# Table of Contents

## Art

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tisha Weddington</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>World of Top Hats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Will of the Wisp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Winterbird</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>74</td>
<td>Velvateen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>78</td>
<td>Heartland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>81</td>
<td>Miss Fix It</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Fiction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nickalus Rupert</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Deadman’s Island</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D.R. Glass</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>This Would be the First Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janice Obuchowski</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Lily Among the Thorns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Gillette</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>Our Span of Three</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Poetry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tacey Atsitty</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Marked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Last Night, Bleeding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christopher Citro</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Waves Frozen Like Wrinkles on Dog Skin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Dear Diary Where Is Everybody</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Light at the Beach a Thousand Doctors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author</td>
<td>Page</td>
<td>Title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alycia Pirmohamed</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Nerium oleander</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Air Plants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diannely Antigua</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Diary Entry #30: Regression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally Rosen Kindred</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>If I Said</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Coda: The Night Glass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zeina Hasem Beck</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Notes on Lipstick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Perrier</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>Epithalamium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Kristin Anderson</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>I Hold my Crown Like a Gun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hilary Vaughn Dobel</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>Year One</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>76</td>
<td>Two Weeks Later</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca Bornstein</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>While I Sit by the River at Lunchtime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Paul Martinez</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>Maybe Next Sunday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Everwine</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>For Ava, in the Coming Days</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Book Review**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cassie Mannes Murray</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Contributors**
WE HAVE STATED going back to our first volume in 2010 that we believe art must challenge as well as entertain, and this issue does just that. With the release of *Raleigh Review* Volume Nine, Number One (2019), we are celebrating our ninth anniversary, and Geri Digiorno’s cover image *Venus Over the Moon* sets the tone for the time in which we published this issue.

Some of the universal themes this issue’s poetry brings us to are historical oppression and silencing, the distinct complications of romantic love and marriage, the challenges and hard-won joys of parenting, and both political and emotional examinations of the female body. The themes of the stories include though are not limited to coming of age during adulthood and the different shapes and manifestations that love takes and that we give to love.

We are so grateful for the ongoing support we receive, especially as we are planning even more programming in order to get to our tenth year. None of us knows what the future holds, though one thing is certain, far too many in the lay population just do not understand the concept or the purpose of a literary magazine, so here’s one for all to check out. Don’t be frightened, the work in *Raleigh Review* may sting a little as we challenge you to do better by your fellow humans, though it certainly does not bite.

While the quality of poems and stories and visual art remains intact for this issue, you may notice our presentation has improved even more as we’re finally moving into the 21st century with InDesign software, thanks to our new layout team.

After the last issue was sent in to Sheridan Press for printing, we realized it was time to reward our staff members who do the work on the magazine, so in addition to increasing the amount we’re paying to our
poets, writers, and visual artists by a third, we are finally beginning to take small strides to help reward our telecommuting and highly skilled editorial staff who are based throughout the country and at times the world.

Over the last year, we helped launch *Lou Lit Review* at Louisburg College, and they are planning the release of their second issue, due out in 2019. And we are now assisting in the launch of two other magazines at universities: one here in America and one abroad in England.

We at *Raleigh Review* look to promote accessible works of experience that are intellectually and emotionally complex. *Raleigh Review* is a 501c3 nonprofit that does not ask for donations. We'd rather our supporters subscribe to our magazine, and we hope you will.

Rob Greene, editor & publisher
We ripple into sediment, they wrote, as though we are greys staggering the river bottom; milky hard and thrown about, not stained pebbles pieced together in the form of beats, curved and edged by strikes. Our light catches even in shards, from gravel. A channel sparks face and heart: they think charred skin and charcoal don’t shine. For a time ignited with wool tinder, this all leaves a deep hue isolated. It’s just now sunrise and silt sinks flint that once took the shape of a heart. Here we lie like pores of an arrowhead, awaiting the day when stone turns to water.
CHRISTOPHER CITRO

WAVES FROZEN LIKE WRINKLES ON DOG SKIN

A second or so for humans. That’s our delay. The world could cough out of existence and none of us would know for a second. We’d go on chopping kale as if it still existed. The flies catching on first, remaining mum. This is how it ends—us staring at the flies wondering what their problem is. Custard pie. Ginger snaps. Sweet tea. A bowl of ice cream. Your bright eyes. I’m listing what’s going away. The last time we spoke I said I love you twice. Once because I do. Again to see if you did too. Phones nowadays don’t click when we hang up but should. The silence after the after-silence deafening. The kitchen clock ticks like soldier feet on a bridge, the kind made from grating. It’s holding us up but we can see right through.
DEAR DIARY WHERE IS EVERYBODY

Since we packed up and moved this summer—oh what joy, what rapture—my left elbow won’t stop hurting. The cat just rubbed against it and I felt a deep soreness with a soft wonderfulness on top. It didn’t make the pain go away. They stayed together and my brain took a subterranean voyage like when you read a fairy tale that’s disgusting and beautiful, the way they used to be and the good ones still are. Most satellite dishes point south, he told me standing below several pointing north. One faced west. I didn’t have the heart to say anything. When I left this time I actually called back to the kids, Don’t grow up too fast! One of them—our favorite—had drawn a dragon for you. Does she want it with fire shooting out? she asked. You bet your ass, I said—but not in those words. I texted you the photo right then, with her little arm across the top edge, obscuring a second unfinished dragon she didn’t want to spoil the good one. What I’m trying to tell you is plant. Plant the bulbs if you want to. I don’t have a bulb plan in my head other than come spring a miniature circus of colorful membranes beside our door. Folks who visit should know the kind of people we are and get pollen on themselves. Over drinks later you and I will pick each gold speck off their arms with our eyelashes.
TISHA WEDDINGTON | WORLD OF TOP HATS, 2018
36” x 48” | OIL ON CANVAS
We’ve been to the beautiful place and seen what the beautiful people were doing and tried to join in the best we could. The sun fell against the sea and a hundred hands rose to lift it into the sky again. The hands supple, touchingly small against an ample underbelly all yellow and hot and broadcasting. Evenings birds lowered from clouds to drop morsels of warm food into our upturned mouths. Washed down with sips of ice-chilled wine the color of bees. Nearby fences high, made with exotic bushes and steel wires. We played no music nor listened to any because we were music and clapped as the sun set when it was supposed to. I lie. The sun clapped for us. Later in our alone place, I rubbed green gels into your belly. Careful not to press myself into your pain, I blew cool air from my sky-like cheeks, looking like a god in a painting then. You looked like yourself. The air conditioning clicked on like a child telling a beautiful lie to another child in another room of the house.
Toby and Lick come ashore in a Boston Whaler crewed by all four daughters, three of them Lick’s. Sixteen years since Toby set foot on Deadman’s. Without Clifford to help exaggerate it, the island reminds Toby of unleavened bread. When they camped here as boys, the territory seemed endless, but now it’s little more than another Florida sandbar with some trees.

“Bowline,” Lick says. His daughter Lindsay grabs the line, jumps overboard, and hauls them to the shallows.

Lick wears his hair close-cropped now, and his eyes never stop moving. His belly is starting to moon, like Toby’s. They’ve got dad bodies. Lick says he’s a firefighter, and although he must’ve saved many homes and forests, Toby can’t help thinking that the old Lick would’ve wanted
the flames to win. Lick takes short sips from the same can of Schweppes he’s been nursing all afternoon. It’s like he hopes it’ll turn into something more potent.

Earlier this month, Hurricane Dennis sucked away enough of the island’s north end to expose a few six-sided coffins, which made the evening news and spurred talk of restoration. Toby read the article three times. Only after the third reading did he scan the Life section. There was something about a funeral service for Clifford, who’d died in New York the Friday before. Heart attack. There was a picture of Clifford, his face severe, his body impossibly thin. Toby wouldn’t have recognized him.

Between bouts of sobbing, Toby had wondered if Lick would attend the service. Six beers later, Toby was still weeping, still wondering. He looked up Lick’s number and called, using the coffin story as pretense. Lick had read the article, too, so they talked about the island. Lick sounded like he’d either been sleeping or crying. They hung up without ever mentioning the funeral.

Here they are, restored to their boyhood stomping ground. True, Toby still hates himself for how they treated Clifford when they were boys, but this place means more to him than guilt. There’s still the question of what it was they’d seen all those years ago. Toby owns whole shelves of DVDs on paranormal investigation. He knows they’re total bunk, but lately, he likes the idea of a mystery. He’s no longer sure that there’s a rational explanation for what happened.

After they’ve unloaded the boat, Toby’s daughter Paula follows Lick’s daughters into the bay. The girls snorkel the island’s brick reefs with dive masks and candy-red swim fins. They track fish whose names neither man knows, and before Toby and Lick can locate one of the island’s weird metallic rocks, the girls beg to see the campsite their fathers used when they were boys. It’s not much—just a sandy clearing with a pile of bricks where previous campers have made fires.

Toby watches the sunset with Lick and their daughters, whose faces are sunburned, except for the pale rectangles their masks covered. Toby and Lick make a fire from fallen limbs while the girls gather shells from the shoreline. He and Lick work quickly, speaking little. As soon as Lick has okayed the fire’s burn rate, Toby sets a pot of stew among the coals.
Lick sits in a collapsible chair. He’s got chocolate and marshmallows, but no graham crackers, so he starts folding the sweets between slices of white bread and passing them to the girls. Paula doesn’t complain. She thanks Lick and toasts her jerry-rigged s’more over the coals like the other girls.

“I would’ve brought a case of Modelo,” Lick tells Toby, “but I’m back on the wagon. Hands tied, doors locked.” He sips his ginger ale.

Toby has a few Modelos stashed at the bottom of his cooler, but he’s not going to mention them. He has forgotten very little about the camping trip they took as boys, but as soon as the woodsmoke finds his nose, the details take on added layers. In memory, there’s nothing prior to being there on the island. It’s as if he and the other boys sprang from the ground.

**THEY STOOD** on the sandy part of the island and struggled to assemble Clifford’s impossible-to-assemble tent. Clifford swore that the island was named Deadman’s because it was the site of a Civil War massacre. Earless Confederate ghosts still roamed the island, he said, and man, were they pissed. He told them to expect a ghost hunt after midnight, and nobody was allowed to wuss out. Toby couldn’t take Clifford seriously, especially when he went around shirtless. Clifford was built sturdier than Lick, but he ate crème-filled Debbie cakes by the box. His upper body jiggled as he spoke.

They were in sixth grade that year, thrust into the uneasy gap between childhood and whatever came next. Though they’d been to Deadman’s plenty of times, it would be their first overnight trip, and as soon as his feet touched shore, Toby felt a few degrees closer to the adult side of the chasm. The boys had been through grade school and Cub Scouts together, but lately, they’d been exploring new sets of questions: Which girls on the volleyball team stuffed their bras? Could you use plastic wrap in lieu of a rubber? Was the actress who played Kelly Bundy stupid in real life? Then, there were itchier questions, like whose family had the most money. Toby knew the answer. Clifford’s had plenty, whereas Toby’s had gone into debt in order to appear like they had plenty. By all accounts, Lick’s family didn’t have shit.

Distracted by Clifford’s Civil War talk, Toby struggled to guide his
fiberglass pole into its sleeve. The temperature had dropped, and he smelled rain. Lick was first to complete his side of the tent, so he pulled a silver Zippo from his pocket and went about torching beach ants. Between ants, Lick said Clifford was wrong—the island’s name was inspired by the death of a single World War I pilot who was shot to pieces in one of those old-timer planes, and even though the pilot bailed, and even though his parachute did its job, he died of blood loss. With the pilot’s final breath, Lick claimed, he spat a general curse on pretty much everybody who’d ever crossed him, starting with his dog, Aileron. Lick snapped the lighter closed, as if to underscore that his was the truer account.

The landscape was tuned to a certain frequency of recklessness that was absent from the world of coaches and curfews. With no plumbing and no roadways, Deadman’s was unfit for extended habitation, though there were structural remnants from a time before erosion problems. The shores were salted with old bricks and barnacled bits of masonry. Pensacola Bay made a boneyard of Spanish galleons dating back to the seventeenth century, and one of these ships had foundered just off the island’s western shore. The doubloons, wine bottles, and iron rivets had been sacked by archaeologists long ago. Near the heart of the island, there were metallic rocks with bubbles trapped inside. There were stunted oaks and palmettos. There were fiddler crabs and herons, and Clifford had once seen a confused-looking beaver push through the sea oats and kick into the bay.

“Ghost weather,” Clifford said. He loaded his tent pole into its sleeve and pointed at a storm cell over the bay—one of those convective monsters that would toss lightning when it damn well pleased. They had no use for rain. The only possible redeeming feature of a bad weather system was if it decided to do an act of spectacular violence, like cleave open a nearby tree with lightning or drop a snout-like funnel to drink up the bay water. Their witnessing such a thing would make them instant middle school heroes, especially if they were lucky enough to get hurt.

“We never saw ghosts before,” Lick said.

“We were never here past sunset,” Clifford said.

“There’s cactuses out there,” Lick said. There was a defiant trill in his voice that Toby hadn’t heard before.
“You jagoffs are wrong about the name,” Toby said, threading his tent pole. “This place was used to quarantine a bunch of lepers.” It was tough not to feel a little superior. The previous weekend, he’d eked out a spot on the all-star soccer roster and groped the chest of regional tennis champ Randi Templeton.

Clifford was about to chime in when the sky strobed bright green. Lightning arched over the bay and tagged the roof of the Civic Center in Pensacola. They were already sinking tent stakes when the first volley of thunder hit.

Toby’s belly feels greasy with stew. There’s a gray slush of coals where the fire used to be. Lick makes a noncommittal jab with a length of bamboo, and the coals flare a deep, hissing red. Something oddly comforting about this gesture. The fire needs more wood, but Toby wants to keep remembering. He isn’t ready to talk, isn’t ready to know Lick all over again. The girls have wandered down to the shoreline, where they sculpt sand palaces in the moonlight and stud them with seashells. Once they’ve given their kingdom a Parisian-sounding name, they stomp it flat. Paula seems to be getting along with Lick’s daughters, and this terrifies Toby.

“Face it,” Lick says. “You’ve been wrong before.”

“Meaning what?”

“The island was quarantined for yellow fever, not leprosy.”

“But that’s got nothing to do with the name. This was a careening ground. They tied the ships to an anchor point. Called it a deadman.”

“That can’t be right.”

Toby can tell from the concussed look in Lick’s eyes that he’s remembering, too. Farther along in the dream, maybe, closer to the end, but he’s in there. He’s weaving memories, trying to make them connect, trying to think of something meaningful to say.

After the storm had passed, the boys walked to the south side of the island. They lunged from the island’s banks and knifed deep into the bayou until their toes broke the silt layer some nine feet down. Near bottom, the water was so cold that their joints ached. When they grew tired of jumping, they leaned against the canal’s sharp decline and rested.

“Were Randi’s boobs nice and squishy?” Lick asked Toby.
“They just feel like fat,” Toby said. He couldn’t help staring at Clifford’s flabby chest and skewed nipples. “It’s not that big a deal. Think of it like grabbing somebody’s leg meat, except way better.”

Lick giggled. Clifford hooted. Toby hadn’t realized his little grope session amounted to something like a social miracle to the other boys. He would never tell them the truth: that it was Randi who forced his trembling hands to her chest, and that his heart was boiling so violently, he nearly puked all over her favorite tank top.

Lick let the current drag him a few yards. The squall had dumped tons of rainwater into the bay, and that payload now surged through the channel, cold and clean tasting. Toby wished he could suggest a skinny dip, but what if somebody called him a fag? Theirs was a delicate performance, and the slightest misstep could win you many months of abuse at the lunch table. Toby pulled his drawers down halfway. Felt sort of good, like he was wearing silk boxer shorts, but it wasn’t the full experience.

Clifford climbed ashore and began stalking the weeds for fiddler crabs, his body pale and glossy. He returned with cupped hands and did a header into the canal, causing a lopsided splash. He surfaced after nearly a minute, opened his hand, and prodded the crab.

“They pass out when you take them down past five feet,” Clifford said. “But they always wake near the surface.”

Clifford was good for one thing: whenever Toby found himself stuck on a hard level of the latest video game, Clifford had the solution.

“Check it out, virgins,” Lick shouted. He wore his swim trunks on his head, and he lay with his belly pressed to the bank. “Try dragging your long-dong in the sand. It’s the greatest.”

For a moment, it galled Toby that Lick had the guts to pull such a stunt and with no fear of name-calling. But here, too, was a chance for leverage.

“Watch it, now,” Toby said. “You might excite the Cliffster here. He might mistake it for a hotdog.”

“Clifford Stifford, fattest shark the bayou ever saw!” Lick was still humping the sand.

“Instead of chum they throw him Swiss Rolls.”

It went on like that.

By sunset, the boys already had a knee-high pile of firewood. They paused to watch the bay water swallow the sun. Toby said the sunset
looked like a flashlight aimed through pink Jell-O. Lick said the clouds
looked like a mist of jet fuel photographed mid-combustion. Clifford
muttered that the clouds didn’t look like much of anything. He had his
sketchbook out, and he was shading a series of ghosts and werewolves
with the edge of a charcoal pencil.

“Waste of talent,” Toby said. “Why not draw us some naked women?”

Lick dredged the cooler for one of the Modelos he’d stolen from Clif-
ford’s uncle. The old man didn’t drink beer, but he liked to keep some
around for visitors who did. Toby had met him once. Tough, for an old
rich guy. Hard blue eyes that had called mortar shots against the North
Vietnamese. Clifford didn’t seem to have a clue that they were drinking
from his uncle’s stock. He must’ve figured Lick’s choice in beer was a
wild coincidence.

“I’m more of a Coors man,” Toby said.

“Coors,” Lick said. “That’s Spanish for redneck pisswater.” His fa-
ther’s favorite joke. “Real men drink O’Doul’s.” He didn’t wink or smile
when he said the O’Doul’s part.

Toby knew what recovery meant. He’d heard how Lick hardly recog-
nized his old man when he finally came home sober. For the first few
days, Lick had been convinced his dad was an alien replicant.

“O’Doul’s is killer good,” Toby said. Alcoholic parents were low-hanging
fruit, and he’d only stoop so low.

“O’Doul’s,” Clifford said. “That’s for truckers who chew Skoal and
beat their wives.”

Toby looked at Lick, whose head pitched at an odd angle. Accus-
tomed as he was to doling out insults, he often seemed surprised to be
on the receiving end.

“Cliffster shows his harsh side,” Toby said.

“Stifford hath spoken,” Lick said.

Toby could smell beer fumes across the fire—a damp, footy smell.
He didn’t think he’d ever come to enjoy the flavor. He feared that in
many ways, he was more like Clifford than he cared to be. Often, what
he craved most was a Capri Sun and a plate of his mother’s perfectly
spiced Spaghetti Surprise.

Clifford cranked open a can of Dinty Moore beef stew and parked it
over the coals. Another can of Modelo made the rounds. The bottom
layer of stew scorched, but they ate it anyway. The beer and toxic stew made a powerful combination. The boys weren’t drunk so much as contaminated. The only defense Toby’s brain could muster was to constrict until it felt like a brick dangling from a length of floss. Whenever his neck shifted, brick knocked against bone. The other boys voiced similar complaints. Even so, they let those bricks swing for a good while before they laid off the beer.

**LICK CRACKS OPEN** a fresh can of ginger ale. Toby can see all four daughters’ heads, but their bodies are lost in a sea of sleeping bags. They’re in that deep and dreamless sleep that comes after too many hours in the sun.

“Whatever happened to Randi Templeton?” Lick asks.

Some stars are out, but most are lost against the glow of city lights to the north. Toby lies on his back. He can’t seem to capture the childhood sensation that up is down, and at any moment, he might tumble into blackness.

“She married Trent Gibbons,” Toby says, “from the debate team. He’s a lawyer now, and she runs a fancy restaurant.”

Toby has married, and he has divorced, only to conclude that his love life peaked in middle school. He runs a shop that makes sports trophies and plaques, mostly for kiddie teams. Paula is his umbrella against social activity. He only leaves work for youth soccer matches, PTA meetings, or dentist appointments. Or badly misguided voyages to a past that wants no part of him. He knows this, yet here he is.

“Funny how things turn out,” Lick says.

“I never got over her,” Toby says. “I know that sounds crazy, but I never did.”

**CLIFFORD WAS FIRST TO NOTICE** that one of the night’s stars had hopped from its socket and headed north at killer speed. Lick told him he was goddamn delirious, but after watching for a while, Toby saw that, yes, the little white star speck was headed for Canada. In less than a minute, it cleared the horizon and passed from view. Toby had never felt more miniscule, or more alone, but Clifford grew chatty. He said that extra-terrestrials did exist, and now they had all seen one.
“Probably an SR-71,” Lick said. “We’re right across from an airbase, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“Looked like aliens to me,” Clifford said.

“Only theater dorks with little pinkie dicks believe in aliens and ghosts,” Lick said.

“You afraid?” Toby asked Lick. Lick’s hard-ass routine was wearing thin on him, but that wasn’t why he said it. He goaded Lick for the same reason he might drop a grasshopper into a jar with a praying mantis.

“Chickenshit?” Clifford asked.

Lick had made a rookie blunder. Now, he’d have to prove that he wasn’t afraid. Saying so didn’t mean shit.

“Don’t worry,” Clifford said. “We’ll go after midnight. First, we fish.” He made a steeple of his fingers, and with that gesture, Clifford seemed to become his uncle, while Lick was still plain old Lick.

The fire popped, and Lick flinched. He pretended to rummage for snacks in Clifford’s backpack, but Toby saw what really happened: while Clifford watched the skies for additional UFOs, Lick sparked up his lighter and burned Clifford’s hemp bracelet.

“JUST GO IN THE BUSHES, like your sister,” Lick tells Lindsay.

Off she goes, pajama cuffs dragging in the sand.

Lick talks about his daughters a lot. How Lindsay wins all the spelling bees. How Tina finally nailed the violin part to his favorite Alice in Chains song. So Toby talks about Paula, mainly because he’s supposed to. He talks about the Rube Goldberg-style orange juicer they made for the science fair, the gingerbread Bastille they spent three nights building for Social Studies. He doesn’t mention the divorce, the crying, or all the nights she locked herself in her bedroom.

“She’s banned from roller hockey,” Lick says, thumb aimed in Lindsay’s direction. “At least till she learns to stop cross-checking her teammates.”

Hard to tell if he’s complaining or bragging. Only surprising part is that Lick’s girls have survived so long under his protection. As a child, Lick filled entire milk jugs with the chrome valve caps he’d stolen from car tires. He evacuated packed theaters with a well timed stink bomb to the air return. He even burned down several acres of protected live oaks, though to this day, Toby hasn’t told a soul.
"He came back once," Lick says. "Clifford did. His uncle told me. This was after Ivan hit. The two of them rowed out, and the whole shoreline was covered in washed-up junk. Fridges, washing machines, bits of dock. Not one square foot of bare sand." Lick pauses to spit something—maybe a mosquito. "His uncle said the sight of it crushed Clifford. He never came back after that."

"No," Toby says. "He wouldn’t have."

"Remember the week after we camped, how he started sitting with those science club kids who still played with pogs?"

"You and I weren’t exactly finishing each other’s sentences after that."

"You told Heather Biggs I’d sworn my virginity to the ghost-daughter of Tristán de Luna," Lick says, sipping. "I should’ve beat your ass."

"You seemed so willing to believe." Toby had always resented that.

"What do you believe now?"

"I guess I’d like a second look."

"Cheers to that." Lick tilts his can forward, but he doesn’t look happy. He watches the bay, as if he’d rather be anywhere else.

**CLIFFORD’S BOAT WAS TOO SMALL** to safely fit the three of them and the three-pronged floundering gig, so they worked in shifts, two seated in the rowboat while the third watched from shore. Lick had already taken an unsuccessful turn in the boat. He’d managed to puncture the armored backs of three blue crabs, but that was it. Lick pouted while Toby and Clifford rambled the bay.

Toby worked the oars, leaning hard to advance his and Clifford’s weight. The floundering lamp floated alongside, its hellish light directed at the sandy bottom. Clifford hefted the gig like a lacrosse stick.

"It’s been long enough," Lick called from shore. "My turn."

"You had your chance," Clifford said.

They watched the sandy bottom for the irregular shape of a flounder limned by the harsh spotlight. Minnows dogged the surface in packs. The boys hadn’t planned carefully. They carried no empty cooler for storing a gutted fish, were they to actually gig one. The boat labored over the shallows and struck a course for the north end of the island, but there was little to see. The light spooked a baby stingray, which sailed like a kite for deeper water, but no flounder.

"My uncle used to catch sand sharks here," Clifford said.
“I’m sure he did, Stifford,” Toby said, “and I bet he used to shoot marbles with a bunch of gnomes and fire-breathing dragons.”

Clifford lowered the gig. He studied the eastern side of the bay and the bridge that divided it. They were close enough to watch the red taillights of cars disappear over the bridge’s hump and reignite on the other side.

Toby was first to spot the squid. At first, he figured an exotic jellyfish had wandered into their funnel of light, but then the animal turned an angry eye upward.

“Squid,” Clifford shouted to shore, as if Lick, on solid ground, would have the proper follow-up orders.

“Kill it,” Lick called through cupped hands.

The animal zipped around Clifford’s strikes and vanished within quick veils of ink. The ink did not disperse smoothly, like a spy car’s smokescreen. More like a dollop of dirty mucus, or worse. Toby swung the bow around so that they advanced on the squid, flushing it toward shore, where Lick waited.

Unable to contain his appetite for marine violence, Lick ran into the water and batted the squid with his hands until he had it ashore. Clifford unwired the light, and he and Toby beached the boat.

“Hand me the gig,” Lick said.

They looked at the squid, which warned them away with spurts of air. The animal’s eyes were bright mirrors that burned back the collective ill will of three hormonal boys with everything to prove. Clifford had grown quiet, and Toby knew he dreaded what would happen to the squid. But this would be a worthy sacrifice. Afterward, the boys would be brave enough to face anything—even ghosts. Not that Toby believed in ghosts.

"YOU ATTEND the service?” Toby asks.

“If you’d gone, you’d know the answer.”

Toby has never been able to imagine Clifford in the Northeast, though he has often tried. He knows some rumors, but he’s curious to hear Lick’s version.


Lick leans forward in his chair as if he’s been waiting for this. He de-
scribes how college taught Clifford to disbelieve in things like alien abduction, ghosts, elaborate government conspiracies, and the immortal soul. In an effort to seem hip, Clifford sheared the final syllable off his name and stopped wearing the bridge for his front teeth. There were rumors that he slept with a few men but that this, too, was mostly an attempt to appear edgy. After college graduation, Cliff moved to the Upper West Side and lived off a moderate trust fund that dwindled—as his uncle told it—at a near-audible rate. Cliff lost weight on a strict diet of baked salmon and diet pills. He ordered all the Stephen Hawking books he could find.

“Far as his uncle knew,” Lick says, “the guy was doing just fine.”

Toby knows how it would’ve gone, Cliff unable to forget Clifford in New York. Cliff watching a matinee when the heaviness planted a knee against his chest and stopped his heart. Toby wishes he knew what movie had been playing.

“I sent flowers,” Lick says.

“Me, too. White roses.”

Toby cried longer and harder than he ever would’ve expected the day he read the article, and now he cries again, quietly, so Lick won’t hear. For most of his adult life, Toby harbored an embarrassing fantasy that, as grown men, he, Clifford—not Cliff—and Lick would somehow reconvene, camp the island once more, and pass their adult woes to and fro across the fire.

“We should walk to the middle part,” Toby says. “See if we can find that old chimney.”

“What about the girls?” Lick works the pull-tab of his can.

“You couldn’t wake them with a bullhorn.”

“Not that I’m scared to go. It’s not like that.”

**Lick Left His Kill** on the beach, where it stood crucified on an oak twig—a warning to trespassers and to the island itself. It was after midnight now, and the boys knew what was coming. The squid killing had spiked Toby’s heart rate. His jaw muscles hummed with excess voltage, and he was ready for something extraordinary to happen. He knew ghosts didn’t exist, but you never truly knew what all was out there.

They returned to camp for more beer and blackened stew. When their
heads were good and murky, Lick lit the lantern and led them tottering past palmettos and scrub oaks to the island’s interior. As they walked, Toby moaned and activated the back-lit dial of his watch, but no one seemed to understand that he was goofing. Where the trail narrowed, Lick weaved around a cactus patch, only to walk mouth-first into a spider web. Lick cursed Clifford, his tongue wound in gossamer. Onward, to an old brick chimney stuffed with beer bottles and rags and used rubbers. No ghosts, no bones, no sound but frogs singing on the island’s marshy side.

The lantern’s flame fluttered and died, but not because of supernatural forces. Lick had forgotten to top off the fuel. He took a moment to cuss Clifford out for marching them through Web City—probably on purpose—and failing to produce a single ghost.

“Shut up a second,” Clifford said.

They listened. Toby, too, heard a tiny rising and falling in pitch, like an underwater radio. Once their eyes acclimated to darkness, they spotted the ghosts, which didn’t glow spectral green, like Toby might’ve expected. They were poorly defined and sack-like—faint watermarks suspended in the trees. Some of them sat on the leaf litter. When the bay breeze cut through, each ghost—some half dozen, total—shifted. Even the sparks thrown by Lick’s thumb as he tried to relight the lantern created light enough to eclipse these apparitions.

Lick put down the lantern. “You bubble-bellied son of a bitch,” he said, turning to Clifford.

Toby was skeptical of the ghosts, but the beer wanted him to believe. Small bodies roosting in the air, untethered. Breathing, or so it seemed. Maybe they did look a little hokey, too much like painted grocery sacks, but if they were phony, the maker’s hand had been skilled. They danced neatly in the breeze, and they were clearly gathered there for some purpose. One of them had the disapproving eyes of Clifford’s uncle. Another wore a tri-cornered hat. Before Toby had a chance to speak, lilting nautical music cued up. The ghosts startled, came to attention. They began to sing:

Well, they call me Hangin’ Johnny
Away boys, away
Well, I never hanged nobody
And it’s hang boys, hang

The song was vaguely familiar, because Toby had heard it before, from a movie. Clearly, this was the work of Clifford. He’d managed to fabricate quasi-convincing ghosts, and they were no scarier than the rides at Disney World. All the worthless effort Clifford had wasted on these kiddy gags, when he could’ve been doing something worthwhile—lifting weights, talking to girls, or jogging off some cake weight. Kid was fucking hopeless. Toby should’ve known.

The ghosts sang on. Clifford smiled, which made the hate-hairs along Toby’s neck burn hotter. Wasn’t fair that the kid was happy with so little, whereas Toby needed that feeling of danger that came with tit-touching, or stealing cherry cigarillos from Tom Thumb, or backyard boxing with the high school boys. Those were the things that made you feel alive, not fiddler crabs, not ghost puppets. Someone ought to teach Clifford what had value and what didn’t.

“I want to go,” Lick said. He stood with his hands clasped in front of him, and his voice warbled as he spoke.

The boys filed down the trail and headed for the bay side, where they’d beached the boat. As Toby and Lick jockeyed for point position, lizards and small vermin fled their path, making papery noises like laughter. Where the trail narrowed, a long cactus spine passed through the bottom of Lick’s right flip-flop and skewered his heel. He paused to cuss Clifford once more. Behind them, another sailor song cued up.

Toby and Lick perched on the skiff’s hindmost bench seat and ordered Clifford to row them out in the bay, far enough so they didn’t have to hear the music.

In a flurry of oar strokes, Clifford made Deadman’s shrink from sight. The northern breeze stalled. Soon, the music faded. Starlight powdered the bay, no sound but the dip of oars as Clifford muscled the boat toward darkness.

“Isn’t this far enough?” Clifford asked.

“Keep rowing,” Lick said. “Be grateful we don’t beat the shit out of you.”

“How’s this my fault?”
“Because,” Lick said, but he seemed to run out of words.
Toby motioned for Lick to say more. It was important that they agree on why Clifford was to blame. You couldn’t put it past Lick to misunderstand a problem like counterfeit ghosts.

“All that spooky shit,” Lick said, aiming his thumb at the island. “He conjured it on purpose.”

“Don’t be a dumbass,” Toby said. “They were fake.”

“They did look sort of fake,” Clifford said.

“You shut up,” Lick said. “They sang,” he said, turning to face Toby.

“You can’t explain that.”

Toby poked Clifford’s flabby knee. “Little Debbie here rigged up a couple tape recorders and Halloween props. He wanted to scare us.”

“I didn’t rig those things,” Clifford said.

“Shut the hell up,” Toby said, “or I’ll slap the buttermilk right out of those C-cups.”

Clifford spat into the water and leaned harder on the oars.

Lick turned to see the island. He started to say something, but it was like he couldn’t bring himself to contradict Toby out loud. Toby knew what was eating Lick: Clifford had been right about the ghosts—or so Lick believed—and the possibility of Clifford being right always put a sour spot in Lick’s stomach.

Lick spun the Coleman’s little flint wheel. Sparks danced within the glass. Clifford told Lick to cut it out. Lick stopped but not for long.

_Flick. Flick. Flick._

Clifford stopped rowing. He glared at Lick.

“Flick that thing one more time,” Clifford said, “and I’ll shove your scrawny ass overboard.” Clifford clapped a hand over his mouth. Too late.

“Well,” Toby said to Lick. “You going to take that from him?”

Lick was an enthusiastic fighter, though not very precise. He managed to peg Clifford’s nose with one good, blood-producing chop, but mostly, he missed. More of a volume puncher, Clifford landed a high percentage of short, weak punches—and a few slaps—that did little to no damage. The little boat bucked and swayed.

“Kill him,” Toby kept shouting.

Lick began landing crisp, long-armed punches at will. Clifford’s nose
drained long ropes of what looked like engine oil. With each punch he landed, Lick whimpered. After a few more punches, Clifford slumped against Toby, and, in his rage, swung at Toby, as if to direct his frustration at the wider world—moon, island, all of it. Toby lifted Clifford by the underarms until he could stand on his own. The kid was all out of fight by then, and his eyes were wet. A dark blood bubble expanded inside his nostril and nearly popped with each breath.

“Tubby bitch,” Lick said. “Put that in your sketchbook.”

For a moment, it seemed enough. Clifford had learned his lesson. He gave Toby his most pathetic I’m too weak to get punched expression. Toby felt his fist unclench.

“Don’t be a baby,” Lick said, apparently to Toby. “We all know you want to hit him. So hit him.”

Clifford stared at Lick. When his eyes moved back to Toby, it was as if he spotted something incriminating at the core of Toby—a jagged aura, maybe, or a dead spot in his heart. Maybe Clifford finally realized that Toby and Lick would never take his side—not once. Whatever it was, Clifford bared his teeth.


Somewhere in the machinery of Toby’s arm, a sprocket came loose. His fist hooked deep into Clifford’s padded belly, and as soon as it happened, he realized it was Lick he really wanted to punch. Too late, too late. Clifford made a wheezing noise. Immediately, Toby patted him behind the shoulder, like that might put the wind back in his lungs. Clifford fought for air. They shared a strange intimacy, Clifford’s body cupping Toby’s fist as if they might combine to form a more complete breed of boy. When they finally separated, Clifford lost his balance and went head-first over the gunwale, sending Toby reeling, and tipping the boat.

Clifford must’ve bumped his mouth in the tumble. When he surfaced, he was missing most of his front teeth. The lantern sank quickly, but the boat seemed to disappear in slow motion, as if mired in grape jelly. The more the boys grappled, the more was lost. They were closer to the Pensacola side of the bay than the Deadman’s side. No choice but to swim the boat to shallower water and turn it over there. It was slow-going. By the
time they struck bottom and righted the boat, it became clear that no one had bothered to pick up the oars. They climbed aboard and tested the various lies they might tell Clifford’s uncle. Their best bet, they agreed, was to claim that older kids had roughed them up and made off with the oars and lantern. Lick said that Clifford’s battered face would offer evidence of a struggle, but Toby knew what was coming: best-case scenario, they’d be pulling weeds all month to pay the old man back, longer yet if he noticed the missing beer.

They took turns. Two hung from the stern and kicked the boat eastward while the third ruddered with his hands. Toby expected Clifford to whine the whole way back, but he hardly spoke, and in the quiet, Toby got that lonely feeling he’d had when they started talking about aliens. So what if Toby half-admired Clifford’s immaturity? So what if he needed a friend who chased fiddler crabs and sketched make-believe?

“You got some good shots in,” Toby told Clifford. It was their turn to kick, and he spoke quietly, so Lick wouldn’t hear.

“Fuck yourself,” Clifford said. The missing teeth gave his voice a whistling quality.

Toby tried changing the subject to video games, but Clifford wouldn’t look, wouldn’t speak.

As they crossed the bay, ambient light in the east revealed a scramble of violet clouds. Daybreak appeared too soon, too fast. Already, things had happened that couldn’t be taken back, and Toby wasn’t ready to see what came next.

Lick said the sun reminded him of himself: an object of such power, it would keep burning for billions of years. Lick said he wanted to keep burning, too. Clifford spat clotted blood. He said the sun looked like what it was: a big fiery ball. No great mystery, no magic. Toby didn’t tell his friends how that weird dawn light clung like powder to their cheekbones. He never said that for him, the newly minted sun didn’t rise so much as explode. He didn’t describe that helpless feeling that there was no way to make it stop, no way to put any of it back.

**TOBY OPENS HIS COOLER** and paws through Paula’s juice boxes. Near the bottom, he finds a few Modelos. He offers a can to Lick, who hesitates, then takes it. Lick slides a finger over the can’s humble logo.
“You’re kind of a shitty person,” Lick says.

“So are you,” Toby says. “Now, drink up. I need you good and brave.”

After a few beers, Lick’s eyes aren’t so restless. He adds one more layer of wood to the fire and tops off the Coleman. They leave their sleeping daughters and walk inland—careful to avoid cacti—until they arrive at the brick chimney. Lick douses the lantern and they stand in the dark. Frogs call. Small life rustles in the brush. They wait until their beers go flat, but no ghosts appear.

A plastic baggie flutters in the upper branches of a scrub oak. Across the bayou, someone’s car blasts an Irish punk rock tune that amplifies as it crosses the marsh. Sixteen years is a long time. Even as a boy, Toby doubted the ghosts, and now it seems very possible that some local bayou kid strung up a few pale bags in hopes of scaring someone. The music might’ve been entirely incidental.

Toby’s not disappointed, not exactly. Real or fake, the ghosts weren’t what drove them apart. It was the experience—the strangeness they’d felt in their hearts, each boy trusting his own version of reality. Each boy reckless with belief.

“Any minute now,” Lick says.

“Right on,” Toby says.

Across the bayou, another song starts up.

“You think he’d ever forgive us?” Lick asks.

“Would you?”

By dawn, they’re both wistful enough to address Clifford directly, by his full name. They don’t make any apologies, not out loud. They don’t recite the words Toby has been repeating for years, as a kind of mantra: I take it back, I take it back, I take it back. Instead, they invite Clifford to remember the UFO, the beer, the squid. They ask him what movie had been playing in New York, and was it worth dying over?

Clifford doesn’t answer.

Maybe ghosts are quieter creatures than Toby figured. He can’t see any shapes that resemble his friend, but there’s resistance in the air. He can feel it. A small and begrudging patch of warmth that occupies the space between him and Lick. ♦
TISHA WEDDINGTON | WILL OF THE WISP, 2018
24” x 36” | OIL ON CANVAS
When she opens her body there is glistening oleander.

How much of her skin is a body of water?

*Nerium* because she is a flood of rain as it falls into a river,

because she unfurls in rich alluvials.

She is allowing herself to love herself, every invisible space

and darkness. She is learning how not every root traces back
to a name. *Olea* meaning
somewhere, she has lost her origin,

which is to say, 
she will follow the stream

and come into glaucous bloom.
AIR PLANTS

*Tillandsia*, meaning
plant that never bruises,

meaning slip of epiphyte
that thrives in the underscore
of displacement,

meaning every leaf is a crossing,
a wound darkened
by a history—

meaning silver wild.

In my body is another morning
plotted with awakenings,

sprouting selves split across generations.

I am this inherited ubiquity,
a silver wild

on the rocks of each continent
that joined hands

long enough to birth me.

Yes, I have air,
I have *pani*,

yet I still long for soil—

to never bruise even as I darken
with another fragment
another place.

I was never fed enough gardens
to build a home.

I only known how to land
everywhere at once—

through a shattering.
At first, I didn’t seem far from repair.
But on a train from Venice, my tears are fat,
used like a boat, replaying memories,
the 99 stories of abandonment. There are ways
to anatomize my grief, the hardest part
was getting their bodies down the drain, the ants. Death is
the greatest protector. She occurs like Jesus again and again.
Sometimes she’s dressed as a French maid,
a Mary Magdalene, a poor woman eating a plum.
My family liked me better when I was with him,
my certain savior. Only a true believer
can die from this curse. Only my mind
is an underworld.

My therapist likes to ask: What are the different ways
that you can talk about your father?
I have a vision of different spoons falling on him,
and I don’t cry. But I’m losing things, I tell her—
the half-life of my body, a compressed
atom in my head. I’m addicted to the suicidal
space, even at weddings.
Even in war, we wait for the silent
landscape after the bomb.
TACEY ATSITTY

LAST NIGHT, BLEEDING

Last night when the prophet was near done
dying, I lay bleeding on my new mattress.

It had been years since I had bled this way,
and I had forgotten how to care for myself.

But Tom’s dad too, he gave them the slip,
the cells of his body—went in a calm yellow
way. Tom texted a photo of his father’s head,
bald—the way my hands were going

from rubbing out blood from beneath
me and inside me, from my garments

and Christ, He welcomed his chosen seer
at the same time. Only yesterday did I see

the feet of a stillborn on Facebook. His toes
and soles and ankles already so pale

and peaceful in a cloud of sheets, while
the rest of us turn and turn in snow,

clotting back into white cells—then a code
talker, a grandfather, how handsome

his life and an American flag lies over—
these mornings I take to the rain

channel on YouTube, without thunder
so it feels real in season. These days,
every time I lie down I imagine cutting
the skin from my navel to my neck

and open up like I’ve never done before.
SHE BEGINS PAINTING PORTRAITS of disturbed children. She works at the kitchen table with the lamp from her desk plugged into the outlet behind her chair. Towheaded boy on the threshold of a garden shed, his face half in shadow, hanging a litter of kittens by their necks from a roof beam. A calico struggles against his hand, the ridged pink roof of its mouth just visible above his thumb. She applies the color delicately, with plenty of water and her smallest flat brush, thinking dimly of a Beatrix Potter illustration. Twice she unthinkingly dips the paintbrush into her glass of orange juice. It doesn’t matter; paint is invisible in orange juice.

By sunrise her wrists are ticking, clocking every hairline brushstroke. When she no longer needs the lamp, she stands, stretches, and takes the stairs two at a time, to her studio on the second floor.
Her studio is sparse, pale walled. Here she works on commission only, producing portraits: the domesticated animal. She paints from photographs. It pays her bills, but the paintings are empty. A dog’s eye can make designs on a person as beckoning and momentary as the crater of water on the broken surface of a pond. By aiming between the ripple of rheumy lashes she can feel her way inside. She could paint herself a home but she prefers this: to lie suspended in watery space. A meaningless painting will shelter her like a womb. Like a womb, it will expel her in the end.

On her easel now is a khaki police dog, its forelegs planted on the coarse grave of some fallen, flag-wrapped comrade. She’s easing down a rear tendon with a dab of cadmium yellow when the dog barks. No—ringing, the dog is ringing.

The phone is ringing. She steps into the hall and collects the cordless. “Hello?”

“Matthea? It’s Adnan.”

The only son of her deceased brother. The wife returned to her native Beirut, the son in school somewhere, New York maybe. She puts her bare foot on the baseboard and smears a toe in the dust. “I’m glad I caught you,” he says, sounding adult.

“How old are you?” she asks.

If the question takes him by surprise, he disguises it. “Twenty-five.”

It is abnormally bright in the house this morning, even though there are no windows in the hall. She squints.

He says, “I left you three messages last week, Matt. I was starting to worry.”

Only her brother called her Matt. She never checks the private line. “Sorry,” she says. “It’s been a long time.”

“Since the funeral.”

“Right. Do you think you could—” She’s about to ask him to call back, but he interrupts.

“I won’t keep you. I’m calling to ask a favor.”

“Okay?”

He inhales. “Actually, I’m filming a movie. At the Point, if you can believe it. I’m coming up there next weekend. I was hoping I could see you.”
She pauses. “I thought you were—a musician, right?” She waits for her memory to provide. “You got that scholarship for—cello?”

“Standup bass,” he corrects gently. “But I’m in film school now.”

“Your mom must love that.”

There’s a moment of silence. Then he says, “Okay, actually—I was wondering if I could stay with you. Just for a night or two, while we scout locations.”

Her throat feels thick.

“I’ll sleep on your couch, the floor, whatever. I’m easy.” He pauses.

“Matt? You do still live at granddad’s place, right?”

“Uh, yes. I’m sure it would be great to see you but I have—” She tries to collect her thoughts. “I have a thing in the—I need time. A lot of work to get done?”

“You won’t even know I’m there.”

“I can’t show you around.”

“You don’t need to.”

“My couch is very—short.”

“Mattie, listen. My mom’s moving back here and she’s in big financial trouble. I just have to finish this movie so I can graduate and get a—”

“Gambling?”

“Yeah,” he says heavily. “The gambling.”

“Okay,” she says. “Okay.” She starts walking back toward the studio, the phone still against her ear. She presses hard on the creaky floorboard at the end of the hall. The slanted ceilings are too white, and the light is too white. “Of course you can stay here. Just call me when you finalize your plans.”

“Thanks. Really, it’ll be really great to—”

But he doesn’t sound as grateful as he should, so she hangs up the phone and puts it on the drafting table. Of course? When did she last use those words? On her easel, the police dog begins to sink. Now she can see that the dirt is fresh and soft and maybe the grave is empty. Every patch of earth is just waiting for an inhabitant, she thinks, as the dirt envelopes the paws.

**ACROSS THE ROAD,** the neighbor appears to be transplanting all of Eden. He returns to the Point every spring, towing his wife and a truckload of
soil. Displayed haphazardly along the edge of his driveway is an array of ceramic dishes and planters that reminds Mattie of her mother’s favorite holiday loaf pans. When the neighbor catches sight of her in the window, he yells upward from where he’s crouching in the scrub grass, excavating dirt from the base of his mailbox, a circle of holes like an inverted fairy ring. “Hey-a, Matthe-a!” His Boston tongue kneads her name like dough.

“Hi,” she calls.

“You expecting guests?”

“Huh?”

“I’m seeing you at that window all morning, finally figured out you gotta be looking for someone.” He chuckles, shading his eyes with one gloved hand. “Wife does the exact same thing.”

“My nephew,” she answers, tapping her feet against the wall under the sill. Behind her, the finished police dog is leaning on the wall, waiting to be mummified in bubble wrap. On the easel now is a trio of cats, but she can’t get into them. They’re shapeless and dead-eyed, and the whiskers—last night she botched the whiskers and had to over-paint half the tabby. She watches the neighbor shake earth from the trembling roots of a nasturtium.

Desperate for distraction, she wanders downstairs, where the watercolor boy is still lying unfinished on the kitchen table. She sifts a decent nib out of the kitchen drawer and begins adding crosshairs of ink to the kittens, a row of bodies limp and finely furred as washrags. She isn’t sure how long she’s been working when she hears tires whining on gravel. Then a car door slamming, and the neighbor’s voice through the front window: “You must be Matthea’s nephew.”

She can’t hear the reply, only the scrape of a bag being dragged over the road, though whether it’s Adnan’s luggage or the neighbor’s bag of potting soil, she can’t tell. “Not much family resemblance,” says the neighbor, and laughs. Only then it occurs to her, that she should hide the paints and the boy and the kittens. She spreads an old newspaper over the picture, probably smudging the ink, but it doesn’t matter. No one should see it. Then she rinses her hands and goes to open the door.

Adnan is no longer the lithe, long-haired teenager she remembers standing silently next to her brother’s coffin. The man on the threshold
has short, almost military hair and a chest deep enough to fill out his V-necked Bonnaroo shirt. She recognizes his mother’s dark, vaguely amphibious eyes. He grins at her with her brother’s smile.

“Hey Matt,” he says, bobbing his head as though attempting to kiss her on the cheek. She steps forward and touches him lightly on the shoulder, pressing him back. “Come in,” she says.

“Thanks.” He hoists a massive L.L. Bean duffel bag carefully into the foyer. “It’s been ages since I was here.”

“Since before—since you were a kid, probably?”

“Basically.” He peers into the house, mouth slightly open.

She marvels at his earnestness. For an instant, she can see it, too, like a painting she would never paint: freestanding flagstone fireplace ringed in shabby furniture that her mother bought from Sears when Mattie herself was a child, mildewing Elk head, attached kitchen with badly scarred wooden countertop and rusty gas stove. The pine bookcase overflowing with disintegrating detective novels and her father’s collection of cribbage boards. And beyond, through the windows: the sloping, verdurous humps of Saddleback Mountain and the white-capped surface of the bay. It is unaccountably rare, and she has a sudden memory of Adnan himself, silky-skinned in the falling light, watching raptly as her own father fills in a crossword puzzle, a Mickey Mouse coloring book and scattered box of crayons forgotten at the far end of the table.

Then Adnan turns to her, smirking a little. “You haven’t done much with the place, huh?” he says. She realizes with a flush of resentment that he’s teasing her. He must think himself very conventionally charming. He must have many girlfriends, like her brother. She imagines telling him to leave. She imagines leaving.

“Are you hungry?” she asks instead.

“Nah, I stopped for a sandwich an hour ago.”

“Well, you’re in the guest room.”

“There’s a guest room in this place?” He squints upward as though through the floor.

“My parents’ room.”

“Okay,” he says. “I’ll drag this up there, then.” He doesn’t move.

“What’re you doing now?” she asks.

“I have to go into town and run a couple errands. Then I was thinking we could have dinner.”
Town consists of a single main street: a grocery store, a gas station, a Walgreens, the elementary school and a squatting stone library. She wonders what he could possibly want there. “There isn’t a lot of food in the house,” she says.

“I’ll go grocery shopping,” he said. “What time do you usually eat?”

“Late,” she says. Her voice wavers with uncertainty. “Let me give you my credit card.”

He looks embarrassed. “C’mon, Matt. Do you know the last time an adult offered me money?”

She feels determined to prove him wrong, to prove she can do this. “You’re in school. And I’m your aunt.”

“The answer is you, at the funeral.” At her look of confusion, he continues, “At my dad’s funeral. You gave me fifty bucks and told me to buy myself something nice.”

Mattie feels herself frown. She says, “And did you?” On an impulse, she steps forward and pulls her wallet from her pocket and places it firmly into his palm. Her wallet is dark leather and wedge-shaped; his fingers are dry and warm. “I have to get back to work now,” she says and shimmies past him, holding her breath as she ascends the stairs.

She stands in front of her easel until she hears the front door slam, wondering what she’s gotten herself into. Then she walks to the end of the hall, to her parents’ old room. She usually keeps this door closed. The bed is made up, as always, in her mother’s favorite quilt and white lace shams. Adnan’s duffel is on the bed, which bothers her a little—who knows if the bottom of the bag is clean—and a crimson hooded sweatshirt hangs on the post. On the vanity is a pair of Ray Bans and a wrinkled copy of a magazine called Wired.

“Adnan,” she says out loud, just to see if she can say his name without sounding anti-social, but her voice is too tangible in the static room, so she crosses the floor and pushes open the single window, the only second-floor window to face the bay. “Adnan,” she says again to the water, and then, for no reason, “Welcome home.”

Mattie only ever really goes shopping to restock the fridge with presliced deli meats and whatever breakfast cereal is currently on sale, and when Adnan reappears late in the afternoon with arms full of brown paper bags, she feels irritated, as though the food is a sign of disrespect to her monkishly empty cabinets. She wonder if he spent her money.
To make matters worse, he goes back to the car twice for more, groceries he unloads carefully onto the kitchen counter: circus-colored cherry tomatoes, frilly greens, an eggplant that weighs as much as a bowling ball, bags of granola with dried red berries and two cartons of milk and eggs and a steak-sized piece of halibut, a can of crushed tomatoes and a can of chicken soup and three cloves of garlic and a net of shallots and Arborio rice and a tall yellow column of off-brand olive oil and a plastic hutch of blueberries and unsalted butter and goat cheese with dill and a box of water crackers and a cylinder of slice-and-bake cookie dough.

She leans on the counter behind him. “Blueberries aren’t in season yet,” she says.

Instead of answering, he squats on his heels and paws into the cabinet next to the stove. “Do you—oh wait, found it.” He stands, holding a red plastic cutting board and a shallow sauté pan that Mattie’s never seen before. Adnan puts the cutting board on the counter, yanks open the butter with his teeth, and lights the gas.

“What are we making?”

“Hand me the wine?” He crushes a garlic clove under the blade of her biggest knife as a generous wedge of butter begins to melt in the sauté pan.

“There’s wine?”

“On the table.” He gestures with the knife and she sees a bottle of white with a duck on the label. There’s also a bottle of bourbon.

“You bought liquor?”

“I just thought it would be nice,” he says without looking up. “We can make old fashioneds or something.”

She brings both bottles to the sink, wondering when she last consumed alcohol. It was never her drug of choice; in art school only the administration students were really serious drinkers. She opens the wine with her father’s ancient wooden corkscrew and hands it to Adnan, who pours a generous amount into the pan. She flinches when it sizzles. He laughs. The golden warmth of garlic fills the kitchen.

“That smells good,” she admits.

“If I could only eat one thing for the rest of my life, it would be garlic.”

“You’d stink.”

Adnan shrugs, the corners of his eyes crinkling. “I already stink.” He
pours risotto without measuring and shakes the pan to coat the kernels in butter and garlic. Mattie pours an inch of whiskey into a pair of drinking glasses.

“That’s one way to do it,” he says, then raises his glass and takes it like a shot.

She watches as he twists the handle on the can opener and pours in the soup can, which turns out to be vegetable broth, watches the muscles in his back heave in soft swells like the surface of the ocean far offshore. She has the odd sensation of not knowing what he looks like when he has his back to her. Of not knowing his face.

“What’s your movie about?” she asks.

He doesn’t answer right away. “I guess it’s about—kids in the woods. Rural kids. In New England.”

“Your dad?” she asks, only a little bit sorry.

He cocks his head to the side, and she can see the slightest tension in his shoulder blades, in the way he raises them up and together. “It’s more about me than him.”

“But you’re filming here.”

“It’s fiction,” he says. The alcohol already has a bright spot burning in her peripheral vision, so she pours herself more. Adnan stirs the risotto. Then he says, “Mark doesn’t even want to film up here, but I’m pretty sure it’s going to be perfect. I saw some good spots today, just driving around.”

She can tell the information is a concession to her, that he’s speaking to break the tension. “Who’s Mark?”

“A friend from school. He’s producing.” He stirs the risotto. “Helping me write, too. He’s staying in a motel in Ellsworth, that is if we even need to—”

“Why isn’t he staying here?”

“He’s driving up tomorrow. But—” She feels unbalanced. “You can invite him here.”

“Okay. Thanks, Mattie.” He turns to face her, still stirring. “Can I see your studio?”
“There’s nothing to see,” she says honestly, but a half hour later they’re trekking upstairs, balancing the bottle of bourbon and two platesfuls of risotto and tomato salad between them.

“Y’know,” Adnan says over his shoulder as she flicks on the overhead. “We’re the only artists in the family.”

“What about your mom?”

“She doesn’t count. She barely does anything anymore. And she’s not your family, technically.” He goes to stand in front of her easel, sticking a forkful of risotto into his mouth. “This is pretty good.” Mattie isn’t sure if he means the art or the food. “She was successful.”

“Yeah, well. Not anymore.” Adnan gestures at the three half-rendered cats. “Who actually wants this?”

Mattie wants to be insulted, but she can’t quite will herself to it. She sets her plate of food on the drafting table. “These are a Mother’s Day present for someone in Connecticut.” There’s something rising in her throat, and to her own surprise it’s laughter. She giggles, a little helplessly, and then claps a hand to her own chest. “Sometimes I’m painting and I just think—” She sees that he’s watching her with amusement, but she pushes on. “I just think, who … the fuck … cares.” She steps backwards, trying to find something to lean on, and her heel hits the couch and she sits. “I hate cats,” she says, and then, thinking about it, “I hate a lot of animals, actually.”

“You hate dogs?”

“Dogs are okay.”

“So this isn’t what you really do, is it?” Adnan says. He’s smirking again. “To state the obvious.”

“What?” she asks dully.

“Where’s your work?”

“This is my work.”

He grins. “You’re really stubborn, huh?”

Somewhere below the window, the neighbor’s riding lawn mower sputters to life. The neighbor always mows the lawn just after sunset, to avoid the heat of the day. She agreed to it a long time ago, the only neighbor for miles. She stands and crosses the floor, intending to close the window. The neighbor has gathered every dried twig and branch from his yard, and he aims the mower directly over the pile. “Hey,” she calls,
suddenly frantic, “Stop! You’ll dull the blades!” She waves her arms, but he doesn’t look up, only wipes sweat from his brow with the back of one hand. Even in the falling light, she can see the remaining streak of dirt, faintly translucent, like turpentine. She slams the window shut just as the first branch breaks under the tire.

There’s something wrong about the whole tableau, then—her rumpled clothes and the pervasive smell of honeysuckle in the darkening house. Her nephew is watching her. On the arm of the sofa, a blob of red paint has hardened to a minute, crimson mountain range.

“I think I might be a little drunk,” she says, avoiding his eyes.

“Matt,” he says and takes a step closer. “Did you ever ask my dad if—”

“I have to sleep and you should, too,” she says. Then she turns and bolts from the room.

MARK PUSHES back his plate. “Dude, you are such a ringer.”

Adnan laughs a trilling, cartoonish laugh and says, “I never pretended I don’t have skills.”

Mark turns to her. “Mattie, did you know this guy is a ringer?” Mark is very tall, with dimples high in his cheekbones. If not for the Malcolm X glasses, Mattie thinks he would look more like a star football player than a filmmaker, in any case not at all as Mattie would expect Adnan’s friends to look.

“Asshole eats nothing but frozen dinners for years and then I come over here and—this.” He gestures sweepingly at the remains of Adnan’s admittedly impressive meal. “Ringer.”

She doesn’t know what a ringer is. “Dishonesty runs in the family,” she suggests, which makes both men laugh, Mark slapping the edge of the table a little bit and making the forks shiver against the ceramic dishes.

“So,” he says conversationally. “You live up here year round?”


“And all alone?” Mark continues. “No boyfriend or anything?”

“Dude,” says Adnan.

“Mattie doesn’t mind.” Mark winks at her.

“I had a fiancé,” she says, wondering what siren urge is causing her to share so much about herself. “A long time ago.”
“What was wrong with him?”

She considers how much to say. “We were both artists, only he thought—he wanted to make it big. And he did.” She looks at Adnan. “I never really cared enough, I guess.”

“I remember him,” Adnan says suddenly.

“You did meet him a couple times,” she says, realizing as she says it. “When you were very young.” Then, because she can’t quite stop herself: “Your dad hated him.”

There is the slenderest, most tender of silences. To keep it from gathering momentum, she grabs her plate and stands. “Who wants dessert?” With a flourish, she pulls the slice-and-bake cookies from where she’s hidden them, still warm, in the microwave.

“You made the cookies!” Adnan is clearly delighted. “You did it while we were out?” She catches Mark’s eye as he eyeballs her nephew sideways. “I can’t believe you did that,” Adnan says again.

She sets the plate of cookies on the table, and both men reach for them. “So what are you doing after graduation?” she asks Mark.

“Oh, I’m not in school,” Mark answers breezily. “I dropped out.”

“I thought you were friends from—”

“Mark had some success with an early draft of his thesis film,” Adnan interrupts.

“That’s right. And as soon as that’s over, I’m climbing Devil’s Tower,” Mark says, grabbing another two cookies at once. “Trying to get this guy to go with me.” He elbows Adnan.

“I told you, I’m not going.”

Mark rolls his eyes. “It’s a fucking—er, sorry, Mattie. It’s a great climb. I did it once before, with my uncles.”

“It’s a sacred place for Native people in the region,” Adnan says to Mattie. “It really shouldn’t be legal to climb in the first place.” Adnan takes a second cookie, but instead of eating it he taps it on the edge of his plate, watching crumbs collect on the table.

“Government and religion shouldn’t mix,” says Mark through a mouthful of crumbs. “And it’s not like I’m bothering anyone.” He grins impishly. “I go up the back way.”

Adnan rolls his eyes. “Asshole.”

“Anyway,” Mark continues with the magnanimous confidence of
someone who is most comfortable talking about himself, “after our boy here gets his shit—er, sorry, his stuff together, we’re starting a production company.”

Mattie feels unsure of what question to ask. “Really?”


“It’s no scheme, bro,” says Mark. “It’s fact.” He leans across the table toward her. “I spent a bunch of years filming this musician in New Orleans. Friend of a friend introduced us and for some reason the guy really took a liking to me. He’s ninety-nine, distant relation of Buddy Bolden, y’know, the works. Anyway, he starts letting me film him, and four months later the storm hits. I was down there with him the whole time. Last year I finished a first cut, submitted it on a whim, next thing I know I’m in Utah winning an Audience Pick at Sundance, I network my ass off, and boom! This shit—er—this stuff is taking off.”

“It’s not that easy,” Adnan snaps.

Mark gives Adnan a hard look. “You call that easy?”

Trying to distract them, Mattie says, “I wouldn’t have taken you for a documentary filmmaker.”

“Well, if Adnan is your idea of a filmmaker, I’ll say I’m flattered.”

“Don’t get me started,” says Adnan into his glass.

“You must really like jazz music,” she says to Mark.

“Freak about it, have been since I was a kid. This movie is my baby. But our boy here—” He jabs Adnan with one elbow. “This guy has a head for business I just don’t have.” He sits back and watches her appraisingly.

“Actually, we could use an artist, too.”

Adnan sits up. “Don’t recruit my relations!”

“I’m just saying.”

“You haven’t seen anything I do,” she points out, feeling slow in front of whatever is so vital in these two boys.

“I can smell talent,” Mark says to her. “You got it.”

Adnan slouches back in his chair, possibly resigning himself to his fate.

**Mattie Startles Awake.** She must have drifted off at the table. After the boys went upstairs she wasn’t able to sleep. She began painting again,
at the kitchen table: this time, a little girl standing in the forest, the leaves and bracken glistening with rain across her squeezed-shut eyes, the rest of her completely naked.

Mattie tries to gather her thoughts, rubbing her eyes. The sunlight is slicing through the bay, tinting the kitchen gold. Adnan is standing behind her at the refrigerator. He’s barefoot and wearing Boston University basketball shorts.


He stares at her. “I didn’t mean to wake you up.” He sets the milk on the counter and pours it over a bowl of cereal, moving casually though he sounds concerned. She can’t tell if he’s making conversation just to keep from being awkward, so she doesn’t say anything. “Mark kept kicking me in his sleep so I figured I might as well get up.”

“I was painting and—I guess I passed out. Stupid.”

“What’s up?” he says through a mouthful of Rice Puffs. And then, as though in slow motion, he walks toward her.

“Nothing,” she says. “I’m just—sitting here.” She’s made a huge mistake but she can’t trace its origins. She stares at her nephew’s hands: light palms, hairy knuckles, neatly trimmed nails on tan, tapered fingers.

“This is your work,” he says. “I knew it!” He pulls the painting of the little girl toward him. “What is this?”

“Nothing.”


She’s pulling the tubes of watercolor toward her across the table. But Adnan puts one finger on the corner of the newsprint, and then something catches in his breath. He finds the blonde boy, the boy hanging the kittens. Mattie goes still. Both of them do.

Then: “This is my dad,” he says.

“Yeah,” she says.

“This is him.”

“It’s him.”

“As a kid.”

She sighs heavily, inhaling so deeply it’s almost a yawn. “Yes,” she says. Neatly trimmed nails, tapered fingers. Adnan’s thumbnail is warped and purpled.

“Did he really kill cats?”
“Kittens.”

And then, with a finality she’s been anticipating since her nephew crossed the threshold: “He always had issues, then,” he says, exhaling as though he’s been holding air in his lungs for a very long time. His breath raises the hair on her arms. “It was always inside him.”

He leans forward and touches the painting of the little girl in the rain. “So this must be you,” he says, almost carefully. “My dad had a photograph like this. Not just like it—” He laughs hoarsely. “But around the same age. Of you.”

“He did?”

“He said he took it, though I doubt that’s true. You’re in the woods, but not naked. Wrapped in the quilt on grandad’s bed.”

Mattie tries to remember. She can’t.

“He said it was after they found you in the woods.”

“That never happened.”

“Matt, c’mon.”

“He made it up.” She considers, trying to remember the last time she even had to talk about it. “We made it all up. Together.”

“Mattie, I found it in the newspaper yesterday.”

“You did what?”

“I went to the library to look up the articles.” When she twists in the chair to look at him, he avoids her eyes. “They were pretty easy to find.”

“Why would you do that?” she asks. In how many years? It’s never once occurred to her that there might exist such public documentation. “Is this for your movie? You didn’t even bother to ask me if—”

He shrugs. “I have a copy of the newspaper, do you want to see it?” Adnan says, a little defensively. “The headline is Local Six-Year-Old Buried Alive. They even mention how granddad sent—”

“No.”

“It’s all there. Hancock Point Press.” His voice softens. “Never knew you were in a coma. Y’know, after they found you was when grandad had him institutionalized the first time. I hadn’t realized that until yesterday.” Adnan looks at her. “That was what he always talked about later. How grandad didn’t even ask—”

“There was bad stuff. But I know your dad wouldn’t have hurt me. It was a game.”
“He did it to all of us.”
“Adnan—”
“He was sick, Matt. I don’t know how sick. And he was a bully.”
“Adnan—”
“Help!” The voice is faint and slightly hoarse, and for a moment, Mattie thinks it’s her own. Then Adnan look at her, afraid. It comes again, then, the panic distinct this time: “Help!” Mattie stands and they run through the kitchen and out onto the lawn. Across the road, the neighbor’s wife is crumpled sideways in the grass at the end of the driveway, her right ankle caught in one of the neighbor’s plantless holes and twisted at a horribly geometrical angle. When she sees Mattie and Adnan, the neighbor’s wife starts trying to hoist herself upward, repeating the word: “Help! Help me! Help me!”

“Whoa, stop trying to move.” Adnan crouches by the woman, touching her shoulder lightly. Mattie tries not to look at the ankle. The woman is curvaceous, in a polyester housedress with some kind of abstract, glibulous pattern.

The woman goes still under Adnan’s touch. “Mattie, do you have a phone?” he says, without turning around. “We’ve gotta call an ambulance. Is your husband home?” He sounds businesslike but kind.

“The store,” the woman says through gritted teeth.
“I’ll run back to the house,” Mattie says and does, trying not to look at her nephew in the grass, trying not to listen to the animal-brained part of her that says it should be her crouched in the grass, her lying partly broken in an empty hole. She hears the neighbor’s wife say, “He went to buy weed killer.” Then she leans forward and sprints toward the house, practicing in her head what to tell the dispatcher and wondering how it could be possible that she has no idea how fast ambulances drive on dirt roads.

“MATTIE, THANKS AGAIN for your hospitality,” Mark says, turning as he slams the trunk of the car. “Sorry for all the excitement yesterday.” They’d watched the neighbor’s wife trundled into the ambulance to Ellsworth, a half-hour drive to where her husband would be waiting. While the boys were out in the afternoon, Mattie had crossed the road and filled in the holes around the mailbox.
“Have fun at Devil’s Tower,” she says. “And drive carefully in the rain.” Adnan comes outside, dragging his duffel bag. The screen door bangs shut behind him.

“Bye,” he says.

“I’m sorry you have to leave.”

“I’ll call you,” he says.

“I hope so,” she says, and to her surprise, means it.

“C’mon, dude, I’m gonna get struck by lightning over here,” Mark calls from around the car.

Adnan walks to the driver’s seat and sits down and starts the car. The tires grind on the gravel. He waves a little bit—or maybe he’s just adjusting the mirror—and the car disappears around the drive. She can hear it through the trees for a minute even when she can no longer see it.

She stands alone in the yard of her family home, her parent’s house, the house that encloses her whole life. The clouds are damp and thunderous-looking in the sky, so much bigger than the house, so much bigger than her and somehow without any space inside.

When she starts to shiver, she goes back inside and climbs the stairs to the second floor. She stands at her studio door and looks at the room, already half in the shadow of the approaching storm: the decrepit drafting table piled in paints, the stretched canvases, the rollers, the cans of water, the fading scent of linseed oil. The police dog still leaning against the wall. The seashell ear of a cat, of cats uncreated. Through the window she can see the needle-fingered pine boughs, and if she leaned over, she’d be able to see the spiral of gnats under the neighbor’s porch light, and through their curtained windows, the neighbor’s wife, moving slowly on her crutches between the stove and the refrigerator. Mattie balances on her toes and presses hard on the broken floorboard. The air is taut and palpable and inviting, but she doesn’t cross the threshold. She stands without moving, waiting, waiting, waiting.
SALLY ROSEN KINDRED

IF I SAID

to my mother

That you were once a doll
tucked in the arm of the crooked birch.

That we nested lilacs in our lashes
but in the morning we could not open our eyes.

(Woke but the lids were closed.
Woke, but the roof refused.)

That you could fasten your song to this cradle-milk sky,
that you could lie down to be named here,

your bones ribbons,
your bones a glass net.

And your sorrow the bird in it, beating.
And if I said you’d always loved me, that I

was your mother, and you had never been mine—
my lonely wren, you would

believe, you would unclench your grief,
let it slip from the silver tree. I say

songs are a mercy.
Our sleep delivers the leaves.

That you are not sick anymore, not sorry—
and (feathers, soft blooms) you remember me.
TISHA WEDDINGTON | WINTERBIRD, 2009
24" x 30" | OIL ON CANVAS
CODA: THE NIGHT GLASS

When I was ten she set a glass of wine on the table.

My mother knew to praise, and the paints for night:
currant, rookwood, garnet.

Stirred in the drift. Shade of a hood.

Her thirst unsleeved in parts: a stem first, a mouth.

My mother’s lips, though, were a blue envelope.

A glued wing, a flap, could keep her sleep’s secrets.

Late at night the glass would crack.

Its whistle split shingles, let the sky inside.

She made it. Her fear named the parts.


She could drown a hyacinth.

She could thread a wolf through the moon.

When I was ten, a glass of wine.

Now I howl when it spills over.

I stain when it slips through.
She’ll say crimson. No, invention. Call the red dress my dream.

I wake hard, a daughter. I break back into a girl.
Today, you bought new lipstick. You ate
dark chocolate, listened to a friend
talk about marriage. You saw a newborn
in a stroller & weren’t moved. You’re relieved
your children’s legs don’t rest around your hips
anymore, that they click their seatbelts into place
by themselves. Your older daughter
just turned 10 & is learning
to send you messages like
“Keep Calm & Love Mama.”
She imitated your dance moves in the car.
This made you feel a little immortal.

The lipstick you bought is called Plum.
It smells good. You’re learning to love bolder
colors on your lips: red, mauve, fuchsia. You want
to go out one day & buy green lipstick.
There should be lipstick called “To Go Out One Day
& Buy Green Lipstick” or “I Talk About Marriage
With My Girlfriends All the Time” or
“I Will Party Tonight” or
“Because Life Is Too Short.” Except today life felt long

enough for you to go through your old makeup.
You gave your daughter the lipsticks she’d broken
& told her not to touch the new ones. You threatened,
she nodded & smiled at her gift. Life was long enough
for you to go out before sunset because you needed
tomatoes & the hypnotic light at that time of the day.
You only remembered the tomatoes when you opened the fridge
& only remembered the beautiful light when
you drove through it. The world took slower breaths
& you loved it, the way you love your children with an ache when they’re sleeping, when the quiet makes you long for their voices that you’d silenced in the afternoon.
Or the way you whisper to your husband in his sleep that you miss him, ask him to remember the words in the morning, & he doesn’t. You talk about marriage. “Only a piece of paper,” he says, & what he means is, “Don’t be afraid. Us is still here inside all this.”
Who remembers anything in the morning daze?

Today you woke up anticipating the hours, smiling in bed like a child excited about a trip to the beach. Surprised, you asked, “What is it, again, that I’m happy about?” Slowly you conjured the house the real estate agent showed you: empty, spacious, full of sun & dust.
Perhaps you were moved when you saw the child. Perhaps you’re saying you don’t regret not having the one that had started inside you in December. You took the pills. You bled. You cried. You want an empty uterus, & to dance.
You want arms strong enough to lift this weight & the new house.
When asked to put “from” in a sentence, your daughter wrote, “I am from my mother.” You’ve decided you are country enough.
The night begins. An airplane blinks in the distance. The old & new loves wait at airports, in homes, on street curbs.
You will wear your new lipstick. Call it “Look at Us, All Want & Tongue.”
Your husband will not stand still for a photo. You will rise when a favorite song comes.
D Dave just sent Lily a link to a short video about wolves being introduced to Yellowstone National Park. She’s at work, at her desk, her headphones on to listen to white noise to drown out Red, a senior writer who works nearby and never leaves, not even for lunch. It’s noon and everyone else has fled—if not to grab a bite in Harvard Square, then to go to the gym, the bank, to Trader Joe’s, to the river to let the fresh air do its salubrious work.

Turning off the white noise proves distressing since Red is in the throes of typing, which for him is a lift-and-smash gesture akin to violent puppeteering. When Lily started working here last July, Red told her he’d first learned to type on a typewriter. As explanation for his clatter, this makes no sense. But this is apt, in that it feels emblematic, since little about this
job—including her being here—makes much sense. She’s a copyeditor at an academic publishing house, working on textbook materials as well as the company’s marketing efforts and internal documents. This is her first editorial job, and, nearly a year in, she’s learned no one is amenable to being edited. They take as personal affront her recasting their sentences, so now she just shuffles commas and—during her more ambitious moments—makes phrases parallel and un-dangles modifiers. To be hired as an editor who mustn’t edit: she wonders if other jobs function this way. But no one would hire a lawyer not to argue nor a doctor not to doctor. She’s uncomfortable being this superfluous. Meanwhile she’s paid more than double what she was making as a grad student—a life that required a Herculean work ethic.

Her job is terrible. Being a grad student is terrible. But she’s not allowed to think everything is terrible, so she’s taking a Year Off to decide what she wants from life, which—she’s aware—makes her insufferable. Her mother talks of this as her doing a long-term cost-benefit analysis. Lily thinks of it as a weighing of merits and detriments. Of course she thinks this way, her mother says. Five years into her PhD in English for Christ’s sake. That profanity has so much tangled within it: pride mixed with jealousy mixed with worry and love. Her mom is an administrative assistant to a dean at Mount Holyoke, a South Hadley girl who, fresh out of high school, got a job as a secretary at the college and then worked her way up. Her father—Lily’s grandfather—was a police officer, a tough guy who didn’t believe in schooling for women. Her mom graduated from high school in 1978, and Lily finds it astonishing some people still, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, thought as her grandfather thought. Lily’s mom says Lily can thank her for throwing all that sexist garbage out the window. Lily, who went to Mount Holyoke tuition free and then, after a few years off—first bussing tables and then working in her alma mater’s study abroad program—went to Yale to pursue her PhD: she is grateful. And she’s mindful of her mother’s hope for her. Once Lily asked: “How did you choose Lily?” She’d have imagined her mother naming her Ruth so she could grow up to be a Supreme Court justice; or Joan so she could wage fierce war. “Like a lily among the thorns,” her mother had said. “From the Song of Solomon. When you were born—first placed in my arms—the phrase sung in my head. You were the beauty among my days. You were the good.”
She wishes she could assure her mother—who didn’t have many options in life—she’ll figure it all out. She wishes she could assure herself as well.

Red breaks to slurp something from a mug, then resumes clattering. She clicks on the Yellowstone link. Wolves loping through snow, white and gray with yellow eyes. A fairytale breed: strong, faintly evil, impassive. Fourteen wolves, the video explains, were introduced into Yellowstone National Park twenty years ago. A deer runs into water, all splash and spray, as a wolf chases it, then drags it down. Introducing wolves, the voice-over explains, led to a rapid decrease in the deer population. She hits pause to let her heart rate slow and studies her halogen-lit environs: thin carpet, desks rife with paper and textbooks.

She resumes the video, and an elk ambles into some sage-shaded bushes. The voice-over continues to speak of deer who started—because of the wolves—to avoid areas where they were easy prey. Later she’ll ask Dave why he sent this link. The video displays a time-lapsed sapling unfurling and explains that deer leaving certain spots allowed aspen and willow trees to grow again. And with these trees came more bugs and berries, which, in turn, let birds return to the land: geese with beige breasts and elegant black necks; a woodpecker, a flare of red on its head, pecking a hole in a birch. With the birds came the roughly furred beaver, here shown industriously chewing a log in still water. Their dams attracted otters and muskrats.

More wolves. Howling, noses to the sky, sharp lower teeth exposed, breath pluming in the chilled air. Wolves also kill coyotes. And the violence is necessary and good, the video suggests, because brutality leads to greater diversity. Another loop of similar logic: less coyotes lead to more mice and bunnies, who became the prey of red foxes, badgers, weasels, and hawks—all of whom had previously stayed away.

The voice-over becomes blunt: the wolves returning meant a better balance of predator-to-prey relationships, which lead to a greater diversity of species, which allowed for more ecological stability.

Once more, wolves, in predatory lope, cross the snow. One is the color of mink but with the same light evil eyes. Definitely she needs to ask her boyfriend why he sent this link.

But before any more of her lunch hour elapses, she’ll run home to
make herself a sandwich. She sets aside her headphones and grabs her satchel. She lifts her hand in a gesture of farewell, and Red looks up startled—as if she’d gone over to his desk and started pounding on it.

As she’s walking out, Sara, a project manager, is walking in, carrying a bag from the Thai place up the street. “Hi, Lily!” she says. “Off to get some lunch?” Lily murmurs she’s walking to her apartment. “Ah, youth!” Sara says. “It must be nice to be so unburdened.”

Lily puts in her earbuds. She’s not that young—thirty-three—but she does annoy the shit out of Sara, so this talk of youth is code for a variety of sins, chief among them that Lily is an arrogant, overeducated upstart who took the job as a lark. Early on, Lily made the mistake of telling Sara she was taking a break from grad school to figure out her life, and Sara—a severe-looking woman, thick bangs, no makeup, a wardrobe consistent in its turtlenecks and cardigans—said it must be nice to try out a career with no pressure to have it actually work out. “No children?” Sara said to Lily in the communal kitchen. Lily shook her head. “Of course not,” Sara said, dunking a tea bag into a mug and smiling brightly to compensate for the sawdust in her heart.

“Oh, to be a Millennial!” Sara calls after Lily, who walks out of the building and into the delicate sunlight. The sky is turquoise and cloudless, the spring air smelling of tree pollen and gasoline fumes. Lily’s heart is a swarm of bees. She’s letting, as her mother would say, the bastards get her down.

She’s on JFK Street, her office on the second floor of a modern brick building designed to blend in with the older, more authentic architecture. Cars hum to her left and people quickstep along the sidewalks. She chose Harvard Square for her Year Off because, when young, she’d loved coming into Boston with her mom. Weekends they’d set out early, her mother driving the hour and a half to the Alewife Station, where they’d park to then take the Red Line into the city. They might visit the Museum of Fine Arts, the Aquarium, the Boston Children’s Museum, or they might, on spring days like this one, walk along the Charles, basking in the urban sunlight and watching the strong-shouldered crew teams racing their narrow boats. Lily often asked to walk through Harvard Yard, so they’d get off on the Cambridge side of the river and stroll across the campus: so much brick and pillar, so many students with book bags.
Her mother would chide her lightly: Harvard was more exciting than Mount Holyoke? Yes, because Mount Holyoke was home and Harvard was adventure—albeit with the connecting thread of familiarity. Clearly there’s still truth in this for her.

She crosses to Mount Auburn, entering literary-themed bar territory. She’s just passed Grendel’s Den and now approaches Daedalus. She misses her grad school cohort, who would love these bars. Her hyper-educated broke peers, all looking out to a horizon not expansive but ever dwindling, creating in them a claustrophobic edge. Next weekend, when Dave comes, they’ll go out for cocktails at Daedalus, which she can only afford because of her terrible job. She’ll drink two Ulysses martinis and giggle too hard at the Joyce reference after finishing her second. Dave will regale her with tales of the music department, of the trials and tribulations of becoming a musicologist, which might be one of the few degrees more reckless than hers in terms of its dismal job prospects. He tells her at least he’s not (still) trying to become a rock star.

Dave has been supportive of her taking time off, although he believes she should finish the degree. He tells her some delicate version of this every second or third weekend when he visits. At first she suggested they meet somewhere in the middle, some tiny town on the Connecticut border. She’d imagined this as seedy, romantic—as respite from both their lives. She’d pay for a motel room. They’d spend time in bed, the thin floral bedspreaad strewn with fast-food bags and his books, his musical scores, her novels. End of days they could get drunk on bad wine from a gas station down the road and sleep contentedly in the dry chemical air.

“I need a library,” Dave said. “A real one, at a research institution. Lily, I believe you’ll be living near such a library?”

So their ritual has become her waiting, those Friday nights, watching out her bedroom window for him to pull up. As he’s turning off his ancient Volvo, she’s rushing out to hug him. He kisses her forehead, and that press of his lips is like electricity, a hum coursing through her.

They spend much of their weekends in Widener, Harvard’s graduate library, that paean to higher thought. In Dave’s favorite study room, there’s marble, there’s a high-domed ceiling. They sit at a long wood table bedecked with brass lamps, each emitting a small glow. She misses the focus that comes from having too much to do: comp essays that need grading; tricky dry articles that require her attention; novels, biographies,
criticism that must be swallowed whole; chapters that must—must—get written so her adviser could point out their shortcomings. Instead, while keeping Dave company, she reads books that have nothing to do with her dissertation, because otherwise this wouldn’t be the Year Off. She’s noticed Dave bites his lower lip when working through an idea. He pats his right knee when something distresses him as he reads. Just before closing a book, he places his palm flat against a page, as if he’ll remember where he was through kinesthetic sense. She’s been observing him more because she’s less focused, more idle. This makes her feel dumb, less his equal, which concerns her even as her Friday-night elation never fades.

Because if she returns to her program, the chances they’ll, in the next few years, find jobs at the same university are infinitesimally slim. They’ll become albatrosses about each other’s necks, and one will, inevitably, have to defer to the other’s career—an inequality from which they might not recover. Or if she doesn’t return, then she can’t possibly move back to New Haven. She’s not told him, but watching everyone work toward their degrees while she flounders and flops would be slow poison. He’d find this irrational. Likely, it is. Now their love is young. Now their love can take some knocks. But when she looks ahead, she worries.

She arrives at Ellery, her street, with its mix of charm and grubbiness. Her apartment is in an old two-story house with a large maple in its front yard. Next door is an empty lot with chain-link fencing. Mostly the street contains brick apartment buildings delineated by their different-colored entryway awnings. And, at the block’s end, are several furniture stores. Tim, her roommate, calls their neighborhood the futon district.

She goes inside to the tiny foyer, her apartment to her right. Before her is a flight of stairs leading to the second-floor apartment. Joe, her landlord, is up there holding a large cardboard box on his hip. She calls hello, and he puts aside the box and comes downstairs. Joe, an engineer who retired early, has a moustache and wire-framed glasses and a slight slouch. He’s a calm, thoughtful man who bears no resemblance to any landlord she’s ever known. He prefers to rent to the academically inclined, so thank goodness Tim, even though he’s just scraping by working in the American Repertory Theater’s box office and bartending at an Irish pub in Davis Square, went to Carnegie Mellon and plans, in the fall, to apply to MFA programs in playwriting.

Joe picks up a broom he left lying against the banister. “One of the
MIT boys is trapped in Paris.” Both the upstairs neighbors, traveling now that the school year has ended, are post-docs. One is in Texas, visiting his parents. He does something with computational biomechanics. The one in Paris studies the metabolic processes involved in the nitrogen cycle. “He emailed to say he won’t be back for another week, but knows a package has arrived for him and hoped I could bring it inside his apartment.”

“That’s so nice of you, Joe.” Lily wonders what trapped means. Surely not unable to fly. More likely some meeting got delayed. Academics are prone to melodrama. She’d be the first to inculpate herself were anyone to ask.

If she’s still an academic—and it’s as if Joe were telepathic. “Franzen?” he says shyly. “Have you decided if you’ll return?” Oh, Joe! So few people care about her dissertation work. When she started her program, she imagined herself in a dreamy early twentieth century reverie of Wharton and James, but it turns out certain topics—periods in history, major figures—are so over-studied as to be, essentially, untouchable. She switched to contemporary lit, to the twenty-first century great American novel, and now, in fact, has so many things to say about Franzen, who’s clearly been waiting for someone to deconstruct his thinking about the Midwest, railroad tracks, class issues, about—of course—freedom. She knows the answer Joe wants. He’s firmly in the camp of The More School The Better.

“I’m giving myself until June to decide.” Her adviser has given her until June to decide.

“Your boyfriend was just here,” Joe says. “Came and went. I asked him how his studies were going, and he said, ‘Oh, you know. Musicology.’” Joe alternates the broom from one hand to the other. “I said I don’t know. And he laughed and said how you were right, I really was the nicest landlord in all the land.”

“Yes,” she says but is confused. “You really are. He studies American folk songs of the 1960s primarily within the framework of American songs of wartime—both protest and jingoistic—dating back to the Revolutionary War. Next time I’ll make him explain himself more thoroughly.” “Nicest landlord in all the land” is very Dave. But he’s coming next week. Unless he got his weekends confused—or she did.
“Johnny has gone for a soldier,” Joe says, and she laughs, letting herself into her apartment.

Tim, sprawled on the couch, glances up from his laptop. “Hey, stranger.” He’s still in his pajamas—a hot-pink T-shirt that says “Slay the cray!” along with plaid pajama pants. He tousles his hair, yawns, and winks. Acting, bartending, being a roommate: it’s all performance for him. He’s just woken up, and in a few hours, he’s off to the box office and then out all hours of the night with his actor friends. Once he gets to grad school, he’ll be more disciplined, he says. He also sees his current life as a kind of limbo.

“Joe just told me Michael from upstairs is trapped in Paris.”

“Trapped my ass,” Tim says. “Found himself a fine Parisian woman is more like.”

“Joe also said he just saw Dave, which doesn’t make sense.”

“Joe has lost it.” Tim yawns again and stretches, setting aside his computer. “I’ll have breakfast while you have lunch.”

In the kitchen, Tim takes a box of cereal from the pantry, and at the refrigerator, she hands him milk before reaching for the bread and turkey, tomato and cheese. He turns to the cutlery drawer. “Did I ever tell you my Craigslist disaster story? My senior year my roommate flunked out, so I had to find a new roomie quick. The first guy who answered seemed nice enough. But when he moved in, he had this cat.”

“Gross,” Lily says. She and Tim agree on their dislike of cats. Tim’s stories, mostly silly and outlandish, often soothe the part of her that thinks the whole world is absurd, which runs counter to another part of her constantly hunting for patterns, meaning, order.

“And he’s like, ‘Oh, he’s a sweet old dude.’ Then, like, two days later, I find my sneakers reeking of cat pee.”

“Gross!”

“It kept happening. If I left anything out, the cat would pee on it. ‘He doesn’t like your scent,’ my shitty roommate said. He had these stupid hiking boots—who wears hiking boots in Pittsburgh?—and I imagined throwing out just one. Because what could he do? Accuse me of it? No one throws out one boot and not the other.”

Tim rises to wash his bowl and offers to take her plate. “I was also taking a playwriting class, so I started imagining this as the perfect opening:
a stage with nothing on it except one boot. I finally kicked the guy out—but what really lifted me out of my funk was the idea that from my pain I could create art, from bad would come good, etc.” He sets the dishes in the rack and leans against the counter. “Then I read Waiting for Godot.”

“I haven’t read it.”

“What the hell.” He points to his shirt. “Slay the cray. What kind of English major are you?”

“The kind who reads novels.”

“Let’s stay focused,” Tim says. “On my boot drama. Waiting for Godot opens with Estragon struggling to take off his boot. Then the second act begins with his boots on stage. My original idea—my art born of personal strife—would’ve been considered derivative.”

“Not knowing from stage boots,” she says as he returns to the living room, rising to follow him, “I would’ve considered you a genius.” She’s grateful for his nonsense. “Today everything revolves around animals being introduced to new environments. Dave sent me a weird video about wolves being introduced into Yellowstone National Park.”

Tim is back on the couch, picking up his laptop. “I know.”

She grabs her satchel. “Wait. How do you know?”

He offers her his stage smile, all dreamy charm. “I was just agreeing with you.” But the way he just tried to sell her on his looks tells her the truth.

“So Dave has been here?”

Tim musses his hair as if swatting a fly caught in it. He sighs. “He has a surprise for you, alright?”

“What’s the surprise?”

“Then it wouldn’t be a surprise,” Tim says. “I’m trying here. I tried to distract you with false Beckettian tales.”

He made it all up? Of course he did. Her roommate wants to predicate his life on the construction of performed narrative. Then her shoulders go cold. “He’s proposing,” she says. It’s another decision when she already has a major decision to make. To be so weird and heartless right now: she disappoints herself.

“You didn’t hear it from me,” Tim says. “Get gone with you, Lily. You’re going to be late for work, and you have a big afternoon of being bored ahead of you. Email me if you want acting tips on how to feign surprise.”
“Tonight? He’s proposing tonight?”

Tim glances down and says he’s done talking.

She flees, a sprint-walk toward Harvard Street, and then to campus, its lawn already green, the tree branches delicate with early leaves. To return to work is to listen to four more hours of Red’s clattering. It’s to shuffle some commas and then feel useless—to hide that she’s cruising the internet, writing emails to Dave, listening to podcasts or audiobooks, and shirking what she should be doing during her Year Off, which is exploring alt-ac careers or making lists of pros and cons, of merits and detriments.

Today Dave has ensured, at least, she will consider her future. Her breathing is shallow. She sits beneath an oak tree and pulls out her phone, writing to Sara she feels under the weather and that she’ll catch up with any outstanding editing over the weekend. In a flash, Sara responds: “Monday, let’s have a quick powwow to make sure you’re on top of all your tasks.” Lily’s punishment for her bullshit will be to sit through a condescending meeting.

A game of Frisbee is happening before the church at the far end of the quad. Otherwise, the campus is quiet. Just a few going in and out of buildings—most likely grad students since summer classes have not yet begun. A guy in scruffy jeans, a striped sweater, his hair too gelled, comes out of Emerson Hall blinking as if the sun were perplexing. And can he get by on his tiny salary? And what hope does he have for a career?

She made eighteen thousand dollars a year to teach on top of first taking classes, then studying for her oral exams, then writing her dissertation. She could make a little more teaching summers, and she could bear it, she thought, since it was The Way Things Went. But if she were to spend many more years in such over-educated squalor? Because, no matter the hoity-toity-ness of her degree—assuming she gets her degree—her chance of landing a tenure-track position is bad. Seventy percent, Dave told her recently, of the academic workforce is adjunct. And her peers report back with horror stories: they go out on the market and aren’t offered jobs, so they adjunct, which means making the same—or even less—than they made as graduate students. Or they get hired but at schools they never heard of in towns they hadn’t known existed.

They all, at points, had naïve dreams of lives filled with books, engaged students, engaging scholarly pursuits. She used to imagine
summers. She’d have tenure. She’d be sitting in a large office, her desk overlooking a screened-in window. Maple branches would hang low, a canopy of green and shifting, dappled light. She’d be reading *The Age of Innocence*. She’d been slow, too, to disillusionment. Wasn’t she part of a meritocracy? If she worked hard enough couldn’t she attain some mild version of her dream? She once said this to her adviser, who laughed and asked if she were from New England. She nodded. “The Protestant work ethic is alive and well within you,” he said. Of course, he’d had tenure since before she was born and his office had views of Yale’s gothic spires, a faded oriental rug, and a velvet divan straight out of Freud.

Then the holidays before last her mother had insisted she get her butt back to South Hadley. But she hadn’t set aside enough for Christmas presents or meals out or drinks with old high school friends. The Protestant work ethic, yes: existing below the poverty line required constant thrift. So she returned to school with her credit card maxed out and thirty-seven dollars in her bank account. And then, standing under a gray sky in a Wegman’s parking lot, watching people burdened by winter coats and full carts amble toward their cars, she had a superannuated moment of clarity.

Behold the families with their children and their eight bags of food! Consider the gallons of orange juice, the jumbo packages of toilet paper, the bags of dog food designed specifically for elderly pets. Voilà the suburban hum, the dullness of lives not in crisis being led. She went into the abundant store and slunk about, choosing some bread and cheese, a few cans of tuna, some oatmeal. She felt shame. Her vocational pursuit was indulgent and impractical, and she was—no matter her constant diligence—a failure.

And here she is now. But Everything Cannot Be Terrible. All the advantages she’s been given in life? That Saturday afternoon over six years ago: her mother was sitting at the kitchen table reading the paper, drinking coffee. Afternoon light illuminated her mother’s gray roots in her hair’s otherwise auburn tint. Lily had just returned with the mail—with the fat envelope from Yale. Her mother put down the paper. Her lips formed an O. “Yes,” she said. She raised her fist. “Yes!”

Her phone pings: an email from Sara setting up a “check-in” meeting Monday at nine in the morning with an accompanying note: “And you seemed the picture of health as you left for lunch, too!”
She clutches the grass near the oak’s roots, ripping it, rolling it between her fingers and letting the crushed green stain her palms. Even if they all seem fraught, choices are thick about her. Lily among the choices.

“Tim,” she texts. “Was any of the cat story true?”

“I had a shitty roommate with a shitty cat who peed on everything. And he wore boots. And I had just been flipping through Beckett. Some truth? Please don’t have a breakdown.”

“I’m not having a breakdown,” she writes. Then: “I can’t figure out the truth of anything.”

“Lil, construct from the day whatever helps get you through the day. Who cares about the truth? I have to shower before I head off to the ART. No breakdowns.”

She thinks again of that weird video Dave sent her. Why send a video about wolves the day he’s going to propose? Much more normal would be to email her song lyrics he likes or small anecdotes about his day. She pulls out her phone to watch it again. Several overarching ideas occur to her: violence is necessary for the greater good of creating diversity; diversity leads to ecological stability; introduce one new element into a system and everything changes.

She thinks: maybe Dave is suggesting marriage would be the new element in their ecosystem, shifting everything else into greater balance. She’d find a vintage lace dress and wind a crown of flowers in her hair. He’d wear that expensive light blue suit his mom bought him for his brother’s wedding a few years back. They’d get married on campus at Battell Chapel, because the chapel has soaring ceilings, a mammoth pipe organ, walls gilded in gold and jade. Dave tells her its acoustics are wonderful. Their ceremony would be brief, but there’d be so much music—his classmates, his professors, and him. Classical guitar and wind quintets and she and Dave would come out into gray air, blinking too quickly, their hearts alight. They’d have a keg party in someone’s backyard, the fence strung up with cheap Christmas lights. She’d return to school with renewed vigor, and they’d make a pact to go only where both were hired. Which would mean a sprawling Midwestern campus, a Michigan State, an Indiana. She’d become accustomed to corn fields and open roads. She’d wear print dresses and pin back her hair: the hipster professor. They’d have a tiny ranch house and invite their neighbors over for summer barbecues.
She thinks: but the wolves created ecological stability through increased diversity. So maybe she and Dave are stronger if they vary their pursuits. They’d get married, but then Dave—still with two years of dissertation writing left—would move to Harvard Square. He’d travel back regularly to New Haven to meet with his adviser, and she’d compensate for his lack of teaching income by finding a new, but reasonably paying, editorial job. The job would be calm and let her edit. She’d not be in a tempest of clattering racket and called a Millennial all day long, and the time would be dull but not unbearable. Then they’d be off, paper lanterns in the wind, to UCLA, because Dave would’ve landed his dream job. They’d live in Brentwood, in housing reserved for faculty, and weekends they’d drive to Malibu or Santa Barbara: somewhere with expensive views of the ocean. At first she’d be a faculty wife, but soon she’d get involved—through a friend of a friend—in screenwriting, adapting short stories and novels. She’d spend her days in a coffee shop, slim laptop before her as she sipped icy drinks and thought about how to construct pithy dialogue and external movements from heady, interior texts.

She thinks: what if that video signaled Dave’s subconscious anxiety about dour outcomes? What if the violence necessary for the greater good is emotional violence? What if she walked home now to find rose petals strewn about the apartment and too-easy classical music wafting from the living room? The music would be Vivaldi’s Spring, which would remind her she has only a month left to decide about school, and then Dave would emerge from her bedroom and drop to one knee, snapping open a small velvet box. And she’d be horrid and shake her head and tell him she didn’t see how she was expected to make all major life decisions in the next thirty days, and couldn’t he have accounted for this before he’d scattered petals everywhere? She’d tell him of the hopelessness of them staying together as academics—and the hopelessness of him becoming an academic and her just being his wife. She’d be saying no now in order to prevent a future in which they flamed out and caused each other tremendous pain. Dave would rise, his knee shaking, and slam the velvet box closed. He’d call her a self-absorbed bitch. He’d say he hoped she spent the rest of her life at her terrible job until she was old and withered and had gone knackers with boredom and sadness. Then he’d rush out, start up his Volvo, and drive off into the Cantabrigian
night. She’d sit on the front steps and cry into her knees. Joe would come out holding a broom and ask if she’d been locked out of her apartment. She’d be crying too hard to answer.

She thinks: greater diversity leads to greater stability. They’d both be better off alone. She’d come home to find Dave in the kitchen. “Hi!” he’d call. “Surprise!” She’d find boiling water on the stove, salad bowls out, candles lit. In the blender would be Dave’s arugula pesto, thick and yellow green. Garlic bread would be warming in the oven. He’d open the freezer and pull out two pints of gelato from that place she loves in the North End. “One for each of us.” He’d hand her a pint and suggest she grab two bowls. Why not begin with dessert? Why not have what’s sweet and easy first. He’d have bossa nova playing in the background, which they both unironically love. He’d stir the boiling water and add a pinch of salt. He’d say, “Hey, I think we should get hitched.” And he’d raise an eyebrow comically high. She’d laugh. “Who is this beau of mine with his impromptu actions and his impromptu gestures? Can I eat some gelato first?”

And they’d eat gelato, which would ruin them for the pesto pasta and garlic bread, but they’d pack up the extra food for tomorrow’s lunch at the library. That night, they’d sit in bed and watch endless hours of something mindless, and she’d whisper to him right before he fell asleep that she would, in fact, think about it. His eyes, sleepy, would still brighten, and he’d kiss her on the forehead.

And by the time she’d have the courage to tell him no, she’d be back in the department and the fall semester would’ve begun in earnest. Nor would she say no outright. She’d suggest they both finish their degrees and see where they’re at in a year—there’s no rush if they love one another. His eyes would be less light, but he’d say okay. And she’d call her mom and say they’d talked about marriage, but she’d been level-headed and had asked if they could wait before committing, and her mother would be delirious with relief—her mother who’d never married herself, who’d only ever said that Lily’s father was “out of the picture” by the time Lily was born. Another thorn, but she’d still had her blooming girl. And Lily would have a child too—just not with Dave. She’d get lucky enough to land a gig at some tiny New England liberal arts college. Dave would go where the musicology winds took him. They’d write each
other often—and then less often—and then she’d strike up a romance with a history professor. Late in life for such things, but she’d settle: have a child, a spouse, a home. She and Dave would still care for each other, but their love would be in the past. All her angst would be.

She looks toward the library, studying Widener’s wide stone steps, its pillars and main door, above which is the Harvard crest and motto etched in stone: Veritas. Dave is standing before the door watching her, his head cocked as if he were a curious bird. She’s imagining this because Dave isn’t here, but then—oh!—of course Dave is here. He left her apartment around noon and has been hiding out in the library doing his work—planning to stay there until he returns to Ellery Street to, ostensibly, surprise her. She thinks: if she just asks him what he meant by sending the wolf video, she can figure it all out. She just needs to understand his intent. And then she realizes she’s smearing her palms against her eyes to get rid of her tears. Dave is walking over, watching her cry. He’s going to ask what she’s doing sitting, crying beneath a tree in Harvard Yard. Lily among the options and right now she has to choose.
SARAH PERRIER

EPITHALAMIUM

Uncork this bottle of wasps—the edge of the wilderness is close by, and a woman waits there, broken at the shoulders, her waist a circle of hay, her spine a broomstick tacked in place with duct tape. In her skirts a space of branches fit for such a nesting as theirs. We carry this danger to her together; we call this danger a marriage.
The mirror holds the days down, wide eyes how I’m
folding back my secrets. In the pines we shiver. Not

a single star could curate this mess—the sky is so asleep
that the animals think we’re gone. Remove the denim—I’m

left with skin. How do we bury ourselves here, aching up
into the open arms of sugar, wearing a cotton dress for

another last dance under amethyst moon? Crawl into the
forest floor, moss wrapping around my feet—another fight

for me to forget tomorrow when I run away again into
an anxiety rhythm. Listen for the crows here in the

bluebonnets. Listen along the highway, car bereft of magic,
casting eyes from mirrors. You know I’m too warm—and

you know that the sun is only asking for another eclipse. I
reach into my stomach for a day’s swallowed bones—don’t

wait for me, though. Wait for the girl inside of me. Learn to want
her lips and her hands, her elbows and knees still as soft as the

primroses in your garden—a whole world can grow in concrete
and here are the pretty whispers I shove into the cracks when I

know you’re watching, hold tight in my hands when I am
sure you’ve gone away, red. In the pines we shiver, still alive
and letting the damp of rain keep us like dolls. Here comes the real, the restless, the animal hunger that I hold tight with both arms—I die here every night just to see the ghost in the cotton dress calling back at me from the other side of tragic.
TISHA WEDDINGTON | VELVATEEN, 2002
24” X 24” | OIL ON CANVAS
HILARY VAUGHN DOBEL

YEAR ONE

It wasn’t summer but we decided it should be.
I wore the blue dress, then a white one,
and was too worldly
to suppose myself a different person.
What is love, however troubled, to the sweep
of someone telling you they see
what you hoped they would see,
to hold that in their sights
even as it harms or hunts them.
It was hubris to say
I would stay unchanged
until it was too late,
the belief I was sufficient
for my own limited purpose,
my litany of small and careless refusals
that brought me to this cliff’s edge
wondering if the hills behind me
ever made the sound of joy
when the wind bustled through them.
But you were there beneath me all that time
in the white chalk of the earth
that crumbled as it tried
to bear me up.
TWO WEEKS LATER

For the fourth morning in a row the TV was on when I rolled downstairs. The kitchen door unlocked. I imagine only the implications. And now, sunset. The sky cutting out

the rooflines’ many eccentric hats
with its X-Acto knife, the sky keeping
back from me and the baseball bat
I hold in a stance only partially rehearsed.

I am not a deliberate killer but credible sources tell me it takes less than one might think.
The night, bounded, holding itself delicate
as a cheekful of champagne, the silence

awkward and prolonged as childhood. Tell me it isn’t like this, isn’t intimate, the living and the dead aligned like lying beside someone close enough
that every instant you’re not touching is a choice.
the office exercisers march
down the path
to oblivion. A tree branch
dips in the wind, leaves
testing the river
like a child
by the side of the pool,
toe first. Back home
my husband
is putting on his work shirt,
ready to bike to the cafe
and wash dishes
for minimum wage
plus tips. And downtown
people are building
a vigil for the fourth man
in my city to be murdered
this year
by the police. His family
is threading the hedge
he died under with flowers,
improbable red blooms
sewn into the greenery.
They are taking back
the intersection, they are making it
beautiful, the only thing
it feels useful to do.
TISHA WEDDINGTON | HEARTLAND, 2018
24” x 48” | OIL ON CANVAS
John Paul Martinez

Maybe Next Sunday

Tonight, the moon is a muted blue beacon.

Cream light pools across the carpet

while in bed, I rest awake. Midnight rushing traffic

sounds like an empty shore and between us, the length

of three long states. Its distance makes the day grow longer.

I am slowly learning how to miss you effectively.

I sleep on postcards. Pluck flowers in one large strum. I sit at home halving apples for later, eyeing them brown like leaves.

I find comfort in knowing that when we long for,

we are watching the same empty sky or instead the floury stars.

I want to cup the Pacific in both hands and hold it above you,

spilling.
TISHA WEDDINGTON | MISS FIX IT, 2009
30” x 40” | OIL ON CANVAS
DAVID GILLETTE

OUR SPAN OF THREE

... IT’S STILL WARM as breath out here on the edge of the desert, where the sun dropped and Mother said I shouldn’t be because of the Mexicans, but to hell with her because it’s not only desert now, it’s an air base and flyers, gasoline, oil, and viscous clouds of diesel exhaust. It’s the might of the U.S. government with runways stretching for miles in every direction, their green generators, trucks and hangers hulking behind that long steel fence, coyotes running and calling to each other across the arroyos that cut down from the hills. Mexico is farther beyond, forgotten and old tonight. The propellers and engines roar around us like a den of animals chained in the dark. A few of the planes escape with a screech over our heads as we shoot across the end of the runways. Their red lights riding at wingtips and atop the tails, the white light leading
from the nose, quickly receding as fading embers in the black sky. Men and motors ascending all around us as fields of fireflies, swarming eastward, tipping over the edge in an honors cavalcade of comets. There’s all of us crammed into Ciena’s convertible, too many; we breathe in, make thin, to squeeze among us one too many more. Someone has her hand on my naked thigh, clutching me for dear life but also moving her fingers teasingly against my skin, nails furrowing, dragging like soft rakes. I press my other leg in to hold her, she shoves up, deeper, to touch me. Her fingers delicate but insistent. Who is that? So brazen with everyone around, but still secret, secure. Hidden, as well it should be. She’s mine for now. We’re all screaming, jostling one another, pushing, jabbing, holding on, tickling, shouting at the wind. Her hand casually slips away. Joins the others. Who was that? How did she know? Doesn’t matter, we’re holding everyone, hands, legs everywhere. Too many of us for one small car with the top tossed back, clutching each other just to stay intact. We were barely friends, mostly strangers at the time, even still I never felt that way again, so open for yes with girls met only moments before. I’m so cautious, careful, standoffish since she left me, left us. Stiff. Alone, now. Marooned inside this empty white room with daisy curtains that are not my choice. Why is that? How does that ease, that relief of wind on our faces leave us? Where does it go? I want her hand between my thighs. I’m desperate for it again, skin to my skin, man or woman it doesn’t matter. No one touches me now. I want that night thrown forward to me, but there is no one left to play. All flown.

There’s a white light over the door, blinding as we approach, with red lights, one at each corner, topping the dusty gutter and drainpipe tips mirroring the wings of their planes. They planned it that way, certainly. To impress us, a huge propeller resides horizontal over the doorway. We are sucked through the intake to where it’s roaring hot, steamy and smoky raw, slightly putrid with pooled beer, disagreement, push and tease. Someone manning a spot from the stage sweeps the dance floor like a searchlight. There’s a cheer—swear to God—a cheer when the spot locks onto us, ablaze in our simple flower dresses, bobby socks, scrubbed clean and fresh. The men descend to light cigarettes, fetch copious drinks, their arms finding our waists, hands in our hands, tugging us away in twos, threes, leaving me alone where I defend my corner, firmly saying no
to each bold, big, rough one—the type I always attract: it’s what I expect. They’re coming at me due to my blue dress—cobalt, silken and rich: no flowers, never flowers, even as a child—ignorantly obstinate, my mother called me when I demanded one color, no pattern. When I saw the material on the bolt, deposited well below the others, I ran my hand along it, my fingers pressed between the layers, tracing that vein of supple mineral through the cottony earth, the soil soft and forgiving as my nails dug in. I pulled it to the light to pin, mark, cut—sewing myself into it tight till it becomes my shield, my sword, my beacon tonight. “Jesus, Mary and Joseph,” Ciena whispers in my ear as I slip into her car, she touches my just re-stitched seam, running her finger down my shoulder. “Aren’t you the one summoning jewel thieves this evening.”

The spot sweeps by again, pausing behind him as he sidles toward me, casting him into shadow, suddenly all swagger. “My dear Lord, you are a vision. Come dance with me. You must dance with me. They will clear the floor for us, darling.” He holds his arm toward me, beckoning with a slow turn of his palm. So close now I clearly see how he gazes into and through me, toward what’s next. He’s lit with that shit-eating smirk of inevitability, always knowing what’s coming, my cowboy clairvoyant. The spot sweeps around again. The sweat on his arm glistens, quivering a-tip his blonde hairs, a drunken barroom dew. I love those arms, his tight muscles pointing to his knobby wrists like arrows. When he pushes me back against the mattress, pinning me there in the half-light mornings before leaving for the mine, all grin and sweat and grimace, me pushing back into him hard until we’re sore. Gasping. I’m aware of him in me, on me, all through the day until he sweeps back to us with the lingering dark air of diesel and dust even after showering in the changing room. She takes him first, then us together. She loved that combined scent more than I, but we share it nevertheless, the essence of earth between us, the bed in which we lay. “You’ve gotta dance with me now, darling. You have no choice. We’re gonna clear the floor, you and me. We need all the space we can get. They’ll step away, you’ll see. Make us a circle. Give us the room, create a show. Come along now, Blue. Let’s dance.”

... Three days.

Three days with him inside me, until I have touched every corner of
him, tasting unlike any other. I’ve had many fumbling boys, but he is my first man. Later we tell everyone three days because it sounds so simple. Mother hates him. Thank God. No ceremony, just the courthouse and a backroom consummation fare-thee-well. So long Texas. I box my books, head to his mother’s in Salt Lake, wait for him there with the others working alongside her at the parachute factory. All women, sewing and rigging with ratcheting machines spitting forth fleet after fleet of silken sails. Three days, I say, when others ask. It’s a love story we tell to make it simple, make it less to conceal much more. I want him and I want her. He wants me and she needs him, inhales him deep as an intoxicating, calming vapor. We can’t tell this to anyone so we say three days of whirlwind romance, just the two of us, the trope that makes it possible to hide her—the obvious third—obscure us in plain sight.

His mother is away for two weeks, attending to relatives in Colorado, leaving me alone in her large house with time to fill so I add the extra shift for longer days, more pay. Those late-hour shifts rotate in unison and contrast so there’s always stragglers coming in, going out, as the clock works its way around. That leaves the two of us alone in the changing room by happenstance one early evening. She works with the machines at the far side, another building entirely. I am washing away simple sweat and exhaustion, she must remove soot and black oils. So many of the women are shy, closing the curtains tightly around the shower, their arms in, eyes down as they bathe, covering with towels as they go. I follow convention, mimic, but am not them. I watch. She is next to me. The curtain between is backlit, nearly transparent. She shifts her weight as a twisting silhouette in the steam, humming quiet and low to herself as she raises her arm high, leans in, allowing hot water to strike her neck, run down her back with a moan. I follow that flow, studying the soap and rivulets of her machine oil circling at our feet, mingling with my current in a whirl where we share the drain. Her skin is much darker than mine—which I’ve never seen this close, not like this—and I think that maybe some of her color is washing down with the oil. I tell her that years later, reminiscing in the morning after he’s left, and she holds my face in her hands, adopting his look of chagrin and surprise when I’ve said something that stops him mid-sentence, “Only someone so white would believe something so stupid, Texas girl.” When I look
up from the drain, she’s facing me through the curtain and can see I’m boldly watching her. She doesn’t turn. She knows the way women like us consider one another, how we understand this shared lack of hesitation, this naked regard. She knew me right then, I knew her.

We dress together and don’t talk. Just observe, study one another buttoning, tying, adjusting, primping. Outside, in a corner filled with shadow, she lights a cigarette for me and touches me for the first time. We kiss, stop, listen for others, kiss again, then break apart, managing to barely maintain that minimal distance between us until we’re back at his mother’s house where we come quickly and tightly together, hidden magnets, alone with each other. She has switched on the lights in the bedroom, drawn the shades to create a private theatre so we see everything as we undress, explore, intertwine. She stays for three days, my first coupling of this kind—so open and long, equal—feeding a rich secret that fills the house. Everything before had been an encounter, only a moment, an hour or afternoon at most followed by recrimination and regret, saying never again to myself, or to her. Now the house is ours and we leaven it with the savory secrets of one another. I discover the space at the back of her neck—my favorite, drifting into a hidden cove—where my chin fits snug as I press in, her head collapsing back in response, her long black hair curtaining over me where I smell her in every direction. I pull her into me, skin to skin, she reaches back to grab my thigh, holding on for dear life, and I lick along the line of her hair toward her ear, probing.

I begin telling him this in my letters, using our shared code of Chaucerian ribald, where he has been Nicholas to my Alisoun in the cryptic stories that allow us to slip through the war censors who would otherwise quickly delete or destroy anything too carnal, too direct. To those cautious, military readers we appear insufferably bookish, dreary bores discussing the importance of Canterbury and its people; all the while, as I pretend at Chaucer, I’m overcome with delight by the disarming knowledge that he is also a lover of old words, old stories, like me, something he has never shared. The way he writes in response with his own secretly salacious prose reveals that he is still referencing the three small books I placed in his hands the day he departed—our “codebooks” I called them. I never imagined I would find a man equally enamored of
these parchment pieces. Certainly not a man plucked from the Texas desert. I thought these dusty treasures were only for voiceless librarians, or apostates trapped in a spire, or odd ones like me, squirreled away, nestling and nibbling in the stacks. But he knows me in every way now, from book to body to papery self.

I reveal my cloistered desires before he leaves, when we are in bed, trembling, filling each other with fantasies and stories as I tell him every detail about my other girls—first as flirtation for him, then as bare, direct fact, an unburdening I did not, at first, intend—knowing that every freighted, truthful word I utter may be the very one that drives him away. Even saying it out loud, in all the particulars, is terrifying, each syllable feels alien crossing my tongue—I have never told a soul. It doesn’t worry him, he says, his shit-eating grin creeping in. He claims he already knew, that it makes him love me more, and I believe him. There is no jealousy, no disgust, no withdrawal. Then he confesses his own unease with the rituals of men, his comfort with women; he tells me of his distaste for things popular and accepted, his lonesome desire to stand apart to watch and consider. I stumble across this softness in him I hadn’t imagined before. His desire to step outside himself into another, to observe, study, become a woman looking out. He is remarkable to me, expanding volumes as he tells me of drifting from boy to man, never sure of his place, afraid in his skin, seeking solace, refuge from himself, from other men. He saw rescue coming, he says, the moment he waltzed to me across the dance floor—saw his future, our future, looming behind my blue dress as a smoky projection.

“We share this understanding between us ... for women. It’s our secret no one needs to know, because it’s ours. It is what sets us aside.” He knows he is my only man as he holds my secrets, and I his. In our letters back and forth, we transform Alisoun’s Nicholas to a she, to Nichola, a darker, desperate her, whom we nurture in our expanding story that drifts between us on tissues of paper in thin military envelopes, some stamped Opened by Censor, but most stay undisturbed, marked simply Passed By. He can only imagine our Nichola where he flies over Pacific islands with the letters linking back to me, but I encircle her actual in my arms, between my legs where I hold her for those first three days, then for three months, then for the remainder of the year as the war winds
down. In those three days she and I construct an imaginary family tree to situate her as my long-neglected cousin from Kansas City, accidentally thrown together now in Utah. She is, in reality, without family and this story offers her one. We most importantly require a fiction for his mother’s return, something she will accept without question. I know a tale of reconnecting family will settle well with her. Weeks later, his mother tells me she is pleased I have re-discovered a displaced relative, “Someone to share your evenings. So it’s not just you and an old woman with her radio. I would be out with my girlfriends too at your age, with the men away, you waiting like this. It’s so good for you, like sisters, you two. If you don’t mind my asking, where are her people from?”

“Georgia and Tennessee for the most part. She was raised by her aunt in Kansas City, who recently passed.”

“Made her way to Utah all alone, like the others at the factory. Women are so shaken and scattered by this war.” His mother clicks her tongue, disapproving of the many injustices and disorders she can do nothing to resolve. “The poor thing. So good you found one another. Found family, however that may be.” Does she know? Could she suspect? Could she even imagine? I don’t believe so, and yet she is a hardened, life-learned woman protecting her own secrets—the disappearance of her husband, for one, how she was left alone in the Oklahoma oil fields to raise her four wild boys. She has only referred to him once, in passing, simply as “That man, their father.”

**I SEE HER AGAIN**, leaning at the edge of the doorway when the children tumble into the room smelling of hay and fresh manure from the ranch.

She is someone I don’t know, but is perhaps someone I see every day? I feel a repetition clicking inside me, clocklike, a ticking when I see her, a habitual coming back and coming back.

Those scents, the soil and soft harvest hay.

She’s from the ranch. Our ranch.

The boys always have mud clumped on their boots, thick gray clods that must be swept away when they’re gone, the carpet is vacuumed double where the mud has crushed underfoot. That Mexican woman with the Hoover mutters when she does it, pushing down hard on the handle, cursing them under her breath, which she should not do. Thinks
I can’t hear her, or speak Spanish, but I do; I hear, I see—they are family, the children, their shoes. They are my family and that Mexican woman shouldn’t say such things about them before me.

She is from the ranch like the rest but doesn’t step into the room. Always hovering beside the doorway. Why does she stand out there? The children chatter and scream and the girl holds my knee with both her tiny hands as she tells me things. Great-grandma, the children say, or Nan, but she—maybe four?—clings to my knee and calls me Na. “Na! Look see!” shouts the little one. “Look see!”

“What have you got there?” I ask, holding out my hands. “Show it to me, what’ve you got?” It’s a ball, a drawing, a clay figure, a phone, something that flickers and hums.

She doesn’t believe I can hear her by the door, standing in the hallway, doesn’t think I notice, but I do; I hear, I see. “She doesn’t like me much. Never has,” she tells the man in a white coat. “No use going in. I just upset her. Better to send in the clowns. She loves the little ones. I stay here. Out of the way. I’m why she’s here, after all. She knows that, despite everything. Doesn’t like me much.” I look around the white walls, at those daisy curtains I didn’t choose—that I would have never chosen. Are these my children? So young and sharp. All blonde, which is wrong. They seem too small, too swift for me beneath my shaking hands. The boys are rough and knock each other down. I don’t have boys—just our three girls: Lisa, Kay, and June. We lost Lisa to the cancer, too young, her children motherless. Kay lives in Phoenix … no … Chicago. June? That’s June by the door: our firstborn. I should have known that. I should remember. My fault. Always my fault. June is the child we brought to the ranch after that night with old Johannsen, the man’s sons trying to pull him from the card table—the land, the river rights, the road and the bridge, handed to us for three dollars on a wager, a misconceived dare by the old man. June is bundled tight in a blanket, I cradle her as we cross the bridge, the four of us now, and step firmly onto the land soon to be ours—the ranch, first child, our future.

**THE TELEGRAM TELLS US** he is to come ashore in San Francisco with the other men to reported ceremony and celebration. We prepare our stories again on our train trip to him, strengthening the branches of our
fictional family tree as we approach California. But no one asks. There is no interest in recitations of history, public or private. We do explain our history later, of necessity in the small, insular town where our false family grows through repetition and impromptu improvisation; a pale town where her brown skin demands classification and generates an anxiousness from her I have not seen before when questions turn probing, too direct. Explaining our togetherness through the fiction of family is the start of the end, lighting the slow-burn fuse that smolders and sputters to that concussive end. My fault, for all monstrosities to come; for the deceptions that pulled us to the edge and over—I am to blame.

But when all those men step off the boats—some in uniform, most not—crowding onto the docks and searching through the crowd, no one wants to speak of family future or past. There are no questions. Too much has been lost, too much dislodged, broken, out of joint. The ceremony is simply exhausted bunting, a sad military band. No speeches, no rank. Only scattered families, finding, holding, touching, clinging tight. Every family hastily collects their own and takes leave, as do we. He heaves his duffle into the bed of our just-purchased, run-down truck with our bags and boxes, then slides beside me, taking my hand as she drives us into the city and beyond, across vast countryside.

I see that he admires her already, studying the two of us, comparing her to Nichola.

We are far from the city, heading into desert plains when I announce that I need to learn how to drive.

“It’s about time,” she says.

“Take it slow, Blue,” he chides. “Remember, everything we own rides in back.”

I take the wheel in the middle of nowhere. She places her hand on mine, guiding the gear shift. He grabs tight to the door, comically bracing for catastrophe. Off we go.

Three weeks to drive from ocean to desert to mountains where we will join his brothers at their upstart Colorado mine—uranium, the new gold rush. We wander east as though we have no destination, talking, resting side by side with windows open, the desert air whipping around, whimsically misreading maps, radio music scratching through oceans of static. In northern Arizona we find a spot with a cabin where we lin-
ger day after day, no one for miles, enough food and stove wood for a week. We sleep deep into morning, pairing off, watching, taking turns exploring one another, reading our letters aloud, creating more stories, paging through the codebooks, swimming in the lake, gathering thick twigs to burn for the pit out front, making simple meals, drinking till drunk, resting by the fire, sleeping beneath three heavy wool blankets with our damp arms, legs, torsos woven together. For those three weeks we are never more than inches apart. I see he loves her because I do, just as I imagined and dreamed from the start. She moves between us as a shared breath. My entire life resides in those three weeks—my purpose on earth: composing, comprising that three, there, then.

**INTERLOPERS ARE WHAT THEY CALL US,** when they’re polite. Descending on this old ranching town, consuming it with dirty bars that sprout along main street as thick warts between fingers, ugly, grating, impossible to avoid. Fights every weekend over pool, money, cards, inflated pride, battles that start indoors then spill to the dirt alley behind. Drunken shootings at home from accident and anger—the miners all have a pistol, or two, or three, and they enjoy using them. New houses arise everywhere but they’re cheap ones, rough hewn, most become ramshackle heaps within a year. Transients, the ranchers call us, with no history, no respect for what they built prior to our arrival, before the maddened yellowcake rush. Treating the land like a casino, digging everywhere to extract riches, dumping refuse in slag piles along the way, spreading tailings ponds that glisten in the sun—alluring and deadly. Mining as a gaudy game requiring no skill, just brute force, endless machines, desperate men, smoking generators, and giant blowers that push air deep into rocky tributaries and crannies—forcing canned breath into ancient lungs. Miners buy new cars for idiot children who smash them within weeks, then callously buy more. When enough money is snatched, swindled, or squandered, the miners abandon their houses and property, leaving gates open to the town’s wild dogs, clothes still pinned on the line, cars collapsed and stripped for parts in the drives, the front door of every empty home gaping wide revealing all and nothing.

His brothers join all gatherings, every town committee, do their best to settle, to spread actual roots. Yet the older ranch families still treat us
like the other careless miners. They make no distinction for intention, and silently enforce a Sunday morning line down the church pews, separating old from new, rancher from miner. He’s beholden to his brothers for the mine they established for us to all share. He works hard, collects his money, which he scrupulously invests through the bank, manages the hiring of more men and eagerly volunteers to tend books in the office beside the mechanic’s shop, putting to use his easy facility with words and numbers. He’s no miner. He needs the wind, the sky. He tells me when we’re alone how the walls press in when he’s below, how nervous he is running the machines, how the dust crackles deep in his lungs and won’t leave him—nothing he would ever say to the other men, secrets and fears he won’t reveal even to her. She loves the diesel and dust in his hair, the ghost of soot and soil rising from his clothes, eager to claim him the moment he’s home, taking him by the hand to our bedroom where she undresses, kisses and caresses him, breathing him in deep, wearing his shirt as a trophy later on the back porch when she’s smoking. They shower while I cook and we eat together, doors shut to the outside, blinds dropped, always careful that no one can see. We know this cannot last. More fiction is required to explain our three, allowing us to blend, mimic, become invisible. We need more story that will allow us to join, pass for normal.

Joseph is not a thinker. “You don’t want a thinker running the skiff,” his brother says at dinner one night when talk again returns to managing the mine. “It’s a simple job, controlling that winch, with heavy loads coming up, men going down. You don’t want him thinking of too many things. You want him listening to the sound of the engine, holding tight to that handle, checking vibration, paying attention to be sure nothing goes wrong. Thinkers start dreaming, solving unnecessary puzzles. Thinkers get distracted and that’s when problems begin. That’s why we need Joseph running the skiff.”

Joseph is big, slow, tends to stutter badly when nervous, and has an eye for her that I notice long before anyone else; I decide he’ll be safe with her due to a tender shyness and shoe-staring reserve that sweeps over him when she’s near. Joseph has never had a woman friend as far as anyone can remember. The three of us agree one night to proceed with this deception, and she guides him into it, gentle, mostly keeping him
company, nothing more than holding hands, sitting close, asking questions about his day when others ignore him. It starts with a few meals together with us at the end of a shift, then trips to the lake with other families. He and I are kind and careful with Joseph as well, adopting him as we would a lost dog, a mislaid child. To the town this seems inevitable, they both appear apart from everyone so it makes sense they would come together—her skin, his simple mind and manner. We bolster the story: she maintains a public prim and proper facade, spending time with Joseph while we sit nearby as chaperones. She genuinely likes him, feels sorry for him—how the other men tease Joseph in ways he is unable to understand. But now I realize we teased him in far crueler fashion. One year proceeds as hoped, then another—our bond of three continues to interweave behind closed doors, but to the simpler world outside we have become a quaintly distinct four, coupled and divided as we should be, man/woman, woman/man.

“We found her” in the back field, barefoot in the snow, middle of the night, filthy with mud in her bedclothes, searching for Daddy. Thank God we found her when we did. Scared the hell out of everyone. She can’t be alone anymore, and we can’t leave her at the ranch. She just goes wandering, so I had to finally bring her here. But eventually... she wanders here too. They found her downtown in front of Sears, on a bench. Waiting, she said. Again, in the dead of night. Out there waiting for Daddy. And now, there’s that.”

She points at the blinking red light and black band clutched above my ankle, thinking I’m not paying attention. She believes I can’t hear her at the door, but I do; I hear, I see, I know. There are people all around me, coming in, asking me questions, different faces each day, black and white and brown, their first names on the plastic tag is all I have to go by. I read the names aloud, smile and say hello because that’s expected, makes them comfortable, and they ask me how I’m doing. “As best can be expected,” I say, or, “Dandy as the day is long,” which makes them laugh. I ask, “And how are you doing?” But I don’t care for their replies. No one is truly with me, no one I know. Even our daughter, June, standing at the door talking about me, she helps me from the chair sometimes even though I don’t need it—I’m strong, can walk for miles, but she steps
back quickly so others do the rest, strangers’ hands guiding me along the hallways with nudges, insistent fingers at my shoulder. Was I honestly looking for him? Why would I? He’s long gone, all flown. I know that. Just me now in this white room with daisy curtains—I would have chosen cloud white, or sky blue, not that cheap flower print, if anyone had asked.

**THE WAGER:** if he can raise an alfalfa crop on the land for two years running, then it’s ours for three dollars. The old man tosses it out as a slur, as if we can’t comprehend what he’s offering. Johannsen is arrogantly confident it cannot be done, no one in his family has raised a successful crop on that parcel in fifty years, especially not thirsty alfalfa. The ranch is expired and dry, good for parking equipment, gathering and loading cattle, little else. The problem is the river, running alongside the property with rights of access, but with water that snakes one hundred and fifty feet below ranch level at the bottom of a narrow sandstone canyon. The river might as well be one hundred miles away—it’s worthless for irrigation. The old man believes only an idiot, an interloper, a miner would think the property worthwhile. It’s well known in town that childish miners will buy anything on a whim. But I see my flyboy husband figuring, gazing at the future drifting beyond the old man’s shoulder, his shit-eating grin blossoming while he runs the numbers, assembles geometry, support struts, and wire rigging in his head. Johannsen demands that if the crop fails, he will reclaim the land, and also take our entire share of the mine—every earthen penny. “You have yourself a deal, old man. And we get the bridge?” Johannsen nods, shakes hands after angrily shrugging off his sons who for the last hour have been trying desperately to pull him home, away from the drink, the cards, and witnesses.

Within a week we start drilling with equipment borrowed from the mine. Everyone works. She and I are slathered in a welcome sheen of oil, sweat and soil. The men joke about our work clothes, the tools in our hands, as if we’re somehow at play. She shames them quiet by reminding them we have donned these uniforms before, like so many others, with much more at stake. Alongside his brothers, we build two large windmills that we attach to a bank of submarine batteries they retrieve from a salvage yard in Colorado Springs. With long cables and pipes, he rigs the
battery bank to a diesel generator and two spare pumps from the mine—one pump clearing air from above, the other pushing water from below.

We hire Joseph and two miners for a week’s work. The men rope themselves and their equipment to a winch line run by Joseph, then descend the canyon walls to the river’s shore, where they blast and burrow into the cliff face, inching each day closer toward the ranch. Eventually the drill from above meets the niche dug in at the base. The men burst their temporary dam. The river floods into the manmade underground pool. I throw the switch on the pump above which triggers the one at the pool, and we watch, wait. I chew my lip as she surreptitiously holds my hand to steady my nerves. He doesn’t flinch—knowing exactly what will happen. With a guttural gush, a small plume of brown water spills over the top pipe, leaking gallon after gallon of river water onto the land—our land. No cheers or applause, just shared satisfaction and relief. “I saw the whole thing the moment he said it couldn’t be done,” he boasts to us in bed, one drunken night after celebrating our first alfalfa harvest—seven acres of vibrant green, “I saw exactly where we are now.” My cowboy clairvoyant. We kiss, she slides him inside her, and we are transformed. He has left the mine for good. We are now ranchers, celebrities of a kind, the family that bested Old Man Johannsen through invention, guile, and mechanical force. Three dollars change hands, the deed transfers, and we hire a welder to fashion a large steel number three and mount it atop the bridge. The entrance to our small ranch—the span of three.

IT IS RAINING, which is rare so late at night that early in spring. It never rains at night. She has been away for the day at a wedding in Montrose, Joseph at her side. She would drive back, as usual, especially if he had been drinking. It’s nearly two in the morning. It rains harder the later it gets, so strange, disorienting. I’m in the kitchen, rearranging dishes, cleaning for no purpose. He’s in bed and has called me a few times to join him. June sleeps in her crib by the stove, curled tight around a doll, blanket bunched at her feet. I pull the blanket higher, barely touch her forehead, watch my daughter breathe, I think of canyon roads now jet black, slick at every deceptive turn. The phone rings so loud I step back, then pick up a receiver that is suddenly awkward, heavy in my hand “...
need to come into town ... your cousin ... Joseph ... a fight ... strangers ... trouble ... we’re searching ...” I don’t hang up, just leave the phone dangling, stepping backward and away where he’s waiting for me in the doorway. He doesn’t ask, already has my coat and boots ready. Does he know? Has he seen this all along? “We need to bundle, Blue. It’s cold.”

Five miles slowly descending our road, sliding side to side on a slather of mud flowing toward the bridge. June rests in my arms, wrapped tight, woken only for a moment as we shifted to the car but has been sleeping since. He nervously studies the edge where we could easily tumble over, tear through underbrush into the rocks, his work boots slipping deftly between brake, clutch, gas. His tongue gripped tight between his lips like those of a concentrating child. I see a hint of light ahead of us as we make the final bend, perhaps a reflection of moonlight returning from water and smooth rocks. Clouds part. The rain has ceased, becoming a mist that presses against the windows. I’m submerged in panic, holding my breath, shivering. We level out, our lights tip forward, catching against the bridge’s entrance, revealing Joseph’s red truck on its side, slammed into the concrete pylon, the remaining headlight shining at the river. He slows, our engine knocks twice hard then stops, silent. We coast the last few feet to our side of the bridge, wipers thwacking uselessly across the windshield, clearing then obstructing the scene before us. He switches them off and sets the brake with a yank. We both see something on the bridge at the same time, moving maybe, not sure what. “Stay here, Blue. Let me go.” He’s pleading, must know what he’ll find.

June’s close in my arms, but I don’t feel her against me, she’s become a still wrapping of cloth, a shape I have nearly forgotten—my fault forever after as I push, push away from her; so cold and abrupt, I become—making her always stand alone, separate from him and me, and how June hates me for it, generating a slow, persistent fury when she says my name, or calls me mother. She will never forgive me, and she shouldn’t. I have been a disappointment in every way. The hardening, all those years of argument with her, with everyone, began here, on the cusp of the bridge. He climbs from the truck, leaving the door ajar, and walks into our headlights. Engorged with rain and runoff, the river thumps and laps on the rocks below, stumbling against itself, echoing up under the bridge as a tinny, mechanical patter. Halfway across the span he stops,
kneels, reaches forward, then sits back on his heels. Beyond him resides a dark triangle of shadow framed by our headlight beams as they leave the bridge, fading into the far trees. The headlight from Joseph’s truck flickers in the same direction, dims yellow, then snaps off. The darkness ahead thickens. I taste gunpowder for the first time, only a wisp but definite at the back of my throat. I lay June on the seat, find a flashlight in the glovebox, and follow him.

They tell us later she arrived in town giddy from the wedding, giggling and singing, Joseph eager to celebrate at the Silver Bucket. Many people took notice because they had never seen her at any of the bars. Surprised, so unlike her, they say, as if they were seeing someone new—which, of course, they were, the hidden rising into view. Joseph is inspired by the wedding, making toast after toast, buying rounds he can’t afford, asking who will be his best man when the time comes. Strangers arrive and that’s when the evening turns, they tell us. The men make lewd comments about her skin, about being too dark to drink there. No one tells us exactly what was said—too embarrassed to repeat it—but I know, I’ve heard it time and again from my mother and the Texas brood. The strangers poke and prod at Joseph’s stutter, making as though they’re hard of hearing, asking him to repeat himself. No one can tell us much about the men—a crew no one has seen before. Idaho license plates, parked in front. It’s late, the rain has started, she’s tugging Joseph to leave as he shouts at the men, telling them to shut the hell up. The men rush over to start on him. She pushes and shouts, then one of them knocks her hard across the face.

Joseph was defending her, they tell us, adamant we understand he tried to do the proper thing. The men are punching him, using a full bottle as a club, taking turns. When he falls to the floor they kick his head, his neck, his back. Someone calls the sheriff, but she returns from outside with Joseph’s gun in her hand and shoots it into the wall. She leaves with Joseph leaning on her. Two of the men follow in their truck, and that’s all anyone knows. The families from town repeat apologies as a skipping record … they should have done more … would have stepped in sooner … if they’d only known … so sorry … so sorry.

He’s back on his feet by the time I reach him. He hears me coming, doesn’t turn, pushes his hand behind him, willing me to stop, but I
keep moving. I pass him then look over just beyond. Joseph is crumpled there, oddly, head back and open where he’s jammed the revolver barrel into his chin and pulled the trigger. Gun still in his hand. I pause just enough to see, to know, and keep walking toward the dark end of the bridge. All these moments arrayed before me—the overturned truck, the pylon, Joseph, the gun, the broken headlight—each one leading to the next as we descended from our ranch, the three of us in the cab, mother, daughter, and husband, oblivious. Gunpowder hangs in the air with the mist, a veil waiting for me to walk through. If we had only arrived as they approached the bridge, meeting them farther up the road, in time to prevent this. But no, it’s my fault. I can’t hold the light steady and the beam knocks around ahead of me but I know where I’m going. She wore my blue dress for the wedding and I’ll see it in the dark, I look for cobalt to shine back: it does. She lies at the entrance, alongside the shattered truck where Joseph has placed her delicately on the roadbed slats. Every part of her is broken, wet, sliced and torn. I sit by her, whispering her name, sweeping glass dust from the dress, smoothing it with my hand along her side, tracing with my fingertip the steady seam I stitched long ago. I finally release the breath I’ve been holding and pull the damp into my lungs, submerged with her now, rain dripping from the lattice above down to the river, joining the tumult where we drift.

**MY LIFE,** my purpose entire in those three weeks at our cabin, he’s in the sky blue lake, swimming out to the dock as we watch. I lean against the picnic table, her head in my lap, she glances over at him then up to me, that freckle in her left eye so prominent, piercing. With the soft stem of a daisy freshly plucked, I trace her face, the ridge line of her nose, the rim of her eyebrows, down her cheek into the shallow of her lips. She closes her eyes and for the first time since we met, she says that she loves me, so soft I can barely separate her voice from the stillness around, from the splash of his arms slicing the water, his feet kicking the surface—but I do hear her.

Was I truly looking for him? In the back field at the ranch, in this busy town and small room where they care for me now? Why would I look for him? He’s gone, all flown. That dusty rattle deep in his lungs grew louder once the girls were grown, overtaking him at last in our bed, on
the ranch, just the two of us at dawn when he passed. No one touches me since, as if I carry a disease; I exude emptiness. They keep me always at arm’s length—except for that little one, the smallest of the bunch who loudly calls me Na. She grips my knee, holding tight, eager to spill her entire world to me in one fast breath.

**I LIFT HER HEAD** into my lap, brushing her long black hair to the side as she liked. He leaves me with her, returning to check on June in the truck. I study her face, glad her eyelids are closed; Joseph has done that, perhaps thinking it would allow her to vanish. It’s cold and wet on the wooden slats recovering from rain. I do not mind. For hours, it seems, she and I rest together, listening to the river run.

I’m strong, can walk miles in the dark, searching for cobalt, where she stands ahead of me in our seven acres of daisies that I would have never chosen; I prefer instead the green of alfalfa, the expanse of sky blue. I step alongside, our fingers touch, intertwine. We walk across our field where together we plundered the depths for water, bringing forth thickets, nectar, and roots where for so long there has been only dust. The desert air is warm as breath as the sun drops, swarms of fireflies part before us forming a path to the open door lit bright and ready. Her hand casually drops away, joins the others as I cross the threshold and into the roar ... ♦
Your first glimpse of me frightened you
and made you cry: a stranger, scraggly beard
and glasses, a slack and weather-beaten face.
I can’t blame you. Even I, at times,
startle, catching myself in the bad light
of a bathroom mirror. So recently arrived,
you like one foot in the circle of the familiar.

I watch you at mealtime—mushing your food as if
you knew the truth of living hand to mouth,
slinging the heft and sweet muck of it
with such delight it turns your tears to laughter.
I might wish for you the gift already yours:
May you hold this joy in mind and turn to it
when you have grown, dear child, decorous and civil.
“TO SEE OUT, I look through my shadow.” This is the home Tina Mozelle Braziel frames in known by salt, her 2017 Philip Levine Prize-winning collection. Covering the wide expanse of Alabama’s waterways and terrain, Braziel draws her reader from dirt to a trailer’s cool underbelly to the studs of a home built by her hands. In doing this, she capitalizes on the way home can be both a place one is fastened to and simultaneously rebuilding.

Braziel layers several visions of what home is and can be. In the first section of the book-length quartet, titled Trespassing, Braziel writes of the blue collar of her first home. The section opens with a description of mending double and single wides, the natural beauty of grease, mechanics, manual labor. Braziel concentrates on this beauty: Dahlia bulbs, a girl who “dips paper boats in motor oil, / drops them in the lake to see them spin in ever-widening circles.” While the singlewide sits in view, so do the willow flies, the blossoms, her father’s salt capsules and grit, and home. In this section, Braziel shares sameness “with the hollow(s) dogs dug to bear puppies” when she crawls below the end of her trailer, but not before sharing her childhood home in a view of quaint, plain wonder.
Her grandma, Mozelle, is the woman who introduces her to the other side of living. Never does Braziel reveal this other side as a greener side, even when later in the book, an acquaintance calls flowers on the porch of a trailer “lipstick on a pig.” Her grandma walks her through the bones of a half-built home, and together they imagine what could be, how homes can be something built in the mind before they ever become a physical reality. She reveals this juxtaposition in the line “the house frames: the studs of entry and barrier.” Here, she references the blind boundaries of home by neighborhood, geography, socio-economic assumptions. Braziel is a girl in the shadow of a trailer seeing out through the eyes of her grandmother’s imaginings. The whole collection is built on this scaffold: the rotating and reflective views of home, especially in the eyes of the women hitched to the place.

In each larger section, known by salt also includes a set of four linked poems. In Trespassing each of these poems introduces Lay Lake through the viewfinder of a different community member. These views are witness to the lake’s force, whether that be its sheer physicality, or how it displaces livelihood. Nature as home is essential, although Braziel reinforces nature’s need to change, especially in reference to women’s social and economic development. Her mother introduces the idea that it’s difficult for women, especially, to stem from a place. “She said that we can’t rinse the dirt from our blood— / not looking bad is all we got.”

Braziel argues against the idea that women are stuck in all four sections, but reinforces it most heavily in Allure. In this second section, the reader witnesses a stripper’s gaze on the men in the strip club where she works, whom she registers as merely “paper dolls and shadows.” Later, her husband, in conversation with a male friend who calls her just “Sunday pretty,” reveals “she used to be a stripper.” This conversation removes her from the domesticity of the home and exhibits her as the actual paper doll. Women trying to break these molds frequent the collection, especially Braziel’s grandmother. In “Interview, 1966” Braziel relays how her grandmother got a job at McDonald’s after her divorce. Because at times, home is her ancestry and name-relation to her grandmother, this poem strikes a turning point in the collection, unfolding the way women were placed, housed, and previously not given over to choice. Braziel attacks this idea in “Fadeaway Girl” where women can be both
“secret and soaring,” similar to how the land and sky can be both opened and closed to her wanting.

What It Takes, the third section, discusses all the ways in which Braziel and others make homes, concentrating on the idea that home is not just the structure, but the homemaker’s relationship to the surrounding landscape, to nature. In the poem, “Breaking and Entering,” a doe walks almost silently into an unfinished home, blending easily with the sky and forest surrounding it. This relationship to nature brings Braziel full circle to the salt she shared with her father in childhood, to the name she portions between herself and grandmother, which sounds “like the bounding of a gazelle,” and finally, to the way in which she and her husband choose precisely each element of land they use for their own home building.

The last of the sections, Rivering, asks the reader to acknowledge their judgment of home, of other people’s homes especially. Braziel writes, “every home was once land, and once someone else’s.” This acknowledgement gives way to the choice in how and why people live when fused to a place. Here, she conveys the excavation of home that she’s been leaning into during the collection. It is her “meander through Alabama, / when Alabama meant thicket.” In known by salt, Braziel is responsible both for the untouchable nature of her state’s topographical features and to the way she builds from them a place of her own. In that place, home is the development of a woman who can be stuck at the edge of Lay Lake, but also the process of rebuilding the lake as a home of her own. By exposing home’s wooden frame, Braziel exposes the beauty of transformation, of growth via place. Here is Braziel’s plainsong: salt, state, and legacy.
contributors

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TISHA WEDDINGTON is a surrealist oil painter based in Raleigh, NC. After completing her education at the NC School of the Arts and The Art Institute of Chicago, she has been exhibiting professionally throughout the area since 1998. Working from her imagination, she enjoys painting curious images that co-mingle man and beast. These images are meant to be comical, beautiful, and kinetic but concurrently show the darker side of nature. What she wants most is to impart a sense of wonder to the viewer, thereby providing the challenge and opportunity to each individual to translate this visual language from their own unique perspective.