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Raleigh Review | Founded as Rig Poetry
Robert Ian Greene
February 21, 2010
EDITOR’S NOTE

This issue notches our seventh anniversary, and Raleigh Review is still a work-in-progress. We’ve reached many goals on our run up to this milestone. A number of our staff members had some personal success. Some of us have scored jobs in our field and received promotions and fellowships—all while reading and selecting submissions to build this volume.

A number of us have our own books coming out in 2017, and one longtime editorial team member and amazing friend, Tyree Daye, won the 2017 American Poetry Review/Honickman First Book Prize. Tyree’s collection River Hymns will be available this fall.

Our talented editorial teams are describing this Raleigh Review issue as one that captures the harmful attempts of the erasure of lineage, erasures of peoples, of civilizations, of families, of languages, of dialects as it relates the self to history and to place. The prose in this issue features a family of puppeteers, residents of the badlands, self-talkers, and those neighbors who may grow dangerously close to us. This issue also features four poetry book reviews rounded out by visual art that attempts to tie everything together.

Even in these very uncertain times, we are doubling down and rolling the dice once again by publishing works that we hope will inspire empathy among neighbors whether across the street or across the globe.

—Rob Greene, editor & publisher
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TRACI BRIMHALL

The Book of Sleep

Tonight calls for the chapter without music.

Tonight asks for the sleep of Alice before
the tumble into Wonderland, of Snow White

after her teeth score the apple. Tonight, let’s skip

the prologue of mechanical stars and knitted blankets
and skip to the denouement of murmur and snore.

Your father waits unkissed on the couch. Let me

satisfy him with ardor and just enough tongue.
Surrender to the slumber descending in Hypnos’ arms.

Let my mother, ecstatic accident of the limbic system,

come at my summoning, stumbling out of a paradise
that said yes too soon. I beg you—bow to the bough

that rocks you. Sweet owlet, let the shadow ease

your eyelids, let it please your lengthening bones.
Rock, rock past the startle. Tonight, the gifts

of Morpheus. Come Dorothy with her golden road.

Accept the witch and the palm-prick of spindles.
Down, down will fall fable, cradle, all, all, all.
JOAN FULLERTON | Revelation 2013
12 x 12 inches | Mixed media on canvas
Cloud to Ground

Scientists can’t agree on how a cloud receives the charge that creates lightning. I hear this & it reminds me of thick rain, a sound like every god

I’ve prayed for, firing a gun over our heads. Then, shrubs burning in the yard, even after my husband turned the hose on them. My son, screaming as if someone had put the gun to his chin. Even explaining how sound originates, not in the strike,

but in the cloud, could not stop his flailing. In truth, when lightning strikes,

I now picture a gun. Like the one that killed my neighbor when she got up the nerve to leave. Like the one that killed two kids a few neighbourhoods away, after a fight with their mother. Like the one my stepfather taught me to shoot, after getting drunk all night & fighting with my mother. We heard them fight & have sex & fight again when it was over. I woke that night & every night for years, running
every faucet. I wrote about snow
because the sky was starsick

the night my father died in a storm, snow
blowing the sky wide open. But there’s no lightning

in a blizzard. No need to fear what science can’t
explain. It snowed until there were no roads.

Until the sky swallowed all colour. Maybe
this new sky is what I wished for

my son. A sky other than white. A sky
with teeth, rather than a sheet over our faces

as we sleep. Why don’t I let him see snow;
my son wants to know. It isn’t about heat

or beaches. Florida, laid out like a sunning seal.
Or with wanting a child to hang from my neck

as lightning cobalts the sky. It’s about the months
of calm, when the cicadas are the smallest

sound beyond the back porch. The months
between spells. It’s how I saved myself

for him. Long nights when my husband & I talk
low in another room, the air conditioner

humming. Every bit of green outside, filled
with moving bodies I can’t name. I remember

snow at the park. Walking home after dark.
My mother’s eyes, raw & red. It didn’t matter
the man. The widow, the wife. Everything ends
the same way. I can’t explain to my son why

I can’t go back. I’ve heard lightning explained
as the work of gods. Unlike snow, disappearing

in the sun, as it did when I left. Sometimes,
I imagine a body, after the thaw. Blue & stalled.

Sometimes, all I have to imagine is the sky
after sound enters. For my son, this is a city

that will have to be left. Every clamor
of cloud. Every gale, flailing the ground.
Dirty White Strings

Every evening when the sun slips through the skies of New Delhi, I unbutton Lily’s dress. I slide it down her breasts with one hand and grab her neck with the other. I don’t pay attention to the men in the courtyard. Some of them breathe clouds of fire; others walk around on stilts. Neither do I mind the little children with their mouths full of puffed rice. They cheer on the fire-breathers and the stilt-walkers. They will grow up to be like their fathers, who have grown up to be like theirs. I just sit on the front steps with Lily’s umbrella dress at my feet. The door behind me is outlined with orange, white, and green triangles. I paint them every year on Independence Day, except during such moments, I can’t remember when that is. Because when I run my fingers over Lily’s body, I always get lost in the same question. *How many times could we make love before morning if, tonight, you were more than cloth and wood?* The pigeons on the asbestos roof guess a number between three and a trillion, and coo their babies to sleep.

Unlike the pigeons, I am not a numbers person. I can’t remember my own phone number. But I have not forgotten the price per meter of the chiffon *sari* that I used for Lily’s dress—written on one of the edges in the shopkeeper’s lazy handwriting. When my needle zipped past the “Rs 275” in blue marker, my wife, Lalita, had been dead for a little more than a day. Not long after she stopped breathing, and before I set fire to the kerosene-spattered logs on her funeral pyre, Lily was born.

The monsoon of 1999 was eternal and wet. Not wet like the dots of mud on your ankles when you wade through the puddles of last night’s rain or like the drops that slither down the leaves the next morning and
fall upon your cheeks, pretending to be tears. But wet like the insides of your dreams are soaked, and all you can remember is rain.

On one such day, I cupped my hands around my ear and placed my head on the left of Lalita’s bosom—where her heart had been beating. Thunder clouds were rattling the windowpanes of our one-room hut. The bottom right corner of Ganesha’s poster, with his pet mouse nibbling on a golden laddoo, was flapping in the table fan’s breeze. The God of New Beginnings watched the tiny white creature flailing around with the unglued corner. I could hear the rainwater leaking through the ceiling and collecting in the saucepan that I had placed on the floor, right under the hole in the roof. I heard my own heartbeats against my eardrums, recurring and distant, like horses galloping in another galaxy. But I heard nothing else. So I rushed to the warehouse in a mad frenzy and returned drenched from head to toe, with blocks of wood and colorful fabrics bundled up like a baby in my arms. They were the finest of all my raw materials.

For a day and a half, I stayed in that room with my dead wife, doing what I do best. I studied every detail of Lalita’s corpse and created a string-puppet that looked like her. I’d been crafting puppets all my life, but that day I bit my lips, cut my fingers, fumbled, and forgot. It took me hours to carve a face out of the rectangular piece of wood. But I made sure that the cheeks were chiseled, just like Lalita’s. The arms and legs were firm and shapely after I stuffed them with layers of cotton batting, then wrapped a thread several times to form the wrists and hands. Thick red paint dripped on my pajamas as I painted a pair of bow-shaped lips. At last, I held my breath and colored the two wooden bumps that were the puppet’s eyes—white inside, black outside. Lalita’s face was slumped on one side of the pillow. I couldn’t help but think how her eyelashes shivered every time she put kajal around her eyes. Now her eyes were open, but her lashes were still.

By the following morning, Lalita’s eyes were bulging. Her body was ice-cold. It had developed a greenish tinge and begun to stink. But I still had to stitch the puppet’s dress. I considered holding one hand to my nose, but I needed both hands to work. So I tied a handkerchief around my face and continued. I hastily stitched some silver moons and stars on the chiffon sari. I then folded it lengthwise and breadthwise, measured it, and marked the edges. But by the time I put down my scissors, I was
retching. I felt my hands tremble and my stomach turn as I pushed the needle in and out of the cloth.

At last I held the puppet in my arms and stood next to Lalita’s body. It was nothing like the Lalita who sat cross-legged in the temple after a bath, counting the 108 beads of a mala, with water trickling down her uncombed hair. Or the one who fanned the firewood, with sweat running down her long neck, as she cooked baby eggplants with fresh coriander leaves. More like the one who pushed me on the bed and unhooked her blouse with an evil look in her eyes. Who nibbled on my lips so feverishly that she made me forget my name. So I decided to name the puppet after the name I used to whisper into Lalita’s ears when she sank her fingernails into my flesh, leaving me with bleeding half-moons on my back. “Lily?” I begged. “Please hurt me.”

Seventeen years—that’s how long ago that was. Except on evenings like these, when I sit on the front steps caressing Lily’s face, it all seems like it happened yesterday.

It’s a little past sunset. The men in the courtyard have put aside their stilts and fire-breathing equipment to join the men, women, teenagers, children, and senior citizens of the colony sitting in a big circle. Pradhan Ji is standing in the center, talking in a loud voice. Time and again he waves his fist in the air and people shout slogans in unison.

Lately, this has become an everyday affair. It was the letter from the Delhi Development Authority that started it all. It claimed that the residents of Kathputli Colony have been encroaching upon more than five hectares of government land for all these years. And now it is time to regularize the state of affairs. I start calculating how many months have passed since the DDA’s notice, when the door behind me opens, and I turn around. It’s Ankita with her empty bottles.

She calls out to me, says she’s going to listen to Pradhan Ji. “I’ll come back after filling water, okay?”

“But it’s late now.” I look at my watch. “You can fill water in the morning. And Pradhan Ji is saying nothing new anyway.”

Ankita doesn’t like standing in the queue at the municipality tap. When I was a little boy, I hated it, too. But Bai Sa still woke me up at 4:00 a.m. and sent me off. Every morning I stood in the queue with the sleeping mat’s crisscrossed impressions on my cheeks. In fact, I quickly mastered the art of sleeping while standing up. As I waited for my turn, I
tried to stop yawning and closed my eyes. That way it was possible to finish a few of my dreams from last night.

The queue for the water tap starts where the narrow lanes of the colony end. The lanes are lined with houses on both sides. Every house has puppeteers or magicians, fire breathers or traditional healers, acrobats, sword swallowers, story tellers, or all of the above. Grandparents, parents, and children have practiced the same arts, under the same asbestos roofs, and filled their drinking water from the same tap every morning.

I was barely eight months old when we moved here, too young to remember anything. But I’ve heard the story enough times to recount it like an unforgettable memory.

When we left Rajasthan, the north winds were singing their woes to the desert, eroding and creating the sand dunes over and over again. Bai Sa had wrapped me in a camel skin blanket and was waiting under a tree for Babo Sa. No one knew if it was a neem tree, a peepal tree, or a mango tree. It was a different tree every time I heard the story. I imagine a canopy of green leaves keeping out the sun as I slept in Bai Sa’s arms. We stayed that way for hours, a couple of ants on an infinite canvas of golden sand, until Babo Sa finally returned. He had a big camel suede bottle tucked under his arm. “Enough water for the journey,” Babo assured Bai as he helped her on the back of an old burly camel. And so we left in search of better things.

On the map, Rajasthan looks like a kite with a torn edge fluttering in the sky. Last year I cut out a map from the newspaper and sellotaped it to the back of the radio. Although stained and tattered, twenty-eight out of twenty-nine states are still noticeable. The distance from the black dot for Jaipur, the capital of Rajasthan, to the red star for New Delhi, the capital of India, is as wide as my fingernail. Yet it took us a whole week to get here.

There were not so many cars on the streets of Delhi when I was a boy. No CNG-powered buses, no tall buildings with reflective glasses, no king-sized national flag at Central Park, no metro trains with red-green-blue-yellow metro lines, no tourists with their colorless, freckled skins exposed in unimaginable places, and no malls with water fountains. A loaf of fruit bread cost only twenty-five paise and photographs were black and white.
Bai and Babo’s photo album is thicker than my pillow. The first picture is of them receiving a trophy from a woman with an unusual streak of gray hair, the then prime minister, and their smiles are bursting at the seams. Then there’s one where our colony is a sea of triangle tents and wild grass. Bai Sa always looked at it and remembered how, when we started in this city, we used to eat three times a day and make more money, the kind of money that helped replace those tarpaulin homes with the brick huts that we have today. But Babo Sa’s favorite picture was the one where he’s surrounded by a crowd outside the Red Fort. Each of his fingers is pulling on one or more strings as a puppet with spiral sideburns greets the people with hands folded in a namaste. He often touched the smiling faces and complained about the world. It was a better place when there was no radio, television, Bollywood, or internet. People had more time for puppets and puppeteers.

Bai and Babo performed in many countries. The government took care of the airfare and visa but didn’t pay much. Some nights there wasn’t any rice in the house. There were enough puppets on the kitchen shelf, though, so it looked anything but empty. Bai Sa listed out the names of all the places they had been in the same order every time, “Moscow, Bulgaria, Denmark, Canada, Swinderland, Indonesia, London, Japan, Paris, Hong Kong, Bangkok, and Dubai.” But nothing fascinated me more than what Babo Sa believed to be a puppeteer’s escape from the cycle of death and rebirth. “Every puppeteer has a ticket to moksha,” he would say, “and it is that one puppet into which he breathes life until he is rendered lifeless.”

It is the middle of summer, but I am almost shivering. My cotton shirt feels too flimsy. I check my watch again. Ankita is waiting for my permission to see Pradhan Ji.

“Please, papa?” Ankita sticks out her chin, “I’ll be okay, I promise.”

“Fine, fine. But he is saying nothing—” She leaves before I can finish. “Be safe!” I call out, but she keeps walking. The plastic containers dance around her hips.

“We are artists, not scum,” Pradhan Ji bellows into the microphone. “And their politics cannot defeat us!”

The rocky courtyard is packed with people. The women are on one side, with their big, kohl-rimmed eyes about to set something ablaze. These are the same women who wash dishes every morning with their
feet swamped by soap bubbles and their faces hidden behind the loose ends of *saris*. The men are on the other side. Their puckered foreheads make it hard to believe that they breathe fire and swallow swords for a living. The children are sitting between the men and the women, obediently, although there is no puffed rice for them to eat tonight.

I approach a group of men who are not listening to Pradhan Ji. They are talking to each other in low voices. Mahesh, the stilt-walker and my neighbor, has a finger pointed to the sky.

“All those flowers and sweets in his temples go to waste.” He gestures for me to sit before continuing. “And if you think he will save us, you are wrong.”

“Save us from what?” I ask, trying to join the conversation. Everyone in the group fixes their eyes on me.

“The government, of course.” Mahesh looks at the other men with half a smile. “It seems like Raju Bhai has been busy stripping puppets again.” They laugh.

Some say that the DDA plans to bulldoze our houses to build a mall like the one in Saket with crystal blue waterfalls. Others place their bet on a cinema hall. Yet others talk about a tall residential complex with kidney-shaped swimming pools and security guards in black uniforms. Nobody really knows what will become of the patch of land we have called home for the last fifty years. All we know is that the Delhi government wants us gone.

Ankita likes the idea of a mall replacing all these huts. She doesn’t want to think about where we would build our new homes or if we could build them at all. That one day she could point to a jazzy shopping complex and boast about growing up on the same plot of land is enough consolation for her. Her friends are gathered under the guava tree and listening intently to Pradhan Ji. She is sitting with them, but she is preoccupied with a dried leaf, crushing it to a fine powder between her fingers.

One day, when Ankita was six years old, I braided her hair, patted some talcum powder on her cheeks, and took her to my warehouse. She cupped her chin in tiny hands and watched in rapt attention. When the puppets danced, she clapped and laughed until tears ran down her face. Since then, she has accompanied me to the warehouse almost every day. Sometimes I used to go to the warehouse in the morning before she
woke up, and I returned only at night. On such days I would keep some *rotis* and onions by her bed before leaving the house.

The years seem to have passed in a blink. Today Ankita is a young woman and an accomplished puppeteer. Sometimes she makes her puppets dance for hours without stopping, telling herself stories she eventually doesn’t believe in. Her hands move as if under a spell. She travels with me for performances throughout the city. She is an expert in the kitchen, too, and cooks baby eggplants better than her late mother. And in a month’s time, she is to marry an acrobat who lives four houses away.

I have prepared everything for my daughter’s wedding day—exchanged all of Bai Sa’s and Lalita’s jewelry for pieces that are new and more fashionable, ones that Ankita picked herself. I have procured an appointment from Raj Painters to get the house repainted, booked the best sweet-makers and florists in my budget, invited the pundit who conducted the *puja* with Bai Sa and Babo Sa when I received my first haircut, and taken a loan from Pradhan Ji to combine it with my life savings, so the small wooden box under the bed is heavier than it has ever been, to be opened only for the payments and proceedings of the ceremony. I have prepared everything, everything but myself. It breaks my heart to picture the little girl who took her first steps with palms wrapped around my fingers walking around the fire holding hands with another man.

When Ankita was born, the midwife had to rub her with a hot towel, massage her feet, and roll her on her stomach before she let out her first cry after seven long minutes. But just then, Lalita stopped breathing. The midwife’s gray hair was swept back into a thin braid and smelled of coconut oil. With a toothless grin, she placed Ankita in my arms, adding that my wife was the kindest and the most beautiful woman in the world. I was too unprepared to wonder if that’s what she told all husbands whose wives succumbed to childbirth. She kept her wrinkled palm on my cheek before saying, “You have no business loving her when the gods love her more than you do.”

My wife and daughter struggled for all of seven minutes to stay alive. Only one of them made it. Soon Ankita’s shrill cries began to engulf the vacuum that Lalita was leaving behind. She was mourning her mother’s demise long before I knew where to start. We were not meant to be like those families on billboards claiming that you’re three steps away from a
home loan, while mother, father, daughter and son smile excitedly outside a bungalow. Yet, if only for seven minutes, our family was complete.

“We will not leave!” Pradhan Ji bellows into the mic again. “Kathputli colony is the world’s largest community of street performers. If the community dies, the art dies.”

As the elected head of the colony, Pradhan Ji believes we should resist the government’s proposal. Although it isn’t really a proposal. The DDA wants all the families to sign a document consenting to vacate their homes. And everyone knows that they will make sure that happens, this way or that.

“Who wants to die rebelling?” Mahesh looks away from Pradhan Ji, tossing black chickpeas into his mouth. “I’d rather eat, sleep, fuck, and live.”

The men around him chuckle and nod in agreement. It is the same every time. I never take either Pradhan Ji or Mahesh very seriously. But tonight I leave the buttons on Lily’s dress untouched. I bury her face in my chest as if I don’t want her to know what is about to happen. As if she could know, somehow. Early next morning, I put Lily in a polythene bag and wiggle my little finger inside Ankita’s ears till she wakes up. We head off to my warehouse. I sing Rajasthani folk songs that I remember from my wedding, Ankita twirls and tugs the strings, and the puppets dance and dance. No one needs an audience.

It took several muggy August afternoons for Lalita and me to get married. The ceremony went on for four days and five nights in the Sai temple before the two of us could leave on my brand new Bajaj Chetak. The pearl blue scooter was decorated with marigold flowers for our first ride. Tired and happy, we joined the evening traffic sashaying on the streets of gold. The city’s toxic skyline with its neon billboards, tall buildings, and shopping malls, the India Gate with its flame in the memory of dead soldiers, dogs scrounging for food inside garbage bins, and endless zebra-striped road dividers whizzed past us in a flash. Around my waist were Lalita’s arms, stacked with bangles right up to her elbows.

At one point, she started playing with the buttons on my shirt. I jumped a red light. The traffic policeman blew his whistle impatiently and raised his baton to make me stop. But I was too distracted looking at
my wife’s hands, painted with swirling grapevines in bright orange henna. Now, no matter how much I try, it is impossible to imagine them adorning my daughter’s hands. The grapevines inside my head can only adorn one bride at a time.

Have I once again loved a woman I have no business loving?

The week passes quickly. Ankita and I make three trips to Chandni Chowk before buying a lime green wedding dress with small, diamond-shaped mirrors on the hemline. She tries it on every morning, afternoon, and evening. But I don’t get tired of telling her how lovely she looks.

Every other day, another young woman with unblemished lipstick walks into the colony, accompanied by multiple cameramen, for one more breaking news story. “Kathputli, as we know, is Hindi for puppet,” she says. “And ironically, the fate of Delhi’s Kathputli Colony has itself been reduced to a play of puppets.”

Some talk about how various presidents and prime ministers have given away awards to the residents for their contribution to the traditional Indian arts. But none of the political leaders have given us proper houses in which to display those awards. Others go through multiple retakes trying to pronounce “Ijazul” right. Ijazul Khan’s Great Indian Rope Trick has made it to the Guinness Book of World Records. He lives in the lane behind ours. Everyone told him that the trick was a myth, but he spent years perfecting it. When he presented it on the first day of the twentieth millennium, on a beach with pearl white sand, the twenty-five thousand people there gasped together. We watched it on Pradhan Ji’s TV.

The nightly meetings with Pradhan Ji continue, but Mahesh and others don’t change their minds. So when a DDA official arrives with the documents on a Monday morning, around half of the people peacefully put their thumb impressions in navy blue ink. The other half watch and swallow their spit.

I am changing a light bulb one evening when two policemen barge into the house and hold me by the collar. One is taller and wearing gold-rimmed spectacles while the other has chewing gum in his mouth. They push me against the wall, ramming my face next to the socket, and the light bulb smashes in my hands. Ankita and I have been eating in the dark for a little less than a month now. But I forget all about it when one
of the men holds my bleeding hand close to my face. A glass shard sticking out of my palm almost pokes my eye.

Ankita is trying on her wedding dress when the men arrive. I see her sobbing over her many reflections in the mirrors on her dress when they find her crouching behind the bed. One by one they run their hands over her slender waist and pinch her belly button. I ask her to run. One of them slaps me twice across the face. The other one grabs her hair. I ask her to run again. This time Ankita bites the policeman’s wrist so hard that he lets her go.

They don’t chase her. The taller one fixes his spectacles and punches me till I fall down. I taste blood in my mouth. They slowly unbuckle their black leather belts. In the moments that follow, I am kicked and flogged until I can’t register pain. I hear a metal buckle landing on the floor with a clang. Soon the poster of Ganesha on the opposite wall is being shredded before my eyes. Religious man, their voices sound like distant echoes, bet you don’t drink. And so I am drinking a dark brown liquid from a small bottle. It looks like Dettol, but it isn’t. Sign the papers. Some more bitter liquid dribbles through my lips and goes down my throat. Sign or we’ll be back.

For the next few minutes, I am sprawled on the floor. Moonlight filters into the room through the holes in the asbestos roof. One moment Ankita’s face is right in front of me, the next moment I see circles without circumferences. At some point, I feel her soft neck against my wrists, and soon my arms are wrapped around her. I hear my knees bumping into the bed’s wooden panel, but nothing hurts, nothing but the beautiful face so near to me, and yet so far away.

Pradhan Ji has commenced the evening’s meeting. Today is the first day of police violence in the colony. A number of people have been beaten up, and some rebellious young men have also been arrested. There is fear and resentment among those who have pledged their loyalty to Pradhan Ji and refused to sign the papers. I can hear him talking on the microphone, requesting everyone to sit down.

Bai Sa and Babo Sa left Rajasthan in a caravan with Pradhan Ji. When they arrived in Delhi and picked a place to set up their tents, there was nothing but wilderness for as far as they could see. They couldn’t have imagined that within half a century, the wasteland would be worth scores of rupees. It’s hard to forget all those evenings we spent sitting
outside our half-built house while Babo Sa prepared the cement mix. The wedding season was in full swing when the house was under construction. Days were packed with performances. It was only in the evenings that Babo found the time to improve upon the structure of cement and bricks.

Bai Sa had the same answer every time I asked what story they played that day. Salim and Anarkali. It was a hit at weddings. 

“Salim and who?” I would ask, although I knew full well.

Anarkali, Bai Sa would then explain for the umpteenth time, was a slave girl in Emperor Akbar’s court. Prince Salim was the Emperor’s son and heir to the throne. One day Anarkali was dancing in the court, and Salim couldn’t keep his eyes off her. They fell in love before the world could stop them.

“Anara is for pomegranate and Kali is for blossom,” Bai Sa would say before handing me a puppet with spiral flicks and sideburns, colorful dots above the eyebrows, an elaborate nose ring, and accessorized hair. Although the slave girl was originally called Nadira Begum, Salim used to address her as Anarkali. She was as beautiful as a pomegranate blossom. Salim and Anarkali’s love story was a happy one until Emperor Akbar came to know of it. He disapproved of the relationship and imprisoned Anarkali. Salim was thus forced to go on war against his own father. But the crown prince’s army was badly defeated.

“What about Anarkali?” I always hoped for a twist, like maybe she managed to elope with Salim and they lived happily forever after.

But Bai Sa never strayed from the plot. “Anarkali was buried alive between two walls.” She pointed towards the house each time. “Like that.” I watched as Babo Sa laid the bricks, his trowel rhythmically scraping and tapping the surface of wet cement.

The alcohol is weakening my senses. I see seven or more wooden windows behind Ankita, although we have only two in our house. When Babo Sa could still use a hammer and saw, he built them with leftover wood from the warehouse. Bai Sa stitched the frilled half-curtains. I imagine a bulldozer tearing through those curtains and smashing the wooden panels in a single blow. I imagine it seven or more times.

In fact, seven or more times Ankita carefully places my head on the pillow so she can stand up and get some antiseptic, but I don’t let her go even though my fingers bleed from the light bulb that could not light up
our darkest dinner because I look for the little bony bumps behind her neck and find the pearl snaps on her blouse instead, which makes her flinch but reminds me of all those years of buttoning and unbuttoning a chiffon dress, all night, every night, to try and strip off the memory grapevine inside my head which Ankita carefully places on the pillow so she can stand up and get some antiseptic, but I don’t let her go because my ticket to *moksha* is that one puppet into which I breathe life until I am my puppet’s puppet and she is the woman I love and we inhale and exhale and move and make noises and be happy because we are more than just cloth and wood tonight, so I tug on the pearl snaps, undo Ankita’s dress, and watch my daughter’s blouse slip off her shoulders to put the infinite principles of puppetry to shame.

Ankita stares at me with eyes that are emptier than the screw-threaded bulb socket above her head. Her hands shiver as she snaps the artificial pearls back in place. She then sits down in the corner farthest from me, locks her arms around her folded knees, and starts weeping.

“We will not leave!” In the courtyard, Pradhan Ji continues his speech. He urges the people to not give up so soon. In his passionate voice, he proclaims once again, “If the community dies, the art dies!” And the crowd repeats after him.

If Bai Sa was here, she would have disagreed with Pradhan Ji. She would have told him that the art never dies, but the audience does. I remember the evening she couldn’t stop complaining about Babo and her performance at a wedding in Okhla. She said that people were distracted. They were discussing the weather, the stock market, and each other’s clothes and jewelry.

Reluctantly, she untied the gunny bag with the props and puppets. It had rained on their way back home. She wiped the puppets with the loose end of her *sari* and laid them down to dry on the wicker mat. In the moon-washed nightfall, they looked like soldiers in a single file. I wondered what it’s like to have thousands of rupees for a private Salim and Anarkali show and not bother to watch it carefully. What it’s like to not be on the stage. To be the audience.

I reached over Bai Sa’s outstretched legs and grabbed one of the puppets in file. She smacked my hand.

“What do you want?”

“Anarkali.”
I asked Bai Sa to tell me a story where Anarkali doesn’t die. But she told me to finish my rice and sweet potatoes, and go to bed.

“Please?” I held the damp end of her sari.

She pulled away the sari and placed a handlebar-mustached puppet in my lap. It had a bright green crown on its head. Salim.

Bai Sa squashed a stray mosquito between her palms and swallowed her yawns as she talked. Salim’s love sentenced Anarkali to death. Not because she was a slave girl while he was Emperor Akbar’s son, but because Akbar himself was fond of Anarkali. In fact, she was one of his many wives. That’s the story of father, son, and pomegranate blossom.

“Funny how his mind, body, heart, and soul belong to him.” Bai Sa studied Salim’s tasseled crown. “And so does the entire Mughal Empire. But what does not belong to him are these.” She pulled up the strings attached to the puppet’s arms and waist, strong white cotton threads that had frayed and discolored over the years. Salim stood up to look at me.

“It’s the same for him everywhere in the world,” she said. Even in Moscow, Bulgaria, Denmark, Canada, Swin-der-land, Indonesia, London, Japan, Paris, Hong Kong, Bangkok, and Dubai. She twirled her fingers, and he did a little dance.
Fetish

for Detroit

1.
The |people| are not explicit. I know them only by their fruit:

dressed stone, brick patterned: intricate; lovely remains
fallen aside like petticoats, my eyeful of private

stairs collapsed. Warped floorboards. A glamorous wreck

has turned my head again; the height of the fall proved in ruin.
*Teach me again that I do not own this body*

though I’m the one clicking, the one who insists

on image: blue chicory holds the walls deep finger-like;
root death: release |reseed| collapse.

2.
Former factory, former church, former

train shed or hospital, form follows
the function of absence, no |erasure|.

I crave the safety of a sterile field. Surely the patient was numb

when the granite steps were pried away. Was still under
while I shooed away the pigeons. Remains

unaware. Remaindered |rendered| beauty
I want to pin to my wall, a fractal of rust and lichen, growth patterns flattened.

_Teach me again. I do not own this body._

3.
Leaves and paint peels blown into the corner, an open window

overexposed: a box of white light to say, what? Salvation lies beyond a walk through ruin? I touch it without touching. Untouched

I ask again: _teach me I do not own these /bodies/._

Sheer curtain rotted and risen on the breeze. Animated.

Handprints on the doorjamb, lock drilled. Something ruined and not ruined, not beautiful |beautiful| as a carved handrail arced above missing balusters. The sheen buffed by long gone hands.

(repeated line in italics from Roger Reeves’ poem “Maggot Therapy”)
JOAN FULLERTON | Returning Home, 2011
14 x 11 inches | Mixed media on canvas
Letter in a Drought

Written in coal and music and butter,
written in trout blood, the letter’s
last words pierced him like barn nails
splintering a wood post, and so he took
the letter out to Crow Creek, listened
for the half slop-pit, half-Buncombe County accent
that meant a childhood shaped by ham-hocks
and mountain laurel, the currency of cheese grits,
heard her voice soft as porch-creak: just leaving,
not forgetting, it said. But he knew what leaving
meant now, had seen the families leave in the middle
of the night before even the cock had cried
for stillness and sometimes just the fathers, who’d shave
a final time in the kitchen before loading
their trucks with whatever they could sneak away,
before their children rose hungry, their ribs
jutting out like snakes swallowing mice.
Even God, it seemed, had abandoned
this place where crops dreamed of rain in their seeds,
where the faint trace of mud-splatter
could make anyone believe that this land
wasn’t turning to dust like a high country Sodom.
Long gone, he knew she’d forget what they did here
beside this once-lapping creek, how the water
had licked their hands in the cool swell of evening.
He knew that once down the mountain, they never
came back, just passed time forgetting the way smoke
curled around scrub-pine in summer’s first dry spark,
their last wisps of memory drying-up
as they sped their trucks towards water.
Sam slips a cassette into the recorder. There’s a brief hiss of blank tape before the man who calls himself Uncle Rick begins his pitch.

“Hey, Sam. How ya doin’? Ready to get cooking with those books? We’re going to read about rocks today—something there’s plenty of out there in the badlands. Oh yeah, I know it’s not the most exciting subject in the world. Not like reading about ol’ Darth Vader, is it?”

Norma listens from the dark kitchen, sipping sherry and taking long drags from a Virginia Slim. The jagged silhouette of the mesas against a full moon fills the window. Uncle Rick sounds familiar—a cornier version of another Rick she once knew. But this Rick is an inmate at a nearby federal prison. He belongs to the prison’s Jaycees. Their community service project is tutoring children with learning problems like Sam, who’s repeating the third grade.

As long as Sam is listening to Uncle Rick, Norma knows her son is safe. Every Tuesday the tapes arrive in a manila envelope at the converted barracks where she and Sam live, one of several hauled down from the Air Force base in Rapid City and set up in the dusty courtyard of the Windy Knoll Motel as extra housing for gypsies like school teachers, combiners, and out-of-work cowboys.

She pours more sherry into the juice glass and goes out into the tiny backyard, sinking down onto the frayed green and white webbing of a lawn chair. *Thank God it’s Tuesday*. A chilly wind is blowing in from the badlands, though it’s still mild for November in the Dakotas. She feels the soft thick fur of their blue heeler, Jesse—christened by Sam in honor...
of Jesse James—as he settles at her feet. After a while the screen door slams. *So much for a little peace.*

“Mom, I don’t know how to do this stuff. You gots to help me.”

Norma closes her eyes, arms growing heavy at her sides. Last time it was a diorama for geography, a tiny African village. Sam got so frustrated trying to make a hut from grass and mud in the bottom of a shoe box, he took the whole thing outside and stomped it into the dust.

“What stuff, Sam? All you have to do is read, follow along in your science book with the recording.” The sweet, syrupy liquid warms her chest. *If only Uncle Rick could show up in person.*

“No-oo.” Sam draws out the syllable, impatience making his voice shudder. “We gots to build a volcano. That Rick guy said.”

“Sam, I think it was just a suggestion, something you can do later. Besides, we might not have all the ingredients.”

“You just don’t want to help me. I wish Dad was here. He’d help me.”

“Well, Dad’s not here. It’s just me and you.”

Sam gets up, stomps away from her. The back door slams again.

This isn’t how she’d envisioned motherhood. Sometimes she thinks it would be comforting just to lie down in the badlands, go to sleep and never wake up.

She’s heard how, even now, some Indian, driven to despair, will choose this simple, painless path to death. When the temperature drops well below zero, he fires up his courage with whiskey. Throwing off his clothes, he begins walking down and down, threading deeper into the shadow of the mesas. She can understand the lure, this mélange of beauty and bleakness, vast as an ocean floor.

She knows Sam goes down there, despite her taboos. Since Rod left in June, Sam’s been staying away from the house more than ever, roaming with another third grader, a boy named Kelly whose mother works at the drugstore.

Neighbors told Norma that teenagers went down to the city dump to smoke pot. Norma had seen them, high school kids who called Rod a hippie because of his ponytail, speeding on their motorcycles through the rough terrain below her house.

Sam had come home one day with a split lip, crying. He said he and Kelly fell, trying to get away from the older kids who were chasing them.
Norma stationed herself where the road crested the badlands in front of her house and stopped one of the bouncing motorcyclists.

“Did you boys try to run my son and his friend down with your motorcycles?” she demanded, her mouth tightening. The kid, no more than fourteen, dug his cowboy boots into the hard, dry earth as his bike idled, rolling a wad of snuff from one cheek to the other and regarding her blandly. Like most males around here over the age of six, he wore a cowboy hat but no helmet.

“No, ma’am, we did not. Them kids was chunking dirt clods at us. Almost made me wreck. We was just trying to get them to go on home.”

Sam denied they’d ever thrown anything at the bikers, but Norma could easily imagine him doing so, especially since he was always trying to impress Kelly.

One Saturday morning, she’d heard them talking on the front door step. “I know this dude that’s in prison,” Sam said. “Me and him’s going to Alaska when he gets out.”

“Yeah? How come he’s in prison?” Kelly wanted to know.

“Shot his partner,” Sam said. “Shot the sumbitch right between the eyes for double-crossing him.”

Maybe she should have another talk with Sam about Uncle Rick. Then again, maybe he needed his fantasies. After all, she had her own. She just didn’t share them. Her first real boyfriend, the other Rick, had been a business psychology major. He had red hair and claimed an Irish heritage, demonstrated by his easy charm. When he talked about the business world, he spoke in a take-charge voice that seemed to fit right in with three-piece suits and kidney-shaped desks. Maybe he’d become an entrepreneur and then gone on to cutting deals, cooking books, defrauding the federal government. But as a prisoner, perhaps he was evolving, becoming compassionate and introspective.

Many of the women in town have husbands or boyfriends in the prison, some very likely guilty of violent crimes. Helga, Norma’s landlady, and LaQuitta, a neighbor who lives in the motel court with her mother in-law, are married to inmates. LaQuitta’s husband is a one-legged drug dealer she hooked up with in the Rapid City Journal personals. Helga managed to spend all of one month with her second husband—a car salesman from California who was staying at the motel—before the FBI caught up with him for operating a chop shop.
Norma pushes herself out of the lawn chair and follows Sam into the house. She should help him with the project. But Sam isn’t in the living room. Norma hears the voice of Uncle Rick droning from his room.

“Sam?” She knocks on the door. “Want to see if we’ve got the ingredients for that volcano? We could at least get started.”

After a few seconds, she opens the door. The window over his bed is raised, the screen out. The tape recorder sits on the floor. There is no sign of her son.

“Damn it, Sam. Get back in this house.” She leans out the window, shouts into the darkness of the motel court, knowing he’s hiding out there somewhere, trying to summon up the courage to keep running. The first time he tried this was right after Rod left. They’d gone grocery shopping in Rapid. He’d seen a rod and reel in the window of a hardware store and begged her to buy it for him.

“I can’t afford it, Sam. I have to buy your school supplies,” she’d said.

“Dad would buy it for me. I know he would.”

“Fine, why don’t you ask him next time he calls?”

“He never calls because he doesn’t want to talk to you,” Sam muttered from the backseat.

No, he never calls because he’s an asshole. He didn’t want to be married. Or a father. But she said nothing.

When she stopped at a red light, Sam jumped out of the car and ran down the sidewalk. She sat there, watching filmy clouds scud across the vast sky. For an instant, she saw herself driving away, putting miles and years behind her. Rod had done it. Now Sam was doing it. Why not her? Horns were blaring behind her. The light was green. She took her foot off the brake, circled the block, and pulled over to the curb, opening the door on the passenger’s side just as her red-faced son walked by.

“Get in, Sam,” she said. “I’ll buy you the fishing tackle for Christmas.”

She knows she’s the easiest target for his anger, but she doesn’t know what to do about it—here, in the geographic center of nowhere. Rod had given her a choice when they left Michigan over a year ago for the only
teaching job he could find—at a high school in a town of eight-hundred on the edge of the badlands of South Dakota.

“You don’t have to come, at least not yet,” he’d said. “Why don’t you stay here till I see what it’s like and maybe find us a place to live?”

“We have to try, for Sam’s sake.” She knew guilt made her follow him. But it was also as if they were in a contest, each hoping the other would leave first.

After a while, she turns the recorder off and lies down on Sam’s lumpy mattress. Another tape begins playing—this one in her head. It’s her own voice, reading from a journal she kept when her marriage started falling apart. The small black book is probably at the bottom of one of the still-unpacked cardboard boxes on the back porch. Like an alcoholic memorizing inspirational lines from the Big Book, she used to read and re-read the pages. Here’s the way it was on a certain night in June 1973. Here it was six months later. Some days she felt like a schizophrenic searching for a message from aliens, trying to interpret strange markings on the page.

By eight o’clock, Sam still hasn’t returned. Norma gets up from his bed and goes to the back porch, rummaging around in an old shoebox until she finds a hammer and some nails. She’s driving nails into the window sashes in his room when she hears the front door open, then his voice.

“I can just break the window pane.” He’s not wearing a jacket, just a t-shirt and jeans, and his cheeks are chapped from the wind, swollen in resentment.

“Why are you doing this to me, Sam?” The familiar numbing seeps around her elbows.

“Cause you won’t help me. That Rick guy says your parents will help you.”

“Yeah? Well, maybe that Rick guy should come over here and help you himself.”

They’ve gotten into a pattern she can’t seem to break. She wishes she could feel that surge of love she had felt for Sam when he was younger. Once, when he was around three or four years old, he had looked at her, a frown creasing his smooth little brow, and asked, “Mommy, how will you know me when I’m grown up?” As if he would morph suddenly into adulthood and be swallowed up in a sea of strangers. Charmed, she had
clasped him in her arms, assuring him that, indeed, she would always
know him. Now she’s not so sure. She sees him standing in his crib as a
baby, thumb firmly thrust in his mouth, rubbing the remains of an old
yellow baby blanket against one cheek while she comforts him, trying to
sooth away the night terrors that used to awaken him. Now she’s alone
with a boy who regards her as the enemy, escaping into a harsh
landscape populated by convicts and juvenile delinquents.

§

Almost every Saturday, Norma can count on her neighbor LaQuitta
coming over with something from her kitchen. In exchange for room
and board, she keeps house for her husband’s eighty-year-old mother. A
large woman with a long gray ponytail, LaQuitta has hinted at having
Indian blood. The weekend before Thanksgiving, she walks across the
court with something in a Mason jar that looks suspiciously like a
human organ.

“It’s pickled deer heart.” She sets the jar on Norma’s kitchen table.
“My granny’s recipe. Tastes real good with crackers.”

“Thanks. I’ll be sure and try some. Was your granny, um, Sioux?”

“That plus a few other things. Us kids used to think she was a witch.
Now I’m keeping care of my old man’s mother, I know what a real witch
is. You know, that old biddy has never once gone to see her son in
prison? Says it gives her heart palpitations to look at that razor wire.”

Norma averts her eyes from the gray mass in the jar. “Are you
cooking Thanksgiving dinner for your mother-in-law?”

“Well, now that’s how come I wanted to talk to you. Her daughter,
that thinks I’m just the housekeeper? She’s coming to carry the old lady
to Rapid for the day. Naturally, they never asked me. If you’re not going
anywhere, me and you ought to just invite ourselves over to Helga’s for
potluck. She’s by herself, too, except for her boy.”

“That’s a great idea,” Norma says. It occurs to her that their
husbands might know Uncle Rick, or whatever his real name is. Maybe
they could ask around, see who’s in Jaycees, who’s making recordings for
school kids.

§
Early Thanksgiving morning, she walks barefoot across the gray linoleum floor in the hallway to turn up the oil heater. Opening the curtains behind the heater, she peers out the window. A pheasant is strutting in front of the oil tank. As the bird picks its way through weeds and plastic bread wrappers, its splendid feathers spread out like a stripper’s fan. At breakfast she tells Sam about the pheasant. He eats Frosted Flakes while she mixes up a potato salad to take to Helga’s for Thanksgiving dinner.

“Wish you’d got me up. I’d of shot it with Dad’s .22.”

“I took the .22 apart, remember? Besides we don’t have any bullets.”

“So? Dad showed me once how to put it back together, plus Darwin gots plenty of bullets.”

Nora doesn’t particularly like Helga’s son, Darwin, a tall, surly faced sixteen-year-old who helps his mother run the motel. She was horrified on one occasion to see him walk up to a mangy, half-starved dog that had limped into the court, aim a pistol right at its head, and calmly pull the trigger. LaQuitta said that was simply “animal control” in this town.

“Well, you don’t need to kill a bird unless you’re going to eat it,” she tells Sam. “Anyway, we already have a turkey for dinner.”

“I don’t want to eat at her house.” Milk dribbles down Sam’s chin. He has an overbite, but Norma can’t afford braces. “She called me a little punk that time.” He spits out the consonants, imitating Helga’s German accent.

“She could’ve refused to rent us this place. You did break the vending machine in her office, sticking your hand inside that flap.”

“You and the old man wouldn’t let me have any money. And he almost tore my arm off,” he added.

Norma never really understood what was broken, just that Helga was shrieking about a machine that cost me $10,000. Rod had been furious, jerking Sam away from the vending machine, almost dislocating his shoulder.

*That’s just dumb, so dumb,* he hissed at the boy.

Norma’s chest had tightened. *Don’t say that,* she’d begged in a whisper.

“You won’t have to be around Helga all the time,” she tells Sam. “You can go down in their basement and shoot pool with Darwin. And don’t call your father ‘the old man.’ It’s disrespectful.”
Norma feels slightly uncomfortable around her landlady, fearing Helga will bring up the vending machine incident or some other misdemeanor Sam might have committed. But as she sits in the kitchen with Helga and LaQuitta, sipping beer and waiting for the turkey to finish cooking, she begins to relax. Helga delicately pours herself another Budweiser at the kitchen counter and stumbles to the maple dinette set in front of the patio doors. She has dingy blonde hair and a small square face that looks pissed off most of the time.

“Oh, my goodness,” she says with a little chuckle. “I am all wobbly after only one beer.”

From across the table, LaQuitta surreptitiously holds up five fingers and winks at Norma, who dips her head to hide a grin and looks over at the array of houseplants and the dead moths and dust balls that have collected at the edge of the patio doors. Helga lives in a real house, not one of the refurbished barracks.

“You have a nice place,” Norma offers when she can think of nothing else to say.

“Oh, but it is too little.” Helga waves her hand. “And everything is move, move.”

Norma wonders if she’s referring to a black vinyl recliner positioned incongruously in the middle of the kitchen floor.

Helga frowns at her. “You are divorce now?”

Norma shrugs and raises her eyebrows. “Separated.”

“I was wondering. I hadn’t seen your husband for a while. I been divorced before, from Darwin’s dad. I was in Germany, helping take care of my grandmother. He fell in love with somebody else while I am gone. Boom!—he moved out. I ask myself, why? Why?”

LaQuitta is brushing her cigarette back and forth across the words “Wall Drug, U.S.A.” on the bottom of an ashtray. Norma figures they’re waiting for her to explain why Rod left. Had he been unfaithful? They both had. Had he hit her? Once or twice, but mostly he just yelled. There were plenty of juicy details, but really they just didn’t love each other anymore.

“What’s it like, visiting in the prison?” Norma asks. “I mean, how do you get in?”
“How you get in? You steal a car like my old man.” Helga flicks ashes from her cigarette onto the floor.

“There’s this guy up there,” Norma says. “He’s Sam’s reading tutor. Through the prison Jaycees.”

“You can bet he won’t be hanging around my Carl,” Helga says.

“You have to write and get them to put you on their visitors’ list,” LaQuitta explains. “What’d you say his name is?”

“Rick. That’s all I know. It’s funny, but I used to know another Rick who sort of sounds like this one. I don’t remember his last name, though.”

“So, ‘Dear Mr. Rick-the-convict-reading-man.’ Hey, don’t go doing nothing foolish. You want to stay in this dump the rest of your life, waiting for a man?” Helga belches without covering her mouth.

During dinner, Norma watches Sam and Darwin hunched over their plates, silently stoking themselves with turkey and dressing like cowboys in a bunkhouse after a hard day’s work. It pains her to think her son fits in here—in this dump, as Helga calls it. If they stayed, he’d be just like Darwin in a few years. She takes a small bite of cranberry relish, feeling slightly queasy from the beer. Helga’s words, waiting for a man, echo in her head.

§

The Tuesday after Thanksgiving, things are quieter than usual at the rural electric co-op where Norma works. Most of the other women in the office are ranchers’ or farmers’ wives whose families have lived here for generations. Nobody ever mentions her husband or asks anything about her life. She’s not even sure the women here are curious. By eleven o’clock, she’s filled her coffee cup twice, smoked too many cigarettes, and tried to sneak read a paperback book at her desk—Zelda Fitzgerald’s Save Me the Waltz. Now she’s peeling Hot Apricot polish off her fingernails, her thoughts wandering as a radio tuned to the only station with good reception softly plays country and Western music.

She pictures Uncle Rick, gazing out a small barred window at the badlands as he records Sam’s lessons in the prison library. He has begun to think of Sam as a son. He has two little girls of his own. His wife has custody, plus the house in the suburbs and the car. He thinks about finding Sam when he gets out. He won’t be able to return to his old job.
back east, so he’ll hire out as a combiner or work on one of the ranches outside town. Although he’s pushing forty, he’s never been in better shape. The prison has a gym, and he lifts weights every day. Maybe he’ll come to the co-op and ask to have the power turned on and the bill put in his name at a little trailer somewhere. Of course he won’t know Norma. Not right away.

“I’m breaking horses east of town,” he’ll say, giving a few well-established names gleaned from the Jaycees as references. “The money will be coming in pretty good.”

She’ll notice the creases still in the plaid shirt and the jeans he’s wearing, stiff with newness. The soft, almost cherubic quality she remembered in his face will be gone, not even a trace remaining in the deeply tanned furrows of his brow. But the green of his eyes will be as clear as a mountain creek. Looking at her behind the counter, he will be transported back nearly twenty years to the college library where they first met. His hand, calloused from lifting bales of hay on the prison farm and digging endless irrigations ditches, will slide across the utility contract to cover hers.

“Norma,” he’ll whisper. “Is it really you?”

Just after three o’clock, the bell on the front door rings, and Norma looks up to see Sam’s teacher, Miss McKee, walk in. She’s come to pay her electricity bill.

“Is Sam sick today?” she asks Norma.

“I beg your pardon?” Norma looks at the short, plump young woman across the counter. The kids call her Fish McKee behind her back because of her long, thin mouth and slack chin. She’s taught school for two years. The few times Norma has dropped in to pick up Sam or visit the classroom, Miss McKee seemed overwhelmed by her charges.

“He wasn’t in school all day. I just wondered if he’s got that bug that’s been going around.”

“Umm, yes, that must be it. He hasn’t been feeling too good.”

Norma leaves the office at four o’clock, driving straight home. Pulling into the grassless motel court, she sees the gate to the backyard open, no sign of Jesse. The Uncle Rick tapes are still in the mailbox. She knows Sam won’t be in the house, but she still goes from one room to another, calling him.
“Looks like it’s just me and you, Rick,” she says, opening the manila envelope and slipping the tape into the recorder on the coffee table.

“Hey, kiddo,” the voice begins. Right away she notices something different in the tone. And the drawl is gone. He sounds more Midwestern. “How’d your turkey day go? I sure hope it was better than mine, know what I mean? I bet your mom cooked up something real special. Isn’t she great? Good looking and a good cook to boot. I can just see the two of you sitting down at the dinner table. Hey, save a place for me next time, will ya, podnuh?”

Norma jabs the off button and looks around the room, at the bare windows with shades rolled up. Is this some kind of message for her? She rewinds the tape and is listening to it again when Sam comes in the front door.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

She punches the power button off. Her anger seems to have faded for the moment. She clears her throat. “Why did you skip school today?” He tosses his dusty jean jacket on the sofa and turns on the TV. “You went out with Darwin, didn’t you?” Helga’s right, she thinks. Sam is a little punk.

“Alls we were going to do at school was dumb things and watch that dumb old movie, *The Hound Who Thought He Was a Raccoon*. Darwin and me hunted for fossils.”

“After supper you’re going straight to bed, no TV. And if you skip school again, you’ll be grounded for a whole week. I have to go to work every day, and you have to go to school. That’s just the way it is.”

Sam clenches his fists. “I know why Dad left—because of you. And I’m leaving too.”

“Fine. You do that.” *Maybe I’ll leave first*. Something cold has taken hold of her.

The following day, after she’s made sure Sam is in his classroom, Norma calls the co-op and tells them she has a doctor’s appointment over in Pierre and won’t be in till noon. She then heads out of town in her old Chevy station wagon, along Highway 81. It’s only a half-hour drive to the federal prison camp. She should easily be home by noon. The prairie stretches out alongside the highway, rocky and brown, the colorful wildflowers that bloom spring and early fall lying dormant. In the distance, she can see the outline of the mountains. It’s a clear day,
just above freezing, with no snow in the forecast. She’s never been to a prison, but from the way LaQuitta described it, this one was pretty open, with non-violent offenders living outside the fence. If she can’t get in, maybe she can at least catch a glimpse of Rick. Or someone who might be Rick. It’s crazy, she knows, and she’s not really sure why she’s doing this. She’s probably reading too much into that last tape.

A private road leading to the prison bisects soybean fields surrounded by electric fences. As she approaches the guard’s shack, she sees a massive brick building in the distance. It once housed a college, although Norma can’t imagine who the students might have been, out here in the middle of nowhere. A complex of smaller buildings are in the background.

When the guard approaches her car, she rolls down the window and launches into her prepared introduction. “I’m here to see an inmate. I know this sounds funny, but all I have is his first name and a description. He’s a member of the prison Jaycees.”

The guard studies her driver’s license, nodding. “Well, ma’am, I’m afraid you have to be on the inmate’s visitors’ list before we can let you in. And we only have visiting hours on weekends.”

Damn, she should’ve known about visiting hours. “I’ll need his full name to get on the visitor’s list, won’t I? His first name is Rick and he’s got red hair. Do you know his last name?”

He looks at her, slowly shaking his head. “We’ve got 480 inmates, lady. And I only know their numbers, not their names. You could try calling the warden’s office.”

For a name that could be fictitious and a man who might or might not still have red hair. The futility of her venture suddenly makes her tired. “Yeah, I’ll do that,” she says. “Thanks.”

Making a U-turn, she slowly drives back down the road, glancing up in the rearview mirror every now and then. There are no inmates in sight, only the guard watching her leave. She takes a deep breath, tightening her hands on the steering wheel to keep them from trembling. Rick, that other Rick, wherever the heck he is, had dumped her. Why on earth would she ever want to see him again? He was her past, not her future.
That evening, she pulls on her down vest and goes out into the backyard, taking a glass of sherry and an old brown blanket. On impulse, she also picks up the tape recorder. Jesse settles at her feet as she sits in the lawn chair. In the silvery light of the half moon, the rock formations in the badlands are like an alien terrain. The chilly air rushes into her nostrils as she inhales deeply from the cigarette, tugging the blanket tighter around her legs. A cloud moves over the moon. After a while the back door closes softly, and Sam comes over to stand beside her.

“Why are you always out here by yourself?” he asks

“It’s just, I don’t know, pretty, peaceful. Don’t you think?” She puts the glass of sherry beneath the chair, surprised he’d even noticed her absence.

“You said there were rattlesnakes.”

“They’re hibernating. And I’ve got Jesse to protect me.”

He settles on the ground at her feet, hugging the dog. “Good old Jesse. How come you like him now? You didn’t use to.”

“I’ve always liked him. I just don’t like cleaning all the burrs and crap off his coat. Remember what a mess he was when he wandered into our yard?” Thankfully, they’d found him before Darwin had.

“Yeah. I gave him a bath in the tub. He hated it.” Sam notices the tape recorder and picks it up. “Were you listening to this?”

“I thought I might.” She pushes the on button and Uncle Rick’s voice in the darkness begins explaining how one rock changes into another and another and turns into lava that ends up being sediment and so on and on until it becomes lava again. “Of course, this doesn’t happen overnight,” he says. “It takes millions of years.”

After a few minutes, she turns the recorder off. “We never did try that volcano experiment. Maybe we could do that Saturday. Would you like to?”

“I guess so. Is he a real guy, Rick?”

“Of course he is, Sam.”

“I don’t think he’s real. I mean, not a real prisoner.”

“Who do you think he is?”

“I don’t know. Just a guy. Somebody they pay to do stuff like that, like on TV commercials.” Sam rubs Jesse’s fur. “But we won’t ever know for sure, will we?”
“Does it really matter? He’s helped you, and he must be a pretty good person, doing what he does for kids.”

The moon slips out of the clouds. For a moment, she catches a glimpse of their future, uneven as the mesas reflected in the moonlight. There’s nothing else for them here. Rick isn’t going to leap from the tape recorder or the manila envelope, a full-grown, mail-order superhero, even if she wanted him to. Rod isn’t going to come back. It’s all on her, whatever happens next. She stares into the darkness until there’s nothing for her to do but get up, keep going.
ROB COOK

The Lord of New York

commands the Thursday night inebriation
from his tagged ledges and windows
in a building that is mostly the sound
of taxis done in
by red lights that don’t end.

On the day he lets the rain
back into his limp,
he will eat chicken bone dinners
with others who’ve given up their names.

Today he took his coat
to meet another coat in Elizabeth, New Jersey
and was not kidnapped.

Today he returned as a smile only—no flesh,
no cop bulletin, no one wanted alive.

He’s learned everything about his apartment-
how much sunlight costs
when it grazes the curtains,
or when it goes missing in the walls,
the mirror, the cupboards,
the moths birthing in each of its nails.

He climbs the stairs to the roof
and traps clouds with Mr. Bilik and Mr. Cap.

Tonight they vote on a maintenance committee.
Tonight they inform on each other.
Tonight they curse with their beat-up fingers.
He watches the easy annihilation of sunset—

he waits and follows the cigar smoke stairwell
back to the bridge lilies
inside the kitchen losing their petals,

losing their petals and no longer touching.

Tonight he returns to New Jersey
and finds the two coats snuggling
in a cemented bed of bibles.

“How do my eyes feel like bricks?” he asks.

“How do my eyes feel like everything they’ve lost?”

The city does not go looking
even for what it still remembers—
“I was offered kisses that weren’t real,” he says-

God’s little boy sitting in a chair by himself
at the bottom of the sea.
Beneath the stairwell

Winds arrive; you herd my shoulder in one hand, purse in the other; roof bellows & still your fingers do not know gentle; beyond panes trees tilt—how we all subject to force; you deposit me in basement; chandeliers of dust; under, you point; wood panels paw my back; & must, wilted cheese, & the mouse’s head separate in trap’s hammer; marble-eyes say sorry, sorry.
JOAN FULLERTON | Ascending, 2008
12 x 9 inches | Mixed media on board
Upon His Skipping Dinner Three Nights in a Row

Let us not diminish. This vacancy hewn in your stomach is no *prickle*, no kitteny *growl*. Say: *canyon, fault line, absence of the left lung*. Call it *basic*, a tongue peppered in lye, the blood I sucked from my last baby tooth, six blanched almonds eaten in thirds. At sixteen, I refused to call my body by its name. Instead: *pinned moth, turncoat, heel of the spoiled loaf*.

Darling, you don’t fool me. I recognize the dolomite spiring between your lips. Listen. I’ve lived ten years with the head of a hammer stuck under my sternum. Take it, and hold steady. Open your mouth.
Out of the Eater, Something to Eat  
Out of the Strong, Something Sweet

It doesn’t always end with temple pillars falling in on the blind, 
but hubris is common in the rising action. The love story is part

introduction, part climax. Before Gilgamesh, in the privacy of grief, 
went through scorpions and smoke to find the amaranth rumored

to resurrect, he and Enkidu bathed each other in the blood of a bull. 
And before Ishtar went to unhook Tammuz from the barbs binding

his flesh to the underworld, she unstrung the corn silk from her hem, 
humming his name. The ecstasy that rouses me from sleep pulls

at my hair like Samson, my heart a bell clamoring at the beloved’s 
ghost-smell on the pillows. When he died, it struck like green fruit

on the earth. But in the before, sadness rose out of us. Happiness 
fell like a god diving into a swan. The heart thrashed toward

the brightness that would sever its stem. Somewhere lions still roam, 
so magnificent they can’t understand weakness, the honey still unmade

inside them, bees circling and clueless their hive will span spine 
to pelvis. Samson, then, still riddleless, his bride still a girl,

unburned. What he would pay for her was still in his pockets, 
the strength to rip the jaw from a lion still roaring in his hands.
Jed, Get With It

Jedidiah has a lot to do. Including, but not limited to, keeping busy.

First, there’s the matter of finding love. Jed is forty and unmarried. He doesn’t have a girlfriend, lover, or friend providing benefits. No house or child, let alone two or three. Without a child, he can’t know the true meaning of life. Or busyness. He currently goes on .7 dates per month.

Perhaps spiritual/emotional improvement should be a higher priority for Jedidiah than finding love because you can’t love others till you love yourself, right? Jed goes to church on Sundays when he has the energy (which isn’t often), and as Jesus said, *What does it profit a man if in gaining the whole world he loses his own soul?* Jed might meet his future wife at church. At the very least, he’d benefit from a stress reduction program; he spends too much time pondering the things he should be doing. BUT the thing is, if in spite of his spiritual (also physical, financial, social, mostly indescribable) shortcomings, Jed were somehow to succeed in obtaining a wife, a girlfriend, or even a friend who provides and demands benefits, which would then require him to spend ever greater quantities of time with his beloved, especially if they have a child, which they’d want within two years or the woman might become infertile, or he, at his advanced age, might fire off the sperm that creates a deficient kid, maybe just one of those nerdy loners, like he was, who prefers Mom and Dad to peers way too long after hitting puberty, which would become the biggest time suck of all, he’d almost certainly
be able to forego some of the other things he has to do, like get a better hairstyle, social life, and family with which to spend Christmas.

In addition to enlisting a wingman and approaching wary women in the supermarket on Friday nights, Jedidiah needs to update his profile on multiple online dating sites and then email ten women a week. Once he gets a date with one woman, he needs to get dates with others so he can finally figure out what he really wants in a relationship and not come off as too easy. He shouldn’t waste time having meaningless sex or contracting a disease, but he should have sex with as many women as possible because without a compelling sexual history, it’s hard to be a winner. In the meantime, he should go out more often with friends so he looks fun in the photos he posts. Maybe he should masturbate less. That takes up real time, and it might be making him soft when it comes to pursuing a mate. Then again, it might also be preventing prostate cancer.

Realizing how much easier it was to meet people when he was younger, Jedidiah sometimes thinks he should dedicate all his waking hours to building a time machine and then go back fifteen years to find a lifelong mate. (Not Maria! Everyone said she was CRAZY, though by now she’s been married for years. At least Jed thinks she’s still married. He can’t be certain, having blocked her from his Facebook feed when she got engaged.)

It would be easier to build a time machine if he’d ever learned to fix things. Also, he should have pursued money from day one, learned fun sports like skiing and sailing, and volunteered at an animal shelter so he’d know more about dog breeds. Women (and men) want him to have done these things. What was he thinking spending that summer before college just lying on the beach? That night he let the bikini-clad college girl spread mud all over his face before her parents called her in to dinner didn’t end up making it into his official sexual history anyway.

Jedidiah walks to and from work (three miles round-trip), but he needs more exercise. It would relieve stress and help him lose a little weight. He should lift weights: that’s the only way to get a really lean body at his age. Of course, if he wants to enjoy exercising, he should shell out for tennis lessons. Then he should find a tennis partner (perhaps a girlfriend who’s good, but not too good, at the game) and hit the ball around twice a week, even in the winter.
Not making six figures (still sitting in a cubicle forty hours a week), Jedidiah needs to improve his work situation. Seek out more work. Stay late. His mother regularly suggests he take a class if his employer is willing to pay for it (she thinks business, he thinks computer programming and, secretly, how to find a wife, who would initially take up more time than masturbation, but also make it so he could go out less often, except to restaurants and the supermarket, and maybe stop worrying about whether he’s done any of the things he was supposed to do with his life, like help a lot of other people). On weeknights he should be networking when not volunteering. Everyone Jed knows is very very busy, which is why he often finds himself alone at and after work, a situation he’s set on fixing. If he wants to succeed, Jed needs to be more like other people. Yet he also needs to stand out. This all makes him very nervous, which is probably why he spends a lot of time on the toilet.

Jedidiah needs to do a better job of creating his personal brand. Less self-deprecation except when it’s self-serving. Take to Facebook and Twitter. Just once an hour. He also needs to stop storing leftovers in plastic containers, get to the farmers market, and figure out the deal with his 401k (there will be lots of things he wants to do when he retires).

Jedidiah used to believe he needed to read more books, but really, who still thinks you can’t get by without Don Quixote? He should be binge watching great TV series. Where do people find the time? Which isn’t to say Jed shouldn’t be making time to relax, have a drink every once in a while. By now he should know a lot more about craft beers and California wine.

When Jedidiah opens up and tells people how crazy it all seems, they tell him he needs to realize that others have it much worse. Actually, to alleviate boredom, Jed reads his fair share of internet journalism. He knows all about single moms, service workers, and war refugees, as well as the hordes of inspiring people doing something about a lot of truly awful situations. To be one of the inspiring people, Jed needs to get stronger in so many ways.

Jedidiah needs more Vitamin D. He should bring his lunch to work but walk outside with it, not eat in his cubicle while reading internet news. He really should go hiking every other weekend. Recently he thought about how the great cathedrals he saw in Europe were so dark inside. Maybe if you spent your life outdoors, farming and walking from
place to place as people used to, you’d find the cool darkness a relief. It was such a sweet thought that Jed never bothered to confirm its veracity.

Jedidiah rarely gives up hope. Sometimes he feels glad to be alive. Sometimes people compliment him: compared to them, they claim, he has it all together. Later, however, these same people have been known to say that Jed really should watch how he talks about all the things he’s done, like having seen ten great cathedrals on a long trip in Europe.

Jedidiah has a lot to accomplish before his college reunion, definitely his high school reunion. Before he runs into Maria or Jennifer or Ali again.
MOLLY BESS RECTOR

Portrait of Mata Hari Before the Firing Squad

The eye of execution day opened on a woman whose many thefts included its own name.

Dressed in silk and velvet:

heavy black kimono, a cloak edged in fur,
she wore a wide-brimmed hat, heeled slippers,

her hair in braided coils.

First she blew kisses, then heard guttering, rounds: thirteen bullets, the last in the head.

It is harder to see blood on a black dress.

She fell first to her stockinged knees, then bent at the waist, her skirt lifting,

as in dance.

Even then, some collector planned to sell the gold disks that had covered her nipples,

her sparkling jamangs,

the jewel-toned songkets she peeled off for audiences who had loved her just-enough darkness, the grit

in the pearl of her eye.

They wanted her badly: her conviction, a foregone conclusion.
You see, it matters a great deal
what a woman wears to die in:

what parts of herself

she chooses to cover, or what she refuses—
that she didn’t wear the blindfold.
LEILA CHATTI

Morning Swim

Because my father asks me to, I rise in the freshly-broken heat. We meet like co-conspirators, unspeaking, a towel slung across his shoulders like a shawl. Silently we trek through the unforgiving sun of this other country, one that raised my father brown and speckled, gave him his God and tongue. But there is no balm either can offer, joint failure of language and prayer—the ones we love sleep across the ocean and do not miss us. We walk towards it, hiss of sand beneath our *shlakas*, desert barbs grazing pink our tender ankles as flies dot the sky like ellipses. The heat licks us and leaves its animal scent, salt sheened over every inch. Cresting a dune, first glimpse of sea, its water green and neat. We shed our human burdens on the shore, rubber flip-flops and towels abandoned in a heap, then linger in the littoral grit. Early light shears cleanly through, glints off shells and shoals of silver fish. We approach the blue skin of horizon, surface smooth as a bed’s new sheet, everything still and untroubled around us, the ocean parting gently as we enter, then sealing us in.
JOAN FULLERTON | Journey Inward, 2017
30 x 40 inches | Acrylic on canvas
Narcissus

When a man throws himself into the black ink of the harbor, the news story says he is just your age.

So I am relieved when you answer, the beloved hook of your voice latched in my ear, saying of course

I’m fine, I would never do such a stupid thing as rid this world of me.

You were the one, long ago, who told me the myth of the boy who loved enough to drown in.

I think perhaps now I love you because I cannot recognize you seen so clearly—suffering, you seem so like myself.
In the early light of day I look
between my legs, spot
the basin and unfurling cloud—
a silken flame. A claret stain.
I flush it down and wash my face.
Make breakfast for myself. Watch
the morning rain. Through the wall,
a child wails. I wait, not knowing
I am waiting. I hear the mother go to her, listen
as the cry tapers off. A deep silence
pours back over. Settles in to stay.
JOAN FULLERTON | Life Transition, 2003
40 x 30 inches | Mixed media on paper
Kything

Lord, there is nothing special about you, unless bluestem is, unless the *seet, seet* of the yellow warbler is a disobedient prayer you always honor, unless the crows hunched on the fencepost like a common row of puritans hadn’t commanded me to dig a grave with my hands like an animal and lay in it, a guest. Too much. Too much breath.

Nothing here is special unless a grasshopper graces it, unless the way cicadas bruise the silence is dear to those who hear it. The danger here is wind and the way last year’s grasses give themselves too easily to the driptorch. Lord, I still grieve the daughter I didn’t want. Her blood burned on the bathroom floor, her new skyless life among root-lace. Pin of her heart stitched into the living field, the bluest stone.

There is nothing special about her unless grief is special to those who carry it. My God, who knows what it is to lose a child, I laid in the ground as if I’d made a burrow and not a burial, as if all sleeps were hibernations, as if all this weeping was waiting for the new season to brighten the ground around me with snow.
What Descends into Flesh

In Western Indonesia, a woman carves an infant-sized hole in the trunk of a jackfruit tree. A grave, to be filled with the body of her child, gone before he cut his first tooth. She prepares his corpse, its bones still soft as the bark of the patchwork limbs. She will not be allowed to attend the funeral, his mother now the milk-white sap of the ever-growing monument. The tree feeds the baby, the body feeds the tree, and the soul, untouched and holy, drifts up through the tropical air.

In Charlotte, my mother sits in the garden of St. Gabriel’s. She whispers to the wall where her own mother rests, an urn set in concrete. She fingers an inherited rosary, speaks to the Virgin Mary, asking about pain, wants to know if leaving is like a long blink, or like suffocating. She leans in, waits for an answer, but what more can we know? Silent, she feeds no one and no stone feeds her.
Irene Simon was picking green beans when the little shrieks started. She’d heard them before and gone inside because it wasn’t her business. *Undo others as you undo yourself.* Tom had thought it a great joke when the MacArthur girl said it, but Irene hadn’t laughed. She’d seen all three MacArthur kids riding bikes around the block, a boy about twelve and two smaller girls with long dark blonde hair, like a Condé Nast ad, all golden and light caramel. Not the kind of thing you saw in a small Midwestern town like theirs. The boy, on the other hand, had zits, glasses, and dark hair. *Nerdy,* Kim would have said. *Looks like he belongs in a hick place like this.* Then again, she’d itched to leave Indiana since she could walk.

This time the cries seemed different, higher pitched, though still faint, or maybe it was how they intruded on her thoughts. Irene was ready to go in anyway. By late August, the leaves on the bean vines were splotchy, battle-worn, the bottom tier yellowing, and even the robust greens were speckled gold along the edges. They were surrendering, she knew, whole fibrous root systems going bust, but what did you expect after such a summer? She sensed them aching down the lengths of their herbaceous stems, loosening at their nodes, even as she stood with the hose, soaking them down—green beans, tomatoes, peppers, carrots, eggplants, and collards. Collards! Tom’s idea. She couldn’t stand them, so he’d made the rounds to all the neighbors lugging plastic bags crammed with the big, crenellated leaves. He’d even left a cardboard box piled with collards just outside the church door, “free” written in leaky red strokes. One of the MacArthur girls asked what they were.
“Cabbage?” She was in pink capris and a yellow t-shirt. Irene missed the days when little girls did church starched, frilled, and Mary-Janed. What was so wrong with little girls looking like little girls? But everything had changed. The MacArthur girl was still cute, in her California beach way. Mercedes. That was her name.

Ken MacArthur was the new youth minister, a relief to everyone, since the old youth minister had turned anarchist and was recently seen around town in black, shaved and pierced. Ken MacArthur, however, was big and pink, with a damp, bone-crushing handshake. His wife, Sally, was tall and angular, pretty in a farmish way. Two Sundays ago, Tom had invited them to supper. He’d insisted Ken and Sally take the box of free collards home, too, since no one else wanted them.

“Bring the kids?” Ken had said, looking directly at Irene, who was standing behind Tom. And she’d nodded and thought, “strawberry shortcake,” staring at his rosy tie. She didn’t mind, honestly, even though Tom had invited them without talking to her first, as he usually did. He had apologized on the drive home, but she said not to worry about it. Good chance to use up some beans.

In fact, almost everything Irene had made for the MacArthurs was from the garden—green bean casserole, mashed potatoes with garlic, rocket salad, and all of it rounded out by cold cuts. What she loved most was prepping the raw beans. Maybe she grew them just for the satisfying snap between her fingers, as if some tightness within her popped loose in the breakage of each knobby pod. And, too, it was a treat to lay the table, dust off the white plates with fine gold trim that she’d once thought would go to Kim. People didn’t bother with such things anymore, did they? Cotton napkins, salt and pepper shakers in the shape of two bulldogs, cut glass dishes of pickled peppers and beets.

She changed into clean slacks and a loose blouse, and made Tom put on a fresh shirt. He grumbled, but she heard him slapping on Old Spice. When the doorbell rang, she opened the door, and just like that, the house was full when before it had been empty as a clean sink.

“What’s wrong?” Tom asked. Mercedes was sniffing, hiding behind her mother.

“Oh, we’re fine,” said Sally. Her hair was damp, her clothes unsettled, as if thrown on moments before. “She’s fine. Aren’t you,
bunny? Can you say hello to Mr. Simon? Remember, from church?” But the little girl buried her face in the edge of her mother’s sweater.

“Come in and have some wine,” Irene said. “Or Tom can mix you something. We got root beer and cream soda for the kids.”

“We’ll pass on the wine,” said Ken, and at the same time, Sally said, “Did you say cream soda? We love cream soda. We just die for it, don’t we, honey?”

Of course, Irene should’ve guessed they were teetotalers. Tom was already getting out the tumblers, trying to move things along.

At dinner, the boy said, “My teacher’s got a fungus in her eye. It’s like a, a freaky mushroom but without the round thing on top.”

“Cap,” said Irene. “That’s the cap. So how big is it?”

“Oh, Dylan, not at the dinner table,” said Sally, and then to Irene, “That’s Mrs. Cristman. She’s been going to Indianapolis for treatment.”

“Like this.” Dylan held his hand a few inches from his face. “She took off her eye patch and showed us.”

“That’s what all this genetic food has gotten us,” said Tom. “Saw a poor Indian fellow on TV with something like that coming out of his ear like a big wet lily. Turn your stomach.”

“Can I use the bathroom?” said Mercedes.

“Down the hallway,” said Irene. “Second door.”

“The crazy thing is that she can still see out of the eye,” said Ken. “You wouldn’t think it, would you?” He pushed a last morsel of potato onto his fork with his fingertips.

When Irene went to the kitchen to get more gravy, she saw the little girl in the backyard. It had been unseasonably warm, and the yard, even in the long shadows of early evening, hummed with heat and insects. Irene set the gravy boat down on the counter and went outside. The girl was crouched near the garden.

“What are those?” The girl pointed to a sprawling mess of squash, clouded with powdery mildew.

“Spaghetti squash. They’re not ready yet.”

Mercedes rocked back and forth on her heels. “Those are cherry tomatoes, right? I recognize them.”

“You want to pick some? They’re sweet, like fruit.”
“Can I try one? Really?” The girl clambered to where the rambling
bush had overrun the more sedate varietals that Tom had put in. Merce
picked one, examined it closely then popped it in her mouth.

Too late, Irene realized that the plants’ foliage was merged together,
and instead of a tomato, the girl had plucked a small pepper. “Wait—”
Irene said, but Mercedes was already spitting and rubbing at her mouth.

“Blech! Yuck!” She glared.

“Oh, it’s not that bad. Just mildly spicy.” Irene was suddenly,
irrationally, irritated by her own mistake, the failure to warn Mercedes
even though the bush was right in front of her. The girl felt like an
intruder now, the way she’d spit the pulp onto a clump of marigolds.
Irene wanted her out, gone, back inside with her parents, as if another
failure was in the offing. “C’mon out of there now. Let’s go in. There’s
dessert.”

“Can you see into our backyard?” The girl threaded between the
sprawling plants to the fence that divided the backyards and pressed her
eyes to the cracks between the slats. “I can see our house! Do you watch
us playing?”

“Of course not! Come out of there now.”

“We could spy on you every day if we wanted to.”

“Well, you’d be pretty bored. Nothing goes on over here.” Irene
turned and marched back to the house, aware of her blouse clinging to
her back, her too-tight waistband, the glum truth of her words. Tomorrow she would cut back, stick to plain lettuce with a little olive oil,
maybe get Tom to go to water aerobics with her (fat chance). She would
rip down a whole skein of snap peas and snap, snap, snap. Her fingers
tinged thinking of it.

Inside the house, Mercedes asked, “Who’s that girl in the picture?”

“What picture? Oh, the one by the front door? That’s Kim, my
daughter. She’s all grown up now.”

“Does she go to our church? Have I seen her?”

“She lives—far away. In San Francisco.” Or so they’d heard. Speaking of it now was like jumping off the high board, the water
rushing up, the helpless shredded feeling. Still, you survived. She’d
decided a while back that she needed to talk about Kim. Normalize, that
was the word.
Later, after it had cooled a bit, they ate apple pie and ice cream on the patio outside. Tom entertained them with highlights from *My Giant Head, My 600-lb Life,* and *Hoarders.*

“Maybe we should start letting the kids watch more cable,” said Ken. “A whole biology lesson there.”

“It’s horrible,” said Irene. “No different than those travelling freak shows there used to be.”

“Listen.” Tom set his empty plate on the ground. “You get to see that they’re all just regular people, just like us. Just because they got some big lump on their face or they can’t reach the table. Don’t you think that’s good, Irene?”

“What’s the Golden Rule, Mercedes?” Ken asked. “Dylan, you remember?”

Both children stared at their father silently. “Undo others as you undo yourself,” said Lizzie. She was sitting sleepily on Sally’s lap. Irene was sure Sally had whispered into her ear.

“Undo—that’s great!” said Tom. “Undo others! That’s what you do, right, Irene? Or is it undo yourself?”

“Help your sister out, Mercedes,” said Ken, nudging his daughter’s leg. “What is it, now?”

But Mercedes shifted away from her father. She turned to Irene and said, “What’s San Francisco?”

§

“I’m going over there,” Irene said to Tom. It was eleven o’clock in the morning. “To the MacArthurs’. Tell them we can hear that racket. I can’t take it. It’s not right.”

Tom turned his chair toward her, looking pleased. “I just got off the phone with Bill. *Hoarders* is going to film an episode right here in Richmond, a bungalow over on 16th St.”

“Listen to me,” Irene said. “They’re beating that child. You know it.”

“No, I don’t know it, and neither do you. You go over there and you’ll just make hard feelings.” Tom leaned forward, his hands spread wide on his knees.

Irene looked down at the bowl she still held, full of overgrown, seedy beans that looked so much like her husband’s arthritic fingers.
“Kids make all kinds of noises that don’t mean anything,” Tom said. “They’re wrestling or playing or whatever the hell kids do. Kim used to raise the roof if she didn’t get her way. You’d think she was dying, don’t you remember?”

“No,” Irene said. “I don’t.”

“Listen, I’m going to drive by 16th Street, just to see. Bill said it got so bad he couldn’t even jam any more mail in the slot. He’d just stack it by the front door.”

Irene went back to the kitchen and dumped the beans into a sink of cold water. What she could do was take a sack to the MacArthurs. Giving things away, that was what she was good at. Cooking up jelly with the little crabapples from the backyard tree, trotting out pies and cookies and boxes of Concord grapes whenever there was a whiff of need. And handing out tomatoes, bushels of them, in every conceivable form—fresh, canned, sauced, frozen into billiard balls. Well, she’d walk over there with a bag of green beans and just nicely ask the MacArthurs what in the world they were doing to create those sounds.

The MacArthur house was big and white, and she stood at the door nervously, righteous curiosity fizzling, plastic bag of green beans twisting from her hand.

“Irene! How are you?” asked Sally. “How’s Tom?”

“Fine. Good.” She stepped in as Sally drew back. Dark shapes clouded her vision as her eyes adjusted. She’d guessed the MacArthurs were people who kept the blinds drawn, even on sunny days. In fact, she and Tom had argued about that a few days back. Now Irene could tell him that she’d been right. As usual.

“I brought you some green beans,” she said, holding the bag out. “Freshly picked.”

“Oh, wow! How nice.” Sally glanced at the sack, but then she put a hand on Irene’s shoulder. She seemed to be examining Irene’s face. “Are you okay?” she said. “Do you need some water?”

“I’m fine, really,” Irene said. She tried to shrug out from under Sally’s hand, but Sally held steady until Irene said, “Okay, maybe some water.”

Sally went to the kitchen, rattling on about how Irene should have a seat, make herself at home. Irene stood with her back to the door, and, without stopping to think, she went up the first three stairs. She had
lived her whole life with propriety and was stunned at how quickly it was shed. Now her eyes were level with the hardwood of the second floor landing, and doors were coming into view. Last year, when the house was for sale, she’d come to the open house. She remembered the high-ceilinged main floor, the big bedrooms upstairs at the front of the house and the two smaller ones near the back that would have been for servants long ago. There was a back staircase, too, a narrow thing, all walled in, that came out behind the kitchen at the back of the house. The previous owner had remodeled the kitchen, knocked out the butler’s pantry to make it open and light-filled, full of stainless steel and marble, like a high-end restaurant kitchen, inexplicable to Irene. All that money spent on a kitchen only ever used for slicing delivery pizza.

The bedroom doors were all closed, and Irene stopped there, at the top landing. Then, two things happened at once. The door to her left opened, and she glimpsed Mercedes’s tear-blotched face, and then Sally stood at the bottom of the stairs saying, “Can I help you? Are you looking for something?”

Irene came down quickly, feeling the heat rise to her cheeks. “I thought I heard something. Someone call me or say something.” She took the water which was in a thick chewed-looking plastic tumbler, a kid’s Kool-aid cup, but this didn’t surprise Irene, not one bit.

“Are you feeling okay now?” Sally asked again, but Irene saw her eyes flicker upward, to the top of the stairs. “Did you have something you wanted…?”

“Just to ask if you—if your family likes green beans. I can bring more.”

“Oh, that’s nice of you. It’s hard to get the kids to eat veggies, but I try.” She laughed a little.

“Don’t give them a choice. That’s how I was raised and that’s how I raised mine.” Irene handed back the plastic tumbler. “We’ve got oodles. We’ll keep you stocked. I’ll just leave a bag on the porch if you’re not here.”

Back at home, Irene said to Tom, “I saw the middle girl, and she looked pretty miserable, I can tell you that. They’re beating her for sure. Or something.”

Tom had come in from the garden. He was wearing his absurd straw sunhat that sat too low on his head and the too-big shirt with the
penguins Irene had got him from Goodwill. He didn’t look like the former manager of a credit union, he was so shrunken and benign. Had he always been so small? They were the same height when they married, but somehow, the years had pushed Tom down, away from her. In what she meant to be an affectionate gesture, Irene yanked at the foolish sunhat, but Tom grabbed for it angrily.

“Look, Irene. You just leave those people alone. They’re not doing anything they shouldn’t, and you’ll just get yourself in trouble.”

“When Sally went to get me a glass of water—and in an old plastic cup if you can believe it—I went upstairs and saw the child with my own eyes!”

“You went snooping in their house? Good Lord—”

“It wasn’t snooping!” Irene cried. “You’d let the world fall apart around you without making a fuss. Just like you let Kim move away. Like you drove her away.”

Tom’s face shut down, as if hurricane shutters had been pulled closed, all expression blanked out, and he turned away stiffly.

Irene knew, even in that moment, that she had no right saying what she did, a terrible accusation, and it had been ten years now anyway. Who would dredge up such a thing after all that time?

One day went by, then another and another. Tom was trying to ferret out the *Hoarders* production schedule. Tom acted as if Irene hadn’t said anything about Kim. This was his way, to push things under the carpet, to shift the focus. There wasn’t even a trace of ice in his voice as he went on about believing Bill but still wanting to know for sure that *Hoarders* was coming to town. Of course, Tom said, he understood why they’d keep that sort of thing under wraps.

“They don’t want to scare off the homeowner,” Tom said. “You know, the hoarder.”

Irene knew Tom was driving by the target house every few days, hoping to glimpse a clue, maybe the appearance of a van or dumpster. Once, he even took Irene with him. Tom eased on the brakes as they passed the mousy bungalow clad in blue vinyl siding. The front lawn was patchy and yellowed, as if damaged by chemicals. Volunteer tomatoes sprawled in a sunny spot to the left of the front door.

“Of course, there’s no studio audience or anything,” Tom said. “We just want to watch the shoot. Me and Bill. And you too, if you want.”
“Thanks,” she said. “But I think you’re both kidding yourselves.”

Tom was grinning, looking past her at the same time, to the blue bungalow.

Irene put a hand on his knee and said, as gently as she could, “I don’t understand this obsession.”

“Oh, no obsession!” He looked pained. “Don’t you ever wonder how other people live? At the credit union, everyone had the same kind of life. This—” he gestured to the house. “Shows something different than—”

“—Than us?” Irene said. “When the MacArthurs were over, you said the freak shows proved we were all the same.”

“Well, sure,” he said, his foot on the gas. “Underneath the crap. That’s the point.”

§

Irene stood on the porch, watching Dylan and Mercedes zoom up the street, standing upright on their bikes to pedal even faster, slaloming from side to side. Irene waved them over.

“You want a cookie or something? Since you don’t like tomatoes.”

“I like tomatoes,” said Mercedes. “Just not peppers.”

“I like cookies,” Dylan said. He’d zoomed up behind his sister.

“Wait here.” Yesterday, she’d made Hermits, but now, twisting the lid off of the oversized Mason jar, she realized they were old-man cookies, the stuffy molasses and wrinkled raisins. She shook out a half dozen anyway, already imagining the children flinging them under the shaggy junipers along the sidewalk. When she turned around, Mercedes was standing there, watching her.

“Oh! You’re a quiet one. Where’s your brother?”

“He went home. What are these?” She’d already taken one from Irene and was examining it closely, sniffing it.

“Hermits, they’re called. They’re very good.” Irene was aware of saying the last word stridently, the way she had when Kim was little, and Irene wanted her to try something new.

“Why’re they called that? That’s weird.” Mercedes nibbled the edge of one and looked around. “What’re you doing?”

“Oh, not much. We’re both retired, Tom and I. You want milk with that?”
Mercedes shook her head and retreated to the front door. She slipped out to the porch, but Irene followed her. She asked, “How are things over there, in your house?”

The little girl stopped on the step. She shoved the cookie in her mouth and shrugged.

“Are you—okay?” Irene asked.

Mercedes took the cookie out of her mouth. “What d’you mean?”

Irene leaned against the doorframe and watched a hummingbird dart at the feeder. “Sometimes I hear, well, like cries from your house. Like someone is yelling or crying.”

But when she turned back, the girl was already off the porch and on her bike, pushing herself backward with her feet. Her long dark blonde hair was over one shoulder and her arms, reaching out to the handlebars were thin, scrawny. Breakable, thought Irene, and held her breath as Mercedes zipped down the driveway, skimming onto the road without looking to the right or left.

Once, when Kim was five or six, she’d got separated from Irene in Elder Beerman. Irene had been happily rummaging through close-out dress shirts, looking for Tom’s neck size in a white or pale blue. And then, that moment—still undimmed, like a naked bulb—when she realized Kim was gone. Irene combed the store, too embarrassed to ask for help, too frantic to even go to the bathroom. Finally, panic drove her out into the parking lot, bladder near bursting, three shirts still under her arm, unpaid. The store detective followed her to the car. Double humiliation then.

Irene found Kim, later, wandering along the sidewalk. She thought Irene had left without her. Oh, it had hurt, that her daughter had thought her capable of abandonment! Had she taken it out on Kim, given her a whaling (as Irene’s own mother would say), to teach her a lesson? No, of course not. At least Irene didn’t think so, but the truth was that even though that moment when she realized Kim was gone was as sharp in her memory as it had ever been, what happened after Irene found Kim was all a blur of relief and pain, and it was hard to tell, or remember now, what had happened, what Irene had done.

§
Four days passed since Irene had seen Mercedes. “I’m taking more beans to the MacArthurs,” she called out. Tom was lying down, as he did every afternoon. He was likely sound asleep, but sometimes he pretended. Irene didn’t check. She wanted to get back to the MacArthurs’. To Mercedes.

Anyone with half a brain could see what was happening, could figure her out. What would Nadra call it? Nadra was Irene’s nephew’s wife, a hefty, sharp-eyed psychiatrist with black hair dyed brassy blonde and white, white teeth. Bradley had married her a year or two ago, and Irene and Tom had flown to Las Vegas for the wedding. That Nadra, she was a sharpie. She would say “projection” or “guilt-complex,” words that would rattle like seed pods in Irene’s head but that couldn’t begin to convey the depth or breadth of what had lain coiled within her for the last decade. Of course, corporal punishment was out of favor now. Still, they’d been normal, hadn’t they? For the time. She’s had this conversation in her head a million times, imagining herself sitting across from Nadra. Every once in a while, Irene worked up the courage to lift the phone and begin dialing her number, but then Tom would call her from the other room and ask her to come see what was on the TV, the freak of the day. And just as well. What would she say to Nadra? That she needed therapy? A sounding board with a Ph.D. to assure her that she and Tom had been good parents, what Irene told herself every day of the week anyway?

The MacArthurs’ van was gone from the driveway, and across the sloping lawn, Irene saw the dogs locked in their kennel. She knocked on the side door anyway. It was a heavy, old house; even the side door was broad with moldings like squared-off tree trunks. Some logger felled an ancient cedar and sold it to a craftsman, who simply planed it and raised it up all in a piece to create the framework for this particular door in this particular house. Pride in one’s work, that’s what it was, only now, such a shame, it was layered in thick paint which had fragmented and pitted. Irene knocked again, louder, and then tried the knob. It opened.

Her plan was to leave the beans on the wooden chair just inside the entry, carefully, so they wouldn’t spill although, if they did, Irene wouldn’t be to blame. The MacArthur smell—old tacos, dogs, and sticky floors—prickled her nose, and she stifled a sneeze. Everything was in half-light, just like before, blinds closed. Jackets were humped along one
wall, over a bench crowded with books, red and yellow backpacks, dog-eared papers, scrawls of ink and pencil and red. She walked through the mudroom and into what she would call a foyer. In front of her was the same wide staircase that she had climbed before, its banister some dark mysterious wood that she should have been able to identify but couldn’t. Mahogany? Walnut? She put one hand on it, and it was easy to walk upstairs for a second time. Easier.

Up close, the MacArthur house showed wear. A tall window shone at one end, and she was struck by the height of the ceilings, even on the second floor. A water stain like a six-fingered hand reached out from one corner, but the smell was better up here—deodorant and Yankee candles.

She tiptoed into the bedroom at the front of the house. A lumpily-made king-sized bed filled one wall, and Irene’s mind turned, unbidden, to the marital act. Not that she wanted to think of it. Still—how did you find time for it with three kids? She and Tom had had trouble finding the right moment with just one at home. Last Sunday, Ken MacArthur was sitting directly in front of her, and the fleshy rims of his ears reminded her of baby rats, pink and hairless. It was alarming to picture him engaged in intercourse, but now the image had taken root, him humping an immobile Sally, only the soles of her feet visible, toes madly twitching.

Irene opened the closet. Messy rows of bright clothes were heaped around wire hangers, and shoes lay in a jumble. Without thinking, she slipped a foot into one of Sally MacArthur’s dark green kitten heels, not the kind of thing she’d ever seen Sally wear but, strangely, exactly the kind of shoe Irene herself favored. Classic, timeless, pinching. She put the other on, leaving her own flats there in Sally’s closet. Now, weirdly, she felt impervious, invisible, like a spirit moving through walls, undetectable. She planned to change shoes before she left, but for now, Sally’s felt right. In the heels, Irene had become a big antenna, picking up Sally MacArthur’s residual thoughts, ambient emotions that lingered in the folds of the drapes, along the ridges of the lilac quilt. How unhappy she was! Standing in Sally’s shoes, Irene knew this, suddenly, certainly. She’d never really thought about Sally MacArthur without a certain derision for her sloppy sincerity, her big-eyed earnestness and slack housekeeping. But now—oh, the shame of it, her unvarnished, exposed
unhappiness! Tied up with her children, or one child in particular. How could Irene have missed it?

Back in the hallway, she peeked into the next bedroom. Dark, clothes spilled everywhere, unidentifiable sports equipment cluttering the floor, pieces of games, comics, messy, unmade bed in the corner, like something from a homeless camp. A plate with the remains of what—pizza?—teetered on the corner of a desk that held a computer and keyboard and a series of what Irene guessed were speakers. The boy’s room. Dylan. Why they let him get away with such a wreck was beyond her. Dylan needed a smartening up, that’s what.

The next room belonged to Mercedes. Irene had no idea how she knew this, but she did, just as she imagined the last room, across the landing, would belong to Lizzie, the youngest. She wasn’t worried about Lizzie. The same instinct that told her this room was Mercedes’s told her that Lizzie wasn’t the screamer. Mercedes’s pink bed, miniature table and chairs, tiny figures scattered across the pink shag rug. The bedside lamp had a shade covered in fabric roses, and the sight, or maybe the smell—that sweet odor of plastic, crayons and fiberfill—finally undid Irene, and she bent over and pressed her face against Mercedes’s fluffy white pillow. The familiarity was an ache in her kidneys. Everything was so much like she remembered it, so much like Kim. She wiped her eyes with one corner of the pillowcase and looked around for something on which to blow her nose.

And then, a sound from outside. The metallic roll of a van door, a tumult of voices, faint then louder. Louder. She leapt up, almost tripping in Sally’s shoes, and slunk to the door but it was too late. A pounding of feet up the stairs. Trapped, feeling ridiculous, as if snared in some old Pink Panther movie, Irene spun around, ran to the bed, then back to the center of the room. Finally, panicked to the point of nausea, she flung herself into Mercedes’s closet and pushed herself to the back. Inside, it smelled of musty wood, but the room was suddenly alive.

“Do you have any idea how shameful that was?” It was Ken.

“It wasn’t my fault! Dylan was pinching me—can’t you see? Look right there, you see all that red?” Mercedes’s voice, yes, of course.

“Well, why didn’t you say something?” Ken’s voice was sweet with sarcasm before it turned hard again. “No, missy,” he said. “You brought this on yourself. Didn’t I warn you?”
“No no no no—"

Movements, a wrestling and then slaps, the sound of spanking. Oh, Irene had heard that before, the ruckus of parental discipline, the shocked cries. *This is going to hurt you more than it hurts me.* Then wails, louder than ever because she was here instead of back in her own yard, where she belonged, where she would be if she had any sense. She should have been picking the very last of the green beans because they were just about done. The beans, the collards, done, done, done. Irene pressed back against something hard—plastic storage bins, she guessed. The edges of the lids jabbed into her spine. Her knuckles were jammed against her front teeth, so that she would have dents in her skin, later, when she finally thought to look. She was trembling with her own audacity, trembling like a battle-worn vine, brittle from summer heat and the effort of keeping upright, from greening and producing long after there was anything worth giving away.

She leaned too far back and felt the stack of tubs give and then sway, and in the fuzzy darkness of Mercedes MacArthur’s closet, Irene imagined the tower collapsing down on her. She leapt from the closet.

In the dim light of the bedroom, Mercedes was over her father’s knee. One of Ken’s hands was poised over his daughter’s flushed buttocks. He stared at Irene. She saw then that both father and daughter were crying, that Ken MacArthur had big, fat tears rolling down his round pink face.

Irene found her voice first. “Shame on you!” And added, “I knew it!” She regretted it immediately, as the full rush of her crime and shame closed in. She registered Ken wiping his eyes and getting to his feet. Irene turned and moved, as fast as she could, across the landing, down the wide staircase. She sped past Sally, who looked up from the plastic bag of green beans, astonishment written all over her pretty, bovine face. Irene ran out the big side door into the assailing sunlight. And she kept going, wobbling down the driveway in the green heels, heart popping against breastbone, ribs aching, and it was not until she was rounding the corner of her own street that she went to take a deep breath and discovered that she could not.

§
When Ken and Sally came to the hospital, Irene pulled one of Tom’s old tricks and pretended to be asleep. There were two reasons—no, three. First, she really was tired, so mind-numbingly weary, in fact, that it hardly qualified as faking. Fatigue had stuck itself all over her insides like gum. Second, embarrassment. Shame, really. If Mrs. MacGregor hadn’t looked up from watering her geraniums and seen her collapse on the sidewalk, if things had gone on normally instead of devolving into an episode, she might have even returned to apologize. Just that morning, Tom had stroked her hair and told her not to worry, that the MacArthurs weren’t pressing charges. They’d even brought back her shoes.

“They said keep the green ones,” Tom had whispered into the side of her head. “Since you like them so much.”

Despite the generosity of the MacArthurs, Irene’s mortification had only intensified. The sight of Ken blubbering as he spanked his daughter was riven into her memory.

And the third reason? Laying there, with her closed, trembling lids, Irene felt a vague pity for Sally MacArthur, a feeling she couldn’t exactly explain or place. Irene had the sense she’d forgotten something, and she needed to remember it before she saw Sally MacArthur again.

And so now, even though Irene sensed the MacArthurs in the doorway, could detect the scent of freesia and stargazer lilies rising from what she imagined was a very nice floral arrangement in Sally’s arms, she remained inert.

She heard them murmur something and leave, heard Ken’s voice in the hallway, encountering Tom, who’d just returned from getting coffee. *Maybe again tomorrow . . . just wanted to say . . . Really, doing fine.* Then a lovely stillness. She let out her breath in a slow sigh and, finally, just as she began to feel herself drifting off, opened her eyes.

Mercedes was standing beside the bed. “I knew you were faking.”

Irene turned to look straight at Mercedes, but she did not lift her head from the pillow. “You.”

The little girl touched the IV line running into Irene’s arm. “What’s this for?”

“Medicine to keep me alive. Don’t touch it, it’ll break.”
“Why were you in my closet?” She had been standing near the foot of the bed but now came closer and sat lightly on the edge of the mattress. “Were you spying?”

“Never mind. None of your business. I think your parents are leaving now.” Irene turned away and realized for the first time that even if she wanted to sit up, she didn’t have the strength. She’d become a sack of protoplasm and tubing, and Mercedes, perched nearby like a newly hatched chick, was a reminder of other things, humiliating things. Irene had been wrong. Hadn’t she?

“Do you get spanked a lot?” Irene said, as loudly as she could. “Well, do you? I want to know.”

Mercedes backed away. In the hallway, voices rose and then fell, impossible to tell what they were saying. Irene wanted an answer to—oh, so many things! But just wanting something didn’t count for a hill of beans. Irene knew that. She closed her eyes again and listened and did not let herself dwell on the unfamiliar looseness of her limbs, of joints and sockets, as if some essential tautness was missing. Nothing to do but wait. One of the nurses was about Kim’s age, with the same dark hair. She would come in shortly and give Irene medicine or food or help her to the bathroom, if that’s what she wanted.
JOAN FULLERTON | Unconscious Growth, 2010
15 x 11 inches | Mixed media on paper
Self-Portrait at Fifteen with Father

Today, we wait easily together
for a glimpse of branched bone
already scraped of its velvet.
On most days, he does not see
hesitation as I mean it.
Most days, I say I am ready.

It must not be a glancing blow,
he says, or square
between the eyes. Clean,
between the fourth and fifth
rib, or we will have
to follow the blood.

Today, we both blink.
I cock my wrist to the left,
burying the arrow in the ribs
of the earth.
I came home to her hanging from the corner of our garage roof. Stipples of blood congealed on the driveway’s sloping tarmac. Ankles bound, white belly slit open, the body’s rivers undone. I could have touched her narrow forehead, considered it but hesitated, and her clouded eye followed me onto the porch. After that, I wouldn’t leave the house until he brought her down. He layered cardboard on a long plastic table in the basement, sharpened his knives. I opened the door and watched him wrestle the skin from her ribs. Where were the branches, I asked, shouldn’t there be white bones branching from her skull? You shouldn’t be here, he said, and the room smelled of sinews. This was the year the herds spilled into the neighborhoods, too many fawns, too much frost, too many snails in the garden. I don’t know how he knew where to set the knife, to parse and quarter and preserve. He showed me her tawny coat, let me pass a finger through the bullet hole, the hind’s heart pierced by a tiny, thick needle threaded with fire and gunshot. Didn’t it hurt, I asked, pulling my hand back from her coarse hair. We give of ourselves as we must, he said, and I saw how he had laid an old shirt over the long face, the eyes, saw the bright emptiness of our refrigerator week after week, the fog of his breath and the weight of the blade in his hands.
CHELSEA DINGMAN

Before You Go

You should know,
he may not be your son, but he made a mural
of his body,
where you aren’t the serpent, or the broken
cross,
but the mother of liars & drinkers & boys crucified
to barn rafters
after a night of revelry. He drags you with him
the way
a motherless boy drags himself away from train tracks,
yellow
weeds from your yard under his tongue. For you, the bellyscars
from
the surgeries are new. Before, the parts of you that were
removed
could be grown. But now, he masters the art of looking
away.
He doesn’t want to visit. You should know, this is true
devotion.
It takes a brave man to sit still, 3000 miles away
from
the only woman he’s wanted to call mama. To whom will he tell
his secrets,
the way his sons look at him like hungry pigeons? Your whole
body
has been changing, the drugs making you marsh & glen, rather
than hardened ice
fields. He forgets his face grows only grey hair now. That you
remember
the fiery-headed kid who lived on Kraft dinner & wiener
& grilled cheese
when you were the village. You should know, before you go
somewhere
that will keep you long away, he can’t bear this slow dis-
appearance.
You called him a tower, once, but history has shown
us
even towers fall to fire. Look around your sterile room.
Ignore
the machines. White walls. Wilting arrangement of carnations.
Pretend
for a moment that he is strong enough to know
the fragile rot
in all things. The mural on his skin is now faded to grey
after
years of friction. On the phone, you used to say, call me next
week,
before hanging up. Now, you’re saying, sweet boy, I need you to be
brave.
Thought for a Little Birthday

for Kelly

Two miles gone, we huff the gravel road toward the pond and the fallen tree.

Already the heat pinches my calves and the gout in my toe drives a needle into the joint,

still I wouldn’t miss this daily appraisal, this hour of sweat and concern—

mortgage, aging, grief, a daughter become a woman, the hard work of love—

talk that transforms struggle into hope, hope into gratitude.

And when we round the pond and you throw up a hand to silence me,

I catch three turtles sunning on our fallen oak, three blessings only you could show me.

On these walks, I don’t always know where we’re going, but when you kick up the pace,

I struggle to keep up.
JOAN FULLERTON | Longing, 2017
8 x 8 inches | Mixed media on paper
Ideas of Story and Meaning: *The Catalog of Broken Things*


*The Catalog of Broken Things* is a book of our moment. Its four concept poems fall within the continuum of hybrid poetics, adopting what they need from tradition—the poem as a communicative vehicle, consistency of voice, deft construction—while abandoning some of the more traditional expectations of world-building, linearity, and closure. Within this vein, the stylistic range of these poems is broad, but the collection consistently calls into question our ideas of story and meaning-making through the speaker’s interactions with the dead and the ways in which the speaker engages in and resists the creation of a cohesive narrative.

The first lyric sequence, from which the collection takes its name, deals with the speaker’s family, both dead and alive. The desolate landscape of the poem, its surreal imagery, and its elliptical qualities set the tone of the collection and foreshadow the content. The third section of the first poem provides a useful look into the book:

My father holds a fishing net of small suns each shining hesitantly, uncertain which planets might revolve around it. He carries his boat.

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

His hands are heavy from the work.

His lips a crack in darkness. The moon fails, falls. The wind listens.
The actions of both the dead and the living in the world of the speaker take on a ceremonial weight, though the images of the speaker’s family often evade interpretation. Yet as the collection progresses, evasion becomes a mode of exploring larger questions surrounding language and the construction of stories.

The second poem in the collection, “The Protagonist’s True Story,” interrogates our ideas surrounding narrative. The speaker sets up a series of experiments: In the final experiment, “I am you and you are I,” the speaker says in the poem’s opening, “. . . We meet in the middle of an empty field. You take out your weapon of choice. Perhaps it’s my choice.” Here several questions are raised by the speaker. Firstly, who is the you? Is the speaker addressing the protagonist using the second person, as one might reasonably assume? Or is the speaker speaking to himself in the second person, since the speaker, after all, created the “you”? Or is the speaker speaking directly to us, the reader?

Each reading is plausible and leads to different readings of the poem. Herein lies Molotkov’s point: our narratives are fluid and ambiguous, subject to change by the reader, and, above all, by the writer.

This theme is expanded upon in the third and fourth poems in the collection. The former, “The Melting Hourglass,” continues to tease the reader into considering her relationship with the speaker:

Dear Reader
I unwrap myself
like a delicate candy
.............
is there anything left
after the wrapper?

The reader is given only what the speaker allows, or what we are able to read into the imagery of the poem. Resisting a traditional reading, the poem forces the reader to consider her role as a meaning-maker in its meta-narrative.

This device is heightened and brought to its conclusion in the final poem of the book, “Your Life as It Is.” The poem is structured like a series of journal entries, written in the second person. In line with the previous poems, the reader is invited to consider who the “you,” or the
speaker of the poem, is—again forcing the reader to create a strategy for entering the world of the poem. The ending is instructive when considering the book’s aims and the aesthetic of the book as a whole:

You go outside, but the outside is gone. It’s like a vast empty field, but without a field. It’s like you, but without you. You have brought a library of building blocks from which you will construct it all over, every day. You must create yourself and the world around you. This is your life as it is.

The reader is left with an existential affirmation: we must create our own meaning, both in the book and in the larger world we inhabit. And so this is a book that rewards a reader who is imaginative, who enjoys hybrid aesthetics and surreal imagery, a reader who is interested in thinking about the construction of narratives, about our systems of meaning and belief. Those comfortable in this territory will enjoy this collection of “. . . curious glances, exploratory words, [and] shy smiles.”
Cheryl Dumesnil. *Showtime at the Ministry of Lost Causes*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016. $15.95, paper.

Cheryl Dumesnil’s new book contains poems that are strikingly bright and inviting. They’re a pleasure to encounter. A reader has much to look forward to here: compelling language, a nearly neighborly atmosphere, and, often, an understated audacity of method. To overhear these poems is to become invested in the drama of personhood while laughing along with a speaker who is in awe of the world she observes. At least, that seems a helpful way to understand the relationship between these stylistically diverse poems. Read the opening to “Ode to Pink Floyd:” for example:

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You were the perfect soundtrack for our theaters of discontent—two honors students stoned
on Acapulco Gold, scribbling ‘We don’t need no thought control’ in the margins [of] our Western Civilization text books, or sprawled on my dorm room floor…
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The winking humor is charming, and the piece is funny and profound at turns. That’s what makes it all the more surprising when one realizes that the poem shares an approach with an especially somber piece like “Don’t.” The latter opens with the speaker ruminating on a sick child, and ends approaching mortal terror:

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Think instead about the hours he spent on the beach last weekend, digging
a giant pit in the sand, then pratfalling
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into it, over and over, in slow motion.

No. Don’t think about that either.
Not the hole. Not the falling.

Both poems surprise by showcasing the speaker’s humility in the face of these counterposed sorts of ineffability, and by bringing the reader to a place where smoking weed in college and fearing for the life of a child seem to overwhelm with equal force, if not by equivalent means.

As with most of the book, both of these poems are written in couplets. However, those in “Don’t” are the better designed. The diminishing line length as the end approaches underwrites the terrible sense of foreboding present in the poem, and the meaning of the hole is upended to great effect. The imperatives are countered by a clever apophasis: Dumesnil balances these elements to capture complex moments and feelings. This balance helps the book feel revealing and honest, and leads to work that can be strikingly vibrant, refreshingly transparent, or, personal to the point of obscurity.

Dumesnil’s poems seem to divulge details of her own life, or slight variations. It’s a strategy she shares with many respected poets at work today. Think of Li-young Lee, or Ellen Bass, Sharon Olds, or the late Philip Levine: their power is in the tension they create between persona and personality. Dumesnil takes considerable risks in this direction, sometimes closing that distance too completely. Consider “What You Were Doing Up There” which opens:

That house, that roof—
above your mother’s
porcelain angels who

saved no souls, shingles
threatening splinters
to your tender feet

Poems are most alive when they provide the right details at the right time. This offers plenty of details: a house, its roof, the shingles,
porcelain angels, and splinters. There isn’t much tension, though. The jump between stanzas, which foregrounds the inaction of the angels, seems conspicuous. Objects in poems often carry their own associations (Elizabeth Bishop’s “The Moose,” James Merrill’s windows and mirrors, or the horse dung in “Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy’s Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota”), which are explored in the course of the poem. Here, the porcelain angels are mentioned, and dropped. That the addressee is positioned over them on the roof, that they are incapable of saving souls—do angels save souls?—isn’t revealing. They are too patly included and dismissed.

To point this out isn’t condemnation of the method, though. *At the Ministry* is such a compendium and interrogation of materials that some unevenness in power is inevitable. The poem “Coming Home” demonstrates a similar method to “What You Were Doing Up There”—a concrete image is used to elevate the material towards the sort of transcendence the best poetry can supply—and in that poem, it works. The brief lyric in its entirety:

A flash of iridescent, humming green
lingers at the hook

in the porch’s crossbeam,
where the teardrop of amber glass

used to hang. Remember? The one
we bought our first June

and kept full of red nectar for years.

Everything feels intentional. The first person plural underwrites a compressed drama. “We” implies a companionship that is intimately at issue. When the speaker says, “Remember?” rather than “Do you remember?” the heartbreak is palpable: there was a “we,” an “us,” and while an “I” is implied, the “you” has gone. The rhythm of the first line creates expectation, which is immediately undercut: “Lingers at the hook,” is insidious in its brevity. The hard consonant contrasts with “green” like a sort of anti-rhyme. That intuition is heightened by the off
rhyme of “green” with “crossbeam:” everything seems out of place. The amber tear, emptied of sweet nectar, accuses the “green humming,” with its suggestion of verdancy and vitality. The past feels irrecoverable when the ‘first’ June is mentioned, unavoidably invoking a ‘last.’

Cheryl Dumesnil has written a fine, if uneven, book which is well worth the read. The poem “Revolution” constellates the major themes of the book—love, both familial and romantic—with the complexities of our contemporary moment. An epigraph to the poem reads simply, “Nahr al-Bared, 2007,” and directs us to a battle in a Palestinian refugee camp. Two pages later, the American housing crisis throbs in the understated “When there’s no money left—”. The title poem, too, evokes our lives and the overwhelming sense of disorientation many of us feel. An ostensibly homeless street performer sings to commuters exiting a train:

> Melancholy’s comin’ for you,
> better put down your broom.

> Y’all die a little every day,
> go ’head now, put down your broom.

The reader gleans the implications: a domestic object, the broom, is meant for use in mundane daily tasks that ultimately don’t matter in the face of time. That the busker’s song is quoted by a poet concerned with the domestic feels exactly right. Dumesnil hears a challenge in the song—to find meaning in our lives, our traumas, and our own lost causes—and rises to the occasion with admirable, subversive, and incisive poems.
TIMOTHY MCBRIDE

The Nature of the Mirror: Life Pig

Alan Shapiro. Life Pig. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. $18, paper.

To those who would find easy, sentimental consolations in a blinkered view of benevolent nature and its divinity-reflecting orderliness, Bertrand Russell had a pithy retort: “There’s a conspiracy of silence about the tapeworm.” Alan Shapiro’s dark and marvelous new collection of poems—the jarringly titled Life Pig—constitutes a similar retort to those who accept easy consolations from art. Shapiro’s concurrently released book of essays—That Self-Forgetful Perfectly Useless Concentration—describes an “anti-monumentalist aesthetic” that his poems embody, “one that refuses the consolations and rationales we fall back on when we talk about art, culture, or history in relation to the suffering of those on whom that art, that culture, that history feeds.”

“Feeds” is telling. The three numbered sections of the book are bracketed by two poems that color all we read: the introductory “Life Pig” and a coda, “Death Hog.” An unpunctuated, heavily enjambed single sentence, the title poem demands a kind of reading that mirrors the rooting about which we read:

The hams the hocks the oddly delicate
little busy trotters
dug in and pushing forward through the already grunted
  through
wet stink of what’s been rooted up and chewed and
gobbled down to be shit
out in clumps and dribbles to be again ploughed
through like a harrow back
and forth across the pen for more and still more …

One of the traditional functions of art is to hold a mirror up to nature—though the nature of the mirror also matters: recall Stephen
Dedalus’s “metaphor for Irish art” under English domination: “the cracked looking glass of a servant.” In M.H. Abrams formulation, the romantic poets replaced the mirror with a lamp—a representation of the writer’s illuminating soul, in the glow of which the reader sees a transformed world. “Life Pig” presents both a mirror and a lamp; neither is consoling:

… at last the head lifts up
defiant nostrils pulsing wide
as if to suck in the even bigger pig of sun
which as it eats is glistening
inside the darkest beads and beadlets hanging from
the tip of every bristle on the snout.

The unexpected iambic pentameter of the final line occurs at the precise moment of logical closure. The effect is startling—as if we’ve been offered something unpalatable on a cloth napkin: the sonic steadiness and resolution coincide with the disturbing recognition that between porcine sun and swinish earth, we cast our own hungry images. The sections that follow will include love poems, moments of lyric beauty, and qualified affirmations, but all will be enacted amid our reflections on (and in) this opening image.

And this is a book in which dizzying mirrors and troubling reflections will loom large: “colossal towers” in which we find “rippling images of buildings inside buildings,” plate glass windows of an arcade in which the speaker and his friends are “looked at by our own reflections,” a group of students watching the televised moon landing “in the very specter of our own reflections / looking at ourselves look back across two hundred thousand / miles,” an aging couple whose brief reversion to youthful play occurs with the woman’s “eyes now in the mirror locked on my eyes locked on her hand,” a dressing-table in which a mother’s magnified face is “warped as in a fun house where there was no fun.”

In place of Emerson’s “transparent eyeball,” Life Pig offers us a “transparent blindfold.” Rather than transcendent visions, our view is always colored by our own animal limitations; rather than the mystic, we more closely resemble the clumsy student who stares through a
microscope and inadvertently draws, not the cell on the slide, but his own optic nerve.

If our vision is circumscribed, so are the utterances by which we attempt to convey our visions. The entangled repetition at the start of “Toward Language” both describes and dramatizes our plight:

Invisible *inn* we live *inside*,
that lives *inside* us, that not one of us remembers ever entering, or knows most of the time *inside* it that we’re even there *inside* … [emphasis added]

The closing lines present a kind of internal roundel in which form mirrors the self-reflexive confusion being described. As two people face each other inside a “prison house,” separated by a wall of glass, the speaker says,

Tell me, before you go, or I do,
just what it is you see through this transparent blindfold, this dividing revealing mistrusted and yearned for what next what now what not of tell me and I’ll tell you.

*Life Pig* opens with a series of poems that present a roughly chronological portrait of the artist as a young man as he considers (or reconsiders) a series public events and artifacts: the holocaust, the moon landing, a Roman monument, an episode in Plutarch, a poetry recital, an arcade. In “Hebrew Ouija Board,” we move from the disorder of the trough to the even more horrific orderliness of the concentration camp. Under the command of a grade school teacher, a young student confronts bodies “neatly stacked” beside “the dirt absence” of a ditch. “I couldn’t look at them / or look away” says the speaker. “I wanted to be nothing else / except the clothes I wore.” As the teacher moves the planchette of the speaker’s hand over the image to decipher the “secret messages the dead were passing back and forth” about the as yet unformed “other picture” of his own future, one recalls Cormac
McCarthy’s description of a boy “made privy to some secret thing to which he was in no way entitled, for which he was in no way prepared.”

In “The Hiawatha Recitation,” the poem proves as unfortifying as the holocaust photograph was overwhelming, the verses the students chant unable to protect them from fears instilled by the horrific “black mouths” of “blown out basement windows” that surround the playground. The decay of Longfellow’s trochaic trimeter—from strict to strained to nonexistent—coincides perfectly with the growing recognition of the distance between the poetic ideal and the students’ lives:

But as always when the bell rang, we filed back into the classroom to our row, our desk, our primer opened to the same page—where we now would read in unison about the triumph and the honor that for us existed nowhere off the page, and even on it now was crossed with something shameful, something unseen we could sense there at the bottom of it.

In his essays, Shapiro points out that “discussions of meter and formal strategies of any kind can easily degenerate into sentimental impressionism if one isn’t careful to connect form to content, style to subject matter, metrical properties to semantic meaning.” A book that rewards (and demands) close and repeated reading, *Life Pig* again and again makes these careful connections. More adroitly than any contemporary poet, Shapiro uses convention “to express an unconventional feeling,” effecting “a kind of reciprocal alchemy: a transmutation of private incommunicable feeling into the public conventions of communication; and, conversely, of those public forms into the particulars of subjectively intense experience.”

In “Green Thought,” for example, he both evokes and reframes Marvel’s iconic “The Garden.” In place of the earlier poet’s Edenic
paradise, Shapiro gives us “a thin strip of woods” beside a deserted park, a run-down playground, a noisy apartment complex, and a “creek that’s not a creek” but “a gully for runoff” in the middle of which the “gnarled exposed roots of a beech tree make / an islet of snakes for nesting condoms, needles, flip flops, and a brown bag full of empties.” Yet Shapiro’s purpose is neither to mock nor dismiss Marvel’s soul-transforming solitude, but to qualify it. If you should happen onto this ratty oasis at just the right time, Shapiro says, “briefly and barely” and “for a moment” only, you can “almost” imagine yourself—not in the trough of a pig—but in Marvel’s garden. In the poem’s final two lines, this qualification is perfectly embodied in the form. Marvel tells us,

the nectarine and curious peach
into my hands themselves do reach.

Shapiro keeps the rhyme, but by displacing it near the start of the penultimate line, he makes us reach even as he describes an ideal that says we shouldn’t have to. You can “almost” see, he says,

the marvel of a willing nectarine
and peach bending the end branches to the hands
that only have to open, never reach.

The anti-monumentalist aesthetic evident here is even more pronounced in “Trajan’s Column.” The poem’s two-line stanzas mirror the helical frieze that snakes up the tower (topped incongruously not by Trajan but St. Peter), recording the emperor’s victories in the two Dacian Wars. What the column awakens in the speaker, however, is not a sense of the heroic conquest; rather the seven-stanza opening sentence records the “tumultuous unreadable sleepwalk through the hacking and / the being hacked, spiraling up and away beyond what we can see.” The speaker takes his place in the ongoing spiral, braiding into Roman history an episode of his own obliviousness in the face of suffering. Worth noting here is the total absence in Shapiro of what is all too often present in his contemporaries: “self-applauding shows of anguish at the suffering of others.” Shapiro never uses the poems as
advertisements for himself. “The Killing,” for example, shows just how quickly we accommodate ourselves to the horrific. The poem is a single sentence that traverses a 180-degree narrative arc as it describes an animal being killed and eaten. We begin, “No sound more hellish” and conclude, “a hunger growing sweet / as heaven as it dies down.”

“The Look” makes clear that piety and principles can be “brutish” as warfare. Here Shapiro employs a tortured and qualifying syntax reminiscent of Herbert Morris to relate a parallel between his life and an episode in Plutarch.

I saw it without knowing
I had seen it
until I saw it again
years later in Plutarch’s
*Parallel Lives*, the look
(I have to think)
not unassailable
but not uncertain
either, and so, my father
to discipline both his urge to do and not
do what needed doing …

The parentheses, the double negatives, the unresolved pronouns, the drawn-out play on “do”—all these suggest a hesitancy in the speaker at odds with the certainty we find in the faces with “the look”: Shapiro’s father beating his brother for some forgotten point of duty and Brutus presiding stoically over the beheading of his sons, Titus and Tiberius, for their part in the Tarquinian Conspiracy to overthrow the republic.

Like piety, innocence offers no escape from the trough. “Low Tide” calls to mind lines from Anthony Hecht’s “Voice at a Séance” on “the sad knowledge / that it was impossible not to hurt anyone / whether by action or inaction.” As the speaker walks casually across the mud flats, his foot falls leave a trail of “subductions and extinctions / on a scale / too small to register.” Thoughtless as “a leper without his bell,” the speaker is “wandering the world, / meaning no harm.” This concluding image alludes to Graham Greene’s *The Quiet American*, specifically Alden Pyle, about whom the narrator says: “I never knew a man with
better motives for all the trouble he caused... He was impregnably armored by his good intentions and his ignorance.”

Life Pig’s final section chronicles the decline and death of Shapiro’s mother—a complement to the more public subjects of the opening poems. “On the Beach” artfully echoes the rooting images in the title poem: “I dug a little hole in the sand,” the speaker says, “my hand the shovel, my fingers the mechanical claws” as he stares uneasily at his sunbathing mother, her skin “wet with beads of light.” In disquieting but unsentimental detail, Shapiro links her gradual inability to speak with the loss of other faculties: “why is it the hand won’t / hear her, won’t listen, is it / deaf or stubborn...” In the book’s single prose poem, “The Last Outing,” the formlessness of the verse makes more poignant his mother’s efforts to impose cosmetic order before her son pushes her wheelchair around an empty parking lot where she will meet no one: “eyeliner, rouge, lipstick, pink matching the blanket on your knees, sparse hair brushed, a dab of perfume...” At her death, one feels the encroachment of the trough on her spotless kitchen, irresistible as the second law of thermodynamics—the final lines faintly evoking the snowfall in the final lines of Joyce’s “The Dead”:

… her long watch over,  
inside dust column 
after column 
she as dust was falling 
ono to all the helpless surfaces 
she wasn’t there to clean.

“Death Hog” returns us to where we began, “the maw of breeding mud.” Here, however, the speaker is even more specific, disavowing any “gorgeous hogwash” that would “pretify” the squalor. In his essay “Some Questions Concerning Art and Suffering,” Shapiro insists that the best poems “recognize the insufficiency of art even as they bring art to the highest level.” Life Pig does precisely that. The book concludes with its most harrowing lines (“instantly unforgettable” in Martin Amis’s phrase). Confronting the pig, we eagerly adopt all kinds of comforting notions, Shapiro says, but that changes nothing: “we sink the same, even / as we swallow. Even then it feeds.”
Andrea Jurjević’s collection, *Small Crimes*, follows a young Croatian woman from a homeland entrenched in war to a safer America. Flash forward from the Balkans of the 1990s to present day Aleppo and we find our fellow humans once again in peril. When I read Jurjević’s collection, I wonder about the future prize winning collections that we may see from the survivors of the current day’s genocides. Jurjević’s collection won the 2015 Philip Levine Prize and will be available from Anhinga Press in February 2017. *Small Crimes* has every element of the beautiful duende that Federico García Lorca first described nearly a century ago. In Jurjević’s poem, “Cinéma Vérité: A Love Story” the drama appears to include an antagonist Jurjević refers to as the “rogue,” who pawns her mother’s gold for joints. The poem could be self-reflective. Meanwhile the repeating appearance of black and blue clothing seems to connect the images of the war in the Balkans at that time with black and blue being two of the primary colors of the war.

I think I’ll eventually forget you, cross your number, throw keys in the meadow by the roads you walked, dressed in black and blue. I’ll not think of two bumpkins who hitched to the cities, left their coastline to erode. I’m sure I’ll forget you, all about you—

every drunken detail, like when you blew up, sold my records to scrape by. Also, the roads you walked off, dressed in black and blue.

Like immigrant scum stood in welfare queues, pawned my mom’s gold for daily joints. You rogue, I’m sure I’ll forget
you, all about you— [“Cinéma Vérité: A Love Story” first four stanzas]

“Cinéma Vérité: A Love Story.” opens the section titled WHILE THE BACKWOODS BURNED and comes prior to her section with an American setting. “Cinéma Vérité” [truthful cinema] is a media form that entered the mainstream via France, so perhaps the poem takes place in transit from the Balkans to America during some limbo in France. This collection is very serious, and the word choice is accessible even though Small Crimes includes a Croatian-English glossary near the back. The metaphors are advanced, and are full of hard shell vehicles on the outside with extensive and layered tenors within the surface of each poem. The collection has some light and a lot of dark. At the same time, in Jurjević’s prose poem, “When At Moonlight You Knock On My Door,” we are met with a man holding a Kalashnikov who says in Serbo-Croat-Bosnian there is no more sunlight, no more moonlight as he takes the speaker deeper into a cave on the night bombs lit up the sky like massive white chrysanthemums:

“… Nema više sunca, there is no more sunlight, nema više meseca, no more moonlight.” The phrase “no more sunlight, no more moonlight” is a lyric from the Goran Bregović song “Mesečina” which translates as “Moonlight.” Even at this tense and violent time of war, empathy shines through as this lyric finds a new path in Andrea Jurjević’s poem, “When At Moonlight You Knock On My Door.” Small Crimes is a wonderfully rich collection, and I can certainly understand why the Philip Levine Prize committee and the 2015 judge C.G. Hanzlicek selected it. The collection is beautifully dark a lot of the time though it is fresh, complex, intellectually stimulating, accessible, intelligent, features real, historical subjects. Just as I trust Philip Levine’s poetry completely, I trust Andrea Jurjević without question. She lacks pretense, and I so admire her voice, her image making ability, her precision, her grit, and her strength within these poems. There are no filler attempts here, all works in this collection are indeed global poems of genuine humanness full of desire, destruction, resilience, loyalty, betrayal, loss, vitality, and maturity. Andrea Jurjević’s collection, Small Crimes, is full of honest poems of experience.
CONTRIBUTORS


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**Rob Cook** will be featuring nude photographs of the swoon-worthy poets of Instagram in his literary porn journal *Skidrow Penthouse* this summer. Recent work appears in *Hotel Amerika, Epiphany, The Laurel Review, Redactions, Stoneboat, The Antioch Review, Birmingham Poetry Review*, etc. He was also included in *Best American Poetry 2009*, which was justifiably slammed cover to cover by the literary media. The poem originally appeared in *Fence*—proof that one can be rewarded more than once for a terrible day. He is also working on a biography of musician Uli Jon Roth, whom you have probably never heard of.

**Geri Digiorno**, Sonoma Poet Laureate (2006-2007) and artist, is founder and director of the Petaluma Poetry Walk. She studied art at College of San Mateo, Solano College, Sonoma College, and Santa Rosa Junior College and has worked at the homeless shelter in Petaluma teaching poetry and collage.

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Intuitive artist **Joan Fullerton** grew up on the vast, slow-paced plains of eastern Wyoming. While raising three children, she studied watercolor with Edgar Whitney, Frank Webb, Charles Reid, and other nationally known watercolorists. She holds a BFA and an MFA from the University of Wyoming. Fullerton’s work has been in galleries, juried shows, and museums since the early 1970s, and she has shown internationally in Italy and Japan. She hosts workshops in her studio and is currently teaching across the nation.

**Rob Greene** is the editor and publisher of *Raleigh Review*. He teaches full-time at Louisburg College in rural Northeastern North Carolina.
Timothy McBride is from Rochester, New York and works at SAS Institute in Cary, North Carolina. He has also worked for USAID, North Carolina State University, and the Centro Internacional de Mejoramiento de Maíz y Trigo in El Batán, Mexico. He has published one book of poems, *The Manageable Cold*, with TriQuarterly Press at Northwestern University. He won the 2014 MacGuffin Award, selected by Carl Dennis; he was also was runner-up for both the 2015 American Literary Review Award in poetry, selected by Gregory Fraser and the 2016 Joy Harjo Poetry Award at Cutthroat, selected by Marilyn Nelson.

A PhD student in creative writing at Georgia State University, Joshua Lee Martin has been published or has work forthcoming in Coal Hill Review, The Cumberland River Review, decomP, The Soundings Review, Town Creek Poetry, The Kentucky Review, Iodine Poetry Journal, and elsewhere. He was a finalist in the 2016 Nazim Hikmet Poetry Competition and the 2016 Coal City Review Chapbook Contest, and his chapbook, Passing Through Meat Camp, was a finalist in the 2015 Jacar Press Chapbook Competition. He currently teaches composition at Georgia State University.

Kritika Pandey is a Young India Fellow. She was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize 2016. She is currently pursuing her MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

D. Eric Parkison received his MA in English at the University of Rochester, where he studied literature and poetry. His poetry has appeared in Squaw Valley Poetry Review, Perfume River Poetry Review, Midwest Quarterly, Zyzzyva, American Chordata, Columbia Review and Zymbol, among others. He completed his MFA in Poetry from Boston University in 2016. He lives in Boston, Massachusetts, where he teaches English at a private high school.

Tanya Perkins’s work has appeared in numerous venues, including The Forge, Storyscape Journal, Big Muddy and The Chattahoochee Review. A Canadian expat, she teaches writing at Indiana University East.

Molly Bess Rector lives in Fayetteville, Arkansas where she co-curates the Open Mouth Reading Series and serves as poetry editor for The Arkansas International.

Sharon Mauldin Reynolds has worked as a newspaper reporter, teacher, and freelance writer. Her short fiction has appeared in numerous literary journals, and her debut short story collection, Walking Air, was published by Pen-L Publishing. She has received grants from the Kentucky Foundation for Women.
and the Kentucky Arts Council as well Kentucky’s highest literary reward, the Al Smith Individual Artist Fellowship. A native of Mississippi, she lives and writes in Lexington, Kentucky.

**Marty Saunders** is from Pittsburgh. His work has received an Academy of American Poets Prize, a Shipsey Poetry Prize, and a Pushcart Prize nomination, and has appeared in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *FLARE*, *Santa Clara Review*, and at poets.org, among others. He is an MFA candidate at North Carolina State University.

**JR Tappenden** is the founding editor of Architrave Press and Poetry Editor for *december* magazine. She earned an MFA in poetry from the University of Missouri-St. Louis, where she also served as the university’s first Poet Laureate. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in the *Baltimore Review*, *Flyway* and elsewhere. Her chapbook *Independent City* is out now from Wells College Press.

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