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RALEIGH REVIEW FOUNDED AS RIG POETRY
Robert Ian Greene
February 21, 2010
EDITOR’S NOTE

In this issue you will see the vulnerability of humankind and those who have no “backup plan.” You will also see the resilience of children as they overcome tremendous obstacles. Living in reality does not always come easily, yet it can also be the source for creating vibrant, powerful art—as you’ll find here.

At home in Raleigh, we’ve begun offering writing workshops to youth at The Hope Center—an organization assisting youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood. As this issue of Raleigh Review came together around themes of family and the difficult reality we live in—and given our mission of inspiring empathy for our neighbors—it seemed appropriate for us to share a small sample of the writing that came out of those workshops. You’ll find a sample poem from ninth-grade student Chelsey Butler on page 90. I think you’ll find it to be quite moving.

In The Review Review, Melissa Oliveira recently called Raleigh Review “a big-hearted lit mag that knows how to delight and devastate.” We hope that will ring true for this issue too, though I must say Raleigh Review still speaks best through the works we publish, so enough rambling from me; I’ll let you get to reading!

This issue is dedicated to one of our earliest supporters, my grandfather, Jack, who told me, “You can’t help where you come from, though you can help where you are going.”

—Rob Greene, editor & publisher
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### CONTRIBUTORS
Enter Ghost

He knew about ghosts,

how sometimes they appear
to everyone, and sometimes
only you can see them,

how we listen,
as they stagger towards us,
trying to parse the babble,
because we think,
being dead
knowing the great secret now,
they must know
other things as well.

how we know them
or think we know them

fathers
  friends
  wives.

How they are wounds
wearing human faces.
The Dog Yard Storm

drops from glaciers across the bay—
katabatic howls that hit the sea
like crashing spruce trees, roil the salt
melt to foam and rise against the grey
clay cliffs, attack the south wall
of our home on the edge of the yard
where the howls of 27 aging huskies
cannot purge the air of December slush—
snow turned rain against the north Pacific rim. Inside, away from the gale, we light
the propane stove for tea, kindle
fire with what remains of our dry wood, burrow
into wool to strike back against the storm,
hope the walls hold, trust dogs to their instinct,
watch the brewing beer settle, and pray
cabin fever can subside, that the impulse
to flee toward the storm is only a cry
for silence to encase the illiteracy of our faith.
POEM | *Lisa Beans*

So Let’s Talk About Metaphors:

Ocean slightly tipped up,  
photo of us blindfolded,  
all the birds, all the seasons.  
Would you like to hear  
about tonight’s sunset?  
I forgot to catch it actually,  
everything already pale blue.  
And it won’t do to tell you  
of another dream you were in.  
I used to crawl under  
my grandmother’s porch,  
lie between the ant hills,  
just to feel relief.  
A swarming inside me:  
Lord, I’m listening.
POEM | Diana Reaves

Benedictions

The way you bait hooks
   with raw chunks of beef neck,
   set bank lines to beckon snappers—

it’s a rite, your body bent
   over bulging tree roots,
   tying knots. You cast

each lure into the slow, widening
   crook of the river—
   our swimming hole

for years, a spot outside town
   where the current isn’t likely
   to swallow us up.

❖

Between us, jarfuls of beeves’
   blood and slim pouches
   of salted sardines.

We puncture the lids
   with hammers and nails,
   lower them alongside

chickenwire traps you anchor
   to the muck-bottom.
   Here, the water barrels, carries
an acrid breeze downstream
to beaked prowlers,
and you tell me

your mother is dying.
It’s spread too far,
and won’t be long now.

❖

I’ve seen you clean a turtle
with a pocket knife and hold
in your hand, an hour

after the gutting,
a snapper’s small heart—
the will to live somehow

throbbing beyond its own nerve, a blessing
that’s survived by mere
muscle and air,

by an intrinsic resolve to work.

❖

We’re still young.
My only answer is to love you

the surefire way
I know how: unfastening
buttons—a widening crook
of sunburned chest,
    the rapid stretch down
to your belt.

No moon tonight. Only wind
    and clouds and hands
and the cotton panels

of your shirt unleashed—
    two wild sails in the gusts,
billowing behind you.
RUBY NEWMAN | *Trees in the Bend, Lake Sonoma*, 2014
14 x 10 inches | Acrylic on art paper
Collection of the artist
Cold

The Byrnes’ address has three numbers in it, all beginning in three: 31–37 Thirty-Sixth Street. After sixteen years of residence, the intrigue of the Three Threes has not faltered for Mary Byrne, so she continues to bring them up in any given discussion, related or not. *A good omen,* she says. *A sign of the presence of the Lord.* Her teenage son is curious to know how an old Astoria tenement house in need of repairs for close to two decades could possibly be a symbol of something good to come, God, or anything else. *Maybe it’s just a street address,* he says, *also known as a bunch of numbers,* in response to which Mary theatrically expresses what a shame it is her son does not possess the same faith she does. Sean then asks her if she has ever considered that there are six numbers in her address, that they moved there when he was six months old, and that there are exactly six houses on the block, which usually keeps her off the topic for at least a few days.

The landlord ignores all Mary’s efforts to have him fix things in the apartment, so she has developed an intense resentment and chooses never to call him by name, referring to him only as The Slumlord. Every faucet in the apartment leaks, including the one in the kitchen, which causes Mary to roll up a hand towel and place it beneath the incessant dripping that would otherwise keep her up at night. She refuses to spend money on a plumber when it is the job of the man who owns the house to make sure everything in it works properly (*Am I wrong?*). Sixteen years of uninterrupted leaky faucets. *A sign of the presence of the Lord.*

The leak in the kitchen sink does not bother the son like it does the mother because he is not the one who spends all his time in there. He is, however, the one who has to listen to Mary talk about it, and any subject
relating to the kitchen is of immense conversational interest to her. The kitchen is where she lives her life; it is her den, her office, and her church.

Apart from Christ, coffee is Mary’s most fervent interest. She is always in the kitchen drinking coffee or brewing coffee or offering coffee to the neighborhood kids who are in and out. You want a cup of coffee? she asks, a mug dangling from her index finger by its handle. I just made some. Fresh. They inevitably decline the offer, knowing Mary’s coffee is too strong, too bitter for anyone to drink but her, and she knows this (she has heard them, on the other side of Sean’s bedroom door, calling it sludge more than once), but she also knows that it is polite of her to offer it anyway. Well, if you change your mind, the pot’s right here on the counter… Have as much as you like… I can always make more. When the guest denies Mary again, she sighs, disappointed, places the mug on the counter, and takes a seat at the breakfast table. Then she proceeds to anxiously steal glimpses of the mug while turning the pages of her newspaper.

Because this is what happens almost every morning, it is what happens on the morning the snow starts. Sean and his best friend, Kevin, both exempt from school because of the weather, are on their way out the door for a cigarette when Mary stops them with the expression of someone alerting her loved ones about an emergency.

“Kevin, hon, how would you like a cup of coffee?” she asks.

Sean is generally embarrassed by his mother’s fixation with offering coffee to his friends, but feels particularly humiliated on this morning. He knows that Mary senses his excitement about the snow day and is searching for the appropriate words to say to bring his spirits back down to earth, to the house, to the kitchen, to her. Worst of all, she’s just getting started. He is repulsed by his mother’s vulnerability. She looks desperate and sickly as ever there at the table with her skinny legs crossed at the knees: an aged actress in the opening kitchen scene.
He imagines the curtain rising to expose a fragile, evidently once beautiful woman at center stage. She is the main character of the production that is Sean’s life. His mother’s shoulder-length graying blonde hair is held back in a tight bun on top of her head and there is residue from yesterday’s mascara beneath her beady eyes. Her robe has fallen slightly, revealing a small, pale chest like that of a park bird. She has lost at least twenty pounds since her husband’s incarceration three years ago, and it hurts her that after all this time, no one’s seemed to notice. To Sean, everything about this scene is staged; he sees before him a set, a dingy costume, lighting. There is an oddly illuminating gray to his mother’s complexion because of the way the winter half-sun enters through the window, hitting her veined, translucent neck like death when it starts to settle.

The makeup artist has done some number on Mary’s face to capture that wasted look: a character whose soul and heart have both been gone for years, but who—by some miracle—continues to move and speak like the rest of us. The three walls around her—the kitchen and living room are adjoining, a visual effect that only enhances the haunting image in Sean’s mind of woman at center stage—the tiled floor beneath her slippers, are all covered with props. Appliances that are not real, but made of cardboard and painted beige or black or brown in an effort to deceive the eye. A fallen, waxen creature in a room that is not a room.

Kevin does not hear Mary. He is fumbling with his fingernails and rocking his head up and down silently since he has got a song in his head he doesn’t yet know the words to.

With the visual of his mother as an old, tragic figure has come an unexpectedly sharp emotion for Sean, and it feels vaguely like pity. By some grace of God, he has come to the realization that the sad clown before him is his blood. He is going to let this one slide.

“Kevin, what are you, deaf?” Mary asks with the playful familiarity distinct to a mother who knows her
son’s friends as well as her son does. Kevin has been coming to the Byrnes’ apartment practically every day since he was seven years old. His red hair and his freckles remind Mary of times that have been lost to her and her family. When he and Sean were small, if either one of them didn’t eat his lima beans, she would kindly ask him to, and since Sean was a moody, disobedient child, Kevin was the one who usually listened. “Do you want coffee?” she asks. “I know Sean don’t want any.”

As Mary goes to lick her finger and separate some pages of Thursday’s Post, she hears a loud crash, and when she looks up, finds her son yelling “Come on!” to Kevin, and suddenly he is charging out the door with his friend after him. The mug is no longer on the counter where Mary left it, and there is a hole the size of a head in the kitchen window, cracks reaching out from it for the edges of the frame. She has not been outdoors in days, and the city’s winter hits her in the face like the breath of a bonfire that is too close.

“My mother is enough to put anyone in a loony bin,” Sean says as he slams the screen door behind him and takes a seat on the front stoop of the house.

When Sean says anyone, he is referring to his father. There is no part of him that is ashamed of his father’s being locked up. Since it reminds him of the hotness of his blood and the half of him that makes him not Mary, Sean feels proud mentioning John Byrne, whatever the context.

“She’s got to stop with the coffee thing,” Kevin says, leaning against the railing. It is not sturdy and could easily send him plummeting to the basement entrance below, but he isn’t nervous about it.

“Every move that woman makes is for me,” Sean says, reaching into his back pocket for cigarettes. “It’s like I come out of my room in the morning, walk down the dreaded hallway, and there’s the old bag waiting to look at me and see what sort of mood I’m in. See what kind of
mood I’m in so she knows what she’s got to do to get a rise out of me this time.”

Kevin puts his hands around the railing and shakes it. He does it while leaning his back against it, daring the structure to let him drop. He wonders if the metal always shook like this. Then he remembers the time he was in fourth grade and some kid pushed him against it as hard as he could. The boy was trying to look tough in front of two Colombian girls from Sunnyside who had been walking home with them from the park. It may even have been Kevin’s own weight that day that turned the railing loose.

“If I look happy, like I got a good night’s sleep, she starts talking about the ads in the paper, like ‘Well look at this new refrigerator they’ve got out now,’ or ‘Why don’t you think about going to college for business?’ She says things hoping they will make me tired, you know, like the sound of her voice is going to make me tired, like maybe if she talks enough with that voice of hers I’ll turn right around and go back to bed.”

“You shouldn’t let it get to you like that,” Kevin says, realizing that there is no way a nine-year-old who was small for his age could have done that kind of damage to the railing. “And anyway, sometimes you do crawl back into bed, so I guess she gets what she wants out of you.”

“I’d rather be in bed than in the kitchen or living room listening to her talk about lampshades,” Sean says.

“Why do you put up with it then?”

“Put up with it? I just threw her beloved dishware out the kitchen window.”

“Yeah, and she didn’t like it,” Kevin says, starting to laugh. Sean’s breaking the window like that has got him thinking about the day he was pushed against the Byrnes’ railing. The look on the kid’s face when Kevin sprang up, all agile and ready to fight, the look on the kid’s face when Kevin pushed him so far across the sidewalk he got slammed against Mrs. Byrne’s car. “Your mother’s face just now. I love it when she gets mad like that.” He remembers the kid’s name.
“I couldn't look back at her,” Sean says. “If I did I probably would’ve killed her.”

“Remember when I pushed Bobby Sheehan into the Corsica and she came out with the broom?”

“The witch that she is...” Sean stares into space.

“I ran all the way home, only to catch a beating from my pop once your mother called him up.” Kevin is clenching the metal with tight fists, laughing so hard his head comes forward. He is deliberately making his body loose so that all that’s keeping him on his feet is his grip on the flimsy railing. Fragile security, he thinks, and he is compelled. He shakes it ferociously as he laughs, eyes enormous, sucking air through the spaces between his teeth. Then, with his mouth wide open, Kevin hovers over the sitting Sean and stares down at him, imitating a madman.

Sean doesn't so much as glance at Kevin. “She's unbelievable.” He scratches the back of his head and spits phlegm. He flicks his cigarette, aiming for his mother’s car door, but it bounces off the tire and into the street. “Let’s go inside and get money. I want food before the snow starts up.”

When the boys enter the apartment, they are surprised to find Mary still sitting at the kitchen table where they left her. She is on the phone now, and Sean notices that she has not picked up the shards of glass in and around the sink. Because they are coming from the outside, it takes each boy a few minutes to realize just how cold the apartment has gotten from the broken window.

“Well, Dorothy, I know it’s not snowing yet, but once it starts, the issue is how are these kids going to get back from school?” She looks up at the two boys, smiles, and shrugs, as if in lighthearted amusement at her dearest friend’s stupidity.

“It’s a snow day, Dorothy. I don’t know what to tell you. But I’ll tell you this much. Even if there was school today, I wouldn’t send Sean out there—No no no, all’s I’m
saying is, it’s dangerous. All right. All right, hon. I’ll give you a ring later. Stay inside,” says Mary. And then, as though an afterthought: “Stay warm.”

Mary is irritated but calm, knowing what she has to do. If she exposes her rage, Sean will call her a maniac and storm out, leaving her alone in the freezing apartment, worried sick about his safety out there in the snow. He clearly wants to assert his power over her and the house, and she will give it to him freely. She will give him his power, and in doing so, she will show him how selfish he is.

“Hey, Ma.” Sean walks over to the sink and picks up the pieces of stray glass, then chucks them in the plastic bag hanging from the cabinet knob at his legs.

“You boys want anything to eat?” Mary asks, reaching for her pack of Virginia Slims. She feels for the gold cross beneath her robe and looks at Kevin, worrying about how skinny he is.

“No,” says Sean. “We’re going to get pizza. You need anything from the store while we’re out?”

“No, hon. Just be back before the weather starts.”

“All right,” says Sean. He ties the plastic bag up and places it on the kitchen counter so he doesn’t forget it when he leaves. Then he pulls out another bag from under the sink and wraps its handle around the knob.

“Yes, you don’t want to leave glass around, even if it’s in a bag,” says Mary through chattering teeth. “Make sure you take that out on your way.”

“All right, Ma,” Sean says, and he heads down the hall to get money for the pizza, Kevin a few feet behind him.

Once they are in Sean’s bedroom, Kevin wants to talk about Jennifer from American History class. Namely, whether or not Sean thinks she is cute, and if he does, what about her is. “Jennifer Campanella is the hottest junior girl,” Kevin says. He waits a few seconds for Sean’s response.

“She’ll be on the phone all day, right in that same chair, talking about a snow day like it’s the coming of Christ.”
“How are you going to go and break the kitchen window like that and not get your ass kicked for it?” Kevin sits on the edge of Sean’s bed and starts tossing a basketball back and forth between his hands. “She’s acting like nothing happened.”

“That’s because she doesn’t want to give me the satisfaction I’d get out of her reaction. You know this by now. My mother will sit in that kitchen all day freezing half to death if it makes me think it don’t bother her what I do.”

“Yeah, but it’s the dead of winter. No one can ignore a hole like that for too long. Someone’s got to come and fix it eventually.”

“I’ll get it fixed tomorrow, after she’s had a good day and night to shiver and cough over it,” says Sean. “What kind of son do you think I am?”

“Also, I think Jennifer’s not a virgin either,” says Kevin, grinning at Sean as he chuck him the basketball, hard. He walks over to his backpack to get a few dollars out of the front pocket. “Or at least, I’ve heard that. I’ve heard that from a few kids.”

Sean spins the ball between his index fingers, then places it on the bed. “Like I’m going to let my mother freeze to death in her own house.”

It is late into the evening now and the apartment is more oppressive than usual because all three know there is no way out with all the snow. The only television in the apartment is in the living room. Channel Five has been saying four to five feet by midnight.

Sean and Kevin have not taken off their coats or boots since returning home hours ago. Mary is still in her robe and slippers, despite the temperature drop in the apartment. She shivers constantly, every so often letting out a gush of air from the bottom of her lungs, which is followed by a violent chattering of the teeth and a long, drawn out sigh.

“Ma, you going to put a coat on or something?” Sean asks. He knows she will say no even if it means getting
sick. He doesn’t feel any guilt about it since it’s necessary that today she learn her lesson.

“I’m all right,” says Mary, who is preposterous and freezing in her robe. The trembling gives her a visceral reminder of both the selfishness of this child, who might never grow up, and her own victimhood as a woman who has sacrificed everything to be treated like an animal.

Kevin sits on the floor, his back against the gray leather couch. He is picking at his fingers, every so often taking little bites, then tipping his head back and glancing at his hands.

“That is an absolutely disgusting habit, Kevin,” says Mary, who is at the opposite end of the couch with her legs crossed. She knows her chest is revealed because she can feel the frigid air from the broken window in the kitchen hitting it, but she leaves the robe open. If she catches cold, Sean will oblige her. He will make her tea and, if need be, run to the store in the snow to fetch her honey.

“Sorry, Mrs. Byrne. I just got to get this one piece of skin off and it’s driving me crazy.”

Some time passes in silence. Mary stirs her coffee. The television has been put on mute, so the only sound in the room is that of spoon scraping against mug. She smokes her cigarette while she stirs, and sometimes her pulls are so deep, Kevin can actually hear the burning of the paper. He sees how her hand gestures make her look like a robot: hand to mouth, hand to mouth, ash flick, hand to mouth, hand to mouth, ash flick. Meanwhile, the stirring, teeth chattering, and burning of the cigarette paper. The Post is across her tiny thighs and she has no hands free to turn the page, so her gaze lingers idly on this one. Kevin imagines a dopehead from the corner and struggles to see a distinction.

“Hey, Mrs. Byrne, you think the sugar’s mixed in yet?” asks Kevin sarcastically. “You’ve been stirring for a good ten minutes.”

“Mrs. Byrne.”

Mary brings the cigarette to her lips, takes a puff, and repeats.

“Izzzzzzzzzzzzz-a-bel-la Ross-a-leeeeeee-nee.” Her eyes are still on the paper. She is making a song out of the name on the page.

Kevin watches her, knowing she cannot see him. His eyes move down to the crucifix between her small, sagging breasts.

Sean sits in his father’s recliner at the other side of the living room, sprawled out and staring into the muted television. He is in the rare state of having tuned out his mother. He cannot hear her chant because he is concentrating on the screen, the lips of the woman with the black pantsuit. She is attractive and probably only a few years older than he is. She stands with an umbrella in one hand and her microphone in the other, smiling at him while she speaks, flurries all around her. Although he cannot hear what she says, he imagines her voice to be soft and raspy. She has one sharp tooth on the right side of her face. Her nails are short and painted black, speaking of a life outside his TV. Each little hand glows against the black of what it clings to. And then the exquisite nails—dots, perfect dots making constellations against her porcelain skin sky...

“Sean, do me a favor,” Mary says. She is done with her song, left irritable and shivering. She is too cold and the game is over. “Since you broke the window this morning like a genius, and it’s got to be below zero in here, do something about the draft. Put a blanket up in front of the window.” She is waiting for her son to look at her and see her chest, the fragility of it; only then will she put her mug down on the coffee table in a gesture that will paint her as frail. Then she will grab the edges of her robe and pull them toward one another, rub her shoulders, and sit
back against the couch as if exhausted. But her son never looks at her.

Sean is too absorbed in the girl—the woman—with the black nail polish to hear his mother. Instead, he sits motionless, still reclined with his hands clasped on top of his chest.

“The window,” says Mary, showing her aggravation now. “Get something to put over it, please.”

He licks his lips and blinks, as if thinking hard about something.

“Sean!”

Sean stares at the girl.

“Please, Sean!”

Mary throws the newspaper down onto the floor. “Sean Sean Sean Sean Sean!” She is screaming now, looking not at her son, but at the wall before her. Her eyes are caught on the portrait of her husband in uniform, youthful and handsome as ever. It was taken the day he returned home from Vietnam. That following summer she would have her first miscarriage.

Sean finally hears her this time, but pretends not to. Instead of responding, he scratches his head and looks at his fingers in an effort to be disgusting like his friend. For now, the beautiful girl is gone from the screen. He can hear Kevin begin to chuckle under his breath.

Mary gets up, walks over to the linen closet in the hallway, and pulls out a wool blanket. She is not even inside the living room yet when she throws it as hard as she can at her son’s head. “Put the fucking blanket over the window or go sleep on the street,” she says. “And when you get home from school tomorrow you can call whoever the fuck it is you call when you’ve got a hole the size of a basketball in your kitchen window!”

Being that this is the reaction Sean has been waiting for, he stays put in his chair. He pulls the blanket she threw at him apart and wraps himself in it. Then he leans over the coffee table, takes his mother’s matchbook and one of her cigarettes, lights it, and throws the dead match on the floor in a flamboyant gesture.
“You’ve got to be out of your head if you think I’m going to sit here and let this house drop to below zero. Look at you sitting there like you haven’t done a thing. Like I’m some lunatic mother flying off the handle every other minute.” Surprisingly, because of all her nerves, Mary has stopped shivering. The fury has rushed through her body and warmed her. “Don’t look at Kevin like he can help you out of this. Getting that window fixed is going to break your bank, and there’s nothing you can do about it now. You made your choice.”

Sean leans back into the chair further so that he is almost completely horizontal. Dramatically, he takes puffs from the cigarette, letting sloppy Os fall out of his lips, then float out and up into the ceiling.

“Oh, so we’re going to play the Johnny Byrne game tonight,” says Mary. “This is just going to be one of those nights when Sean pulls stunts that remind me a little too much of his father, and I get a little scared. I get a little scared, but I let it go because I know he’s just a kid.” She is talking to Kevin when she says this, and not once does she look at her son. It is as though he is no longer in the room. “He’s just a kid that doesn’t know any better.”

Sean smiles and squirms around in his blanket like a little boy. Then he brings both legs up and slams his snow boots on the coffee table, knocking Mary’s mug over in the process. He pretends to watch the commercials.

Mary is unaffected by the spill even though it has left a large, dark brown stain in the middle of the beige carpet. She continues to speak to Kevin. “Next thing you know, he’ll be throwing punk kids like yourselves out windows.”

Kevin has seen this sort of thing between them before. Sean acts in some manner that disrespects Mary and her household, and all of a sudden she starts speaking as if he is not in the room. However, he has never seen her bring up her husband during one of these episodes. The hole in the window must have been just the thing the poor woman needed to push her to that point—the point of speaking hatefully of a man who for
years she had been treating like a beloved ghost with a name in need of preserving. Usually when she mentions Mr. Byrne, it is with seeming love and a sense of loss: *Sean, you eat just like your father* or *Johnny used to always do this with his hands* or *Boys, remember that time Sean’s dad took us to Coney Island for his birthday?* Kevin wonders why it’s taken so long for her to reach this place. Isn’t a woman whose husband tried to kill her supposed to hate him back instantly? Shouldn’t the breaking point have been that time he put his hands around her neck and pushed her all the way to the open window?

“I’m going to get out of here,” Kevin says. He doesn’t really want to leave since he’s been enjoying the show but knows he has to at least make the gesture.

“No, you’re not,” Mary says. “Your father told me not to let you go anywhere tonight with this snow.” She brushes a piece of hair behind her ears. “Plus all the crazies are out on nights like this.”

“All right,” Kevin says, relieved. *The crazies.* He sees his friend for the first time in a while, there on the other side of the room. He is smoking a Virginia Slim, looking foolish as ever in his blanket and ashing on the floor like a crybaby. Kevin knows that if he or his mother behaved like this, somebody would be getting slapped around a little, which is why he has always believed strongly that there needs to be a man in the house to keep everyone in check. But Kevin likes Mary. He likes her because he is not the one who has to deal with her. He likes her because she looks pretty good for her age, and when she leans over to reach for her coffee, he can sometimes see down her robe.

Sean refuses to look away from the television.

“Hey, Prince of Queens, get up out your throne and cover that window.” The back and forth with Kevin has calmed Mary down a bit, which makes her feel liberated, knowing that if she can only maintain this show of playfulness, she will get her power back. Just as with John, she wins the fight if she keeps Kevin unaware of what’s inside her.
Sean finally looks up at his mother. “You seem real upset, Ma,” he says. “You okay?”

“Get your ass out of that chair.”

“I’ll buy you a new mug, Mommy, I pwomise!” Sean screams in a baby voice. He jumps up from his chair maniacally, throwing the blanket on the floor. “But just as long as you pwomise to leave me alone from now on!”

Kevin is witnessing it all with a grin on his face. He is sure they don’t see it, so he revels in it. He likes knowing that on this rare occasion, he can be amused by something inappropriate without having to hide it. It’s not like at school or at home where his teacher or his father can catch him. In this house, no one is ever looking at him, even when they are.

“You most certainly will buy me a new mug, you ungrateful piece of shit.” Mary has lost her humor, her cool, and her glow is gone from her. In its place is the former paleness, a paleness that reflects the snow outside, the cold that has made its way inside, and the familiar sickness of this house. “And you’ll buy me a new window, too.”

“Ma, you ever notice your hair and your face are the same color as the couch? Sometimes I can’t even tell where you stop and it starts.”

“All right, Johnny Junior,” says Mary, “that’s enough now. Clean up the coffee you spilled, cover the window, and get to bed.”

“I wish I was more like Johnny, since then maybe I’d have the balls to at least try and get rid of you.”

“Stop it, Sean. Stop it right now.”

“For good this time!”

Mary grabs her son by both arms. “Go fix the window, Sean!”

Kevin is now practically rolling around the couch laughing, grabbing his side and eventually falling back against the cushions. He watches the portrait of Mr. Byrne, remembering him fondly, his jokes and his odd way of always speaking like the funny man in a movie. Mr. Byrne, the good-humored soldier. Mr. Byrne, the
mental patient, and the only presence in this room without movement now. The idea of this kind of transformation taking place excites Kevin, so he starts hitting the coffee table with his fists, which goes unnoticed by mother and son.

Sean is yelling, but his nerves are calm, and he knows he is doing and saying the right things for the first time in a while. Today, he feels like himself, and he is saying all the things he means. He feels the way he should feel. He feels like a real Byrne.

“Ma, remember the night Daddy got put away? You remember the look on his face when they took him out of here, like he was disappointed in himself?” Sean grabs his mother’s arms and pushes her off him. Then he moves closer to her, which forces her to step backward, and there is real fear in her eyes. She drops onto the sofa.

“Yes,” she says softly. “Yes, I remember. He had tried to hurt me, and it tore him apart. It tore him right apart…” She trails off. “Tore him to pieces.”

“Good thing Billy stepped in, and it was him who got thrown from a second-story window instead of you, huh?”

“Yes. Your cousin was drunk. He could take the fall. I wouldn’t have been able to. I’m too old, too fragile.”

“I wonder about that look, Ma, don’t you?” Sean hovers over his mother.

“What look?”

“The look on Daddy’s face. That look of disappointment when they put him in a car and drove him away forever.”

“He couldn’t cope with what he’d done,” Mary says, and she begins to cry. Not a loud cry, or a wail, but a soft moan. If both boys hadn’t been looking at her, if, for instance, they had been watching the television at the moment she broke down, they may never have known she was crying. “He couldn’t cope with what he’d done, with what he’d tried to do,” Mary says. She begins to whisper nonsense to herself. She covers her face, which
causes the words to become muffled. “He was all torn up inside from it,” she says through her hands.

“Yeah...he was.” Sean suddenly feels tired. His mother’s tears have no effect on him. He sees them as weak, as he is weak. Their exhaustion, that is, the exhaustion of this house, shames him. “I’m going to Kevin’s for the night, Ma.”

After some silence, Mary says, “All right, son.” She is staring at the floor, trying not to look up at the wall with her husband’s photograph on it, trying not to look up at her son as he walks away from her. “Be careful in the weather.”

But before Sean walks away, he leans down over Mary and brings his face to her cheek, lingering there for a few seconds. He feels the chill of her skin and wishes for the first time all day that he had just covered the window for his mother like she asked him. Her face feels so delicate against his, the cheek bony, frigid. Sean can taste the residual salt from her tears as he walks over to pick up the blanket on the floor. He wipes away his mother’s tears from his lips and folds the blanket. Then he places it on the chair and tells Kevin to get some paper towels for the rug. He will see about buying her a new window in the morning. Sean knows Mary will not pull the wool blanket around her until after they are gone, so he is anxious for them to leave. First, though, they will clean up the mess.

Kevin is on the other side of the couch from Mary with his head resting on the cushion, bored. He is worn out from all the yelling and laughing and now this ridiculous crying, but pulls himself up anyway and moves for the kitchen. Reaching for the roll of paper towels on the counter, Kevin imagines Mary freezing to death in the apartment tonight or tomorrow. Sean will find her sometime over the weekend, when he finally makes his way home. Her body will most likely be in the bedroom, laying out on a perfectly made bed (using the covers would have shown Sean weakness), stiff with ice, frail hands no longer frail, as they will be locked like concrete onto the cross around her neck. No one will be able to get
at it, so they will have to bury her that way, which is what she would have wished. Someone, perhaps a nosy coroner, will notice that the television is still on in the living room, and although passively, unsuspecting of foul play, he will wonder why: Saturday morning cartoons? Nothing but a robe?

As though the three of them had earlier taken, all at once, some sort of powerful stimulant, each crashes within moments of one another. That is, they are swept over, collectively, with a sense of defeat from the drama of the day. Kevin attempts to scrub the coffee out of the carpet in vain. Sean, holding back tears, has forgotten about the spill and is staring into the commercials as if they might remove him from where he sits. Mary is at the corner of the sofa with her face in her hands avoiding eye contact with a photograph. For the first time in a day, three people in the same home all feel the same way: completely alone. One of them, the one with the most sensitivity and intelligence—the one who, years from now, having lost both parents to mental illness, will become a social worker—he is the one who in this moment wonders about the consequences of keeping company, of rooms, of closed spaces. He wonders about the consequences of too much snow.

The fight was a drug that inadvertently caused each to feel so revved, so alive. The simultaneous recalling and prospect of violence was a progressive simmering of energy that has now, so suddenly, turned stagnant. The energy ignited, and like a flame, it did die down. But the fall of the thing is proving harsher than its life, and when all is quiet in the apartment, the dust of everyone’s nerves settles like ashes. It seemed before that they were divided—one laughing, one crying, one screaming—one amused, one devastated, one empowered. But now all they have is the silence: muted television and spilled coffee. The unity in the clatter becomes apparent only when the real solitude sets in. No more opposition, no more harsh reminders of the running of the blood.
Suddenly, the prospect of the boys weathering the storm outdoors seems natural. Why hadn’t anyone thought of it earlier?

Once the door is shut behind them, Mary begins to weep. She lets out hard, deep sobs as she sits hunched over on the sofa, both hands clasping the gold cross around her neck. She wants to pray but feels unworthy of God in this moment, so instead continues to watch the television. She decides to take it off mute, hoping that the sound will soothe her, and it does. There she finds a young and attractive newscaster, an unconventionally beautiful girl, small and friendly and seemingly kind. Very young to be on television giving news. Very young, and most likely very ambitious for her age. What a lovely voice. What a lovely and soothing voice she has.

Mary wipes her face with the sleeve of her robe, gets up, and walks to the kitchen. She can no longer feel the harsh wind from that giant hole in her home hitting the bare skin of her neck, her face, her ankles. What a relief the absence of discomfort can be. She stops in the doorway and stares at the broken window, eventually making her way to it. Before reaching the window, though, she runs her hands along the surface of the breakfast table to remind herself of all the dents and cracks there. She has to push hard on the wood to feel them through the growing numbness in her fingertips. So many years of wear.

She recalls the night many years ago when Johnny let Sean stay up late to watch a baseball game they had both been looking forward to. Sean was about six at the time and the two of them watched it from the kitchen table so they could play a card game during the commercials. The table was brand new then, the surface still clean and immaculate, so that night Sean asked his father if they could play in the kitchen instead of the usual coffee table, which was always so rough and raised, like stone, making it hard for Sean to grip the cards right with his soft nails,
his little hands. So Johnny said to Mary that they would be watching the game from the kitchen.

Mary didn’t say much that night. She just sat there taking in her kid and his father as they played cards together, the bigger one telling the smaller one every so often to shut up because the game was about to come back on. Johnny asked Sean if he was planning on running his mouth through the whole game, to which Sean said no, then he stared up at his father, alert and present as ever. Mary knew it wasn’t because he was embarrassed or even frightened by Johnny’s tone that he looked that way at him, but because he was proud. Part of him was cautious, even timid, and the other part was wondering if maybe he should keep talking because if he did, his father was sure to keep telling him, sternly, to stop. Mary remembers it so vividly that it’s as though she was the child herself. It’s as though she was the one sitting in that chair next to John, peering up at this man and wondering about the nerve on him.

Once she reaches the window, she touches the sharp edges of the opening her son made in the glass. Through it, she can see the snow-covered street. Even the cars are completely covered now.

There is no one out there.

No one except for two boys. Mary can see them about to turn the corner. One is putting his hat on. The other is kicking the snow banks apart as he walks. He is breaking them apart with the might of his boot and letting the snow fall into the sidewalk at his feet. She listens to the voice of the lovely girl in the living room, softer now, from the kitchen. Tomorrow will be another snow day, the girl says. Looks like it’s going to be a nice, long weekend for all five boroughs. Shutting off the television, Mary escapes as she draws her robe close and makes her way to the bedroom.
RUBY NEWMAN | Reclining Nude, 2010
36 x 16 inches | Pastel
Collection of the artist
POEM | Martha Silano

What To Say When Your Baby Brother Calls to Tell You He’s Drowning in a Touch-Tank in the Seattle Aquarium

Definitely not I told you not to drop out of swim lessons before you graduated from Minnow to Shark. Probably best not to blurt I’m not quite down for that whole legal guardian of your children thing. Wait, maybe Hang in there! Any sec you’ll be sprouting fins! is the only appropriate route: You’re almost a merman—seaweed-y dude grasping a trident,

which, depending on the country and the myth, means you’re about to be extremely ugly (pointed green teeth, pig eyes, red nose) or a Brad Pitt-ish hunk with magical powers—lifting curses,

brewing potions, rising to the surface as throat-clearing thunder rumbles, when lightning’s flashing three states away, or if not a storm’s Doppelganger, its cause.

Ship sinker. Crackerjack teacher. Or else, remember how we’d rise before breakfast, before the giant sweeper scooped up what the tide hacked up, grownups tucked in their Cold Duck and triple Tom Collins beds? Surf
a chorus of longing for the other side, a place called Eurasia, foreign as the salty breeze, as sobriety. All we had was horizon—a somewhere not the car-choked Parkway, cages Springsteen urged us to spring from. 365 days a year we dreamed of streets dead-ending in sand, sizzle of surf dissolving the scent of Johnny Walker Red. Maybe as a merman you’ll remove your inherited hexes: agoraphobia, reclusiveness, fear of flying, fear of death, mania masked with booze; maybe it’s a good thing you reached for a sea cucumber, found yourself sinking. Just hold on a little longer, for your gills and scales, your conch, for a tune to match your siren song.
Mother of Pearl

A minnow circling tiny in the black,
the baby grows alone. How can I tell
you what it’s like to share a body, crack
my flesh apart and feel my organs swell
with someone I don’t know? How strange, to grow
a stranger. Well, I know his fishbone spine,
I’ve heard his stampede heart. I know that though I’ve
never held him, I have hurt him. Brine
and blackness, shipwreck body, guide him home.
I pick the dog’s hair off his empty bed
and wait ’til, still more fish than child, the foam
and slime of waterlife still on his head,
we bring him home. ’Til beating light shines on
our nacre boy, our perfect stranger son.
POEM | Nancy Reddy

Of All That Is Seen and Unseen

The story doesn’t say if Thomas touched
the risen savior’s side. We only know
that touch is what he took for proof. Like most
of us. On Palm Sunday we walk singing

through falling snow. At Easter Mass the girls
beside me in the pew wear matching bows.
The old priest says by faith and not by sight
but even Mary Magdalene didn’t know

the risen Christ until he called her name.
I never say my son to the body
that moves inside my body now. The priest

blesses our silent and spoken intentions.
I don’t know what name to call him, but when
I’m still I feel him move beneath my ribs.
POEM | Nancy Reddy

The First Miracle

After sunrise service papa took us out behind the stand of poplars and as we held our palms up to the pinking skyline one by one he lit a box of barnburners, held each glowing tip against the thin web of skin beside my thumb and as the little ones looked on he peeled the blister back to show the new skin risen opalescent beneath my worldly flesh. Papa breathed a wish into my palm and the wound bloomed a cloud of honeysuckle. The sweet scent made me sick and mama called us all to come inside, to change and start our chores. Tell no one, papa said.
Fine Lines

Sitting alone in the cavernous living room of Tom’s warehouse apartment, Janice listens to Mexican love songs, the music they used to listen to together. It’s what he always put on when she came over. She wasn’t wild about Luis Miguel or any of the other Latin crooners at first—she doesn’t speak Spanish—but now she can’t get enough of the music because it makes her heart ache whenever she hears it. It’s the same deep, visceral despair that washes over her late at night when she drives by his apartment and sees his car, the same pain that wells in her chest when she walks by his office even if he’s away and all she can glimpse is his empty chair.

Before turning on the stereo, she checked the freezer for vodka, knowing she would find a half gallon on the top shelf; there had always been a bottle in the freezer back then. It’s all Tom drank, and now it’s all she drinks, because she somehow feels closer to the past when she does. The only light in the room comes from the candles she lit, the ones clustered on the old cedar trunk he’d fashioned into a coffee table, and those lining the brick wall, dripping wax onto the cement floor and forming puddles that dry atop dried puddles already there from the times before. Tom had always lit the candles whenever she came over, and then they’d cuddle and kiss on the sofa for hours at a time, sipping vodka sodas and listening to Mexican love songs.

Janice slowly scans the room again and sighs heavily, drawing air from the pit of an emptiness she, until recently, didn’t know was there. Her eyes, wet and raw from stretches of crying, pause at the spots that once held different meanings, and she wonders how spaces can occupy both happiness and hopelessness at the same time. She looks to the kitchen where they cooked together, a cassoulet that one time. It’d taken the better part of a day. The cassoulet had overbaked in the oven while they drank.
wine and later made love, wildly going at it on the table with all the pots and dishes and food falling off the table and crashing to the floor. They were happy then, as happy as she’d ever been in her life, and she could never have imagined she’d one day throw a skillet at him, nearly hitting him in the forehead she was so enraged with jealousy.

She looks at the front door where he begged her not to leave the first night she’d gone home with him. She told him she had to go, hoping he’d ask her to stay. She could tell then that she had her hooks in him. But that was okay, because he had his hooks in her, and they’d collapsed to the floor in each other’s arms, right there at the foot of the door, right on the very spot where, not so long ago, he’d stood locking the deadbolt against her, refusing to let her in. As hard as she’d pounded on the door, beating it with her palms and then her fists until they were raw, bruised, and bloody. He’d remained silent the whole time as she screamed his name until her voice was spent, and she could scream no more. That’s when Tom’s neighbor threatened to call the police if she didn’t leave, letting her see him dial 911 on his cell phone to show her he meant it.

Janice isn’t sure how late it is, but she knows she’s been there a long time. She’s heard the same songs loop around again and again—how many times she isn’t sure, it’s all a blur. The level in the large vodka bottle has dropped considerably, and she’s beginning to see two of everything. There appears to be twice as many candles lit as before, yet somehow it’s still as dark in the room as it’s been that whole night. A few weeks ago, when she’d come to sit alone in the apartment, she drove home drunk and nearly had a head-on collision. She thinks maybe this time she’ll sleep it off on the sofa and then leave in the morning before Tom’s neighbor gets up and notices her car parked out front.

Tom won’t be coming home tonight. She knows because they work in the same office, the same office where they first met in the breakroom, where it all started. He stood blocking the coffee maker while talking
to several coworkers, and she had interrupted, teasing him right in front of everyone, calling him a fucking Sequoia, telling him to get out of the way or else. It got quiet, and everyone turned and stared at her incredulously, the way people in the office sometimes did. He’d glared back at her coldly. Still, when their eyes met, she could tell in that instant they would be together. She knows he won’t be home until the end of the week because she has access to his schedule. She still has a copy of the key she gave back to him when he told her he would change the locks if she didn’t return his spare.

Tom had always said she was crazy, joking in the beginning that he was turned on by the danger he felt from it, from the rush it gave him to be with her. Then it got so that he was no longer joking or turned on by her unpredictability. He at first called her a nut-job, endearingly, with a smile and a sparkle in his eye. That was before he started calling her psychopath and then psycho-bitch with fear and acid in his voice. He’d said there was a fine line between being quirky and being just plain crazy, and she’d crossed that line. But she hadn’t crossed any lines; she was the same person. She knew it, and he did too. If anyone had changed, she told him, it was him. What had changed were the terms he used for her and the way he felt about her when he used them.

Blue and red lights all at once begin circling the high-ceilinged room, racing wildly around the walls and over the steel beam rafters. There is no siren the way there was the last time she was found out. She is thankful, at least, for that. She suspects it’s the neighbor who called. She realizes only now how loud the music is playing, surely loud enough for someone to hear, even through the thickly constructed brick wall of a warehouse. The neighbor also has Tom’s schedule and will know he’s out of town. He’s a nosy neighbor, someone she once appreciated because she knew he kept an eye out for Tom and for her when she used to stay there. Keeping a lookout for trespassers, for interlopers, for people like the person she’d become. Or, perhaps, had always been.
POEM | T.J. Sandella

The Former Number One Draft Pick Speaks of Love

Greg Oden was arrested...this morning, accused of punching his ex-girlfriend. The victim’s best friend, police said, told the woman, “There isn’t that much love in the world. You need to tell [them] that he punched you in the face.” —USA Today

Of course I was thinking about love when her cheekbone gave way to my melon-sized fist. I know better than anyone that to love is to hurt. Look at me—two bum knees, a creaky wrist, a face like your grandfather’s baseball glove. What good are a couple dozen cars and a mansion on each coast if I’m to be remembered as one of the greatest draft busts in the history of the game? Do you see? We’re only ever a stanza break or torn tendon away from immortality. Nobody ever taught me how to write a résumé or knot a tie—there is no backup plan. Oscar Wilde says each man kills the thing he loves. Bukowski: find what you love and let it kill you. Maybe I don’t strike you as a reader—that ubiquitous dumb jock stereotype— but I’m more than just a pair of sneakers
and a jump hook. What team, what woman would ever want me now? Time. Mother. Ohio. Tell me again about redemption. Take me back.

Oh wise one, if there isn’t that much love left in this world, then tell me why my giant heart won’t stop breaking.
The Catalog of Broken Things

I let my dead mother in.
She’s lonely out there on her own.
Her ears are seashells
empty of sea.
She carries me among her bones
where her womb was.

The moon, a breath
away, a dead fact.

I leak into the moment, linger.
Death holds
my hand, listens. I want to stop, to go
back, to think
it through before
being.

Shadows watch
out for me.

My mother brings a pillow full of
her own hair, soft like dawn.
She grew it all her life, and after.
She sleeps lighter with her head
on her own past.
The past, her only coin.
Her lips don't move. She says, 
*Where is your passport?*

I don’t have it.  
I don’t need it yet.

Her eyes are flowers, but softer.

2

My wife, an answer  
that eludes questions, makes  
words shine in their own right and wrong,  
turns  
thoughts to facts  
to fictions, makes me  
regret our passing future,  
our separate past.

She is a crooked mirror,  
in which I’m more  
and less.

She undefines me,  
sends me looking for myself  
in new places.

I invite exile, love  
invasion, mourn  
her in advance.
My father holds a fishing net of small suns, 
each shining hesitantly, uncertain 
which planets might revolve around it. 
He carries his boat.

His eyes are oceans of salt 
with rocky islands in the middle 
where light goes to sleep.

His hands are heavy from the work.

His lips a crack in darkness. 
The moon fails, falls. The wind listens.

My uncle’s face is askew. 
He hasn’t been born yet. 
His feet are embedded in beautiful marble blocks.

He’s ready 
to tell me things about my parents 
I’d rather never know.

My parents have their own 
beautiful marble blocks in 
their memories. My uncle retreats, uncertain 
of my attention.

I’m someone else’s memory, 
someone’s marble block.
My sister wears her old skin, her face a boat.

If I shake her hand, will she crumble? She has her passport. If I embrace her, will she turn into a shadow in my arms?

I measure time in broken things, lose count.

I see myself in the street, by the sea, in a cell, in a shell, in a joke, in an accident. I see my life as a short story, as I prepare to check out from my body, my thoughts run after me. My brevity lasts, demands lifelong scrutiny.

My son gives away heaps of roses on a dusty street corner. His hands bleed from rose thorns, but he smiles, ruffles his hair, a garden in his head.

I don't know how it ends.

The ocean knows.
My grandmother is not herself.  
She never was.  
She has a room of dark fabric.

My brother and I fear to disturb her.  
We listen for her footsteps  
when we can’t fall asleep.

She reminds us of all the sad futures we have escaped. The moon is written on her face.

My father died before I was conceived.

He sets sail, his winds all his own,  
his water, his future, connected in a certainty, his boat a yes.  
He holds the map of broken things.

He seeks the most unrepairable.

I listen to his eyes, relearn  
his story, welcome absence into my life.

I touch my dust, dust my mirrors.
My grandfather has wings, but he doesn't know it. He uses them just once, to fly away before I can meet him. He is waiting, in his hands, a small sun. He doesn't seem to notice it.

His smile is glued to his face, his passport in his pocket, his feet, embedded in a beautiful marble block.

My aunt, a shadow without a landing. In her chest, small streams fight for the chance to be called river. I list her in my catalog under tumors. She deserves more attention. We all do, we keep telling the moon, but it's dead. It doesn't listen.

I listen.
My husband is a continent
I don’t have
a boat for. His thoughts come long distances to reach me.

He looms in the doorway
with his gender and his sex and his confidence.

I could be swept away by his single move,
yet he moves me.

He hurts me, without knowing.
He learns me touch
by touch as I
learn him, mourn him in advance.

My daughter’s hands are made of mirrors
reflecting only my own face.
Is this how she thinks of me, or I of her?

She is a shadow without offspring.

Her face is missing,
as if I’d never thought her through.
My mother nods in her chair all day. Her cup is full of air. Her eyes, so vacant one can fill them with one’s own hopes. Silence is her only coin.

She holds the map of broken things for my catalog. She keeps a small, private smile. Her eyes, kaleidoscopes of darkness.

She knows: suns and moons fail in the end. Boats sink, rot. Marble crumbles. And now, I know it too. I’m used to this exit of others, this betrayal of permanence.

My lips don’t move.

I tell her,  
That thing you said was true.  
I’ve applied for my passport.
POEM | Tod Marshall

We Carry Guilt Like A Virus

My ex-wife looks old when I see her, and the bitterness is that I’m even older than she, more lines, bruises, long hours unable to fix anything. Another plane goes down in the ocean, and the Coast Guard launches rescue boats. They stare through binoculars at water for days, occasional whales at first a distraction then just part of oblivion, blue and endless. It’s hard to remember exactly when certainty of the end arrives. Some couples survive betrayal, passionate fights, yelling in front of children. If I were inside that plane, I’d hide in memory at the first jostle, smoke on the wing, the passenger next to me crying and trying to get her phone to work. Bodies rip through clothing like a strainer. Seatbelts cut you in half. I’d hope to be tendony strings of flesh for fish, mouths that could gulp me whole.
RUBY NEWMAN | *Water Molecules and Currents III*, 2014
30 x 40 inches | Acrylic on canvas
Collection of the artist
POEM | Tod Marshall

Drawing

No surprise: line across the paper means horizon. The orange arc that spawns eight wavy yellow threads is sun. Fridge magnets hold it in place with old notes and photos of children now grown; otherwise, the brown trunks and the green trees and the silver bear and the barn (red with a black door) might depart for somewhere else. Keep staring: you'll never figure out whether the sun rises or sets, whether you're sitting on the porch of your own grand house or the child decided we shall never have one.
KIRK HINSHAW | *White Magic Dreams*, 2010
10.5 x 7.5 inches | Collage
Collection of the artist
POEM | Emily Vizzo

The One Passenger

w/1 line from Count Guiseppe Panzadi Biumo

Sunday can’t save
everything. But go where you feel familiar,
a sea gone thick w/autumn yellowtail. Sunken
lobster crates, white peel of a trawling
wake pressing itself, like a question mark, on the blue
sea butter. You might try to strike a deal
w/the childhood your mother had.
Swim in the bottle she drank from
like a teacup seahorse. Use your shoulders
to slim the bottleneck. Press your fingers
to her lips through the glass hole,
saying You are not alone. I am just
not here yet. But she pulls you out
w/her mouth. You become a puckered
gin kiss souring her womb.
Inside there you even feed on yourself,
sucking sores between the thumb
& index finger.

Spirits take the shape of the glass
they’re poured into. Don’t they?
What would not have worked
out is the point. Your name is what
I’m trying to tell you.

Even today the sea is a blue bottle
w/still. The man breaking glass circles
in the sand marvels that they become
invisible in the water. Crushed
knives joining the chill full
tide. *It’s like they’re not even there,*
he tells his children. His daughter & her crinoline mouth. But she knows not to drink the water. *Even if life is not lasting we can know things.*

I told you that your mother kissed you from a bottle to be kind. The truth is that she left you there, already reaching for the next breakable thing. No wonder you feel so comfortable taking the shape of a hole. No wonder you watched jealously when some other daughter put her bare foot & then her mouth to the sharpened sea.
RUBY NEWMAN | *Klamath Lake Sunrise,* 2012
40 x 30 inches | Acrylic on canvas
Collection of the artist
FICTION | Mark Brazaitis

Goodbye, Goodbyes

First Panel

An older girl spins at center ice; a younger girl skates cautiously near the boards, her arms extended for balance. The older girl, who is fourteen, wears tights, a short pleated skirt, and a T-shirt with “Skate USA” written across the front. Tina, the cartoonist, isn’t sure there is such an organization as Skate USA. There is, she knows, a Bowl USA. Her soon-to-be-ex-husband used to bowl every Tuesday at lanes owned by Bowl USA. She erases “Skate USA” and pencils in “Winter Olympics.” But will her readers think the older girl is an Olympic skater? She is supposed to be a good skater, no more. What Tina wants to convey is that the older girl is entrenched in the local skating world. The younger girl isn’t—at least not yet.

Tina erases “Winter Olympics” and writes “Sherman Figure Skating Club.” But this is too long a name. In newspapers—twelve still publish her strip, Main Street Madness—the words would be too small to read. She erases them and writes “Sherman FSC.” She outfits the younger girl, who is eleven, in a heavy winter coat and gloves. She wants to include finer details: the older girl wearing her own (expensive) pair of figure skates, the younger girl wearing rental skates. She suggests this in the condition of the skates, the older girl’s sleek and new, the younger’s old and worn.

If Tina were honest—and who wants to be honest when honesty scares?—she would concede that her comic strip is dying. With the mass extinction of newspapers, she may soon be drawing Main Street Madness exclusively for her hometown paper, the Sherman Advocate and Post, which, seemingly alone among
its black-and-white-and-read-all-over contemporaries, has held on to a steady readership and advertising base.

A couple of years before, Tina decided to seek a larger audience by writing a graphic novel. The endeavor proved more challenging than she expected. Used to producing economical, four-panel strips (eight panels on Sundays), she struggled to summon multiple characters and complex plotlines. Several months passed before she drafted a first chapter. She was often in a dark mood, and this saddened and frightened her daughter, who was ten, and annoyed her husband, who had agreed to assume a greater portion of the childcare and household responsibilities as she worked on her novel. Her husband became more annoyed when, after reading the first three chapters of Goodbye, Goodbys, he saw himself in the character of the failed painter who becomes a bartender.

It was true that her husband had failed to realize his dream of becoming a musician. But there was a difference, she insisted, between a bartender (the character she’d created) and a bar owner (her husband). “You think I’m a failure,” her husband accused half a dozen times over the next few weeks. In retrospect, she thought there was something exaggerated in his wounded demeanor, as if he was looking to find a cause he might blame for the disruption he’d already planned. One night, tired of defending herself against his grievances, she said, “You’re a middle-of-the-road guitarist, a so-so singer, and the owner of the fourth best bar in a ten-bar town. Life goes the fuck on.”

She apologized immediately, but she knew she’d said something irrevocable.

Second Panel

The older skater and the younger skater, who have become friends, spin side-by-side at center ice, smiles on their faces. Tina intends the smiles to convey more than joy. They express (she hopes) the radiant feeling of finding a kindred spirit, someone who celebrates the same moments and music, someone who understands

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without explanation. Both skaters are now wearing “Sherman FSC” T-shirts. They wear identical skirts. The younger skater no longer wears rentals but brand-new figure skates.

Because it is a public figure skating session, other skaters appear in the background. One of the skaters occupies a prominent spot to the left of the young women. He is a boy the older skater’s age and wears a T-shirt that says “Tigers,” which is meant to suggest his predatory nature. He is as handsome as she can draw him, with wavy black hair and inviting dark eyes. His eyes—she hopes this is obvious—gaze greedily, hungrily, at the older skater. Neither the older skater nor the younger skater notices him. They are enamored with skating, with what their agile bodies can do, with their blooming friendship.

If she were honest—that dreadful phrase again—she would admit that today’s cartoon is about her daughter. In the last three years, Ella, now twelve years old, has grown from a novice skater into a dedicated athlete who skates five times a week. Twenty months ago, she joined the Sherman Figure Skating Club, where she at first was the shy girl at the end of the rink practicing her waltz jumps and spirals in anonymity. But she was a quick study, and her skating improved so fast that even her coach, whom everyone calls Alice Marvelous, said, “I would be surprised if she isn’t landing all of her doubles by the time she turns fifteen.” She didn’t become friends with the girls her age in the club. Rather, she and a more advanced skater named Paulina, three years older than Ella, became best buddies. When Tina mentioned to Alice how sweet, but unexpected, she found this relationship—no older girl Tina knew when she was her daughter’s age would have befriended her—Alice said such relationships weren’t uncommon in the figure-skating world. “Girls of the same age and skill level become rivals,” she explained. “Girls of different ages and skill levels support each other.”
Ella and Paulina spent hours together off the ice, although skating infused all their conversations. They filmed videos of themselves performing off-ice axels, lutzes, and toe loops. They followed well-known skaters on Instagram and attended a “Stars on Ice” performance in Cleveland. They watched YouTube videos of figure-skating bloopers, howling with laughter.

Third Panel

The handsome young man, now wearing a “Lions” sweater, stands beside the older skater, who has stopped skating in order to speak with him. To her other side, her young friend performs a sit spin. The older skater, who, like her friend, wears a “Stars on Ice” T-shirt, is clearly flattered by the young man’s attention, clearly enamored of his wavy hair and winsome face. The smile she wears is intended to say *I’m curious about the world you’re inviting me to join.*

The limitations of four and eight panels, and a desire to tell a longer story about love, in several manifestations (between spouses, between siblings, between friends), were why Tina had wanted to write a graphic novel. To devote herself to *Goodbye, Goodbyes,* she put *Main Street Madness* on hiatus the way Gary Trudeau had done years before with *Doonesbury.* Although she continued to work three days a week as an art teacher at the Tree of Knowledge, a private elementary school, the loss of the income she earned from her comic strip meant that she, her husband, and Ella had to watch their spending. One of the casualties was her daughter’s figure-skating lessons, which dropped from three times a week to once a week. Ella said she understood. But Tina overheard her, on the phone with Paulina, say, “I’ll never land my axel now. And forget my double Salchow.”

Her husband’s displeasure with the character supposedly modeled on him made it difficult for her to work on her novel. Their estrangement grew. He appeared occasionally at meals, less frequently in her bed, often choosing to spend the night on the couch in the den. She thought to speak to a friend about the unnerving
degeneration of her marriage, but cocooned in what used to be the blissful life of her family and more recently obsessed with the writing and drawing of her novel, she had allowed her friendships to atrophy. She’d twice permitted her two closest friends’ birthdays to slip past unacknowledged.

When she rewrote her book to make the husband’s character an investment banker who, because he works fourteen-hour days, is largely absent from the story, her husband balked.

“I see,” he told her. “I’m invisible.”

“You’re working, providing for your family,” she assured him, abandoning, because she was tired of fighting him on the point, her insistence that the husband’s character wasn’t modeled on him.

“I think you’d like me to become invisible,” he said.

“No,” she said. “I think it’s you who want to disappear.”

The conversation had taken place in the living room. In its aftermath, to her horror, Tina had found Ella in the adjacent foyer, practicing camel spins on a shoe-sized spinner Paulina had given her for Christmas. She might not have heard them. She might have been pretending she hadn’t heard them.

But other even more fraught conversations followed. Tina tried to reassure her daughter about what was happening, but she sometimes failed to fill her words with conviction. Ella, however, didn’t seem fazed. Whatever her parents’ troubles, she still had skating; she still had Paulina.

Fourth Panel

Is her cartoon about her daughter or herself?

She would like to think she is aiming at a universal experience, something all women have felt in their lives, the pull between romance and friendship. (Men, she supposes, face a similar conflict. John Lennon chose Yoko Ono over the Beatles, after all.) Carly, the woman her soon-to-be-ex-husband is now dating, used to be her friend. Tina and her husband met her at a party thrown by the Sherman Advocate and Post’s publisher. Ten
minutes into their conversation, Carly told them, in detail spurred no doubt by the wine she’d drunk, about the end of her marriage, an event so recent, Carly said, she had RSVP’d to the party on behalf of both herself and her husband.

Feeling sorry for Carly, Tina invited her over for dinner on several occasions. Twice, she also invited over a single male friend so the meal would be a cuatro, but nothing clicked between them. Tina could assume later, however, that things had clicked between Carly and her husband, though he insisted they’d become lovers only after he’d decamped to an apartment in Partytown, Sherman’s college-student-dominated neighborhood.

She hasn’t seen Carly in months, although a week ago Carly sent her a card, saying she hoped they could remain cordial “for Ella’s sake.”

The humiliation of having a friend jump into her husband’s bed would have stung less if her graphic novel had sold. But she couldn’t even find an agent to represent it. She must have tried forty agents; the last wrote back to say he found the book’s ending, in which the protagonist resurrects her deceased friend by drawing a cartoon of her that comes magically to life, “as sentimental as it is implausible.”

Meanwhile, when she was ready to return to Main Street Madness, six newspapers told her they were dropping her strip. Three had folded. The combined circulation of the newspapers for which she now draws is 278,522 (Sundays) and 212,654 (weekdays). A quarter of a million potential readers are more of an audience than most artists enjoy. But at the height of its success, Main Street Madness reached more than four million readers.

She will be okay; Ella will be okay. Okay was, of course, never her dream. She will draw Main Street Madness until the last newspaper drops it or folds. She will consent to the divorce her husband wants. He will probably marry Carly, and Tina will worry about Ella abandoning her for the stability and warmth of a two-parent home. It’s possible Tina will remarry one day, but at the moment
love feels like walking onto an iced-over lake during a thaw. She prefers the safety of shore.

She will be okay; Ella will be okay. But it pains Tina to finish today’s strip because it isn’t only about Paulina throwing Ella over for a high-school hockey player with shoulders as straight as a soldier’s and a go-ahead-and-hate-me-because-I’m-beautiful smile. When Paulina disappeared abruptly from Ella’s life, Ella cried for three straight nights. Nothing—not even her promise to bring Ella to the U.S. Figure Skating Championships in Boston the following year—soothed her. On the third night, sitting next to Ella on her bed, exhausted and worried about the depth of her daughter’s pain, Tina herself cried. This proved the antidote to Ella’s tears, her daughter’s sadness replaced by alarm. “What’s wrong, Mom?” she repeated until Tina’s “nothing” sounded sincere enough.

No, today’s strip isn’t only about Ella and Paulina. It’s also about her and her older sister, Marilyn.

When they were growing up, Marilyn, whose eyes were as bright and blue as Tina’s were clouded and dark, employed her sister in her “Great Dramas,” as Marilyn called them until she was old enough to be embarrassed by the hyperbole. They began when Marilyn was seven and Tina four, and consisted of simple, one-act living room performances. Marilyn was always the heroine, Tina always the sidekick. The villain was usually an off-stage presence but was sometimes portrayed by Rascal, the family’s Persian cat.

The girls’ parents, noting their daughters’ passion, signed them up for summer theater camps. As if the instructors had witnessed their homegrown productions, they always assigned Marilyn the lead and Tina the role of second banana, which, rather than disappointing her, thrilled her. In one early production, she played Toto to Marilyn’s Dorothy and barked as if every line Dorothy spoke was a sunrise. One summer when Marilyn was fifteen and Tina twelve, they performed as Hamlet and Horatio in an unconventional (and abridged) version of the Shakespeare tragedy. The director, a college student
with six earrings and a Mohawk, was so impressed by their chemistry he wanted to cast them as the leads in his stage adaptation of *Thelma and Louise*, although he’d yet to write it and never did.

During the run-up to performances, Marilyn and Tina rehearsed in Marilyn’s bedroom, pausing occasionally to praise each other and critique their fellow performers’ lackluster or inept efforts. After shows, they spent hours reviewing their performances line by line. They celebrated their certain futures as Broadway stars.

But at the end of the *Hamlet* summer, Marilyn met a high-school senior named Otto. He was tall, green-eyed, and wavy-haired. In contrast to the way Tina saw her sister, with religious admiration, he often seemed indifferent to Marilyn. To Tina’s horror, this made Marilyn like him more. Marilyn spent an oppressive number of hours talking to him on the phone. She stopped acting because, she said, she wanted to “liberate my life” to be with Otto. She was smart and had excellent grades. She could have gone to a good college. But she decided to attend the mediocre university Otto attended in the southern part of the state.

One April day, after a three-and-a-half-hour bus ride, Tina walked unannounced into her sister’s dorm room, her voice trembling with tears, and asked Marilyn, “What happened to us?” Calmly, in a manner Tina might have found patronizing if she could bring herself to criticize her sister, Marilyn said, “Just because we’re sisters doesn’t mean we have to be joined at the hip.”

When Otto broke up with Marilyn in his senior year, Tina thought she might win her sister back. But within a month, she was dating someone else.

The man her sister eventually married isn’t unkind. But first he moved Marilyn across the country, then he moved her to Perth, Australia. Tina rarely sees Marilyn or her three children. Ella sometimes forgets she has cousins.

Tina’s final panel shows the younger skater stalled at center-ice, her expression meant to suggest sadness, betrayal, and resignation. (Has Tina ever tried to draw so
much emotion on a single face?) Behind her, the older girl is skating off with the wavy-haired young man, their faces turned toward each other, their hands linked.

Tina pulls her pen from her Bristol paper and regards her creation. “God damn,” she mutters, not because she’s gotten it wrong but because she’s gotten it—painfully, perfectly—right.
KIRK HINSHAW | *Cut from the Fabric of Dreams*, 2012
17 x 17 inches | Collage
Collection of the artist
POEM | *Barbara Edelman*

**It is nor hand nor foot in mouth**

Forgot to type your name, forgot how to say it, forgot the sound of it, I mean the spell of it, forgot how to spell it, forgot you had a name, forgot you had a face below your hair above your earrings, forgot the meaning of your name, forgot how to mean it, forgot your name means stranger, *Barbara*, which is strange because you’re so familiar, you’re like family, I call you by my daughter’s name, her name is Rosemary, you’re like a spice to me, a bloom, you’re like a virgin, I call my daughter by her mother’s name, that fiend, you’re like a mother to me, you’re like Helen Mirren in *The Queen*, no, scratch that, Helen Mirren’s like my mother in *The Queen*, we saw it in an empty theater, you walked along the banister, you’re like a cat to me, an acrobat, you’re like *Prime Suspect* Helen Mirren. Forgot the root of your name, forgot its trunk, forgot its limbs, its skin, its tender intersections.
POEM | Jennifer Bartell

Leaves Like Prayer

This is what leaves like a prayer: the collard greens my father planted.

_A collard is a cabbage that does not develop a heart._

Their green leaves are like hands clasping for prayer, arching towards the sun for an answer.

My father sleeps in his grave.

And the collard greens he planted keep growing in his autumn garden. After the last dew, the frost bitters them and the time comes to reap what dead hands have sown. My brother cuts it from the earth’s body.

My father’s heart failed and he fell to the floor: the green prayers do not leave the black earth.

But here we are. At the table with turkey and stuffing. I clasp my hands over them greens seasoned in pork fat.

This is what’s left. This is what leaves like a prayer.
POEM | Kwame Dawes

Rain

For Claude Clarke

Oh to live in a world of giant leaves, big as sheets, so that when the storms come as they always will, a barefoot man won’t have to worry about messing his clothes up with wet, and a one-panty woman won’t have to worry about the kink rushing back into her good hot-combed hair, for she and he could find shelter in the ordinary miracle of big-ass leaves, taller than a grown woman, wider than a grown man, just laying around in the world, waiting.
POEM | Brock Jones

Dendrochronology

Sunlight and shadow confuse sky and earth
here beneath the Chankiri Tree,

against which children small enough to be swung
by their feet were beaten to death: tree

instead of bullets. Reisom’s was whiskey and Wellbutrin.
I’ve never seen his grave. I imagine sycamore trees.

In front of their new home, grandpa planted a willow
sapling that’s now a gnarled, brittle tree.

Each morning, more leaves on the maple outside
redden, petiole through vein to lamina back to the killing tree

near Phnom Penh where I stand, head back:
This tree, Brock. This (beautiful) tree.
RUBY NEWMAN | *Trees in Deep Summer*, 2014
10 x 14 inches | Acrylic on art paper
Collection of the artist
Thaw

Not love, but fire
built against bitter cold.
The solitary woman
and the solitary man
peel something tender.
What does our skin know
of itself except what
presses against it?
Cheek brushing sternum,
forearm brushing breast,
then fingers, lips—all
the necessary tinder.
POEM | Sarah Crossland

Darling

In the late 19th century, a man claimed to have discovered a drawing in the tunnels beneath Hastings Castle that “resembled two shadows of human bodies on the wall,” proving the tunnels were once used as dungeons. The drawings were later found to be a hoax.

If they were not lovers, then let them be prisoners. Who, in the torchlight sliced with a guard’s saber, sketched their shadows while the white-lipped snails hunted the tunnel floor for dirt thick as milk, what only the dead will eat.

Weeks lost in their windpipes, their charcoal vined from fire and dross bones—they learned to live on art alone. Their bodies, from the darkness, turning the color of comb honey, chamberous, captive, prized—

If there was valor in their crimes, they wore their suffering like the shining heaume of a god.

What do we love more than lies?
River

The oranges have gone soft, but we lie in bed eating them over paper plates by the oily light of the kerosene lamp, the juice running down our chins. “I’m happy,” I announce as he licks my sticky skin. We’ve never been happy.

After we make love, he says, “This is his cabin, isn’t it?”

I don’t answer. My fingers trace a new tattoo, drawn in blue ink on the inside of his arm, a lit match next to a star.

He gets up and dances, wrapping and unwrapping the towel—a weird, angry staccato—his body barely a skeleton now. I suck in my breath, remembering him the way he was. He tosses the towel away, falls back on the bed, and pretends an old movie death with a flourish of coughing and chest grabbing.

His fingers curl around my neck, and we both wait for them to tighten, breathing together. The burn scars on his chest glow in the shadow light.

I want to tell him everything that happened while he was gone, but we know those stories don’t belong to him. They’re better buried in the fields beneath the blue air with our baby. “I want to be safe again,” I say, as if it’s possible.

We get dressed and wander to the edge of the water. Phosphorescent bubbles rim the low riverbank like some foreign poison drifting in from the sea with warnings from the dead. The water washes the shore and leaves its lacy residue. I hopscotch on one foot over the silky wet and stand in awe of my footprints as they disappear like the steps of a ghostly avatar.

“What do you want, baby?”

All I can think of is the instability of love, the prison of memory.
He holds me close, pressing his lips to my ear. “What fire do you see in the future?”

It’s you I want to tell about the red light descending on the horizon, the dead gull that floats to my feet, broken, its swollen eyes opaque.

We walk the edge of the estuary until it ends, until it’s almost dark and the mists weave in and out, blinding us. Bats zigzag above our heads, their silhouettes slicing the air in urgent chaos. I run away from him toward what I think is the road, but I trip and fall in the shadows, hitting hard, the heavy silt sucking me down, breath gone, swallowing muddy sand—and you’re with me, I feel you.

He yanks me up by my hair, grasps my shoulders and jerks me onto the shore. We run like speechless phantoms on our way back to the car. He guides us with his own radar, already knowing my answer.

He drives me toward you so fast I think everything will end right here.

He drops me off without an argument, not even a word, more than ready to give me away. I stand on the curb and watch the road long after the taillights disappear, trying to decipher the feeling of one thing ending and one beginning and the river between them.
After you promised *it only happened once*

I'm counting manholes again
& three johns in hardhats emerge
from the hazard drains.
They are kicking-cans-smirking
having just seen under the city
'cuz even in winter, she's steaming
with secrets and split bones,
marled receipts, a shy call from the florist
a slipped smile from the neighbor gal
you know anything lost through a grate
grows ten times its size down there.
Even the note of lilac on the afternoon
teacher blooms its own lace thicket.
And you are sorry.
In our street some foreman lays warning
cones, attends to a pothole so sore looking
he’s called a gaggle of teamsters over,
they’re shaking their sorry heads,
have recruited every machine they know,
can only beg and beg at the fracture.
You know even machines must go home
to their hinge wives, lay out diversion
tunnels, that’s how they protect the grade.
And what’s to be done with a gouge
this size but roll over and over
its bruise site, hope each day
repeated, helps a little.
Soon it's patched steel-tight,
veers to the why of its breached side.
*Ditch, dirt, plunder*, this ex-road says.
It's so slick the cars bounce off it,
even the chipped birds know
not to fall there.
Your second chance, as seen through the rear-view window

I’ve heard of blue shipwrecks,
blue revenges exacted,

even a blue something-argued.
But never blue turtles, never this
critical a tortoise blue
capsized over the center median.

This rocking creature on its back
just looks like I’m sorry

but looks like hope too.
Hope without hands,

hope whose friends have said
it’s still just a bad idea.

Did you hear that brake rattle?
The wild lip of something caught on our wheel?

In my mind I can fix this.
In my mind there’s a magical rig

I fashion with tiny bones and glue.
It’s a movie moment. I stop the cars,
the boys with their rocks,
the midnight coyote,

stop everyone's hurting.
What is it you'd said about crush-love,

being better left 'side of the road?
Truth: I just touched it once—

it was all shell and jaw,
hard nights on the phone.

Blue shrapnel, blue buckshot
blue one-eyed warning staring up.

Truth: It bit mean
like you promised it would.
POEM | Brittney Scott

Schema

_The wound is the place where the Light enters you._ – Rumi

I live inside my brother’s death
inside his angry wound

He rode through the wooden door
to the room with the darkness

It was fall, early dark
when he shot himself

The sound of his body dropping
was the new moon’s invisible rise
was my body

waking from a long sleep

In the darkness

I lived in the room
until my brother shot a hole through his head

he shot light through the ceiling

Now I live inside
my brother’s thumb shaped tunnel

Acorns fell where his body dreamed

Thick ringed trees grew whole

from the hole below his ear, the place I climbed from

and up

and up

I am awake inside the space he left
I make the shape
of my brother’s white body

I fill the space my brother would fill
His blood was light's first pinhole
shot through the night sky
They grew and burned and made people
and dogs, houses, fish,
rooms with darkness
light in them
votives I can follow with my body
my body holds the shape of grace
POEM | *Elyse Fenton*

**Life on Other Planets**

Thanks to old science fiction we've been thinking about it all wrong. Mile-wide colonies with their gaudy odalisques and breast-shaped domes, inhabitants who speak some Turkic-Altaic variant beneath their silver kaftans.

But by *habitable*, astrophysicists just mean capable of holding water. By *life*, celled organism. Maybe that's what my friend means when she says she's not sure anymore what life can be. Her child is two weeks dead. In the galaxy's audition the planets keep rotating redly, saying *pick me, pick me.*
POEM | *William Orem*

**The Swimmer**

I.
In early wintertime she drove there (he had left her then), crossed in the ferry, arrived by mothy dusk.
Alone now in the blackly drafted house she lay before the fireplace grate

wrapped in an afghan
cold but alive.

II.
All that night
strange constellations wheeled through empty window frames.

Upstairs she found the old brass bed just as it had been—
a heavy counterpane from her mother’s generation.
At dawn she slept, feeling the house shift

and snap,
the rafters dream.

III.
She stayed the weekend, then the week.
Drove to the local market at most need,
eggs brown and weighty; sugar dark, 
bacon wrapped in paper 
by the inquisitive grocer’s hands. 
Would she be rooming up there long? 
Sometimes she wandered miles by foot 

through sleeping gardens, 
hills in the late season, 
those unending columns of pines. 
Cold wind trembled inland 

off the mighty lake, 
a question. 

IV. 

That morning when she heard the cry 
she rose from coffee and, 
bare-legged, hurried down the flagstones. 
How could she say the thing she saw? 

Brightly backed by sun, its sides crashing down gray water, 
an elk, 

snout jutted high for air; 
she had not known their kind could swim. 

From where was it arriving? And what 
had summoned such a hulk of life 
to these spent waters, this 
remorseless coast?
V.

It rose, the huge machinery of legs streaming, staggered in the weeds, muscles fierce and slick. She saw the rude mist steaming off its flanks, the nostrils’ ragged cloud.

A second time it made its cry—a bellow, trumpeting, a song of lived transition. And she joined in (Should not all victors sing?)—

two by the blowing lake edge

shouts bearing each forward.
POEM | Chantelle Smith

From the Kitchen Porch

Silently peeking through half-naked trees,
autumn hangs on thin mountain air
grown pungent as dark rotting leaves emit decay
and issues an assurance that eventually spring seeds
send thick roots into the dirt before green returns—
stalks, blossoms and leaves.

Ravens, whose vociferous cries share news of the day
fly from one branch to the next
taking turns talking
disappearing haphazardly into the woods
voices fading in their wake.

I pour velvety cream into my coffee
the shade of walnut dye swirling up
in a caramel-colored cloud—it falls until stirred.
I consider the constant chatter of ravens in their
conspiracy of majestic disorder: strutting, flapping,
stretching, snacking—standing guard for each other.
Words

Standing here with a book I never read, a paper I never wrote on and words barely expressed, never shared. Hiding in the shadows of my past, seeking toward the future that is yet to come and lost in the present of today. Never be able to reach for the star that beholds my hopes and dreams I have not nor will I ever know if accomplished or destroyed—forever.
Outsiders Looking for Connection: 
*Good People*


Robert Lopez populates these twenty stories with a cast of outsiders looking for connection. We meet characters who are violent voyeurs and suicidal, who’ve been abandoned and physically beaten, who suffer from alcoholism, debilitating headaches, and clinical depression. They ask, “Is this any way to go through life?” And they’re constantly wondering if anyone else cares about them. If this sounds depressing, rest assured Lopez handles each situation with unflinching candor, and even the unsettling moments aren’t devoid of empathy.

Take, for example, the narrator in “Guiding Eyes for the Blind Dog Training School,” whose neighbor’s son dies. Of the son, the narrator concludes, “He seemed like a good kid, if you can tell that sort of thing from the kitchen window.” He wonders what it means to say someone is a good person. “I’m sure if one were to overhear what these good people talk about,” he speculates, “one would draw other conclusions.” His wife, he admits, “is good with people, is better at thinking the best of them, better at talking” than he is. At the funeral, the narrator, who isn’t sure he’s ready to have children, feels he’s playing a part as he expresses condolences to this neighbor he barely knows. But ultimately he begins to see a link—however small—between them.

Even if some of the stream-of-consciousness stories like “Family of Man on Isle of Wright” feel slightly frantic, the intelligent word play, reminiscent of Samuel Beckett, renders them worthwhile.
Several of the main characters are estranged from or in conflict with their loved ones, which further develops the theme of isolation and connection. In “Anytime, Sweet,” a lovely short piece about an encounter with a waitress, the narrator wonders if his ex-wife is feeding the dog. “Welcome to Someplace Like Piscataway” revolves around the narrator’s estrangement from his sister. The narrator in “The Sky Was Everywhere Like Water” has punched a woman in the mouth. In the opening line, he claims it wasn’t his fault, but by the end, he anticipates that one day “this is something we can tell our grandchildren.”

Lopez’s most memorable moments are when his characters compare themselves to others. In “Anytime, Sweet,” the narrator tries to convince himself he’s “like everyone else in the diner.” And they’re curious what others think of them. In “The Sky Was Everywhere Like Water,” we get this reflection: “I’m not sure what people assume, either, but I’m sure it’s the worst.” The desire to be understood is also explored in “I Want to Kiss Myself, Good God”:

“It pains me that the horrible people are horrible... and I think what can I do. I am a man, after all, and I am surrounded on all sides, helpless, and all I can do is keep to myself, which I do most of the time because were I to say this out loud for anyone to hear, for anyone to take the wrong way, misinterpret, because that’s what horrible people do the world over, in big cities and small towns and quiet villages and hamlets and rural prairie places with all of the grain waving and grandstanding, then what will become of me then?”

At times dark humor finds its way into these confessional stories, and throughout the collection, the diverse voices ring true. Lopez has said music played a big part in his experience growing up, and it’s apparent in Good People that his writing has found its rhythm.
CONTRIBUTORS

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Jennifer Bartell received an MFA in poetry from the University of South Carolina in 2014. Her poetry has been published in Callaloo, PLUCK!, Blackberry: a magazine, decomP, Fall Lines, Composite (Arts Magazine), and the museum americana, among others. Jennifer is an administrator for The Watering Hole, a poetry collective for Southern poets and poets of color who write about the South. She is also a Callaloo Fellow.

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Mary Block is originally from Miami, Florida. Her poems have been featured in Rattle, Conduit, Tampa Review, Saw Palm, and Weave, among other publications. She is a graduate of New York University’s Creative Writing Program, where she received her MFA in poetry. Block was a 2012 finalist for the Ruth Lilly Poetry Fellowship from the Poetry Foundation, and her poem “Crown for a Young Marriage” has been nominated.
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