jars of salsa he canned right before being admitted to the hospital this last time. The tomatoes and peppers came from his garden, too, where he deposited his blood, his skin so thin it breaks. The blood thinner makes him bleed out in great drops and streams from the least cut, puncture, or scrape. Gardening has long been a bloodsport, but he keeps transplanting rose bushes and pruning them, too.

★

Don’t we become all our dead? My dad lived life’s terror, fought through that body quake of inevitability for an entire year in Vietnam. A habit he couldn’t shake, of course he would pass it on, that feeling of being caught like a criminal in your own skin, looking at the scar on your forehead knowing you’ll carry it around to the end of your days. When my daughter fell and hit her head on a rock and that rupture of skin became a scar, I rubbed vitamin E oil on it for weeks. It didn’t make a damn. She’ll carry that mark to her forever, too. Sometimes I become so addled by grief I wonder at the wisdom of writing it in its pre-emptory stages. But shouldn’t there be a real-time accounting of what it means to mourn?

★

In one of the last goodbyes, my dad motions me over to his car as he’s about to leave for dialysis.

“You know that .22 I gave Brad? I want to spend some time with it. Try to hit the side of a barn, you know?”

I nod my head. My dad pokes me in the arm, “Don’t forget!”

We give him the rifle during the next visit, but we forget to bring it back during this, what we imagine our last.

My sister later tells me, “Dad always gives you the best last words.”

★

At the conference on war, I am around people who think about war as much as, hell, *more* than I do. My dad a combat veteran, my husband one, too. More questions than answers for those of us who ponder: “Are there limits to how we can share the burden of war?” These questions linger a few days later as I watch my dad and listen to him talk.

Dad hands us jars of his salsa in what I am sure will be the last time, the day after I attend the conference on war.

He cautions, “Make sure to leave enough for your mama. Debbie’ll need some, too, when I am gone.”

Dad asks my husband about the explosion in his US Air Force fighter jet the week before, about the auxiliary engine that blew the fuck up, the vaporized hydraulic fluid—the worst carcinogen in the airplane—filling the cockpit and his lungs, about documenting damage done to plane and body. Just in case.

Dad examines a jar of pickled cherry tomatoes spiked with chiltepins and hands it over with a promise: “It’ll light your ass up.”

Pınar Yaşar

The Future

When he laughed I felt it. And when, like most of us by age twenty, he tried to jump the gate I felt it too. Sometimes knowing you are headed towards an unstoppable train, a kind of jackhammer wielded by fate, the dirtied promise that awaits our citizenry, it seems like a better idea to meet the train yourself instead of waiting for the day it kills you anyway.

I used to tell him between kisses that I thought we were lucky, stupid creatures that we were, to know a better way. Think of all the glory we take in, I would say, the food and wine and desperation. How would we know what it felt like, otherwise?

It has to hurt to be good.

We rolled around on the grass a lot between the school buildings and the armory. I can't remember how long we've been saying our daily recitations and eating bread rations paces away from heavy artillery. We smoke cigarettes after hours underneath the awnings that line the north facing side. We call it our "death threats," the only way we can remind the ones who keep us here that we could choose to die before fate ever finds us.



Kelly DuMar, *Pen & Ink* (2019).

Katherine Ann Davis

The Hero and the Hot Dog Vendor

In the city, the golden late-September dusk was a signal for sellers to clear the sidewalks, even in high-traffic areas, but tonight the hot dog vendor stayed. This year, he reminded himself, was the year of change. He'd said so last night at his birthday celebration, or wished it as he blew out the votive candle Charlie had pushed into his poppyseed muffin. He'd written it on two envelope scraps, pocketed one and taped the other to his cart as a constant, friendly nudge. Now the hot dog vendor smoothed that tape, stomped down the usual pain, and blinked into an expanse of people. No officers, thank goodness. A silly ordinance—autumn evenings were when tourists walked about most eager to spend—but he understood. They all did. Across the street, Russ of Russ's Slushes folded his umbrella. He was fined by an officer last week and couldn't afford more chances this season.

Pain threatened again, climbed past the hot dog vendor's ankles to settle around his knees and hips. A second stomp, a third, and he pictured it sink like mercury in a thermometer. A fourth stomped it all out, he imagined, spilled it from his heels and toes into the concrete. That's what his physical therapist advised when treatments no longer fit into his budget: *positive visualizations and/or distractions, no rich desserts, lots of water and turmeric*. Sometimes ibuprofen, but the hot dog vendor had forgotten the change purse where he kept pain relief, so caffeine was his lone source of any different feeling.

At least distractions were easy: he posed for the double-decker bus tours, reinterpreted maps for sightseers, sold passersby cans of cold soda, and swapped stories with folks who crowded his cart to cross *try street food* off their bucket lists. He met grandkids, bachelorettes, the recently retired. He liked this rhythm, this quick turn to embrace visitors in the city that had fashioned him into a satisfying performance. His cash pouch grew fat. The extra money would of course go to Charlie.

He opened a silver lid and pinched a hot dog between his tongs, shook off the water and asked about toppings.

"The works," a young woman requested. Music notes were

tattooed up the side of her neck. She pulled a few bills from her handbag while, around them, people whispered and pointed into the sky, the alleys. God, not tonight, he thought. Tourists gathered every night in hopeful clusters across the city, but the hot dog vendor sensed urgency in this crowd's gestures, a frenzy that had ballooned over the hours. His stomach rumbled. The woman laughed.

"Have *you* eaten yet?"

"Nah."

He put on his little show for her. Still shaking the tongs with one hand, he tore a sheet of wax paper from the dispenser and scooped up a bun with the other. Next, his best trick: his fingers spread to open the bun at the exact moment he dropped the hot dog from above. Then a sweep of mustard, of relish. The plop of a pickle spear. Cabbage and diced onion sprinkled on top and, finally, the handoff.

He'd done well. Her face brightened, and she didn't flinch when she brushed his fingers while taking hold of her purchase. She thanked him. He offered her a soda. She accepted, presented another bill. He counted change. The umbrella overhead rippled in the breeze. Yes, the air had grown a touch calmer—but it also gained a tartness dark enough to unsettle him. The officers, he knew, came by at times like this. He nodded goodbye to the woman, sold hot dogs to the two boys in line behind her, then quietly shut it down.

That night, Charlie agreed things seemed better. He was newly settled in an apartment the hot dog vendor recommended—a low rent situation far outside the city, not too many residents—and had googled cheap car insurance, cheap life insurance, self-pay clinics, and food pantries. Charlie's motivation ended there, though. Unopened mail blanketed the couch. Unopened dish and laundry soap bottles the hot dog vendor had bought for housewarming sat undisturbed on the bathroom counter. In the kitchen, trash bags burst from paper plates and plasticware. Greasy footprints crisscrossed the floors. Charlie pulled gray socks up to his knees and slumped in a chair that once belonged to his mother. The hot dog vendor had spent many hours with this chair: he'd loved Charlie's mother, bought her mystery stories and cherry cordials from the drugstore, helped light her prayer votives on Saturdays, let her teach him cribbage and talk conspiracy theories whenever he'd visit otherwise, which was usually without her son. Though he'd waited until after she passed to break professional ties with Charlie, the hot dog vendor still twisted with guilt inside when he

thought of her. She'd prayed for her son's future, tacked all hopes onto their partnership's outcome.

Charlie picked at the pink cushion beneath his thighs. The hot dog vendor sipped instant coffee from a juice glass.

"Did you cancel your cable?"

Charlie shook his head, wouldn't look him in the face. "They got me in a contract. Two years."

"Your phone?"

"Contract." Charlie knotted a loose thread around his thumb.

Sixty years old and still a child, thought the hot dog vendor. He wanted to yell, to whack Charlie across the head with an open palm—a fantasy that had popped up and solidified over the years, he was ashamed to admit. In the early days, when they shared a stand, when the hot dog vendor was saving for a cart and Charlie's mother's roasted cashew recipe kept them earning between part-time jobs, he might have drowned Charlie in a vat of melted butter and rosemary. Given multiple credit card debts at 17-23% interest and a sequence of payday loans to pay off other payday loans, he was astonished he didn't. And he was glad he didn't, in truth. Chewing his lip, the hot dog vendor set his coffee on a newspaper stack. Three important-looking pieces of mail, separate from the rest on the sofa's arm, caught his attention. He slid open their envelopes with a butter knife, read the letter enclosed in the first. "I told you," he said. "I said to stop asking for cash advances."

"I know."

"The fees are a scam. Don't you know that?"

"I know."

But Charlie didn't know. Charlie, whose adult life was a series of decisions to ensure only the moment's comfort, never weighed consequences, never eyed the future, never had a fucking clue. And who could educate him now? The hot dog vendor crumpled the letter and said, "Give me your credit cards." Two or three phone calls might lessen his monthly payments at least, or knock down the interest rate. Maybe save a hundred a month for other bills. *This year is the year of change*—yep, and dammit, he was going to try.

Charlie felt his shorts pockets. He tossed a slim wallet to the hot dog vendor. "Take it all."

"Don't be stupid." The hot dog vendor found the cards and brushed aside the wallet, gulped the rest of his cold coffee and rinsed his glass. He wanted to be done with this, the cleaning-up-the-messes part. If Charlie kept to a schedule, a budget with a little spending money, then the hot dog vendor could check in maybe twice a month. Two phone calls. Two cheerful *hellos*, two brief *how are yous*. Two friendly nudges not to live on popcorn and

frozen French fries. Two rundowns of the day's game shows. A possible friendship in recovery. And no late night performances with the hot dog cart—once the debts disappeared. The hot dog vendor sudsed a dollop of soap in his palm and rubbed the glass rim, rinsed it again while completing his daily tip-toe stretches. He'd had a plan for those debts, a timeline. Everything was arranged for himself and for Charlie. But insurance wouldn't cover the damage last time.

It was several months ago, mid-spring, when the sun began to linger into evening. Twin girls in orange tights asked for plain hot dogs, then pulled ketchup packets out of their mother's shoulder bag. Suddenly, a frenzied energy from the tourists buzzed and crescendoed. Dozens of armed men spilled out from the shadows, fought with officers and each other. When the Hero arrived, tourists cheered on his takedown of the baddest armed man. The city: saved. The hot dog cart: toppled, smashed by the crowd, thickening and wild.

"An act of God," insurance agents called it.

The hot dog vendor blamed himself for lack of foresight and preparation. Since last year's hurricane season caused record coastal damage and future seasons were predicted to worsen, since the Mayor pushed for twice-a-month heroic demonstrations to increase tourism and therefore city-repair revenue, the hot dog vendor had heard stories of other street vendors' losses. Of course they had the ordinance now, which the Mayor assured was for their protection, as the heroic demonstrations only occurred at or post-dusk. But because they couldn't benefit from the tourism increase, the vendors felt their livelihoods wobble, their savings chopped away—especially when the Mayor refused to disclose exact dates and locations for the heroic demonstrations. Somewhere in the city, was all they knew.

Charlie said he hadn't eaten dinner.

Remembering the extra cash, the hot dog vendor pulled out his money pouch and uncreased several bills. "Tomorrow could pay even better. Weather permitting."

Charlie scrolled on his phone. "Weather's supposed to be good."

"Then I'll just have to look out for officers." He handed Charlie the money. "Order a pizza or something. With a salad."

Charlie refused the gift at first, which was not what the hot dog vendor expected, then asked if the hot dog vendor kept enough for himself.

"I—yes. I'm good to go, Charlie."

Tears stuck in Charlie's eyelashes. His voice choked when he

spoke again. “Thank you.”

Overwhelmed by his former partner’s shame, a rare moment of self-reflection but a real one nonetheless, the hot dog vendor squeezed the credit cards in his pocket and frowned. He told Charlie not to worry and patted his shoulder on the way to the door, took the mail and boarded the bus home to his own apartment and fellow tenants.

The next day carried a sweet warmth reminiscent of early summer, and the hot dog vendor lost count of the customers who arrived with a Russ’s Slush already in-hand. Soda would be impossible to unload, he knew, and while he regretted those losses, today he sold twice as many hot dogs during the noon hour. Possibly the Mayor’s initiative was working: tour buses seemed to run like a carousel, and the foot traffic was like a throng of concert-goers. The hot dog vendor barely remembered to stomp, or didn’t have to.

A ballooning sense of the crowd’s frenetic energy never left him, though. Throughout his busy afternoon, the hot dog vendor searched for inspectors-in-hiding, for signs of the Hero and preparations for a heroic demonstration. He weighed the risk of a second late workday: if insurance didn’t pay out last time, then it certainly wouldn’t when he was in violation of a city ordinance. He was undecided still when evening air scattered the afternoon’s warmth and the other carts packed up for the night—undecided until the woman with the tattooed music notes joined his line again, and he felt reassured. “I fly out tomorrow,” she said, “but I’d love another. The works, please.” While he fixed the order, he worried about how to entertain her. She’d already caught his peak performance, and he had little experience with repeat customers. But she clapped her hands at his taped-up inspirational scrap, read it aloud—“*This year is the year of change*, hell yes!”—and snapped a selfie with it, her head propped against his cart. Thrilled, he handed her the hot dog, and she took a bite, *mmmm*ing in an exaggerated way that endeared him. He wanted to ask her to take a selfie with him and with his sign, their faces together, hopeful and wide-grinned. It was just the two of them at the cart; the rest of the tourists had congregated up a distance.

As he pep-talked himself to request the picture, she coughed. The hot dog vendor’s head snapped up, his muscles tensed, ready to perform the Heimlich. But the woman wasn’t choking. She screeched, “Look!” and he peeked at the sky from underneath the umbrella, peeked into the shadows beyond their sidewalk. There they were. The goddamn officers.

“Shit,” said the hot dog vendor and cleared his throat into his handkerchief. He shouldn’t curse in front of customers. His embarrassment at being fined in front of an audience was no excuse for rude behavior. But no one in the thickening crowd noticed him. No one paid attention to anything but that yellow glow of dusk bouncing off the buildings and the officers emerging into the half-light. It was the reason they’d come here. It was the reason anyone came here. They pulled out their phones and took pictures.

“Where is it? Where is he?” The tourists ran into the street to look, then hurried to claim spaces on the sidewalk. They’d forgotten their sunburns, their bucket lists, their maps, and their hunger. A rumble filled the air, an expanding bubble of clangs and shouts. They readied their phones.

The hot dog vendor closed the umbrella and scooted his cart behind them. Separate from the crowd, he reasoned, we’re beyond their rush and smother. We’re onlookers, removed from the action. Scenery to them, even. Not like last time. He stood in front of his cart, rolled tightness out of his ankles, kicked the pain out of his knees.

The bubble burst.

Men in armor—different armor than last time—flooded the open spaces. They whirled and twisted their bodies; they struck the officers’ jaws, crumbled the pre-treated columns and sides of buildings, and pushed harder against anyone who pushed back. Coughs erupted in the dust-filled air. The crunch of bone and concrete. The thud of baton against metal. The hocking of phlegm. The smell of shit and sweat. High laughter exploded from the baddest armed man, and then the Hero’s entrance: the still-gleaming sun gold against his suit, he rushed to the baddest’s throat, choked the laughter. Both men fell.

Whoops and hollers, egging them on.

The clicks and flashes of maybe a thousand camera phones.

To the tourists, the scene was expected—extraordinary only due to the lucky timing of their visit. It was a live show, off the big screen, as they’d been promised. But the hot dog vendor knew something was wrong.

Like all residents, he had seen this action before. Damage to streets, sidewalks, storefronts, offices—all the reasons the city was a construction zone in perpetuity, even outside hurricane season. City officials budgeted for this sort of thing. They could absorb the costs, plus a certain amount of police corruption through sabotage, overreach. Confusion as people mixed up enemies, loyalties, their ever-changing storylines. More recently, though, tourists arrived with their own weapons and the will to use them.

The hot dog vendor had watched the Hero dodge these men and relocate the main scene when tourists were too intent on their own hero fantasies, when the unarmed spectators were thrilled with the new characters' presence regardless and viewed the Hero's personal risk as an additional layer of tension. Fools never fear the effects of impulse.

Now, away from the crowd, the hot dog vendor again watched and wondered, but it wasn't until the Hero used a fire hydrant to hoist himself that he recognized a subsequent change. Panting, the Hero stood and faced them. Someone shone a cellphone flashlight over his eyes. Blood vessels. Bags. Blankness. The Hero looked at the hot dog vendor and stomped his legs—three, four times for each leg—and at once the hot dog vendor understood the change as well. Between ever-shifting streams of enemies, pressure from the Mayor to “stimulate the local economy,” tourists' expectations and interference, and growing threats of harm to himself and the officers—it was too much. The Hero wanted to be done. With more than cleaning-up-the-messes.

The hot dog vendor offered a wink to the Hero, a little nod. He felt kinship: together, they wanted this impossible thing. A clear way out. A clean end to their debts and hassles. As a fellow resident of the city and performer, the Hero, the hot dog vendor felt, understood him too.

The hot dog vendor stretched out an arm, opened his hand.

“The cart,” said the Hero.

“My cart?”

The Hero said nothing more.

Before panic could bloom in his chest, before he could register that the baddest armed man was about to rise and strike again, the hot dog vendor felt the tourists' grip on his body. They pulled and squeezed; they shoved him aside. He tripped over the sidewalk curb and skidded on his knees, winded. Pain shot up through his ankles, his hips, seared his neck and shoulders. Concrete scraped his shins and elbows. The crowd swarmed past and into the street. Cheers overtook the sounds of whatever was happening to his cart.

The hot dog vendor sat a long time alone, picking stones out of his cuts and wheezing. He sat until his legs fell numb and every other noise died. By then the sun was gone.

The city: saved.

A buzz on his chest and his tinny cell phone ring. That would be Charlie calling about the day's earnings, or dinner. Or to ask how his conversations with the credit card companies went.

Wiping his eyes with his sleeves, the hot dog vendor touched one apron pocket, then the other. No cash pouch. No purse with

the ibuprofen. No inspirational scrap. Nothing but the letters and Charlie's credit cards, as though the thieves had sensed their worthlessness. He ignored the ringtone, struggled to his feet, and stomped each foot four, five, six times. The pain refused to move, like hardened cement in his tissues.

He took the cards and letters out of his pocket, and erased Charlie's voicemail before dialing the first number. He recited Charlie's zip code and Social Security number, long ago memorized. "Yes, I'll hold," he said into the recording. Music blared. The hot dog vendor imagined its notes pulsing alive in an upward spiral, their origin someplace deeper than his pain. He imagined the existence of a salve that might heal his skin, a peppermint oil that might penetrate his weak knees and ankles. His cart... "Yes, this is account ending in—" he wiped his eyes again, looked at the first card. "In 5539. There's been an accident. A mistake." The music had disappeared, but its notes were still there in this woman's pre-recorded voice, in her customer-rep confidence. He watched them spin and rise and glitter in the dusk. "Yes, continue. I am interested. Yes, cash advance. Please tell me your rates. Please, tell me I haven't exceeded my limits."

Kimberly L. Becker

The Unmade Bed

The bed at your place
was never made
We started to go
through the motions
but realized we were both
on the ceiling, so we lay
and told stories instead
How your incested sister died
in bed, choking on gum
How each of us,
separately, as children,
pretended the ceiling
was the floor and how
we'd crouch in angles
created by walls and rooves
We finally stopped talking
and lay untouching,
relieved of pretending
that we were otherwise made

Big Shoe Dance

On the Count: I found out on the fifty-third day of dating Lyle that he was going to jail. We had watched the season finale of *The Have and The Have Nots* and I pressed him to go out for drinks. I lived across the street from a casual place called Velvet Taco, so a beer with smoked poblano salsa and corn tortillas against the backdrop of the Reunion Tower seemed fair for having to watch a Tyler Perry production. Lyle rolled up his pants leg exposing a black device attached to his right ankle. He wiggled his finger between the thick plastic bracelet and his skin. “This my monitor,” he said and gave one of those inglorious half-smiles. I wasn’t shocked that he was in trouble with the law, nor was I alarmed by the black callus protruding from his leg. Strangely, all I felt was peace—finally, after almost three months of dating, he had revealed his flaw.

“I can’t drink,” Lyle said, “It records my blood alcohol level through my sweat glands.”

Another reason why I only seen him at night! Maybe he had lied about working the graveyard shift at a distribution facility. I started to become concerned about my imperceptibility, for all those years of schooling and that job I had in military to “observe,” how had I not seen that damn thing before?

“Don’t look like that,” he said, rolling his pants down, “It’s nonviolent.”

“Doesn’t matter,” I said, trying to ease his shame. Of course it did matter that he wasn’t a thief or murderer, but jail and Black men are simpatico, it comes with our experience. He told me that his lawyer and the District Attorney had tried to reach a deal but having a second-degree felony meant he had to serve a year in jail with five years of probation, in addition to paying restitution to the state.

“When do you leave?” I asked.

Lyle put his thumb to his mouth and sunk back into the couch.

“Five days,” he mumbled. I heard him but I wanted him to own it for wasting the last few months of my life.

“What?” I asked.

“I get it,” he said, “I’m not trying to hold you down.”

Shep has a round face with a bald pointy-head. His white uniform swallows his small frame making him look like a little-boy wrapped in a white sheet. He stares at me while he delivers his testimony. I squirm and shift in my chair trying to get out of his line of sight. "I knew what I was doing," he yells. His voice is high-pitch and croaky and consumes the room. "I don't think about the time I've spent in jail, but I think about what I did every day." The room is still except for the three horseflies orbiting above us. The tiled floors are waxed so well you could see your shoes reflect. The chairs are arranged like a grade school assembly, and I sit alone in the last row. The guards are positioned behind me and I keep reminding myself not to turn around, that there's nothing to be afraid of.

It's June 2017, I'm sitting in the Cummins Unit, a 16,000-acre prison-farm operated by the Arkansas Department of Corrections. It's the first day of a two week "Death Row Facilities Across the South" tour with the Embrey Human Rights program. Last June, I gassed my car, headed east on I-20, with my friend, Chas. We spent a month on the road visiting plantations throughout central Louisiana. Chas lived in Pineville, or what people in the nearby city of Alexandria referred to as "across the river." I was investigating the creativity of the slaves, the tools they made in captivity, for a book idea. After a week into the trip, while trying to pry more information from a tour guide at the Melrose plantation, who seemed to be an expert on the slaves' happiness, Chas made a joke: "You'd have better luck talking to a prison inmate, she not telling you nothing."

John Henry "Shep" Sheppard, at 72, is the oldest prisoner in the unit. He leads the MTT, or "Making the Transition," panel that was established in 1985 by a group of confined men. Their goal: assist "new arrivals" on how to adjust to prison life as a way of survival. These days, the MTT panel is mostly called upon when middle school administrators decide to give kids "shock reality."

"These are my children," Shep said, smiling proudly, exposing his teeth.

4 Days to Report: Lyle and I decided that we would make the best of the measly days we had left. We budgeted time down to the second. I figured there was no sense in us departing with bad beef between us, besides he was going to jail for a year, and although we'd both be punished, he'd get the bad end of the stick. It seemed like ironic retribution.

We were at Zipper's Bar that evening when I discovered Lyle used drugs. I had ordered vodka with lime and swirled the red

sippy straw while Lyle held firm to his bottle of water. He bounced his head awkwardly offbeat to country western tunes. His wavy hair glistened under the strobe lights. I glided my finger from the bottom of my vodka glass to his side of the bar and rubbed the top of his hand. He jerked a little as if I had stung him.

"You're not drinking?" I asked.

"Nah," he chuckled.

I had thought we would get drunk and fuck all night assuming the dire circumstances. Disappointed, I gulped down what was left of my drink and nodded toward the patio exit.

Outside, Dallas Friday night traffic kept the hot wind in circulation—warm enough to want to strip naked while the vodka was doing its work. We sat across from one another under the dim patio lights. The fluorescent 7-Eleven across the street cast a perfect glow. Lyle lit a cigarette and passed it to me. I took a few pulls, because alcohol makes me crave it, and passed the cigarette back to him. Tires rolled by at a steady pace on the road, creating a rhythm with the faint bass from the club, circles of chatter and laughter.

"What's on your mind?" I asked, breaking the silence between us.

"I'm embarrassed," he said, "I can't even enjoy you right."

He didn't look at my face the entire time as he explained his first DUI, how he had followed a guy to a small college in Hawkins when he was 18, how he didn't know how to love so young, or how to drink and party. He'd tried to pledge Kappa and got pulled over on I-20 going to Fort Worth. He rambled, trying to connect the dots to trace his mistakes.

I told him I didn't want to talk about the past. Time gave us a clean slate. I needed to close the distance between us. I imagined him going to the bar and ordering Tito's with no filter—gulping it—and somehow, newly unshackled, we could discover authenticity. I needed something else to remember him by besides that black cancer attached to his ankle.

"One drink won't hurt," I interrupted.

"I'm worried about the fourth and fifth drink," he snapped. He reached into his pocket and unraveled what appeared to be snot tissue and put what looked like a white pill in his mouth. He took a swig of water, "I'm good."

On a farm off Libson Road ten miles west of El Dorado, Arkansas, Frank Willet went to work, just like he did every morning, leaving his wife, Annie Yocum Willet, at home. Their son, Buford, arrived some hours later to visit with his mother and

quickly realized she was not there. He became concerned about her wellbeing, remembering a prowler who had been in the barn the evening before. The kitchen stove had also been pulled from the wall, which seemed odd to him. Buford grabbed a flashlight and a gun and searched the barn. Around the house, Buford noticed “a man’s footprints, barefoot tracks, and the track of a woman’s wedge type heel.” He then knocked on neighbors’ doors and called relatives inquiring about Mrs. Willet’s whereabouts. With no luck, Buford informed his dad, and they searched the woods voraciously before calling the police. However, it was Frank who discovered his wife’s nude body in a shallow mud puddle covered with scratches, brusies, and other “evidence of violence.” Frank told the police he walked up an old creek bed and followed the creek to a bridge that he could not cross, so he went around to the other side looked under the bridge and discovered her body. The autopsy would later reveal that Annie Willet had been raped, and that her death was caused by drowning. Once the police canvased the crime scene, they found “torn clothes, broken eyeglasses, a pair of yellow gloves, a woman’s slip, a woman’s shoe,” and they cast a footprint from the mud near Annie’s body.

In my mind, it’s a hot and humid morning on July 1, 1964, in the Natural State. I envision Buford’s eyes swelling with rage as soon as he realizes the yellow gloves belonged to “their tractor driver and farm hand,” John Sheppard. Even worse, it was a Negro who had raped and drowned his 68-year-old mother.

Shep had secured a job on the Willet farm two weeks before the murder. He later told the police, “he had hidden in the barn overnight and put on some gloves and entered the house after Frank Willet went to work.” Court records noted scratches on Shep’s arm and blood on his shirt and pants.

Shep had told the officers that after he surprised Annie, he “hit her in the face with his fist” and “dragged her to the water hole” where he “held her head under water until she stopped kicking.” Later that morning, Shep went to work for another farm three miles away. He was arrested that afternoon on his way home.

“About 30 minutes after the arrest, he was interviewed by Officer Taylor. Sheppard freely admitted his guilt, giving an account that dovetailed with the physical evidence already discovered,” the case notes reported. However, the notes also revealed that Shep had originally denied committing the crime.

2 Days to Report: I had just finished running on Katy Trail and was lounging on the couch when Lyle appeared at my front door. He said he had finished his arrangements and was in my

area and he'd tried calling several times but the phone kept going to voicemail. I lied and told him my phone was dead, because revenge doesn't have to be grand.

"You wanna be adventurous?" he asked, taking off his shoes. For the first time, Lyle was wearing shorts, and that monitoring device had left the brown skin around his ankle beige. It was awkwardly obvious that it had been there, so I didn't question him regarding what happened to it.

"As long as it doesn't land me behind bars," I said.

Immediately I wished I could take those words back. Yet, deep down, I wanted to get into an argument. I needed to hear his reason for not telling me he was being caged sooner and not the reasons I told myself. The *carpi diem* mood had slowly dissipated over the days and the more I realized I'd never been on a *real* date with Lyle, the more I realized I'd never have him as a boyfriend without the justice system.

"Yes or no?" he asked, "I thought we agreed to make the best of these last days."

I felt obligated in a twisted kind of way, since Lyle was only guy I had been with in Dallas to honor my no-sex-until-three-months rule, and just when we had arrived at the okay-to-fuck-day, everything was suddenly complicated. His cheesy, cunning smile was cute, and I was curious as to what he had planned.

"I don't know," I said, playfully, "Yes!"

"You sure?" he asked. "No turning back."

He took something out his pocket and threw it on the coffee table—it slid to the end and stopped just before falling off. I picked it up; it was a small clear plastic bag with four blue pills in it.

"What the fuck is this" I asked.

"Relax," he said, "It's Molly."

I googled Molly: "often refers to pure crystalline powder from MDMA, usually sold in capsules." Lyle was now sitting on the couch. He leaned back into it and stretched his arms across the back.

"MDMA?" I threw the little bag at him, which landed in his lap.

"You act like you never had ecstasy before," he said. He took a pill out of the bag and placed it on his tongue. I wondered if this was how my Mom had been pressured to use drugs. Had she, too, been caught between honoring her word and trying to accommodate a man? He closed his eyes and mouth simultaneously and swallowed.

Thirty-minutes later my stomach had dropped into my pelvis. I felt the air tickle my nose-hairs as it traveled to my lungs. My body jittered like I was nervous, my jaw hurt, I was fatigued, and

my sight kept zooming in and out of focus, “How does this shit supposed to make me feel,” I think I asked. And then we were dancing in our socks and underwear to Chicago house music. “You’re rolling,” I think he said.

We rolled to the kitchen where we drank water and smoked cigarettes. Then, we were back on the couch watching reruns of *The Have and Have Nots*. He explained how “brilliant the cinematography was,” and how Tyler had captured “perfect shots” of the characters’ facial emotions, “Right here,” he said, pausing the show, “It’s dramatic.” I was impressed that he understood cinematography and I turned the television off. We talked for hours about trivial things and drank water, orange juice, and smoked more cigarettes.

We each took the second molly in my bed, mesmerized by the ceiling fan. This one took less convincing because the mood was good, and I no longer wanted to have sex—not totally confident that I’d be able to control what would happen. We held hands and listened to the smooth jazz radio from the Pandora app on his phone. In that moment, I understood why the drug was so popular: no worries, smooth floating. And then I was pulled down like a balloon losing altitude.

“I’m sorry I didn’t say anything,” Lyle said, releasing my hand so he could scratch his discolored ankle, “I didn’t know how.”

Then he told me about his second DUI. He was depressed and heartbroken and struggling to get over his ex-boyfriend. “There were days I could just end it,” he said. My mind spun. His baritone voice was blending well with the flutes and trombones coming from his phone.

I squeezed his hand and didn’t utter a word as he navigated me through his late twenties and early thirties. His bitterness towards his dad for being incarcerated for eight years, leaving him to take care of his mother, his fear of planes and regret for not traveling outside of Texas, the unhealed resentment towards his mother for the things she did for money.

“This the last one,” he said, “I’m done drinking.”

I lay there trying to find the best way to tell him goodbye, that I was not willing to sacrifice a year of my life while he went to jail, but my legs were numb, not that tingling numbness that you get when your feet fall asleep, this numb was good and painless and I enjoyed it.

I heard the fire alarm from my phone going off but ignored it and went back to sleep. When I did wake up, my phone was glowing like an ornament. I dragged myself out of bed and made my way to the bathroom sink. I splashed water on my face and

tried to recall the last two days. I refused to believe I had slept an entire day away. I took an Advil and hauled my feeble body back into bed. I had fifteen missed calls: eight from Lyle, two from Chas, and a few other numbers I did not recognize.

I called Chas because Lyle's phone was probably in that room where the Deputy stored people's personal belongings when they reported as sentenced. Chas was babbling about this new project, that he was commissioned to display his paintings at Hotel Modern in New Orleans. Then, out of nowhere, I confessed to Chas that I had used molly. "Bitch," he said, "That shit puts holes in your brain."

I hung up the phone and googled "Side Effects of Molly." After an hour of reading MD blogs and My Molly Experiences, exploring the reported side effects, the diagnosed side effects, and even the potential side effects, there were no holes in my brain. Although my skull felt like it was broken and glued together again, the only hole I was left with was one in my heart after reading the sticky note on my headboard: "Thanks for the adventure. I'll write soon, Lyle."

On appeal at the Arkansas Supreme Court, in 1965, Shep's new attorney, George Howard, argued that Shep did not initially receive a fair trial and that his confession of guilt was inadmissible. According to Howard, the case was widely popular across Union County and newspapers and radios had formed a narrative of the crime, making the jury pool biased. Four Negroes and two whites were disqualified because they had professed to the court that they were against the death penalty. The attorney argued Shep "is of such low mentality" that he was incapable of making an admissible confession "or of intelligently refusing to request the aid of counsel." Although the State Hospital records show that Shep was committed from August 1960–October 1962, and although he was found to have "mild, idiopathic, mental deficiency," with an Intelligence Quotient score "putting him in the class of moron," and witnesses had testified about Shep's mental deficiencies, it was determined that he was "not mentally ill to the degree of legal irresponsibility." The defense's only win was to exclude the defendant's boots from being linked to the crime scene evidence, since they were deemed a violation of Shep's privilege against self-incrimination.

Time Served: A month after Lyle is gone, I struggle to decipher what is real. I slack on my running. The only exercise I get is the eighty-nine steps from my back door to my mailbox and back.

The fact that I have to wait for him to contact me because the county hasn't assigned him to a unit makes me irrational. Now, I monitor the mailbox.

It has been forty-two days and I receive a letter from Lyle. He informs me that he has tried to write sooner, but he has been moved to several jails across the county, and he's not sure where he will land, and that I need to register with the state so I could be "approved" to visit. A week later, I get another letter: "This letter is to let you know I am being transferred again."

I receive two more "transferred letters" and when he finally calls, ten weeks after he has reported, he asks me to send him money for commissary, find "approved" books for him to read, and get in contact with his mother. I send him one hundred dollars, and have no luck contacting his mother. Then, the next time he calls, more demands: money for storage fees, commissary, and more books. I send him more money for commissary, pay his storage fees, and get "approved" to visit.

Seventy-four days after Lyle reported, I drive to Huntsville for our first visit. I've gained more than twenty pounds, I haven't had a haircut in months, and I struggle to keep a smile on my face when I see him. He's wearing a white sweatshirt with white pants and blue "karate-kid" shoes. He has a ring around his head from his durag. His hair looks freshly cut, and I'm lost for words. "You look good considering where you are," I say.

"Did you bring quarters for snacks?" Lyle ask.

I empty ten dollars in quarters from my pocket. He lists his favorite vending machine snacks on a mini notebook-pad sheet, and I wait in line with other visitors to fulfill his requests. Before I know it, our hour is over and all we talked about was his hair and all we did was snack on junk food. I say, "I'm not driving here anymore." He's nonchalant, shrugs his shoulders.

Six months after Lyle reported, I stop accepting his calls. I stop waiting for letters.

Shep concludes his MTT speech and makes his way around the room to shake each visitor's hand, thanking us for listening, thanking us for coming. When he approaches me, I extend my hand first, and we hang on to one another as though we are life friends, as though his twenty-minute spiel is enough to bind us. And then, the hand-holding goes too long and I yank my hand from his grip. I smile and tap his shoulder, "Thank you for sharing your story."

On the bus everyone is quiet. Rick, our tour sponsor, encourages us to write down our experiences for the travel blog. I'm lost

in the endless soybean fields as we ride down the country road. I think about if Shep will remember me. Did the sincerity and love transfer from our handshake? I am agitated that I care for him, that there is no *why* he has killed Annie Willet, and that I did not see him as a violent murderer, but as a sick child unable to comprehend that he will be buried in the Cummins Unit Cemetery. I close my eyes and try to think of something that will make me smile.

There's an old white man with gray hair wearing a blue "Witness to Innocence" tee shirt waving as the bus arrives in the hotel parking lot. He leans on his thin wooden cane and ashes his cigarette into the grass.

"How was the prison?" he asks to no specific person, as we unload our bags from under the bus. Rick gives him a warm hug, "It's good to see you, Gary."

We arrange the hotel lobby chairs and couches into a circle around Gary Drinkard and listen as he shares how he spent five years on Alabama's death row before being exonerated. He blows his nose with a red bandanna shoves it in his front pocket as best he can while sitting. He was sentenced to death for the robbery and murder of a 65-year-old automotive junk dealer despite being at home at the time of the murders and suffering from a debilitating back injury. "These old slave states," he says, "they want to kill people and I don't understand it."

Gary is standing alone outside the hotel waiting for his ride. I take out a cigarette and walk outside and stand beside him. "Got a light?" He gives me the lighter and flicks the half-smoked cigarette he's working on into the ground and steps on it. I try not to get caught staring too long at the Mickey Mouse jailhouse tattoo on his forearm.

"I couldn't imagine being on death row for a crime I didn't commit," I say, afraid to ask him what creative things he did while waiting to die, afraid that I'd appear self-serving and insensitive to his experience if I ask the wrong question.

"You learn to do the dance" he says, holding out his hand for his lighter.

I flame up the lighter and cup it. Gary puts his cigarette in his mouth, brings his head towards my hands, lights his cigarette, and blows out the smoke.

"When you in the legal system," he says, "Everybody's doing the dance. The prosecutor needs to convict. The defense needs to acquit. Victims' families need closure. And the public don't want murderers on the streets. Then, when you in the jail, the inmates become trustees. They learned to do the dance on the guards. The

guards do the dance on the staff. The inmates do the dance on they families. I had to learn to dance too, if I wanted to survive.”

In the beginning: It’s a wet August day in 2015, and there is no indication that the rain will slow down.

I arrive at the gym at a time when no one in their right mind would drive in this weather. I make my way to the cardio room and begin to stretch before a long slow run on a treadmill. I’m sitting on the floor with my right leg extended. I lean forward and reach for my toes, close my eyes and count for thirty seconds. I open my eyes to a pair of black and white Turtle Dove Adidas in front of me. These are high-quality running shoes, and as *Runner’s World’s* reviewer notes, “They have an open grid pattern that adapts to your foot’s movement and makes for a smoother transition from heel-strike to toe-off.”

I know the owner has to be a more serious runner than me because those shoes cost well over two thousand dollars, and only a serious runner, more serious than me, will pay for them. I can’t help myself. “Are those *real* Turtle Doves?” I ask, pointing at the shoes.

He takes out his earbuds, “They are so comfortable.” He lifts his foot off the floor and shows off his shoes.

“I’m sure they were worth the money,” I say, slightly jealous. He chuckles, “So worth it.”

I untie and retie my worn-out shoes and mount the treadmill. He gets on another treadmill nearby and we both run at our own pace often glancing in each other’s direction until the glances are uncomfortable. I stop peeping on him but I feel his eyes on me, which makes the temptation not to look damn near impossible. Then suddenly, he’s gone.

I am drenched in sweat when I walk out gym. Somehow, we converge in the parking lot and I give him the peace sign as I’m walking to my car. The rain has slowed but it is still drizzling, “Nice talking to you,” he says.

I nod my head and keep walking towards my car. And then it hits me, this guy must have been waiting to say goodbye so I pullout out my phone and share my contact info with him because surely a guy wearing two-thousand dollar shoes fits within my standards.

Once I make it home, I receive a text, “Hey this Lyle, from the gym.”



Jason Kerzinski, from *Tenderness* (2018).

Raymond Deej

I've Been Sulking over Dennis and His Gold

Thereafter and for a few weeks I did porn, which is a condition born of space and a brief window of time.

Consider a barbeque. You share vodka and scampi with a pucker-lipped yapper, Dennis, who happens to say words in the best ways possible. He sees you. He reads you. Your trash skin and sinking sockets. He's like a medium. He says life is long and terrible and this catches you square. Truth. And so follows a handshake, even a big hug, then a once-lurking black van and but 40 minutes to a place and a mattress aside an equally terrified, rip-torn soul.

He calls "*Action!*"

And you do it. Oh hell, you just do it. *But she does it too!* The event registers as a joint struggle—a welcome shock. You cling to her. It's the both of you and none other. No recourse. No eject. Dennis won't shut the camera 'til it's done. Suddenly you grow together because you have to. You are become a formidable, heat-seeking duo.

And Dennis is thrilled.

"You jagoffs sold it! *Heeeyyyy* we're cookin' with GAS now!"

Then you clothe with your backs turned and exit out separate doors, never to meet again. Except for once in the produce section at Don's. You catch sight at distance and stare.

It's exhilarating, uncanny. Then she looks away and asks a nervous boy a fake question about the origins of jicama. He stammers. He is poorly trained and incoherent. But she waits. She lets him struggle until you turn and walk away. Then she's out the door in seconds. It's sad.

Nevertheless a job inevitably presents itself, as jobs are said to do for the whites. Money returns and rent and utilities go down easy once more. In fact the pay is even better than it ought to be because there's a desk and a phone and this is America. Meanwhile time and the daily erode even recent memory, and once again you come to believe in your worth. You see value there. You sit at the desk with the phone and regard yourself, calling no one.

This has been my case, to date, gainfully, and for the foreseeable future. I eat well. I've grown an elitist paunch. I shave and

manicure and covet television and things go mostly to plan. Last week a robot vacuum came to my door. Straight away I set it to work and sat in a chair where I grew frustrated with its performance and how little it learned. Toward this vacuum I thought insane, wicked, criminal thoughts. Soon I slept and dreamed of a stoic chimp who made snide remarks while my back was turned. I awoke to find the vacuum had died somewhere. I stood and searched my numbers and phoned Dennis.

“Dennis. Can you use me?”

I explained my life since then. My situation and schedule. He was mid-scene.

“Lord! *Oh God no!*” he said. “Right now? I’m spinning gold over here!”

“Gold?”

“Yes gold! And are you gold, Sal? Be honest with yourself. Are you still *gold* in this moment?”

Then he hung up. I set the phone and got down on my hands and knees and fished the vacuum from beneath the sectional. It was a terrible blow.

Adam Schechter

the Thin Alley

Redoubtable strain image cluster vertical pressing 'gainst gray
Anne's walls O Anne O Sylvia interminable Sofia hammers plays
bayan this divine string my impressed calluses O tattoo terrestrial
drone my waves cresting smashing troughs striving quarters
bending halves like Hungary like Russia O you parricide each
tender catch of throatbox my antediluvian burned burned you
writhing you mass of tentacle ink Rome Rome you arsonist you
terror of mind and breath you caustic wash verbiage lye my life
my life you parricide my life

Sarah Lyons-Lin

birth, 5

Together we rehearsed lullabies from the womb.

MARY MARY quite contrary how does your garden grow

(This is not our name. Our name is DAUGHTER or VIRGIN or CHILD or SORRY or SUBMISSIVE OBEDIENT SLUT or THANK YOU.)

with little bells and bullet shells and men all in a row

She was a conglomerate of dead rabbits pouring out of my vagina. No, she was rabbits stacked up the birth canal that I pulled out by the ears, like a magician. No, she was a controversy, household pets stuffed between open legs, and labor was seven days long.

As a baby she was an awful mass of feet, ears, and fur, but when she grew up all those extra parts smoothed away. Only the extra mouths remained.

We spent a long time trying to convince the doctor I had delivered an orgy of small animals. He prescribed me

(QUETIAPINE)
(OLANZAPINE)
(LURASIDONE)
(ARIPIRAZOLE)

He prescribed me a name. He said take this but you may not sleep. He said take this but you may suffer migraines. He said take this but you may think about hell, you may contemplate killing yourself, you may stay up late and think very hard about whether the bathtub or the kitchen makes more sense and you may role-play and you may make unusual behavioral choices and yes, you may not sleep, there, there, have another dose

*Mistress Mary quite contrary how does your garden grow
with dizzy spells and cockle shells and fleece as white as snow*

Suzanne Schultheis

Holes

You won't be able to call me on the way to the donut store—
icing filling up her whipped pockets like cotton candy corners.
Apologies on the abortion but we had to give up
being bullied
to run sideways and scream how high
as you say jump.
A sweep of bouncing blonde begging for approval
from pricks of vocabulary.
Not to be confused with happiness or doubt
or anything altogether
ordinary.
In her turpentine chest
and breath of green leaves
ignoring certainty.



David Troupes, *untitled* (2013), buttercupfestival.com.



David Troupes, *untitled* (2013), buttercupfestival.com.

Infatuation

Horse stands stewing in bitterness, exhaling bilious thoughts to mix with damp summer air, staring down a future of same: unrelenting, unalterable acrid loneliness. To distract, he revisits a ride with the erudite and warm Elizabeth, one of many he regularly replays to deepen their permanence. Their long rides, accompanied by Elizabeth's monologues, were the most delightful he experienced. Today, befitting a dark interior, he returns to her lecture on international death practices.

For weeks, horse watched for her, and the flat, silvery braid down her back he sometimes teasingly lifted with his mouth as she tended the stirrups. He loved her lavender mixed with toast scent, her soft hands on his muzzle, her verbally signaling a turn or stop, never pulling on the bit. Then he heard an offhand conversation between Mexican stable hands. Horse's Spanish is poor, but he pieced it together: "¿Oíste que la señora se murió? Era buena persona."

Kind woman, indeed.

Elizabeth was the exception; their friendship, respectful, mutual, in service to each other. Before and after, horse knew a series of riders but mostly little girls. Affectionate as they were, they could turn fist or boot to him, finding his stance off or when having trouble getting in the saddle. One girl punched horse on the nose regularly, no excuse required.

Now permanently turned out, in his not so old but not so useful age, memories leave him more embittered than comforted. Perhaps the practice of Hindu prayoparvesa or Jain santhara, both slow deaths by withholding food and water, as she described to him, are not unlikely sources of Elizabeth's demise, given her own loneliness. The practices describe a way for horse as well: dying with equine equanimity, before bitterness leads to Japanese kodukushi, a sadder way, more like giving up than choosing.

A tiny white figure staggers over the clumpy tractor-mowed field, reaches the fence, drapes across and hugs the lower rail. Looking above then below, choosing over rather than under, it raises one leg and tips onto the tall paddock grass but up again in an instant. A baby. Seemingly too small to walk, it hurtles, head pitched forward, directly toward him. Horse hears laughing.

The tiny euphoric thing dashes toward horse in utter delight, its forward momentum a speed exceeding its ability, solely produced by intense joy and desire. A strangely familiar and acutely physical emotion floods. He can feel how badly baby wants him. His heart throbs, blood rushes to his head. Baby's unadulterated happiness and desire stabs him, drains his congenital antipathy and looses it on the meadow, leaves horse gasping.

A generational anamnesis of all manner of human brutality, the weight deepened by advancing years, anchored in his bones, behind self-imposed blinders, shunning any redemptive human gesture, falls away. Marcescent memories of intimacy proven false, discarded as he was again and again, flutter to the ground, diminished, comminuted. Baby's unadulterated delight is baptism in possibility. Innocence rushes back.

Baby arrives, glistening forehead, flushed face, ungainly proportions, rolls and creases where limbs should be smooth. Boldly, it weaves in and around horse's legs, stretching on tiptoe to pat his breast. Warmth ascends. Finding his tail, baby attempts to catch a handful. Horse leans down and baby staggers brisk and stiff-legged to his muzzle, grasps and pats both sides.

"Ha-dah," baby says, "ha-dah." Points to his nostril, touches softly along the rim with a tiny pink finger.

Baby is so close horse studies each eyebrow hair, the curve and turn a pristine herringbone pattern, aligned perfectly, one over the other. Baby's mouth opens to reveal pink tongue and two short rows of teeth. Magic seeds.

"Ha-dah," baby says. "Ha-dah." Statement not question.

The tiny thing grasps his front right leg with both arms, pulls as if to climb it, then reaches up, two arms, and grunts, "Uh, uh, uh," bouncing toe to heel, demanding a lift.

With a sound between a grunt and cry, baby stamps one foot with passion, requiring both arms to balance, head nodding for emphasis. Horse laughs, lowers his head and baby takes an ear in both hands, pacified, pulls it close. He smells the broken grass where baby crushed it, damp sleep in the folds of baby's neck. Fingers gently grasp his ear, not pulling.

"Ha-dah," baby says again, leaning away, even and calm, to meet horse's eye.

Horse blinks and baby brushes its cheek against his, loosening its bonnet. Fine brown hair springs up, happy to escape.

"Molly!"

A shout from the other side of the fence; a woman runs toward them, wild as a mare with a new foal between her and coyote. The sight plops baby on her bottom, chubby hands clap bare thighs.

Then, brow furrows sincerely, one hand gestures, musical babble rising, perhaps posing a question.

Over the fence and so close horse sees her outstretched arms tremble, mother slows, mutters, “Whoa, whoa; whoa now.”

Baby leaps up, encircles his leg with all her limbs, and as mother peels her away, baby shrieks, all writhing arms and legs, arched stiff back, anguish contorted face. Carrying baby off, horse neighs and mother looks back at him, face shiny with tears, then walks faster. Baby lifts her head, pushes up to lean toward him, waves one tiny hand left to right, fleshy metronome.

“Ha-dah.”

Horse nods, stomps the ground with one foot as baby herself did, sees her daisy-embroidered white bonnet below.

Later, in his stall, after being swatted at by the groom for not scurrying in fast enough, horse tears into his hay with appetite. In a corner of his stall, under the sawdust, the bonnet.

Ha-dah.

Joseph Johnson

After Great Beauty

I committed to the genre.
Those garnets stiffened
& igneous. So
I caved in, & found out
Oh,
how American of me.
How torn blue jeans
deep in red states molding
slowly, how your hair
got washed
in gas station bathroom sinks.
What the odometer reads
after great beauty.
For scenery, some trees
grow hundreds of years.
Like those junipers there—
we might never see them perish.
Like, I have never driven past
the coal plant in springtime.
Still flowers styling its hillside,
the hillside
killing off its slope.
I wrote this letter
without voice.
& after the folding,
travel. Sleet, pale mountain
pass. After that,
no you. For you,
great beauty.

Elliot Parker

The Rain in June Helped Us Grow











Sasha Torchinsky

u won't see me cry

when people see me cry
i think of when i was seven
the year i learned
the permanence of my penis

Katherine Fallon

The Book on Fractures IV¹

I.

Two with the same bleeding architecture
between well-padded thighs became examples

to her. Without such turnbuckle modeling,
or even only if seen less frequently, displacement

would have turned inward, causing her to become
guarded: hips held tense in power grip,

the muscles that should gradually open
would have closed.

II.

There is of late a reconsideration
of normalcy. An examination, finally,
of the mechanisms of injury

and how to prevent it—

It is not impossible to set loose
the experimental animals
while they are still as they should be,

which is to say, while they are
still young, and whole.

¹ This found poem is culled from the medical textbook *Fracture Treatment and Healing* (Heppenstall, 1980), using a series of random pages.

Van Gogh at Work

They made a movie about Vincent Van Gogh, animated by a team of painters in the style of Van Gogh's paintings. It's called *Loving Vincent*. The world's first completely painted movie. Sounded like a gimmick to me, but my father-in-law played it the day after Christmas, when we were all sitting in his living room, recovering from a disastrous *Jeopardy!* viewing experience, by which I mean my wife's brother named a pornographic actress in an attempt to answer a question regarding a Steven Soderbergh movie. He was thinking of the wrong Soderbergh movie, but my wife's father said, "Who?" and googled her name on his phone. A taut silence filled the room. My father-in-law spent years in therapy recovering from what he always called "sexual addiction."

So we were all in a strange mood when the Van Gogh movie came on, feeling slightly displaced and out-of-sync with the passage of time. It proved to be a savvy choice. Something about the old-fashioned artificiality of the movie's renderings calmed us. I suppose I can only speak for myself — maybe everyone else went on feeling vaguely panicked while the movie played, while I got lost in the dancing, sour yellows and speckled blues of the imitation Van Goghs.

The main question the movie asks is, did Van Gogh really shoot himself in the chest, out in the countryside, before one of his canvasses? It's a detective movie. The man from Van Gogh's portrait with the yellow jacket and pencil-thin moustache plays the detective; in the process of trying to deliver a letter to Vincent's brother (already deceased, it turns out), he becomes fascinated by the discrepancies in local accounts of Vincent's death. Was it murder or suicide? Or some strange combination of the two? It occurred to me that this may have truly become an urgent question for the people making the movie, specifically the hired painters. Perhaps they felt that, by spending countless hours imitating Van Gogh, they were not just loving him, as the title suggests, but actually *becoming* him. And when you're in the process of becoming someone else, it's important to know if that person killed himself in the middle of the very same work you're attempting to duplicate.

Now the movie became much less relaxing; the oil paint washed across the screen at a desperate pace, and whenever I

saw red, I became nervous it would turn out to be blood, the blood of the animators, who had reached a breaking point, same as Van Gogh. I noticed that the moment of the gunshot is never actually animated. Be reasonable, I thought, it's nothing more than an example of noble restraint. But I couldn't help but imagine that although it was in the script, they couldn't keep the animators assigned to paint it alive. They dropped dead by the dozen, I thought, infected by their hero Van Gogh. Killed by the feeling they were simultaneously making the best and worst paintings of their lives.

I squeezed my wife's hand, but she was asleep. Everyone was dead asleep but me. I married into a family of easy sleepers. My family is the opposite. Nobody knows how to sleep. My mom watches television at all hours of the night because she can't sleep, and my dad has sleep apnea. His sleep apnea is a symptom of asbestosis, the result of breathing in too many asbestos fibers. He got it from doing mechanical work at a nuclear power station in Oconee, South Carolina, a short drive from our house. By this point in time, everyone understood the danger of asbestos exposure, his supervisors included. But they needed the work done anyway.

Jessie Lovett Allen

Engine Flush

The Engine Flush machine looks like something you'd see in Doc Brown's lab in *Back to the Future*. It rolls like a hand truck, and it has two hoses with nozzles to hook up to the customer's engine. The mechanic flips a switch, it starts beeping, and some kind of detergent whizzes through and flushes out the sludge.

It's an easy sell. Your primo suckers are the people who feel guilty because they're overdue for an oil change, which is pretty much everyone. The Engine Flush offers easy absolution for the reasonable sum of \$130. "Yeah, I know I'm like a thousand miles past due," they'll say. And I'll screw my face up into an expression that conveys, *yeah I totally get it, life is busy* but also *we both know you cannot fucking neglect your engine if you want this car to last*. And then I explain how the oil will be extra dirty, and if they want to ensure no lasting damage to the engine, they can upgrade to the Engine Flush.

Price conscious folks might hesitate a bit, but I just back off and say, "Well, you definitely don't *have* to do it. The engine will *probably* be okay with just a regular oil change." And I pretend to start typing up the ticket for the regular oil change before they change their mind and go for the flush. That reverse psychology shit works.

Another ripe demographic are the octogenarian-types who worry that their vehicles sit too much in the garage. "I just don't go many places like I used to," they say. Well, when the oil doesn't circulate regularly, it can degrade and separate and develop harmful sediments, and Engine Flushes remove that toxic sludge that's just been coagulating at the bottom of the engine. Makes sense, right? Actually, total horseshit.

Once, this loopy girl came in with a set of giant fake eyelashes stuck above the car's headlights. "It's my car's birthday," she said. "I want to do something special for her."

"Oh wonderful," I said. "I have the perfect gift."

I know this all makes me sound like an asshole, but Ted has a permanent spiff on the flushes of \$10 extra beyond the normal commission. If I sell thirty a week—just six a day—that's an extra

\$300 in my paycheck. I do have a soul, though. I will back off if I can tell the customer is legit poor.

★ ★ ★

When you're writing up a ticket, they have the Three Cs that you have to follow: Complaint, Cause, and Correction. Usually I just write the complaint, the mechanic writes the other two, and then Jody makes sure it's all squared in the computer so the warranty reimbursements don't bounce back.

We always have to qualify the complaint with "Customer states _____." This is because customers are dumbasses, and you don't know if their complaint is objectively true. Like this:

Complaint: Customer states A/C is inoperable, no cold air blowing from vents

Cause: Vents were in the closed position

Correction: Opened vents, A/C blows cold

I'm supposed to catch shit like this before it gets to a mechanic.

★ ★ ★

Last year, I found a naked picture of my mom tucked into the visor of Rick's pickup. It wasn't a sexy picture that my mom posed for; I mean, even though I don't like to think about my mom being sexy, I realize she's full person and all, but this picture was something different. She was in the bath, her hands were up by her face like she was washing it, blocking her eyes, so she probably didn't know he took the picture. I put it back right away, but I can still see her body in the soapy water and the puff of her pubic hair.

Anyway, I've known Rick is a fucking creep asshole ever since he married my mom when I was seven, so that wasn't a newsflash. But who the fuck keeps a photo like that in his vehicle? I drove his pickup a lot, so he knew I would eventually find it. I think it was an intentional mindfuck. I dropped out of school a few weeks after that, but I'm not super depressed about that part. When Ted hired me, he actually seemed almost impressed with my half of an Associate's degree. I'm on pace to make like \$35K this year, I have my own apartment and car, and I don't have to deal with Rick's bullshit.

★ ★ ★

One day this kid rolls in, and because he's modded the car with so much extra shit, there's no room for the battery. So the kid

ran some cables through the body of the car and the battery lives in the trunk. Wayne, who's like forty and probably the sharpest mechanic there, took a quick look under the hood and said the kid was probably going blow himself up.

Anyway the kid's here because the Service Engine Soon light is on (*no shit!*) but Carlos has an idea: "Write up a fake ticket saying the customer wants the battery replaced. Give it to Justin." Justin is eighteen, and they're only letting him do oil changes and other easy shit. I have to say that Carlos is a funny fucking dude, and he's always punking people. Once, a car came in with a smashed up bumper, and Carlos parked the car real close against one of the cement poles near the garage door and pretended to Ted that he crashed the car. Ted acted super pissed, but I could tell even he thought it was a little bit funny.

"I'm in," I say, and I write up the fake ticket:

Complaint: Customer states wants battery replaced

I pass the ticket to Justin like normal, and he acts bouncy swiping the key off the board, probably because a battery swap out is more exciting than the tire plugs he's been doing all morning long. After he pops the hood, his eyes bug out when he sees how fucked up the engine looks, and he chews the inside of his cheek as he paces around the front bumper trying to find the battery. I'm doing slow, deep breaths so I don't crack up.

Eventually he scans the shop, probably trying decide who's the safest person to approach. Ted's in his glass office talking on the phone, probably to some pissed-off customer who demanded to speak to the manager. Justin lurks outside the glass until Ted hangs up.

"Hey, um, there's no battery in this car."

"What the fuck do you mean there's no battery? Didn't you just drive it?"

"I know, right, but I swear to God there's no battery."

And then I get paged for a call on line two. It's this old dude Donald who says that ever since he got the oil changed a couple of days ago, his windshield's been fogging up bad. See, people imagine this non-existent cause-effect relationship between their most recent oil change and any random problem. "Make sure to push the A/C button when you're trying to defrost," I say, and although he's still suspects this fog is related to the oil change, Donald's willing to give that a shot.

I hang up and turn around just in time to see red-faced Justin launching his Mountain Dew bottle down the shop while Carlos and the other guys whoop and laugh. Next Justin chucks an open bag of Fritos towards the guys, but since a bag isn't aerodynamic,

the Fritos just rain down all over Justin's workspace, which makes Carlos and the guys laugh even harder.

* * *

I'm in Ted's fishbowl office. Ted gets paged for a call on line three, but he makes a hand motion that tells me to stay the fuck in my seat. On Ted's desk, there's a smooth, flattened river rock painted to look like a clock with his son's school picture glued on. It says "It's Time I Told You I Love You." Ted's like 50, about the same age as my stepdad, so his kids are my age now, but his son looks to be first or second grade in the picture. Ted can be a ballbuster for sure, but I've seen him with his sons and I don't think he's a prick.

Ted hangs up. "I don't have time for this bullshit," he says. "You just wasted twenty minutes when he could've done a whole goddamn oil change. We are a busy shop. I don't need this she-nanigans. And don't be an asshole to Justin."

I feel my face reddening and my chest tingling, but I say, "What the fuck, Ted? I don't know why Justin has to be such a baby about it. It wasn't even my idea."

* * *

Like six months ago, I got *Hollywood Squared*.

This happens when the truck arrives overnight and unloads all the new cars in front of my garage doors. There's a note in the computer and a sign on the door that says our dealership only accepts vehicle delivery between 7 a.m. and 9 p.m. but what happens sometimes is the truck driver thinks, "Fuck it," and just drops the cars in the middle of the night anyway. He shoves all the keys through the nighttime drop slot so they're a tangled up pile on my concrete floor.

Hollywood Squares was that game show from the '80s where they had washed up celebrities sitting in the squares of a giant tic-tac-toe board. But *getting Hollywood Squared* actually references the bonus round, when they have a line of cars on stage—all the same model. Then, the contestant selects a key from a pile, picks a car, and tries to start it. If it starts, then he wins the car.

Our shifts are staggered, so I get to the shop fifteen minutes before Carlos and discover this clusterfuck of cars blocking my doors. Wayne says, "Ouch, you just got *Hollywood Squared*. Have fun with that mess." I scoop up the keys and shove them in my coat pocket. I push the door open, and I want to slam it closed,

but I can't because it's got some kind of hydraulic arm on top that makes it close gentle. I can't even light a smoke, because if Ted sees me with a cigarette inside a new car he'll kick my ass. I've moved just three cars out of the way when Carlos shows up. He lowers his power window as he drives past slow and yells, "Hollywood Squares, motherfucker!"

In the real *Hollywood Squares*, the contestant could pick a celebrity to sit in the passenger seat for good luck. But in this nightmare bonus round, where I try all the keys in all the cars, it's just Keith and Carlos shivering in a cloud of cigarette smoke just around the corner and they don't look at me.

On the day after the battery bullshit, I'm the first service writer in at 7:15. The only other person in the garage is Wayne, who must've been there since at least seven because he's already buried in some electrical wiring diagnostic carried over from yesterday. On top of Justin's toolbox, there's an unopened bag of Fritos leaning on a Mountain Dew bottle, which I knew was still cold because you could see the condensation droplets on the plastic.

At 7:30, I open the garage door, and the first customer is a grandma-type with big hair and maybe a dozen Beanie Babies in the back window. I bet she thinks they'll be worth millions someday.

Complaint: Customer states there is a chirping squealing noise under the hood

"It probably just needs a belt," I tell her.

"Is that bad?" she asks.

"No," I say. "It's a regular maintenance item. Not a big deal. They'll check it out and make sure there's nothing else going on in there." I climb into the car and after a brief entanglement with the string of fake flowers—a sort of lei—draped between the driver and passenger visors, I slip the numbered hangtag on her rearview mirror.

I give the ticket to Keith, and I'm heading outside for my smoke break when he hands me the lady's air filter, blackened with dust and debris. Keith says, "Sell the lady a new air filter." I take the filter and head out the back doors. I sit on the curb and light a smoke.

On my first day of training, Carlos explained how these dirty air filters were ideal sales props: a visual aide that you can present as hard, forensic evidence to the customer proving that they need to fork over twenty-five bucks. I'm a pro now. I'll say, "You're gonna

want a new filter,” but my facial expression chides *how could you let it get this bad? Aren't you ashamed?* And they are ashamed, like the waiting room is a courtroom, and I'm the tough-love judge who's offering them a second chance.

On Wednesday nights, Ted lets the mechanics bring their own cars in after hours and use the lifts and equipment. I once saw Wayne take the air filter out of his own car and clean it up, so I try it. I tap the plastic edge of the lady's filter on the curb, and it knocks out the leaf pieces and tiny twigs. Holding my cigarette in my teeth, I rake my fingers through the folds in the filter scraping out more dust and pollen and shit. When I'm done, the filter looks okay. Not quite new, but decent. I ruined my own prop, so I just give the filter back to Keith and tell him she's a tightwad.

Erin Wilson

Tungsten

The company said tungsten
and so we all lowered our thoughts
and began to herald tungsten
as the right and rich behaviour.
Tungsten, we thought while we slept.
Tungsten, we urged,
and our breasts dried up.
Tungsten, you bastards, tungsten!
And our minds refined and firmed,
and our fleshy thighs became interred,
and our teeth, while we smiled,
flashed callous, metallic.
Success. There was finally success!



Keith Hood, *Soul Glove* (1974).

brian g gilmore

red rooster bar, idlewild, michigan (for jeff and tamm)

of course there is a
jukebox that plays
mostly motown. every-

thing on the menu is
fried. people
are mostly happy.

they own this. they
ride golf carts through
the streets w/ speakers

attached. they fire up
the barbecue. they drink
cold beer & ice tea.

they play scrabble &
try to fish & don't
have to worry 'bout a

thing.' it is as if they
are finally free. like that
martin luther king jr.

speech. like derrick
bell's afrolantica.
like they left america.

like they never came
to america. like they
never worked the lines.

like they never helped
the unions get what
they got. like they

never had to sue to
become citizens. like
they never left arkansas

mississippi, alabama,
louisiana. like their
kids never did get shot

& killed in the motor
city. like they never rioted.
like they never rioted.

like they never got left
behind like they are
carcass for buzzards.

like they got up this
morning & drove
to idlewild. they

came in this bar &
ordered fried catfish
& an ice cold beer.

they put some coins in
the old jukebox.
they sat down &

ate their food slowly
& heard it again.
martin luther king jr.

talking crazy. like his
last name garvey. like
he really don't like it

here either. wants to
come home. right here,
where everyone loves

hot grease.

Contributors

Adam Schechter is a queer musician and poet living in SD. His poems are forthcoming or have appeared in *The Paragon Journal*, *The Raw Art Review*, *Tiny Seed Literary Journal*, *Prometheus Dreaming*, *Pasque Petals*, *Cathexis Northwest Press*, and others.

Anthony DiPietro, a RI native, earned his MFA from Stony Brook University and now serves as associate director of the Rose Art Museum in Boston. His poems and essays have appeared in *Notre Dame Review* and numerous other journals, and won fellowships and residencies. His website is AnthonyWriter.com.

Arlandis Jones teaches writing at Paul Quinn College in Dallas, TX. He is a graduate of the Mountain View MFA program at Southern New Hampshire University. He is currently a doctoral student at Southern Methodist University where he researches the intersections of performance, sexuality, gender, and trauma.

brian g gilmore is the author of four collections of poetry, including *come see about me, marvin* (Wayne State University Press, 2019). A columnist with the Progressive Media Project since 2003, he is both a Cave Canem Fellow and Kimbilio Fellow. He teaches social justice law at Michigan State University.

Chila Woychik, German-born, has lived in the American Midwest most of her life. Her essay collection *Singing the Land: A Rural Chronology* is forthcoming from Shanti Arts Publishing (2020). She fell in love with Jeeps at age ten, and has an abiding interest in European chocolates. Visit chilawoychik.com.

David Troupes has published two books of poetry and a theological study of Ted Hughes, and he recently held a Fellowship with Aldeburgh Music as an opera librettist collaborating with composer Joe Rust. His comic strip Buttercup Festival can be read at buttercupfestival.com.

Elliot Parker is a 20-year-old writer from NY, currently studying they psychology of social movements and comparative politics. He expresses himself through a diverse set of mediums with the hope that he can connect with others through art.

Erin Wilson's poems have appeared in or are forthcoming in *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Kestrel*, *A Journal of Literature and Art*, *On the Seawall*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *The Adirondack Review*, *San Pedro River Review*, *The Meadow*, and *Juked*, among others. She lives and writes in a small town in northern ON, Canada.

Jaina Cipriano is creating visual metaphors for emotions she has trouble defining. She builds physical environments that open her models up to becoming part of something bigger. Jaina's work takes the shape of a dream you wake up already forgetting, tasting only the vivid edges while

the center dissolves. More at jainaciprianophotography.com and Insta [@jainasphotography](https://www.instagram.com/jainasphotography).

Jason Kerzinski is a photojournalist for ANTIGRAVITY Magazine in New Orleans and a street photographer. You can find more of his work at jasonkerzinski.com.

Jessie Lovett Allen teaches writing and literature at North Platte Community College in western NE. She holds an MA in English from DePaul University and a PhD in Literacy Education from the University of Wyoming. She also takes classes in the MFA program at the University of Nebraska-Omaha.

Joseph Johnson teaches in New Meadows, ID. He received his MFA from the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, and his work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Big Big Wednesday*, *Chicago Review*, *Forklift*, *Ohio*, *Pangyrus*, *Pleiades*, *Washington Square Review*, *Yalobusha Review*, and elsewhere.

Katherine Ann Davis is a writer from WI who serves as Senior Prose Editor for *3Elements Review*. Her work has been published by *Passages North*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, *The Pinch*, *Gigantic Sequins*, *Sycamore Review*, and other journals. For more about her, please visit katherineannndavis.com.

Katherine Fallon's poems have appeared in *Colorado Review*, *Permafrost*, *Meridian*, *Foundry*, and others. Her chapbook, *The Toothmakers' Daughters*, is available through Finishing Line Press. She teaches at Georgia Southern University and shares domestic square footage with two cats and her favorite human, who helps her zip her dresses.

Keith Hood's short fiction has been published in *Blue Mesa Review* and *Quick Fiction*, and is forthcoming in *Wayne Literary Review*. Keith's photography has been published in the *Ontario Review* and been exhibited in juried shows at the *Michigan Photography Exhibit* and the *Toledo Museum of Art*.

Kelly DuMar is a poet, playwright, and workshop facilitator from Boston. Her chapbooks are *girl in tree bark*, *Tree of the Apple*, and *All These Cures*. Her writing and photos appear in many literary journals including *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Crab Fat*, *Corium*, and *Tiferet*. Follow #NewThisDay at kellydumar.com/blog.

Kimberly L. Becker is author of *Words Facing East* and *The Dividings* (WordTech Editions), and *Flight* (MadHat Press). Her work appears widely, including *IDK Magazine*, *Panoply*, *Indigenous Message on Water*, *Women Write Resistance: Poets Resist Gender Violence*, and *Tending the Fire: Native Voices and Portraits*. Visit kimberlylbecker.com.

Lee Anne Gallaway-Mitchell grew up working on a family farm in Lockney, TX. Her essays and poems can be found in *Bat City Review*, *Iron Horse Literary Review*, *o-Dark-Thirty*, and *terrain.org*, among others. She is an MFA candidate in creative writing at the University of Arizona.

Lindsay Reeve received a Joseph-Armand Bombardier award for her PhD in English at the University of Toronto. She now lives and writes

in San Francisco, and her first short story can be found online at *The Cincinnati Review*.

Michelle Geoga is a writer and artist from Chicago with an MFA in writing from the School of the Art Institute. Her work has been published in *Longleaf Review*, *Five on the Fifth*, *Cleaver*, *New American Paintings*, and elsewhere.

Parker Young lives in Chicago. His writing has appeared in *Hobart*, *Miracle Monocle*, and *Oyez Review*.

Pınar Yaşar is a *Tin House* alum and can be found in *Haverthorn Press*, *Cities Boston* (forthcoming 2020), and *La Bruja Roja*. Yaşar is a child of the Kurdish Diaspora and intently dedicated to reimagining home.

Raymond DeeJ lives in ID with his kids. That's everything. The daughter's been making the rules.

Sarah Lyons-Lin grew up in IN and recently finished her Master's in creative writing. Her work has appeared in *Rust + Moth*, *Art House America*, and *Englewood Review*, and her chapbook is *lectio divina for reborn things* (Press254, 2018).

Sasha Torchinsky is a queer artist born and raised in Vancouver, BC on the unceded traditional territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations. Sasha is inspired by James Baldwin, reality television, and freaks everywhere.

Suzanne Schultheis resides outside of Pittsburgh, PA with two neurotic chihuahuas and spends her days at the public library where she works in Technical Services. She still scribbles poems on sticky notes, napkins, and picnic tables.

Z Kennedy-Lopez is a writer and educator who's fond of cats, swimming, and Latin American electronic music. Their work has appeared in *Arkana Mag*, *peculiar journal*, *TSR Online*, *A VELVET GIANT*, and other publications, and they can be found on [Instagram](#) and Twitter [@queerbooksloth](#).

Rejected: Goops

Puppy Aura Cleanse

Cayman Portfolio Chakra-Science Alignment

Friendship With A War Criminal

CocoaSoothe™ Single-Origin Cacao Bean Suppositories

Alligatorsourced Mouth-Gel Lotion To Activate Core Metabolism

Feng Shui Your Phone App Icons Organizer

Traveling To Space Because There Is “Nothing Else To Spend All
This Money On”

Spark Joy In Youthfoot™ Solid Amethyst Muk Luks

Locasourced Sisal Rope Belly “Fit”-ness Esteemicizer

Holistic Bubbles 30,000x Diluted Supreme-ium Hard Seltzer

Wellnessourced Neodymium Magnet Self-Discovery Elbow Cuff

Get You A Babby Blessing “Pima” “Indian” “Medicine” Bag

Prepurchase Astromomical Natal Chart For Your Condominium

Take This #BestLife Lear Jet To An Anti-Global-Warming Summit

Scheele Green Tantric Ewe’s ~~Vagina~~ Vulva Clutch Purse

Smells Like Karen’s Freshly Washed Anus Backpack Potpourri

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God Is Tiny SloRelEase DMT Dermal Patch Talk Therapy Substitute

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Jaina Cipriano, *Look Quick* (2018)