EDITOR’S NOTE

Thank you to all who submitted to our inaugural poetry contest. Our poetry team whittled away at the rather large batch of approximately a thousand poems of 2017 Laux/Millar prize submissions to select a fine group of finalists. Dorianne Laux and Joseph Millar have this to say about Kristin Robertson’s 2017 Laux/Millar Prize winning poem: “We like the digressive nature of the poem, the many very particular places it goes, the obsessive protectiveness of it, its startling imagery and evocative and wide-ranging imagination: from anchor to anvil, from cocaine to suet to grain.”

Our subscribers help us continue our mission to foster accessible yet provocative contemporary works of experience that are emotionally and intellectually complex. Just as in Kristin Robertson’s prize-winning poem, we at Raleigh Review have our own “anchor to anvil,” and that is to open a permanent writers’ house one day. We are not asking for donations in these difficult times, but hope you will subscribe to our magazine if you can and have not already. Literature is the one tool that we all have in common that redeems humankind from the hate-filled rhetoric of these polarizing times.

For many of us, our budgets have no room for anything that is not a basic life necessity, and yet a number of us do tithe to the arts because, for us, this work is so very necessary. Thinking back to our temporary loft office on Fairview in Raleigh’s Five Points, I remember the very first unsolicited subscription that came in from a literary agency in New York. This early support that has continued well into our seventh year really helps us realize that we are on the right path.

While we hope to continue with Geri Digiorno’s beautiful collages with Raleigh Review Vol. 8, No. 1 (spring 2018), we feel Travis Green’s gorgeous collage “Dorianne” is the perfect introduction to this issue. This issue provides two reminders for our organization: 1. Raleigh Review has an extremely talented staff, and 2. Raleigh Review is honored to have the steady guidance from our life teachers, Joseph Millar and Dorianne Laux. Together, we believe that great literature inspires empathy by allowing us to see through the eyes of our neighbors, whether across the street or across the globe.

—Rob Greene, editor & publisher
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Poem for My Unborn Daughter

Months now I’ve handed you over
in my dreams. To the tall, strange man
on the subway platform. To nuns.
To the firefighter backing down
the ladder. To the masked surgeon.
The strongest swimmer. From evildoers
I’ve hidden you on the top shelf
inside a lidless piece of crockery.
My wherewithal to stash you places
never runs out. You fit inside the air
duct at the Cascade Inn, which shares
with Food City a parking lot taped off
for the bald eagle, her nest a crown
of thorns for the Aisle 6 streetlamp.
I’ve weighted down a duffel bag with
your anchor body, your anvil body.
Instinct, it is, above all else, to save.
When a lab rat’s given a choice to eat
chocolate or free another trapped rat,
a stranger it’s never seen before, it will,
every time, again and again, lift the door.
I’ve sewn you pinch by pinch
into my suitcase like a kilo of cocaine.
mixed you into suet for grackles to smear
onto their asphalt-rainbow wings. Away
from me I’ve winnowed you like grain.
Tonight I whisper to you, Please drink,
as I flag down a river-bound springbok.
The first step to building a fire is balancing. Birch bark. Cedar. Pyramid of twigs. Dry leaves are mostly a distraction—quick to disappear alone, into ash, lighting nothing. I crouch, cough, blow one teaspoon of air at a time. I resist celebrating until I’m sure it won’t go out. Fret when he tosses on the logs too soon. I’m more careful now. I feed the fire in bare handfuls, a slow meal: tinder, kindling, softwood, hard. I’m sorry I didn’t learn to be patient until after I’d lost you. Now I name mouthfuls of smoke for every boy who swilled my absence until it hardened to coal. Now I shape my palms to a new jaw, marvel at its weight. And you keep doing what smoke does when it leaves the treeline. Lighting nothing. Losing its name. Until even the sky forgets.
EMILY PAIGE WILSON

Reasons to Return Home

Because we disappoint the clouds by how little our bodies change shape, so the least we can do is move for their amusement. Because the splinters on your front porch are just the earth’s turns at telling secrets sharp enough to sink into your skin. Because your mother can only weather so much worry before every morning becomes a storm sworn to sweep out all harbors until you return.

Because postcards are just ghosts growing up without a secure sense of home. Because the perfumes you spilled in your suitcase can still be worn: the scent of wreaths wilting, waiting to be unpacked: lemon and vanilla and crabgrass. Because a stone that rolls gathers no moss, but who doesn’t want a soft sheen of gentle green to grow around them, a barrier between body and unsolid ground?

Because the etymology of “migrate”: one who trembles when they remember they’ve left the tea kettle on and must save the kitchen curtains from burning. Because if your father has a father, then your moon must have a moon hidden beneath the floorboards of your childhood bedroom.
AMY GORDON | Finding My Frequency, 2014
36 x 48 inches | Mixed media on canvas
STEPHEN GIBSON

Noir

*What is a river? A river is water that flows and carries things away, including the river itself; its “there-ness” is never the same “there.”*

This Zen moment was brought to you by the Green River Killer in the northwest, a man who drove its highways in his truck.

Gary Ridgway kept a hammer in his truck under the driver’s seat—it made blood flow on roads all along the American northwest.

If you were a runaway, he thought of the river. It was so cool when he offered weed to you. *The woods are full of weed, he’d say. Let’s go there—*

and he’d turn at a logging road with you there staring into the headlights with him in the truck. You suspected what was going to happen to you, though not the details. Until body fluids flowed he kept your corpse, then dumped it into the river.

Mortuary sites all along the American northwest were as common as truck stops. In the Northwest, hikers out with their dogs would find bodies there under thin piles of dirt and leaves, or the river would give up another secret begun in his truck.

On the news, detectives gathered, the river flowed behind them, and it seemed like a rerun to you—

it was. He watched the same TV reports as you. Someone was killing girls in America’s northwest, temporarily buried them, then just let the flow of the river carry them downstream—until there you found them—like so much junk a pickup truck illegally deposited, like an old mattress, into the river.
In Millais’ painting, Ophelia floating down that river looks lovely, tragic—she could recite poetry for you. That’s not how death happened inside that truck. Millais’ painting was shown at a memorial—Northwest high school seniors are as sentimental as you there in the Northeast or Midwest or South, and overflow with just as much emotion whether rivers in the Northwest or South or wherever you are give up corpses. And there also, men like him sit in trucks, watching the emotions flow.
The Soul of a Parrot

1.
Orissa, the mother goddess in ancient Egypt, had a parrot’s beak nose. Val cannot help but notice that her cousin Alberta has one too. Val and Alberta are eating lunch together in a Middle Eastern restaurant not far from Alberta’s house, where Alberta, in her eighties now, lives alone. Val offered to take Alberta to lunch, and Alberta suggested a restaurant near her house. Val is hoping to order curry, but Alberta has confused Middle Eastern with Indian, so Val orders falafel. Such confusions have always marked Alberta’s day-to-day existence, inviting scolding in the past from her mother and in the present, in a milder form, from her grown son, admonishments that she seems to need to take the place of genuine affection in her life. Alberta often talks to Val of her troubled childhood. She stuttered as a child. Her mother often admonished her for not being pretty. “You were such a cute baby,” the mother said to her once when she was six. “But now your father and I are so disappointed.” The mother, herself, was very pretty and very vain. What cured Alberta of her stuttering affliction was an old cockatoo the family inherited from her paternal grandmother. The cockatoo was lonely and bored with its life in a cage without its mate (its mate having been Alberta’s paternal grandmother). To pass the time, the cockatoo taught Alberta to speak correctly and to piece the parts of a jigsaw puzzle together. Though the cockatoo was quite intelligent, it sometimes spoke vacuously in ironic tones, just to amuse itself. Whenever Alberta’s mother had walked into the room, it would say, “Pretty Bird.”

2.
Once upon a time, an old-fashioned schoolmaster had for a pet a parrot named Perico, and this parrot enjoyed listening to and joining
in the daily recitations the students repeated. Sometimes the parrot grabbed onto the stick that the master swayed to direct the recitations, bobbing its head, keeping time with the rhythms of the lessons. After school, the parrot enjoyed sipping from the cup of sweet chocolate the master drank late in the afternoon. Sometimes the parrot hooked the toes of its zygodactylic feet into the awning, and as he rested, he would kiss the shining bald head of the schoolmaster. Other times the parrot perched on a wind vane atop of the master’s roof to recite the monotonous syllables the schoolmaster loved to hear. The man and the bird grew comfortable in each other’s company like an old married couple. In time, the schoolmaster trusted the parrot implicitly and ceased to trim its flight feathers as a token of this trust.

3.

“We are red Macaws,” said the Bororo Indian husbands of central Brazil. “Our wives try to tame us, but we are wild by nature. We live in the homes of our wives; yet we long to hunt in the forest. Our wives’ brothers own our names and claim our possessions, and thus we dream of flight. The words we say are not our own. We repeat what we hear.” In a patriarchal society, wives carry large pocket books and dress in colors bright as the colors of parrots. In a matriarchal society, husbands mimic words of mighty women and eat crackers. In 3000 B. C., the husbands retreated to a cave upon whose walls they spat paint forming the naïve shape of a bird, a wild parrot, a red macaw. The representation on the cave wall signaled a vision of loss (the inevitable day when the red Macaw would be forgotten), but not a loss of vision. The husbands said, “We paint parrots because our wives do not meet our emotional needs; theirs is an ersatz intimacy. We paint parrots because we long for authenticity. Today we are kept men, boy toys, but soon we shall be transformed from our present nascent stage to mature psittacine, the red macaw, a perfect incarnation of freedom.”

4.

A tame parrot, a wild parrot: birds of a different feather. The three masks of God—parent, child, and holy bird: gods with distinct missions. A suka parrot announced the birth of the baby Jesus and stirred the womb of a virgin. Can a divided God help us find our one true self amidst a multitude of selves and so many modern distractions? Some of these selves we have fashioned to be saintly or respectable or upright, but one self is cutting the tips of its fingers in a closet, is burning its thighs with a cigarette; another is falling in
love with a mirror and is taunting a needy child; still another is reaching into a hollow to steal a parrot egg. Oh, our foolish dreams of unity. Intelligible speech does not arise from God’s silence but from the wild parrots’ chatter, from their cacophony. Ca-ca: the sound of a parrot calling. Caca: a word that means shit. The devil too has many guises: Lucifer, Satan, Beelzebub, Mephistopheles. Oh, Prince of darkness, Prince of pasty white skin. White-skinned devil. Black-skinned devil. Yellow peril. Red peril. Detested races of the world, scattered through continents. Continents of the world scattered from Gondwanaland, home of the Ur parrot. Feathered Friend, I plucked your feathers to adorn my hair. Dear Mr. Popinjay, I plucked your feathers to fashion a garland to adorn my naked shoulders as I jazzed Paris upon the stage in the year of Our Lord, 1927. One true parrot whose feathers we pluck to gather courage, to harness energy, to tuck luck in our hat bands, to weave our headresses, to steady our arrows, to dip in dark blue ink. Dandy-like, dandelion: bright yellow, green, blue, and red. The clown’s soul is a laughing parrot. The king’s soul is a soaring parrot. Do not capture the parrot: the clown will die; the king shall perish. In India, a parrot has perched on a prostitute’s elbow: Mol and Pol. At sea, a parrot has perched on a pirate’s shoulder: spirit brother, phantom limb. The native guide carried a parrot on her sleeve. “Oh, you are our parrot. We shall follow you up the steepest mountains, down the deepest valleys, even into the valley of death.” Death cast its long shadow on the land of parrots and the valley of parrots echoed the dry cough of death. The parrot’s soul shall always haunt us; long after death, it remains a white ghost, impaled in a ring-barked tree.

5.

Alberta said the cockatoo not only talked but also listened, and as it cocked its cockatoo head to one side, it seemed to understand an unloved child, a stuttering child, a discarded child of an ambitious mother. The cockatoo had lived a long time. Deprived of tropical forests, of other parrots’ company, and of flight itself, the parrot recited words, practiced patience, observed life through its bars, waited for Alberta to come home from school. Then one day the old cockatoo died because it was so very old and so very wise and had lived its long life upon this earth, and Alberta wept inconsolably. Alberta’s mother had the parrot stuffed and placed it under a bell jar on a living room shelf. Years later, when Alberta first learned that her mother herself had died, she immediately thought, “Now she can no longer hurt me.” Then Alberta buried the cockatoo in a proper grave. She had already imagined its immortal soul in Paradise.
6.
I would not say one should never trust a parrot. And yet a parrot can fly away at speeds that allow fifty miles a day. Every feather in a parrot’s body is designed for flight. Trust wisely in accordance with nature. I would advise, Know thy parrot! One day the schoolmaster was directing his chorus of children, when one boy shouted out, “Perico has flown away.” All of the children ran to the door and the master followed. In the far distance, they saw a green marble gleaming in the sky. Nothing could be done. “It must be God’s will,” the schoolmaster said (hand upon heart), though he felt sad and betrayed. To temper his emotion, he called the children back from the door and once again bid them follow his direction (that is to say, the direction of his stick) in the daily recitation of numbers, syllables, and the indisputable truths of the Holy Catechism.

7.
A male parrot has no phallus. Its testes are internal, resting near its kidneys. One external hole vents urine, feces, and sperm. The parrot Ya-Lur, a missionary parrot from the United Pentecostal church of Lubbock, Texas, had a thick tongue and could speak in tongues. His master told the native congregation, quoting from the book of Isaiah, “For with stammering lips and another tongue will he speak to this people.” Mayan syllables and intonations with a slight Texan drawl flowed from the thick-tongued parrot’s mouth but formed no discernible words, and yet the human preacher, the parrot’s master, being an interpreter of tongues, understood the meaning and told it and esteemed the worth of the parrot’s gift of tongues and declared that the sounds came from God through His avian messenger, part bird, part angel, whose wings and colorful feathers exuded creative energy. Repetition acquires meaning, and so I repeat, repetition acquires meaning. Liminal being: soul and incarnate body, which spills sperm and cracks and savors the taste of tropical nuts on Earth yet flies to the Lord in Paradise, a pure spirit like Brancusi’s elongated bronze, to hear the Holy Noise and to impart its ecstasy.

8.
Vicente Riva Palacio was a nineteenth-century Mexican author who wrote about parrots and schoolmasters. One day, the beloved schoolmaster was called to a nearby town a good fifteen miles away, a half-day’s journey on an old horse. He mounted his horse and politely tipped his hat to all the ladies who gathered to say goodbye to him. By afternoon, he was riding through the jungle. The sun high in the sky, the heat of day distorting his clear perceptions and
clouding his good sense. He thought he heard the children of his school reciting their chorus of lessons: syllables, sums, and commandments. He shook his head as if to dispel the auditory hallucination and traveled on, but as his horse trotted along, the cacophony of sound only grew louder until suddenly a flock of parrots flew across his path reciting multiplication tables, and behind them flew the most majestic of them all waving a stick in its claw, and this final bird, the old schoolmaster recognized as his escaped Perico: “Oh see, now, Dear Sir, I have a school of my own!” Thus the story ended. Val was not sure if the moral of the story pointed to the poor teaching methods of that day, to the intelligence of parrots or their stupidity, to their inability to truly understand the meaning behind the words they repeated, or to the tragedy of tamed parrots who never could return in perfect harmony to the wild.

9.

The parrot of the Maharajah of Nawanagar, who travelled in a Rolls Royce, on yachts, and on biplanes, had an international passport. He boasted a gilded cage with an embroidered silk night cover. Vanity, vanity, all is vanity. Oh, vain be the popinjay: vanity, its chief vice! The parrot of the Maharajah of Nawanagar also took the Lord’s name in vain, repeated mariners’ curses learned in his avian youth that, due to his great longevity, were now defunct. Other parrots are known for good deeds. Wild parrots are deemed sustainers of all life: they rustle leaves as they eat, dropping seeds to the ground upon which other creatures nurture, and thus parrots coincidentally propagate fruit trees far and wide as loosened seeds scatter to the winds or are emitted through diverse animal scat. Domestic parrots likewise do great good as companions and accomplished teachers of speech. A parrot knows no greed but rather is its victim. Bandits reach into the hollows of trees to snatch eggs to incubate or the just-hatched chicks to pack in crowded crates to transport them, motherless, to sell at great profit in pet stores in first-world nations. Nothing natural about the parrots’ natural history in the drawing room, nothing natural about the parrots’ natural history in a cage: the bad conscience of capitalism, the bad conscience of colonialism. At the Managua airport the revolutionary soldier inspected the crate to find forty-nine parrots dead among ninety-nine packed up. The fifty others immediately quickened to take flight back toward the jungle from whence they came. They soared majestically high in the sky, claiming their freedom and their home. The poet, Comrade Ernesto, hearing of this incident, tried to balance joy and sorrow but
ended his famous poem with the image of the forty-nine dead parrots. He could not erase that troubling vision from his mind.

10. Pretty. Pretty. Beware of flattering strangers. They might display you on a shelf. Alberta never called her parrot Polly. She did not know its name. Its name (which indeed had been Polly) died with Alberta’s paternal grandmother who had lived in another state and whom Alberta never met and with whom Polly had mated and for whom she now mourned. Upon the grandmother’s death, Polly had cried alone in her cage with only dirty water to drink. In one corner of the room, the expired body of her faithful mate, Alberta’s grandmother, slumped upon the floor. In time, with mounting mail, unpaid bills and unanswered telephone calls, help finally came, but by that time the cockatoo had plucked out all of its breast feathers, had lost one-third of its weight, and refused to tell its name. To plume means to decorate a body. To plume also means to take all the feathers from a body: the sorrow of self-mutilation. In another house at another time, a family which had come upon the hard days of Great Recession deserted Gordy its cockatoo in an open cage in the empty, unswept living room, leaving only a dish of water and a bag of dog food in one corner. Neighbors heard the distress of the bird and called 911 for help. In the shelter (full of deserted parrots), a crippled female cockatoo shyly courted Gordy, who had never known his own kind before. They nestled their heads in one another’s necks and found great and abiding comfort. Polly, deprived of avian succor, saw the cuts on the tips of Alberta’s fingers, saw bitten nails and hidden burns and recognized her own sorrow. She could not mate with Alberta for she had mated for life with Alberta’s dead grandmother, and grief, it seemed, might last forever. Yet she taught the girl to speak, to piece together jagged pieces of words and puzzles. She found ways for a time to divert them both from their loneliness.

11. Two toes forward, two toes back, once bidden, the trained African Grey chose with its curved upper mandible the Tarot card of destiny. The king must die. A messenger from the House of Hermes delivered the news, presenting a parrot’s egg next to the card upon a gold plate. The king, having a premonition, did not wish to answer the door and only did so finally with great and debilitating dread. Upon seeing the egg, the king hung his head and then himself. “The King is dead. Long live the King.” The king’s son has now assumed the throne. Thus and so, generation follows generation. We designate the
parrot a gifted storyteller, and every story is the story of generation. We so wish for continuity! (And yet seldom act in its accordance.) We designate the parrot a clown. We laugh because we do not know what we laugh about. We tell our parrot jokes: Runaway parrot: polygon; parrot in a raincoat: polyunsaturated.

Question: What do you get when you cross a parrot and a tiger?
Answer: I don't know, but when it talks, you better listen carefully.

12.

Elegy Stitched Together

It’s just that idea like you’ve lost your keys for good and no spare, but no really you’ve lost your car or you’ve forgotten where you live, the street and color of joy. Is your hair falling out? It is now in strands like ridiculous eels at the surface of the brown river. Slitting up and back down with their slender tailbodies, rinsing down the drain. Remember I would straighten out your black hair with my fingers—it was always on end and nothing like mine. It just wouldn’t sit. It’s just that you sat in the truck, but I remember you underneath with the tire on your back as I tried to find a seam to unhook. There were no stitches, no hooks, the tire was yours. A tire seems necessary like employment or a trustworthy dentist but it will burn and spin and land like split open fireworks unable to stop exploding in a young hand. It’s just that there is more than one fuse. The hand is gone but someone picks it back up in the gravel. The show explodes back into the dark sky. It’s just that I saw your blood underneath my fingernails and I kept it there for weeks. I never wanted it to wash away like common dirt. After each shower I would check and make sure it was still there and it was, believe me it still is and now I try to bite it away with loose-teeth dreams in the mirror they are falling to dust and shaking like unstable bricks like a dog her jaw shifted from the car that hit her, her last face a growl her shining long bite-me teeth dry and misplaced but the blood stays there I keep biting until I bleed and it is still your blood isn’t it?
I Am Not Your Aunt

There were three—
two spasms of blood, even once

a baby, born screeching like a gull. The first must have slipped

in the dark when the sky unbuttoned
and swayed in moans. The second,

a tucked seed hiding its face in the open
pomegranate, its cracked peel.

The second slipped too, or scraped
through rough swells. And the third,

we know about you. My near-nephew,
your father is not my brother.

Sing for it. Open your dark wet throat
and howl. I will not know you.
Bones

form soft in the folds of a woman
until she opens and they belong
to someone else. They break
to sweet marrow, burn to inches
of ash, just like the rest.

When my father lived
in California I’d drive up
to visit him. I couldn’t go
inside, so we’d sit on the porch,
drink beer, watch the goat
scatter droppings. Everything
that wasn’t said, bones kept
in a pocket of thought. I still can’t open
my jaw enough to speak.

See how the bones map the face
of these hills, determine the dry grass,
the way it burns. A cracked valley
clavicle. Pelvic pond: dry.

See how a grave becomes two
sprigs of willow a child
brings to its wet mouth.

I use these bones to skip town, forget
the fist-shaped holes in doors, the shaking children,
the mess of why I can’t go inside.
I’ll pad my bones, grow them stone
dense. Harder with each step.
Root Cellar

From the German, *rathskeller*, underground passage, root, rot, Latin *cellarium*, meaning storeroom. I get stuck in etymology to avoid the cellar.

Your brother and I flew out of Anchorage on a small bush plane, open cockpit. We flew low and saw caribou moving through a tiny forest, as if in a diorama. Lichen, furred trees, moss on the north side. This was twenty years ago, longer. What I remember is, we visited you out in the bush at the fishing lodge where you were working as a guide.

But wait. I met you first on the stairway of your parents’ house. I was in college, sneaking out of your brother’s room in the early morning, hoping not to be discovered. You appeared at the bottom of the stairs.

Sometimes we make choices and don’t know it. Your brother and I visited you in Chico that summer. In the evening, you cleaned your guns. I was afraid to be in the same room. Guns. Too real. I’d only seen them in the movies. This remembering, long overdue.

At the fishing lodge, salmon season had passed. The spawners barely moved as they molted and decomposed in shallow pools. Once so silvery, so vital, pushing upstream. I made distinctions then, between us, the salmon, the caribou, and the great brown bear by the river with her two cubs, pawing salmon out of its pools. You looked at them with something like praise. We kept our distance.

Later, helping Louise with dinner, I offered to go down to the root cellar for onions and green peppers. I climbed down the ladder, past the russets packed in a box of sand, past the pint jars of strawberry and blueberry preserves.

Not long ago, my daughters surprised me too early one morning. They were not quite four and delighted with the blueberry tart they had made for me, in a terra cotta plant saucer with its dose of
minerals, dirt, and mold. Thawed blueberries arranged on top—Lord knows what else. Flour, sugar, colored sprinkles. Four hands purple-printed on the white cupboards, dragged chair. Purple sweeps in thick trails on the floor, abandoned paper towels. Sugar crystals crunching underfoot, that sticky sucking sound when footsteps are released. A beautiful mess.

I am willing all these detours I have taken. Grateful for delay. Haven’t thought of that cellar for years. You came down to the cellar, too. Moved near me in that cramped bounty. Apples emitting ethylene, ripening nearby tomatoes too soon. You helped me gather the vegetables.

You were so close, and though we didn’t touch—electric, heated air. The air. Your smell—salt, sunlight, forest. *Too bad, you said, my brother saw you first.*

And if we could have tunneled through to the woods and the caribou, followed the moss, migrated north, lived by rivers that sparkled with salmon, in that simplicity, would that have been more true? That knowing between bodies.

I wanted—that salmon part of me—to leap, cover myself with you, not think. Pine and cottonwood shimmer their leaves in the wind. The rust fur of the caribou. How solid you were. The big Alaskan sky. I still remember that space between, close, not touching, silvery, alive.
AMY GORDON | The Goddess Within, 2017
36 x 50 inches | Liquid metals, gold leaf, wax on wood
HONORABLE MENTION, 2017 LAUX/MILLAR POETRY PRIZE

JENNA BAZZELL

All Is Wild, All Is Silent

... it takes forever to believe the dead are friendly.
—Jorie Graham

My mother is dead you hear
yourself tell anyone who
asks, anyone who answers oh
but never asks how, but when
as though ignoring will make
it disappear like your mother
slurring, her hands you could sense
confusion through, the kitchen
painted over and another
cigarette burning without
end, another bedroom door
gone white, a water-stained lampshade.
She is dead. A copper roof
oxidized to green. You quarter
onions, slice potatoes. Every-
time, you flinch before the gas
range ignites. She’s dead you hear
yourself repeat. You devein shrimp
hovering over the sink.
Through the window, pines border
the yard swallowed by tall shadows.
Her unwillingness buried
beneath them. You move to watch
them stand still, move the other way
to see their needles shed. She’s dead.
You say it to make it small,
the way it never seems to come
or last, until you say it
My mother is dead until
saying it is comfortable,
like a belief. So, when you
hear it, you stand still and wait.
The Speaker’s Prayer

If I speak for my mother, I must leave my own body. I must not expect to wander home, to see robins darting in low shrubs, leaves of a birch tree folded like fins, my body not able to respond, but bent in praise like a sheaf of wheat. If I speak for this woman, I must no longer believe this world is for me, but for the red oak leaf that papers and curls waiting for autumn’s singe. But if my belief is murmuring water in a creek nearly dry, is this wrong? If I speak for her, I know her figure, but cannot yet tell whether she is a twist of smoke unfurling beyond a range of pines, a bunch of big bluestem, or the flute-clear song of the wood thrush. Let her hear me in the sway of the switchgrass, let her hear me in the wisteria’s drooping clusters of flowers. Let her hear me in the stream water pleating over and over smooth stones. Let her listen.
Most room maids stay one season, two tops. Eight years makes me some kind of pro. That’s why my nametag says Mavis Bouchard: Room Attendant Manager, being at the Mountaintop Inn so long and doing what I’m told, both. So I do what I’m told the day Craig Ladney shows me little Miss Jenny Parker and tells me to train her, even though you can tell looking at her she won’t last—homecoming-queen pretty, dirty blonde hair falling in kinks around her face. You can feel the prissy glowing off her right along with the shine on her teeth.

“Rule number one is do whatever Craig Ladney says. He’s the boss,” I tell Jenny. “Rule number two—take whatever comes your way and clean it the fuck up. And rule number three—blend with the wall paint. Far as these guests go, we’re not even here.”

She nods like she gets it, like she’d do anything you said, but that whole first while together, I’m waiting for the prissy to take over. Think how long it’ll take a girl like her to learn how to scrub a toilet, change a bed, and leave a room fresh in no time flat. Her with half-moons at the tips of her fingers, starshine coming out her eyes. Then think how long it’ll take us to find the next one when she gives up and leaves. I’ll be cleaning twice my normal rooms and dragging my Rosalee home late to bedtime for months to come.

First stop’s the utility room off the 100s hallway. The dryers stand at the back, big enough to swallow you up. We got maid dresses in the closet to fit about any size girl ’cause of all the coming and going. They’re polycotton and gray like soot with a round white collar. Hanging there in a row they look dull as socks until Jenny walks out wearing one. Might just as well be a ball gown on her, the way it snugs up against every rise and fall of her body.

In the bins by the dryers, we got a day’s worth of clean towels to fold, plus toiletry items on the shelves to restock the maid carts, so
we get to work. Jenny Parker folds washcloths into perfect squares straight off. She squirts out words like “cute,” right after she pulls on that maid dress, then again when she gets her hands on those little wrapped-up soaps and tiny shampoos.

“Cute?” I spit out the word. Every damn thing about Jenny is cute, from the perky uptilt of her nose to her bright blinky eyes. What does she know about a job like this? About cleaning up messes bad enough to show up in your nightmares?

“Ain’t nothing cute about this job,” I tell her. “You wait and see.”

First day I keep her at the laundry doing inventory, a job I been putting off for weeks. Something about setting Jenny Parker up to count towels and bedsheets the day through makes me chuckle all the way down the hall with the cleaning cart, even if I got to carry a double load until her training’s done. I been on my own with a double load all week as it is, ever since Manuela called from New Jersey saying she moved.

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At the end of that first day, I pick up Rosalee from my mama’s house, rush her home, bustle through her bath just so we get a few minutes together, me pulling my feet up alongside hers on her bed for reading time. Rosalee’s partial to princesses. Up to me, I’d skip them altogether unless every last one could be like Cinderella. You got to respect a girl knows how to get dirty, don’t shrivel up when the work gets hard. Not too many like her, though, so I make up extra characters.

“You hear tell about the princess’s best friend, Tallulah?” I ask Rosalee. “She went on up to the community college and got her a LPN license.”

“She did?”

I love the way her voice sounds when she’s sleepy, so small and far away, the way the knob of her head rests warm against my arm.

“Yeah. She had to study real hard and stay in school, but now everybody at the hospital loves her. She’s the hero of the whole place.”

“Does she get to wear party dresses?”

That’s what Rosalee wants to know. Party dresses.

“A working girl gets to wear a uniform,” I tell her.

“I want me some party dresses,” she says, half-asleep already, so sure she would’ve been wearing a gold crown on her head and ordering people around all day long, eating fancy cakes taller than her mama if she’d lived back in them olden days. I don’t tell her how there’s always been more folks taking orders than giving them.
Wiping up toilet seats. Chucking out garbage. She’ll figure that out soon enough.

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Next day Jenny shows up looking like a fashion magazine in her little gray dress. I tell her she’s ready to work some rooms with me. I’m hoping for the worst kinds of messes just to see what she’ll do.

Lucky for her, first room we come to ain’t so bad. Husband and wife. You can tell they got theirselves a system to live by from how they got their little stacks of things just so. His pocketful of change and notes to himself on the one side of the bed. Her lip balm and book to read plus half a wadded up tissue on the other.

Looks like they come up for a day or two of hiking the Appalachian Trail. All you got to do to get to the AT from here is walk along the highway about half a minute, cross over, and disappear into the woods at the white blaze. I like to picture that myself sometimes, wandering up there after work one day, slipping into the trees, walking till my legs give out, then laying back on the dirt and rocks and staring up into a wide-open night sky, black but for the stars peeping back at me. Nothing but me and my thoughts for a zillion miles.

But I got places to be.

The husband and wife are staying one more night, so I show Jenny how to make the bed, smooth everything so it looks like a machine could’ve done it, tricks for how to get the spread to tuck around the pillows. “It’s all in the wrist,” I tell her. She shadows my every move, tries them out for herself.

Next room ain’t too bad neither. He’s a one-nighter, so Jenny gets practice ripping sheets off a bed before we come upon the mess in the bathroom. Now we’re talking. Man must’ve shaved his beard off into the sink. Looks like a body’s head coming up out of the drain. “We get a lot like him,” I say. “Maybe hiking the whole AT, stopping here ‘cause it’s near about halfway. This motel might be the first time he’s seen the inside of a room since Georgia or Maine. Look out, too. Sometimes what you find in trash cans in these kinda rooms don’t sit well with the stomach.”

Jenny wrinkles up her nose, a mixture of grossed-out and curious. “Like what?”

“Bandages from blisters five states old, maybe pairs of shoes worn through the soles, stinking like an army of men died in there.”

Jenny keeps her nose pinched, but she swabs every last bit of hair out of that sink.
Next day brings the exact kind of test I been waiting for. Drunken frat boys in this room, looking for a wild night some ways out of town. “You take the interstate one hour either direction, you’re at one big old college or another,” I tell her. “Never know what you’re gonna find in one of their rooms.”

Jenny hovers at the door. I knew this kind a room’d be rough on her, and I feel almost sorry. But I can’t have her calling on me whenever she comes across a mess like this one. So I square my hand against her back and shove her forward.

“Frat boys try just about anything drunk,” I tell her. “Hike after sunset. Swim in the pool. Run naked up the highway. Sometimes they get too fucked up, think they’re in the bathroom when they’re standing by the bed. This was some drunken frat boys in here for sure.”

Trash cans full of puke. “At least they made it into the can” is what I say. I peel out the plastic liners, spray some disinfectant. Jenny looks swoony. But she goes over to the bed, smart enough already to snoop around the covers for surprises before she pulls them off. She makes a tidy pile, then she’s back at my elbow, watching and helping.

The bathroom’s another room full of sick. Plus, empties—cans and bottles—fill the bathtub. “Jesus,” Jenny says. “We oughta have Hazmat suits.”

Imagine her and me in a couple of them bright orange jumpsuits straight off one of them cop shows. We’d look almost alike. Not like in these clingy maid dresses, showing my fat shoulders and big broad ass as compared to Jenny’s plum-perfect breasts and firm little tush. Them Hazmat suits even got hoods. They’d hide the way my hair lies flat against my head, gets stuck in the little bit of sweat from working, as sure as they’d hide how Jenny’s curls almost dance at the sides of her face.

Break time, we prop up our feet. Jenny grabs a snack and a book from her purse. Some kind of nut and seed combo you might toss out for birds in winter. And I can’t even read the title of her book. “Eating bird food and reading ‘Tangerine?’” I say. I know it ain’t the right word, but it’s the closest I can get.

She smiles at me, showing those too-white teeth. She says a word in French that don’t sound a thing like tangerine, and she tells the name of the guy who wrote it, a name that looks a whole nother way from how it sounds. “It’s French for the stranger,” Jenny says. “It’s about a murder. Mostly about feeling like an outsider, though.”

“What’s the title in French for?”
“The whole book’s in French.” The way she says it, you’d think it’s normal as pie to sit in the break room of the Mountaintop Inn reading a book in French. I shake my head, pick up a *People* magazine from the floor, and thumb through a whole bunch of trash about rich famous people. This one’s back in rehab, that one’s got a baby bump, all these other ones with their plastic surgery. But I’d never be sitting in a room with any of them. “What you reading that book for?” I ask.

“I like it. I’m going to major in French literature in college. That’s what I’m saving up for.”

Saving up for. Like you could get to college from here. For most folks, this is the place you go when there’s no place better to choose from, but here she is, ready to waste my time and hers, learning this job just long enough to turn right around and leave it. “So, what? You starting college in the fall?”

“I did my first year already,” she says. She rolls a pinch of bird food between her fingers.

What did Craig Ladney expect when she walked in, job application swinging from her baby-soft little hand? Didn’t he even ask if she planned to stick around? Probably didn’t think past looking at her. And looking at her’s all he has to do. I’m the one stuck for months training her and then retraining whoever comes next. I’ll be sending postcards to Rosalee before long with all my extra hours. “So when do you head back?”

“I don’t.” Jenny’s lips close up around her shiny teeth. “I guess you could say the money ran out.”

I hike myself upright in my chair. “Ran out?” I can’t feature Jenny Parker racing up to the utility office before the stroke of five to keep her heat on for the weekend or putting back the Nilla wafers and baby carrots cause the grocery bill ran too high. “How’s that?”

“I was supposed to do an internship this summer.”

“This summer?” All I know about internships is they make better jobs than this one. “And you wound up here?”

“My daddy set it up for me with some friend of his. When I didn’t take it, he said I could just make my own money from now on.”

“Hard to argue with a man wants his daughter to work for a living.”

Jenny says, “Huh.” And then she looks off into the dusty back corner of the break room and keeps talking. “I show up for my interview, right? Guy says my daddy didn’t tell him how pretty I was.” Jenny closes her eyes and hunches her body in toward itself like she’s one big fist getting ready to strike. “He had some pretty specific ideas about what I could do for him in that internship.”
Jenny keeps her lightning bug green eyes facing the corner. I tug at the back of my shoe, trying to give relief to a blister there, and what do I see but the dainty little black flats on Jenny’s perfect little princess feet? Me with ugly-ass fat-soled nurse shoes and blisters. “You couldn’t just talk him down?”

“Talk him down?” Like she was the only girl ever had some asshole get the wrong idea about her.

“Yeah, talk him down. Offer less than he’s asking, but keep the damn job. Instead of spending the summer folding towels and scooping puke when you could’ve been someplace better.”

“Come on, Mavis. No way you’d stand for that kind of shit.”

“Who knows what I’d stand for?”

“If it was your daughter in place of me?”

“Rosalee don’t get nothing handed to her so easy as that. Wouldn’t catch her turning down so gold a goose.”

Jenny shakes her head at me. “Well, I kicked the bastard in the balls and walked out.”

Picture Jenny with her tiny shoulders squared. Some ass-wipe fat old man with a waddle shaking under his chin, talking dirty to her. Then the look on his flabby face when her foot comes swinging into his unsuspecting prostate.

Jenny zips her little baggie of seeds, crams her book in her purse, and slams her feet back on the ground. “I don’t believe you would’ve done any different.”

She walks off before I can say anything back. And I hate that she’s right. Put me in a room with some man that talked that kinda trash to me or my girl? Ain’t but one of us coming out fit to reproduce, I promise you that.

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Maybe a week goes by and Craig Ladney says it’s time to open up the pool for the season. Somebody’s already been to fix up the chemicals, so when me and Jenny pull the latch on the gate and go out there, the water shimmers up at us all blue and green. It’s the first day open, so there’s no sopping wet towels growing mildew in a pile, no backup of sticky, crushed beer and soda cans crawling with bugs. Just spent redbud blossoms floating on top of the water and a frog or two stranded in the filter boxes, bloated and gray. Jenny’s hands wobble when she fishes them out with the net. She looks greenish around the jawline, and I’m thinking, Here it comes. But she hurls them frogs over the fence and moves on.

It don’t take as long to train Jenny as I thought. After the second or third week, she don’t flinch at even the fiercest messes we get.
Another week or so, and we might be in the break room at the same time, but we ain’t pushing the cart together no more. She’s got her rooms, I got mine. Mind you, Craig Ladney has to sign off before I can give her the full number, so she’s only up to half what she should be, but it’s better than it was.

Month or so in, Speak-of-the-Devil pokes his head in the break room. Push-broom mustache polka-dotted with potato chip crumbs. Beer belly jiggling out over his belt and tugging at the buttons on his shirt, same gray as the maid dresses. His pits wet with sweat. Jenny’s on to yet another one of her French books and sits there reading it and eating her nuts and seeds.

“You done a fine job with the training,” Craig says.

To me or Jenny, neither one of us can tell. We both mumble out a thank you. Jenny packs up and walks out the door, scooting around his wide girth in the doorway. He don’t much move out of her way and keeps his eyes fastened at her ass.

“That mean you’re gonna give Jenny her share of rooms now?” I ask him when she’s far enough down the hallway not to hear.

“Don’t wanna chase her off,” he says, still staring after the spot Jenny’s ass just disappeared from. “Don’t wanna push her too far too soon.”

Same man set me up with all my rooms my third day. Followed behind me, testing my work. One time he hung his hand from the open door of a room he just looked over. “Finished?” he said with a face like a skunk just went by. He pulled me in and showed me the toilet seat I’d left flipped up. “That look finished to you?”

How was I supposed to know what finished looked like? Rosalee up half the night before, breast milk seeping down the front of my dress. “I ain’t never cleaned a hotel room before, sir,” I told him. Hadn’t never stayed at no hotel neither, not that he cared.

He huffed himself up, taller than he already was, and said, “Guests’ll think somebody done used it if it you leave it flipped up that way.”

But for Jenny Parker all he can say is how he don’t wanna chase her off. I burn holes in his back with my eyes while he walks away, but you know he can’t feel a thing.

For now, Jenny Parker knocks off early every day. I watch her take off her shoes, walk barefoot around the pool, dip her feet in there. Sometimes she spreads out on one of them chaise lounges, hands at the back of her head, staring out at the mountain view like a guest. And here’s me, finishing my extra share of rooms till late, getting in each night with hardly enough time to switch little Rosalee into her PJs.
So I start following after Jenny, checking up on her work, hoping to find something wrong, give me a good excuse to shake a finger, tell her a thing or two. But I go room to room. No lazy corners on her tucked-in sheets. Always the right number of clean towels, hanging right-angle straight. All her rooms even feel prettier somehow. I don’t find nothing wrong. So I leave one of the doors unlocked. See what’ll happen.

A little woman with a shrub of gray hair and red glasses clangs up to the front desk later, yammering about the unlocked door. “I was not aware the doors could be anything but locked,” I hear the day clerk tell her. Like she ain’t never as much as touched one of the doorknobs around here, didn’t even know how the locks worked. The old woman fusses a little more. The clerk gives her a $5 coupon for the Waffle House up the road and tells her she’s very sorry.

It’s a habit I take to, walking into rooms Jenny’s finished with. Think of all the bubble baths Mama or my aunt Sadie’s giving Rosalee in place of me. The times I’m glad for a thunderstorm in the middle of the night cause it gives me twenty extra minutes with my little girl, never mind she might be bawling for fear of the noise.

Sometimes I leave a door unlocked, a bar of soap in a sink basin. Spill the hotel shampoo in the bathtub. Leave the toilet seat flipped up. It’s not like it matters. Real world don’t seem to touch folks like Jenny. Never seems to ask nothing of them either. If it did, you know she wouldn’t have no clue what to answer.

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By now it’s full-blown summer. Days up in the 90s. Air so hot all the blue in the sky bleeds out and leaves it just white. Everything smells like sweat and suntan lotion. You can think of the whole wide world of possible messes we got to clean up poolside. Used condoms floating in the water from folks sneaking in and humping under water in the middle of the night. Baby spew and rotten diapers left out in the sun. Raccoons dragging crap from the trash cans hither to yon. And all the while the polycotton maid dresses slicking your whole body with sweat.

In the break room, Jenny talks on and on about her French books. I get used to the sound of her voice. She tells me the stories in English, making them sound as juicy as grocery line gossip. I start to tell her some stories of my own. Mine are about regular things, in regular English. About Rosalee and how she hops between my aunt’s house thirty miles south and my mama’s house thirty miles west, how she wakes up in the night sometimes and don’t know where she’s at, walks into a wall trying to get to the bathroom. I tell her
about Rosalee’s daddy and how he walked out on us when she was still a baby. She had the colic so bad she could cry five hours straight. Willy’d bury his head in the pillows, then shout out, “What the hell’s wrong with that kid, Mavis?” He used to talk like babies was something you got at the Walmart, and if they come out wrong, you could just head back up there and trade them out. I tell her how, when Willy left, I said a little thank you up to God, cause I swear life got easier from there. Rosalee even started crying less.

Maybe I tell all this to Jenny to prove how hard I work or maybe cause I never had nobody to tell before. “You tell a good story, Mavis,” Jenny says. “Just like my French ones, with all the right amounts of heartache.” Jenny teaches me words. Serviette. Savon. Clé. Makes what we do sound classy.

Still, every day, after she finishes her half-ass share of rooms, she slips off barefoot to the pool, and I slip myself into one of her cleaned-up rooms and slather a sink faucet with lotion or leave a blob of conditioner on a toilet seat. Makes my extra rooms that much easier to bear.

One time I pulled all the hair off the brush in my purse and jammed it in the bottom of my shoe so I could stopper a sink in one of Jenny’s rooms later, fill it with water, and float that clump of hair in there. But before I left the room, I peeked backwards. It looked so ugly I had to fish it out. I flushed it down the toilet, drained the water out of the sink, then twirled the toilet paper roll one or two spins and left it dangling instead. Just one imperfect thing.

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One clear-sky day, halfway through August, the hot sun’s boiling down like hellfire. Except for us cleaning up after everybody, anybody outside is in a bathing suit, half of them in the water. There’s mounds of towels squished up into soggy puddles every time we check for them. Styrofoam coffee cups from the lobby self-serve scattered around, forgotten hair bands, candy wrappers. People will make a mess, that’s one thing I learned on this job.

A woman in a red bikini’s floating her little baby round in circles in the pool. A man sits on the edge with his feet in, baby-talking at them now and then. One or two college girls are fry ing up their skin in the sun. Some shrimp-faced old lady’s tippy toe-ing in at the shallow end. A crow calls out from the trees on the downhill side of the pool patio. The slope of the mountain cuts across the sky just beyond. A big rig engine-brakes out on the highway.

Jenny Parker strides up to our usual lookout—the spot where we can see all around for what needs cleaning next—and stares out at
the mountains the way she likes. My body aches from all these weeks of extra rooms to clean. Seems like Craig Ladney ain’t never gonna give Jenny her full share, and the day ain’t getting any longer. My paycheck ain’t getting no bigger, salary being the up and the downside of that Manager on my badge. I get this urge to run up behind her and just smack her into the water. Dunk her under like my brother used to do to me. Hold you down there just long enough to give you a hint of the end of the world.

But I keep un-wadding sopping towels and setting them in the dirty cart. Hurl a sogged out diaper into the trash. Fish crunched up Styrofoam cups from the filter boxes.

The lady in the red bikini sets her baby up on the lip of the pool to crawl around. The daddy coo-coos at her and claps his hands. The baby keeps crawling along the edge of the pool in her bright pink and orange bikini with its little matching bonnet. I think the daddy says something sour to the mama, and something in the air changes.

I look back to Jenny. She’s running. Nothing else makes noise or moves. It’s hot, but iciness spreads up my back. The baby was crawling, and now it’s not crawling anymore.

Jenny jumps into the pool, dives under the water. The red bikini mama lets out a shriek. The daddy flaps his arms like he’s trying to fly. Everybody else around the pool’s all the sudden sitting up and looking in the same direction, just staring, stupid, at the glassy water and the ledge of pool behind it where a baby’s supposed to be.

Jenny pulls the baby, purplish, from the water and heaves back out of the pool. The daddy jumps in beside the red bikini mama and both thrash through the water as fast as they can go, aiming for Jenny and their baby. “Oh Jesus, oh Jesus,” the dad moans. The mama whoops for air like she was the one about to drown. They pull themselves poolside in front of Jenny and the mama grabs that baby, tips her upside down until she coughs and spews water and milky white stuff. Every one of us watches the purple drain off the baby’s face, leaving it pale but for the sunburned tip of her nose. All the while Jenny stands there streaming with pool water like all she’d done was the most natural thing, and I want to know, how did she know what to do and I didn’t?

First words out of the mama’s mouth I mistake for some kind of thanks until her words clatter into clarity. “What the hell you think you’re doing? You some kinda lifeguard? You could’ve killed her. You’ve could’ve killed my baby!” Water courses down the woman’s face and she clutches her baby to her chest like a splayed frog.

I strut over and shove myself up between Jenny and the shouting woman, my face just inches from hers. “You won’t watching your
baby, lady. Every single one of us here saw that.” I can smell her sour breath. As for Jenny, water pours off her and puddles at her feet. Her hair flops wet-dog flat at the sides of her head.

The parents hustle themselves and their baby back off to their mound of towels and t-shirts in a ruckus of crying and a few shouts of blaming each other now that I stared them down from blaming Jenny. Then Craig Ladney’s voice rumbles in the distance, asking, “Is there a problem here?” and I remember rule number three about blending with the wall paint. Last thing he ever wants is commotion in the pool area.

“Let’s get you freshened up,” I say and whisk Jenny off to the 100s hallway. Her elbow feels bird-like in my hand, and her eye makeup smears down her cheeks.

She lets me tug her all the way to the utility room. Hot as hell in there with that wall of dryers. She peels her dress up off her head, unhooks her bra, slides her drenched underpants to the floor. I try to look the other way, to not see the milky smoothness of her flesh, the purpled rings of her nipples, goose pimples standing up all over. Soggy and makeup streaked, she looks a bit like a corpse drawn from a lake. But she’s still beautiful.

I can see every knot of her spine, though, the ridges of her ribs. “You eating okay, Jenny?” I toss her wet things in with the tumble of drying towels and fetch out a few hot ones.


She lets me wrap her in the warm towels. It’s like holding Rosalee after a bath, but for the smell of chlorine in place of baby shampoo. Jenny lets me tamp water from her mossy wet hair. With her hair flat, her eyes seem twice as big, twice as green. She curls into my attention like she needs it.

“You ever tell your daddy what really happened with that man and that internship?”

“Wouldn’t change anything.” Jenny wipes her blurred makeup with a corner of the towel. “My daddy’s not the kind to admit a mistake.”

“Not ever?”

“I’m not waiting around to find out,” she says. “I’ll save up my money here and send myself back to school no matter how many years it takes. What else am I going to do?”

Me? I fucked around, married the first loser who got me pregnant, and landed here.

Jenny’s hair dries back into its perfect ringlets and her makeup-less face stares up like a clean slate. And I see that the biggest
difference between her and me ain’t how pretty she is and how many
breaks the world’ll give her on account of that, but it’s how my
working hard don’t push in any direction, just circles the same old
things. Toilet bowls, sink drains, pool tiles. Nothing changing. It ain’t
her fault she knows what to do and I don’t. It ain’t even her fault
she’s so pretty or that she came from money and knows a whole part
of the world I’ll only ever see from the outside.

I start to feel a little sad, knowing one day Jenny Parker will leave
the Mountaintop, leave me behind. But then a bright, burning
squiggles up in me. Sure, nothing’ll change for me if I sit around here
waiting for someone to hand me something different. But what if I do
the changing? Pick a direction and start moving that way? There has
to be somewhere else I could get to from here, just like Jenny.
Someplace without so many toilets and overflowing cans of other
people’s trash.

Real quick when my shift ends, I’m gonna shuffle up that road a
ways and disappear down the AT, find a quiet spot with a view onto
the valley below and up into the open sky. I’ll go there for just a few
of my very own minutes and think up something better that might
come next.
Glass Bottom Boat

Because there’s so much color to admire below
but feeling a little sick
on my bench with the swaying,
our stalled and stationary drift,
I had to look down through glass
with the other ogling families
in hoodies and parkas,
the better to see where shoals
of orange Garibaldi swarmed
through streaming algae,
soft as in slow-motion dreaming.
You cannot fish particular species
protected by the state,
our captain said. And we nodded in silence.
It always heartens me to hear it:
*For he will pluck my feet out of the net*
in the wide and delicate pond of humankind,
if only such care were taken with us all.
The Annunciation

It will come down to he said, she said.

The color of sunlight, shade, what could be heard from the street, whether the spider lilies were still blooming.

The great I AM spoken by one swallowed, in silence, by the other.

Many times a day she will try to think of lying there his shadow crossed over her, but will conjure nothing.

Other times she will wake with the feel of a tongue wet in her ear though she has sat for hours on the shower floor scrubbing her face away.

Behold—a word of witness.

So much went unrecorded between the girl and the Angel.

Did it pour down like honey? Did it sting?

The soul, whatever it is, struggles to articulate.

She can still go to that place, where nothing grows, where her mind has nothing in it and only breath ties her to the world with a blue hair ribbon.

The movement of the soul toward articulation is slow.

No official complaint has been recorded.

It is known that she was clutching a book, that through the whole ordeal she kept one finger in the page.

Behold: a word of holding steady

in the mind, in the eye—
Later, they will ask why didn’t she drop it, use it to push him away.

No, it was not the first time she’d been in his garden. Yes, willingly, she may have claimed to be his.

It felt good to be held, until she felt nothing.
Incarnation Ghazal

I have looked back to see my own body,
unsure if it could really be my own body.

The soft wood of the willow tree splits easily—

I fill the doctor’s forms regarding my own body.

On TV, men smile, white, in fresh blue suits.

Who has the right to oversee my body?

I count my breaths, careful slow—

Friend, refuse to be a refugee from your own body.

Laxmi was reborn as Sita; Mary carried God as man.

Did they ever want to flee their human body?

Good years, more years I’ve watched her thinning skin—
the woman who gave me my own body.
Fixed high on the temple wall, carved stone couples twist.

Tourists wonder: is that joy a possibility for my body?

The tulip lost its petals in the spring's warm wind.

What force can set me free in my own body?
AMY GORDON | Spiritual Warrior, 2017
48 x 60 inches | Acrylic and liquid metal on wood
ANGELA BILGER

Jacksonville, Near I-295

After the clouds empty themselves into the afternoon, I wade onto the porch, weightless, parting the palpable air. You used words to create, but you forgot to create a word for the way the bricks of the houses seem lit from within, or for the alien green halo-ing the leaves of the lone maple that trembles, saturated and effervescent. Perhaps I’ve always understood you best in the departing wall of rain, in the language of tires on the wet highway, in the glow of the atmosphere that makes me feel so grateful, and so lonely. Let me worship you in the battered, bruised-rose sky that turns this world strange.
STEPHEN GIBSON

Noir

Hair clumped on duct tape, skull in a trash bag, some cute logo on a child’s dirty pink T-shirt which I can’t remember, but seeing it as I ate pizza and drank beer in Rome at an outside table under an awning of some fast-food joint across from the Colosseum, one more tourist just trying to get away from all the other tourists—I couldn’t look away from the TV. The trash bag had been ripped open—bite marks on finger joints, the skull, and what was left of the dirty pink T-shirt. Some kind of animal. You can’t leave a body outside and not expect that to happen. All around, people ate and watched the same news program as I did, as I ate pizza and drank beer, surrounded in Rome by tourists just like myself who went looking for a table outside and ended up staring at a child’s remains in a trash bag. This was before the Florida case with that child’s T-shirt which also had some cute saying on it, some beach-joint kid’s T-shirt with sparkles and place names every joint sells from Clearwater to Fort Lauderdale. As people ate, I heard “monster” in Italian. The saying on the T-shirt was in Italian. So was the broadcast—and I was a tourist looking in, you might say, on dirty laundry. A trash bag isn’t “dirty laundry” with a child’s remains left outside—nonetheless, I was looking in as others looked outside themselves and didn’t like what they saw. That food joint in Rome was like a thousand others; a thousand trash bags were being stared at as I sat at that table, drank beer, ate pizza while across the street from me, hundreds of tourists were lined up to get into the Colosseum, wearing T-shirts
and shorts and sandals and skirts and flip-flops, T-shirts with the faces of bands on them always worn outside and never tucked in, T-shirts with foreign logos tourists just love, who wear straw hats as they eat gelato in joints like the one I was sitting in where I drank beer and ate pizza—and heard “monster” as people stared at a trash bag.

I looked at the T-shirts all around in that fast-food joint waiting to order, waiting for outside tables, as I ate pizza and drank beer, a tourist, with remains filling a trash bag.
Erratic transcription of notes taken at a refugee camp in Anse-A-Pitre, Haiti.

The refugee is the sole category in which it is possible today to perceive the forms and limits of a political community to come.
—Giorgio Agamben, We Refugees

Laurencia Etienne has a tumor: “Gigantic Uterine Miamazilosis.”

Ezekiel finds nothing in the toasted choking dust but hunger.

The priest dispenses Marna-Pack Famine Relief Rice, iron fortified.

For six months: No papers, no money. No rain since baldest days of cloudless June.

Domingo beaten by the police for no reason but that he looked Haitian.

Because the radio whispered to Geniseé Chat that it was gonna be like ’36 again, because she heard the tígueres from the pueblo talking, because someone asked her to say parsley.

The climate of fear, not the drought, brought him here, since this parched earth already belongs to Antonio Jean-Luis.

Niné came on the old paths, by the old roads, that only she remembers.

The owners of land from here to Barahona had Jeremy Pierre water their fields with his sweat, now on this side of the earth the owners of the land let him squat, give him little jobs.

There are 4,000 in this camp.
All of the crop is lost, but there was a sweet rain once years back and then the land was good, yes, Annette Jeudi’s family all had their fill, yes, there was plenty to glean in the fields after harvest.

Chicho the cane cutter with work-gnarled thumb, Bertrán the stevedore with truck-broken back.

Aquino who harvested yuca, plantain, manioc, pigeon pea, red kidney beans, rice.
Getting By

Becca-Jean showed-up at my house cradling a hammer in her arms, so I stopped her at the door and demanded she tell me what was going on. She looked down and back up at me like she was holding a chicken casserole.

"It's not what you think," she said.

"So what is it?" I asked.

Becca-Jean opened her mouth to respond, but when no words emerged, she closed it, then dropped her head. “Please?” she asked, the word scratching from her throat.

In our whole lives, I had never heard that girl beg. Not when our first-grade teacher beat us purple for taking an extra milk. Not when her mamma put the plug-in lighter of a Ford station wagon to her stomach. I gestured Becca-Jean inside.

§

She’d first shown up about a week previous. I was making drop biscuits and singing along to Emmylou’s *Quarter Moon in a Ten Cent Town*. When I turned to wash the dough off my hands, I started at the shadow in the doorway. I was reaching for my rifle before I recognized her. Then neither of us said anything for I don’t know how long.

"Becca-Jean?" I asked as the shock of it all dimmed enough for my manners to return. I rinsed my hands and opened the screen so she could come inside.

"They would've wrecked the machine," she said and raised clenched fists. When I saw the condom wrappers, some torn corner of what had brought her to me after all those years started to make sense. I put my hand on her shoulder and guided her inside to the trash can.
While she scraped her palms, I set coffee and fresh biscuits on the table. When she’d finished, we sat, and I broke open my biscuit and drizzled honey over it. I watched her trace the rose pattern on the edge of her plate. I waited. Maybe we hadn’t said so much as hello in close to ten years, but I knew. Ask that woman questions, and she will stone-faced lie. Put her in a quiet place, and the truth is bound to rise up.

“I think it started back in April,” she said when I was halfway through my biscuit. “He started doing some work up in Tahlequah. Was gone all week. Sometimes didn’t come home on the weekends.”

I nodded and made one of those noises women make, the one that means both I’m sorry and Go on if’n ya want, but you don’t have to.

“And there were the text messages,” she said. “Like, even when he was home, he’d be texting. I asked who was on the other side once, once mind you, and he told me it was business, and that I should mind my own.”

I made the noise that means What an asshole. I finished-off my biscuit and reached for a second. I watched Becca-Jean take a small pinch off her own, then put it on the plate instead of raising it to her mouth.

“It just seems so impossible,” she said, her hands busy turning the biscuit to dust. “Things like this don’t happen to—” Her hands stilled and she shot me a look. Then she reached for her mug and plugged her mouth with coffee.

Part of me resented her for it, sure, but another part didn’t care as much about the offense as it did that I was the one, after all those years, who Becca-Jean had brought her troubles to. So instead of telling her off the way I’d dreamed of doing, I did what friends are supposed to do. I told her that the woman was a dumb slut and that her husband was a worthless asshole and that Becca-Jean deserved a helluva lot better. I ended with, “If there’s anything you need from me, if there’s anything I can do, just let me know.”

Becca-Jean thanked me, then looked around as if the strangeness of her being in my kitchen had just set in. She asked for the time.

“Going on nine,” I said.

She dusted her fingers together and stood, thanked me for the food and coffee, said she was running late. As I followed her to the door, I figured that visit was the end of it. Her coming at all seemed like a brain accident, like how my friend Deb’s first husband, after he got blown up in Afghanistan, sometimes forgot they weren’t married anymore.
But on her way outside, Becca-Jean asked if she could store a few things at my place. “You know, to keep Gary from absconding with them,” she said.

I wondered where she’d gotten the word absconding, and why she wanted her stuff stored in a house an anemic sunflower could punch a hole through, but when nothing made sense, everything did, so I gave her my number with the warning that I worked in the flower shop from eleven to eight, that I had a standing gig at the Alibi on Saturday nights, and on Sundays, I visited my brother. She didn’t comment on the gig or my brother, just thanked me again before walking back to her car. She gave a small final wave as she pulled away. I thought that was the last I’d ever see of her.

But as I took the stage on Saturday, I had this feeling she would show up. The first few years she was married, I’d imagined it a thousand times. She would be walking past and hear me singing one of our old favorites, “Mama’s Never Seen Those Eyes” or “Midnight Girl in a Sunset Town,” and she’d just have to come inside. She’d shout me a drink. She’d apologize. We’d get back to each other. After a few years, the scene changed to me telling her to fuck off. A few years more, and I stopped imagining it altogether.

But of course, Becca-Jean didn’t show up that Saturday night any more than she had any others, so the next day, when I went to visit my brother, I didn’t tell him about her visit, though I maybe wouldn’t have mentioned it anyway.

“Good to see you, sister,” he said, pulling out the aluminum chair and sitting. Bryce had called me a lot of things growing up, but sister was something new. Part of his born-again thing.

“Good to see you too,” I said. The orange of his jumpsuit washed out his complexion and made the scars on his face and hands shine. It’d been five years since it all went down, but seeing those scars still made my heart hurt.

We settled into the kind of talk we always made. The hot spell. The high school basketball teams. A famous actor had died. When we’d gone over the funny parts of the actor’s movies, I brought up the senator who got caught buying male hookers even though he was all about how much he hated the gays.

“ Weird how people can do that,” I said.

“Be gay?” he asked.

“Say all these words that go one way, but live their lives in a whole other direction. Don’t see how they aren’t torn apart,” I said. I thought of Becca-Jean’s husband. Except I didn’t think he’d denied what he was doing—I was pretty sure Becca-Jean hadn’t asked.

“Satan leads many astray,” Bryce said.
“That so?” I asked. The laminate on the table was peeling. I began chipping at a corner with my thumbnail.

“Satan steals the truth from our hearts,” Bryce said. “And I fear he’s stolen it from yours, sister.”

“Really,” I said. “And how’s that?”

“A woman’s Godly duty is to bear children, to nurture future Christians for the salvation of the world,” Bryce said.

I sat back in my chair. “You think the devil is what’s keeping me from having kids?” I asked. “What’s he doing? Standing in my uterus, stabbing all the sperm go by? Is that what the pitchfork’s for?”

Bryce leaned across the table.

“I think you don’t wanna end up like Mamma,” he said. “And you think having kids will put you there.”

His eyes were steady on mine. The only eyes in this world that had borne witness to what I’d seen and heard and done as a child. To what had been done to me. It’s what I hated most about the Jesus talk. When Bryce started in on it, he stopped sounding like my brother, and that left me more alone than I’d ever known I could be.

“Bring you anything?” I asked, standing and pointing at the guard.

“The Lord’s Salvation is all I need,” he said.

“How about some socks?” I asked.

“Love you,” he said and held up his hand. We linked fingers and squeezed. Then the guards arrived and took us in our separate directions.

On the drive back, I passed the church and thought about how my brother and I used to wait for service to start. Then we’d rummage through people’s cars looking for loose change, candy, forgotten french fries or Cheerios—things people wouldn’t miss. One day we found a roll of twenties. I put it back but saw Bryce shove it into his jacket when he thought I wasn’t looking. I knew then our lives would split. Bryce was looking for something more than just getting by.

When I got home, I headed out back to burn the trash and that was when I got a text from Becca-Jean asking if she could come over. I told her to come on and found myself hustling to change shirts and wash my hands, though why I bothered, I don’t know.

“Want a drink?” I asked, lifting the bottle of Beam from the table. She was wearing a pearl choker. We called them collars when we were young.

“I’ve got prayer group tonight,” she said, her eyes working over my kitchen as she stepped inside. I had no doubt she saw every
peeled linoleum edge and counter scratch, but the cabinets had a new coat of paint and the floor was vicious clean.

“That’s not what I asked.” I pulled down a jelly glass. She smiled and took the whiskey.

“That it?” I asked. There was a plastic sack dangling from her wrist.

“Some of it,” she said. I held my hand out, but she set the sack on my table, then pulled out a chair.

“I feel like, I mean I talked you deaf the other day, but how are you?” she asked.

I eyed her long enough to let her know I did not believe her interest genuine. Then I went ahead and sat down.

“Good job. Good health. Good whiskey,” I said. We clinked glasses.

“How’s Bry?” she asked. Becca-Jean was the only person my brother had ever let call him Bry. He’d always had a thing for Becca-Jean. Time was when she’d felt the same.

“Good as can be expected,” I said. Becca-Jean made the noise that means both I’m sorry and What ya gonna do?

“That Hudgins girl crawled outta her Mamma ruinous,” she said, and I agreed, even though people had said the same about us.

“Remember when she lit Allie Null’s hair on fire?” asked Becca-Jean. “That smell.”

We both shifted in our chairs at the memory of singed hair and flesh mixed with the hot baked asphalt and fresh-cut weeds of the school playground.

“Hear her kids are just as mean,” she said. “Heard one of them stabbed a pencil into a girl’s ear. Won’t ever hear right.”

“Why are women like that the ones having kids?” I asked. Becca-Jean flinched.

I wanted to apologize, but to apologize would be to say it had happened, so I tried to get us talking in a different direction.

“How’s your dad?” I asked. “Still with the casino?”

“Thinks the government is after him,” she said. “Moved back to the homeplace.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, and I meant it. My parents were dead, so caring for people who’d brought me into the world but done nothing for me once I was in it was not a burden I had to bear.

“Nothing to be done about it.” She traced the rim of her glass. Her wedding rings flashed. I wondered how the stuff with her dad had gone down with her husband. You can take a girl outta the holler, but
you can't drag her whole family. Not that he would have to worry about any of that too much longer.

“You talked to any lawyers yet?” I asked.

“Power of attorney is almost impossible,” she said.

“I meant the divorce,” I said. “My friend Deb might know someone.”

Becca-Jean looked at me for what felt like a full minute. Then she asked, “Remember that Christmas out at the park?”

If she didn't want to talk about lawyers and divorce, I wasn't going to push it, but why she didn't just say as much, I didn't know.

“Course I remember,” I said, knowing she meant the year Bryce and me and Becca-Jean broke into a cabin at Robber’s Cave and spent Christmas day drinking stolen peppermint schnapps and talking about the kinds of people we were gonna be once we got out of that town. Bryce was headed to Alaska. He’d roughneck until he had a million dollars, then retire on a patch of land in Montana. Raise a mess of kids. Teach ’em all how to fish. Becca-Jean and I were headed to Nashville. We were gonna open for Reba McEntire. We were gonna have houses with rhinestone gates.

“Sometimes I think,” she said. Then she shook her head and smiled one of those closed-lip smiles she must have learned around the same time she’d started pulverizing biscuits and using words like absconding. “Anyway, I've got prayer group tonight,” she said and downed the rest of her drink. She slid the sack over to me as she stood.

I saw her to the door. I wished her a good evening. I waited until she was gone before I made sure I was right about what she’d left behind.

§

“A sneaker?” Deb cracked open a beer and scraped up the change I had laid on the bar to pay for it.

“A sneaker,” I said and took a pull from the can. “She said it was sentimental.”

“Horseshit.” Deb took my empty can and rinsed it.

“That’s all I wanted to hear,” I said. “I just wanted someone else to say it’s weird.” Deb and I caught eyes and smirked. I turned to the man sitting at the far end of the bar. “Whadya think, Skip? Think it’s whacko?”

Skip grunted and hunched his shoulders. Skip hadn't said more than ten words since he’d first propped himself up at that bar. He didn't even speak to Deb, who’d been serving him drinks for years, which was why Deb and I had fun ribbing him.
Deb crushed the empty can and handed it to me. “I say you tell her to rent a storage unit like every other goddamn person in the world.”

As I banked the shot off a Great Divide poster, I heard the side door open, and from the way Deb’s mouth turned, I knew it was Hoyt. I knew even before he spun me around and leaned me back for a long, gut-tingling kiss.

“When did you stop askin’ permission?” I said when I caught my breath.

“When you stopped expectin’ me to,” he said.

“Seems more like when you got expectations,” I said.

“I’m expectin’,” he said, moving until his lips grazed my ear, “two whole nights of you and me.” Then he grabbed my waist and began dancing me around the bar. He smelled like two weeks of tour bus, and I could tell he’d already been into the bottle. A laugh burst out of me, and he pulled me closer and started steering me towards the door. I called goodbye to Deb as it swung shut behind us.

Hoyt danced us all the way over to my place, warbling “Tennessee Waltz” at the top of his lungs as we went along. When we got inside, I steadied myself with the back of the couch while Hoyt pulled off his shirt and got to work on mine. Slow. Appreciative. For all his rough ways, Hoyt knows how to cherish. That night we took our fill, then lay across my bed and smoked and chatted. I told him about Becca-Jean.

“High school friend?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said, and wanted to say more, to explain how close she and I had been and how much it had hurt when I lost her. But I didn’t say any of that.

“Best not to get involved. Rich people don’t just up-and-leave. They get lawyers. Affidavits. Have entire court hearings about who gets the coffee table.” He pulled me against him and kissed my temple. “You don’t wanna get dragged into somethin’ nasty,” he said, then began to hum “A Thousand Miles from Nowhere.” I pressed my ear against his chest. Let the vibrations quiet me.

§

The next day, Hoyt wrapped some biscuits in a paper towel and headed out, said he’d be back later, though what that meant, I didn’t know. I found it better to pretend like the world outside of my house was the Pacific Ocean, and Hoyt was a sailor, and apart from me he was in no solid place, just out on the wide, blue water. It drove Deb crazy, the way I let him be, but it suited me fine.
After Hoyt left, I washed the sheets and the dishes. I cleaned the beard hair from the bathroom sink and the piss drops from the toilet seat. I pulled weeds. I ironed shirts. I baked biscuits. Then I found myself in the kitchen, my hands not sure what to do with themselves. Any normal day I occupy my own time just fine, but give me a few hours with that man and the restless rises up in me.

Which might be why, a few hours later, when Becca-Jean showed up at my house with the hammer, I let her inside. There was her begging, sure, but I won’t pretend my own lonesome didn’t have something to do with it.

§

“It’s these rabbits,” she said as she sat.

I stared her down. Rabbits was no kind of an explanation.

“Can I have a drink?” she asked.

“Rabbits,” I said, as I pushed my glass across the table.

She closed her eyes and took a deep swallow. She did not open her eyes as she spoke. “Gary’s got these rabbits. Dozens of them. He made special cages. They take up the whole last half of the back yard,” she said.

“Okay,” I said, when it was obvious she thought she’d said enough. “So what’s this got to do with the rabbits?” I watched her take a breath. She still didn’t open her eyes. I wondered what she saw in there, or if she drew comfort from the darkness. I put my hand on hers. Her eyes opened. We sat like that for I don’t know how long.

“You should come over,” she said, standing and picking up the hammer. “I want you to see how ridiculous these rabbits are.”

“I’ll drive separate,” I said and grabbed my keys from the nail by the door.

§

Becca-Jean lived in one of the neighborhoods outside Poteau that had sprung up courtesy of the natural gas boom but were left unfinished once it all went bust. Split level houses spread over acre lots. Some of them no more than falling-down frames. Others were complete save the wood scraps left piled in dirt patches that would have been lawns. The neighborhood was called Neverland, which meant a person didn’t even have to work at the jokes.

In her kitchen, Becca-Jean laid the hammer on one of those island things I’d seen in movies, the kind with pots and pans hanging above it and a sink in the center, and I sat on a nearby bar stool. She pulled a bottle of bourbon I’d never heard of from a walk-in pantry and
poured a measure into two crystal tumblers. I hated how good it tasted.

“Remember when we cut outta Spanish class and went streaking around the Red Oak baseball field?” she asked.

I smiled. We’d barely gotten back into Becca-Jean’s truck before a red-faced teacher had come running out of the building.

“What was that catcher’s name?” I asked. “The one you had a crush on?”

“Ephraim Moore,” she said.

“That’s right. Didn’t something happen with him? Car accident or something?” I asked.

“Drowned,” she said.

“That’s right,” I said, and we both sat heavy for a moment. Then Becca-Jean did her best to get us talking in a different direction.

“Remember when that point guard from Wister said you smelled poor, and you broke her nose right there on the court?” She saluted me with her glass.

I saluted back, even though I’ve never been proud of that moment. I was suspended, and we’d had a decent shot at Regionals.

“Remember those jean skirts?” I asked, and we both laughed remembering the hours we’d spent gluing fake gemstones and leather fringe to our asses.

After we’d quieted, Becca-Jean asked if I remembered the day we stopped wearing those skirts. We were late for basketball practice, and in our rush, we didn’t see Coach Boone in the shadows of the locker room until he’d pinned us against the wall. In the first stunned seconds, he rubbed his erection against the fringe, laughing. When we started fighting, he stepped back and walked away, whistling off-key.

We knew no one would give a shit. The man won football games. So we stayed quiet. Let him think he’d gotten away with it. Then we put a dime bag in his desk the day the drug dogs were at the school for D.A.R.E.

“One of the best things we ever did,” I said, and this time I saluted her.

Becca-Jean swirled the bourbon around her glass. “Heard he was going over to Stigler,” she said. “Heard that’s the real reason the school did anything.”

“At least he doesn’t have locker room keys,” I said and finished my wine, then reached over and filled the glass with water. My mouth felt stuck together.

“They get by with it,” Becca-Jean said. I looked at her. She was staring out into the back yard.
“What?” I asked.
“What? They get by with it,” she said again, lifting the hammer and weighing it in her hands.
“What?” I asked.

“Want to see the rabbits?” she asked.

§

From the kitchen, we stepped through glass doors onto a wooden deck with an iron picnic table and grill. I could imagine them out there. The men in khaki shorts and the women in sundresses. The men grilling hunks of meat and the women ladling potato salad onto plastic plates. Some would have brought their children. I wondered what Becca-Jean said when people asked why she had no children.

In the fading evening light, I could see large square structures up against a tall fence. We walked down the steps leading off of the deck.

As we drew closer to the cages, the smell was bad enough I had to breathe shallow. It was clear her husband had not been home in a while, and Becca-Jean was not about to dirty herself with his leavings.

“You’re the only one,” she said. “You’re the only one I knew would understand.” She flipped the pen latch. We stepped inside.

A few rabbits scattered, but most stayed where they were. I walked over and crouched down next to a pair huddled in a corner. There had been a stretch of years when I’d shot and skinned rabbits nearly every day, but these were not the rabbits of my childhood. They were no bigger than my hand. And they had sleepy eyes and pom-pom tails. They had collars. They had names.

I looked at Becca-Jean. She had knelt down and was holding a rabbit by its scruff. I walked up behind her.

“Becca-Jean?” I asked. She didn’t look at me. I wasn’t certain she’d heard.

“Becca-Jean,” I said and knelt down beside her. Her chin jerked, but otherwise she didn’t move.

“Becca-Jean,” I said, and laid a hand on her arm.

When she raised the hammer, I dropped my body onto hers and rolled her to the ground. We were both still for a moment. When she began to struggle, I let my body weight pin her to the Earth and hoped the riot those closed-lipped smiles and prayer meetings had kept lashed down all those years might pass. When I realized the calm would be a long time coming, I hauled Becca-Jean up and dragged her back to her house. She toppled us twice, but I held on.
When I finally got her inside, I threw her into the walk-in pantry the way I’d tossed her into swimming holes when we were young, then propped a bar stool beneath the knob. A half second later, she hit the door with so much force I heard something break. She screamed, the sound like a bearcat caught in fence wire.

I feared that sound would bring the neighbors, so I grabbed my keys and ran to my truck. I got to the end of the street before I remembered there were no neighbors. I turned around.

For most animals, leaving the cage open would be enough, but I figured those rabbits were all still huddled inside, too stupid to leave their own death trap, and there was a patch of woods behind the house.

I left the truck running and went through the gate and into the backyard. Inside the cages, I tried to herd the rabbits through the door, but they didn’t go far, so I made a t-shirt basket and carried them. I don’t know how many I saved. I don’t know how many I left behind. When a crash sounded from the house, I decided I’d done all I could.

That night I sat at my kitchen table with the doors locked and my rifle loaded. I thought about calling someone, but who would that have been? The cops? People like me don’t call the cops on people like Becca-Jean. I thought about Deb, but what would I tell her? And what could she do? I kept my hand on the rifle stock, jumped at every house creek and night critter.

It must have been seven or eight hours, but it felt like twenty, maybe thirty minutes had passed when Deb called to ask if I’d heard.

“HEard what?” I asked and took note that the sun had risen and that my knuckles ached.

Deb told me that some jerkwad in Neverland had called the cops because, get this, his rabbits had gotten loose.

“Rabbits,” she said. “Like someone stole his car.”

I flexed my hand. “Rabbits, huh?” I asked.

“Dozens, I guess,” said Deb. “Can you believe it? Like, imagine Sheriff Tucker standing there trying to take the descriptions.” She shifted her voice into a fair imitation of the Sheriff. “So you say Bugs had long ears? Uh huh. And a fluffy tail? Right. Right.” Deb broke-off and hooted with laughter. Then she told me that the police figured it was probably teenagers pulling a prank.

“Anyway,” she said. “I doubt they’re gonna spend too much time searching for Daffy.”

“Daffy was a duck,” I said and reached to put the safety on my gun. It was then that I saw the marks on my arms. The blood on the table. Smelled the rabbit shit.
“Ducks, rabbits, whatever,” Deb said. “I can’t believe a grown-ass man thinks the cops should spend their time looking for them.”

“Rich people,” I said.

Deb made the noise that means I know, right? Then she told me she needed to make a dozen more phone calls. I told her I’d get to work on the flower arrangements for the vigil. She was still laughing when I hung up.

I walked out back and threw my clothes into the burn barrel. I sprayed myself off with the hose, then went inside and grabbed a bottle of rubbing alcohol and the dish brush. I scrubbed until the shower ran cold, poured the alcohol until I couldn’t feel the sting.

When I heard the truck pull into the drive, I made for my rifle. But it was Hoyt whistling “If You’ve Got the Money, I’ve Got the Time.” I did my best to calm my breath, then went back to my room and pulled on a shirt.

I met him in the kitchen. He was carrying a bag of potatoes and a carton of eggs and nearly dropped both when he saw the state of things. He put the eggs away before leading me to the couch. He whistled long and low when I finished the story.

“I figure they died,” I said. “And I’m not sure getting eaten by a coyote or an owl is a better way to go, but I’ve always liked how Waylon sings, ‘I can’t say I’m proud of all of the things that I’ve done, but I can say I’ve never intentionally hurt anyone.’”

Hoyt pulled me closer and kissed my temple. “You done a good thing,” he said, and for some damn reason I’ll never understand, his saying that was the one thing that made me believe it. It’s like when he sings, “had a lover, she felt as good as trees.”¹ The song’s not about me, but it’s a good line all the same.

There’s a hundred miles of bad road between here and the Gulf of Mexico, but we don’t say it. We listen to Tab Benoit sing “When a Cajun Man Gets the Blues,” watch turtles lurch from cypress knees into black swamp water as we drive the Atchafalaya Basin Bridge. The last time we were back home, we knew we’d be leaving again, heading back to the Inland Northwest, to that tinderbox of wheat and fir. When we cross the bridge now, we lose the horizon, pine thicket crowding I-10, and I think if I let my hand out the window, I could graze the state workers bush hogging the trash in the ditches. They say now the maps are wrong, that the state is no longer a boot, that the toes are cut off, that the sole jags. There’s a hundred miles of bad road from here to the Gulf, but there used to be more. Tab sings about dancing the fais do-do till he can’t dance no more. We’ll soon be home for good, tucked away in fields of sugar cane. What’s left of the boot loses another football field of wetlands by the time we make it to Baton Rouge from Lafayette. We unload our things, sip coffee on the back porch in the citronella candle light, and we’re back home where flames from the factory flare stacks of Cancer Alley rise above the cane, in this state whose sky is fire and whose ground is water.
AMY GORDON | In Lite In, 2013
60 x 72 inches | Acrylic on canvas
At the Garden Inn in Blytheville, Arkansas

It seems right that summer should lead to this, a low brick structure
and a row of violet doors covered in dust. Above wet
steam grass, a butterfly lifts the sky on its powdery wings.

In my room, I check the mattress for bugs, pull the creases taut
to examine flecks of tobacco and dirt. Lying down,
head in sunlight, body in shadow, I dream of you again—
it's becoming chronic—but wake thinking Blytheville, like a silky claw
reaching in to remind me where I am. July in Blytheville,
in a season of warm, pushy rain. I have never been so far away.
Birthday at a Motel 6

The summer rain takes one last sweep through the leaves.

   Sunlight shimmers on the stones below. In the parking lot,
two girls smoke as they stroll, following the gray scrolls of their breath.

   Some of the doors are open to dim rectangular scenes
as intricate as tarot cards—Lovers and Fools and High Priestesses.

   Above them the wind carries petals over dusk’s border.
Sparrows hunt for their inheritance in the trampled grass—

   and my question endures another year, lit by tiny stars
striking out across Arkansas. How will I live without her?
Unspoken Conversation Between an Addict and an Old Friend

I couldn’t bear to watch
You hollow yourself out
Into the eye of a needle

You began to hunt every day
Woke earlier and earlier

Your knuckles on my window at dawn
I NEED YOU TO HELP ME I’M YOUR FRIEND

How else could I hope to love
Any part of you but to leave
With the little that remained

I learned to mourn the living
Loss is a poor guide but at least
I had some peace without you

//

When I needed you most
The needle answered

Addiction is like making friends
With the butcher
Dancing alone with him
In the walk-in freezer

We were fantastic dancers

You want to move
The memory of me
To that fertile land
The forgotten

I’m still here
Look past
All these teeth
STEVEN GIBSON

Noir

In the TV show, a docudrama, they find hair, some carpet fibers from the killer’s apartment, his DNA on victims’ clothes at crime scenes, shoe prints the police preserve in plaster casts—even the killer identified on a store security video (hindsight is 20/20), coming in from the rain.

An eleven-year-old victim, to get out of the rain, takes the bus instead of walking home—wet hair like a rat’s tail, the Butcher of Rostov says on video during his confession. (The serial killer’s apartment actually yields little, unbeknownst to him, which casts doubt on whether he could be linked to crime scenes going back decades). Cities become crime scenes. A ten-year-old returning home (again, in the rain), is lured by him when he pretends to be a TV cast member she says he resembles. He dries her hair as she says her mother is waiting at the apartment and she has to leave. The butcher confesses on video, in graphic detail, what he did to her. Then the video goes silent for a moment. The interrogator, not seen, resumes, asking, What did you do to clean up the apartment? The killer again details everything, adding that in the rain afterwards, he felt clean. And laughs—he had black hair and was handsome then, not like now, he says. (The casts of TV shows had been questioned, and a varied cast of pedophiles, including one who confessed on video to the crimes.) Andrei Chikatilo says, before his hair turned gray, he would watch police at his crime scenes (in 1984 alone, there were fifteen crime scenes), in rain, and sleet or snow—then he’d return to his apartment.
When police arrest him, he’s returning to his apartment with a plastic jug filled with beer. (Police look miscast in their trench coats although it’s beginning to rain.) At first, they stop recording—there’s a lapse on video—then Chikatilo drops the jug as they record the scene. A cop puts him into the sedan, pushing down on his hair.

The docudrama resumes outside an apartment, with video of a reporter doing her news cast as if at a crime scene—placing on the ground a hair scrunchie wet with rain.
DEREK UPDEGRAFF

The Bull from Kelp Forest

“Fat girl/skinny guy is my favorite combination,” he says to me. He’s driving, and I’m in the passenger seat of his truck, our boards in the bed, bungee-corded down. We’re about five minutes from the beach now, on surface streets, and when we were at that stoplight a minute ago, a fat girl and a skinny guy walked down the crosswalk, real sweet-like, his arm around her big waist, all proud, him in a tank top with those toothpick arms near those ham legs, and so Rob said that thing about the fat girl and the skinny guy being his favorite combo. And he’s a jerk like that, but I’m just wondering where those two are heading in the dark, cold morning, with him in that tank top and her in her jean shorts. And now Rob says to me, “But there are other good ones too. Like rich girl/sketchy dude. Beefy guy/skinny chick. Short guy/tall girl. Like tree-tall girl with really short dude. That’s a good one. But fat girl/skinny guy is hard to beat. It’s a classic pairing.”

Rob picked me up about a half-hour ago since my car’s in the shop again. It was dark when he pulled up just after 4:30 a.m., and I was outside, not wanting to wake my wife and kids. I stood out on the curb for about ten minutes. The night/morning air was damp, and I missed how I used to get up early to do stuff like this. Get up early to surf in the morning before high school. Get up early in college to drive to the mountain and spend an entire weekday snowboarding, in both cases doing as much as we could to avoid crowds—me and Rob or another friend like him, and sometimes Dale was with us, but he could never quite keep up in big waves or on steep mountains—and if you don’t have that impulse to rush down the tall, steep face of a wave or a mountain at sixteen or twenty-two, you’re not going to get it later, because from what I’ve heard, people get more protective of their bodies as they get older, and I can’t get that, but I think it’s true for most, and I look at my life
now, and I get up early to work my ass off, I get up early to tend to a crying twin if Sheila’s conked out from feeding two kids at once or dealing with the diapers and everything, and so now on this morning I’m up early to run out into the freezing ocean where it’s supposed to get up to ten feet, and I’m not thinking about anything but dropping in on the steepest waves I see, and I even like the idea of getting pummeled now and then if I miss the drop-in and get turned over and churn down under the water for a while before the tumult lets me up, and so there’s no Dale today, just me and Rob like the best of our years before we ended up being our current twenty-nine-year-old selves.

We turn down the street that leads to the little parking lot by the pier, but you’re not allowed to park in that lot anymore since they put up the signs, so Rob parks on the street across from the lot, where other rich folks like Rob live. But his parents’ house is further up the hill with an ocean view, and he’s living in the village part of town now anyway in a condo he probably doesn’t pay for, but I don’t ask about stuff like that because I don’t care, but really I do care a bit and have always been a bit intrigued and envious of that inheritance after inheritance passing on of imagined privilege and tangible wealth until someone down the line finally screws it up for the next in line.

But anyway we are on the street near the pier, and he pulls his truck to the curb, and he says, “Your car going to be ready before we meet up next week? I don’t want to have to keep driving out there to get you. Too inland, you know.” And he smirks. Because he’d keep driving out to get me, and he knows it. But he has to say jackass stuff like that. It’s in his veins.

And I say, “You forgot rich boy/girl-of-the-day.”

And he says, “What?”


And we both laugh at that too. And I’m so glad not to be him. But we both know I’m a little envious. And then I realize I set myself up. And I’m waiting for him to come back with something. Poor kid/fill-in-the-blank. Scholarship kid/fill-in-the-blank. And what would he fill that blank in with?—because he doesn’t know Sheila that well even though he was my best man at our wedding. And I’ll knock him in the mouth, I swear, if he says something bad about Sheila, because I’m all about her right now even though I couldn’t wait to get out of the house this morning. And he has no right to knock her because he was never with us when we dated at Pomona since he was up in Los Angeles. And screw those rich kids from our prep school anyway,
especially Gary who I never see anymore, thank God, who asked me where I was going to college in our senior year and, when I said Pomona, was all, The good one or the bad one? Then I was all, What? And he repeated himself for the prep-kid-scholarship-boy who commuted from east of Richville, saying, The good one or the bad one? And then I got what he meant, and I said, Cal Poly. And he smirked and was all, Well, Sam will be up there too, nearby at Pomona College. And Rob was there, and he must have thought I needed saving because he said, He’s going to be an engineer. Cal Poly Pomona’s a good school for engineering. But I don’t need rescuing, and I said—to Rob as much as to Gary—it’s a good school for anything, you shits. But that’s all beside the point because I’m waiting for Rob to say something about me and my girl, but he’s still kind of getting a kick out of my girl-of-the-day comment, and once the laugh trails off he says, “Yeah, that’s true.” And then, “We should get some fish tacos after this for the long-ass drive back to your house.”

He parks his truck and tosses his keys in the glove box. Then he pulls out a single spare key and puts it above the rear driver’s-side tire after we get out of the truck. Then we grab the spring suits out of the back and towel-change them on. We toss our clothes and towels in the cab and push down the door locks, and then we grab our boards and cross the street. The asphalt is cold and newly smoothed, but I still step lightly out of habit from slamming my heel down on sharp pebbles too many times throughout the years, which isn’t bad if you’re already done for the day, but you don’t want to prick your feet up before you’ve even been out in the water, so I’m light on the balls of my feet like a chick in heels or some graceful animal just for a minute as we cross the road. And then we’re on the sidewalk heading to the staircase. The concrete is even colder and harder than the asphalt, and there are sand pieces strewn here and there that start to stick to the bottoms of my feet. And then we’re bouncing down the concrete staircase, then we’re on the cold soft sand, then we’re galloping onto the wet sand, and then there we are, darting, feet and legs crushing the water until we’re at our knees, and we jump on our boards, chest and fiberglass meeting horizontally, and we’re skimming for a few feet, side by side, like brothers, like twins even but with different hair color, and then, before our momentum slows, we start to paddle, and our hands and arms break the water and scoop back around, and white water rumbles toward us as waves break and rush to the shore, and we hit the first few small ones head on and the cold water licks face and neck and collects in hair, and it exhilarates, and it’s the exact coldness you need to finish waking you
up and keep you sharp for what’s to come since the waves are tall today, and as we keep paddling out and the broken waves ahead of us are large and unruly we start to duck-dive the rest of the way, pushing the front of the board beneath the water a few feet down, then following under with our heads and bodies while a foot shoves the back part of the board beneath the water too, and for a few seconds, I’m under and Rob’s under and our boards are held under by hands, then feet, and the mass of white water thunders over us and doesn’t push us back to the shore since we’re good at duck-diving and are far enough under the water that it passes over us, and we pop up on the backside of the wave with the tip of the board breaking the water first and then our heads and shoulders following, and the moment we are back on top of the water lying on our boards we are furiously paddling again, and again a mass of white water rumbles toward us, and again we duck-dive under a broken, charging wave, and then another, and then under a wave still breaking, and then we are out in the clearing of calm water, in the line-up past the breaking point, and we sit up on our boards, our legs on each side while our boards are a foot under water, and I splash water on my face and slick my hair back with my hands.

In the line-up it’s just me and Rob, so we won’t be competing for waves until others start showing up, and the sun is almost out at this point, but it’s still mostly a dark, dark gray. We’re usually pretty quiet with each other once we’re out on the water. But sometimes we get to talking. We have to take long pauses whenever a set comes in because we would rather drop in on the next wave instead of talk about anything. I think about asking him how he’s doing. But he’s always fine. Mr. Fortunate. Mr. Single-Without-Kids. Mr. Rich-Boy-Grown-Up who doesn’t have to worry about the things I worry about. But he’s always been my best friend, and I do love the jackass, and there’s a set approaching, so instead of asking him anything, I reach out for one of the floating seaweed pieces, and I rip off the big leaf and hold on to the bulbous part. They’re about the size of a golf ball but smaller and oval-er, more oval-like I mean, and I hold it between my thumb and two fingers and pinch down on it and the little thing rockets out of my hand, shooting out from the slime and pressure, and it smacks him in the cheek and drops to the water, and I laugh and he laughs, and I turn my board around and start paddling to the shore as the first of this set keeps approaching, and I’m paddling hard now, and I’m angling just right as I’m shooting forward with my paddling and this wave slowly building under and behind and in front, and it’s taking shape, and all this space opens up in front of me, and the tide is low so this happens pretty quickly, and
I’m staring down a growing wall of water, but I’m just in the perfect place and angled just enough, and I paddle and paddle because I’m on a shortboard, six foot six, none of that longboard nonsense, and so I paddle and paddle because on a shortboard you really have to get in there before you pop up, and now I’m in there, and I pop up, pressing my chest up, my hands on the rails, then my feet sliding beneath my body and my hands in the air to my side once I’m standing, and this is a movement that takes a half-second to do when you know what you’re doing, and I’m up, and I ride regular with my left foot forward, and Rob rides goofy with his right foot forward, and Dale—well I don’t remember how Dale rides because I don’t see him up very often, just see him getting pummeled on the inside or see him sitting outside in the line-up chatting about this or that, too afraid to drop in on anything on big days like this one—and so I’m there dropping into the first one of the day, and I take it to my right because that’s the way it’s breaking there at that spot. So I’m about to face the wave, which is my favorite way to be, and I drop in and I’m about three or four feet down the thing, angling just right, and I’ve got about another six feet below me as the water is being sucked up from down there, sucked up and racing up this face, and I’ve got to tell you that this is about one of the best feelings in the world because it’s all so fast, and if you see it from the shoreline, from the outsider’s perspective, it might not seem like much, but from my view, from our view when we do this, man, those few feet below me seem like a building’s length, and I’m bending my legs just enough, but my style is to stay kind of straight up still, but I’m bending my knees a little, and I shoot down those last few feet, and I turn hard toward the wave, and I head back toward it before turning back a little bit, and now we’re in sync, me and the wave, and we’re unfolding at the same rate, and it’s over my head three or four feet as it keeps shooting me to my right, angling me down as more and more of its length turns to white foam, but I’m in the sweet spot the whole time, and it’s getting smaller and smaller as we’re angling in the shore’s direction, and it’s about at my head now, and normally I’d do a little move or two now, pop up for a floater or something, but this is my first one of the day, and I’m just appreciating being out, so I just cruise on this thing as it loses its power, as so much water that was making this wave is breaking away from it and spreading out into other parts of the ocean, until it’s only knee-high now, and the water is only a few feet deep, and I’m pumping the front of the board up and down to keep on the wave, and then it’s done, and I belly flop off because, Why not?—it’s early and cold and I’m happy to be here, and then I’m on my feet in a couple feet of water, and I’m horizontally on
my board and paddling back out into the line-up, duck-diving duck-diving duck-diving, and now my arms are feeling the sting a bit, but I’m in the line-up and I catch my breath, and I look around to see where Rob is.

Rob must have caught one of the waves after me because now he’s paddling back out, about twenty feet away, and he pops out of the back of a wave he’s just duck-dived, and now he’s paddling toward me, and now he’s here next to me. And he sits up on his board and splashes his face with water like I do, and he reaches for some floating seaweed, pulls off a little floater ball from one of the leaves, and shoots the thing at me like I did to him. The seaweed ball plinks my chest, bouncing off my wetsuit and hitting the water. I pick it up and plink it back at him, and it hits his shoulder and drops again. We’ve been doing this since high school, hitting each other with these little seaweed bulbs. It’s kind of a fun way to pass the time, and they feel neat in your hands, and sometimes when you squeeze too hard when you’re trying to shoot it out, the thing caves in and makes a loud popping sound.

We stop shooting the seaweed bulbs, and things are quiet out in the line-up. The sky is still more dark than light, but it’s no problem seeing everything. Probably in twenty minutes or so when the light has really spread out everywhere, more surfers will show up, and our little spot will start to crowd, and we’ll have to start competing for the waves.

“It’s pretty warm now,” I say, pushing my hands back and forth in the water in front of me.

“Yeah,” says Rob. “It’s nice. It should be a good spring this year. Some good storms for us.”

“Yeah, that’s good,” I say, and I’m about to say something about hoping to find more time to come out here more often, but there’s another set coming, and this time Rob is paddling for the first one, and I watch as he paddles past me on top of the flowing water that is building into a wave, and he’s darting away now, and the wave is big and building up quickly, and I half-see him drop in and disappear as the back of his wave climbs up, but really I’m more focused on the other bumps of water coming toward me, the second and third waves of the set building up in the distance. And the third looks like the biggest of the bunch. And it’s really building fast, and I have to paddle out farther because if I stay where I am, the thing would break on me and I’d miss it, so I paddle out farther real quick, and then I turn my board and body quickly and redirect myself to angle toward the shore, and just like that, I paddle only one or two strokes and this monster builds so fast and sucks me in, and I push down,
and I’m kind of too far to the top and should be more in the middle as it’s building, but I’m high at top, and I pop up early and force myself down, and I’m staring down what has to be fifteen feet of face, and I have a quick second where I can still pull out, but there’s no way I’m doing that, and I feel the lip pushing me in, and I crouch down a bit and hold onto my rail with my right hand to steady my board, and I get hurled forward, and I’m off the wave now. I’m in front of the wave because it spit me forward since I was too high, and I am in the middle of the air, and there is this mass of breaking water behind me, as tall as a house, and I land flat on the water fifteen feet below, but I didn’t angle enough, and the wave breaks down right where I am, and I take a good breath of air because I know what’s coming, and the breaking white water flings me upward after I’d just touched down, and then I fall back down again into the mass of broken, rushing water, and I’m pulled under the wave and start to get churned about, like I’m in some massive washing machine, and I’m getting rolled over and over, and the whole time I’m as calm as a fish when someone like Dale would be freaking out and sucking in water, and my mouth is tight, and I’m tumbling and tumbling until finally the wave has moved on, and I’m about four or five feet underwater in a calm section between waves, and now I swim to the top and take a breath because I know what’s coming, and the breaking white water flings me upward after I’d just touched down, and then I fall back down again into the mass of broken, rushing water, and I’m pulled under the wave and start to get churned about, like I’m in some massive washing machine, and I’m getting rolled over and over, and the whole time I’m as calm as a fish when someone like Dale would be freaking out and sucking in water, and my mouth is tight, and I’m tumbling and tumbling until finally the wave has moved on, and I’m about four or five feet underwater in a calm section between waves, and now I swim to the top and take a breath, and I pull my board over to me by the leash strapped to my ankle, and I get back on horizontally, face the direction of the line-up, and paddle and duck-dive, paddle and duck-dive, until I am back out in the line-up.

Rob is there. And he says, “That looked fun.”
“‘You saw that?’ I say. “It’s too bad. It was big.”
“You were too far in.”
“I know. But I had to try. How was your wave?”
“Good. Better than my first.”

We’re quiet again and looking out for the next set. And as if by instinct, we each reach for some seaweed and start pulling the leaves off the little floaters. And we’ve each got a few of the oval bulbs in our hands. And we fire them at each other, and they miss or else they clink off our chests or arms. And then another set approaches in the distance, slowly rolling toward us, and because it’s still more gray than light, and because we still have the line-up to ourselves and others will be encroaching soon, we turn around and prepare to paddle to where we need to be to catch these next ones. And as Rob kind of whips around the point of his board and spins himself while still sitting on it, he’s facing me, and I have the last seaweed bulb in my hand, so I squeeze it and fire it at his face like we do, and right then he yawns, but I’ve already started swinging my board around,
and I’m already horizontal now and paddling for the first wave in the set, and I’m paddling forward—but didn’t he just yawn? I’m thinking—and I look over my shoulder while the wave is building beneath me and hurrying me along, and I see him yawning in slow motion, and the bulb I shot goes right in his mouth—the little thing was speeding—and I laugh while I’m about to drop in—but then I wonder if he’s choking, or did he spit the thing out okay, and I’m still lying on my board about to pop up, and I still have time to pull out and paddle back to check, but I’m thinking, No, I’m sure he’s fine. But didn’t I hear choking, and I’m thinking, No, that wasn’t choking. That was the sound of this wave. And then I’m up and racing down the face of this one, and I’m caught up in it, in the moment. I’m feeling free, and I’m just standing and riding again. No tricks today. Just old school cruising. And this is another big one. It’s solid and dangerous, but I’m really calm on it. I’m just riding this thing out. I’m not in control. I’m being taken. And what could I do anyway? And the spray hits my face. And it’s so cold and really reminds me about living. And more spray hits my face. And sometimes things just come out of nowhere.

A different friend’s dad once told us a story about a guy on the back of a garbage truck. Back when garbage trucks had a driver and a guy or two hanging on the back who would hop off and throw the garbage in the back at each house stop. Not like now where a mechanical arm does it. So my friend’s dad and his friends are driving in a convertible, and they’re young, just cruising, hanging out, but they’re behind a garbage truck. And the trash pick-up guy hanging on the back spits this loogie, a real big nasty one, and my friend’s dad’s friend in the passenger seat of the convertible, well he yawns and stretches his arms and kind of stands up a little, and because he stands up a little, his head is higher than the windshield, and the garbage man’s loogie goes right into the guy’s mouth. Just like that. Out of nowhere. And the way my friend’s dad tells it, the guy was pissed and disgusted and downright shocked. It was the shock of it, having someone else’s spit and mucus ball land right in your mouth like that. And I’m thinking about that story as this wave is fizzling out near the shore because I’m sure Rob was super shocked by the slimy piece of sea bulb landing in his rich mouth, which isn’t as bad as a loogie anyway. And maybe because he had to spit the thing out I caused him to miss his wave. Oh, for shame, if I caused such a thing.

And I hop off my board into shoulder-high water, and my feet bounce off the sand, and I pull myself back on my board, lying horizontally, getting ready to duck-dive my way back into the line-
up, to laugh a bit at Rob, but there’s his board about thirty feet ahead of me, between me and the line-up, and it’s bouncing around in the white water of a dying but still fierce wave, and the board wants to come toward me, but its leash pulls it tight and keeps it in check, and I’m waiting to see Rob’s face and hands and shoulders pop out of the water somewhere, and I’m waiting for that gasp of air—like when we would train ourselves to hold our breaths longer underwater by walking along the bottom of his pool while cradling a cinder block to keep us down, and then when our lungs burned for air and it seemed, after minutes, like we couldn’t handle another second, we’d let go of the cinder block and float slowly to the surface, and then we’d gasp gasp gasp and suck and eat the air. I’m waiting for that gasp from Rob now, but I know it’s not coming. And I know that choking sounds like choking and not a wave.

And then Rob’s body does pop up, but it’s his back with his head still under, and in his black wetsuit, his rounded back poking through the water looks like a rock or a seal head because he’s still at least twenty feet away, and I realize I’ve been kind of paralyzed in my mind while I was surfing and probably knew my friend was choking—or did I not know that?—but now I’m finally clear-headed, and I’m paddling over to the bobbing lump. I’m furiously paddling over to the bobbing lump. And my arms are burning, but man, I’m racing across the water so fast, and I get to my friend before the next wave comes, and I flip him over, and he’s pale in the skin and purple in the lips and eyes, and I undo his leash from his ankle so his board can dart to the shore, and I maneuver him onto my board, adjusting him until he’s straight on his back. And I steady the board while holding it and floating next to it, and as the next rush of white water comes, I get between the board and the wave, and I throw my back into it to take the hit, and then I push the board forward and hold my friend’s feet and the back of my board as the wave takes them and then takes me kicking behind while holding board and friend together, and we ride the wave all the way to the sand, me dragging behind, and there are people on the beach since the light is coming through the gray. They are getting ready to go out and surf, but now they see Rob on the board and me dragging the board across the wet, firming sand until we’re out of the water’s lick, and I’m beating down on his chest, and I’m craning my finger throughout his mouth, craning it all around in there trying to dislodge and scoop out the seaweed bulb that he must have—probably?—swallowed, and I tilt his neck back and put my hand under there like he’s my girl, and I lock my lips on his and blow in air like I was taught way back when we were junior lifeguards together for three summers, and then I go
back to working on his chest, really hammering my palms down, and there's the crack of a rib or two, but still I hammer hammer hammer, and right when I'm about to try for more air, the damn bulb shoots out of his mouth and over my head, and then he's spitting up water and coughing, and I roll him to his side, and there are way more people around us than I thought, a whole crowd really, and up in the parking lot there are the flashing lights of an ambulance, and there are murmurings around me. Maybe something about a hero, but my mind is too foggy again to process the din.

The paramedics take him off my board and put him on to their gurney. Rob hasn't said a word. He's coughing lightly, and one of the medics is attending to him. Another one is asking me questions while we're all kind of jogging across the sand in our cluster. Two carrying the gurney, one talking to me while we're moving. And I'm thinking, Aren't they supposed to come in pairs, not trios? And then I say something about finding him bobbing around in the water, and then doing CPR. I say he must have swallowed some seaweed because a bulb shot out during CPR, and I can see Rob's eyes locked on me while he's strapped down, but he's not talking, and I can't quite tell what, if anything, is going on behind those eyes. Can't tell if that glazed look means he's doing okay in there or if he has some brain issue. And just as soon as the medics come, they're off, and I've given them Rob's name and info, and they tell me what hospital they're rushing him to, and I say I'll be right behind them.

But before I leave, I walk back toward the water's edge to collect my board. It has a few new dings, but it will work fine. I tuck it under my arm, and I'm about to walk to Rob's truck to drive to the hospital or maybe just home, maybe just crawl in bed with Sheila before the bulk of the day hits, nuzzle in beside her before I relay the mishap, but then I remember Rob's board too. And it isn't to the left. But there to the right it's being pushed to the sand, then pulled back to the ocean, then pushed to the sand again. I get it and tuck it under my other arm. I guess the crowd of people is in the water now. It is definitely morning now. The best breaking spot that had been mine and Rob's is already muddled. All those late risers who think they're early risers out there fighting for position in the line-up. We would still be out there too if this hadn't happened. We would be out there, but we'd know the best rides had passed before the others spoiled it. And I bungee-cord our boards in the bed of the truck, and as I'm reaching for the key left on top of his tire, and as I'm unlocking the driver's door and getting in and staying in my wetsuit while the last bit of ocean in it soaks the seat—while all that is happening I'm thinking about that sweet chubby girl and her valiantly thin guy, and
I’m wishing them the best, and thinking of them being happy together, and their warmth makes me think maybe we’re not all so bad, not all bad as we’re slow to react to things, or sometimes choose to let others fend for themselves for a while before stepping in and helping out, and so all I can do right now is drive forward, move on in this truck I’ll get to borrow until my car gets fixed or maybe longer.
The night before I turned sixteen, Mama almost called an exorcist. I’d been out with a friend who believed she was a witch. It was easier to let Mama flick holy water into my eyes than to tell her I’d been practicing a different kind of worship, easier to let her die thinking I was straight.

I’m not supposed to remember her this way. We are supposed to carry our dead with reverence. I know. But sometimes I don’t. I confess, sometimes I like her better gone.

Like last April, when a cold front sheeted my lilacs in ice, and I loved them that way, loved them so much I didn’t care that the afternoon thaw would kill them, loved them enough to say to nobody, it’s a good thing she died before I—and I shut my mouth with the force of a trap snapping a mouse’s neck.

Like the first time I let a strange man fuck me. How I would’ve given anything to call her, to say, see, Mama, I didn’t let you down. Please come back.
CELISA STEELE

My Father’s Dementia Diagnosed

In fourth grade I bought my first pantyhose, and my father brought hydrochloric acid home from his lab at the university. I dropped the hose in a big glass jar, added diluted acid, recorded elapsed time as the tiny holes in the nylon mesh expanded, blossoming into a single nothingness.

Now I know it wasn’t a science experiment about acid rain but a lesson about how the most flawless things—the pristine shimmer of new pantyhose—dissolve. And all I can do is document the disappearance.
AMY GORDON | In My Head, 2016
48 x 48 inches | Mixed media on wood
Killing the Super Avenger

Ken Miles killed The Super Avenger on a Monday afternoon, and that night, when he went to bed, he felt cool and hopeful knowing the next morning would be clear and full of possibility. The tension knot in his neck, an unyielding marble at the top of his spine, was gone. Killing The Super Avenger did what Advil and Goody’s Powder and even a masseuse named Marla couldn’t do. Ken was thirty-eight years old, shaved his pale white skull every other morning, and needed to lose fifteen pounds. With the death of The Super Avenger, for the first time in over a decade, Ken had no deadlines to meet the next day or the next week or the rest of the month. He had choices, lots of them, and the fear sparked by that openness thrilled him.

It only took a couple of weeks for the angry emails to start. Rumors had swirled for days, people posting on TheSuperAvenger.com message board about whispers of distressing news regarding The Avenger. How did rumors like these begin? Ken read the message board every day and tried to respond to emails from fans. Now almost all of his emails begged him to say that rumors on the website weren’t true. It had been Ken’s idea to start the site several years ago as a way to interact with the fans, let them feel closer to the process, and even gauge their reactions to plot twists. A lot of the fans felt part of The Super Avenger; they’d read the comic almost since the first issue, they’d grown up with him, they treated him as if he were more than real, as if his two-dimensional life constantly wrapped itself into their own. When large hailstones of hard times fell on The Avenger, these fans’ lives darkened, their bitterness expressed in sentences of all caps letters: THE AVENGER’S LIFE SUKS AND SO DOES MINE! Ken tried to reassure such posters, telling them things would work out for The Avenger. He’d bounce back strong and decisive. Ken would type in short, clear, grammatical sentences, hoping his rationality and calm would seep...
through his keyboard and into the minds of distressed fans. If he made them feel better about The Avenger, they felt better about their own problems.

Five years ago, when distribution rights to *The Super Avenger* were bought by one of the two biggest comic book publishers in the country, the message board erupted. Or rather, it froze; the server overloaded with so many people trying to login that it just stopped running, like a child covering his ears and saying, “I’m not listening, I’m not listening.” Ken had started the maelstrom by posting an announcement of the change on the front page of the site.

Three days later, he was finally able to get the message board to load, a slow and tentative crawl, giving Ken plenty of time to be sure he wanted to see what people thought.

Ken had sold out. That was the consensus. Message after message of how Ken had lost integrity, how he’d become just another corporate shill, how he cared more about money than creativity. The Avenger would never be the same. Ken’s chin sank toward his chest as he read the attacks, as if an invisible hand slowly pushed the back of his head. It was expected, he told himself. The fans cared almost as much as Ken, and they had been betrayed. The Avenger had been theirs, and while the comic was published by a small independent company, the fans were part of an intimate community, one ahead of the curve, one with knowledge of something great that the masses were too unadventurous to discover.

Ken had used his simple, rational sentences to put them straight. He thought about each thing he wrote, deleting lines, typing them again, changing single words to make certain he expressed exactly what he meant. He wrote that nothing would change, that he still owned the character and all creative decisions were still his. The comic would be done the same way, only now it would be in more places, bookstores instead of just comic shops. Sure Ken would potentially make more money (and he did, a lot more), but that would enable him to focus more on The Avenger. He wouldn’t have to take other work to pay off his mortgage.

Some fans didn’t care; they were done. They’d find some other hero to invest in with their souls.

Maybe they did stay away. Ken wasn’t sure. Too many new fans showed up. The message board became even more active as sales increased. Eventually the controversy faded, new fans not caring and old fans just accepting it, and the posts once again focused on the stories themselves.

On Monday, after mailing off the final, finished pages of the last issue of *The Super Avenger*, Ken did not log on to
TheSueperAvenger.com. He’d sealed that part of his life into the envelope with those pages, pressed extra strips of Scotch tape over the flap just to make sure it was secure, and mailed it to New York. He was moving on, he told himself. It wasn’t guilt that kept him away; the relief pouring out of him was too pure to be blemished with culpability. He decided he would give the fans a heads-up closer to the publication date, but for now, his life needed to be free of the restraints of The Super Avenger.

§

For two weeks, Ken scribbled short notes and story ideas in the mornings and read, calling it research, in the afternoons. The books he scanned were mostly mysteries; Ken felt the plot elements of these potboilers would focus his attention on pacing and reveals. After a few pages of reading, boredom descended, and he’d suddenly be surprised at wasting an hour flipping channels on his TV, stopping to answer questions on a game show or give advice to defendants on Judge Judy.

Then, with almost three weeks until the fatal issue hit stores, Ken wrote a short note and pasted it to the homepage of TheSuperAvenger.com.

*I am aware that there has been much speculation regarding the future of The Super Avenger. I know that many will be upset with this, but The Super Avenger series, and character, will be ending with the next issue. I think it is an exciting and heroic exit for our hero, and I hope you enjoy it. After over a decade on The Super Avenger, I am moving on to new projects. Thank you all so much for your support, enthusiasm and encouragement.*

Ken turned off the computer and went to bed.

He awoke to one of his email addresses, the one he made public on the message board and in the comic book, completely full. Cyberspace could not stuff or ram or crumple any more mail into his box. He didn’t read them all, just got a sampling, a Gallup poll of opinion. Seemed about 94% were against the end of The Super Avenger. A few were notes thanking him for his work and for the entertainment The Super Avenger gave them over the years. Ken clicked open the ones that said *Thank You* in the subject heading first, thinking all of those must be positive. Not so. They had tricked him. *Thank you* in the subject heading was followed by *for killing my favorite character and ruining comics*, or *for not caring about the fans you selfish asshole*, or *for just proving the world is full of jerks*.

Ken slammed his fist on the table next to his keyboard. The deluge of insults was endless. They hadn’t even read the damn comic
yet. He was a scapegoat for their own pathetic lives. Ten years wasn’t long enough? Then the empathy set in; their sense of betrayal was completely sincere, their sense of losing a friend, a beacon in their lives, heartfelt. Ken had ripped them hollow only because he was tired of writing the same character? Because he wanted to write a screenplay? A sad character movie about doomed love that didn’t have a damn thing to do with superheroes? Ken ran a finger along the base of his skull, digging for the marble that used to grow solid and new every day. But it was still gone. He rotated his neck, turning his chin toward one shoulder than the other, and his neck muscles moved easily as if they had been well greased. Ken turned off the computer.

That night Ken parked his Camry on Morgan Street in downtown Raleigh, walked along the ripped up concrete that used to be the Fayetteville Street outdoor mall, the big yellow earth movers silent like discarded and bombed out war machines, and went into City Bar. The inside was long and narrow, opening out in the back to accommodate a pool table. Ken sat at the bar next to a support post that hid him from anyone passing by on the street, not that he was ever spotted. Outside of comic book conventions, he was never approached for autographs; he just felt protected being next to that sturdy square column, and so it became his usual spot.

“Hey, hey,” Mickey said. “Been a couple of weeks, man. You on the road?” Mickey was three or four years younger than Ken with stringy hair, what you could see of it outside his baseball cap, dyed peroxide white. Even his sideburns were white. He always stuffed two pens into the hat, framing his face as if the cap had fangs. Ken wondered if Mickey was going bald. Why else always wear a baseball cap? Without it he probably looked on the downslope to middle age instead of like a young hip guy who dyed his hair the same color as Hulk Hogan’s.

“No,” Ken said. “Just been busy.”

Mickey poured Ken a pint without asking and put the full glass on a square napkin. Ken took a short sip and looked over the rim of the glass, past Mickey, to the framed portrait of The Super Avenger almost hidden amongst the bottles of whiskey and vodka and rum on the back wall. Ken had drawn that picture about four years ago and gave it to the owner of City Bar. After being a regular for a couple of years, he grew to appreciate the quiet honesty of the place. They left you alone if you wanted to be left alone, and they listened without judging if you wanted to talk. There was no hounding him for future storylines, no questions about the limits of powers, like Ken got from fans. Roy, the owner, had thanked him for the picture, and the next
time Ken came in it was framed and behind the bar. Roy didn’t know anything about The Super Avenger, he just liked the gesture. Gradually, Ken let them in on what he did for a living, how he got started, conventions he went to, and Roy and Mickey and Lisa, the other regular bartender, listened and seemed genuinely glad that someone could make a good living creating comic books.

Ken frowned at the drawing. He’d drawn it quickly with a Sharpie, and it had come out crude, the biceps and thighs too rounded, too bulky, like over-inflated balloons. *When the last issue hits,* Ken thought, *that ugly little drawing could probably fetch a couple thousand dollars on eBay.*

The bar was almost empty. Ken heard the dull ping of pool balls slamming into each other from the back. A guy down at the other end of the bar read from a paperback novel and sipped some dark liquid from a short glass. Mickey slung his towel over a shoulder and crossed his arms in front of Ken. “No conventions?” he said. “Isn’t it almost that time of year?”

“Well, yeah, almost. But, not for me this year.”

“Really?”

Ken sucked in another mouthful of beer and swallowed. “I did it Mickey. I killed him.”

“How’s that?”

“I killed The Super Avenger. It’s done. Already sent in the last issue.”

Mickey pushed back his cap a little revealing a long forehead with no hairline in sight. “Wow, man. I know you said you were getting tired of it, but, I didn’t think—”

“Time for new things.”

Mickey nodded his head. “Good for you. So what’s next?”

He hadn’t told anyone what he wanted to do. Not even the comic book company. He’d told them he needed time and was going to take it. They had dangled contracts in front of him, put money on the table to write and draw some of the company’s heroic mainstays, but Ken just said maybe later. “I’m going to write a screenplay.”

“On The Avenger?”

“No. Not yet. Of course my agent wishes I would.”

“You got an agent?”

“Yeah. In New York.”

“Shit, you could sell an Avenger screenplay tomorrow, I bet.”

“Probably.” But that bored him, the idea of rehashing old plots to make them fit into a movie, plus seeing whatever actor they chose not live up to the character in Ken’s mind and on his drawing board.
It being a man, a regular man, in spandex, made the back of Ken’s neck stiffen. “But I don’t want to do it now.”

“That’s cool. So what’s it about?”

Ken cleared his throat. The story, the sketchy idea of a story, he had in mind was simple and direct, but Ken thought the simple stories shined with the most truth, the most emotion. “It’s about a woman. She’s married, and she has an affair with this guy and it’s good. Good for a while. Adds spice to her routine. But then something about the guy comes out and it puts her and her family in danger.”

Mickey leaned down onto his elbows on the bar. “What comes out?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“Like Fatal Attraction?”

Ken frowned. “No, not like that. Something that he’s involved in.”

“He’s CIA?”

“Too much,” Ken said. “It’ll come to me.”

“Of course it will.”

But it didn’t. Not the right thing anyway. Ken toyed with lots of ideas, some just fleeting flashes in his head, others that he wrote down, expanded on, took to some conclusions. Inevitably they were too farfetched. He wanted danger, sure, but not intricate conspiracy. He’d been ruined by writing about superheroes for so many years. Any idea naturally drifted into the hyperbolic world of over-muscled villains. He’d conditioned himself to think that way, practiced it, exercised it until it became muscle memory.

Ken stretched out on his couch, pages of character notes on his chest. In the corner of his eye he could see the winking red light of his answering machine with the message from his agent (“Hey Ken, just wanted to know if you got something yet. Outline? Synopsis?”) waiting to be set free.

Ken collected the papers on his chest and dropped them onto the coffee table. His joints felt creaky when he stood up, stiff and in need of rest. Every day now he felt tired in the afternoon but wide-awake when he went to bed. Sleep seemed like a game he just couldn’t win. He glanced down at the scattered pages on the coffee table.

There’s plenty of time, he thought. All the time in the world. His living room was dim, lit by a single lamp. Ken went to the kitchen and turned on the overhead light. The mail, snail mail he thought, was unopened, not even looked at, on the table in the corner. Bills, junk mail, a white envelope with Ken’s address handwritten. Ken
picked up the white envelope, his address in short, slanting, block letters. There was no return address. He ripped open the envelope and fished out the letter inside. It was two pages long, handwritten in a tight compact script, someone who was careful about what they wrote, measuring each letter for readability.

*I have been a longtime fan,* the letter began.

Christ, Ken thought. They got my address. He imagined more and more coming, accusing letters, desperate letters, maybe even threatening letters. He pulled a chair out from under the kitchen table and sat down. Maybe Susan’s lover finds out something about her husband. Ken dropped the letter to his lap and stared up at the ceiling. He’d had this thought several times over the past couple of days. But then wouldn’t the screenplay become more about the lover and less about Susan? It would be his dilemma, tell this woman what he knows, get more involved in her life or just let it alone. “It’s her story,” Ken said. Well, then maybe it’s about the decision she makes with the information. Her choices. But what information? Ken sighed and brought the letter back up to where he could read it. Turned out this fan was a mother, had two young boys. Ken skipped ahead to the end of the letter to the signature. It was signed *Karen P.* This made sense. For years and years letters printed in comic books gave the writer’s first name and last initial.

*Karen P.* went on to say that it was she and not her boys who was the real fan and that The Avenger’s death greatly distressed (Distressed, really? A woman with kids distressed over *The Super Avenger*) her. Not just because it meant she was losing a character she had grown to care about (she wrote CARE in all caps like the irate fans on the message board), and not just that something would be missing from her life (Really? Her life?), but because Ken was tossing aside something magical. Ken had talent, she wrote, and he had become condescending toward his talent, not appreciative of it, not willing to use his gift. She did not wish him any kind of failure, she wrote, and underlined that part for emphasis, but she knew that turning his back on The Avenger meant turning his back on a part of himself and his talent and that he would most likely never capture that type of magic again. The medium itself had not become limited; rather, it was Ken’s own faith in his abilities that had diminished.

Ken wet his dry lips with his tongue. He wanted a beer, so he got a bottle out of the fridge and twisted off the cap. He grabbed the torn envelope from the table. *Raleigh* was part of the postdate circle stamp. So the letter was local. He’d probably met Karen P. at a signing or Raleigh convention. She had probably dragged her kids along so she didn’t feel so out of place. Wasted talent? No, that wasn’t
what she said. Ken scanned the letter again. He had become condescending toward his talent. What the hell did that mean? He took it for granted? Shit, if she knew how hard, how many hours he spent bent over the drawing board. Ken instinctively reached for the back of his neck, two fingers digging into the skin. His probe discovered a BB-sized ball of stress, a seed to grow into something larger. Ken balled the letter up and tossed it in the trash.

§

A week later Ken had a first scene of his screenplay. He still didn’t know what would happen, but he knew the main character and needed to get something down, show her in action to make her real. The movie opened on a typical day with Susan getting her kids, two boys (had they always been boys?), ready for school while her husband printed some documents, stuffed his briefcase, gave Susan a peck on the cheek, and headed out the door to work. Cliché? Sure. But Ken wanted it to be a cliché. That was part of the setup, part of the surprise. The audience would sit down in their seats and think they were seeing a regular family scene, but then they’d be thrown off guard when Susan’s lover came over after the kids left. Shakespeare? No. But solid.

He read over the scene again, slashed out a sentence of dialogue that sounded convoluted, too long-winded to be natural. He then opened the front door and lifted the lid on the metal mailbox. He picked out two letters, one of them a white envelope addressed in Karen P.’s handwriting. He hadn’t forgotten her. Some nights since her last letter, he stared at the ceiling in his bedroom and thought about the woman, the mother of two young boys, probably around his age, so upset by the death of The Super Avenger that she tracked down his address and poured her heart out onto the page. And it was her heart; he knew that. Underneath those calm words, that rational rebuke, was the clear sound of a heart breaking. So different than the exaggerated cries of anguish on the message board, not knee-jerk at all, but someone who examined her feelings and found the best way to express them. He pushed her to the back of his mind when he woke up each morning. Swinging his bare feet over the side of the bed to the floor, he buried her under character notes, potential plot twists, and lines of dialogue from his screenplay. Now, standing on his narrow concrete porch, he tore open the current letter with his index finger, his front door still half open.

I wish to clarify some things from my previous letter. I am sorry to be bothering you this much, (She considered two letters a bother?)
but I wished to explain better what I meant in my last letter because I feel it is very important. Not just to me, but for you.

Typical. Let me dissect somebody else’s problems, Ken thought, as a way to understand my own. Was he a therapist now for Karen P.? Cheaper than paying by the hour, just get out a few sheets of paper and pay for a stamp.

Karen P. continued in the next paragraph to praise Ken’s talent, his use “of the superhero genre as a metaphor for current human struggles” (English teacher? Probably bored explaining Romeo and Juliet to a bunch of high school freshmen) and the “skillful manner in which he showed the gray area surrounding human conceptions such as in the ‘Crown is Fallen’ story arc.”

“The Crown is Fallen” ran in eight consecutive issues five years ago, not long after Ken had sold distribution rights to one of the big boys. He conceived it partly, well mostly, to prove to the naysayers, all those screaming SELLOUT on the message board, that he still gripped the reins of The Avenger, that he would continue to write the sometimes murky stories published when the comic was an independent. In it, The Avenger becomes aware of a growing threat in the Middle East. A rogue country, the made up Yaria, created its own personal superhero who was secretly attacking countries in the region to build up Yaria’s dominance. Some anonymous concerned citizen of Yaria sent word to The Avenger, and without much forethought, he went and defeated this Yarian champion.

But The Avenger discovered it was not a simple case of Yarian aggression. Turns out the anonymous tip actually came from the U.S. government. Emboldened by their new hero, Yaria was steadily limiting U.S. access to its oil. Not only that, some of the Yarian attacks were merely to steal food for its growing class of impoverished people. The obvious moral of the arc showed no government proved all good, but Ken had enjoyed writing it and thought it pretty well covered some complex issues, at least as well as a comic book could. Plus, it shut up most of those SELLOUT posts.

Karen P. at least appreciated the deeper questions of heroism beneath the fistfights between men in spandex costumes. Ken smiled and went inside his house. “The Crown is Fallen” was a pretty good story. Ken had drawn and redrawn the final scene of the story, when The Avenger confronts the U.S. president, several times, pushing against and then past his deadline causing the title to be a couple of weeks late to stores. But those four panels, two in longshot and two in close-up, were some of the best Ken had ever drawn. Maybe the last page of “Where Are You Avenger?” better rendered the
disappointment of The Avenger. But those four panels sat high on Ken's list of favorites.

After heaping some wild praise on Ken, Karen P. returned to her theme of wasted talent. She had decided Ken wasn't condescending toward his gifts; he was contemptuous of them. Ken plopped down onto his couch, the letter tight in his hand. Pages of his screenplay were scattered on the coffee table like giant playing cards. Ken stared at the pages. And what was he trying to say in this story? That question continued to plague the whole project. Right now he had characters with no purpose, people just idly going through life and bumping into problems as if their eyes were covered with a blindfold and they were spun around in a circle three times and set loose on the world. Karen P. wrote, You feel that you have become better than the stories you tell, better than comics in general, and this foolhardy idea blinds you to your true calling. It is as if a skilled filmmaker were to suddenly decide movies were not fulfilling enough and turned to painting.

Mentioning movies seemed more than just a coincidence to Ken. He read over that line again. He looked toward the windows along the front wall of his house. Maybe Karen P. watched him every day. Maybe she sat calmly in a car down the block, binoculars pointed towards Ken's windows. He shook his head. “Don’t be silly,” he said. He laughed at his own egotism. A stalker? Him? Ken dropped the letter on the coffee table on top of the last page of the scene he had written. Contemptuous of his talent? Maybe if he could talk to Karen P. she would understand.

§

Eight days later, Ken sat at the kitchen table with his laptop. He had started on scene two of his screenplay, finished several pages over the last week, realized it stunk, and started over. Scene two was to be a sex scene between Susan and her lover, Brad. No, not Brad. Ken hated Brad now. Terry. Or Carl. Or maybe Carl Terry. Carl for now, until he thought of something better. The problem with writing a sex scene was that you had to deal with the sex. When Ken got the couple in bed together, it inevitably became either pornographic (“She's into it, moaning in ecstasy. ‘Come on baby, deeper.’”) or fluffy, some made for TV movie or a romance novel (“He takes her into his arms, holding her tight. “I've been thinking about you all day, all night, all week.’”) And he had to show the sex, the shock; our housewife heroine, not being all that she seemed, needed it.

He knew the mail had come. He'd heard the creak of the metal box as the mailman raised it and then his shoes—the mailman
always wore black tennis shoes with white socks—on the brick steps almost an hour ago. Ken had forced himself to not get up. The mail wasn’t going any place, he told himself. But an hour seemed enough time. It proved he wasn’t hopeful. Besides, it had been eight days since he got a letter from Karen P. She was probably done, got all she needed to say out.

Ken opened the front door, lifted the lid on the mailbox, and took out what was inside without looking at it. He carried the mail to the kitchen, set it next to his laptop, then poured himself a glass of water from his Brita pitcher. He took a drink of the water, and it flowed cool all the way down his chest and to his stomach. Over the edge of the glass he saw the white envelope on top of some other letters, his address written in Karen P.’s now familiar block script.

This time, Karen P. listed reasons why *The Super Avenger* exceeded the possibilities of other art forms. She said *The Avenger* combined elements of cinema and theater, with the deeper character nuances of a novel.

Ken lingered over the word *novel*. He’d always equated his tireless story structuring with novel writing. He hated the term *graphic novel*; it seemed too much like a gimmick and unfortunately had become a catchall. Ken thought of his Avenger work like a novel because of the length, the ongoing subplots that influenced the character over time.

*The Super Avenger* is much more akin to a longer work of fiction because of the intricately laced plots and characterizations that occur over a larger stretch of time.

She had to teach English. Or at least be an English grad. He imagined her on the beach, a big floppy hat shading her from the sun, rereading a classic, Dickens or Austen. No, probably Tolstoy, a book big and fat, heavy as a brick. Karen P. had a new tactic too. She wrote: There are still new areas of this medium yet to be explored, potential in this field yet to be tapped. But you have chosen to not even try. Perhaps you have a fear of failure. A fear of losing your audience. Or, and this is closer to the truth I believe, you can no longer see the potential in *The Super Avenger* because you feel trapped by it. When you think of *The Super Avenger* you see walls, limits, roadblocks. Where once the walls were challenges to be overcome, now you see them as a box on your creativity. When did you start fearing challenges?

Ken folded up the letter, careful to halve it along the creases Karen P. herself had made. He put the letter with the last one he got from her in the middle drawer of his desk. Who was this Karen P.? And how did she have such insight into Ken? It’s not really insight,
Ken thought. Anybody could guess that Ken was tired of doing comic books and wanted to explore different, less constrictive mediums, that he wanted to write about real people for Christ’s sake. Yet Karen P. knew how to articulate those feelings so succinctly. Better than Ken even. For several days, right after the second letter, Ken had a strong desire to contact Karen P. and try to explain himself. He had a need for her to understand. Maybe she could even help him focus, take his scattered ideas for the future and mold them into clear, concise action. Maybe Karen P. posted on TheSuperAvenger.com message board.

Ken turned on the desktop in his bedroom. The activity on the message board was well below normal levels. Lots of posts about the last issue (most seemed to begrudgingly like it) and then people talking about current comics they read, as if they were casting about, hoping to latch onto another hero that could fill the void. Ken frowned as he scrolled through all the names on the message board. Everybody used an alias on the board, protecting their anonymity for some reason. Most aliases had some form of Avenger in it, like AvengerFan1 or TheRealAvenger. Other people tried to prove their legitimacy as true comic fans, acknowledging that even The Avenger was part of some tradition. They used names like KingKirby or SteveDitkoLegend. There was no way to tell if any of them were Karen P. Ken would have to just get lucky and find some writings that matched the style of her letters.

He got another idea. Most times he just deleted emails from fans after responding, but on those rare occasions when someone sent him something thoughtful, something that asked legitimate questions, a query that could very well help the direction of the story, Ken saved it. Why had he not thought of this sooner? He hadn’t wished to face the message board or the fans. He had closed the door to The Avenger only to have Karen P. push it ajar with the toe of her letters.

Ken opened his email server and clicked on the saved folder. There was more there than he remembered. A lot more. Wow, he really did have a lot of thoughtful fans. I should read these again someday, Ken thought. He sorted the emails alphabetically and there it was, an e-mail from kpetersonandfamily@aol.com. She sent the message two years ago about a big reveal in a story arc called “Friends and Foes Alike.” Karen had been impressed with the way Ken had set up the reveal of that arc, that The Avenger’s friend, Lester, turned out to be a mysterious new criminal dogging him. She especially appreciated how The Avenger came to understand some
of his own culpability in Lester’s turn since The Avenger had constantly forced Lester to live in his shadow.

Karen Peterson. Such an ordinary name. Ken clicked on his response to Karen P. *Thank you for your nice note. I can tell you are a passionate reader who sees beneath the surface of stories to their true meaning.*

Her message and his mundane response constituted the sum of their communication. He could email her again, start a back and forth dialogue, maybe even meet face to face. But why hadn’t she emailed him since? Why the snail mail? Hiding her obsession? She hadn’t emailed him now for some reason. So he wouldn’t email her? She wanted a one-sided conversation? He’d call her. Prove his empathy for her letters.

An online search revealed twenty Karen Petersons in Raleigh. Ken ran his finger down the list of names. Raleigh was a bigger place than he acknowledged. Occasionally, he was reminded of this. He lived according to his own preset routes so much, following the same tracks to the same familiar places, that he usually thought of Raleigh as just another town, his town. But towns didn’t have twenty Karen Petersons. Should he call them all? No. He could narrow it down.

He took the latest Karen Peterson envelope and drove to the post office. The woman at the desk gave him the district covered by the postdate stamp. The district included the Five Points area, an older and often expensive part of Raleigh. The part of town that held an art house cinema.

With his new information, Ken went home, loaded a map of Five Points onto his computer, and then searched through the twenty Karen Petersons till he found a match. Karen Peterson, his Karen Peterson, lived on a street just a few blocks from Glenwood.

Ken looked at his watch. It was 1:30 p.m. Kids at school, probably. Husband at work. Maybe she was at work too? He could call. He had her number now. Or he could just stop by. Would that be strange? But wouldn’t she be excited to see him? What type of woman, married, two kids, living in Five Points read *The Super Avenger*?

Ken got in his Camry and drove down Glenwood Avenue. Trees lined both sides of the street, still green and leafy. A steady confetti of light fell on Ken’s windshield as he drove. Hayes Barton Church, large, institutional, sat at the center of the Five Points intersection. The five roads spread away from the church, marking the church as the unnatural hub. Once it was probably the center of communal life. The church was out of place now, competing for primacy with a gas
station on another corner, a dry cleaner, a pizza place, some overpriced boutiques.

Ken turned right at the church. He drove a couple of blocks, and the houses became more spread out, staking out more elbow room. They sat farther back from the street and had wider green lawns that all appeared newly mowed. Ken took a left and then started reading numbers on mailboxes, slowing at 420 and stopping at 422. It was a large two-story brick with a wide driveway on the right side. Shrubs, cut as level as planks of wood, circled the house. At one corner, a tree or bush bloomed white flowers.

Ken parked across the street behind a silver Mercedes. A black SUV, shoebox shaped, was in the driveway. Ken thought the SUV was empty, but then the driver’s side door opened and a woman got out. She wore khaki slacks and a pink cardigan sweater. She really was around Ken’s age, but she looked older. Her domestic tranquility gave her an air of longevity and tradition. She was like the Hayes Barton church, a pillar of the community, a mainstay. She permed her shoulder length hair, probably rolled it every morning. Ken watched her walk around to the passenger side and lift out her son, a toddler, down to the ground. She grasped his hand in hers, and they walked across the driveway toward the back of the house.

Karen Peterson peered down at her son as they walked. It was clear she was saying something to the little boy. They never glanced in Ken’s direction; they just went on completely unaware that someone watched them from across the street.

Ken sat in his car and stared at the house. A light came on in an upstairs window. Karen Peterson lived in a nice house in a nice neighborhood and had a beautiful little boy. She radiated respectability. What had Ken expected? She was a regular person, well on her way to being Ken’s mother. Why the hell did she need to read The Super Avenger? There was more to Karen Peterson. More than probably her husband knew. Ken imagined her husband, a lawyer, a vice president at a bank, some job where he wore a tie every day. He pictured them seated around the kitchen table at dinner, Mr. Peterson answering questions about his day, Karen telling him about something the kids did. Could she discuss The Super Avenger with that man? Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe she hid her comics, read them after the kids went to bed. Without thinking, Ken’s hand went to his neck. The seed had grown from a BB to an M&M. Ken rotated his head and his neck creaked.

Ken started his car and drove back toward Glenwood. He turned right instead of left, not sure where he was going, not really caring, not even bothering to read the name of the street he was on. The
road wandered into another residential neighborhood, mismatched houses, some decades old, some only months old, that somehow fit all together into a cohesive community. Ken thought about The Super Avenger. When he used to start a new story for The Avenger, he’d always get up in the morning, sit down at the drawing board and say, “Well, what are we up for today, old buddy?” He’d scribble doodles and notes on a blank page and slowly some image of The Avenger would emerge, some situation. Sometimes an action shot, The Avenger cocking back his mighty fist. Sometimes it was a quiet moment, The Avenger’s pained face after being betrayed by someone. Ken could always find the thread of a story in those doodles.

As the houses and green lawns flashed by his window, Ken wished he had a piece of paper and a pencil. He had an image of The Avenger now, his eyes soft and wide, the whisper of a smile on his lips. There had been women in The Avenger’s life over the years. He had had girlfriends. But they had functioned mostly as props, objects to complicate the danger. But what if The Avenger fell in love? Heck, what if The Avenger fell in love with a woman named Susan that was married and had two kids? Ken slowed the car. One of the side streets probably led back to Glenwood, but he wasn’t sure, and the need to get to the drawing board clouded his sense of direction. He pulled into the driveway of a white ranch-style house with a flat roof. Ken backed out of the driveway and turned his car toward home.
ESTEBAN RODRÍGUEZ

Shotgun

At the end of every year, as nightfall dragged its constellations across the barbed horizon, and the barbecue smoke, billowing like ceremonial incense, fogged the already foggy edges of this scene, you’d watch, from the picnic table, your uncles standing where the moonlit fields began. There’d be five, maybe six of them, your mother’s brothers and those married to your aunts, all with a koozied beer in hand, and guts, hanging over their belt buckles, to match at least one of your ideas of manliness. For hours, they’d talk in mumbled phrases about some aspect of work: the cleanest rest stops in Texas, the truck engines beyond repair, the cows whose bodies refused to die—their stunned heads banging against the killing floor—and though your father sometimes joined, spoke about the foundation of a plaza he helped lay, he’d leave, the way he’d leave in the middle of everything, without saying a word, while you, cautious of your distance, crept closer in, unsure, however, what they meant when they began thrusting their hips, slapping the air, and pulling the hair of the invisible figure in front of them; each repeating the motions in some shape or form, until, a handful of beers later, an uncle would mention that midnight was near, and another would head inside the house, bring his shotgun out, and insist they all take turns cocking the barrel at the spokes of fireworks, or at the capsized moon, or at a random spot in the sky that symbolized everything that had built up over the past year, and that only they, convinced this was the way to renew themselves, could aim at, pierce.
Sacrifice

Her mother gave her a brocade music box. Father said he would go out to the woodpile and swing his ax, imagining her face.

She was cold like the Lucerne falls, the hard wet rock and the caves where the Anabaptists, hunted and chased, hid. There’s two sides to every story, is an old trope and lazy.

Book of lies is more like it. She opened its secret, gold gears and pivots turning.

Mother said it was a traumatic birth, a hematoma in her side inhaled and exhaled its blood-swollen sac, like a jelly fish bobbing in waves of pain, tentacles dangling between her legs. Or like a ballerina in crimson tulle, a cascade of red satin ribbons.

They had to cut me out of her blue belly, rip me free.

I said thank you with such thirst, lips like two orphans, begging. My father loved her into a kind of death that women are experts at, the clasped hands of wonder, squeal of delight or terror. Whose violence was it, his ax or her, something she was born with and handed down to me, chiming its song, inheritance, like the color of hair.

I thanked her again and again for being so beautiful. I thanked her for loving me so much. I begged her for mercy.
AMY GORDON | Feeling Surrounded, 2015
32 x 72 inches | Oil on wood
Duet: Poems of Wild Music

Chapbooks are attractive objects. Duet numbers fewer than twenty pages, small enough to slip into a pocket as you head out for the day, so slim you’ll forget it’s with you. Then, in a moment of need—on the bus, in line at the grocery store, or stuck in traffic—you can take the chapbook out and be transported.

Duet will explode in your hands. Dorianne Laux and Joseph Millar’s poems of musical contemplation and celebration brim with sharp images. They contain honest portraits of the self and the world we inhabit, alongside the songs and musicians the poets have cherished throughout their lives. The chapbook covers a lot of territory, exploring topics and figures like Cher and Paul Simon, the day Lightnin’ Hopkins returned home, and Dolly Parton’s breasts.

Singing back to the stars, Millar and Laux pay homage to the music they have lived their lives to. Many poems explore the relationship between musician and audience, how music affects our lives and impacts our inner worlds. Here is “Music My Rampart”:

I can point to the exact place in my chest
where James Taylor’s voice reverberates.
I have no defense against that tenor, those
minor keys. It rushes through the aisles of my body
like a priest on dope, trailing smoke, his crucifix
captured in the folds of his robe …

There are nights I jerk awake as if the phone
had rung. But there’s no sound except
the refrigerator humming, the joists creaking
in the cold. I watch moonlight move
across the wall and it’s as if I could touch
my own sadness, the rooms flung with filaments
that loom in the pockets of my closed eyes.
There’s no accounting for it. I open my mouth
and sing Sweet Baby James. I cross my hands
over my breasts like a woman who is happy to die.

The speaker reflects on how we carry our favorite songs inside of us, showing how they shape the landscape of our hearts. The poem
reveals that, in moments of suffering, music can be a salve for sorrow—it can transform pain into a pleasure so good we have the strength to face death.

The scope of these poems often turns outwards as well, gazing beyond the lives of their speakers to study the way music inhabits public spaces. Here is “Donut Shop Jukebox”:

Each morning Willis plays checkers with Eddie, the meth addict 40 days clean

... Inside it smells of coffee and sugar, the Shirelles singing Baby It’s You and someone taps on the fogged up window, late for work, needing jumper cables. In the fields beyond where the ditch runs with water the star thistle opens its stunned furry leaves, dry needles jabbing the air.

I like the engine roaring to life, a savage red dogwood shedding its flowers over the sidewalk, over the fence. I like your hat with its purple feather, cheap as a melody, cheap as a wish.

People play checkers while they listen to music, they have coffee and doughnuts. Oftentimes this is what music is, the background to which we live our lives. But penetrating this poem is a subtle recognition that music is not made only by singers and instruments—the poem acknowledges the beauty of common sounds, like tapping on the glass or an engine roaring as it is turned on. This serves as a reminder that our ears are always tuned. That the bees are music, too. The soundtrack of the world is always playing—all we need to do is listen.

The poems in this chapbook offer up an honest, no-frills view of what life gives us: pain, humor, sensuality, and song. They are driven by narrative and anchored in deep emotion. For those who have never bought a chapbook, Duet is the place to start. It’s short enough to read in one sitting. Small enough to carry with you. Once you read these poems, their lines and images will ring in your head like the words to your favorite song. You will find the type of poetry you can take with you wherever you go.
KRIS B. HOFFLER

I Have Memories, You Know: Dream of the Gone-From City

In Barbara Edelman’s collection Dream of the Gone-From City, there is a question inherent in the title: will the overarching theme be dominated by loss, i.e. gone? Many of the poems contain speakers who are looking back, or trying to, to places and times in their lives that are no more. There are even two speakers with virtually no memory left of what was once their lives, yet they attempt to create some reference point based on what is in front of them.

To address these two extreme versions of loss, the poems “Maple Grove” and “Assisted Living” find the subjects in retirement homes. Both of them live with only brief, fragmented recollections of their previous lives. At the end of “Maple Grove,” we find what must be one of the children visiting the vacant father. The visitor makes note of the briefest of moments when the father catches a fleeting glimpse of the past.

Jerry O’Malley visited daily. “Milton Edelman!” He said it on arrival and departure. “Jerry O’Malley!” said my father to his friend, learning that to name the whole person is to hold him, fast, throughout the arc of his translation; to reconstitute him daily at the heart’s table.

“Assisted Living” is much more tragic. The elderly subject can remember nothing, even her identity. She lives in an eternal now where even the simplest of things are new mazes to wander.

... Each week she writes new algorithms to survive, from toothbrush to spoon. Her softball glove, her Raleigh 3 speed are not even memory. Her new sports are dress, food, hygiene. A slalom course to every doorknob.
However, all the poems are not this bleak. The poem from which the title is derived explores the dream side of memory. The unknown speaker is walking through a post-apocalyptic dream derived from snippets of memory. In a moment of lucidity, the speaker questions her own mind:

... How could you choose this again
and again? Why take the risk? To step into this vicious little
detour-

The theme is continued through numerous speakers recalling apparitional places that were once real but now only exist in dreams or memories. Some memories are clear and seem to be accurate in the speaker's mind; others are undoubtedly embellished into emotional landscapes.

These poems explore the idea of the word memory having an unspoken subtext of loss within it. On the other hand, it also has an opposing subtext of gain in that it brings something once lost back into a ghostly existence, no matter how altered from its original state. These poems are intelligent and brave in that they explore facts of our consciousness, and this is sometimes difficult to face. This is a vivid journey of the past through the lens of the human experience:

I have memories, you know.
I'm not a person with a helium
balloon for a head.
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