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

This issue decelerates some of the turbulent times we are living in so we can all breathe and then see them for what they are—an inability to use the right words by the outliers who believe they are in charge. In an interview published in July 2018 via Sapling, our genre editors Bryce Emley and Landon Houle mention that poems and stories that lack empathy won’t go very far at Raleigh Review.

That said, we are not into blaming, denigrating, nor degrading any group of the world’s citizens, and nor do we understand the entitlement issues of the extreme sects on either side of the horizon. Using the right words is the one tool we have to combat all the greed and filth this world seems steeped in at this time.

This issue is a prime example of what we mean by poems, stories and visual art that must ask questions and teach us without answering the questions. Finger-pointing from all sides from the top-down has brought on insults, wrongdoings, loss, bullets, teargas, riots, and fistfights.

At Raleigh Review, we believe in redemption and second chances. We also believe in doing right by our neighbors, and we cherish what makes us unique. We believe in promoting the best words as art that inspires empathy in our neighbors everywhere in the world, whether across the street or across the globe. At Raleigh Review, we believe art must challenge as well as entertain.

—Rob Greene, editor & publisher
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Raleigh Review | 1
LUKAS HALL

How a Bullet Works

I can show you the difference
between a wax slug,

a cut shell,
a foster, wad slug,

one that breaks through a smoothed bore,
one that smoothes

out itself.
It weighs ten grams.

I can show you how the lead
when it enters

unfurls the grey-brown fur
to find the shoulder bone.

How it paralyses, how it exits.
How the bullet
twines into the trunk
of a tree.

Fifty or sixty yards from where it first
gasped air.

How to re-use it,
then re-use it again.

When the chamber is emptied,
you begin anew.

Rifling can be
deceptive,
like wind moving brush
    or the faded

    emerald acrylcs
    on a deer stand.

The difference between neglect
    & an accident.

    How the bullet
    should never go off

in the right hands. How a safety
    really means nothing.

    How it sputters

    then blooms.
“It appears the gift could not be refused.”¹

Trapped in the speed of the highway  
the white seabird flew too low  

against the sky. The shrill white wing clipped  
and spun into becoming  

a sudden broken spell. Mute precision: god  
in the oncoming headlight,  

a solemn weapon. At roughly eighty miles  
an hour, its hollow-boned body  

spit into the air before careening  
toward the roaring ground. All of this  

quick and lonely as I watch  
new death in the burnished frame  

of my rearview mirror. I keep going.  
Watch a man decide to live inside the blade  

of prayer that is his body. The country  
became what countries become and I was  

one black man forced to drive  
inside it. When I look back  

through my mind, the white seabird still  
whirls, raw and at an angle  

fitted to the blunt machine of grief.  
Its death was a gift in its precision—  

chance gorges on the wrong life  
and our new wound blooms.  

¹Title taken from Jack Gilbert’s poem “In Dispraise of Poetry.”
CHRIS KAPPMEIER | Off Season with Seagulls, 2011
24 x 30 inches | Oil on canvas
The Horses

Two little towheaded boys marched into the tall grass and weeds. A man wearing military fatigues followed close behind. “Drop down! Take cover!” he shouted, and they disappeared out of sight. The grass shook. Snorting, chortling noises sounding like laughter surfaced as the man stood there shouting orders.

I was spending a lot of time looking out the window. I’d seen the boys outside in the tall grass before, playing hide-and-seek and make-believe games. They’d moved in a few weeks earlier, in the middle of the school year. Sometimes they fought with each other, rolling around in the dirt, wrestling and punching and screaming at each other, “Butthead! Butthead!” I’d only seen the man once or twice.

The house they’d moved into, weatherworn, in need of a new roof, had once been a barn. It was part of a compound of old farm buildings where I rented a converted trailer with peeling yellow paint. Our landlady lived in a bungalow that stood under a large live oak with one broken limb and another propped up with scaffolding. A third renter, a tall, skinny man who wore a repairman’s uniform and drove an old pickup, lived behind the landlady’s house in an unpainted shack, the kind meant for tools. Our houses ranged along a rutted looping dirt driveway with a gate to the main road. Tall grass and weeds grew along the side. The house where the boys lived was the farthest from the gate, near a fenced-off sheep paddock and a smaller goat enclosure.

Beyond the sheep paddock a horse pasture dipped into a swale. The horses galloped back and forth or just stood around. No one ever approached them or rode them. In the winter rains, the swale filled partly with water so the horses had to huddle on the uphill side, and now, with spring, frogs appeared everywhere—in the grass, on leaves, their chirps pulsing steadily through the night.

Scattered in various places around the property were fruit trees, rose and rhododendron bushes, flower beds and tiny vegetable plots,
all of them scraggly and unkempt, with thistles, tall, ragged dandelions, and oat grasses crowding up and stifling healthy growth. A failed farm is what it was, much of it sold off, and the owner, Rae, supported herself now as a landlady, not a farmer. On a distant rise above the horse pasture stood a large old gabled two-story house with a porch, the former farmstead, all weathered and peeling and boarded up. Rae puttered about maintaining the property as best she could, and the rest of the time stayed in her house, leaving us renters alone.

I’d moved to this out-of-the-way place after being raped, came crawling here to lick my wounds, like a cat that’s been hit by a car. Loneliness felt more comfortable in a lonely place. But I wondered why a family had chosen to live here where there were no other kids to play with. There was a small town a couple of miles away, but it was fifty miles to the city, fifteen to the nearest big town. The mother went to work every day wearing nice clothes—pantsuits or dresses. She had long dirty blonde hair and was a little overweight. The man generally stayed in the house.

“On your bellies! Slither forward!” He dropped down, and the grass shuddered as he and the boys crawled in the direction of my trailer. I grew alarmed. “Watch out, watch out! Shit, they’re going to get us!” he shouted. Then I realized the sounds coming from the boys weren’t laughter at all but crying. It rose from the grass like puffs of smoke and hung in the air. “Stop that sniveling, they’ll hear you,” the man snarled. “This is war.”

My blood gushed with a whoosh. I had to hold myself tight to keep it in. Suddenly they all popped up and ran for the barn. Then the tears brimmed in my eyes and fuzzied everything. At that time, I had a tendency to weep out of the blue, for everything, for whining dogs as well as abused children, for the woman in the television ad who had arthritis, for burnt toast.

The man was a big guy and still wore his hair in a military crew cut. Most vets who’d returned from Vietnam grew their hair long right away in order to fit in. I wondered if he struck the kids or his wife.

Generally I would look out the window for hours at a time, at the sheep, the birds, the leaves fluttering in the breezes and the clouds floating by, soothing myself into a kind of numbness. Now I was afraid of what I might see. I put on a record of The Doors and lay down on the shag rug. *This is the end … The end of laughter … All the children are insane … The killer woke before dawn.* The song swallowed me up with its eerie doomed notes, and somehow that was relieving.

I dreaded the nights, when the blackened windowpanes threatened with specters of my worst imaginings. Before then, in the late afternoons, I drove the fifteen miles to my waitressing job. Dinah’s
Dinah catered mostly to the local small businessmen and families. It had booths and the food, ordinary burgers, steak, and chicken type stuff, was not bad, not greasy. The regular customers had learned I wasn’t the chatty sort and made no demands on me, did not joke around with me or expect me to carry on with them. I just took orders and delivered food and stayed in my own head. It was the same with the other waitresses and the cooks and with Dinah: they were friendly but respected my privacy, as if they sensed my story.

One night a man I’d never seen before, six feet, clean-shaven, gray hair, well dressed, had taken a booth. He’d ordered the steak and fries special and then leaned forward and whispered to me, “I’m in big trouble. Really in trouble. But I don’t want to say anything about it.” His breath reeked of alcohol. “Oh, I’m sorry,” I said, and walked away. When I brought his food, he said, “You see, I’ve forgotten what motel I’m staying at.” I didn’t say anything. Halfway through his meal he got up and left. By the time I noticed, he was nearly out the door. He hadn’t paid yet. “Hey!” I called. He walked quickly away, down the street. I started to go after him, but my legs turned liquidy, and my vision blurred. I blinked and looked around: everyone was still eating as if they hadn’t noticed anything. I felt almost as if I’d been raped again and nobody cared. Run through and hollowed out inside, except for hatred and rage. That’s the worst part: what comes after, the rape happening over and over again with every rebuff. That’s why I kept to myself as much as I could.

She came to my door one day. “Excuse me, hi,” she said. “I’m your neighbor. I thought I should introduce myself.”

It was a Saturday. She was wearing jeans and an untucked shirt instead of one of her dressy outfits. She had a little sharp pointed nose like a mole’s. I looked for bruises on her face and didn’t see any. We talked in the doorway because I didn’t invite her in. Her name was Holly, she said, and her husband’s name was Jared. She said she worked as a store manager to support the family because Jared was a vet and had some problems.

I said I’d figured he was probably a vet.

“Oh, did you? Why?”

I told her what I’d seen. Why did I? I don’t know why, it just came out.

Holly looked pained. She hemmed and hawed. “That’s actually one of the reasons I came over. It’s quiet out here, and he’s not flipping out as much as he used to. He’s not drinking as much either. But I was hoping, since you’re home during the day, maybe you could keep an
eye out on my kids? What I mean is call me if you see something starts to happen? Like what you just described. Because I can leave work and come home then."

“I protested against the war,” I said.

Holly looked at me flatly and nodded slowly. “I know I’m asking a lot.”

I wanted to say no. Inside my head, I was screaming no. But I said, “I can’t promise anything, because I don’t spend all my time looking out the window.” (This was a lie.) “But if I happen to see something, okay.”

She wrote down her number on a little piece of paper and gave it to me. “Before Vietnam he was a sweet guy,” she said as she left.

Then why hadn’t he gone to Canada instead of a place where he didn’t belong? I shouted. But I was only shouting in my head. And why hadn’t I been able to say no? I’ve always had a hard time saying no. Is that why I got raped? Did Lenny see that in me, did I not say no with enough conviction, or maybe, even, did I not say no at all, say it only in my head, like just now?

I’d left college to work in a factory. The war had made a lot of us radical. We’d grown up witnessing fire hoses turned on women and children in Birmingham, King and James Meredith and Fred Hampton all murdered, and now the war. Many of us joined revolutionary organizations and tried to organize the working class.

I was a cutter in a small factory that made fiberglass filters. All of us cutters were women. We had to spread out rolls of formaldehyde-treated fiberglass wool on large tables and, leaning forward toward the center of the table, measure and cut them with heavy blades in long, forceful swoops. The fiberglass dust got into the corners of our eyes and up our noses, and we itched all over. We would stack the cut sheets into piles of seven and shove them into a furnace which turned them into cork-like boards. The formaldehyde came steaming out of the oven in nauseating fumes. Then the boards were sent into another room where men machined them into filters of different shapes and sizes.

I was surreptitiously agitating for a union and at the same time handing out leaflets against the war and U.S. imperialism. A short, pudgy guy named Lenny began asking lots of political questions and seemed to be very interested in everything I had to say, so one night after work, I went out with him to a bar down the street from the plant to talk with him further. But he kept drinking and pressing himself on me. “You’re a tough girl, you’re a liberated woman,” he kept saying. When I got disgusted and left, he followed me out into the parking lot and forced himself into my car and raped me.
I didn't want to go back into that factory and have to face him day after day. It was out of the question to complain to management or police. The people in my organization told me to suck it up and forget it—there was important work to be done, and I shouldn't divert attention from what really mattered. What about the Vietnamese? They're putting their lives on the line. Do you think a woman in the N.L.F. would stop fighting because of something like this? No one understood or seemed to care. I think they even felt it was my own fault. I tried to go back to work and ended up in the bathroom all day crying, so I would have gotten fired even if I hadn't quit. After I quit, my comrades stopped talking to me.

§

I pulled the curtains to let in the sunlight and saw him approaching with the two little boys. Quickly, I moved away from the window. When I heard the knock, I was expecting it, but still I was not prepared, and I froze, thinking, No, I won't answer, but then I went anyway and opened the door halfway.

Up close, he had a surprisingly round, boyish face, not the hard contours I'd imagined. He was dressed neatly in chinos, no military fatigues now. His kids were long-haired and cute: little hippy kids. He kept his head turned to the side as he talked to me.

“My name's Jared.”

I said nothing. The children gaped. He still didn’t look directly at me.

Then he said quickly, as if he’d rehearsed it, “My wife said she's met you, and that you work an evening shift. There's kind of an emergency come up. I've got to get into town, and I don't want to drag these little guys along. I have to hitch, see. We've only got the one car.”

He stopped, glancing sideways at me. I understood that faltering all too well, but still I waited.

“So I was wondering if you could watch after them while I'm gone, till my wife gets home.”

I shrugged, frowned. I couldn’t think of a reasonable excuse. Actually, I’d grown up doing babysitting jobs in my neighborhood and got along with kids.

“If it wouldn’t be too much trouble,” he mumbled.

“I guess.”

“Thanks.” He looked at me then, for a second, his mouth barely twisted into a lifeless smile. He touched both boys on the tops of their heads, turned, and walked stiffly down the driveway toward the road.
Finn and Kyle were ten and eight, freckled and round-faced like their dad. I got out a pack of cards and taught them five-card draw, using pinto beans as stakes. They loved it.

“I see you guys playing outside sometimes,” I said casually.

“Mmm.”

“Riding your bikes and stuff.”

“We like to have races.”

“And obtacule courses,” added the little one, Kyle.

“Obstacle,” I said.

“Yes, obstacule.”

“Do you like playing obstacle course with your dad too? I think I’ve seen you doing that.”

They were silent for a moment and looked at each other. “Not really,” said Finn finally.

Hours later, when Holly came to pick them up, she explained Jared had gotten a chance to see a doctor at the Vet Center. She was sorry it had taken so long.

Actually, the kids were rather precocious and I'd enjoyed their company. A few days later, they came to my door on their own. “Can we play cards some more?” They looked up at me with round, hopeful eyes. I taught them gin rummy this time. It became a regular thing, their coming over every few days or so if they got bored with playing outside. Maybe they didn’t have many games or toys at their house, and certainly they didn’t have friends to play with. They kept my mind off things.

It was their idea to play two truths and a lie. “Daddy got drunk last night. Mommy threw a dish at him and broke it. Then we woke up in the morning and there was an electric train set.” “I used to have lots of friends. I got beat up by the police once. I made two hundred dollars in tips last night.” Whose truths were sadder, whose lies more hopeful?

Sometimes Jared would show up to get them, still always shifting his gaze aside and avoiding looking directly at me. It surprised me to see how willingly they ran to him.

When I wasn’t going to work or amusing the kids or gazing out the window, I played solitaire. Or I tried to read. The main item of furniture in my trailer was a long low bookcase from a Goodwill thrift store, lined with books from my old life, political books like Labor’s Untold Story and Lenin’s What Is To Be Done?, and classics like Hardy, George Eliot, Faulkner, Dostoevsky. Some of them I’d read before and loved and some of them I hadn’t read yet. But now I could never read more than a few pages before I’d throw the book down. Nothing I read made sense to me anymore.
I spent hours listening to music and day-dreaming. I’d put on a Bob Dylan record or go back to The Doors and recall my life in college before I started working in the factory. It had been a heady time: smoky, late night meetings discussing plans for actions against the war, my boyfriend at the time casually leaning against the wall with a nonchalant smile on his lips and mimeograph ink all over his hands. I missed it. We had brainstorming weekend retreats at the beach, where we camped and mostly played. One time we broke into a Board of Trustees luncheon meeting and ate their desserts. Everything was fun and funny then. When the movement became more serious and we joined various revolutionary organizations, it changed. No laughter. Everything deadly serious. In our zeal we were pitiless, as pitiless as my former comrades were to me now. I’d turned my back on old friends and family as if their lives didn’t matter. Burned bridges in the heat of the moment, and then suddenly one looks around and realizes where one is, what one has done, the devastation all around, the loneliness, the new landscape.

§

I heard him yelling. “Get on in here you goddamn runts! Do you wanna get hurt? Do you wanna get killed? Huh?” A door slammed. More shouts and piercing wails that couldn’t be contained by the walls of the house. Was he hitting them? Trembling, I went to the phone and called the number Holly had given me, which I’d posted on the wall beside the phone. After five rings a woman answered sounding harassed.

“This is Holly.”

“This is Myra from next door. You told me to call you if he freaks out, and I think he is. He’s screaming at the kids and they’re crying. They’re inside the house and I can’t see what’s happening, but it sounds bad.”

“Oh no. Oh my god. I’ll come as quickly as I can, but could you please, please go over there and try to talk to him now, yourself? Just say hello or something. Maybe that will calm him down a little. It’ll take me a few minutes to get out of here and then it’s a long drive.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Okay.”

I sat for a moment listening to the sounds of tumult, which had subsided a bit but not stopped, then I mustered my will and headed outside toward their house. At the door I heard him say, “Get your asses in there,” and stifled, choked crying. I knocked. “What the hell?” he said in a muffled voice. As he opened the door I froze. Why am I doing this? He looked directly at me for the first time, a look of both rage and fear, his eyes tearing through me yet not seeming to actually

I returned to my trailer, to a precipitate silence that was heavy, ominous and oppressive. When I heard Holly’s car pull up, I felt thankful, no longer alone.

§

A few days later, heading to my car I noticed him and the two boys in the sheep pen. The sheep were looking on quizzically, silently, while he held the wire fence apart for the boys to scoot under into the horse pasture. Then they started clambering up the hill toward the deserted farmhouse, walking slowly, picking their way with apparent difficulty over the bumpy unmowed ground. I watched, worrying that he was flipping out again. But he was holding Kyle’s hand, and the children were tripping along eagerly, not being dragged.

Out of the corner of my eye, I was aware of the horses in the swale below, who had immediately, with the intrusion, lifted their heads and perked their ears forward. My attention focused on them. They tapped the ground with their hooves and shifted their bodies. I had never looked closely at them before. There were six of them, all a reddish brown color with white streaks on their noses and black ears and black manes and tails. They’d usually struck me, from a distance, as an aimless, forlorn clump in the background, another aspect of the failed farm, but now they seemed to spring to purposeful life, cantering up the hill toward the farmhouse, whinnying, tails streaming behind and manes flapping. They held their heads proudly high, their flanks heaved and muscles churned machine-like. They seemed to me now large and more powerful than I’d ever realized.

Noticing them, Jared and the boys stopped and turned. As the horses drew close, Jared shouted. A shrill, discordant shout. The kids cried out.

Without thinking, without questioning, I started for them, through the sheep pen and under the wire fence and up the hill, stumbling here and there on ground pocked with little seeps of water. As I neared, I could hear the horses blowing through their noses and snorting. Jared was cursing, “Fucking gooks! Fucking gooks!”

“Finn, Kyle,” I called, but they didn’t turn to look at me. Their eyes were glued on their father and the horses. The horses whirled about confusedly, they drummed the ground with their hooves, they raised their heads and necks and pinned down their ears.
“Get down,” Jared shouted. He turned back and pushed Kyle into a muddy puddle. Kyle started wailing. “Shut the fuck up!” Finn’s body shook with suppressed sobs. “Stay still!” he turned and shouted at me, and I stopped in my tracks.

The horses now were a blur of swishing tails, heaving flanks, flaring nostrils and whitened eyes. Their smell and heat wafted from their frothing bodies and choked the air like dust. Their whinnies were like snarled chains of demonic laughter. One of the mares reared up and bared her long teeth.

Jared crouched and groped around on the ground while he said crazy things. “Charlie out of the spider hole. Ripcord, Ripcord, fire the tracers.” The children trembled and whimpered. I circled up slowly behind them, watching Jared and the horses nervously. I wanted to take the children away, but I was afraid of what Jared would do.

His hand found a rock, and he picked it up. “Okay, men, I’m going to rock and roll” He lurched up with a blood curdling yell and hurled the rock at the horses. It hit the mare that had bared her teeth, and now she reared up again, bellowed, and mouth open in rage, charged at Jared and kicked him down with her front hooves. Jared tried to roll away, and the horse lunged and bit him on the shoulder.

The children and I screamed.

Jared didn’t get up. I was terrified, and like him earlier, shouted at the kids to stay still. With Jared lying quietly on the ground, the mare backed off a little and rejoined the others, who were squealing and snorting and whirling about in tight circles nearby.

I cautiously approached Jared. He was bleeding and clutching his chest. His eyes were open, blinking. The children, crying, obediently huddled a little distance away. “Are you all right?” I asked.

“I got my million-dollar wound,” he said.

“Huh?”

“Firebase Anderson. Triple canopy rainforest. They kept coming up the east side of the saddle. My friends killed all around me, but I get my million-dollar wound. Wake up in a tent hospital and I get to come home.”

“You’re home now.”

“I know, but the demon still comes after me.”

“Can you stand up?”

“My chest hurts. I think a rib’s broken.”

I could hear the horses’ hissing breath, feel it on my skin. Moments passed that seemed like forever. The children’s crying tapered off and gradually, in the stillness, the horses calmed down, stopped wheeling around and simply gathered in a quiet huddle a ways off.
“I’m scared but I can’t let myself feel scared because then it’ll overtake you,” Jared said. “Can’t take your eyes off the enemy but afterwards …” He didn’t finish the sentence.

“What’s your demon?”

The boys approached. “Are you all right, Daddy?” They crouched down beside me, their little bodies still shaking in fear.

I said, “He’ll be all right. He’ll have to go to the doctor though. Go get Rae, and go very slowly, don’t run.”

I watched to make sure the horses didn’t get stirred up again by the movement. They turned their heads to watch but stayed put. It was as if they were guarding Jared and me, holding us prisoner.

“The thing is, they’re just boys.”

“Who?” I demanded.

“Four VC coming at me out of the bushes right ahead. I sprayed them down. Phew, I thought, and then I started shaking. Then I turned over the bodies to see what they looked like, and they were just a bunch of boys.”

“So that’s it.”

“Not really. It was me or them.”

The horses were motionless. I could hear the distant sighing sound of the hollow sky.

“What is then? What’s your demon?” I was angry. I wanted him to confess. I wanted him to cry and beg forgiveness.

“We went into a village. It was a VC village in the night. We were going to burn it down. We rounded everyone up to take them away, women and children and old men. Then I heard a noise in one of the huts. We’d ordered everyone out. Everyone was supposed to be rounded up. So it must have been VC I thought, and I opened up and sprayed it. Sprayed it so nothing would be left alive. Then I went to look inside.”

He started crying. “It was a woman with a baby halfway out her.”

His words bit into me, raked through me, a hot, burning, suffocating wind threatening annihilation. I squeezed my fists as if to hold on to something. But it was he who shook with silent weeping, his eyes squeezed shut, his face contorted, as I watched.

Then I heard the voices of Rae and the kids starting up the hill. The horses perked their ears and gently swung their tails. On a nearby half-dead tree, hundreds of suddenly chirping red-winged blackbirds perched and fluttered, like tiny flames on a huge candelabra. Rae was furious and yelled that it served him right. Maybe it did, yet I knew that I would drive him into town to the hospital emergency room and sit with him and the kids until Holly came.
CHRIS KAPPMEIER | Brooklyn Bridge Entrance on a Rainy Night, 2010
24 x 30 inches | Oil on canvas
you wish you had known her before your father
imagine her a young lush cheeked child
with ribbons in her hair

in your favorite picture from before
she is a teen dressed all in white—
one hand on her hip the other at the knee

her ass pushed up and out and on her lips a pout
that says I’m cute but complicated
she is standing on your grandparent’s lawn

back when it was still framed by those tall slender trees
Mo used to wrap in tinfoil and Christmas red ribbon
the grass is a tender lime green the way Pa likes it

even then he made time to care for small things
when you told her you were in therapy Momma said
my parents were so happy

you like to picture her childhood
she the youngest of seven it must’ve been ordered
but loud in the best way

you can imagine how they must have orbited her
bought her sweet treats taught her silly unimportant things
like how to jump rope throw down at dominoes and curl her bangs

in that big eighties way yes you would have liked to see her then
to know what it is to dance around your mother
to be bathed in simply easy joy
HONORABLE MENTION, 2018 LAUX/MILLAR POETRY PRIZE

EMILY MOHN-SLATE

Lightning Flowers

My daughter is finally asleep
in my throbbing arms.
The woman next to me,
who let my wild baby grab
her rings, lick the zipper
of her purse, waving away
my apologies, sleeps now, too.
On her tray table, her
highlighted hair a perfect
frosted cake.
Lois, married 38 years
to her second husband
who died recently—
*He was a good one*, she says.
*A really good one. It changes everything.*

Lois was surprised
I have a second husband too.
My first husband, a heavy bell
still ringing —
my second husband, clear
light on green leaves.
Maybe it was supposed
to be this way.
What do I know?
In her sleep, my daughter
clutches my shirt collar—
the edge of a boat
in her dream.
Through the crack
in the seats, I watch
a movie—no sound—
Tilda Swinton, Ralph Fiennes,
& two younger actors
eat pretty food, give each other
meaningful looks.  
Then some betrayal  
and they all go crazy. 
Tilda glides around in  
a white sheath, big aviators. 
Her sleeves billow like cool air  
No baby to bounce.  

We coast into purple-black  
clouds, to a forest of  
lightning trees on the horizon. 
The last time I saw my first  
husband, he was wearing  
a wool jacket, oxford shoes, 
living alone in a loft.  
Just the right amount  
of silver laced his beard.  
He seemed happy.  
I think about my husband  
at home—the one who said  
You deserve to be loved well.  
We fly into light  
slashing the night’s skin, 
burning up the sky,  
& she wakes—I start  
bouncing again, sing  
twinkle twinkle little star  
in her tiny ear, lightning  
cradling our plane,  
how I wonder what you are—  
branches barreling down—  
the future the most  
beautiful, terrible thing.
Sometimes I Pretend the Daughter I Wanted Was Born Alive

The window seat knows all about regret, the rooms unlit in a body. Strawberries pile in a bowl on the counter. The seeds slide past the wind in my throat. Outside, the catty sun comes from its nest in the thornbushes to shock the cockleshells.

Regret belly-crawls over the sawgrass like fever. The desperate crowns of the Queen Palms bend to their own need. Between bricks on the house, the case-bearer moths’ cocoons dazzle before new wings can even hope to row the sky. This might be shame, not regret.

Broken tile, torn lanai screens, leftover rain. Wing-thin, this love. This not-love. The seeds swell my mouth. I drink the rain, seed the feeders, feed the drains. And still, what is sane.
FINALIST, 2018 LAUX/MILLAR POETRY PRIZE

CHELSEA DINGMAN

After You Have Gone

_after Kevin Prufer_

Your room still smells of smoke. The walls, yellowed, but unpapered. You never believed I was allergic. Ashen,

I can’t clean anything. The wood table, bare, except for the rings from the tree that was felled to give you somewhere to eat alone. That last visit, the kids were so small. You bought them food, but the fridge remained empty. The city, swollen with snow.

All accidents add up to these quiet rooms at some point, I think. Everyone going on around us as if it was expected that a woman would drink enough wine to forget disease lionizes the skin, the cells. The cancer, an afterthought.

What did you really want to know? You held my son in your lap, the other playing quietly on the floor. I can’t revisit that moment.

I can’t revise the sting of snow that escaped winter with us. Outside, tonight, I breathe in the cold. Like smoke, it stings my throat. It’s not light that divides one room from the next. I was so sure you’d come back from this. Instead,

light empties every room. The windows, shot-through.
Other women don’t tell you

for S

you are not immune  They say your child
will be your reason  for living your whole  happiness your
life  But once outside of you  he isn’t
your life  that is—crack  in a dying flower’s
moss-crusted pot  and the unfinished  crochet sweater
and the wall  her husband threw  her back against
so hard  it left a trail of bruises down her spine
a blueberry  on each vertebra  mouthfuls  her son adores
awake and shaking—  He is  his own
life and flesh  breathing and beating  independent
of your heart  And so you are not  immune
though they may say  how could she?  she has her son
to think about!  how self-
ish! They’ll pity her  while judging  They won’t see
self as bound  to broken—her  mother’s china and father’s
absence—to  afraid The winter’s light is far too short
to see  the handful of pills  she must have chewed
or the dull blade  from her husband’s straight edge razor
or the leather strap she stole  off of his briefcase and fashioned
around the showerhead  behind a locked
bathroom door  wedged closed  with an infant
tub  while her son  napped or screamed and her husband
drank or texted  another women  and hid their money
in the doorframe of a house  she didn’t know
had walls  Other women try
defining this for you  how empathy  makes a garland
of all past and future mothers  of hands and breasts and bellies
of holding  selflessness  where you  must bear yourself
but they forget  how easily  forgetting comes
—a pill a blade a noose— forget that pathos
means to suffer that mother means the same
and you had not one feeling she could do this and you
are and are not to blame she tried and this is not
about you but it is because you are a mother
a self that’s less and ish and on the brink of changing suffixes
and you can’t end this because you don’t know how
and you are glad beyond all suffering and feeling that she
failed at this as well so you are left to dream
that it is summer and your boys are barefoot
on a picnic blanket stained with berries their bellies
distended from sweetness purple mouths and hands
and you hold hers against the ground and ask
to stay here just a little longer
Lessons from My Grandmother

Beloved Valium addict, you willed to me your sense for the routine too-muchness of things, their desire to fail which only sustained dread can overcome, foreseeing each misfortune and swallowing it like a whole egg. It cannot be overstated how much depends on such vigilance. When you shower leave the phone off the hook so you can’t miss the call about the accident and unplug appliances that, left untended, are as good as setting fire to the house. Play solitaire. If you get all the cards out, the week may improve. Pray on bridges so you don’t die cursing. When someone asks how you are, say you can’t complain. When the dead come in dreams, ask what’s wrong.
When he was in his prime, he used to beat her, and she could smell it coming on—the way people do storms. She’s in the kitchen telling Jessica, my wife, that he excreted testosterone from his pores. I’m muddling my way through the assembly of our new electric cradle in the living room.

“No one has had his heart attack, though, I come and go without even thinking about the consequences,” she says. There’s a silence. She’d come over from next door uninvited.

I tighten the last screw, plug in the cradle, and watch it swing. When Jessica comes into the living room, she hoists Curtis’s tiny body up on her shoulder and slips her breast back into her ruffled shirt. Curtis seems to enjoy the cradle, his eyes bright and the roll of fat under his chin wet with slobber. He watches the mobile turning above his face. Jessica looks over, and I know she wants me to say something, so I blurt out: “Doris, it was so nice of you to bring by the cake.”

“I know it’s hard with a little one,” Doris says, standing near Jessica. “My own children were a mountain of work, but it was worth every minute. So many women don’t seem to understand that anymore. I’m happy to see your wife is breastfeeding.”

I walk Doris to the front door and, on her way out, she tells me: “I’d better go get Mike his lunch. The cardiologist gave us a meal plan, and I don’t want him snacking on junk.”

With her gone, I go back in the living room where Jessica is looking out the glass back door. I put my hands on her shoulders. Mike’s two dogs are bounding between his yard and ours, snapping at one another and rolling in the grass. “I know you don’t like them,” I say.

“I don’t. It’s like she comes over here to check if I’m even feeding the baby.”

“I think she’s trying to help because she knows we don’t have family in the area. I was talking about the dogs ...”
“You hear the way she talks,” Jessica says. “And, no, I don’t like their dogs, either.”

There’s a piercing yelp outside as the Rottweiler sinks her teeth into the scruff of the Doberman. The Doberman snaps about before slinging the Rottweiler off his back. A tuft of fur lands in the grass and the Rottweiler’s lips are bloody. The two dogs run off to the neighbors’ yard and don’t come back.

Jessica is crying silently. I can tell by the way her shoulders rise and fall. “I hate it here,” she says, slipping out from under my hands. “I want to go back home.”

I feel guilty standing there, then I listen to her feet on the stairs until she closes the bedroom door upstairs. We’re in this town for my job selling local TV ads, but the bigger market isn’t paying what I hoped. The established salespeople close on all the good leads, and there isn’t much commission left for me. Sitting on the couch with my laptop, I look up the breeds of Mike’s dogs on the internet: Rottweiler Metzgerhund. An ancient breed introduced by the Romans. “Butcher dogs” used to pull carts of meat to market. Doberman Pinscher. A lineage started 1890 by tax collector Karl Friedrich Louis Dobermann.

My thoughts drift back a couple of months. Mike was still healthy, and I stood in my yard watching him. His sharp order—“Trot!”—pierced the summer air as he strode in a square, turning tight corners with the dogs alongside.

“Heel.” The dogs sat. The Doberman looked sharp and pert and the Rottweiler brutish. “Come on over,” he said, looking at me standing there with the garden hose. “They won’t bite.”

It was our first conversation without our wives, and his breath smelled yeasty, like beer. It didn’t take him long to say that you simply can’t ban assault rifles. “The term itself is just a liberal fabrication. You can assault anyone with any gun.”

Curtis’s sudden crying breaks my train of thought, and I look around the living room. Putting aside the laptop, I drape a towel over my shoulder and lift him from the cradle. When I pat him on the back, he spits up, and I carry him upstairs to where Jessica is in bed with the TV on. She isn’t crying anymore, but her eyes are glassy and unmoving as she stares at the flickering screen.

“Can you take him for a bit?” She doesn’t react as I hand her Curtis, but she cradles him in her arm and strokes his face to soothe him. “I’m going to ask the neighbors to keep their dogs chained up.” Leaving the house, I cross the front yards in the afternoon heat and notice that all of the neighbors’ blinds are closed. There’s no sign of the dogs as I climb the stairs and ring the doorbell. When Doris answers, she’s
squinting in the light and has changed into a bathrobe and fuzzy slippers.

"Your dogs are fighting," I tell her. "They were biting each other in our yard."

"Those dogs have been out of control ever since Mike stopped training them. He’s asleep right now."

"I want you to keep them penned up or chained," I tell her, watching as she folds her arms. "We’ve got the baby around, and they’re dangerous."

She doesn’t respond, but runs her tongue up under her lip and sucks at her teeth. Then she says she’s had it with Mike’s shit. She says that having a nice young family next door ought to be a privilege. "I want him to get rid of those dogs," she tells me. "I’m done taking ‘no’ for an answer."

"You don’t have to get rid of them. That’s not what I meant." I suddenly felt guilty for taking a sick man’s dogs.

"I’ll take care of this, young man," she tells me, starting to push shut the door. "You just go home and be with your family."

I’m left facing the closed door, and, even though I really want a dispute to win, I don’t know what to say if she opens the door again. Having been unable to do anything for Jessica since the day Curtis was born, I want to fight hard and make at least one problem go away for her. On the way back to the house, I’m thinking that if they get rid of the dogs completely, then I should be fine with that. Jessica will know I made it happen. She and Curtis are both asleep when I check on them. Clouds gather in the sky throughout the afternoon, and just before sundown, a little rainstorm happens. When Jessica comes downstairs, she’s wearing her oversized t-shirt and combing the hair out of her face with her fingers. We order pizza delivery for dinner and eat on the couch watching a show about brides and weddings.

"I’m exhausted," Jessica tells me. "I don’t know why, but I just can’t get my energy back."

"Well, Curtis is sort of like a cute vampire," I say, looking over to see if the joke resonates. She doesn’t take her eyes off the TV. I would change the channel, but this is what she wants.

Later that night, once we’re upstairs in bed with the lights off, I reach under Jessica’s t-shirt and move my hand up the smooth, cool skin of her waist to her breasts. It takes a while before she reacts, but then I feel her lips searching for my mouth in the dark. When we pull off our shorts and I roll over on top of her, she clings to my back and her breathing becomes labored under my weight. A minute later, Curtis shrieks in his room. "Shit." Jessica gets up. "He must be hungry."
Squeezing the pillow in frustration, I watch her go down the hall. I splash cold water on my face and bury it in a towel. Weeks have passed like this. She’s comforting Curtis down the hall and feeding him formula. I pace the room and linger by the bedroom window, peeking out the curtains. Mike is on his patio and the dogs are lying on their bellies in the grass, chewing bones. Doris slips out of the house. Ignoring her, Mike cocks his chin and stares out in the yard. I strain to see what they’re doing. Doris leans in like she wants to put her face up to his. She’s saying something, but he keeps turning away.

“What are you looking at?” Jessica asks, causing me to jump. She’s behind me. “I think Curtis will sleep some more.”

“I’m watching the neighbors,” I tell her, and she comes to the window with me. When Doris tries to grab Mike’s arm, he swats her hand and shoves her backwards. Doris regains her balance and plants her feet apart, shouting. Her face is contorted into an ugly sneer as if she is demeaning him. Mike, patting his fist and stepping forward, swings out to catch her temple with a right hook. It seems a fearsome blow, but then Mike himself is staggering and clutching his chest. He bends over heaving and steadies himself by clasping his knees.

“Call the police,” Jessica tells me. “Call them, now.”

“Wait a minute.”

Doris goes inside and slams the door. Alone on the patio, Mike slowly rights himself to step out into the grass and the dogs have stopped chewing their bones to watch him. When he picks up a ball and throws it across the yard, they get on their feet but don’t fetch. Instead, they fan out around him.

Mike picks up a switch from the patio and goes after the Rottweiler, swiping at her hind legs and causing her to jump. He displays the switch at the ready and points towards the ball. When the Rottweiler backs up, Mike hits her on the spine and she flinches. Closing in from behind, the Doberman nips at Mike’s ankles. He rotates on his axis and slices down across the dog’s wet nose with the switch. By then, however, the Rottweiler is ready to sink his teeth into Mike’s fleshy calf.

“Stop them!” Jessica cries out, and I grab and hold her close to me, feeling her shallow and fast breath. “They’re going to kill him.”

“I’ll call the police if he can’t handle them,” I tell her. “They’re his dogs.”

Mike is trying to pull free his leg, but the Rottweiler is snarling through locked jaws, jerking her head from side to side and flaying the pant leg. For a moment Mike hops on one foot, but then he falls back and the Doberman leaps for his outstretched arm, biting right above the elbow.
At this point, I’m on the phone with the 911 dispatcher. Mike does a single, violent stomach crunch to curl his body into a fetal position, dragging the dogs with him. They step on him and tear his flesh, biting his arms and legs as he protects his face. Then he stops moving. When the dogs back away, Mike is limp and rolls onto his back.

“We need to help him,” Jessica repeats as I explain to the dispatcher what’s going on. I warn them about the dogs.

“Emergency services are on their way,” the dispatcher says. “Stay on the line and do not attempt to intervene.”

Outside, the dogs are near where Mike is lying. They’re panting and looking off into the distance. I’m afraid to leave the house, but I’m not sure I could muster the desire to help Mike anyway. He disgusts me lying there. I’m still holding Jessica, but I can tell she’s isolated in her thoughts. I’m silent, too, because I don’t want to make things worse. It hurts to leave her alone like that, though. I need to tell her that Curtis will always be safe. How can I know?

When the ambulance arrives, the dogs shy away from the flashing lights. There’s a policeman with the paramedics, and he stands between the dogs and Mike, resting a hand on the handle of his pistol. One paramedic does chest compressions and defibrillation while the other brings a gurney. Mike looks lifeless to me as they wheel him towards the ambulance. His arms and legs are bloody, and I feel certain he’s dead from a heart attack. The policeman knocks at the patio door, but Doris does not come out of the house. When I let go of Jessica, she lingers near me. “I’ll check on Curtis,” I tell her as the child cries out again in his bedroom. Curtis looks up from his crib with perfectly round eyes. His jaw opens and closes and his anemic lips and outstretched tongue search for a breast. I pick him up, supporting his neck, and lay his head on my shoulder carefully.

“I want to move back home,” Jessica says, standing behind me. “I hate living here. These people are awful and I don’t have anyone to talk to. I want my parents around.”

“What are we going to do for money? We’re here because this is where I got a job. You just want to give up?” Hearing her talk that way makes me angry.

“Give me Curtis,” she says, and reaches out. “You’re not holding him right.”

“Fine.” I hand her the child and go out the front door, sick of her being upset. Obviously what we saw was awful, but now it will be one more thing that’s fundamentally wrong. Outside, I find Doris getting into her car. “Did you see what happened?” she asks. “Animal control is coming for the dogs. I’m on my way to the hospital.”
“I wasn’t trying to make you get rid of them,” I tell her through the open car window. “I only asked for them to be chained up or fenced in.”

“You were just looking out for your wife and kid,” she says. “I’ve wanted them gone for years, but he promised me they would never attack.”

Two days later, we find out that Mike isn’t coming home, and Jessica is more calm. She won’t change her mind about moving home, though. She never will now.
JOHN SIBLEY WILLIAMS

Synonyms for Paradise

I’d like to start again. Instead of
a car that won’t start & this parody of sky,
a working engine, gas, a crisp blue forgettable
morning. Instead of that same old forever,

a temporary heaven of breath & sex & pain
& verbs. The children it’s too late to have,
let’s have them. The chapter where my mother
starts calling me by her father’s name: expunged.

If owning a thing erases it, I’d like to start
by buying up all the homes I’ve ever lived in.
Then everywhere I’ll never plant roots.
It hurts me to do it, but let’s let the synonyms

for joy & for grief bleed together, like salt
& fresh water, like poles of a magnet.
That we all die before we’re finished
is no excuse to abandon this worn-out

car by the side of some nameless road,
flipped over, only partially on fire.
That we should know when we see it
is not the same thing as a promise.
Forever Daylight

Again the sun fails to dissolve & I
cannot wash the light from your hair.

The world stands excruciatingly visible,
stuck in its song. What the night must steal
to give us something to rediscover
about ourselves never leaves our hands.

No gauzy horizon. No ambiguity. Nothing
to unlearn. We draw the curtains. But even this
is a candle. Even the bent heads of icecaps
melting. The fjord rising. These sheep are not
the dreaming kind. Rugged, furious, walking
cliff sides as if water. That something can have
no gods at all & still be holy. That we are finally
seeing ourselves in the full light of another’s
eyes & cannot stop flinching. Our throats gone
gravel & road salt from all this ceaseless awe.
There are worse ways to die.
   The tin foil sword my son hacks off the heads
of hydrangeas with, turned inward. The poisoned
   teacup my daughter serves to the stuffed bear
clutching a fat pink heart I gave her
   for her third birthday. The sky
peeling back layer after layer like an onion,
   a bedsheet in August, & the world
warms. It’s amazing
   what you can find beneath
what you’re looking for. Beneath the doe
   we left for dead, a mangle of maggots
gleaming white & true. Beneath me,
   my son pinned to the earth
giggling as if the moment belongs to us.
   I once made a necklace of paperclips
   & wore it like a string of enemies’ ears. Even if I knew
how to take it off, I wouldn’t. I haven’t.
We all need something to scream into. Void.
   Mirror. It’d be a shame to mourn ourselves alone.
CAMERON MCGILL

Pharaoh

My father’s asleep,
arms crossed upon his chest.
I whisper to him
blue in TV light,

collect his breath
in jars, shelve them
inside me.

Nothing waits
except the filth under his nails.

Tomorrow, a doctor
will search his body
for the wrong languages
dying to preserve themselves
like kings.
Following Instructions

What part of her body was under my fingernails, as I sifted handfuls over the flowerbed?
My shoes passing shivers to blades of grass that kept her on their tongues like shadows sunlight couldn’t shake.
Her body, a coarseness; I considered a spoonful.
Said flower over and over, meaning her name until something bloomed.

I left her by the black rocks beneath the blue spruce, inside the unlit pagoda lantern rusting by the wooden shed, and on roses, their petals in grey motes.
Syllables of her body— a coffee can of coins I carried.

I was giving her back to the flowers— my voice saying delphinium assured the future.
My hands a sieve raining seeds to a field; I watched them sink.
Her hair in my nails; nose in my eyes; four chambers of the heart, my mouth.
I left some in the bird feeder, gave her to the skyway like string in a beak.

~

Closing down the house.
I left fingerprints on the sink, on the wall as I switched off her kitchen light, the door handle I turned to leave, my own face. Dorothy, I followed the instructions.
I wanted to touch everything once.
ANDREA LEWIS

White Sands

1
A lone coyote crests the mesa, lopes the line against the moonlit sky. She’s all inside her skin, inside her gray-gold fur, alpha female, shoulders working, jaw slack. She catches scent of Bernadette and waits.

2
The fifth-grade filmstrip showed the head of a longhorn steer inside the outline of a girl. A cartoon uterus and tubes. The monthly burden, colorless, flowed out politely, like the white sand in an egg timer. Cramps—the dragon teeth gnawing at her pelvis—would lessen if you touched your toes.

If I touch my toes, I’ll barf. Bernadette waits for Theo on the hood of her stepdad’s Bel Air. She wants to climb up to the early morning moon. It droops behind the fire-eaten sign for Okie Joe’s. She wants to enter that coyote and outrun the pain, anyplace but here, this town, their house, her mom, who can’t stop buying crystal barware, accent pillows, accent tables, swizzle sticks, sunburst clocks, and bottles of booze so big they come with sculpted handholds in the glass.

3
You’re such a virgin, Rosa always says. She flaunts it every chance she gets, the sex she had with Rory right here in Okie Joe’s. They did it there on the glass-strewn floor, with peanut shells and mouse shit for a mattress, Sputnik blinking through the blown-off roof. The place exploded years ago, torched by passing galactic aliens, the locals like to say, because it’s up against the Missile Range and Trinity.
Rory, of the blond stubble and fleece-lined denim jacket, kills coyotes from the cockpit of his Cessna, banking low across the yellow foothills in the rising yellow sun, 22-gauge and a cowboy hat, with the alpha female down below.

The Laramide Revolution saw the lift of the southwestern spine of the Rocky Mountains that forced into the light of day on our lonely planet a swath of dazzling gypsum that allowed itself for seventy million years to be eroded, etched, scratched, and pulverized into the retinascraping two-hundred-and-twenty-four-square-mile phenomenon in the Tularosa Basin in New Mexico that people call White Sands.

Rory pulls the trigger. Unperturbed, the alpha female trots her trot beneath the waning moon, beneath the diamond-point of Venus, beneath the mothership, the fading stars, the satellites.

Bernadette crouches by the liquor cabinet and upends her purse—used pink Kleenex, ticket stubs, *The Catcher in the Rye*—to find the yellow tin of Anacin. She swallows six with Dr. Pepper and leaves for school. She hopes the pad won’t leak along the way. As always, there is Rosa on the corner by the Baptist church, her woven purse from Juarez lumpy with Hostess treats and hairspray, mascara and movie mags. *You’ve got that pain-crease in your forehead, ’Dette. Let Theo do it out there on the dunes and you’ll feel better.* They squeeze into the smoke-fogged senior bathroom where girls in letter jackets sit on sinks to light their Kools and never let you wash your hands.

*The Story of Menstruation*, a ten-minute animated Disney film made in 1947, was narrated by Gloria Blondell, voice talent and actress, sister to the more famous Joan Blondell. Gloria was not mentioned in the credits. Use of the word *vagina* in the script is believed to be a first in the world of film.

White Sands Missile Range, in south central New Mexico, is the largest military installation in the United States. It occupies 3,200 square miles of the Tularosa Basin, and it surrounds the gypsum
The dunes of White Sands National Monument. It is home to the Trinity Site, where the world’s first nuclear weapon was detonated.

The Soviet Union launched Sputnik, the first artificial Earth satellite, into low Earth orbit on October 4, 1957. Its radio signal, transmitted at 20.005 and 40.002 MHz, was easily detected by amateur radio operators around the world. Sputnik completed 1,440 orbits of Earth and burned up on reentry on January 4, 1958.

Theo’s locker smells like crushed baloney, plus the Anacin’s worn off. In all his tromping through coyote tracks and chamisa, feather grass and scorpions, he’s found a single shiny scrap of the mothership. Bernadette rubs it with her thumb. It’s like my mom’s silver lamé pedal pushers. Theo has a bullet head and slanted eyes. Down the hall, a kid yells, Theo! The spacemen called! They want you back! Bernadette would like to burrow in a den with pups and go to sleep. Theo thinks: \( V=IR \). Ohm’s Law. How to overcome Resistance and experience the Voltage that is Bernadette? Come out there with me, he says. I know there’s more.

“Rosa, I’m not doing it in the sand.”
“Well then, go to Okie Joe’s like I did.”

First light.

Rory turns his collar up and taxis out. He’d rather be jerking off to thoughts of Rosa, but two more longhorn calves are out there with carotids leaking blood onto the desert floor.

Bernadette puts on a pad, three pairs of panties, and her hiking boots. She commandeers the stepdad’s Bel Air and fishtails out of town for Okie Joe’s.

The alpha female checks her pups. Tilts her head when she hears the plane. Creases her forehead, licks a pup, and trots away. Theo launches Morning Sun onto half-lit lawns. He has a year-old rubber in his jeans and the shred of mothership tied to his bike. The Schwinn’s a symphony of clanks and grinds. He pedals out toward Bernadette.
She crests the mesa underneath the hanging moon. Now she is all inside the gray-gold fur, catching scent of Theo, shying from his grind of metal, shying from the plane that banks aloft. She sets a course by the dimming stars and lopes away.
Ode to Dial-Up

The century arrived,
and I made an altar of cords,
modems, of wires I knew not
where to plug, of a desk
I’d sit in front of for hours,
typing papers, typing projects,
hoping the signal wouldn’t slow
or disconnect, and that I
wouldn’t have to kneel,
uncoil the labyrinth of cables,
speak to them as though
they were on the brink of death,
and think, while I waited
for something within them
to give, that such delays
were penance for the pages
I visited, for the nights when I
watched two bodies tangle
into one, and when I’d slide
my hand beneath my shorts,
tell myself—as I confessed
when homework was late—
that some things were beyond
my control.
BETSY FOGELMAN TIGHE

Spring Rapture

Cutting sprays of lilac off the bush.  
It is not emptier than it was.

Over the mountains rises the orange moon  
like my heart when you awake.

The sparrows build a nest above our lantern.  
The cat catches the mother in the house. Cold eggs.

Crickets call again around the corners  
and flies soil the sitting melon.

In pots, blossoms wave in the breeze.  
I could never leave you, dearest.
Light

Rising from my knees, with open eyes and sealed lips, as the pastor prays over the flock, I quickly flee the chapel.

Outside of church, I hold hymns in my mouth tighter than the white boy placed between my lips. Suck in. Look up. Blow out. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat. Repent. Butt in the air, I recall Catholic school,

wooden sticks and Sunday evening service. I think of how the confessor does not confess. How hell isn’t too far from the front pew. How, en masse, sheep are slain in the spirit for their flesh to be laid at the altar.
CHRIS KAPPMEIER | Twisted Pink Cherry, 2018
22 x 28 inches | Oil on canvas
body composition

before you, i could fit
every piece of me into a backroad,
a needle. a beginning and an end.
sometimes, you treat me like a sweet
cherry, halved
between your teeth, split open
like a flesh wound. sometimes, i try
to map you out with my fingers,
each tip finding and failing
to replicate your many angles.
i have trained my hands not to shake
around you. sometimes, you smirk,
and they forget. i’ve been longing
for the dun of your skin, for your tired
eyes the color of pool water. you have become
the god of my body: each shiver
through cells, each twitch
of tendon. somehow, you became
what is holy: my tithe comes
in the shape of my mouth
against yours. i live in the church
between your bones, each rib a pew
to worship in. sometimes, i’m
an aspen tree, trembling
in your slightest breeze.
The ghost in Miriam’s garage was not a ghost at all but her ex-boyfriend, dressed in yesterday’s brown work uniform—he was a driver for UPS—ratty house slippers, and a floral fitted sheet fresh from the laundry. He wore the fitted sheet over his head, and, worst of all, he told her he’d used the sharp edge of a pair of needle nosed pliers to cut holes in the sheet for the eyes and nose. On the place where the mouth should have been, he’d used silver duct tape to affix an oversized X, like the ones used by abortion protesters and people who thought you shouldn’t pull the plug. That particular set of sheets was new, too, a gift from Miriam’s father, a man who shopped at white sales, taught gluten-free cooking classes, and crocheted afghans even though he was not gay, or not publicly, at least, since he was still married to Miriam’s mother. And maybe that was Miriam’s problem, somehow, that she’d expected Donnie to act more like her kindly domestic father. And now Donnie was moving out, after only three months, and, he said, cutting holes in her floral fitted sheet was some kind of last stand, a protest meant to force her to concede she’d been unfair, unreasonable to expect him to watch television programs about interior design, to watch the flamethrowers and jugglers at her Renaissance fairs, and to take medication for his cat allergy or learn to live with the occasional sneeze.

But maybe she had been stupid to ask him to move in with her in the first place since she was not, and never had been, what they called “girlfriend material.” She liked to do her own thing—she was used to doing her own thing—and she was not about to change at this late date. She was forty-two and never married, and Donnie was six years her junior and already twice divorced. He had a son from his first marriage and a daughter from his second, neither of whom he saw...
except on their birthdays, or, more properly, the day after or sometimes the day before their birthdays, depending on whether or not the birthdays fell on weekdays or weekends. The collected pangs of this knowledge should have served as warning signs, but Miriam had never before had a live-in boyfriend, and finally having one, even a lousy one, made her feel more like a leading actress and less like the chorus girl she’d always been.

“You ruined my fitted sheet,” she said that day in the garage. “You’ll have to pay me back.”

“I’m going to live in the garage,” he said. “For a while.”

Finally, after the stunned silence that followed, he admitted he’d lied about the apartment he’d talked about renting, lied about his new route with UPS, lied about working for UPS at all. The uniform was stolen, not by him but by a friend who had a brother who really did drive for UPS, and the women, he said, always thought the uniform respectable and cool.

“It would be respectable,” Miriam said, “if you actually worked there.”

“I tried,” he said. “I couldn’t pass the test.”

“Get out,” she said. “You can’t live here.”

At first he assented, saying the garage was too cold, for one thing, and for another he’d rather walk on glass than share space with the washer and dryer, not to mention the goddamned litter box. And he was sorry about the fitted sheet, he said. He’d only meant to scare her.

“Oh yeah,” she said. “Like I really thought you were a ghost. Real scary, Donnie, just like in the movies.”

“Not that,” he said. “Your precious floral sheets. I wanted you to think I’d put holes in everything you own.”

“Well, did you?”

“No,” he admitted from underneath his ghostly disguise. “I lost my nerve.”

She pulled the fitted sheet from his head and shoulders and wadded it into an unruly ball. She had liked those sheets, maybe not as much as she’d pretended to, maybe not even half as much as she’d allowed him to think she did, but still, she could not get over the injury to her personal property. In another era, she would have taken him to The People’s Court.

“Look, Donnie,” she said. “You can have the couch. Until you’re back on your feet.”

“That lumpy old thing?” he said. “I’ll take the garage, thanks.”

“You’ll have to clean the cat box.”

“Fine.”

She realized she had the upper hand. “And fold the laundry.”
“Done.”
“And eat what I cook for dinner without complaining.”
“I never complain,” he said, which was a lie, but for the sake of expediency, she let it pass.

Looking back, she realized the misguided vision of herself as someone’s girlfriend had been both unrealistic and embarrassing, a false dream of demographic conformity, especially foolish in this, the age of same-sex marriage, children moving back in with their parents and vice versa, whole groups of young and not-so-young adults calling one another roommates at the same time they haunted urban landscapes and made experimental art. That she’d settle for a twice-divorced and now jobless deadbeat dad seemed to her not just pathetic but diseased, a sign she’d read too many women’s magazines growing up. And her mother had not pressured her. Her grandmother had not pressured her. She’d wanted only to know what it felt like, to be seen out to dinner with him, to wear his t-shirts to bed, to complain about his odd-but-lovable habits to her coworkers at the office. She worked in a cubicle, sure, but there was the break room to think about.

“How long are you going to stay?” she said.
“Until I’m dead,” he said. “That’s the other thing I meant to tell you. I’m going to die.”
“Get real, Donnie. You’re not going to die. I could get so lucky.”
“The doctor said a couple of months. At the most.”
“When did you go to the doctor?”
“Grubgeld-Decker Disease,” he said. “Google it.”

Later, after about five minutes online, Miriam realized Donnie’s illness was in fact a hoax, an elaborate phony news story invented by a mischievous group of medical students in Galveston, Texas, an allegedly deadly virus spread from computers to humans that made people—so far the disease had struck only Americans—sentimental and self-congratulatory, interested in only the blandest foods, keen on European travel, and pale to the point of translucence. That Donnie thought she’d go for it seemed insulting but also perplexing since he must have known a few keystrokes would expose the lie sooner rather than later. But Donnie was always doing stuff like that. Really, she should have known. There was the time he bragged about drinking expired milk that was, in fact, brand new; the time he subscribed to sixteen magazines using Miriam’s credit card; the time he told her he’d brought home a surprise and then packed the freezer full of fish heads and squid. She might have called him the class clown if he’d had any class or managed on any occasion to make anyone laugh. Why had she chosen so badly? Why had she chosen at all?
But the days turned into weeks, and Donnie kept the garage clean. And he found a job, seasonal work watering plants at a local greenhouse, the kind they dismantled for the winter and replaced with an empty gravel parking lot until spring came again. But when the work ran out, he said he was moving anyway, going to Vegas, he said, where he had a buddy who worked the blackjack tables and for sure could get him in. Still, he spoke of his disease as if it were real, blew his nose constantly in a way that sounded fake, and, strangest of all, began to limp. All that would have been fine—par for the course, really—if something terrible hadn’t happened, something totally unexpected, a cause for true and terrible grief.

Three hundred miles away, in Baltimore, a UPS truck hit and killed Miriam’s father. He’d been in a crosswalk, listening to Shostakovich on his iPod and carrying groceries home from the store, when the driver, tired at the end of an eight-hour shift, sped through a school zone and reached for the radio’s knob at the exact moment Miriam’s father took his first hesitant step into the street. The family, of course, was going to sue; already three lawyers had dropped by the house unannounced. Miriam knew she had to go home to her mother.

“You can’t stay here,” she said to Donnie that night in the garage. Donnie, sitting on top of the dryer and reading a celebrity magazine, did not look up. The air smelled of fresh cat litter and fabric softener; he’d been hard at work.

“Do you know how often two celebrities wear the same dress to an awards ceremony?” he said. “Pretty often.”

“I’m serious,” she said. “Something has happened.”

“Not here,” he said. “Nothing ever happens here.”

“In Baltimore,” she said. “My father is dead.”

Donnie closed the magazine and hopped off the edge of the dryer. He walked toward her and, like a coach congratulating a player after the last big game, gave her a playful punch in the arm. “Sorry, kid,” he said. “Rough stuff.”

She went on to explain that she didn’t want him living there alone, not without her watchful eye to protect the house and her belongings. “You’ll invite people over,” she said. “I know you will.”

“Not on your life,” I said. “I’ll stay right here in the garage.”

“You’ll forget to feed the cats.”

“Never,” he said. “Their habits are my own.”

“You’ll buy strange-smelling cheeses and leave them open and exposed in the refrigerator.”

“Let’s face it,” he said. “I might do that. But I’ll clean it out before you get home.”

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Something softened in his face so that he appeared at once compassionate and judicious, like a seasoned old gardener confident of an upcoming large and well-deserved inheritance. And his eyes were kind. Suddenly, she detected the scent of spray-starch in the air. Had he been ironing? She looked down and saw the floor had recently been swept and mopped, and the cobwebs in the corner had been replaced with a wide variety of brand new toys, treats, and cushions for the cats. He could not have been trying to win her back—it was too late for that—but his countenance was cooler, more mature, somehow steady and true.

“You can stay,” she said. “I’ll be back in a couple of days.”

For dinner, she cooked something she knew he would like—seafood gumbo—and asked him inside for a dish of ice cream for dessert. That he declined and went to bed early was proof of his dedication to the straight and narrow, since ice cream was his favorite and the garage, that night, was drafty and cold.

The next morning, she phoned her mother first thing and bought a last-minute plane ticket online. She couldn’t stop thinking about her father’s injured corpse, the gash in the center of his chest, his bruised and bloody face. Her mother had identified the body without her. How many seconds had passed before he knew he was going to die?

In the kitchen, standing at the sink rinsing out her cereal bowl, she overheard Donnie from the garage. He was talking on his cell phone.

*I know,* he said. *I just need a little longer.*

A little longer for what? Probably he was late to work again, something he seemed to be able to pull off fairly easily and frequently without the greenhouse manager’s notice or care. *I’m taking care of it,* he said. *As Emily Dickinson once said, “My little old life is like a loaded gun.”*

“But something about his tone unnerved her, and she decided, at the airport, to call him with some pretend last-minute information about the care of the cats. She was checking up on him, sure, but she had a right, after all, to the secure knowledge of the safety of her own home, her own pets, her own washer and dryer.

But when she finished dialing his cell number, she heard a stern male voice, not Donnie’s but something like Donnie’s, the same allergic hum and cadences, but deeper and more deliberate. Surely she must have dialed the wrong number.

*Please listen carefully,* the voice said. *Our menu items have changed.*

Maybe she’d dialed her bank by accident.

*To speak to Donnie, press one.*
This was his number after all, she decided. He was acting playful now, like an older brother spying on his sister’s after school cheerleading practice.

*To speak to Donnie’s housekeeper, press two.*

Probably this was some kind of a stupid joke about her regrettable willingness to allow her garage to become his living quarters.

*To speak to Donnie’s veterinarian, press three.* This was getting ridiculous now; who was he trying to kid? She started to hang up when the voice was interrupted by a quick fanfare of trumpets, sprightly and majestic like the ones you heard on television during the Olympics or a royal wedding. She was about to hang up when the voice came back, louder and more forceful than before.

*To speak to the ghost of Miriam’s father, press four.*

“You goddarned idiot,” she said into the phone. “That’s not funny.”

She heard him laugh now, a slow, cunning whistle, his mean laugh, the same laugh he used when her interior design programs on television were interrupted by tests of the Emergency Broadcast System. She knew he was flawed, sure, but never had she suspected he’d be so cruel. “What’s wrong with you?” she said. “You have something wrong with you.”

*To return to the main menu, please press the pound key.*

“Get out of my house,” she said. “Leave the key in the mailbox.”

“Look,” he said, now back to his real voice. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re a sicko, Donnie, and you know it. You’ve never even met my father.”

“Really,” he said. “Learn to take a joke.”

“I can take a joke.”

“Good girl.”

“I’m not so rigid as all that.”

“That’s better,” he said. “I’ll take good care of the cats.”

He hung up without saying goodbye, and she was left there in the airport, her hands shaking with something like sadness and something like rage, her suitcase like a dead animal at her feet, her head beginning to ache from the whooping sounds of a trio of adolescent male soccer players gathered around the small window to wickedness inside one of their cell phones. She paid four dollars for a bottle of water and waited at the gate, all the while thinking more of her father than of Donnie, though images of him in her garage—maybe he was sweeping the floor, folding laundry, changing a light bulb—crept around the edges of her memory. Maybe he was not so bad. Definitely he was not good, but maybe, just maybe, he was more complex than dastardly, more butterfly than moth.
At her mother’s house, the mood was unexpectedly buoyant, since all four of Miriam’s uncles and both her aunts had arrived in time to add personal, celebratory touches to her father’s funeral. The brothers and sisters had grown up touring in a traveling theater troupe, and their general merriment carried them through all family occasions, especially the funerals. They told jokes and sang songs, made decorations from outdoor detritus, ordered takeout and fed the leftovers to the dog. Someone constructed a life-sized cardboard cutout of Miriam’s father holding both a ukulele and a violin. They lugged photo albums from the attic, vacuumed old rugs, went shopping for mourning clothes in various vibrant hues. They hugged Miriam perhaps too many times. Even the funeral arrangements themselves and the depressing task of cleaning out her father’s closet became reasons for long, funny stories that always ended with an anonymous brave act or someone down on her luck catching a break and coming on strong. In the midst of all the sad merriment and happy grieving, she thought only rarely of Donnie and in not at all generous terms. Something in the profile of her serious stolid mother refusing to cry during the funeral made her decide once and for all she would ask Donnie to leave upon her return.

But on the day before she was supposed to leave her mother’s house for the airport, the doorbell rang and her cell phone went off at the exact same moment. Standing on the front porch and clutching his own cell phone was Donnie, clad in a black turtleneck and jeans, stomping his feet to keep warm from the cold. There he was, framed by the smeared glass of the storm door, his face unshaven and his hair sticking out in matted clumps. Behind him, she saw his car still running in the driveway. When she stepped out onto the porch, he hung up the cell phone and looked up at her with expectation and affection, a wish for approval like you’d see on the face of a poodle come home from the circus. How had he known where to find her? She realized he had all the passwords to her computer and free access to any old address books she might have left lying around; probably by now he’d drained her bank account and convinced the neighbors she’d moved away. From behind his back, he brought forth a single white lily.

“I was worried about you,” he said. “Objects in this mirror may seem closer than they appear.”

“You can’t be here,” she said. “The funeral is already over.”

“I know that,” he said. “An idle mind is the devil’s playpen.”

“You’re not saying it right.”
“Calm down,” he said. “Continued use of that tone of voice may lead to cardiovascular events from shortness of breath, to tightening of the chest, to heart attack.”

“You’re not funny, Donnie.”

“You used to think I was funny,” he said. He held the lily at arm’s length in front of him. “Before.”

“Turn your damn car off,” she said. “You’ll drain the battery.”

They all went out to dinner out at a pizza parlor, where, to Miriam’s surprise, her uncles and aunts and even her mother all did inexplicable things like compliment Donnie on his turtleneck, buy Donnie drinks, and ignore Miriam’s proffered conversation topics in favor of Donnie’s. Now with something to prove, she agreed to forego her plane ticket and ride home with Donnie instead. Everyone but Miriam seemed to take his presence in stride. Back at her mother’s house, she threw her things in a bag and issued her goodbyes. Not a single one of her relatives acted shocked or inquisitive or even protective, and their indifference made her feel evermore the loss of her father, who would have known, somehow, to try to scare Donnie away. Without him, she had a strange sense of belonging to the cosmos, so that pulling out of the driveway felt like pulling into a chasm between her old self and future self, a space so silent and removed you could not hear the sounds of your own breathing much less expect anyone to hear a call for help.

They rode home in silence, the steady thrum of the road noise their only companion. Several times Donnie asked her why she wasn’t crying, her goddamned father had just died, after all. What was she made of, stone? She told him to shut up, and mostly, he complied. At every gas station, Donnie made her stay in the car while he stepped out to talk on his cell phone. Once, when they were almost home, she asked whom he’d been talking to.

“Guy I know in Vegas,” he said. “You know: Start spreading the news.”

“That’s New York.”

“I want to Bee a part of it: Laaas Vegas.”

“That’s the wrong song.”

“I’m the one singing it, aren’t I?”

“What does he want?” she said. “Your guy in Vegas.”

“Very big doings,” he said. He was wild, speaking very quickly. “I just need a little longer.”

She finally managed to get it out of him. He had given up the plan to become a blackjack dealer and now was going into real estate, investing in a turnaround property in the middle of the desert. He said he needed to continue using her garage as his home base.
“It’s my home, Donnie,” she said. “It’s my home base.”

“It’s a garage,” he said. “You don’t even have a car.”

He was right, of course—she took the bus to work every day and walked to and from the grocery store—but she paid for that garage, paid for the washer and dryer and cat and cat litter box and ironing board and recycling bins that went in it. It was her garage, and she wanted it back. And a very small part of her—a part she didn’t like to confront—felt hurt he didn’t want to give up the garage in favor of moving back into her bedroom. Why, for example, had he come all the way to Baltimore just to tell her he wanted to continue living in her garage?

Once again, she felt herself softening. “Well, what are you going to do all day? While you’re waiting for this magical windfall in Vegas?”

“I’ll do what I always do,” he said. “I’ll wake up with the alarm on my cell phone. I’ll check my mail. I’ll play Word Juicer and Mammary Time and Rat Hole Race Part II. When my cell phone speaks, I will listen. When it gets tired, I will grant it the power of electricity. And when someone inside my little machine tells me something of some import, I will answer. I will answer to the call of destiny.”

“You’re crazy,” she said, and before she knew it, they were home again where her cats were happy to see her but also happy to see Donnie, and, after a few days of unpacking and extra laundry, they settled back into their usual routines of seeing one another only rarely, and then with only muttered bits of practical wisdom and statements and false decorum.

Everything seemed to be going fine—she thought of him in much the same way she might think of a lawn ornament or a talking parrot she couldn’t bear to give away—until he started inviting people over, and not just regular people, either, but children.

“I’m giving them piano lessons,” he said one night at dinner.

“You don’t have a piano.”

“We’re using an electric keyboard,” he said. “Sometimes I don’t plug it in.”

“Do their parents know,” she said. “About these lessons?”

“Their parents are paying me to give them lessons, duh.”

“How much?”

“This is some kind of Jewish thing, right? Like you want your cut?”

“I’m not Jewish,” she said. “But you still sound like a bigot.”

“But you have Jewish relatives, right? Like some of your ancestors are Jewish? That makes you Jewish.”

“You don’t even know how to play the piano.”

“I’ve been playing the piano, thank you very much, since the sixth grade. I went to a boys’ school where they taught you stuff like that.”
“I don’t think you ought to be alone with those children,” she said. “In my garage.”

“This is a business,” he said. “You wouldn’t understand.”

That she worked a full-time job and he was unemployed seemed not to faze him; lately he’d started reading stock reports online and tearing out pages from magazines featuring men in sharp business suits. Aspirational photos, he called them, something to look forward to. And he’d professed, ever since she met him, to be an authority on everything from deforestation to the budget deficit to cheeses of the world. She didn’t mind his armchair expertise, not really anyway, but lately she resented his need to diminish her own knowledge and experience so as to make his appear more worldly and vast. She’d been working her whole life, after all, always someone’s dutiful Girl Friday. She arrived early and stayed late. And she had ambitions, too. It wasn’t as if she took long lunches for hair appointments or filed her nails at her desk. She wanted something better for herself, something—or someone—better than Donnie.

One night, she came home from work to find him sitting not in his usual post in the garage but in the backyard, at her picnic table, doing something with a long, wooden dowel that looked like churning butter. Looking closer, she realized his hands were fast in motion with not one wooden dowel but two, and they seemed like knitting needles, maybe, some kind of sewing or craft.

“I’m making baby blankets,” he said. “For babies with no parents.”

“Which babies with no parents? You don’t know any babies without parents.”

“You haven’t been paying attention to the news,” he said. “Haitian refugees. They need blankets.”

“And you’re making them? In my backyard? Another business venture, I presume?”

“This is charity,” he said. “Have a heart.”

“Since when do you care about charity?”

“Since your father died,” he said. “I found the whole thing very moving.”

She was angry now, unbelieving he would dare to bring up her own father’s memory as an excuse for his increasingly odd and paranoid behavior. A couple of days prior, he’d complained of cockroaches in the garage and, to discourage their mating, he said, put out metal pie tins filled to the brim with sugared water. When she protested, saying the cats would drink it and turn diabetic for sure, he dumped the water over his head and invited the cockroaches to “devour him like yesterday’s dinner.”
“I don’t know why you’d go and start caring about people in need,” she said. “You’re not exactly Mr. Compassionate.”

He said the Haitians would be coming over the next day to pick up the blankets, and he’d be hosting them in the garage. She thought at first she should stop him, put her foot down for once, but she reconsidered when she imagined herself ripping the blanket from a shivering infant and ordering the parents off her property. The whole thing seemed ridiculous, like some kind of high school competition to see who could collect the most canned goods. Probably Donnie had won competitions like those whereas Miriam herself had received her perpetual Honorable Mention.

Now she watched as he folded the blanket neatly on top of the picnic table and pronounced it finished. Standing, she felt smug when she realized his knitting was far from proficient. But why should she feel so small? How did this sleazebag always manage to take the high road? It was time for him to move out.

“It’s over, Donnie,” she said. “I think you need to move.”

“Thank you for calling Rent-A-Center,” he said in his robotic telephone voice. She’d heard it way too many times lately. She started for the house when he surprised her, saying, “For Hope for the Hopeless, press one.”

“I don’t like your jokes, Donnie.”

“For Cruel and Unusual Punishment, press two.”

“Enough.”

“For the ghost of Miriam’s father, press three.”

“You don’t know a goddamned thing about my father,” she said. “So you can stop pretending.”

But he was an expert now, a regular Robert DeNiro. As soon as he started in with his telephone tree voice, his whole body went limp and detached, so that his arms swung from his elbows and his head drooped toward the floor. But his eyes crinkled at the edges, and his hand reached out to touch her shoulder. It was uncanny, really; he was just like her father. And he said kind and soothing things, like I’m listening, dear and Let us together take some tea. Like a two-bit player from some Psychic Hotline, he became a vulture and hovered over the smell of death. She had to turn away to keep herself from believing the lie.

The Haitians came and went without incident, and she didn’t disturb Donnie for days. But one of her cats stopped eating, and Donnie healed him. The washing machine broke, and Donnie fixed it. Her windshield wiper blades went bad, and Donnie changed them. Every night after dinner, he took out the trash.
“Is that all it takes,” she said one night in the driveway. It was dusk, the whole neighborhood quiet with the evening news, the horizon a deep shade of orange. “You take out the trash, and you’re some kind of saint?”

“I take out the trash for the sake of utility,” he said. “It has nothing to do with goodness.”

“Have you been reading self-help books again?”

“I am the river and the muskrat,” he said. “I am the wind through the trees.”

“No you’re not.”

“I am the alpha and the omega,” he said. He kicked a pebble into the street. “The beginning and the end.”

At work, in her cubicle, she wished for something different, she hoped for something new. She drank a cup of soup and ate a cup of coffee—that’s just how wrongheaded the whole upside-down world had become. Checking her email for perhaps the fiftieth time that day, she realized she was just the right, or wrong, kind of person who others expected to become a connoisseur of funny salt and pepper shakers, a lover of bathroom soaps in unexpected shapes, a joiner of book clubs. Everyone thought she was the kind of person who believed all the stories about women who gave birth to three-headed babies and men who seemed at first like Dracula’s wayward nephew, but became, through the woman’s love and affection, phlebotomists at busy inner-city hospitals. In the stories, the women said plucky things like, Isn’t it lovely? Isn’t it just the love-love-lovely? The women wore red lipstick, carried handbags that matched their shoes, and said to anyone who would listen they were happy and blessed. And when the magic happened, it was as if the curtains parted, the windows opened against the salty summer breeze. And the man was a monster. The man carried a dagger. He was a winged creature, a giant with hairy knuckles. He rescued you or ravaged you, didn’t matter which. In real life, the hero was a regular old conman like Donnie, pretending for the sake of his supper to like and do all the same things her father had liked and done, teaching keyboard lessons to unsuspecting elementary school students, wearing a velvet smoking jacket to bed, ordering rare and exotic plants from catalogs, and now waiting for her to come home.
CHRIS KAPPMEIER | After the Blizzard, 2010
24 x 30 inches | Oil on canvas
HONORABLE MENTION, 2018 LAUX/MILLAR POETRY PRIZE

BAILEY COHEN

Four Sonnets

after John

i.
Despite my invisibility my feet still feel heavy
when I move them across the mudded snow
all browned and made disgraceful like the snow
I am disgraceful I eat only when fed and never
for myself John taught me how to cut herbs how to
fold them unto themselves and chop finely
placing one hand on the back of the knife and rocking
back and forth he still sees me and I am
glad for this I am trying to appreciate more and more
to celebrate such small things like the way fresh sage
must float in the air like mistletoe when I swallow it gently
how dedicated & longing these plants must be
to not just awaken but rise even when brought down
first by wet snow then by my large and stumbling feet

ii.
Drifting dutifully now I hover like a bee surrounded
by a devoid of flowers surrounded by
queens glazed in honey John stirred honey into the mug
that I handed him full of vigor and what once was water
like a bee I limit my drifting to only short distances
I move from grass blade to grass blade and am celebrated
by no one for this effort I think in terms of menial tasks
& hexagons fuck whenever I want to & always
in an anthology of gardens and beautiful things I stand
triumphant & ashamed what use is recovery
when there is no home to return to I hover like
so many other beautiful hovering things but I still hover
Oh John I miss you something awful
your too sweet honey and springtime passivity
iii.

Exhausted by these longer days I am attempting to slow my heart rate taking quiet and tired breaths. I flicker like candlelight but smoke like something else feel myself becoming realer & stranger. Walk into sunlight and despite my expectations am nonetheless blinded I worry other people can only see my shadow glistening on sidewalk cement John I am becoming less of a ghost to myself it feels so lovely John I’m sorry that this feels so lovely but lately missing you has been wearing on me like the sky on something flightless lately I am sleeping for normal amounts of time but despite all this I remain terrifying John my remnants are all so terrifying.

iv.

By now John whispers to me through falling leaves or not at all my mother called told me her mother visited her in a dream I didn’t know what to say so I changed the topic didn’t tell her last night I dreamt I was a dream I liked it so much better to exist without consequence & only by moonlight to exist without worry now when I worry I worry about simpler things like if I’ve really changed or if I’m mourning properly I never know what skin is my own until I taste it oh John I dream of holding a lover’s tongue between my teeth of saying if you can hold me then you can hold me John I have done enough John I have tried my best John when my mother calls next I will say good morning I will say I’m doing just fine.
Meg Pall hung upside down with cigarette smoke oozing out her smile, but her bottom bunkmate Bridey Hatfield didn’t stir. Meg shook out her wet hair and whipped Bridey’s blanket like a horse tail to flies. Then she sucked down her Chesterfield and dropped it on Bridey’s sheets. Nothing. The spot smoldered. “Hey, girlfriend.” The spot flamed. “You’re on, like, fire.”

The other girls at The School for Wayward Girls hissed Stop but not too hard or loud, because no one wanted the Sisters to hear, but most everyone still bore the blows and burns that marked Meg’s special welcome to the dorm. Meg finally kicked her powerful legs in the smoke and dropped, light like a gymnast to the floor. She tossed the window key to one of her lieutenants, Lonnie Dahlcet, and ordered her to “air out the dump.”

Another girl, Hug Schyne, smothered the fire with her blanket. Everyone crowded around the sighing ash. The new girl, Bridey, wasn’t moving. Judy Schoetenstein pushed through the others and pulled back the smoldering top blanket. Underneath were knotted sheets bunched into human form. Lonnie gaped and said, “What the heck is that?” Everybody turned to Meg, who sneered and rolled her eyes to cover her own surprise. Then Bridey wiggled out from under the bed with a wet cloth on her face. She got to her feet unfazed by the hissing mess of her mattress and sheets and went to the empty bed in the back.

Meg dropped a big hand on Bridey’s shoulder.

“You’re my bunkmate, girlfriend. I like you. How’s abouts I show you the cans and cant’s tomorrow?” She waved to Judy Schoetenstein and said, “Take off the mattress on this bed and put it on Bridey’s, would you, girl?” Judy stared up at her with a hard smile. She was shorter than Meg but more muscular in the arms and shoulders. Meg
shook her head and warned, “Now. You know, Shots, if you don't, everything breaks down, and when you're not expecting anything ...” Meg made a little grinding motion with her fingers pinched together and said, “Hssss.”

Shots and the others broke away and another girl, Hayley Bendix, got Bridey a new mattress and sheets, underneath Meg as before. Everyone settled in for the night, Meg making calculations and plans for the new girl, and Judy stroking a sharpened screwdriver between her legs. The next day they would continue work on gutting and repainting the old infirmary and pantry behind the main building. The work was so miserable that the place was known as the Goddammit Pantry. The Sisters planned to make it into an office and storage facility for the groundskeeping staff tasked with maintaining the school’s two acres and four buildings, arboretum, greenhouse, tropical conservatory, observatory, band gazebo, and hedgerow maze.

The girl’s work was a hot and messy affair of crowbars, hammer claws, and sledgehammers set to decayed wood shelving, walls, doors, and floors. Everything screeched and groaned and wouldn’t come loose without a fight. All the girls wore coveralls, scarves, face masks and safety goggles. They were soon coated in gray dust and particles of dried paint.

It would not do for Meg Pall. She paid her usual body double, a sullen freckled girl named Rose Riehl, to work the infirmary for her. With all the girls in their coveralls and face masks and goggles, the Sister Crew Chief couldn’t tell the difference, and if she did, there were other ways to buy favors. While everyone else labored in the heat and dust, Meg was drinking gin, smoking Chesterfields or weed, and painting paintings in a secret closed-off section of the school’s boiler room.

2. Torch

At the next day’s end, the girls returned from work in the Goddammit Pantry to shower, eat, and relax. With the proper privileges, they could go the rec room to enjoy cards, dominoes, TV, visitors, or video games until ten o’clock, when they returned to the dorm for the night story. By the door was the battered blackboard, a permanent chalk fog over glances of old calculus and words. Across it were story titles themed by the Sisters. They said extemporaneous public speaking was an essential tool for character development. Each night, a different girl chose a different title. No written notes or preparations were allowed. The speakers were Maggie Killum, Ann Hodiak, Pearl Muldoon, Judy Schotenstein, Paulette Folgers, Haley Bendix, Connie
Kleen, Donna Solotarr, Sophie Pecaud, Nan Easy, Hugg Shyne. Jinny Bode was listed as the teller for that night, and then Bridey for the next, followed by Jessica Flack, Baby Novak, and, on Sunday, special day- and night-time stories, (a double feature) read by Meg Pall. Some of the titles were:

- My Best Friend
- My Favorite Food
- My Favorite Color
- What I Did on My Weekend
- My Most Unforgettable Teacher
- The Most Wonderful Time I Have Ever Had
- What is a Good Citizen?
- Public School or Home Schooling?
- Intelligent Design versus Evolution: Which Theory Do You Believe?
- Gay Rights, or Gay Wrongs?

The storyteller that night was a small jittery girl named Jinny Bode doing, The Most Wonderful Time I Ever Had. She mumbled through her nose. “Once I was a girl who wanted … who always dreamed of …” She stole a darting glance round the room and lost momentum and voice.

The bunks stirred with the low groans of girl predators aroused. Meg Pall hung over the edge of the top bunk and called out to Jinny, “C’mon, girl! Shake some bootie!” Everyone laughed, even Jinny. Even Bridey. Especially Bridey. Her laugh brayed on after the others fell silent. She got louder, and harder. She got guttural. She barked, snarled, snorted. She morphed into a humorless mechanical honker in some kind of time signature. “HE-haw. HE-HE-haw. HE-HE-HE-Haw-haw-haw-HE.” She left her bed and kept at it walking a slow circuit around each of the girls, her body swaying in rhythm with the sounds. “HE-HA. HE-HE-HAW—haw. HEEUH-HAUGH! HEEUGHH-HEE-HEE-HEE-haughhh-HAUGHHHH!”

Their stares were cold venom, but Bridey didn’t stop until she saw masks of fear. Her own face had gone purple, and her fine spittle misted the air. Meg ordered her to stop but she went on. “HEEUGH-HAUGHUGGGGH! HEEUGGHHUH-HAUKKHHHHUHH!” Bridey went to Jinny Bode, who paled and drew back. She leaned in close to Jinny and whispered in her ear. Jinny relaxed and smiled. From somewhere Bridey produced a torch and gave it to Jinny. Then she called out, “Lonnie, would you get the lights?” Out of the dark Lonnie said, “It’s gotta be Meg tells me what to do.”

Bridey laughed—a soft, girly giggle now. “That’s not true, Lonnie. You can help whomever you want.”
Lonnie sounded confused. “That’s what she says.”
Bridey said, “I think you misunderstood. I think Meg would want ...”
Meg yelled, “Jesus, Lonnie! Go ahead and do it!”

There was a long time when no one breathed. Lonnie’s voice was small and trembled. “I ... uhm ... yes, yes, Meg ... anything you say ...”
Then she laughed, and everyone else joined her. It was a goof. Bridey wasn’t afraid at all. Even Meg laughed, thinking, *they will pay for this. I swear. All of them will pay.*

Lonnie turned out the lights and Jinny returned to the center of the room with the flashlight the head sister Hortense, who was a Brit, insisted they call a “torch.” With her face lit spookhouse style from under the chin, she opened her mouth and channeled Bridey, who’d slipped in behind her on the floor, a cheap and obvious effect but unnerving in the dark. Meg was about to order them to stop and didn’t; she couldn’t afford any more humiliating challenges to her authority tonight.

“...The story of “The Most Wonderful Time I Ever Had” begins with who I am. Most of you know me as ‘Jus’ Jinny. Good old reliable Jinny. The one who’s always there, though somehow always superfluous. The one whose brain, whose soul doesn’t seem to be fully operational. A nice enough girl, you probably say. But still. You know? Would you want her as a friend? No? Yes? Maybe a kind of filler friend, like a nice, neutral filling in a group scene picture. Like a movie extra, like a person barely known, a liminal-friend-acquaintance-filler-extra kind of person, so our question tonight becomes, What kind of story about “The Most Wonderful Time I Ever Had” could such an illuminated yet liminal, indefinable girl tell? What kind of story about “The Most Wonderful Time I Ever Had” could such a liminal girl tell? What sort of liminal, liminal girl story is going down? What histories with words shivering states of liminality, shimmeringly in-between states sharp as gin—like an agonizingly protracted transporter sequence in the original *Star Trek*—could be told?“ Jus Jinny fumbled with the torch, then she went on: “I’m going to tell you a story of “The Most Wonderful Time I Ever Had.” When you hear this story, I want you to listen for certain words. These are keywords, like the numbers on a combination lock. When you hear what you think are keywords, hold them in your mind. If there are more than you can easily remember, you can write them down. And when you think you’ve heard all of the keywords, I want you to visualize them as beads on a string, or metal links on a chain, or silver and topaz or copper and tin or platinum or bronze or lead discs or tubes—things that are small and finely wrought or tooled or engineered. Next, imagine yourself putting this bracelet around the wrist of another. This may be someone in your memory—a childhood friend, or someone you know now, someone you love, or like, or even
hate or fear. Whatever feeling you have about them that would be a reason for wrapping this bracelet around the other person’s wrist. Again, maybe you hate this person and think of the bracelet as shackles. Or perhaps a subtle method of poison transmission, from the toxic metals to the body through skin contact. Or perhaps there is the residue of a hallucinogenic that the beads and tubes have been marinated or electroplated in ...

Jinny finally held the torch still and closed her eyes. There were a few hopeful claps that she’d finished. But she opened her eyes and continued: “So here the story seems to come to a screeching, squealing, jammed, steelwheel-on-steel-rail halt. Just a Jinny thunk-bolloxed tale of a sociopathologically, on-the-verge-of-a-binary-sexuality marriage imprisonment to male domination is all you think Jinny has to say, is what you’ve got, you’re thinking. Or, as the story, screeches its jammed-air brakes against steel-on-steel wheels on tracks: you think that this, this, right here, is the thing that’s going to get you to the end of this story intact? Because whoever you think you are, whoever you think I am, the screeching is coming to a manacled halt, as if putting the chains of your manacles along the metal tracks you speed on may be, you’re thinking, the only way to break free?"

Bridey nudged her arm from behind, and Jinny moved the torch off her face and up the wall. “Thus, the story, this story of a Jinny is really about the Liminal Girl, the All of Us In-Between, floating between states of being in order to recount how a magic bracelet of language can both empower and poison its recipient. A wedding bracelet as prison shackle, the Spanish wife as *esposa* and handcuffs, the object holding out both possibilities, like the ambivalent nature of all social designation.” Jinny paused. Someone sneezed. Bridey went on: “The Liminal Girl occupies not the single, married, unmarried, or the non-marital orientation of the Ms-ian state, but the Ur-Status, before and apart …” She took the spot of light up to the window to light a tree branch just beyond the glass. Then she shut it off, and they all slept, even Meg.

3. Flambé Everclear

The next day after work at the infirmary, everyone trudged back to the dorm to find the writing on the blackboard had been changed to:

THE SCHOOL FOR WAYWARD TALES

*The Flambé Everclear*

*The Battle of Fort Tylenol*

*The Goddammit Pantry*
While everyone was talking about the new titles on the blackboard and what they meant, Meg Pall came in, gin sharp as nettles in her breath.

In a slushy voice, she told their backs, “This is like when rogue programs attach to a link, like leeches sucking Bogey’s blood! You all got a little PUP on yer hands. That’s a Potentially Unwanted Program, hiccup. That’s what this Bridey of Frankenstein’s got up to, on you. You don’t know stuck till you can’t ever get unstuck from her, again.”

Judy Schoetenstein shook her head with, it seemed to Meg, a nauseating new look on her face: pity. But there was nothing to be done about it. About anything. It was freeing. She could say it all.

It was Bridey’s story night, but Meg tried to take the spotlight one last time. Bridey let her firewalk the walk.

“What do you call it,” Meg stood on her toes and threw out the words as if to a gathering of ghosts, “when all you want is to get a good look inside your search engine? What do you call it when the rows and rows of the squinting new all transitively reference the Third World’s hate for you, for all of you? What the hell is that?”

The girls sat silent in their bunks. There was none of the usual compulsory clapping, laughter, or cheers. Meg knew she was finished but pushed on. She went for her most splendid glish-goat hoopy-hard version of “The Flambé Everclear” right there, vivid on the spot.

It was a story of spunk and spit, of sexual threat and fighting back, of toothpicks and olives in molecular-model array down the bar of a skinhead neo-Nazi dive. She was marooned in this Oregon backcountry dump, penniless, far from home, angling for a rapeless ride out of there with nothing but a wacked wager on the famed and made-up on the spot bar game known as The Flambé Everclear.
She told the neo-Nazi shits that you start with a line-up five shot glasses long of Everclear, just close enough to link the glasses with an olive-toothpick-olive-toothpick-olive-toothpick tinker toy or molecular model array. The olives and toothpicks are stuck together in an up-and-down V pattern, so each glass has an olive with a toothpick rising out of the glass, with another olive and toothpick at the top, then another toothpick descending into the next glass and olive, and so on in a repeated fashion down the bar. All the toothpicks and olives have been soaking in Everclear, and all the shot glasses are filled to the rim with Everclear. You tell the barkeep to gather up, say, ninety toothpicks, and ninety olives, which will give you a few turns of Flambé, and you let them sit in the alcohol nice and long while you take cash bets on you and other players and try to slip a bill or two out of the wad into your jeans when they’re not looking.

After everybody’s had a shot or two and made what you hope are increasingly raucous and impulsive bets—for what, they don’t know—you explain the rules: first round, five shots of Everclear in a row down the bar, linked by the olive-speared toothpicks going in and out of the Everclear, linking all the glasses. First glass you drop a match in, Everclear catches fire, you try to blow the flame into the next toothpick and olive with the object of setting the next glass and then the next, on its own line of fire, on down the glasses until everything’s aflame. When you do it right, it burns blue and yellow and white until the end, when it’s red, and the last glass is black, just like the colors of your fucking flag. And it’s a win or lose. You don’t make it down the line, you’re out. First player that makes it downs the line, swigs the hot drinks, sets up the shots for another burn, (with one glass added), drops the match, blows. Last man standing with the most glasses and the longest line walks away with the money.

Meg had no idea if any of this was possible. The real trick of The Flambé Everclear was to get the jackboots jacked and drunk enough to slip out the back with money enough to buy a ride from the dim boy she’d promised to pay down the road. It didn’t matter anyway. Before Meg was finished with her story, all of the girls had left the hall and gone on to the showers, or to the dining room. Meg was alone. She was through with all of them. It was that punk Bridey who’d ruined everything, coming along when she did, just when Meg was solidifying total control of the girls and the dorm. It was precisely the wrong moment, because something delicate in her and in her hold over them was only half-formed. Bridey’s appearance set off a perfect storm of an insurrection, led precisely, from their point of view, at the right time, by the right person, and against the right leader or oppressor, which was, had been, incredibly, it seemed, her. Her? Or Bridey?
4. Campfire

Meg’s reign of terror was over, and in its place freedom and autonomy ruled, such as it was for wards of the state. There was elation in the beginning, a flowering of diverse voices in the bedtime stories and a spirited brio and camaraderie in the work crews. The old infirmary and Goddammit Pantry was gutted, reconfigured with drywall, plywood, drop ceilings, and new floors. It was given a new paint job and was soon occupied by the groundskeeping staff and their gleaming landscaping tools and machines. Sprightly progress was also made trimming the hedgerow maze, which slowly and inexorably became the focus of Bridey’s attention. Every day she made special requests to work with the groundskeepers, boasting an extensive knowledge of lawn maintenance, gardening, and tree-trimming. At first the Sisters and the groundskeepers were skeptical, but Bridey won them over with inexhaustible cheerfulness and impressive pruning, cropping, and seeding skills.

But what about the dorm? There was no more bullying or paying for protection. The bedtime story titles had been changed. Incredibly, the Sisters did not seem to notice or care. And the new bedtime stories continued without Bridey, or by special others properly trained by her, hidden behind the designated readers under a black habit pilfered from one of the Sisters. Over time it became clear that the power vacuum opened by Meg’s ejection would not be filled by Bridey. The hedgerow maze claimed all her energies. Some said Bridey could be seen wandering the passageways of the maze for hours at a time. Some said she trapped wild animals and cooked them over fires. It was rumored that a select few girls sworn to secrecy had been allowed into her inner circle to share the wild games and magic campfire tales far into the heart of the maze. Meg was surprised that she did not hate or even resent Bridey and the others. Maybe it was a relief: let others be the bosses and the guiding lights. Now she’d be left alone to drink, smoke, and paint. But the change in the dorm had larger, deeper consequences for her.

Meg no longer smoked, drank, or turned tricks with the townies or neo-Nazis. She was shunned by the others and left alone and decided this was what she deserved. She could not remember who she had hit and burned.

Since no one else would speak to Meg she had no choice but to ask slow Lonnie herself: The next morning the work crew was on their way into the maze to trim a new passage. Meg was walking alone behind the others where she was meant to be. Everyone was busy...
talking to everyone but her. The big question on (almost) everyone’s mind was what their next work assignment would be. Meg didn’t care. All she wanted was to be left alone, but some of the looks she’d gotten, especially from Judy Schoetenstein, promised there’d be trouble, maybe violence to come the next time they caught Meg alone. It was dangerous for her to go in the maze, and now she wanted to remember: who had she actually punched or burned? The question for Meg seemed urgent. She thought she should have at least kept some kind of record, written receipts for each blow or burn exacted. Yes, it was true she’d gotten a little rough with some of the girls. But even that was not necessarily such a bad thing. Who, she asked herself, had she actually hit-hit, and who had she just pushed in an especially forceful way? Wasn’t it true that it was mostly forceful pushing? Perhaps the term forceful push itself was too forceful. Maybe it was a kind of pushy push. A shovey push. Or, at most, a sort of pushy slap. A hard pushy slap, sometimes with her hand angled a little sideways. A kind of slap-hit-chop. An edged hit-chop so as to present a minutely harder, wooden-board, boney plane of a hand to the girls’ surfaces kind of slap. Yes, a slappy-boney-chopy-forceful push-slap. That was what she’d given most of them: Jinny Body, Paulette Folgers, Sophie Picaud, Nan Easy, and Hug Schyne. (Maybe Nan’s was a tiny bit more angled-hard; Nan had yelped and bruised more). Of course, there was Lonnie Dahlcet. Lonnie was hanging back from the others. Either she wanted to talk to Meg or, more probably, she didn’t want the others to see her breaking the ban on Meg. Meg called out to her. Lonnie stopped and stared. Then she turned her back on Meg and walked away.

“Lonnie! C’mon!” But Meg let her go. She was quickly out of sight. Meg walked on. Soon she was at the first big juncture of five different paths. There was no way to tell which one was Lonnie. She caught her breath and stood still, looking at the sky. The morning sun was now covered by creamy silver clouds. She heard some birds, and some hammering, and voices of many angry girls. They were getting closer.

Meg’s right arm suddenly hurt so bad she cried out and doubled over. She pulled off her sweatshirt. Just below her shoulder was a vertical set of four round burns, like the ones she had ground into the girls. Had she ground them into herself? And when? Would this earn her forgiveness? Would anything?

She sat down to wait for the work gang girls to come back. Their raucous voices and threats passed by on the other side of a hedgerow, and then receded into silence. Meg slid into a fetal curl and didn’t wake until dusk.
The wind bore the scent of burning wood, and a rope of sparks and smoke coiled into the sky. It had to be Bridey’s lost campfire, now only a couple of hedgerows away. The still night air brought their singing voices impossibly close, like a ventriloquist’s trick of a tiny woman, sweetly singing from inside your fist. You have only to open your hand, and the song will come clear.
Samantha Leigh Futhey

Fence Building

Brambles clenched fence rows, shielding dips in defense, entries for escape.

Always, I followed my father, his silent assistant, across fields of birdsong scythed from sky.

Utility knives and crimping wrench flicked and snapped wires taut, my father fusing a temporary fix. At night, beer-buzzed, we yoked exits for ourselves, restless slipknots mimicking stability. We wanted the ease of slipping under wires, the calf who disregards borders, claims the grass on both sides of the fence.

So easy to release knots, small strings we twisted in our fingers, tempted to tug everything we built and restored, loose. Isn't this what we thought we wanted? Picking the clover we covet without committing to the field?

But now, our newly drawn lines: stray messages and letters miles, months apart. Through fields at night, Milky Way the only light, a division of space we follow, interpret dark lines embedded
in our palms to lead everywhere except the point we meet. Cross out the prophecy marked on your hands, walk the studded path. There, I'll meet you, my feet scoured, cracked, but ready to stand all night.
solstice

the solid ice now like a table set for an eagle feast: fish guts pulled from one quick slit made by the thinnest knife

* 

entirely (if briefly) how light the raw day is. how patiently we must wait for the water to bring our rocks dead wood

* 

the thing that whispers to the feathers on a finch I do not know. the sun’s the same. the light is not. o yellow grow
A. MUIA

The Good Confession

Santa Gertrudis La Magna
Baja California
1842

In the uneasy morning light, Barros the gravedigger of Santa Gertrudis pushed his hand-hearse from the abandoned mission to the campo santo. He walked slowly, stopping to wipe his brow. He put a hand under his heart and felt it stutter, and he paused a moment before going on.

The cemetery was overfilled, bursting with the remains of the Cochimí—the aged and overtasked, the infant and near-infant, the robust and brokenhearted and accidented and diseased and wasted. The born—legítimo, natural, adulterino, bastardo; and the baptized—standard and provisional, privadamente, in articulo mortis, in periculo mortis. A few markers of stone leaned into one another. Men of stature lay in repose under flat table tombs. Mounds of bones congregated beneath. The forsaken campo santo was soundless in the wind.

Barros smoothed the half-hearted furrows where coyotes had been digging. A vulture wheeled above. He went to the corner of the campo santo and with a spade he worked into the earth, loosening the soil and inserting his fingers. Sifting the ground, he pulled up bones to make more room, for the long-dead priest had said everyone must have a consecrated burial at least once.

The bones disarticulated in his hands. He blew detritus from their fissures and placed them in the hand-hearse. A mist lay across his brow. He sat back on trembling shanks and the vulture alighted on the half wall, watching with a red-rimmed eye. Barros did not know whether it favored the bones or him.
When the cart was full, he hoisted it by the handles and rolled toward the charnel house. The hand-hearse groaned on wooden wheels and he eased it around cholla and creosote and old man cactus and giant cardón, the profane creaking trolley jumping over the rutted desert like a merchant at sale. In the cart, he carried the remains of three infants, or perhaps four. When he began sorting them, he would know.

Bones clicked and settled as he pulled up to the door. In days of old, a soldier had taken a skull from the charnel house and mortared it above the lintel. Without a jaw but somehow grinning at those who passed underneath. The moon had hidden itself, but across the arroyo he saw in the waning starlight the whitewashed stone of the deserted godhouse. Daily Barros had tended the luminary, that tiny burning light, though the Presence had long departed.

The sun came over the hill. There was no one to call to misa, no priest or soldier or people. The Angelus hung silent. But Barros removed his hat and began to sing:

\[\text{Ya viene el alba} \\
\text{rompiendo el d{\textdegree}} \\
\text{digamos todos} \\
\text{Ave Mar{\text{\`i}}a.}\]

The solitary voice drifted along the arroyo and across the empty corrals and into the mission of stone and out again. The refrain lay like a pall across the desert. Birds and the scrabbling in the brush fell silent. He pressed a palm to his chest. He felt the faltering rhythm, and rasping he turned to the cart and pushed the hand-hearse into the charnel house.

The ossuary was low and narrow, leaning sidelong upon its foundation and covered with an arched roof, like a wine cellar. It was windowless and lit by two tallow tapers glowing on either side of an iron cross with a figure of Jesucristo perpetually dying upon it. The floor was cured in blood.

On the ground, stacked in neat bundles like cordwood, lay the long bones—femurs and tibias and ulnas. On the lowest shelf, Barros placed the curved bones that would not stack easily, like those from rib cages. Smaller bones, such as carpal bones, and talus bones, he put on the second shelf. He fit the bones tightly, as a mason might do. On the top shelf, he arranged the skulls in rows like little catechumens, front-facing and staring toward the door with empty eye sockets darkened into round wells by the candle-glow behind them. Uncle,

As a young man, Barros had feared the bones. He snapped the spines of the dead when no one was looking, so they would not return to bother him. But in time, he kept company with them. Brittle parishioners in the dark sacrosanct chapel and he the lone unkempt elder at Lauds.

A few bones remained in the cart. Jumbled relics of the benditos difuntos. He reached for them but his heart floundered and he sat down. He found himself within a cloud. The ossuary disappeared, and his feet could not feel the ground. He felt he might float away and he clung to the wall of bones. No one about and only Jesucristo hanging upon his cross with the weight of iniquity tearing his hands.

When the cloud passed, he was sitting again upon the cot. He kept a flagon of wine beneath his bunk, and he brought the wine to his lips, good wine from the godhouse vines. He looked at no one with failing eyes. The cloud desired him. He did not know when it would draw him inside for good. Today, or tomorrow perhaps. His days were spent, and no priest had come or would come.

He looked to the bones. Faltering, he got to his feet and removed his hat. His legs gave way, and he sat for a moment and labored up again. He explained to the bones that he had something to say. He must finish before the cloud enfolded him. Perhaps he had no right to disturb them in such a way. But he hoped that they might listen.

Years ago at the godhouse, there lived a young plowman who carried many grudges. With his tools, he slashed the earth and thought of his enemies and studied passerby and made his terrible plans. Everyone feared falling beneath his vengeful eye. It was widely known that the plowman had poisoned his own father by grinding a tarantula into his food.

The priest was always working on him. Forgive, forgive, the priest admonished. Unforgiveness is a millstone no man can carry.

One morning, the plowman discovered that the priest was right. He could not rise from his bed. He had become too heavy, trapped under the weight of many grudges with his own guilt added besides. He had never confessed his many murders; he was afraid the soldiers would carry him away to hang. But as he lay there, crushed beneath the load of wrongs and scarcely able to breathe, he vowed that he would live a different way. He would learn to forgive.
The plowman never spoke of this vow. But with forgiveness the weight lifted, and he was able to rise again, and one day while out walking, he came upon a man named Peti Juan.

Peti Juan was a leader among the Cochimí. He guarded the sacred things that the fathers worked to destroy: capes of human hair, and tablets, and bull-roarers. There were many dead and dying in those days, and Peti Juan roamed the hills and found the sick and sore-covered and suffering. Though the priest always tried to arrive first, everyone called for Peti Juan, and at the risk of his life he attended them.

Peti Juan was a great protector of the people. For this reason, when he saw the plowman, he threw a stone and hit him in the face. Hey you killer, Peti Juan said. Why don’t you leave before something worse happens to you.

Whether Peti Juan intended it or not, the stone put out the plowman’s eye. The priest punished Peti Juan by putting him in stocks. But the people rejoiced in the plowman’s misfortune. For years, everyone had feared him. They didn’t know he was trying to live a different way.

The plowman went to see Peti Juan in the stocks. The people rushed between the two men, afraid the plowman would try to revenge himself. But he said only, The matter is settled. I forgive you for putting out my eye.

No one believed him. Everyone thought he was trying to make Peti Juan relax so he could kill him.

Peti Juan was sentenced to the stocks for three nights, and on the third night while everyone slept, a rabid skunk reeled by and attacked him. Everyone woke to Peti Juan’s screams. By the time the priest arrived, Peti Juan’s arms and legs were flayed open with bites.

The priest beat the skunk to death with a hammer from the forge. Peti Juan trembled with fear. Let me out, Father, he begged. But it was too late. The priest ordered that no one come near, and he tried to give what comfort he could.

In a week’s time, Peti Juan burned with fever. He jerked about and tried to free himself. The godhouse rang with his wails. The priest came to perform the offices for a dying man, but Peti Juan lunged at him, biting and straining. The Father had to bless him from a distance. With horror, the people watched Peti Juan’s misery—his contorted animal face—and the Cochimí wept for their good leader who had comforted so many but would receive no comfort himself.

In the night, the plowman came in secret to Peti Juan. The poor man lay raw and bleeding, twisted in the stocks. Spume dripped from his mouth.
—Kill me, Peti Juan whispered. Free me from my suffering. The plowman looked around. No one was about. The hammer that killed the skunk lay nearby. He picked it up and hefted it in his hand. Then he put it down.

—I have killed too many men, he said. And I have forgiven you.  
—Please, Peti Juan begged.  
—I cannot harm another man, the plowman said. I cannot bear any more heaviness.

He went away as Peti Juan seized and bit himself. The plowman did not come to him again. The anguished cries kept him awake for three days until Peti Juan lay dead, and even then he could hear the cries. The Father called for him to take the body and bury it in the campo santo.

The plowman thought continually of the way Peti Juan had suffered. He saw the monstrous face and the white rolling eyes. The screams followed him everywhere he went. He carried the weight of that forgiveness for many years.

Barros slept for a time and awoke trembling. One of the tapers had gone out. He felt his throat and the heart beat feebly on, and he got up. He relit the wick and the flame sprung up and settled back. Slowly, he straightened the bones; he worked at tucking them into place until weakness ranged over him again. He lay back, puffing shallowly like a fish, and took another swig of wine. A dark hand lay upon him, and he brushed it away and found it was his own.

When he could speak, he turned and addressed the bones again.

A woman named Manuela de casa served as the key matron of the godhouse. Everyone called her de casa because she lived in the monjerío, where the single girls were kept. Though she was old, she was also unmarried. After the death of three husbands, she had given up.

Manuela de casa watched everything those girls did. She went to bathe with them; she accompanied them to meals and to the misa and back to their beds. No one could even speak to the girls without the permission of the priest, who trusted their oversight to Manuela de casa.
One day she caught a man looking at her during mass. It was the stonemason, a man shunned by the people because he built boxes for the dead. He had not chosen this profession. But the priests forbade the people to burn the deceased according to their custom, and someone must handle the bodies. The people decided upon the stonemason, who was already something of an outcast.

The stonemason was younger than Manuela de casa by many years. His face was scarred from an accident in his youth, but his nose was straight and his teeth fine. Despite his reputation, Manuela de casa found herself looking at him during the prayers. She wondered what he intended. One morning when the priest turned around, the stonemason made a gesture with his fingers that no one could misinterpret. Manuela de casa flushed and led the girls back to the monjerío.

That night she heard him outside the window. Let me in, he called. Manuela de casa stole to the door and unlocked it. She stood there flaming like a young maid, standing in the moonlight under the high window. The girls were asleep. She could not believe her good fortune. She had been beautiful once.

But the stonemason said, I have come for the girl called Tomasa. I am burning for her, I can’t stop thinking of her.

Manuela de casa could see that all his overtures had been a pretext to gain entrance to the monjerío. But she had been alone a long time. Lie with me, she said, and then you can go to the girl.

—I’m not going to use myself all up on you, he said.
—You don’t have to use yourself up. Just hold me in your arms.

She stood her ground. She would not let him come to the monjerío again if he did not agree. She had her own little room, and he lay on her cot and held her, and she pressed his hand between her thighs. After a while she brought the girl to him.

Manuela de casa stood outside the door. She could hear Tomasa protesting. But soon the girl quieted, and the stonemason left before daylight.

He came again the next night, and lay with Manuela de casa, and then the girl. Manuela de casa could not believe the glow she felt. She thought the flame had died away long ago. But it hadn’t. She dreamed of the stonemason and his rough hands all day long—while teaching the girls to mend the Father’s robes, when bringing meals to the sick, and even during prayers. She went around with a little smile on her face.

As for Tomasa, she stopped laughing with the other girls. She sat in the misa and neither spoke nor sang. The priest asked if she were sick and she did not answer him. He told Manuela de casa to watch
Tomasa carefully. Many had died of sickness, and the priest was worried for her.

It went on like that for a few weeks. The stonemason came to the monjerío every night. Soon the girl began to wait for him. She got up when the others were sleeping and came to the door and listened for his footsteps. She stayed outside Manuela de casa’s room until they were finished, and then she hurried in to lie with him.

Soon he stopped visiting every night. It fell to twice a week or sometimes once. Manuela de casa and Tomasa waited for him together, but when he arrived he looked unhappy. Manuela de casa listened outside the door. She could hear Tomasa crying. The stonemason came out and Tomasa clung to him and he brushed her aside and left. Why have you driven him away? scolded Manuela de casa. She struck Tomasa atop the head and sent the girl crying to her pallet.

A week later, the priest called for Manuela de casa and Tomasa. When they came to his study, the stonemason was there. Manuela de casa looked nervously at the priest, but he turned to the stonemason and said, This girl likes you very much and wants you to be her husband. What do you say?

Manuela de casa could see the girl’s eyelids fluttering like hummingbirds; she seemed like she might cry in front of them all.

The stonemason looked at the girl. I do not like you, he said. He bowed to the priest and went back to his stonemasonry. The priest told Tomasa to choose someone else for a husband and come back and see him again.

Tomasa didn’t go back to the priest. She died the next month from shitting sickness and never had the chance to marry anyone.

Later the stonemason told Manuela de casa that he did like Tomasa. But he did not love her. He felt it was best to set Tomasa free to marry someone who did. In truth, he said, it was Manuela de casa that he had come to love.

Manuela de casa was filled with joy. She had been carrying a terrible burden for what she had done, ruining a girl just so she might feel that old glow again. But the love of the stonemason would lift her spirits. Now he would come to comfort her.

The stonemason said he would not. Because of the suffering he had caused the girl, he vowed that he would seek love no more. Manuela de casa wept and tore at him, but he would not relent. To make such a vow seemed a foolishness to Manuela de casa. Now everyone was alone.
Barros sat before the bones. A bat shuffled along the ceiling and disappeared into a shadowed corner. He took another sip of wine. A fog was descending and he gripped the cot. But it was only the wine.

The meter of his heart swelled and waned. Unrelenting, the skulls gazed at him. He looked obliquely at the Christ who had forgiven all but left men behind with such heaviness. The cloud hovered around him. He held up his hand to stave it away and turned to the bones and spoke again.

By this time another priest had come. The people called him Father Blacksnake because of the darkness of his robe and because he was fond of the whip. The priest did not understand why the people should take offense at this, for he flogged even himself.

Father Blacksnake had but one follower, the man who served as sacristan. This man had no wife or children. The people looked upon him as the source of every evil and trouble. Twice they had driven him out, but he always returned, for he had nowhere to go.

He kept company only with the priest. He felt sad that his sole companion was a blacksnake who caused the suffering of others. But he stood beside the Father as he made his mysteries. The priest would gently beat his breast and say, Mea culpa, mea culpa. The sacristan alone understood this.

One night, Father Blacksnake came to the sacristan’s room. In the darkness the priest knelt and confessed that he was afraid of the people. He had whipped them mercilessly, and now he feared the punishments they might think of, like hanging and dragging and cutting. The priest was ashamed of this fear and begged the sacristan not to speak of it, which he never did.

—There is forgiveness for you, Father, the sacristan told him.

The priest wept and whispered, Perhaps on the day of judgment, God will have mercy.

But he continued his days in fear. Vow that you will stand with me if trouble comes, he begged. And the sacristan made that vow, for he knew what it was to be a man despised.

Not long after, Father Blacksnake died unexpectedly. It was night. Nothing holds the people like a horror, and the Cochimí crowded into the chapel to see the dead priest. A late fog drifted in; it moved like smoke around their feet, into the godhouse and out again. Candles flicked shadows onto the Father’s face. He seemed at first to smile, and then to furrow and frown, and children watched from the door with interest.
The sacristan arranged the Father’s black cloak over the white tunic. He made the stiff hands to clasp a little cross. He placed the priest with head toward the altar as the Father had once instructed him should anything happen. But without the priest, the godhouse lost its fearsomeness. All the mystery had departed with the man.

The people grew restless. They came to the corpse and pushed the table because they knew the Father wanted to be arranged in the other direction. They began pulling the robes from the priest. For years the Father had forced them into abrasive garments. Stripping the priest seemed a fitting thing to do.

The sacristan remembered the Father’s fear, and the vow he had made. He tried to put himself between the priest and the people, but they fetched the blacksnake. They whipped the sacristan into the corner. They whipped Father Blacksnake. Soon the priest lay denuded and hanging sidelong off the table with his head near the ground. The sacristan crawled over and hoisted him up.

The people pulled out some of the priest’s hairs. Father Blacksnake himself had taught them this, the power that resided in the corpses of religious men. Soon the Father was half-bald on one side.

Some of the people began to leave. They had no interest in waiting for another priest. But others held a cold justice in their eyes. From that moment, they decided labor would end. No one would make bricks, tend the gardens, weave, or look after animals. They talked of how many cattle each person should be able to eat. They talked of sex. The monjerío doors were pried open; no longer would young maidens be locked away.

They spoke of all who died of shitting sickness. The priests repaid us badly, the people said. For all the work we did. Who built the godhouse? We did, with our sweat and blood. We paid with our lives.

They looked at the corpse and the sacristan saw a dark notion forming. He lifted Father Blacksnake’s naked body. Drops of blood fell from the sacristan’s face onto the priest. Now the Father is dead, the sacristan said. There nothing more to be done to him.

Trembling, he took a step. He moved like a bier through the sea of people. They murmured against him and he hurried on, struggling with the cadaver across the arroyo to the cemetery, looking back the whole while. Hastily he buried the priest in the campo santo. He had no time to wrap Father Blacksnake in so much as a cowhide. The grave was very shallow. But he did his best to speak what words he could remember from the Father: Quia apud te propitiátio est. Requiéscat in pace.

Now the priest was safe in the ground.
The sacristan returned to the godhouse to gather his things and leave. But the people were inside. He hid beneath the window and listened to their complaints. Some felt that justice had been satisfied, for the priest was dead and they themselves were living. Others cried that all should remember the many who perished because of the fathers.

Then the sacristan heard a man boasting to the others, saying, When we get up from here, we’ll go to the campo santo and get that priest.

The sacristan stole away from the wall. He ran to the storehouse and filled a jar with lamp oil, as much as he could carry. He took it to the campo santo. He knelt at the shallow grave and began digging. He dug until he felt the priest’s hand. He pulled the Father from the earth and the priest’s mouth and eyes were filled with dirt. I am sorry, Father, he said.

Near the campo santo were stone pits for curing hides. The sacristan put the priest into one of them and covered him with lamp oil and set him alight.

The smell was terrible. Black smoke and ash rose like grainy incense into the dark red sky. Cruelty and love and fear drifted upward—the sum of all the priest contained. The sacristan added wood to the blaze: the skeleton ribs of great dead cacti and what kindling he could gather. The fire burned hotter.

He tended the flames throughout the night. At dawn he heard men tramping along the arroyo and cracking through the brush. They looked into the pit and shielded their faces from the smoke and covered their noses from the stench. The priest was black and already breaking up.

—This is the wasp’s stinger, the sacristan declared. The end of it.

The men laughed. You’ve saved us a lot of trouble, they said. Who could think of a better justice? Now there is nothing left of the priest to ascend to his god.

Then the sacristan remembered how the Father had told them of the great rising of bodies on the final day of the world. And dismayed, he realized that in vowing to protect the priest, he had barred him forever from the day of mercy.

With a cry he pulled brush from the flames and threw handfuls of dirt upon the priest until the fire lay extinguished. But it was too late. The Father was all earth, sand, and ash. The sacristan stood with smoldering hands and one by one the men went away satisfied.

After that, the Cochimí abandoned the godhouse. They went to their relatives in the hills, free to live in the accustomed way. The sacristan was the only one left. Because of what he had done, he
vowed never to leave the Father. He would stay and keep him company. And if the great rising of bodies should ever occur, he promised not to rise with them.

Barros sat in the charnel house until the sun hung low over the land. Carefully, with moments of resting, he placed the remaining bones among their brethren. He stood before them hat in hand. When he could stand no longer, he sat before them. Once, the cloud passed over and examined him. He sang beneath it and awoke in a dream singing. The candles drew into themselves, and in the darkness he watched the bones. Unrelenting, the skulls regarded him. No pardon was offered.

He waited through the watches of the night. But the spirits were gone to the place they had gone. At last, in the absence of anyone, he spoke over himself as he remembered: Ego te absolveo in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti. And he blessed himself.

He was surprised to feel at first one vow lift from his chest. Then another and finally a third. He put a hand to his heart, and a lightness lay upon him.

He gathered himself and extinguished the tapers. He left the bones and went out. Under the moon he walked slowly toward the campo santo, and twice he sat down before going on. In his pocket he carried a handful of shells.

He passed through the little gate, and tottering he placed three shells upon the grave of Peti Juan, and three upon the place where Manuela de casa lay. He placed three shells upon the grave of the girl Tomasa and again over the ashes of Father Blacksnake. Three shells he guarded in his hand.

In every campo santo there is a place for the innocents, a separate space for the very young. Bells are rung not mournfully, but joyously, for an infant has died in purity. A cross is carried, but without its staff, for a life incomplete.

Barros, now having made a good confession of his heaviest sins, went to the grave he had prepared for himself. It was a fine grave, empty of other individuals, a spacious place in the corner of innocents. He spoke again over himself. Quia apud te propitiatio est. Requiéscat in pace. He placed the remaining shells beside the grave. He sat upon its edge and watched the moon yield its place to the sun, and he looked forward to the sight of another sky.

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**Dāshaun Washington** is a Massachusetts native/Dallas resident. He is the 2018 winner of the Robert Bone Memorial Poetry Prize. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Borderlands, Tinderbox, Reunion, Bluestem*, and *Mistake House*, among others. Dāshaun is currently pursuing a BA in Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Texas at Dallas. You can follow Dāshaun on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook @DashaunDub.

**John Sibley Williams** is the editor of two Northwest poetry anthologies and the author of nine collections, including *Disinheritance* and *Controlled Hallucinations*. An eleven-time Pushcart nominee, John is the winner of numerous awards, including the Philip Booth Award, *American Literary Review* Poetry Contest, Phyllis Smart-Young Prize, Nancy D. Hargrove Editors’ Prize, Confrontation Poetry Prize, and Vallum Award for Poetry. He serves as editor of *The Inflectionist Review* and works as a literary agent. Previous publishing credits include *The Yale Review, Midwest Quarterly,*

**Gregg Williard**'s fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and visual art have been published in The Collagist, Diagram, decomP, Infinity’s Kitchen, Slag Review, and Your Impossible Voice, among others. He is presently the subject of a one-person drawing exhibit at the Ohio State University Lima campus gallery in Lima, Ohio. He lives and works in Madison, WI, where he coordinates refugee services and teaches ESL at the nonprofit, Literacy Network. His students are from Afghanistan, Bhutan, Iraq, Syria, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Pakistan. He also produces and hosts the spoken-word radio show “Fiction Jones” on WORT community radio (wortfm.org). A novel featuring his protagonist, Bridey Hatfield, is forthcoming.
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