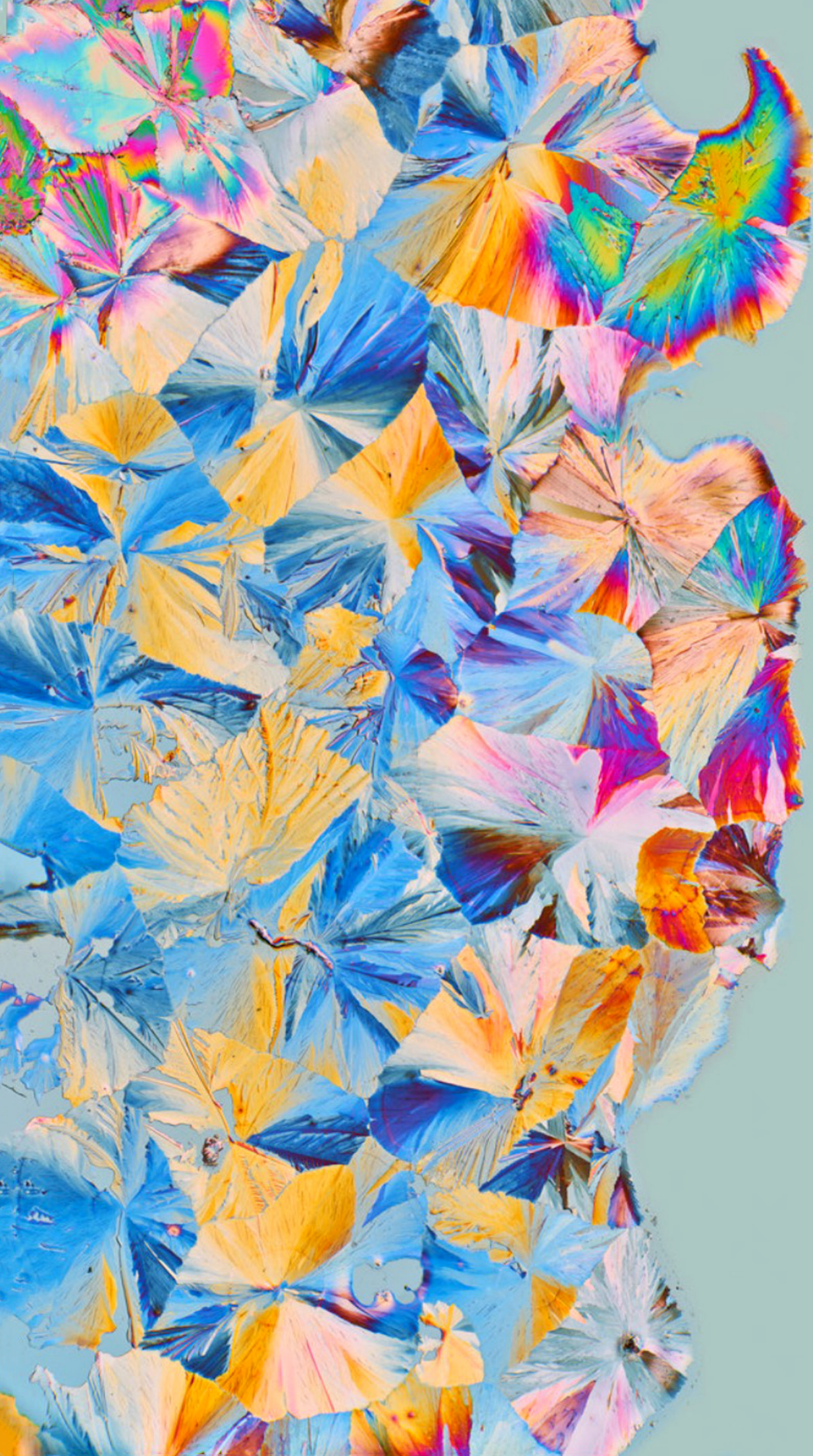


RIPRAP41

RIPRAP41 LITERARY JOURNAL

RipRap

41

RipRap is a literary arts journal designed and produced annually by students in the Master of Fine Arts, Creative Writing program at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB).

RipRap is published in association with the department of English and with the support of the Instructionally Related Activities Fund.

RipRap accepts submissions from early September to mid-December. Genre specific guidelines can be found with the following link.

http://www.cla.csulb.edu/departments/english/riprap-journal-submission-guidelines/

Please direct all inquiries to riprapjournal@gmail.com

Department of English
RipRap Literary Journal
1250 Bellflower Boulevard
Long Beach, CA 90840

RipRap is printed by:
University Print Shop
1331 Palo Verde Avenue
Long Beach, CA 90840

RipRap Literary Journal
Copyright © 2018
Long Beach, CA 90840
All rights revert to contributors upon publication

Editing Credits

Editors-in-Chief
Rachel Brownell and Adam Keaton

Poetry Editors
Kelsey Gutierrez, Sr. Editor
William Godbey, Jr. Editor

Flash Fiction Editors
Jose Prado, Sr. Editor
Lauren Lavin, Jr. Editor

Creative Nonfiction Editors
Zara Raheem, Sr. Editor
Courtney Countryman and Olga Murillo, Jr. Editors

Fiction Editors
Ashley Anthony, Sr. Editor
Nicole Hakim and Blanca Munoz, Jr. Editors

Art Editors
Rachel Brownell and Adam Keaton

RipRap Coordinator
Stacey Park

Contributing Editors
Seth Morales, Katherine Gomez, Julie Yeeun Kim, Andrew Liu, Emily Gagner, Nina Calabretta, Nick Rader, Kathryn Mae, Rebecca Contreras, Robin Gaitan, Sharlene Huynh, Miranda Gamez, Letitia Deon, Jennifer Ostroff, Emily Quinn, Maxwell Kent, Ellery McGregor

Cover Designer
Ryan Przybylski

Layout Designers
Rachel Brownell and John Feijoo

Faculty Advisor
David Hernandez

RipRap is a literary journal designed and produced annually by students in the Master of Fine Arts, Creative Writing program at California State University Long Beach (CSULB). Since its inception in 1951, the journal has evolved from its original title, Hornspoon, until it was renamed Gambit and finally, in 1979, RipRap.

RipRap highlights new and emerging writers from across the country as well as enlightening interviews of award winning, published writers who are featured in the CSULB English Department's Visiting Writers Series or from the known writing community.

RipRap offers a humble invitation to talented and aspiring writers of all genres and is open to everyone. Specifically, RipRap publishes short fiction, flash fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, and art such as photography, illustration and comics.

This year, RipRap 41 highlights multitude and diversity in all forms, celebrating the uniqueness of culture, race, sexuality, gender, place, and perspective. It contains local and global submissions of writing and art inspired by the kaleidoscopic composition of Southern California, the greater US, and abroad. As always with all our submissions, we seek out work that is innovative, forward-thinking, and as entertaining as it is thought-provoking

New editions of the journal are published each May.

Acknowledgements

RipRap would like to express its sincere gratitude to all those who helped contribute, edit, promote, support, and produce this year's issue. We could not have completed this year's issue without the help of you all, and we are incredibly thankful.

We would be remiss to forget any one person but would like to personally thank the following with the hopes that even those we do not name know that we appreciate you and all you have done:

ASI, Lisa Behrendt, Dr. Stephen Cooper, Sarah Davis, the English Graduate Student Association, the Earl Burns Miller Japanese Garden, Cai Emmons, John Feijoo, Katie Ford, Lisa Glatt, Suzanne Greenberg, Dr. George Hart, David Hernandez, Dr. Eileen Klink, Christopher Knight, Chris Kraus, The Instructionally Related Activities Fund, the MFA Creative Writing class of 2019 and 2020, Dr. Bill Mohr, Sean Richard Moor & Gatsby Books, Joyce Morfe, Doris Palomarez, Doris Pintscher, CSULB Print Shop, Rebel Bite, Dr. Norbert Schurer, Dr. Patty Seyburn-Little, Submittable, Dr. Charles Harper Webb, and Rafael Zepeda.

RipRap Literary Journal

41st Edition

Spring 2019

California State University, Long Beach
Department of English

Table of Contents

Poetry

Samson Allal Kartaoui Jardine — 55 *from* The States 11
Michael Ventura-Rogers — L'appel du Vide (The Call of the Void)..... 12
Adam Tavel — At the Women's Shelter 13
Kalen Rowe — Houston Love Song // Tourmance..... 14
Kent Leathman — CXXX..... 18
Andrew Liu — Portrait of the Dreamer, Unframed..... 19
Trevor Plate — Trust Tragic..... 20
Matthew Schmidt — The Way to Memphis..... 22
Jeffery MacLachlan — Watchfire..... 23
Nicholas Reiner — Cavern // Kingdom 24
Nicole Burney — Polyglot 26
Diane Goff — My Lover 27
Stanley Delgado — Wilde Posing as a Somdomite 28
Cliff Saunders — Teetering on the Edge..... 29
Amelie Meltzer — Mirror Test 30
Letitia Deon — Decisions Made and Determined by the Tortured Mind..... 31
Dani Dymond — Seeds..... 32
Laura McCullough — Until You Know It 33
Amanda Ice — Subliminal..... 34
Hannah Marshall — The Seed 35
Gustavo Hernandez — Refugio..... 36
Jose Oseguera — Brazos de Bracero 37

Art

Camilo Garza — Defy Machismo Culture..... 40
Mario Loprete — Untitled 41
Lydia Kegler — Breast Anatomy // Flower Gold Uterus..... 42
Aleskandra Dimitirijević — Concrete // Untitled..... 44
Riley Waite — The Cross..... 46
Yu Shen — I and 我 47
e.a.d. sellors — Collage 48
Jason Stopa — Johari Window 49

Flash Fiction

G.T. Gordon — Diet Coke and Oranges..... 51
Erick Zepeda — Walk Home 55
Rachel Karyo — Arrival..... 59

Creative Nonfiction

Scout Petersen — Electric Chair 63
Ryan Kim — Habits 70

Fiction

Lauro Palomba — False Bottom 78
Robert Sumner — The Late Great Planet 96

Interviews

Interview with Katie Ford..... 106
Interview with Cai Emmons 110

Contributor Bios 115

Poetry

55
from The States

A whale skull, hollow as white supremacy,
but with the same permanence, a gliding ghost,
harpoon-impaled spume-spouter, a coastal king,
rots on its cement throne in this small port.
The sail-folded masts of anchored yachts
are standard bearers swaying to its call,
but Ocracoke's Xs of blinking gulls,
the egret's trinity, minarets of mist,
the horizon's wave-underlined hyphen,
the salt wind's low whisper, wet planks on the pier,
the tilting sky's cloud-seamed tapestry
gliding on the green glass of the self-healing sea,
foam chains breaking at the feet of fresh combers,
contradicts the reign of any race.
Dunes slide on the street like occupying crowds
in a province where the president is gone,
where helicopter blades swirl in the stateless sky,
until they fade, like a neon sign's last flash,
and the sea-sidled slab of surf-shotgunned slate
is the parliament floor of paradise.

L'APPEL DU VIDE (THE CALL OF THE VOID)

Definition:

the temptation to step into oblivion,
when standing on the edge of a cliff,
or the impulse to swerve a speeding
car into the stiff trunk of a cedar.[1]

---

[1] In an Uber, a bit drunk from one of LA's rooftop brunches,/ my girl and I touch balmy thighs in the backseat,/ with her friend riding shotgun./ We cruise through a gusty-humid early afternoon,/ air dissipating the cumulus vegetation of clouds/ to stark-reveal the San Gabriel mountains,/ seeming nearer today to the cold-blooded roam and arched spines/ of ancient grazing beasts than anything geological.// It would be all lens flares and pop-indie strumming/ if this were a movie, but complicating/ its tight arc, I sit entranced by whiffs of cherry/ and its dancing blossoms of auburn hair in front of me./ I had never felt her friend quite this way,/ but there was something in that light; I fear/ context has a knack for exposing beauty's depths.// There's a felt congregation of slime, as if the very thought could cause/ my coccyx to grow a detachable extension—/ a scaled rudder for navigating this sudden lust—/but I am compelled to regard the face framed/ in that side-rearview-mirror, as my knee bobs/ with another in touch and time to the radio;/ another with whom the word love, has been/ a daily vitamin sustaining us both for years;/ another who, unasked and unspeaking,/ answers my four am complaint of a stomach ache/ by tucking the frilled bottom of her nighty/ into faded Great Lakes Middle School gym shorts/ and descending three flights into the still-dark alley/ to extend, tiptoed, atop a busted microwave/ and pluck a lime overhanging from the yellow two-story's backyard,/ all so my chamomile tea will be/ as complete as her mother's remedies// But there go those wavy hairs, pirouetting/ in irregular wisps upon peaks of cheekbone/ and the contours of warm earlobes—an enigmatic mane/ of changing mood-ringlets with my desire/ and the sun's and the wind's and her's—/ a tryst of variables pulling on colored strings.// No matter how many lab coats concur/ that this lizard brain pre-set to procreate/ is an excuse, the way/ gravity excuses an apple's fall,/ these thoughts make me sick.

AT THE WOMEN'S SHELTER

A stenciled Mickey Mouse adorned the wall.
He bent to hug a wheelchaired girl whose shirt
read I'm Okay With Me. Green peppermints
in handblown candy dishes sat throughout
on tables, countertops. A zoo in plush
nestled on my comforter—two frogs
peeked from the pouch of mother kangaroo.
They smelled heavenly, like those breezy springs
fabric softener bottles advertised
on rainbow shelves my family's cart pushed past.
The counselor smiled and said kids called her Nan.
I kicked her arms away and stayed inside
the shadow of my steamed-up Batman mask
beneath my cot because I was a bruise.

HOUSTON LOVE SONG

In Houston, the heat crawls through your skin & finds a place to live in your blood, the perfect home you've built in your body. You've found places to store it, to live with it in you like someone you love difficultly. In Houston, the cold is just cold enough to surprise you with an arm around your shoulder & mist that makes streets disappear & the seeable world a bubble that moves with you, revealing a mystery at a time. In Houston, the night is starless but full of friends in packs pulling star after star out of their hearts like stories that have accumulated in traffic or been forgotten in the thoughtlessness of isolation. In Houston, we talk a lot about the underground grinding away unnoticed like a factory keeping everything alive. In Houston, everything you touch is a little wet or feels heavy with oil. In Houston, everything rots into something better. Everything rots faster and becomes more like Houston. The heat and moisture melt wood & plaster, & the cold hardens everything into braille. In Houston, the brick gets old quick & cracks for cockroaches to slip inside & tickle the pits of buildings. The swamp creeps up to our doorsteps & slurps at the seals every Summer and Spring. In Winter, Houston has nothing to scrape off the crust of humidity that freezes on its windshields. In Houston, a lot of us disappear for a while or don't come back. A lot of us are just passing through. A lot of us are spread across the spokes or spin on the edge of a wheel. In Houston, a person can disappear in the fast transparent flash of the blades and roll home for months. & when you see them again they're not the same. They're something boiling in the hot gutter puddles of Houston, in the potholes & spent, gutted highway tires & gasoline dirt that swells up wherever you dig. The mosquitoes drink it when they're lonely, confused, tired of blood, & full.

TOURMANCE

A fox tells me you want to bite my head off.
Endearing,
being chewed up
politely, yet savagely,
by a beautiful gold,
weirdo poet with tractor beam blue eyes
and a spitfire-lipsticked mouth.
The honor
of being small, obliterated,
melting like chipped ice on your tongue.

*

You grab my duct-taped thumb
and blow magic on it with a huff.
Earlier, I almost accidentally cut it off
with a sharp paper guillotine named Charlie Chopper.
You kiss it with air in the rosy pale flatlight morning,
I feel something scatter, like vultures,
or electricity in one neuron patch shooting to another,
or years of bad ghosts,
with a single breath.

*

My Comrade Wearisome holds hands with me.
I thought it was for aplomb, stability, comfort.
Or the fairy dust we scoop onto the webbing
between thumb and index finger,
snorting the minispoon quick quick into a nostril
or two. We thought it was for that.
Our eyes fanning in sync with our breath.
Our hands gripped on ladders.

*

At Disco Hospital you and the Duchess
lie face down on the leather couch,
taking turns with a
3Doodler pen
melting rainbow spaghetti onto each other's backs,
burning each other for fun and ritual.
A wiry crown hovers over your spine.

*

My stomach's heart churns,
or the intestinal tangle of my blood
beats, whichever describes
a love memory showering into present,
that the cold-lipped soft
press the magnets of souls locked
into forever or swallowed.....
Red, found plump
on lips' cream, haunted interior
filters through which everything lands.

*

We speak Dolphin Road,
the ancient language of
poets in the sea.
It lives just shy of consciousness,
in the crimp of the chest where little fires
start from dried leaves and moss roots.
Dolphins, who kill for fun,
or swim belly up through boat wakes
in mutual masturbation.

*

Between the hours of owl and alligator
on a luxury pool floatie
on the floor of a shotgun home.
Someone is vibrating,
which lights up the room
with screen, blue.
We sleep away together coldly that night.
You sing with your breath in your sleep.
An ocean tongue sweeps our dreams
into currents. You squeak out songs
and squeeze me onto you
like a soapy sponge until morning.

*

By New Year,
time collects like knicknacks.
I drink a cup of champagne
to get to a softened clump of grapes.
For each of my grapes

I make a wish.
The same wish twelve times in a row.
"I love you," and then a chomp,
a little fortune of sugary pulp.
A wish is the same as love.

Kent Leatham

CXXX

My lover's balls are nothing like the sun.
He takes them off at night when he comes home
from clubbing, along with his cock, the bigger one
that fronts his smaller cock (although it's grown
two-tenths of an inch this month). His voice
is cracking less and less. His cheeks are rough.
These days at the gym, the other boys
applaud his abs and biceps, call him buff,
spot him on the bench, don't see the scars
below his pecs, behind his chapped lips,
have no conception of the twenty years
of fun-house glass distorted in his hips,
the blood that should have burst forth cum.
There are no gods on earth. My love is one.

Andrew Liu

PORTRAIT OF THE DREAMER, UNFRAMED

In my iris is a reflection.
Among the irises a frog
leaps into still water.
Before the surface tension breaks
a familiar quiet in the eye's center
a familiar face heading out
of disturbed water. Brother
murmur all you like
of the past, of the wastes
where we burned your bandages,
where we gave up our old faces.
I have quieted myself to stone

without giving a limb over to their
reckless meditation, such unexamined
unearthliness destroys more than ego and its wild desires and I
still desire you. Hair
between thumb and index
arm between shoulder and neck,
to embrace is to become one
without forgetting how you were split irreparably
in two. And I hold you.
Heaven floats serenely
in a pond of anonymous tears.
Pure water is without salt
the same way angels are contrived when a person surrenders
the decision of their winglessness.
No matter how you cry out sometimes
it feels good to curse the macrocosm
with our voices all in minors. the way we love profanely,
It feels good to love profanity Hell, I'm not ready to give up flaw and form,
I don't want just one kind of formlessness.

When I hold your hand and remember you by name
it's me becoming the portrait on the wall, the figure on tv,
pushing past the boundary, the frame, the screen,

walking clear out past the lines
of sight, of audience, of security check and guard.
It was raining tonight at the museum.

I loved the pricking
of all those drops on unreal skin,
I loved the freedom of its public parking.

TRUST TRAGIC

My lover, who is neither my wife nor my husband,
drips gold like the gold in sunken treasure.
When I caress their veins
their blood cells pierce me
like thin red needles.
When they raise their eyebrows
I think of a cobra poised to strike.
(*My wife's veins are blue like a shark breathing,*
my husband's veins are a lonely gray.)
I hate my lover and everything they stand for. This is why the sex
is so good.
This is why I can only take them as my lover
and never as my wife or my husband. All this pressure
to clean out the dust in other people's spinal chords, to twist myself into
uncomfortable shapes
just to understand them.
I can't stomach any of it. All I really want is to touch my own body
and I can only do so through another person's body.
This is objectification. This is the way things are.
(*The other night my wife noticed lipstick on my collar*
and I lied and told them it was only from my husbands lips. And when my husband
also saw the lipstick on my collar, I lied and told them it was only from my wife's lips.
They won't ever find out the truth because they aren't on speaking terms at the moment.
People are so stupid.)
Every Tuesday and every other Friday, I meet my lover
on the roof of the tallest building in the city.
I rip off their clothes and we fuck
on the helicopter pad, in the middle of the big "H".
Bodies in revolt, brains in anarchy
Forgetting about hating or loving or wives or husbands.
No such thing as good sex,
just lips and salt and fluid and shit and noise.
No such thing as human being,
just the amorality of gods.
No more longing,
just acid rain
that
stings at my eyes.
(*When I get home from work, I sit down at the dinner table*
with my wife on the left side of me and my husband on the right. I eat a dinner
that my husband makes with the groceries that my wife
purchases. We don't talk. The way they eat their meals is full of resentment
and isolation so I try not to even look at them.)

After I cum, I can't stand being close to my lover anymore.
This is why I always meet them on the helicopter pad.
That way, once we're done, I can say:
We really should get going
before a helicopter tries to land.
Wouldn't that be so embarrassing.
Plus the rain is starting to dissolve the skin
on my face.
So we leave and my lover hides in the bathroom while I run to a
high-end-upscale clothing store
to buy them new clothes
since I ripped up the others.
Do the right thing.
(*When I lie in bed at night, with my*
wife on the left side of me and my husband on the right,
I stay awake and listen
as my mind starts to vomit up disturbing scenarios.
Scenarios where:
my wife runs away with my lover
or my husband runs away with my lover
or my wife and my husband run away together
or my wife and my husband both run away with my lover
and leave me here alone.)

Matthew Schmidt

THE WAY TO MEMPHIS

Driving through the asshole of Arkansas,
the radio preaches when I let it—
a Baptist Encampment belted into the hill,
flea markets and antique stores appear,
tables cover lost artifacts, loss.

> Too much time to consider
> whether a new speck clouds
> my vision, how I'll miss Sparky
> snuggled against my leg, Susi
> keeping me in crosswords.

An American Legion, couple of bikes
outside. I envision stopping for a tallboy,
feeling its icy aluminum, tasting its callous
brew, asking the usual questions—why
live here, die in this beautiful earth?

> I know the population signs
> buttress citizens inside
> afterthought towns, rusting
> chassis having forgotten
> paint and what it's for.

WATCHFIRE

Biker gangs gather
at the fairgrounds

with packs of Molson,
but stare in different directions

making every group of four
resemble an alcoholic compass.

Sons of Sam, Bad Disciples, Brothers
of the Wind. Pallet ribs rattle

and eject indigo flesh
that pops and sizzles,

belching smoke in cursive hoops.
An aging loudspeaker

from an RV leads the national
anthem, and the men remove

their ball caps, bald heads
beaming the watchfire to the stars

like a thousand oval torches.
All of the flags

cremate in a flash.
The heat pierces everyone's cheeks

with a ruby dimple, forcing a hand
up as they wince away. The man

over the PA crackles
that tonight is meant to bring home

all of the missing and deceased.
For the men at this event,

the wars did nothing. And so
that's all anyone speaks.

CAVERN

At Fox Coin Laundry
Paolo conjures quarters
out of the changer,

slides one in the slot
to buy eight minutes of heat.
No clothes in the dryer

he just watches
the dryer spin empty
spin fast, a whirling cavern

a hot dizzied void.
He's wearing camouflage
says his enemies are

watching him, hands
gripping the dryer
door handle,

his mind the cavern,
crystals lining
its dark recesses

KINGDOM

To hold a tostada is to hold
a kingdom & she holds
Wednesdays for us, family night

primero the beans on the
flat shell like a raft
& then the chicken

shredded care
lettuce, cheese, salsita
y entonces vamos a platicar

around the dining room table
laughing at her jokes & chismes
Grandma, hay mas salsa?

yes mijo over there
by the beans, the stove,
the kingdom's boundless space

Nicole Burney

POLYGLOT

Saints congregate/ at the fresh produce section in Costco/ We come in peace/ I mean respectable tatters/ I'm saying, who isn't mesmerized by warm curry on an eager pink tongue/ Honey is expensive/ we should be kind to bees/ or/ we should be kind/ and when I say "we", I mean the collective that should know/ a petrified limb can bend with the proper ointment/ Peel an orange, if you're down/ I mean, don't watch the news/ have a sunfruit/ I'm saying that boy with his skittled pockets is a sunfruit/ skimmed on a lip of sidewalk/ he will be not shadowbound/ he cannot be overshadowed/ please/ the sun is too close for children/ and I am reaching for a goddamn hosanna/ We are possessed of ghosts too high to name/ what I'm saying is, I love many strangers/ I love/ and honey is so expensive/ Saints bump and squeak their cardboard carts/ there's a sale going on, I just know it/ I meant, that numbers are marching and chanting and waving rainbow flags/ what I mean is/ I supped on cactus fruit/ the boy evaporates forms another and another/ my mouth peels a tinted frame/ a split-screen demimonde of brown faces and head scarfs/ I've screamed at frozen peas for months, but nothing melts/ what I mean is So Hum/ I couldn't save you, and I'm sorry/ what I'm trying to say is, I wish I were a lighthouse/ brimmed with stories/ I mean some things are hard to come by but worth a charred slog/ I mean the price for you, honey, is a pollinator/ is mangoes after the Blitz/ is still love

Diane Goff

MY LOVER

has creased my neck with his stiletto mustache
lifted the hairs on my body
with his secrets

leaving me wet starving
he closes me out of the shower
and one by one presses body parts
onto the glass door
for me to see
pearl string of the spine slit
tumor of the lips
forearm like the underbelly
of some lank fish
blind phallas slipping
on the soapy glass

it is only his fingertips
flat fleshy tidbits
spun in ancient whorls
that tell me what I know
and do not know
of him

Stanley DelGado

WILDE POSING AS A SOMDOMITE[1]

after Estelle

The reason I am
what I am is up
in the stars — a little
to the left, right
near stupid Jupiter.
The constellation is called Ophiuchus
— Greek for serpent-bearer, serpent-maker, or
Serpens,
Or, Man Holding Serpent.
Balladsinger / chainblinger
Names in heaven
now, like
my older brother who went for a swim
Down the river Styx & caught a fungus
caught a virus or a parasite
Yoyos be like; VVVVVVVV
In heaven without a hand & dancing freely & thinking
of an outfit to wear tomorrow.
Baggy jeans & the constellations underneath them.

[1] In the mid 1890s, a married Oscar Wilde had a sexual relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas, son of John Douglas, the Marquis of Queensbury. The marquis wanted this affair to end, so he left a message for Wilde at a dinner club which Wilde and his wife attended regularly; the message read: For Oscar Wilde, posing Somdomite. — The marquis meant sodomite, in reference to the affair. The message confirmed what many suspected, and Wilde decided to sue the marquis for libel. The marquis was arrested, tried, and found not guilty. The evidence provided by the marquis, however, led to another arrest: Wilde, charged with indecent cts upon, and with, men — "sodomy." Wilde was tried and found guilty. He was sentenced to two years of hard-labour in prison, after which he moved to Paris, and lived there under a false name until he died in 1900.

Cliff Saunders

TEETERING ON THE EDGE

You have a right to kneel
before the foundation of a comet
and to plant any winter hibernation.
Your reward is to see balloons stir
behind the ghosts of injustice.
You learn to survive by weeding out
the clowns who rely on bees
to evade tough truths.
Rubbing your way through
tinted plexiglass just won't do.
Why, you might usher in
a whole new Victorian era
of shackles and heavy rains!
You really do need to dissolve
the bars of your heart.
Your local orchestra's counting on you
to inspire new organists to gaze
at the sky in wonder of the stars.
You need to know how they treat
the trail of hummingbird cake
rimming the tree of untapped history.
Face it, you are really falling apart
with your oysters of memory,
with your lap filled with story.
You just feel helpless
as a bridge in the water, and sirens
might be bad for your heart
as they near your street,
but they're not hurting.
It pays to have an angel sleep
on a hill near you because you
might soon become the latest to feel
the dogwoods shaking with delight.

Amelie Meltzer

MIRROR TEST

I am licking milk up off the floor with the dog.
I am pouring Sprite in his water bowl,
cause I'm worried he gets bored of just water.

No one tells me sugar could kill him and
for the record, it doesn't.

When I'm feeling self-destructive you say
imagine yourself as a child,
would you hurt her?

I always have too many follow up questions
to benefit from good advice;

I want to know
Is she me?

Letitia Deon

DECISIONS MADE AND DETERMINED BY THE TORTURED MIND

I follow my younger sister
through corridors, fun house
mirrors, between withered walls
peeled of paint. I have followed her
erroneous paths. The deathly halls
killing time with battery deficient
watches. I'll stop following her now.
No closer to helping her.
No closer to her helping herself.
She is medicated, sporadically.
She smiles, rarely. She cries, often.
Her self-inflicted terror stretches
her limbs into ropes binding her.
Her body, pin riddled, a cactus.
In the corner of our hotel room,
on a trip to visit our dying father,
she sits like a heap of clothing
counting pennies in darkness.

Dani Dymond

SEEDS

The morning I started bleeding, I woke up feeling
like misshapen fruit, freshly birthed from Earth's soil

but sunburned, unkempt, left to learn my way around dirt
and the rough hands of men once I broke that seal, burst

past darkness, the surface, into my own body––watered
down red thighs, like those fistfuls of poppies gathered

in vases beside my bed, framing me for burial despite
my grand, wet entrance into open air. Technically, it is

a tearing––roses molting, the rupturing of a membrane
meant to encase every seed flowering within me. There.

I could feel them, shuddering for light. If you turned me
inside out, my cells would sprout, a meadow on two feet.

UNTIL YOU KNOW IT

It was the winter I was stomping around the house
complaining about your love being too good for me,
& what if all the other women found out,
they'd be lined up down the block,
& you were scoffing, of course,
that little V between your brows
getting more like a V every year.

You surprised me one day with a CD
of my favorite singer-songwriter.
It was the first music we'd shared in a while,
& I tried to be a better wife.
For your birthday, I bought you a shirt
the shade of raspberry sherbet,
thinking you needed some color
& you looked lovely, that little V breaking up
like geese forgetting they're flying south.

Sometimes, while you sleep, I touch that space,
smoothing & memorizing it
while planning my next transgression,
hoping it won't be what you'll finally leave me over,
like the last song in a great album,
the one that makes you cry & listen
over & over until you know it so well,
you don't need the music anymore.

SUBLIMINAL

I rewind us;
Through backward talk like devilish tongue
I think I hear I love you.
Demon chatter,
Some may call it;
Some claim Illuminati tricks
The way you can nearly make out Satan
In the gibberish,
But sometimes those reverse sounds at night
Sound like they might conjure you.
Render me a heretic
But I like our song better backwards. Words
Swallowing each other,
A snake inverting itself
Into a strand of bone and still-wet flesh.

THE SEED

Suppose giving birth
means planting a pebble inside an orchid, that gardens
grow without weeds springing up
between peppers and cauliflower.
Imagine: no potato beetles or wintercreeper,
no vaginal dilation. Suppose
all people are shining stalks of bamboo, moon-born,
forgetful. In church we are dunked
again and again in spirit waters, each time cleaner,
our skins becoming cold, unblemished tungsten.
We reflect the light.
We reflect each other's faces.
The waters then expanding into a clear sea,
we construct boats from ancient texts;
the last mother who died in childbirth
stands at the helm. Her child is the whale
who guides us. Suppose the earth
paused in its orbit and we remained in night
long after these secrets should have disseminated
with morning. Suppose Noah drowned
and his wife married the dove with its green branch
so that now we all wear white wings;
perhaps we build no libraries but the sky—
suppose there was a way to answer the child who calls
out in the night, afraid that everyone she knows has turned to bone,
riverlight, granite. Perhaps the answer would be
the garden, the indifference of the rain,
the mouse and beetle mouths who eat what we hoped
was sacred. As it is, the myths we keep on telling might still
shake the concrete walk into glitter and paper, things which
are capable of floating
or shining—

Gustavo Hernandez

REFUGIO

In the early morning, there is a sweetness
in the white smoke rising from our houses.
It is December and the night mist has left
behind its small complications; they are
water on dry corn stalks; it is everywhere:
rooster feathers, tractor wheel, the largest
nativity scene en el rancho, where even
the devil is gold-flaked. This is memory
and isn't, because I am trying to tell you
of the time when only my grandmother's
shoes were left to walk across our patio.
Just after the time she stomped across it
to undo the rusty deadbolt to the room
my sister had locked me in and the times
she guided my hands across it to wash up
in my mom's lavadero. After we were all
gone. Living in El Norte. No, y yo pa que
voy? Y quien va a echarle agua a la salia?
O al arrayán? O a las rosas y a los aretes?
I am filling in words now. See, how I am
trying to make this vibrant for you, for us
because on this side, things grow on their
own whether someone goes or stays. I'm
trying to make this okay for you. Show
you I can still feel her missing me, in this
body: no shirt in a stainless steel kitchen,
hairy chest and the crow's feet, my glasses.
Show you there's no such thing as the hills
one day not unfolding in light and dew and
smoke.

Jose Oseguera

BRAZOS DE BRACERO

Death dug its heels in the dust specks,
Licking its lips gathered as one soil hot,
Thirsty to mud its dry mouth with men's blood.

Arms spread comfortably wide as vulture wings
Casting shadows on Pedro's wrinkled neck
At 34, older than most men his age.

Hands rough enough to be gentle—
Fire that burns and perfects as it purifies—
Gnarled sinews knotted in virgin colt mane:

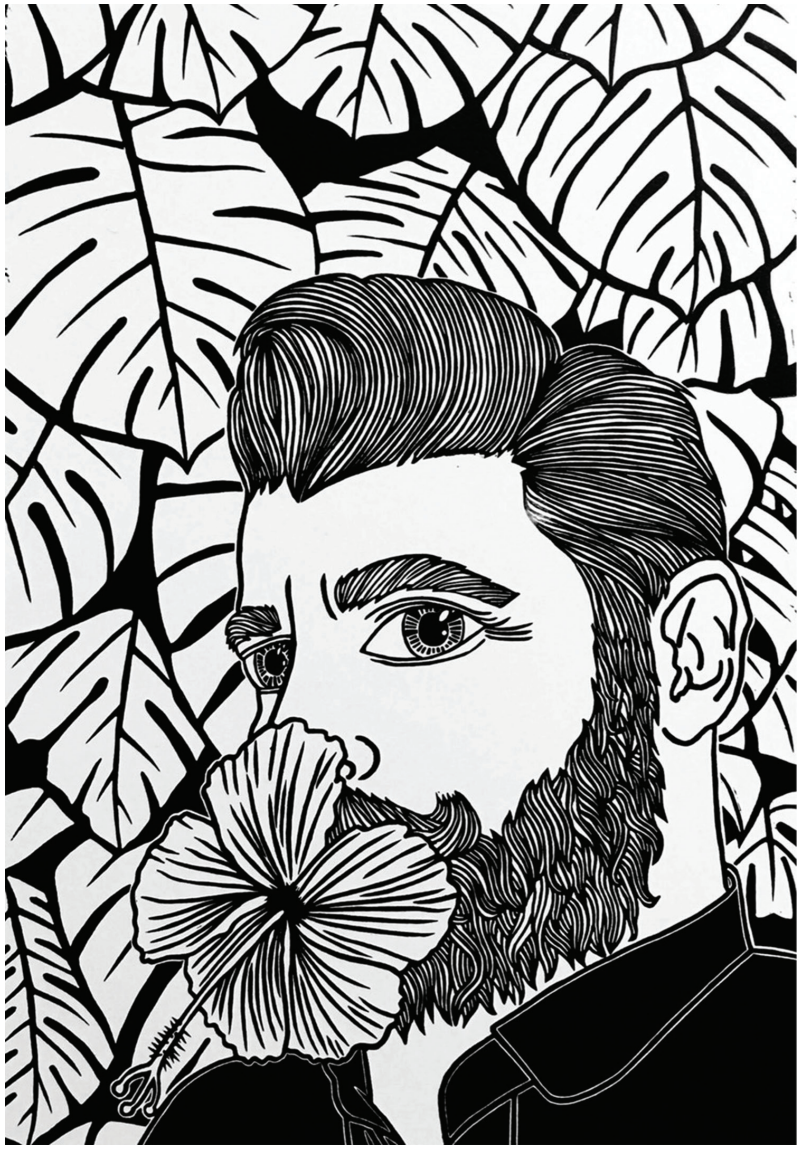
Young, wild, too stupid to fear the lies clamming his hands—
Innocence and malice striding in its black stare—
Strong enough to kill as easy as children are cruel.

He would've ripped the bucking head off
Before its muscled body mangled
His corpse for a young wife to rattle past the snake's nest.

It wasn't his urge to tame the rearing beast
That kept him from falling,
But knowing he never would if he did.

Though death kissed its teeth to see him gallop bareback,
Drunk on aguardiente, they each smiled for different reasons:
That day, the horse would come by name as he someday to dust.

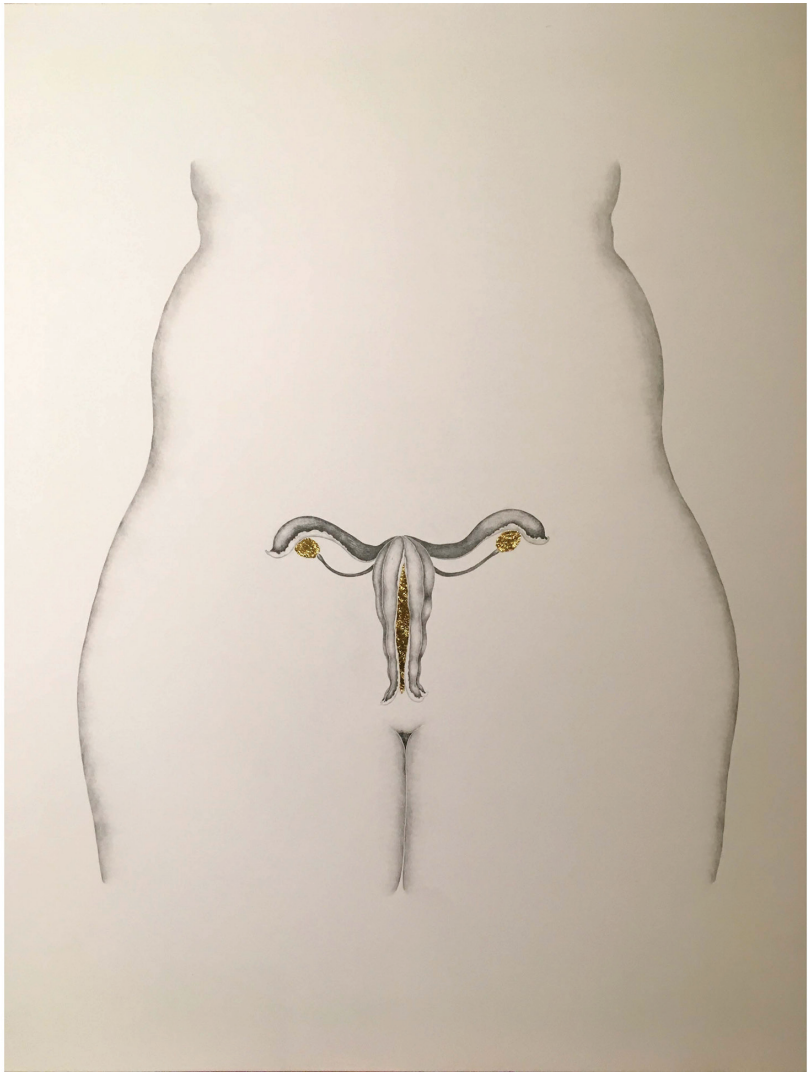
Art



Dafy Machismo Culture, Camilo Garza

Untitled, Mario Loprete

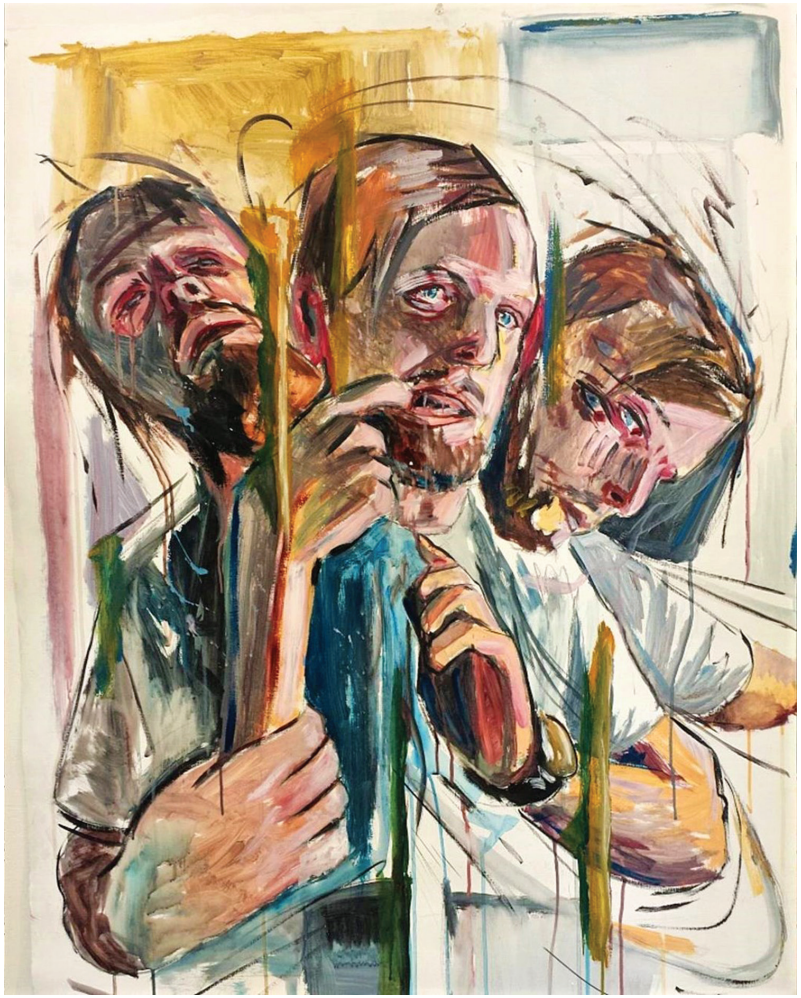
Breast Anatomy, Lydia Kegler



Flower Gold Uterus, Lydia Kegler

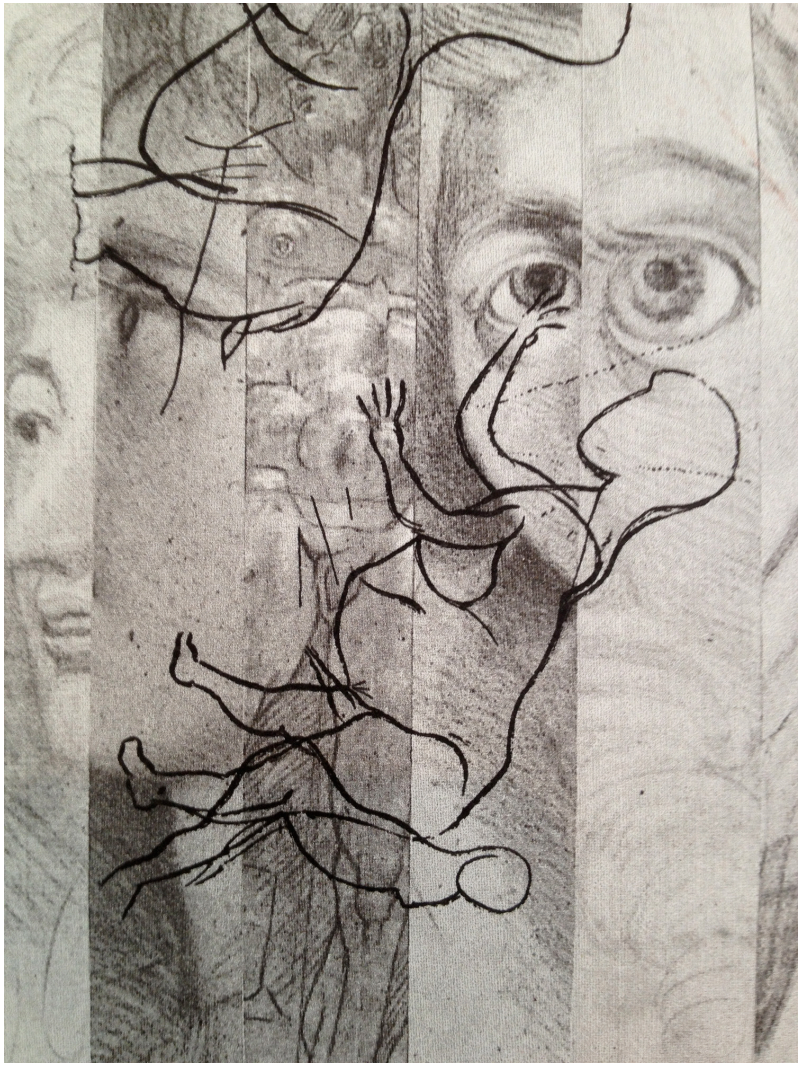
Concrete, Aleksandra Dimitrijević

Untitled, Aleksandra Dimitrijević



The Cross, Riley Waite

I and 我, Yu Shen



Collage, e.a.d. sellors

Johari Window, Jason Stopa

Flash Fiction

DIET COKE AND ORANGES

She went to his house, and it smelled like oranges. She let herself in when no one answered her knock. The door was unlocked anyway.

One of his roommates was in the kitchen. The stranger's tall, thin frame stood leaning forward with elbows on the counter, a pile of rinds lay in spirals under his wrists as he slowly peeled. The roommate looked up at her with droopy stoner eyes and nodded to the screen door off the living room. It was ripped straight through the middle like someone had fallen through it. She would find who she was looking for there.

The week before, when she first saw him, he was in the sun, leaning against a brick wall on lower campus and tying his shoe. He was balancing his bag on one shoulder as his glasses slipped down his nose. As she walked by, he nudged her and asked if he could borrow the thick textbook cradled to her side. He squinted one eye and smiled half a smile.

YES, she thought. She shrugged, "Sure." She stepped out into his backyard that was a patchwork of dead spots of grass and pots of succulents laying haphazardly around. She found him in the sun again tossing a tennis ball to a mutt circling a dying avocado tree. He held a cigarette in one hand and hurled the ball toward the sky with the other. It tumbled over and over, and she thought the free-fall looked nice.

She kicked a crushed beer can laying in the grass at him. He shielded his gaze and laughed. She felt something in the hollow of her ribs shift and drop like a swimmer springing from the diving board: a pawn in gravity's show. He introduced her to the dog. It didn't belong to anyone, but it hung around sometimes and occasionally ate the rotting fallen avocados and got sick. They sat in the thirsty, thinning grass.

"I didn't finish the reading yet," he shrugged. "Couldn't really get into it." The dog nosed her hand and circled the yard. One of his ears was smaller than the other.

"How does he get in?" she asked.

"He hops the fence," he said. He chewed the inside of his cheek. She noticed that he was looking around like he was expecting something more exciting to appear.

"Do you feed him?"

Standing, he stated, "Let's go for a walk." They strolled to 7/11 six blocks away. He took long, loping strides and nodded his head like he heard music playing on his own unique frequency. She tried to keep up, but she was always a step or two behind. The dog trotted around them for the first two blocks then got distracted by some crows picking at trash in the gutter on the busy intersection. She looked to him, but he didn't seem to mind.

The cool air collided with the harsh ringing bell overhead. She paid for her Diet Coke. He got a blue Gatorade. She was hungry but didn't say so. He stole a handful of double-bubble when the cashier turned to straighten the tiny bottles of tequila, and they each chewed three pieces until their jaws creaked and they came to the elementary school park with its asphalt wavering magnetically in the heat. They went on the swings, and he soared higher. They jumped off mid-air.

He announced that he won—and he did—and as he laughed, she saw that his tongue was an unnatural shade of blue. He told her about his band. She made him smile when she said with a straight face, "I don't really like music." He playfully kicked her foot, so she tried to shove him back, but he caught her arms and held her for a second.

"I think you'd like my music." She pushed him away, but she wanted to tackle him right down on the burning hopscotch lines and taste Blue Number 2.

As they walked back down his tree-lined street, he talked about wanting to backpack for a month if he ever graduated. When they turned toward his cracked driveway, a car with tinted windows pulled up and honked twice. He glanced toward the street.

"Ah, I gotta go," he shrugged. She nodded. "Business, you know?" He shoved his hands in his pockets. She nodded again, even though she didn't know. He told her to get the book inside if she wanted.

"See ya around, kid," he said.

"See ya," she waved. She went back inside, and her eyes had a hard time adjusting to the lack of light. His roommate was sitting on the couch with the bag of oranges on a wooden pallet acting as a coffee table. He was folded up on the couch, his long limbs and angular elbows tucked like a bat.

She found the room down the hall, the third door on the right, and spotted the book on his desk half covered by a sweatshirt. It held a fast food receipt for a bookmark. He had made it through three pages of the assigned chapter. She looked around, breathed the air. It smelled like weed and eucalyptus soap. There was a stack of textbooks, a jar of change, a pile of old CDs, a drawer of pills and plastic bags, a guitar in the corner, and a broken hanger on the floor.

She was about to leave when she saw the roommate watching a home renovation show. A couple was deciding between gray or white tile. They wanted something "clean." She sat down on the sagging pleather armchair. She was looking at the pile of oranges, and without looking at her, he said, "you can have some."

They watched a few episodes in silence; just the predictable dialogue from the show and the velvety sound of the peel parting from the fruit lay between them. Little spritzes of citric acid sent quiet plumes of perfume into the dense Sunday afternoon air.

During a commercial, she heard the dog whimper at the screen door. She went to him, crouched on the threshold, and handed him a peeled orange through the ripped screen. He sniffed her outstretched arm and ate the offering in two bites. He licked the juice from her hand, and she felt her eyes sting. She brought him another and returned to the couch.

"You know," his roommate said in a slow, deliberate manner, "he never feeds that dog." She nodded. He turned to face her with

his miserable, blurry gaze. "He's not that kind of guy, you know?" She nodded again, and they continued peeling, finishing the episode. She cleared the pile of rinds, tossed his receipt, and left with her book.

She drove home listening to a radio show and laughed alone at the funny parts. She started her laundry, not minding to separate the colors. She watered her plants and looked in the fridge twice. She compared flights for far away places, setting the number of travelers to one. She closed her eyes when she began to feel sick.

That night, she sat cross-legged alone in the bathroom, smelling like Diet Coke and oranges and bile, thinking about the dog and the fence he had to climb to not be fed.

WALK HOME

You're sitting against the wall looking down through the railing at your old third grade classroom where you used to get sent outside almost every day. You're in eighth grade now, thirteen, but you go to a little private school that has elementary and middle school. Or Junior High like some of the teachers say. You hate that name, though. It sounds gross. Like a kid who wants to sound more grown up than he is would say that. It seems like every kid wants to be in high school already. For some reason they think it's going to be fun or free or mean that you're a big kid. Bull.

You can't really say that you're the mature one, though. Mr. Hackett just sent you outside for making an inappropriate joke. You're trying not to remember it, but it was of a phallic nature. You don't know why you can't just keep your mouth shut. You're obnoxious and you make an ass of yourself, and afterwards when you get in trouble you can't even be one of those guys who doesn't give a shit about being punished. You aren't sure if that's a good or bad thing.

As you stare at the door to Mrs. Harper's room, you begin to picture yourself as a skinny, undersized, eight-year-old, slumped against the door with tears on your face. Your brother said once that he could hear you yelling from his class every now and then. You don't have any memory of the actual experiences of third grade, but that's not far-fetched. You were such a troublemaker back then that Mrs. Harper left a note for mom to read that demanded she send you to a psychiatrist. She had been under the impression that you had ADHD or some behavioral disorder of the like. You had to give your mom the note because she didn't go the parent-teacher conference, and she didn't come to pick you up at 3:15 like most of the kids so the teachers would go home before they had a chance to talk to her. You wonder why Mrs. Harper jumped to making you get therapy before talking to you. You wonder why mom just took you and didn't really ask you about

it. You contemplate these things briefly. None of the other kids in class even knew about that stuff and you've been trying to let the memory die with your third-grade self.

Mr. Hackett comes outside to talk to you. "You know you can't be saying stuff like that. Come on, Andy," he says.

"I know," you say. You force yourself to make eye contact. They always ask you to look at them before you can go. You sit back down in class and manage to keep quiet until the end of the school day. Nobody says anything about you getting sent outside. The other kids thought it was mildly funny and probably not all that memorable, but you know the whole thing is going to keep circling around in your head for a week.

The bell rings and you're the last one out of the room. You watch the kids heading for the parking lot. They're talking excitedly, their faces beaming. You realize it's Friday. You start walking home.

You turn down Spring, where the air is still and the trees create a row of shade on the right side of the street. You try to savor the ambience before you reach Alameda and all the assholes who honk at each other for going the speed limit are rushing by. You catch your reflection in the window of a parked car. You stop and pinch your gut. You scratch your head a bit and watch the white flakes fall on your shoulder. You feel the jagged rows of teeth in your mouth, tongue the piece of tooth coming out the side of your gums, just above a premolar. Thirteen and you still have one baby tooth left. Mom says you didn't yank at them enough. You turn to see if anyone is behind you. Nobody on the street, but you get going and pick up the pace.

Cut through the park and there's the image of Mr. Hackett's contorted face in your head. You remember what your mom said about your posture and straighten up your back. She insists you'll be handsome when you're older. You know it must be the inclination of all mothers to do so, but every time she says something along the lines of "the girls are going to be all over you," you feel a tinge of anger. It makes you think of how the girls in

your class laugh if you lean your head too far down and your neck rolls up like a piece of dough. You imagine getting a knife and just cutting through your stomach, but here when you cut it, it's just a glob of skin that comes off and now your body is flat. In here, you throw the remaining glob on the floor and it shrivels and melts like a snail after salt's been poured on it.

You get to the intersection and press the button to cross. You realize you touched it with your fingers and rub the side of your pants. You look at the pizza place on the corner and start thinking of what you should eat when you get home. You know once you pass the swamp of fast food guarding your neighborhood you won't feel like cooking anyway.

You just hope your brother doesn't bring his friends over. They're always so loud, and sometimes they ask if they can play Xbox in your room. He brags about how dank his weed is, but you think they come out of that garage smelling like burnt mint that's been stashed beside their ballsacks for twelve hours. For some reason you can't ever bring yourself to say no. Then your bed smells like armpits and resin.

You start wondering if you should have gone to more of your classmates' birthday parties when you were younger. You never wanted to go, even when you got older and mom told you how expensive everything they had planned was. Maybe the point of paying money to go to school with a bunch of white kids is to eat a bottomless plate next to the pool. Maybe that way you'd be charming and compliment Mrs. Clayton on her home instead of getting anxious when you stand in their big, open living room.

Home is close now, but this last street before you turn onto your little cul-de-sac feels like the longest part. There's a big curve in it about halfway down that blocks your view of the other side. As you approach it, you imagine it's the edge of a large cliff. A cliff so high up that there are thin cirrus clouds scattered about the bold, blue sky beneath your feet. It's like something out of Looney Tunes, where a character accidentally leaps over and then scrambles to get back onto the ledge. But this is serene. It's quiet down there. There

are no houses, no people, no smog, not even any of the greenery that has no business being planted in Southern California. It's just a dry, dusty valley. You could yell at the top of your lungs and nobody would hear. You could laugh at your own stupid dick jokes. Could even keep quiet forever and just be left alone. You kick some little rocks off. Watch them plummet, sink through the wisps of water vapor, disappear without a sound. You take your foot and dangle it over the edge. Slowly shift your weight onto it and you feel a breeze slap at your face.

The roar of an engine. It's that asshole who things he bought a personality trait at the car dealership. You start walking again.

ARRIVAL

The daughter-in-law double parked the car in front of the emergency room and said she'd be right back, and ran through the wide electric sliding doors to the curved front desk, but the receptionist was on the telephone, which seemed strange, the daughter-in-law thought, and she looked around for another emergency room employee, but she did not see anyone, which also seemed strange, or perhaps just not what she expected. She turned and saw several wheelchairs lined up beside the entrance, like shopping carts at a supermarket; turning back to face the receptionist who was still on the telephone, the daughter-in-law gestured that she would take one of the wheelchairs, if that was alright, and the receptionist gestured that the daughter-in-law should help herself. The daughter-in-law thought there was something amazing about the way she and the receptionist were able to communicate with each other using only facial expressions and gestures while the receptionist listened to someone else on the other end of the phone, and it was nice, too, thought the daughter-in-law, that the receptionist seemed friendly. The daughter-in-law approached the wheelchairs and saw they were not fully opened, and they seemed unusually wide, and she wondered if they were special emergency room wheelchairs. She grabbed the closest one and pushed it out the doors and down the path to her father-in-law, who was helping her mother-in-law out of the front passenger seat of the car. The daughter-in-law pressed down on the seat of the wheelchair, but she worried she had not opened it fully — that it might collapse beneath her mother-in-law's weight, like a stroller not properly snapped into place; but then the daughter-in-law thought emergency room wheelchairs must be designed to be user-friendly, idiot-proof; unless, thought the daughter-in-law, only trained hospital staff members were supposed to operate the wheelchairs. Perhaps the receptionist, distracted, was overly confident in the daughter-in-law's wheelchair operating ability (and didn't the daughter-in-law

give off a vibe of always knowing what she was doing, didn't she deliberately or unconsciously project authority so others would allow her to take control, control control control); maybe the receptionist had made an exception in allowing the daughter-in-law to borrow the wheelchair. The daughter-in-law asked her father-in-law to take a look (I'm not good with machines), but her father-in-law said he was sure it was fine and seemed utterly unconcerned about the wheelchair situation, which annoyed the daughter-in-law, because shouldn't they share the responsibility? Or maybe she felt uncomfortably inferior to her father-in-law, who was good with machines and did not feel the need to be always in control; or maybe she was just on edge because she could not shake the feeling that something was dangerously wrong with the wheelchair; but before she could explain any of this with words, or facial expressions, or gestures, her father-in-law was guiding her mother-in-law into the wheelchair, which did not collapse but worked perfectly, and there was even room on the seat of the extra-wide wheelchair for the mother-in-law's small black canvas backpack, an unpretentious and practical accessory, thought the daughter-in-law. The mother-in-law might be having a heart attack, the nurse practitioner at the walk-in clinic had said. The daughter-in-law had felt surprised, because she did not expect a heart attack to be difficult to diagnose. Now the daughter-in-law studied the woman sitting in the wheelchair beside the slouched backpack. The mother-in-law's breathing sounded strained and mechanical, but her face looked relaxed: She was having a heart attack, or she was about to have a heart attack, or she had just finished having a heart attack, or she was experiencing something like a heart attack, only different. At any rate, the nurse practitioner had strongly recommended they go to the emergency room and even offered to call them an ambulance, but the father-in-law said the daughter-in-law would drive. Sitting in the wheelchair, the mother-in-law coughed, and the daughter-in-law wondered why the nurse practitioner had recommended rather than insisted they go to the emergency room, and should they have considered not coming here, or was the nurse practitioner pretending, for unclear reasons, that

they had a choice? The mother-in-law stopped coughing, and her husband asked if she was alright, and she nodded. It occurred to the daughter-in-law that once they entered the emergency room they would be processed and absorbed into the emergency room and would then belong to the emergency room. The daughter-in-law thought perhaps they should take a moment to discuss their options, but already her father-in-law was pushing her mother-in-law towards the automatic doors so the daughter-in-law said she would park then meet them inside. Alone in the car, the daughter-in-law told herself that today it would be critical to stay calm. The windows were closed, and she could smell her new lavender deodorant, and she decided she liked the smell, that she found it relaxing, and she reminded herself to try to be a good listener. Walking across the parking lot, she could hear birds, but she could not see them. She wondered if they were real. Before her, the giant rectangular hospital loomed like a pulsating machine.

Creative Nonfiction

ELECTRIC CHAIR

"Mother, I am perfectly capable of using the control stick to move myself," I spat out, tensing my jaw muscles as my mom wheeled me up through the newly renovated hallway leading to our kitchen.

She said nothing, silently insisting that I still needed her help to get around. The ramp was finished earlier today. We could finally stop eating dinner in the living room around the TV since the stairs were no longer a barricade to the left side of the house.

This was going to be my first meal at the table in a few weeks. As we rounded the corner into the kitchen, I realized how long it had been since I'd set foot in that room. I laughed to myself. 'Set foot,' one of those popular phrases I'd always used but never thought too much into. Now that I'll never physically 'set foot' anywhere again, it seemed rather stupid.

The walls still look the same. The same uncomfortable photo of my brother and me in matching t-shirts as kids hung a little crooked against the burnt orange walls. I recognized the framed photo from my second-grade soccer team pictures, and next to it there's a photo of me at my high school graduation with my arms wrapped around my high school buddies. It sure seems like a world away, but in reality, it was only a matter of a few months.

My mother, still behind me, leaned over the right side of my chair and said softly, "Dinner's almost ready, honey. Can I get you something to drink?"

I sat there for a few seconds hoping she would get the hint to give me some personal space.

"Water's fine," I say fairly monotone, and she proceeded to fill up a glass.

I parked myself in front of the spot at our dinner table that I'd sat in for years, except the wooden seat I identified as my own was now in the basement, presumably hidden under a few blankets

or cornered in by some old Christmas decorations. My wheels were turned a little too far to the right. I didn't hit the table at the angle I'd hope to, but I honestly didn't care enough to try to move. It's ironic because I was always very great at parallel parking my car but learning to park myself was a monster of its own.

I looked up at the clock on the wall to check to see if my dad would be home before we started eating. It was only 5pm. I had to be fed like a senior citizen, so unironically I ate just as early as my grandpa would.

Dad won't be home until 7 or so. I'll likely be asleep by the time he gets here. My mother makes me go to bed so early these days, mostly so I have strength for physical therapy in the mornings.

Dinner was served, and my mom set our bowls in front of us, like for a second expected me to eat it myself. She sat down in the chair to my right. It actually ticked me off, because that was my brother John's seat, not hers, but there was no sense in arguing. He was off at college anyway, it's not like he'll be sitting there anytime soon.

I sat there avoiding my mom's glance as she shoved spoonsful of the overly chopped up mac and cheese into my mouth.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

I forced my eyes to meet hers. What kind of question even is that. Does she really want to know I'm thinking about how she's sitting in John's seat at the dinner table, or that I'm so exhausted from using the remaining working muscles I have left in my body to chew the fucking food I can't even pick up myself?

I swallow hard, and I tell her something she'd rather hear. "Just thinking about when dad will get home, that's all."

She looks disappointed, but she always kind of looks that way.

It's hard trying to be positive, feeling like I need to put on a face and pretend like I'm happy now. And of all people, I shouldn't have to pretend to be anything in front of my mother.

She picks up her fork and begins eating, and I manage to use my tongue to get ahold of the oversized bendy straw. My teeth latch onto it, and I take a few gulps, then we start the whole process over. She feeds me a little, then she eats a little, then we drink some water. The routine was so familiar we didn't even have to ask each other what came next, although we still did sometimes, but only to create white noise.

As lame as it is, I'm absolutely exhausted after eating. I'd have thought my lack of motion in life would at least leave my spirit in high energy, but alas, that's not how it works.

"Mom, I'm really tired. I think I'm going to lie down."

"Alright honey, I'll meet you in there in 5," she said while combing the top of my head with her hand.

I offer a quick flash of my dimples to say thank you.

My chair could only go a whopping 5 mph, so there was no quick way to get out of the uncomfortableness that constantly floated between us. It felt like we spent every second of every day together now. My mother and I weren't even that close last year, I've always had more in common with my dad, but when her maternal instincts kicked in over the summer, some new version of her awoke inside. She's simultaneously my best friend and the most annoying person in my life.

I rolled over the fancy ramp that was likely something my parents went into debt to install, driving the even more expensive piece of machinery that I now identified with. The mirror that hung on the hallway started to mock me. It was positioned a little too high, so I could only see from my shoulders up, almost making me forget I was stuck in this electric chair.

I stopped for a second and just looked at my reflection, and then down at my contorted limbs. All feeling in my legs had practically diminished. They still buzz every so often, it's my bodies way of taunting me. As for my arms, they're slightly better off, emphasis on the slightly. I'm learning how to move them more and more in therapy.

I heard a few clangs of dishes being washed back in the

kitchen. If my mom saw me staring at myself, she'd probably start crying, and that's something I want to avoid at all costs. If anyone should be crying it's me. I banged my right wrist against the control stick to steer and approached my room.

My bedroom door used to have sign on it saying, 'Drew's man cave,' alongside some album covers. The door wasn't even there anymore, because of the whole "I can't open a doorknob" issue. A few weeks ago, my mom suggested we hang up a sheet so that I have more privacy, but I didn't see the point. No one came into my room anymore except my parents and me, so there wasn't much to conceal. It's not like any girls are begging to come over and be alone with me.

Right on cue, my mom entered after 5 minutes exactly. She moved like clockwork. My mother was practically an unpaid servant to my every need. Financially speaking, the goal of being waited on hand and foot is a dream most people wish to achieve, except now I don't want it. My mom isn't paid, and she never will be, but she's the sole reason my body gets out of bed day in and day out. I'd do anything to be able to do it myself.

She began picking me up out of my chair. My 120-pound body was much easier for her to handle these days. She carefully set me onto my freshly pressed sheets and tucked me in. My lights were motion activated so I knew I had 10 minutes before they'd shut off for the night.

Sleeping is the easy part; it intrigued me post-paralysis. I love researching sleep habits, REM, and the meaning of dreams. In my dreams, I can run again, but I'm pretty sure that meaning is fairly obvious.

I can't help but think for the, what seems like, millionth time about lucid dreaming. I find myself now constantly wondering if I'm just in a state of sleep paralysis. My body is numb, and my muscles are permanently relaxed, while my brain is fully awake. I can't speak sometimes after my body falls asleep. My mind flickers around while my idiot body knocks out.

As soon as I shake the thoughts of what's behind my dreams,

my mind's stuck on that beach last July. I remember the waves, in a seemingly flawless motion they cascaded over me, like being spun into a cycle, similar to the rickety washing machine my mother had in the basement, except this time I was the pair of blue jeans being turned over and over, ending in a sharp halt.

I felt like I was there again, face down in the Pacific Ocean, unable to feel anything around me. When it happened, I thought I was actually dead, or maybe that tingly sensation had meant I was floating, kind of like an out of body experience. When I first realized I was paralyzed, I instinctively held my breath, a move that I now know was crucial to my survival.

My body had felt like an anchor in the salt water, lifeless, yet so coherent at the same time. I never had this cliché flash of memories people have before something terrible happens, it was like bombs going off in my frontal lobes. It wasn't peaceful, that part's bullshit. It was scary as hell, but shockingly that was one of the moments I felt most alive, due to the epiphany that life can be taken from me so easily. I'd never been a very philosophical guy, at least not before I became a quadriplegic. Except the yearn for survival wears off.

My mind drifts off with my body, and I'm finally where I'm most happy, in my dreams.

The sun knocks on my eyes through the bent white window shade to my right. If only I could turn over and shield myself from the horror that is a new day. I can see the digital clock on my wall, and it reads 7:56 am. I hate how I always wake up just a few minutes before I need to be up. What am I going to do with those 4 minutes now? I can't sleep; my mom will be in my room in exactly 4 minutes to pick me up and put me into the chair that will drag me along.

I shut my eyes, and the minutes go by rather quickly, so when I open them, it reads 8:05, and still my mother hasn't entered my room. "Mom?" I call out sheepishly.

I memorized the sound of her footsteps. She drags the heel of her feet when she slides across the hardwood floors while my dad bends his arches at an angle that leaves a more profound sound

every time his heel touches the floor. My mom was on her way in.

"Hi honey, did you have a good night's sleep?" she says standing in the empty space where my door belonged.

"It was fantastic," I say back sarcastically, "I dreamt that no one had to wait around for me to load onto a plane, that I could dance at a wedding, that I could walk the dog instead of it walking me…" My words got faster and faster as I spewed them off.

"Stop. STOP. Please, stop it."

My mother hadn't used a strong tone with me since I'd been sentenced to life in a chair.

"This is your life now," She said and looked around like she felt strange. "You cannot live your life constantly feeling sorry for yourself. And this is my life now, it's our life. We have to be a team, and in order to do that you cannot hate me, and you especially cannot hate the world for this."

Even though I couldn't reach them, I still avoided her eyes.

"I've listened to you pity yourself for far too long, and today I am done. You can have all the time you want to be bitter about whatever vendetta you think the world has out for you, but I can't do it anymore." She paused for a few seconds. "So, I'm not going to put you in your chair until you decide that you are going to be positive about your life."

"What do you mean?" I said sharply. Was she really threatening to leave me lying here if I didn't comply with her terms? This triggered my aggression rather than stop it.

"The choice is yours," she said as she left the doorway.

"Mom you can't be serious!" I say in a panic. "You can't just leave me here all day! … MOM!"

I start shifting my teeth back and forth through a clenched jaw. The ridges running over and over, back and forth while my mind races. If I could move them correctly, my hands would have coiled into fists. I'm not an angry guy, but I have every right to be mad at the world. The world took me from… well, me. I'm a prisoner in my own body for god sake, and now I'm a prisoner in my own home.

I lay there, and after some time I release my jaw. My facial muscles relax, and I breathe in through my nose. Forgiving the world for paralyzing me wasn't something I had on my agenda today or even 10 years from today. How can someone who doesn't understand my pain have the audacity to leave me in limbo? A literal physical limbo.

She'll give in sooner or later. She doesn't have the heart to make me lay here all day.

And so, I wait. I wait for her to crack.

HABITS

The first time I was without my father was when I was twelve. My mother was taking me and my little sister to visit relatives in South Korea, but there were a few concerns as we left my father at home in Virginia. The biggest of which was our Chihuahua, Booney, and how he would fare with the person in our family he liked the least: my father. It was clear he had no love for the dog as Booney stayed completely away from him. The other concern was what my father would eat as his culinary skills were limited to boiling water and using the microwave. With the exception of waiting for my mother to cook dinner, I imagined him doing the same thing he did every night after work. He'd come home, turn on the TV, bubble up instant noodles, and fall asleep on the couch. His pot belly would rise and fall with every snore, an occasional breath would get caught in his throat before being exhaled in a relieving *kaaahhh*.

My father was a man of routine. Every day before he went to work at the dry cleaners, he'd wake up an hour earlier to pray on his knees and read his Bible. Sometimes, I'd tiptoe to the kitchen and catch him eating breakfast. The coffee machine would slowly drip into a glass pot as my father scarfed down a green banana before emptying a full bowl of cereal and topping it all off with a large muffin. He consumed food in an instant, as if it would vanish if he didn't eat it.

In the post-war Korea he grew up in, perhaps that was the case more often than not. Anything that interfered with his habits, especially his diet, would incur his wrath. Once, when my mother chastised him for trying to take a piece of my fried chicken, his nostrils flared and brow furrowed. An otherwise calm man nearly snarling. My father unhesitatingly quit drinking and smoking when he started going to church to win over my mother, but his addiction to junk food merely supplanted it.

The tupperware my mother had packed inside his lunch bag

clattered around when he left.

"See you later," he'd say on the days I caught him. But even on the days I stayed in bed, I imagined my father opening my bedroom door to say goodbye.

When we returned home from Korea, my father looked like a different man. He had slimmed down and had a weariness to him. When we were in Korea, he called and told us he had lost the dog. He had let Booney outside without a leash as we normally did, expecting him to come back into the house. Instead, the dog seized his opportunity. My father said he searched for a few hours before giving up. Later that day, against all likelihood, Booney decided to come back home. More than how, I wondered why he returned, as if he was stuck in a routine of his own.

I imagined this was one of the reasons why my father looked exhausted, wearing a 5 o'clock shadow and glassy eyes. The likelihood that he had missed us didn't cross my mind until I returned to my room upstairs. I hadn't felt the deep absence of my father until I saw him standing in my bedroom doorway with a sober smile. We embraced and tears streamed out of my eyes unexpectedly. He softly repeated a Korean male mantra to me, "울지 마," "Don't cry."

So I wiped away my tears, ashamed at their unsolicited presence. Korean men's tears were reserved for only the saddest of occasions, but mine held no reservations. They were merely dammed up by force of habit. My own routine started with that trip to South Korea. My father told me to keep a daily journal, to write down my thoughts and impressions. I assumed it was to keep my mind active during the lazy summer since I was unable to adhere to the weekly quota of books he made me and my sister borrow from the library. It didn't occur to me that writing was something he did.

Sometimes, I'd catch him hunched over his fake mahogany desk writing in his own journal. However, I could never be as consistent as my father. I, more or less, kept a daily ritual of rushed prayer and sporadically jotted down thoughts on paper when I couldn't contain them. On most days, it was something to cross off

the list, but every journal entry added up. Years later, when I told my parents I wanted to study creative writing instead of biology, my mother lashed out at my decision, telling me to stick with what I had already invested my first two college years to. Defeated, I threw back a glass of wine on an empty stomach and sulked my way to the living room couch where my father approached me. He sat down next to me and I braced myself to hear more of the same. An admonition to seek consistency, to listen to my mother.

"인생 은 하나 밖에 없어, 니가 하고 싶은 거 해," "You only have one life, you should do what you want." I don't know what prompted this sudden maxim from my father, but it bolstered my decision and would continue to echo throughout my life.

I was twenty-six when I started working in a junior position at a digital agency in Washington D.C., and two years later, I found myself stuck in a consistent, but loathsome cycle. I was a silent worker, lacking the confidence to speak up at meetings or show the initiative required for a promotion because I hated my job. My trajectory was predictable if not clear.

I would need a new career and get a certification in one of the many avenues in computer programming in order to obtain a lucrative position at a government contractor to sustain the comfortable life afforded to those who lived off the nation's capital. Once I was financially secure, I would start a family and raise my children to follow the trajectory I was in because my parents' routine had been built around the hope of passing down stability. It was tempting to stay home, to make sure the safety my parents had invested in me returned to them two or threefold when they retired. But my father's words bubbled up again in my mind and I decided to apply to Creative Writing MFA programs. I wanted my own routine. When I got into one of the programs, I had to leave.

It wasn't until my father's colonoscopy that I realized how habits can develop unexpected side effects, intrusions that forcefully uproot the familiar.

"Your father had two polyps and I removed those without a problem. However, there was a third polyp I couldn't remove," the doctor told me. "I believe it may be a small tumor." The word "small" lessened the word "tumor" that immediately followed it. It made the tumor sound less frightening, as if size and danger had a positive correlation. I hoped that another doctor would be able to remove the small tumor from my father's colon with the proper "small" tools. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case and when my father groggily woke up in his bed, I translated what the doctor had told me. Still under the effect of anesthesia, he responded with an affirming groan.

According to biomedical publisher, Karger, colorectal cancer is a "civilization disorder.[1]" In fact, colon cancer has very little to do with one's genetic disposition, and more to do with "affluent Western societies... the strongest contribution to environmental risk for colorectal cancer is dietary. Consumption of fat, alcohol and red meat is associated with an increased risk.[2]" In the United States, colorectal cancer is the third leading cause of cancer-related deaths in men behind lung and prostate cancer.

I drove my father home, so he could sleep off the anesthesia on the couch. I went up to my room and got on my knees beside my bed to pray as my father had taught me to years before. Instead, anger swept over me and I wept into my blanket. I felt my father's anger pulsing through me, the suddenness of being without him. It had come without warning and invaded my daily life, and I wasn't prepared for it.

Although my father was diagnosed with cancer, I believed my trajectory was still clear. He would have his surgery late winter and I would prepare to go to school the following fall. Similar to a colonoscopy procedure, my father couldn't eat certain foods or liquids that would color and obscure his colon. He could only paint his insides with white bread or pasta, chicken breast, apple juice, or

1 Watson, Alastair J.M., and Paul D. Collins. "Colon Cancer: A Civilization Disorder." Dermatopathology, Karger Publishers, 5 July 2011, www.karger.com/Article/Abstract/323926.

2 Ibid.

rice crackers. The day before his fast, he enjoyed a hearty meal at our favorite American restaurant.

"이거 마지막 저녁 이네," "I guess this is my last meal." he said.

My father inhaled his dinner like he always did as if the sooner he ate, the sooner it would all be over with.

The tumor was located in the rectosigmoid junction, which was near the end of the colon. After the surgeon cut it out, they would stitch up the rest of the colon together and sew him back together. It seemed like a simple procedure and from what the doctor told us, it was. When my father came out of the operation, the doctor said that everything had gone smoothly. When an aunt came to visit to offer her best wishes, my father thanked her with a couple of loose tears escaping down his face.

After the surgery, they ran biopsies on my father's lymph nodes, small glands throughout the body, an important part of the immune system. They hadn't expected any of the nodes to have cancer cells, but to their surprise and ours, one did. After my father recovered from the surgery, he would start chemotherapy.

Nearing his first session, he came home distraught one night. He had blown up at my mother, who had told him he needed to develop healthier habits. To stop lying on the leather sofa in front of the flat screen television, to walk on the treadmill that sat unused in the basement, to do the opposite of what he had been doing for so many years. My mother went upstairs and my father sat in his spot on the couch, muttering "그냥 죽을게," "I'll just die."

My sister and I went to check on our mother, who had witnessed a terrifying side of my father, an angry eruption due to the force of change.

"너무 무서워," she said, crying. "He's so scary." I went downstairs and my father was still sitting in front of the television, muttering the same words until I told him to stop. He hung his head, unable to look up at me. My mother and sister came down to join us in the living room. It was then that the reservoirs broke open and I saw my father weep for the first time in my life, a

harrowing and sorrowful cry. As I watched my father break down, a similar reserve broke within me. We all joined my father on the couch and wept together, our tears solicited by our new reality.

The silver lining was that the chemotherapy was preventative, which meant there was no visible mass to track. It was a precaution to lessen the likelihood that the cancer would reappear. I postponed my plans for graduate school to take my father to his treatments, and to translate information to my parents.

In the beginning, my father experienced no nausea or hair loss. He even continued working throughout his treatments. The hospital route became a new commute, a temporary detour. For six months, the visits to the oncology department became a bimonthly regiment. I, selfishly, had even begun to look forward to the treatments because I wouldn't have to go into the office and could fulfill the role of the dutiful son.

"글은 마음에서 서야데," he told me one day in the car. "You have to write from your heart." I nodded along as I normally did whenever my father gave me unsolicited advice, but remembered his encouraging words to me when I was in college. Later, I discovered my father hadn't just spent those hours in his office writing for himself. Apparently, his writings were published in his church newsletter. My mother had collected his numerous poems and essays over the years in a scrapbook. My father was a writer.

A few months later, the chemo began to take a toll. I watched my father throw up, the anti-nausea medication was no longer able to hold anything down. His hair thinned along with his body, and his face grew gaunt. Near the end, he couldn't stand the sterile smell of the hospital, and swore that chemo left a literal bad taste in his mouth. He still continued to work in his deteriorating condition at the cleaners, enduring the stuffy summer heat until he could collapse onto a cot and sleep. We counted down the weeks. After the chemo finally ended, my father was left with neuropathy

in his hands and feet, peripheral nerve damage that caused numbness and pain. The effect of chemo was cumulative and had left this scar as a reminder.

A year had gone by and graduate school waited for me in Canada. The day before I had to leave, I packed everything up in a hurry, trying to rush through everything. I wanted to avoid the onslaught of emotions I would inevitably feel when I had to leave my parents. I stuffed my clothes in garbage bags, my books and kitchenware into boxes, and rapidly tossed them into my car. I had chosen to leave in the early morning, so I wouldn't be able to register what was really happening. My parents were both groggy, unable to process everything either. They reminded me of any miscellaneous things I had forgotten. Clothes hangers, a rice cooker, and towels. After it was all stuffed into my car and time to go. I finally embraced my father and a sob escaped me, then another one, and as I weeped into my father's shoulder, he began to sob too.

"건강 할게," "I'll be healthy," he told me. I hugged my mother, who continued the flow of tears, and I got in my car. I reversed out of my parking spot and waved goodbye. As I drove away, I tried to stifle my tears. I wanted to avoid the finality of leaving, trying to convince myself that it was only temporary, an interruption to the routine. But the truth was it felt so permanent because both of our routines had come to an end. We had gotten so used to it all that it was hard to imagine being without one another.

Fiction

FALSE BOTTOM

On the first Sunday of the month, the state museums were free. Bernice had gone to join the lineup that would be mushrooming out of the Uffizi Gallery. Or Palazzo Pitti. Or whichever one she'd finally decided would be the shortest to start her daylong wandering.

On Good Friday, she'd set out for a quick look at the jewelry on sale on the Ponte Vecchio and souvenir gifts for her parents. She'd ended up absenting herself the whole afternoon after receiving her shock. Then she'd kept the news to herself for twenty-four hours as she devised how best to break it to him. So maybe today she'd merely sought out a nook remote from the crowds where she might resume the conversation with her mother till her phone battery drained.

Stuart had been okay abetting it. With six of their ten-day vacation days consumed, he said he was bloated with Renaissance religiosity, longed to swap those huge preachy canvasses for a simple Dutch landscape. Art not being his strong suit, it was the sole comparison at hand. But at least it was an out.

Bernice hadn't objected. She was in on the sham. It suited them both. They'd lain back-to-back in their hotel bed, her confession wedging apart his eyes for a good portion of the night. After a time, he wondered if her view of the window curtains was as captivating as his of the blank television screen. But he didn't turn to ask.

He reflected that the hours had surely migrated into Easter Sunday – resurrection, redemption, the re-opening of the Heaven border crossing for the sinners drumming their fingers and fed up with the delay in Purgatory.

He was also mindful that this year Easter happened to fall on April Fools Day. Perhaps a neat practical joke jabbed at the penitents' expense.

By morning, his thoughts still felt like an overstuffed suitcase that he couldn't quite squeeze shut. He couldn't figure out what to remove.

They showered separately, each monopolizing the bathroom, careful not to display any casual nudity. They'd been civil, intentionally amnesic. Wisely, she hadn't prodded; then again, her field was psychology. They'd gone down for their continental breakfast, the straightforward spreading of jam on bread and the pouring of coffee now performed all too self-consciously. They hadn't quarreled over their divergent plans.

Later, they'd strapped on their backpacks, walked a few hundred meters together so as not to appear petty, then uncoupled without a kiss. Brilliant theatre if they'd been acting.

Catholic country and barely eight but museums, supermarkets and shops were doing business. Not much piety left anywhere. Hideaway restaurants were using the holiday to finally put out tables; horse-drawn carriages had materialized in the piazzas to clip-clop customers around the historic streets; clothing was dispensing with layers and length. None of this anticipated by the catechism Stuart had learned. All of it pagan natural, unfolding with the season.

Welcoming distractions, he stopped to watch trash removal in progress, a vehicle at a collection station lifting garbage and recycling containers out of the ground – ingenuity in a city of limited space – and emptying them over its back.

Wending past presumed targets, Stuart came across the orange jumpsuits and lime-green vests of firefighters and paramedics, the police blues, the khaki of the military with semi-automatic weapons clasped to their chests, barrels pointing down; drilled to defuse crime, fire and tumult in the body and the body politic.

Most of the colors were in motion but definitely not headed to Mass.

Surveillance and security of the cities. Ever more to pass through. The desire for freedom from fear gobbling up the other

freedoms. Normal was what you settled into. Stuart didn't consider it far-fetched that one day people would be frisked before being allowed into the countryside, then again to be let back in. And once out there, pay to sit by a preserved lake or copse the way they now paid to watch a movie.

Roll out fine weather, culture, food and hospitality and you came up with anxiety? With erratic governance and crises that rotated like the chamber of a fired pistol? But then to call any place stable or rickety nowadays was to state the banal, like the harm or good of bacteria.

Around the men and women of public order, currents of carefree tourists eddied or flowed through the piazzas, washing in and out of the accesses, up and away from the sites themselves. Flood the streets with guardians, Stuart thought, but good luck spotting a terrorist in these universal crowds – that at a snap could be spooked into a rabble - or danger in the recesses of their bags when every electronic toy might sub for a detonator.

Even if you could tell the native and foreigner apart, it wouldn't help. Amerigo, his Italian-descended colleague with whom he shared the offices of their family practice, had pointed out before departure that this country, its tradition of beauty and charm unavailing, had notoriously seen homegrown devils kidnap its prime minister, slaughter his bodyguards, later murder him and deposit the body folded like a fetus in a car trunk in the centre of the capital as a taunt to the government. All the more to beguile on a first trip there, Stuart had responded.

He hadn't elaborated why he believed in very little beyond the shortcomings of humans though he felt gratified and moved by their rare triumphs.

The most Christian thing he'd seen so far had arisen in one of the neglected lesser streets off the Piazza del Duomo. There, he and Bernice had walked past a pair of 'senza tetto', without a roof, cocooned and concealed – but for clumps of black hair - in sleeping bags, side by side in front of a shop doorway. Someone had placed

two cellophane-wrapped panini by their heads so they would find breakfast when they awoke.

Days ago, Bernice had taken him to the Baptistry to hear the first-ever British Anglican choir sing evensong in that gorgeously-adorned structure during vespers. He supposed that too might be classified as Christian, a gesture of reconciliation, but not exactly fast-tracked since the egocentric Henry had sundered the Catholic world by yanking the Church of England off in its own direction. Five hundred years, was it?

At the evensong's conclusion, they'd visited the cathedral itself. Something resembling an airport security machine had been pushed in though not yet made operational. Perhaps to scan for wayward believers like himself.

"God allows science," a fellow intern had once joked after too many beers in the pub down the street from their hospital, "so as to get rid of those who are just faking faith."

Faith was the old nun, her infirmities but an accelerant to her ultimate reward. After hiking in the hills across the Arno River on Thursday, he and Bernice had stopped in a small medieval church to rest and cool off. Bernice had gotten up from their pew to better examine one of the niche paintings darkened by centuries of candle-smoke worship and the incoming clouds sapping sunlight from the windows. He thought they were alone in the mid-afternoon gloom until he heard the steady prayer of the cane on stone, rhythmic as the mantra of the rosary being recited. With all the devotion of a daily pilgrimage, an elderly nun was struggling up the side aisle, her trudge silhouetted by votive candles, to finally pause inordinately below a statue of the Virgin Mary.

The Virgin as intercessor, welcoming petitions and hope. In infinite representations, usually barefoot and looking down at the supplicant from her lofty height in a white shift, a blue mantle atop it. The familiar pose of arms held forward, palms outward in invitation: 'come to me'. It seemed to Stuart that by adding a slight hunch to the shoulders, the artists might just as easily have had the Virgin asking, 'But what can I do?'

Stuart entered the Piazza del Duomo. Although she appeared to have arrived on the bicycle leaning behind her on the protective railing, a seated woman in an elegant indigo gown and with her hair pinned up, was playing something symphonic on her violin, its case opened in front of her to collect donations.

Officials were erecting and positioning barriers, creating a perimeter around the cathedral entrance and a cleared zone between it and the Baptistry. The area was being cordoned off, Stuart assumed, for the celebration of the Scoppio del Carro, the Explosion of the Cart.

Last night, he and Bernice had watched a replay of the previous year's festivities on the regional Tuscan television channel, grateful to be sheltered from their own improvised explosive device that had blown up.

It hadn't looked at all like a cart. Pulled by four white oxen from outside Florence, then through its streets and unharnessed in front of the massive cathedral doors, the deep reddish-brown contraption, one or two stories high, more closely resembled a siege engine or some sort of Oriental temple with a squarish base and an approximate wedding-cake configuration. It had been crammed with fireworks. At eleven o'clock, after much fanfare by drummers, trumpeters and flag throwers in period costume, with the 'Gloria' having been sung in the Duomo, the archbishop had lit a dove-shaped rocket: Colombina, the Holy Spirit. Racing the length of the wire to which it was attached – and this had been replayed more than any other sequence – it flew out the doors, slammed into the cart and, starting at the base, set off the staggered fireworks in ascending bangs of crackling noise and white smoke. If it all went without a hitch, Bernice had explained, a bountiful fall harvest was assured.

Shrewd, Stuart acknowledged. Far more spectacular and likely to catch the attention of the faithful – not to mention these heathens already massing with their smartphones – than a priest murmuring blessings over sacks of grain.

The novelty of the city was taking his mind off his complication.

He exited the piazza and proceeded towards the Santa Maria Novella station. The sidetrip he and Bernice had planned was probably compromised now, also gone up in smoke, but just in case, he'd seek an answer to the train timetable that the website didn't provide.

The station was teeming. Departures and arrivals at full steam. Some pigeons had suicidally landed amid the throng but were cleverly dodging the hundreds and hundreds of feet and wheeled suitcases bearing down on them from every direction. For a bit, he aimlessly followed the pigeons' dance.

Glass walls had been installed for additional security so that people could no longer reach the platforms without a ticket check. The electronic signage on Platform 13 alerted that on April 8, traffic approaching the Bologna station would be disrupted because of an 'ordigno bellico' unearthed from the last war. The English crawling across the screen translated the message as 'bomb removal'.

After a slow advance, he made it to the ticket window and got his information.

A mounting desire to shake free of the mayhem hurried him from the concourse but he stalled outside the station, undecided. He remembered Bernice proposing Fiesole as a possible jaunt. He did a phone search of the name and the transportation options.

At the first supermarket, he detoured from the walking route. It was street front narrow but its interior ballooned into aisles and a delicatessen. He bought salmon sandwiches, a packaged individual salad of radicchio and various greens complete with a napkin, a plastic fork and packets of vinegar and olive oil. To be safe, given the time he'd be absent, he added a small round pizza margherita, a grapefruit juice, a half-litre glass bottle of red wine with a twist top and, why not, a pastry that the woman safeguarded from squashing inside a rectangular plastic container.

Backpack stuffed, and through the thinning pedestrian traffic – except for the anaconda of 'David' buffs uncoiling out of

the Galleria dell'Accademia – he located Piazza San Marco and Bus 7 that would trundle out of the historic centre and climb to the hilltop town of Fiesole. Bernice said it had been Etruscan long before Florence became Roman and then marched up to conquer it. Anything less hectic would do.

A dozen passengers got on Bus 7, all locals apparently. To Stuart, a good omen that he was escaping the crowds. Some validated their tickets as he had by inserting them into the machine to be stamped but most simply took their seats. He'd noticed this previously. Either they carried long-term passes or casually cheated the honor system. He'd yet to see a driver or inspector intervene.

Once beyond the Florence suburbs, the route threw up views of the valley and fields but in its knifing upwards it seldom found a gap in the walled-in houses on either side. The residents had bricked their privacy right up to the asphalt.

There were few stops on this early run. Behind his sunglasses, Stuart rested his eyes. Involuntarily, he shook his head. The details still struck him as outlandish; there ought to have been a saner version. The half-hour ride would provide a little solitude to sort it out. Or, failing that, to arrange it properly, which was to say, to situate himself in the disarray.

Four years to the day. Four years since meeting Bernice at an April Fool's party. Almost three since moving in together. Four years for the chickens to come home to roost, for the cat to get out of the bag, for…he couldn't think of any other animal truisms.

You left her mother to housesit while you flew off on a lark to commemorate the anniversary and while she was sweeping the walk of debris after a spring windstorm, a fifteen-year-old boy appeared at the end of the driveway claiming to be her grandson, Bernice's child, and asking if he had in fact tracked down his biological mother. How did a kid pull that off?

Stuart pictured it but it was third hand, from mother to Bernice to him and distorted by shock at each stage. In the photo of the boy that Bernice's mother had attached, he looked healthy

enough. And, it went without saying, headstrong too. The boy's face didn't help Stuart summon the incident with sharper accuracy, but it freed him to script it any way he wished, to reduce the outlandish to palatable.

A useless exercise. So, he skipped to where he entered the scene Saturday, with grandma having phoned and emailed her daughter and Bernice sitting him down in the hotel room instead of heading out for lunch.

Bernice had had time to prepare. She'd answered all his questions forthrightly. Now, to the rumblings of the bus engine, there was diminishing value in chasing after loopholes. He bowed his head and looked out over the top of his sunglasses. The landscape hadn't altered.

Not possible. Something of that magnitude slipping her mind. She hadn't claimed it had 'slipped her mind' but four years of a whopping omission was a bit much to have to accept. The baby given up at eighteen. Her mother filing it away too. Would Bernice have brought it up if they'd gotten around to talking marriage? The woman he didn't know. A partner with a false bottom smuggling family skeletons.

It troubled him as much that she'd been embarrassed for not having volunteered the facts sooner, but not ashamed. She hadn't worried about her abandoned baby being discovered. If anything, she seemed to be excited and she'd smothered that reaction poorly. How often must she have stared at her grown son's photo and smiled? Stuart's forgiveness wasn't even relevant.

Here was the kicker: she'd transferred her questionable behavior to him, laid out a future for him to anatomize; this shortcut to a kind of fatherhood without a diaper change or a disheartening report card.

She'd seen he hadn't taken it well. Maybe she'd thought that because his job involved healing people, he'd be less apt to disappoint her. If he let it ride, he'd gain a fully-formed stepson though he'd never wanted one. No point in pretending to be good old dummy Stuart if he wasn't. Sooner or later it would be

exposed too, like a quack cure. Three into two. Mathematically, a negative, no?

What would it serve to deny it? Being an uncle twice over seemed family enough. His brothers would produce more nephews and nieces. He cared medically for his patients, had never hankered to birth new ones.

He hadn't noticed a lady get on with her dog. A mixed breed. Small and well-behaved in her lap. Stuart and the dog traded appraisals till the dog took its interest elsewhere and Stuart digressed as well.

At sixteen, there'd been a different dog. A jack Russell. Their neighbor had a daylong obligation to attend to and she'd handed Stuart her house key and asked him to give the pooch its twice daily exercise and 'business disposal'. Easy as pie and he so trustworthy, she hadn't bothered to supply an emergency number.

But she'd left the wrong key. After almost snapping it in the front door lock with repeated attempts, he'd circled around to the back, hoping she might have overlooked latching the patio doors. But she'd only saddled him with the dilemma. Break her window or burden her with a carpet shampoo and vacuum. The latter was obviously less damaging and less his fault. It had saddened and angered him to have to watch the jack Russell, a tireless dynamo on outings, pleading with him as it pawed the glass and executed pirouettes and cartwheels.

The bus grunted the final stretch of incline, swung right and halted at its terminus in Fiesole's relatively flat Piazza Mino. Stuart got off with the remaining passengers and the driver.

The bulbs of the scattered street lamp had conceded to the morning. Shorn of their foliage, black trees he couldn't identify exposed their bloated stumps rather than scrawny branches. In the piazza, the Florence road had divided and cut up both sides with a small roundabout in the middle, relegating the hotel, cafes, restaurants and ice cream shop relegated to the perimeter and only the stand-alone food-and-wine stall, still shuttered, conducting business within it. Few people and vehicles circulated but on

another day in another season he could imagine Mino catering to a babble of foreign tongues.

Three of the four streets spoking out of Mino mercilessly demanded an immediate resumption of the upward schlep. Stuart figured the fourth that disappeared to the right of the cathedral probably began to plummet as soon as it was out of sight. Fiesole seemed a typical Tuscan hill town where you were either wearing down the brakes on your sneakers or punishing your thighs and hamstrings with no respite from gravity or topography.

Easy to see why at this higher elevation, the cooler temperatures, breezes and paucity of visitors gave it a more authentic feel, as Bernice had indicated. Fiesole had lured the wealthy and notables such as Boccaccio, Hesse, Klee, Proust and Lloyd Wright. His smartphone map showed Etruscan walls, Roman baths and a Roman theatre nearby. None held much appeal beyond their delaying his return to Florence.

Neither did the two churches at opposite ends of the piazza: another Blessed Virgin, the colonnaded Santa Maria Primerana on the rise or the eleventh century cathedral of St. Romulus. Its bland exterior wasn't going to reverse his opinion. The crenellated clocktower behind it had much the same effect.

He turned off his phone. Bypassing the cathedral, he began huffing up the steep and uneven stones that would lead him to the Monastery of San Francisco. There was supposed to be a panoramic lookout at the top and the strain to get there guaranteed it. The walled sides of the pedestrian street were overgrown with vines and surmounted by treetops, breaches in the stonework plugged by plants and weeds. He hardly noticed the handbag shop, closed but its windows sunshine winking to stop and be tempted by the leather.

There might be something in Bernice's character traceable to her teenage lapse. Something he could rely on to hang a verdict. Would it explain, for example, her habit of enthusiastically taking up an idea but then wavering on it? One of her least attractive qualities that irked him most. He'd seen it at gatherings where, as

they were picking up speed, she lost altitude, staying power. Even this trip had slid from hosannas to practical arguments against its scheduling. Inside the plane, he'd idly wondered if the fasten-your-seatbelt sign would appear in the nick of time.

If he could match various traits to the unforeseen pregnancy, he might be more tolerant of them. What counsel had she been given? By whom? Which pressures had been applied? Had she been scarred or immunized by the experience? Because apart from suppressing the secret, she hadn't harmed him.

A game to be played fruitlessly to foolishness. He could rationalize anything looking backward, making her actions fit whatever mold his biases designed. It really came down to personal expectations; some patients accepted bad news with greater equanimity than those merely cautioned.

Reaching the lookout put aside his useless thinking. Below him, an acute slope with snippets of dwellings peeping through the cypresses and vegetation like beige inlays stitched into the land's green tones. In the distance to the right, Florence in its bowl, the hills smudged, the glare smearing the calligraphy of the city though nothing could blot out that signature dome. Here and there, glints like surgical instruments arranged in an operating room.

Although he'd come this far and only the last and slightly higher hundred meters remained, he decided to pass up the monastery and its monks' ascetic cells bereft of objects and sound. Who in their right minds chose permanent solitude over companionship anyway? Were they so besotted that it ceased to be a choice? Could you call a bunch of solitary people living together a society, like his mother sewing blocks of fabric to create crazy quilts?

He sat on one of the stone benches and observed Florence like a Petri dish. The naked eye couldn't spot it but you knew something was underway.

When he descended to Piazza Mino, his bus had gone; traffic sparse. Turning on the phone, he found Bernice's text: 'Still in line at the Uffizi but it's moving. Will you be back for the explosion?'

He quickly replied: 'Just getting started in Fiesole. Doubt will make it in time. Watch out for shrapnel', which he intended as humor. He thumbed off the phone again. It occurred to him that having mentioned Fiesole, a place she'd proposed they visit, she might view his appropriating it on his own as a slap at her, something they needn't share, a judgment delivered.

Too late to take it back.

At the top of the piazza, just beneath the Santa Maria church and the fence that separated them, there was a rather unusual monument: two uniformed men on horseback facing each other and shaking hands. Stuart's smartphone search identified them, capped and caped, as King Vittorio Emmanuele II being hailed by Garibaldi at a bridge in 1860 after a successful campaign to unite Italy from the Alps to Sicily. Stuart walked around the equestrian statuary. Royalty and revolutionary apparently in harmony. But something else was being suggested because the sculptor had cast the king's horse as nervous, with a lowered head, a swishing tail and a stamping leg while Garibaldi's stood composed.

A small sign encouraged another panoramic viewing. He began the climb of Via Belvedere. This one was more interesting with a paved road through an equally ancient section but graced with renovated homes of attractive architecture. He especially liked the lamp finials. Through one iron gate, a handsome, white-chested grey cat, poised as Garibaldi's horse, sat comfortably on a tarpaulin-covered motorcycle. It watched him with half-sleepy eyes as he took his photographs.

At a second home, near its arched entrance, they'd installed a green wall beauty beneath which a koala bear was climbing up to it on a white branch but with its head turned to gaze at the visitor. Stuart, always watching for features that would spruce up his own house, photographed that too.

When he finally reached the promised vista, the best vantage point was occupied by a young woman, mesmerized or stoned, perched on the low wall, her feet thrown over the edge. If she was contemplating suicide, the mild gradient might break bones but not end life.

Here the houses glued at their back were less like villas, unbarricaded, their exteriors painted and neat. A man came out of the one directly behind Stuart with a can to water the flowers of his various planters. Having turned at the noise, it seemed rude to Stuart to not acknowledge each other. They exchanged 'buon giorno', forgetting to wish each other a 'buona pasqua' while the young woman remained self-absorbed.

The slope offered olive trees and, at its faraway bottom, orchards, a strip of highway, a complex of beige, brown-roofed buildings and a secondary road penned in by parked cars that might have been Stuart's bus route. By the time he'd taken in his fill, the girl had scarcely budged much less jumped. Once again, he returned to Piazza Mino.

Another bus had just terminated its run and shaken out a handful of tourists, mainly individuals. Some had begun immediately taking pictures of everything, principally themselves, while others weaved about like blindfolded prisoners released into the light and trying to make sense of their whereabouts.

The last thing Stuart wanted was to be dropped off in Piazza San Marco in thirty minutes, to then hide from Bernice. Fiesole had been the most important centre of the region and later a necropolis. But its ancient ruins, even as a retarding measure, didn't beckon; he saw plenty of those with his senior patients.

His trained mind cleared. On the way up, the bus had stopped in the hamlet of San Domenico with its convent, restaurants and bar. From there the road had continued its wind to Fiesole. Logic told him that the Etruscans and their successors wouldn't have established a circuitous route to reach the valley and the river. And they wouldn't have waited for a bus company to start a daily service. These ancestors were clever people. It was only

ignorance that made the times arrogant: that no age's troubles had ever been greater than our own, no era had ever cared more, none had been brainier at finding solutions.

From medical school, Stuart recalled the benefits of traditional Chinese medicine. There were female Egyptian physicians millennia before Christ. These same Etruscans knew the liver, gold fillings, false teeth. The Hippocratic Oath was fifth century B.C. Galen was doing head surgery. The Romans had invented forceps, scalpels, performed cataract operations, investigated glass and magnification. Italy had been training doctors since the thirteenth century.

There had to be a more direct means, which he estimated at eight to ten kilometers, to Florence. All he had to do was to keep walking downhill. It would be pleasant and time-consuming. According to Bernice, in one of the countryside villas, the original or serving as a foundation for a later construction, Boccaccio had set his Decameron about young folks escaping the plague in the city. Stuart would excuse his late return by having taken the opportunity to look for himself.

He strolled past the bus and its driver smoking outside to the mouth of Piazza Mino where the bus had turned in. A stretch of road and to his right, unmarked and diving steeply, the paved lane sheared off, tight and high-walled as the route to the monastery. His phone map showed several avenues from Fiesole to the valley, each a serpentine squirming. One of them would get him at least to the hamlet.

The lane was potholed and patched in many spots. Initially, he leaned back against the grade, feeling the pull in his thighs and the hamstring he'd injured playing squash with Amerigo weeks before. But after several hundred meters, the plunge relented, and he could take customary steps again for granted. The walls, draped with vines like rugs put out to air, became dull. When the rare car approached him, he pressed himself against the wall to let it pass; when he came to a t-junction, he simply chose down over up, left over right; when a vista broke free of the enclosures, he paused to

check if there was anything new to admire. He'd see someone far ahead but lose them for good on a bend and never spy them again. At last, he came upon a crew of three, two of whom were relaxing, pruning overgrown branches. No hurry in the task at hand. He primed his 'buona pasqua' but they made do with exchanging nods.

From behind the walls the occasional bark of a dog was taken up by several others like tomtoms transmitting the passage of a stranger. But the air was mainly mute except for the birds with spring in their voices.

Perhaps he was not on Via Vecchia Fiesolana after all. Perhaps the villas within were only contemporary summer retreats, not Boccaccio's refuge. Two might have qualified, the first with a tall green gate, the lower part modern solid, the upper like a portcullis, and the time-bruised masonry sculpted with an eroding escutcheon and other embossments. The slim outside columns, above the more substantial weight-bearers, displayed the color and brittleness of breadsticks.

The second showed its debilities on the entire façade but was enlivened by a corroded stone head, only the curls still delineated, from whose mouth water hadn't flowed into the basin for decades or centuries.

He fell back to batting about the twist in his life. Bernice would welcome her son to a degree he would not. There were biological parents - and where was the father in all this - who never wanted to meet up again with their offspring but Bernice's awkwardly-dampened emotion implied she was about to retrieve a precious belonging. Who was to say she wouldn't latch onto a sustenance in the boy that she hadn't drawn from Stuart?

Not for the first time, Stuart dwelled on his father's detachment, bequeathed to his sons, and how he couldn't always guard against it despite his awareness. He saw his two brothers plied with its dead weight. They were all friendly with each other but reuniting regularly not at the top of their lists and each of them too often taking turns at being absent.

Parents tucked seeds into their children. He'd spotted it countless times when a parent accompanied a young child into his office. It was tricky becoming what you'd rather not be. Inherited traits diluted but sufficiently thick and commingled that whatever you made of yourself was not entirely of your own choosing. That being so, you couldn't really amputate the parts you'd rather have wished away.

His father had been a steady provider of seeds but an indifferent grower. An inept gardener with an unsullied thumb and never expressing so much as a bird hole of regret. Their mother hadn't mirrored him, hadn't lived in his thrall but was often overruled. If Stuart had been impregnated at eighteen, they probably would've disowned him along with the baby, not become co-conspirators like Bernice's parents.

By the time the lane indeed emerged at the hamlet of San Domenico, he was uncomfortable from the morning's rising warmth and heated-up by his preoccupations. Hungry too for nourishment and a break. Fortunately, the bar had customers. An ambulance was parked in front. Inside, a pair of paramedics were tending to their coffees and cornetti.

Stuart ordered a beer, took it outdoors to the umbrella-covered deck. Another soul was out there with the last suds sliding to the bottom of his glass, looking like he might need a refill but unable to afford it. Traffic was picking up on the road. The latest Bus 7 passed, growling at the insistence to keep climbing.

There seemed to be only one car-packed street heading into the hamlet itself. He saw a bench on the opposite sidewalk. Finishing the beer, he claimed it, shrugging off his backpack to get at the pizza, salad, juice and a few swallows of wine. Across the street, the locked restaurant, Piatti e Fagotti, with its three vertically rectangular blackboards yet to be scribbled with the Easter specials. Behind him a vast field of tall grass swaying into a grove of olive trees. Within the corner where the road and the hamlet street met, a gaudy rose pink umbrella, fully opened but possibly rod-broken, had been discarded.

Eating and drinking wiped his mind's table of leftover musings.

Near the bus stop the lane resumed but a lane no longer. After the helpful sign indicating 'Firenze', it acquired the aspect of a secondary road, widened for dual use though traffic remained light. It declined gently but in better condition. The accompanying walls survived but appeared less sclerotic, less ailing, less claustrophobic. Everything was fresher, gentrified, more entertaining and worth surveying. Soon there were extensive fenced-in properties with the villas set back and the pathways running to them escorted by lawns and budding trees.

He came upon Villa Schiafonia flanking the road, its contemporary gates partially open, the notice advising that it had been transformed into a 'Centre for Advanced Studies'. He checked it on the internet. The name meant 'avoiding boredom' and Alexandre Dumas had stayed there but nothing about it being the site of the Decameron.

He squeezed inside. Statuary, some heedless, some headless, ran the length of one side but on the other it fanned out into a broad and deep formal terraced garden with vases, fountains, stairways and boxed hedges like a labyrinth though they were not high enough to bewilder. The manicured hedges had been beautifully laid out in a myriad of geometric shapes separated by gravel paths: scalene triangles and trapezoids, rhombuses and truncated pyramids and quadrants, others whose names Stuart no longer recalled or whose inventive configurations had yet to be named. Expecting to be approached and expelled, he didn't venture beyond the balustrade that overlooked the garden. When no one appeared, he took videos and close-ups till he'd exhausted his perspectives and then slipped out.

As the walk progressed, Stuart was able to look forward, see what lay beyond the next curve before he came to it - for example a woman exercising her Alsatian with a tennis racquet and ball on scruffy ground beside a stream.

More minutes of roving. Then the road briefly constricted, and he popped out into a Florence suburb proper.

It was little more than a cul-de-sac parking bazaar with just enough space left unoccupied for buses and vehicles to loop around. The stream on the right had shed its natural banks and been channeled into a flume but the facing side was stacked with the three-to-five-storey residential buildings of the car owners. It was also the terminus for buses 1 and 319A. A map under glass beside the stop told him he'd come out on Via Giovanni Boccaccio. Perhaps there'd been a connection to one of the unseen villas after all. Now he could wait for a bus to drop him at the train station or finish walking to the hotel.

He put off the decision and sat on one of the metal benches. He removed his sneakers and socks, rested his bare feet on the former. Emptying the backpack of its contents, he was pleased to see that neither the warmth nor the bouncing had crushed the pastry. He ate it first, then leaned back to polish off the salmon sandwich and wine.

Patience might be a virtue, but the wait-and-watch variety could be as effective as action. It was daily evident in medical outcomes, politics, relationships. But he didn't have much faith patience would work in this case. Still, he wasn't ready to announce anything to Bernice just yet; to endorse or reject. The story was bound to have unspoken subplots.

The boom didn't originate nearby and lacked concussive force but was powerful enough to startle him. He stopped chewing, listened for sirens. A white-haired man was seeking the source as well while waiting for his dog, but it had frozen in mid-squat.

Then Stuart caught the grey and black scowl of a cloud above the roofs, like one of his father's infrequent foul moods, bullying a swatch of blue from the sky, an angry sulk refusing to disperse. It was metastasizing from somewhere in historic Florence. Whatever was going on, he doubted it had anything to do with the Cart.

THE LATE GREAT PLANET

"Carnage Commander is the coolest villain," Icarus Winfrey asserts with uncharacteristic confidence as he slowly flips through the pages of a comic book, doting on certain panels that show the heroes and villains flying above a cityscape. His imagination augments the comic with visions of himself swirling and swooping between skyscrapers, ignoring gravity as he swerves out of the way of energy blasts from the ray guns of cantankerous villains. He sits on the well-worn maroon carpet in his bedroom reading comics with his friends, Michael Augustine and Steve Emmerich, eight-year-old boys from across the cul-de-sac. Posters of Spider-Man and Wolverine almost cover the white walls, except for a patch next to the door reserved for a framed copy of the Ten Commandments posted on the insistence of his mother.

"No way, Storm Shatter has ninja skills," Michael counters. "He could kill Carnage Commander easily." Michael's mop of curly whitish-blond hair contrasts with Steve's severe, straight-combed black hair.

"If Storm Shatter kills Carnage Commander, who's going to pay him?" Steve asks. "Duh, that's his boss." His face has already assumed the disfiguring grimace of the chronic asshole.

"He's a mercenary, he could work for any other evil organization." Michael smiles, too

good-natured to be offended. "He doesn't care."

Icarus turns the pages of his comic carefully as though examining a rare, ancient text; Steve and Michael swipe the pages sideways like they're sorting through junk mail.

"Double duh. Who would hire him if he kills his first boss?"

"I just think Carnage Commander is cool because he comes up with all the evil schemes," Icarus says, trying to steer the conversation back to his preferred villain.

"Nerd," Michael says. "Yer supposed to pick who can fight the best."

"Who's yer favorite hero?" Icarus asks.

"Camel Cricket 'cause he has night vision and he can jump really far," Michael answers without hesitation. "In issue twenty-two he destroyed Persona Non Grata with a laser death kick."

"Camel Cricket sucks," Steve says. "Agit Prop is cool 'cause he has the power to mobilize grad students with visions of corporate malfeasance."

"My favorite issue is number thirty-eight when Bahum Bug destroyed Christmas Spirit," Icarus says and looks up, then averts his eyes from his more confident friends.

"Albion, your friends need to leave now," his mother shouts from downstairs. Patsy's voice slices through their joy like the ceremonial blade of Wolverine's ninja mentor. "It's dinner time."

Icarus runs out to the top of the stairwell and looks down fearfully at the obese mound of tension standing at the bottom. A glum glare meets him. "My name is Icarus now."

"Your name is Albion," she shouts. "Shut up with that crap. I'm sick of hearing it."

"But I wanna be -- "

"I don't give a damn what you want. Use your real name or people will think you're weird."

"Can Mike and Steve eat dinner with us?" Icarus asks.

"No, their parents can feed them." Patsy snorts to relieve the pressure from the polyps in her sinuses. "It's not our responsibility."

In the cul-de-sac later in the evening, Michael and Steve throw a glow-in-the-dark frisbee back and forth. Small bats dive in and out of the cone of light projected down from the streetlamp as they decimate a cloud of fireflies and moths attracted to the light. Icarus hates to see the fireflies go but he loves the bats too much to hold a grudge. A bat swoops over them and dives into a moth. Icarus watches the bat swerve back up in a loop-de-loop; all else hazes into periphery. The frisbee whizzes by his head. He snaps out of it and retrieves it from the ground ten feet behind him.

Michael throws the frisbee and Icarus catches it with one hand, a skill of which he is particularly proud.

"What's wrong with your family?" Steve asks in his usual perturbed tone. "My family has guests over for dinner a lot. We don't kick them out."

"Sorry." Icarus throws the frisbee to Steve.

"We were talking about making our own comic book," Michael says.

"Cool, can I help?" Icarus asks.

"Why? You can't draw," Steve points out with obvious pleasure.

"But I can help with the story."

"Any idiot can write a story."

"What're you gonna call yer comic?" Icarus asks.

"Adventure Squad," Michael answers.

"Are you gonna have some characters who can fly?" Icarus asks. "That's the coolest power." He loves the idea of creating a comic. Often when he reads them, he thinks of alternative plots. When Carnage Commander sent Storm Shatter to retaliate for the destruction of Castle Carnage, Icarus imagined that Storm Shatter became a double agent and faked an attack. Carnage Commander was not fooled, and the master villain neutralized Storm Shatter's ninja skills by swirling around him with the help of a prototype jet pack.

"No one's gonna fly," Steve says. "Super powers are kids' stuff. Adventure Squad is a highly-trained elite force like G.I. Joe but without a stupid name like that." Steve sticks his finger up his left nostril and digs around.

"At least one of them should be able to fly," Icarus says, "if not naturally then with a jetpack."

"Fly up to the top of the tower and toss the frisbee." Michael points at the water tower looming over the grassy field, blocking out the moon. "I bet it would go for a mile." "Throw it here," Icarus says.

When the frisbee loses its glow-in-the-dark charge, the three boys run to their respective homes. Icarus finds Patsy sitting at the dinner table, reading a magazine with a magnifying glass. A gentle

country song sung by a woman with a Shenandoah accent slinks across the room from oak-cabinet speakers.

"Mom, can I go over to Mike's house?" Icarus asks in his sweetest voice. "We're gonna work on making our own comic books."

"No. Stop wasting time with that childish crap and do your goddamn homework."

"But we..."

Patsy slams the magnifying glass on the table. "I said no."

The next day the three boys visit a Christian bookstore on their way home from school. Most of the reading materials hold no interest for them, but the Jack Chick comics are irresistible.

"This one's good," Michael says. "It's about how Satan invented rock music." A drawing depicts a decadent hippie mesmerized by toothy demons emerging from a pair of stereo speakers.

"I like this one about how God invented AIDS to get rid of deviants," Steve says.

"How much are they?"

"Who cares?" Steve looks over his shoulder at an elderly woman working at the counter who pays them no attention. He turns back and stuffs the miniature comic into his pocket.

Icarus takes a comic book titled CHAOS from another turnstile and flips through it. The gruesome illustrated panels of brightly colored apocalyptic episodes excite him more than any other comic ever has. A frantic, starving man hoarding food from his starving kids; an airplane careening toward the ground without a pilot or co-pilot; portable guillotines for any faithful dissidents who refuse to be branded with the mark of the beast (a bar code, like on cereal boxes.) He ignores Steve's urging to steal it and pays the old lady for it instead. On the way home he follows Steve and Michael by sound, unable to take his eyes off the fascinating dystopia he now believes is imminent.

After hanging out with his friends for a couple more hours, Icarus walks into his grandmother's basement apartment holding

his new comic book. From his grandmother's TV the 700 Club reports on a recent tornado that was provoked by the local school board's acceptance of science text books that mention evolution. Christine sits in a fake leather recliner, her head nodding slightly, as it has been for the past few years.

"Gramma, when is the tribulation gonna start?"

"Could be any day now, the way things are going in this country." Her crooked fingers fidget with her glasses.

"What's gonna happen to us when the Anti-Christ takes over? And why would anyone vote for him, anyway?"

"He tricks everyone into voting for him by promising all sorts of welfare programs."

"Will the four horsemen attack innocent babies, too?"

"Don't worry, Albion," Christine says - needlessly, as Icarus is perfectly calm - "only the secularists will suffer. We should be raptured and fly up to heaven before all the bad things happen. What got you thinking about this?" Icarus hands her the comic book. She skims through it. "I have a book that you'd like. She leans over and plucks off her shelf a copy of The Late Great Planet Earth by Hal Lindsey.

Icarus reads the paperback in his bedroom. The conflagration graphic on the cover under the blue block letters of the title frighten and excite him for a moment. Symbolism is becoming noticeable to him. The flames are our imminent future. He wonders if he will have the courage to proclaim his faith when the police begin guillotining people for failing to wear the mark of the Beast. To avoid detection, he could use his family's camping equipment to hide in the nearby state park. He could forage for food with his survival knife that has a hollow handle to hold matchsticks and a fishing line, just like the one Rambo had. His dad let him buy it in a souvenir shop in Virginia Beach. He could hunt, too. The last time his family took a sojourn in their Chevy station wagon to visit relatives in Indiana, his uncle Tom let them hunt birds on his wooded property. Icarus shot three sparrows, and his dad shot two while supervising. Icarus thought that if you hunt,

you're supposed to take the meat for cooking later, but this kind of hunting was fun, too. His dad put the dead birds in a shoe box and when he got back to the relatives' house, showed them to his sister. She wrinkled up her nose and said, Those are too small to eat, and went back inside. That reaction was better than when Icarus shot a squirrel out of an oak tree in their backyard with his dad's pellet gun. Simon patted him on the back and congratulated him on his good aim. He pushed the squirrel carcass onto the cement patio at the base of the deck steps. They went inside and announced his victory. His mother looked out the large bay window in the dining room, paused, and started sobbing. Why are you teaching him to do that? Those are our little friends, she wailed.

When the tribulation comes, he will finally get to prove his heroism. He will collect as many dissidents as he can find and provide them with refuge. Together they will acquire weapons and train in guerrilla tactics to resist Satan's tyranny like the Wolverines in Red Dawn resisted the communist invaders, which was practically the same thing. But he has to face the possibility that he would be caught. It would be terrifying, but he thinks he would become a martyr rather than submit to Satan's proxy. A twinge of doubt shames him. Maybe Steve was right. Maybe he really is a coward. Maybe when confronted with the gleaming blade of the guillotine and a basket of freshly decapitated heads he would pledge allegiance to the Beast. If Christ can forgive all other sins, why couldn't he forgive that one, too? Mike would wear the mark of the Beast if he were told to. Steve would be in charge of a guillotine squad.

Patsy rages on the other side of the closed door. "After all I've done for this family, abandoned all my hopes and dreams, and you…" He never hears Steve's and Michael's mothers do that. He always thought it normal but now he is not so sure.

Icarus sets aside the book and resumes drawing stick figures with guns shooting at a caped stick figure flying above them. He whispers to himself, "I believe I can fly."

Icarus and his father rake burgundy and gold leaves in the backyard. It is a hard chore, but Simon gave Icarus a few dollars to make it easier.

"A comic book I got says that anyone who doesn't get a bar code tattooed on his forehead will be decapitated by the Beast."

"Wow, comic books weren't like that when I was a boy," Simon laments. "Can't you just read Archie and Jughead?"

"No one reads that crap anymore."

"Watch your language. I might not let you read them anymore if they're that violent."

"But I showed it to Gramma, and she said it's true. She lent me a book that says a lot of the same stuff but even more scary stuff. It says the beast with ten heads and seven crowns is something called the European Union and…" Sometimes he watches the news on TV with his dad. Icarus's little heart pounds with the realization that those stories that bored him at first, the ones about old politicians wearing suits and talking about government regulations and stuff had a sinister hidden meaning: Agents of Satan laying the groundwork for the Anti-Christ's ascendance.

"Don't take everything your gramma says for the truth. She's old and she's getting a little cuckoo." He rakes a couple more bunches of leaves onto a growing pile. "Don't tell your mother I said that."

"But it's all based on the Book of Revelations. It has to be true if it's in the Bible!"

Simon sighs and knocks the handle of the rake against his forehead. "Al…"

"I'm Icarus now."

"Icarus, huh? Last week you were Prometheus."

"I decided to be Icarus 'cause I wanna fly."

"Huh. Ya know, that story doesn't end so well for him."

When the raking is done Simon lets him invite his friends over. Steve and Michael arrive with their drawing supplies and immediately set to drawing another comic.

"I wonder if you believe hard enough that you can fly, then you could do it." Icarus leans on the railing of the deck, looking at one of the piles of raked leaves below. "Do you think it's possible?"

"I dunno," Michael admits. "I think on Atlantis the people could fly."

"Gimme a break," Steve says. "That's impossible."

"I've heard if you believe hard enough, anything is possible." Icarus climbs up over the railing.

"What are you doing?" Steve asks.

Icarus jumps. He looks to the sky and extends his arms upward as he falls. The leaves cushion his landing. He crawls out of the pile and stands to the side.

"Geez, why didn't you fly away?" Steve asks, his rudimentary sarcasm devastating.

"I wanna do it too," says Michael. He drops his crayon and runs to the railing, climbs over, freezes when he looks down. "Are you OK? Did the leaves make it safe?" He looks squeamish. Steve sneaks up behind him and pushes him off. Michael shrieks but lands safely in the leaves.

"Yeah, I think that's the problem," Icarus says.

"Problem?" says Steve. "You wanna hurt yourself?"

"Now you jump," says Michael.

"It only works if you believe in it completely," says Icarus. His flash of insight pleases him. "If you believe completely, you won't need the leaves. You'll fly or you'll be raptured before you hit."

"You idiots are gonna break your legs," says Steve. He shakes his head in dismay at the immaturity of his companions.

"It's doubt that makes us fall."

"I don't know why I lowered myself to marrying a man who…" Patsy rants in her bedroom. Icarus can feel her voice reverberating from his ear canals out to his jaw bone.

He ties a cape from a superhero costume around his neck. "I believe I can fly." In Christine's room he picks up a Bible. She's back in her recliner, perusing a Reader's Digest.

"I have a goddamn master's degree. Why…" Patsy's tormented soliloquy echoes throughout the house. Icarus doesn't know what he did to make his mother like this, but he has no doubt it is because he is such an awful boy.

Christine groans audibly and looks up from her magazine. "Your father is a patient man. Your grandfather would've knocked my head off if I screamed at him like that." Icarus looks up at the black and white framed photo of his grandfather hanging on the wall above a credenza. The man died when Icarus was a toddler. In the photo he wears a penetrating expression and a dark suit. He clutches a large Bible with a cloth bookmark hanging out, a visual cue for his status as a Southern Baptist preacher. Icarus sees no humor in the man's face. He believes what his grandmother says about him.

"I believe I can fly." Icarus smiles at his grandmother and walks out. She gives him a perplexed look and resumes reading.

He opens the front door and steps out onto the front porch, wearing the cape and holding the Bible. "I have had it with this shit…" his mother rails on behind him. He shuts the door, silencing her. He crosses the field where he has often thrown the frisbee around. His cape flutters behind him as he strides toward the water tower. He climbs up the dozens of ladder rungs at a confident pace. Normally he is afraid of heights; climbing the tower was inconceivable to him, though he heard that teenagers go up there to do drugs. But now he is fearless with faith. His little hands and sneaker-clad feet propel him up the ladder as quick as Spider-Man sprinting up the Empire State Building. He reaches the top and he stands at the edge. He peers out over a community awaiting his heroics and believes he can fly.

Interviews

Interview with

Katie Ford

By Stacey Park

October 2018

Katie Ford is the author of If You Have To Go, Deposition, Colosseum, *and* Blood Lyrics, *which was a finalist for the LA Times Book Prize and the Rilke Prize.* Colosseum *was named among the "Best Books of 2008" by Publishers Weekly and the* Virginia Quarterly Review *and led to a Lannan Literary Fellowship and the Larry Levis Prize.* The New Yorker, The Norton Introduction to Literature, Poetry Magazine, The Paris Review, *and* The American Poetry Review *have published her poems. She is Professor of Creative Writing and Director of the MFA Program in Creative Writing & Writing for the Performing Arts. Last fall, Ford read from her latest collection* If You Have To Go *at CSULB's Anatol Center and RipRap's Coordinator Stacey Park interviewed her before the reading.*

SP: Why do you write?

KF: I feel compelled to write when I am undergoing some kind of turmoil, or when I feel something very deeply. For me, the most creative emotional state is internal conflict, crisis. And when I don't know what it is I feel, or what might be the bridge out of it, I sit down to write. I am drawn to the genre of poetry in particular because I'm a miniaturist, and the resources that poetry avails—how the emotional life is forged, refined, honed via the poem—have not yet run out for me. I doubt they ever will. My mind doesn't lend itself to narrative or story, and I'm ignited by the poem's lyricism and musical logic working together in the act of articulation. With poetry, I don't have to work with a slow build, with the long arc of the novelist or memoirist. The immediacy and the suddenness of poetry is right *there*, it occurs before your eyes if it's to occur at all.

SP: Your other books have been described to have a meditative mood, especially *Deposition*, and I sensed that disposition throughout *If You Have to Go*. Do you think that mood is present?

KF: Other people have made that connection between *Deposition* and this book, but it wasn't intentional for me in any way. I see the correlation because the extended "Last Breath" sequence in *Deposition*, and the sonnet sequence in *If You Have to Go*, have subjects that can't be exhausted: religious discontent and yearning on the one hand, and loss of love and its attendant loneliness on the other. There are no answers for those subjects—not truly—so once you open one door, there are many more to open, endlessly. The other books between *Deposition* and IYHTG consist of singular poems that stand alone, less in sequence. I write under the duress of circumstance, and although there are different kinds of duress, they ask similar things of us: Anxious contemplation, and the ache to be on the other side of the duress. One more thing I'd say about this: if I'm meditative in my new book, or in others, it's not a peaceful, ritualized meditation. It's not calm. It's very upset.

SP: With *If You Have to Go*, did you come into it with an idea for a project or was it a compilation of disparate poems?

KF: I just started with the first sonnet and continued. The original, opening line for the first sonnet was, "All I ever wanted was the communal table." Then that got folded in as a later line, but that was the initiating emotion and utternace. So I started with the first sonnet and then thought, what would happen it I made it a crown? This was kind of comic to me, since the crown is such an archaic form. But I took the last line and made it the first line the next day, and kept going. It gave me a link, a starting point. I didn't have to start with nothing when I entered the next poem, but I realized quickly that the challenge of the crown is to make the repeated lines dynamic, always on the move, advancing, ruminating, but never only "repeating." Creatively, I think any time you are writing in sequence, you ride its momentum, and don't question it. If it still has steam or motivation, you follow it through. It'll die off on its own accord. This makes me

think of Frost's statement about poems, that "like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting." It will always melt away—the poem and the sequence, too. When the form doesn't yield anything creative anymore, you know you're done. It's gone. With the crown, I went sequentially, one-by-one. I didn't write a pocket of them and then fill in the gaps, although I did, of course, have to revisit and revise all of them, and some of them were stickier, caused great technical difficulty, so I would let them rest and return to them months later.

SP: Would you describe yourself as a formal poet?

KF: I'd say I'm a formalist—not because I write in obedience to form but because form ignites my creativity. What I'm referring to isn't just inherited, traditional form (although sometimes it can be that), but the shapeliness of a poem. I tend to get lost in my own unwieldy free verse. I discovered, in *If You Have to Go,* that because I was in such internal turmoil at the end of my marriage, I had to find external stability in form. Free verse wouldn't have offered the stability I sought then. The structural constraint offers a kind of architectural support for rather shattering feelings. If I were told to write 50 free verse poems about the my marriage dissolving, I wouldn't be able to face it. Ultimately, the obedience and disobedience of structures is what captivates me enough to keep writing.

SP: What do you think separates this collection from others you've written?

KF: The sonnet sequence, primarily. It feels like something happened in the sonnet sequence that hadn't happened to me yet creatively. I feel a sense of loss that I am not inside of the compositional process anymore. The form and content had a depth of creative engagement and articulation that felt almost cruelly honest. It felt like certain lines were slaughtering portions of me, necessary portions, very likely. This is perhaps my most honest collection.

SP: What's your relationship to the "I" in the poem, or the speaker, when writing a collection that is deeply personal?

KF: The "I" is me in this collection, which isn't to say that everything is autobiographically true. I'm not putting on a persona. But the first person is very complicated in poetry, generally speaking. Emily Dickinson says that the first person "does not mean—me—but a supposed person." But in my collection, there isn't a "supposed person" as much as there is my soul and its body set in "supposed" places and contexts. The poet does not have to work within the bounds of linear logic or literal sense, thankfully. A poetic intelligence is an associative intelligence, one that takes leaps and works in the tracks of figuration, so the question, "is this the author's life? what happened? what's the actual story?" is evaded all of the time, winningly, cunningly, in poems.

SP: What's exciting to you about poetry today? And what makes you excited about writing poetry today?

KF: In 2016, I read 230 books as a judge for the National Book Award. I think I had notions about American poetics that were ill-conceived prior to that experience. When I read across the wide spectrum of what was printed in a given year (and these weren't everything written or published that year, only what was submitted by publishers), I realized that you can't say one standardized thing about American poetry. When you see that diversity of articulation, experimentation, and formalism, it indicates a robust literary health. *Everything* is being tried. I think the new generation of first books is astonishing. Readers are open and ready for new voices. They devour them. And, as a writer, you can pick up any book and say, "Look at what this person is doing that I could never do," and that's something to be glad about, to be thankful for, not envious or jealous, although artistic envy can spark a striving to be evermore original and ambitious in one's own work. People are very obviously doing what they want in their writing, and there's no style or vocabulary that is standardized in any crucial way. Poets aren't under a tyranny of normativity, thank God, and that's thrilling.

Interview with

Cai Emmons

by Nicole Hakim

January 2018

Cai Emmons is the author of His Mother's Daughter, The Stylist, *and* Weather Woman, *which will have a sequel entitled* Sinking Islands. His Mother's Son *has been translated into French and German and won the Oregon Book Award for fiction.* The Stylist *is considered one of the earliest novels featuring a transgender character. Emmons' work has appeared in many periodicals, including* The Santa Monica Review, Portland Monthly, *and* The New York Post. *Emmons holds a bachelor's degree from Yale University, an M.F.A. in film from New York University, and a second M.F.A. in fiction from the University of Oregon. Last fall, she read an excerpt from* Weather Woman *at the Anatol Center at CSULB, and RipRap's Junior Fiction Editor Nicole Hakim interviewed her afterward via email.*

NH: Was being a writer something you always wanted to do?

CE: I have wanted to write (and been writing) since I was a young child. I first wrote poetry and I remember compiling some of my poems in a "book" for my parents when I was eight years old. When I was in fourth grade, I had a teacher, Stefan Vogel, who had us write "daily compositions." We could write about anything we wanted and it was not graded. Occasionally he gave us a prompt to use if we were stumped. It was in Mr. Vogel's class that I realized how much I loved to write. After that the question became more about *how* I would become a writer and what kind of writing I would do, rather than *if* I would become a writer.

It has been a somewhat circuitous route to the writing of fiction. In college I began writing plays and I had a couple of them produced in New York. This was very exciting, but I knew I could never earn a living as a playwright. I turned to film as a way of making a living while still doing creative work, but over time I felt my sensibility was

not really in alignment with film. I missed the interiority that fiction allows. So I left film and retooled myself as a novelist and have never looked back.

NH: If you can share, what is your writing process like?

CE: I am a big believer in habit. Writing is like any other activity—the more you do it, the better you become at doing it. The writing brain is like a muscle that needs to be used on a regular basis in order to remain strong. So I write daily. There are exceptions of course, when life intervenes, but mostly I write immediately upon awakening, before I have interacted with the world, so as to preserve as much as I can of the dream state.. We have a coffee maker in our bedroom and my husband brings me coffee and then leaves. Then I go to work, writing longhand on a pad of paper. I don't open my computer or phone. I don't answer the door. I try not to talk with anyone. I write for maybe three or four hours, until the outside world demands my attention. If I'm at a residency I write for a few hours, go for a walk, and then return to writing. This is the great pleasure of a residency, the opportunity for sustained attention to the work.

Eventually I have to type my work into the computer, and I try to do that before too many pages have accumulated. But I can't compose very well on the computer, because I feel the presence of other human consciousness in the form of things like spellcheck, or sudden notifications that your computer has been backed up, etc.

NH: In your new book, *Weather Woman*, how did you go about researching meteorologist terms in creating Bronwyn?

CE: *Weather Woman* was a challenging book to write because the main character is a scientist—both a meteorologist and an atmospheric scientist—and I have a very scanty background in science. I knew right away I would have to do lots of reading. I began with a 24-lecture series about meteorology produced by Great Courses: "An Introduction to the Wonders of the Weather." While much of it was above my head, it introduced me to the important parameters of the field. Then I

went on to read about physics and neuroscience, as I wanted to think about what my character, who discovers she can alter the weather, was actually doing in terms of transmitting energy. Then I read various books about climate change. A few standouts in my reading were: *Apocalyptic Planet* by Craig Childs which looks at places on the planet that are being "desert-ified" and other places where glaciers are melting at a rapid rate, harbingers of what the entire planet faces in the future; *The Intention Experiment* by Lynne McTaggert which reviews research about entanglement theory; two books by Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction* and *Field Notes From a Catastrophe*, Bill McKibben's *Eaarth*, and Michio Kaku's books *Physics of the Impossible* and *Future of the Mind*. Another favorite and very useful book was *The Cloud Collector's Handbook* by Gavin Pretor-Pinney, which has wonderful descriptions and pictures of clouds.

Some on-line research led me to a wonderful blog written by a woman who had grown up in Tiksi, Russia, which is where my book ends. I wasn't sure I was going to be able to imagine Tiksi until I ran across this blog. The photographs were so evocative that it enabled me to imagine this distant place I had never been. I even created a character named Vera, based on the girl I saw in the photographs.

I was very fortunate to meet, on Twitter, a climatologist and glaciologist named Jason Box who has been studying the Greenland ice sheet for many years. He invited me to go on a trip to Greenland on which he was going to be the resident scientist. We went up the west coast of Greenland, stopping at villages along the way, hiking, kayaking among the icebergs, talking to the locals. It was early summer and light all day long, and the place had an otherworldly quality. Although Greenland didn't make it into *Weather Woman*, it does figure in the sequel, called *Sinking Islands*.

I should add that I was doing this research as I was writing. The writing guided me to what I had to research next.

NH: Do you have any advice for aspiring writers?

CE: I think the most important thing to remember in pursuing a writing career is that you must *prioritize your work over everything else*. I say this because no one else will do this for you. The world is mostly oblivious to writers, and while people might encourage you along the way, over the long haul *you* are the only one who cares deeply. So don't let other activities eat up your time. Figure out when your best writing time is and make that time inviolable—don't let anyone coax you into doing anything else at that time. This is hard sometimes, when you feel obligations to other more remunerative work and to friends, but hold fast! Eventually it will be such a habit you won't even be tempted to give up your writing time.

Beyond this, there is only reading widely so as to develop a context for your work.

Contributor Bios

Nicole Burney is a native of New Jersey. She's fascinated by linguistics, and how language reveals layers of estrangement and human identity. Her work has or will appear in THE RUMPUS, Cold Creek Review, Glass Poetry, Cleaver Magazine, Obsidian: Literature & Arts in the African Diaspora, Empty Mirror, the Ellis Review, and Lunch Ticket Amuse-Bouche. Nicole is currently working on her first full-length collection entitled BLACK MAMBA.

Stanley Delgado lives and works in Southern California. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in Mud Season Review, The Sierra Nevada, and The Santa Ana River Review. He can be reached via Twitter @stststanley.

Letitia Deon is completing her MFA in poetry and currently studies, reads, writes, and teaches in Long Beach. She gains motivation and inspiration from her two favorite poets: Gerald Locklin, who she considers the Frank Sinatra of poetry, and Charles Webb, who she believes is the Rock Star of poets.

Aleksandra Dimitrijević is a New Media Designer currently based in Serbia. Her art is inspired by the sheer act of living.

Dani Dymond is a graduate of Southern Connecticut State University (B.A., 2016) and CSU Long Beach (M.F.A., 2018). She is a poet, a dog mom, and an English professor at Cypress College.

Camilo Garza was born and raised in the border town of Brownsville, Texas. Growing up queer and effeminate in a society that prioritizes masculinity over femininity compelled him to repress certain "feminine" behavior beginning at an early age in order to avoid conflict. Today, his work in painting, printmaking and collage attempts to atone for this by commenting on themes of toxic masculinity, machismo culture, queer identity, queer history, and

queer civil rights. He is currently a Senior at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley majoring in Art Education.

Diane Goff lives in the mountains of Virginia. Her poetry has appeared in magazines such as The Sun, Artemis, Hospital Drive and Silhouette. Her book, Riding the Elephant: an Alzheimer's Journey, was published in 2009 by Dreamsplice Press. She holds a Masters degree from Hollins University.

G.T. Gordon is an educator from Southern California and a Creative Writing MFA student at Chapman University. Her undergraduate studies in Film and Music at California State University, Long Beach often inspire her fiction, poetry, and memoir pieces. Her writing usually explores the complicated process of finding one's identity in youth and the tangled relationship that binds reality, memory, and perception.

Gustavo Hernandez is a poet from Orange County, California. His work has been published in Sonora Review, Reed, Acentos Review, and others. He is presently working on a bachelor's degree in creative writing at Cal State Long Beach.

Amanda Ice writes poetry and fiction. She lives with her husband in Southern California.

Samson Allal Kartaoui Jardine was born in Boston in 1990. Samson is currently a lecturer at Cornell University.

Rachel Karyo's short stories have appeared in Noctua Review, Liars' League NYC, Liars' League London, and the horror anthology Deep Cuts: Mayhem, Menace, and Misery. Her short story "The Well" is forthcoming in the Grit City Comics Monster Mash-up anthology. Rachel lives in Seattle, Washington.

Lydia Kegler is a visual artist, dancer, and poet from Buffalo, New York. She currently in ger final semester in the Jack Kerouac School of Poetics at Naropa University, in Boulder Colorado.

Ryan Kim is a MFA candidate at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.

Kent Leatham's poems and translations have appeared in dozens of journals, including Ploughshares, Prairie Schooner, Fence, Softblow, Able Muse, and Poetry Quarterly. He received an MFA from Emerson College and a BA from Pacific Lutheran University, served as an associate poetry editor for Black Lawrence Press, and currently teaches creative writing at California State University Monterey Bay.

Andrew Liu is an MFA student at Cal State Long Beach's Creative Writing Poetry Program. He hopes to work as a lecturer for a community college one day and writes with myth and landscape.

Mario Loprete, born in Catanzaro, Italy in 1968, is a graduate student at Accademia of Belle Arti, Catanzaro. He lives in a world that he shapes at his liking through virtual, pictorial, and sculptural movement. Painting for him is the first love. In creating a painting, he starts from the spasmodic research of a concept with which he wants to send a message. The sculpture is his lover, his artistic betrayal to the painting.

Jeffrey H. MacLachlan also has recent work in New Ohio Review, the minnesota review, Columbia Journal, among others. He teaches literature at Georgia College & State University.

Hannah Marshall lives in south central Illinois. Her poetry has appeared in The Madison Review, Anglican Theological Review, Wisconsin Review, Big Muddy, Stoneboat, and others. She is pursuing an MFA in poetry at Converse College's Low-Residency MFA in Creative Writing.

Laura McCullough is a poet and memoirist whose books include The Wild Night Dress, selected by Billy Collins in the Miller Williams Poetry Contest, Jersey Mercy, Rigger Death & Hoist Another, Panic, Speech Acts, and What Men Want. She has edited two anthologies, A Sense of Regard: essays on poetry and race and The Room and the World: essays on Stephen Dunn. Her poems and prose have appeared in Best American Poetry, Georgia Review, American Poetry Review, Painted Bride Quarterly, The Writer's Chronicle, Guernica, Cimarron Review, The Southern Review, Gulf Coast, Pank, Hotel America, Prairie Schooner, and many other journals and magazines. She has had scholarships or fellowships to the Bread Loaf Writers Conference, the Nebraska Summer Writers Conference, Sewanee Writers Conference, the Vermont Studio Center, the Virginia Center for the Arts, the Betsy House, Marble House, and has been a Dodge Poetry Festival poet, a Florida Writers Circuit poet, and a Decatur Book Festival poet. She has had two NJ State Arts Council Fellowships, one in poetry and one in prose. She teaches full time at Brookdale Community College, has taught at Stockton University and Ramapo College, and is on the faculty of the Sierra Nevada low-res MFA where she teaches poetry and critical theory. Visit her at http://www.lauramccullough.org/.

Amelie Meltzer is a San Francisco native studying in Pittsburgh, PA. She is a medical student and activist, working to address racial bias in healthcare. She writes poetry and nonfiction. She recently spent five entire minutes looking for something she was holding.

Jose Oseguera is an LA-based writer of poetry, short fiction and literary nonfiction. Having grown up in a diverse urban environment, Jose has always been interested in the people and places around him, and the stories that each of these has to share, those that often go untold.

His writing has been published in a wide variety of journals including Meat for Tea, Sky Island Journal, The Esthetic Apostle, The Inquisitive Eater, and The Main Street Rag. His work has also been nominated for the Best of the Net award and the Pushcart Prize.

Lauro Palomba has taught ESL and done stints as a freelance journalist and speechwriter. Approximately seventy of his stories and poems have appeared in American and Canadian literary journals.

Scout Petersen was born and raised in Omaha, Nebraska. She's majoring in English and minoring in business at the College of Charleston. Currently, she's writing for her university's online publication called The College Today.

Trevor Plate spent his childhood on the island of Guam before moving to the Pacific Northwest. Now he lives all over the country while he continues to write poetry. His poems have previously appeared in Maudlin House, Boston Accent, and The Ilanot Review.

Ryan Przybylski is a hobbyist photographer with a passion for abstract and macro photography. Follow him on 500px and DeviantArt @endprocess83.

Nicholas Reiner is an American poet of Mexican heritage. His work appears or is forthcoming in Spillway, Aquifer, Fourteen Hills, Connotation Press, and Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review. He holds degrees from Stanford University and the University of California, Irvine, where he completed an MFA. He is Director of Communications at the Anti-Recidivism Coalition (ARC) and lives in Los Angeles, CA with his wife and daughter.

Kalen Rowe is a multidisciplinary artist and musician from Houston, TX. They have a degree in Creative Writing from the University of Houston, run a bookmaking and publishing print shop out of their home called Anklebiters Publishing,

and have self-published and handmade two of their own poetry chapbooks, Free Songs // The Image as Machine // Some ~American~ Poems and Something Beautiful Triumphs // Idling Fire. Their poetry has been published or is forthcoming in Botticelli Magazine, The Letters Page, Gravel, Gargoyle, No Assholes, and others.

Cliff Saunders has an MFA in Creative Writing from The University of Arizona. His poems have appeared recently in Pedestal Magazine, West Trade Review, Pinyon, The Ibis Head Review, CURA, San Pedro River Review, and Neologism Poetry Journal. He lives in Myrtle Beach, where he serves as co-coordinator of The Litchfield Tea & Poetry Series.

Matthew Schmidt is working on a PhD in English at the University of Southern Mississippi. His poems have been published or are forthcoming in Hobart, Pleiades, The Seattle Review, Territory, and elsewhere. He is an associate poetry editor at Fairy Tale Review.

e.a.d. sellors is a writer, artist, filmmaker, and publisher of Ragged Lion Press. He was born in London, UK, where he currently resides.

Yu Shen is a sculptor and metalsmith, living in Iowa City, Iowa. Her work focus on the relationship between individual and society; personal value and identity recognition exist in the different cultural background. She got her MFA in sculpture major from Ohio University in 2016. Currently an MFA candidate in Iowa university in Metal arts.

Jason Stopa is painter and writer living in Brooklyn, NY. He received his BFA from Indiana University and his MFA from Pratt Institute. He is a contributing writer to Art in America, Hyperallergic, and The Brooklyn Rail. He teaches at Purchase College and Pratt Institute and edits for a philosophy journal at Columbia University.

Robert Sumner grew up in Virginia and has been a Californian for twenty years. His fiction is forthcoming or has appeared in The Emerson Review, The Quotable, Jokes Review, and The Penmen Review. @RobertGSumner on Twitter.

Adam Tavel won the 2017 Richard Wilbur Award for his third poetry collection, Catafalque (University of Evansville Press, 2018). You can find him online at https://adamtavel.com/.

Michael Ventura-Rogers holds an MFA in poetry from California State University, Long Beach. He runs a local business and finds great delight in all things science, sport, and scholastic.

Riley Waite is a Fine Artist from Ireland, currently based in southern California, who focuses primarily on representational figure paintings. His work can be categorized as mimetic in relation to "The Four Corners of Painting." Currently, he is working on a series of paintings tackling his tumultuous upbringing in two different cultures: Ireland and California. Never having a place where he truly felt like he fit, always split between the two, travelling to both on a yearly basis, he has never truly found what 'home' is, whether it be in people, a specific place, or a memory. His current painting series explores these issues and looks for a conclusion, if any. His subject matter includes portraits and scenes of his friends and family from both cultures.

Erick Zepeda was born and raised in Los Angeles. He is a recent graduate of California State University, Long Beach, where he obtained a degree in Film with a Minor in English Literature. He hopes to have a career in writing both fiction and screenplays.