

Into The Void

Arts and Literature



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Into the Void Magazine

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Claustrophobia

Brad Garber

The universe is deflating leftovers in the freezer bag jar screwed shut box taped closed as all the doors in the house a smothering comforter smoke moving down from the ceiling clawing at the carpet primordial gases rushing in around my skin and toward the big thumb in the sky smothering sweat dripping a white light focused into a dismal point in blinding steam small shadows of soupy life darting and bumping against my expanding chest sweating while thick fat boneless skin sucks me into some closing tube of darkening thickness the shadowy forest encroaching my legs like wheels in water while black holes absorb starlight and the universe begins backing into itself the walls the walls the walls inching together like slowly clapping hands rats escaping through cracks my hands and feet aching under pressure screams disappearing into blood-colored gelatin until my gagging is compressed like coal into a diamond encasing eye-scratching fear a sparkling death.

[not the dead boy on the news]

Darren C. Demaree

i told my son that he was not the dead boy on the news that they were together that they are together that sometimes bombs go off inside the hearts of little boys that sometimes those boys are born with bombs inside their hearts that sometimes adults put bombs inside the hearts of little boys and when he asked me if there was a bomb inside of his heart i lied to him many times i lied to him many times i told him that sometimes it matters how many fingers you have on each hand and sometimes that couldn't matter less and sometimes the best thing is to look down upon your body and imagine the ticking as a gift

Dark Matter Ghosts

Deborah L. Davitt

Invisible, intangible,
Ethereal, otherworldly,
 affecting reality by inference,
the past warping the present
 six times as much material
like gravity shapes space.
 that we cannot perceive,
The weight of existence;
 than which we can.
more people have died than live now.
 The unseen universe cradles
Ghosts, or just memories, exert
 the visible one, holds it tight,
unseen influence on children.
 spokes and rim of a great wheel.
Entangled descendants, spooky
 Perhaps death is just a passage
action at not such a distance.
 from seen to unseen.





Solitude #2
Mridul Kanti Goshami

An Empyrean Humor

Dale Ritterbusch

So much dark energy in such great abundance
this universe is speeding up
ironically (or not) at the same rate my mind
is slowing down. I read the same page
of a lesson on space-time over and over,
string theory available perhaps, and only fleetingly,
to a synaptic perception of but one dimension more
than found on a flat, two-dimensional canvas,
a painting using tricks and trompe l'oeil
to give depth and distance and movement
through time curved to an ancient return.
I get lost in the vanishing point.
But that glimpse—an unmathematical dimension,
number six or seven?—is everything,
a sharp glimpse of something else,
something that powers mind awakened
from the long sleep of a life riveted
to the ground beneath in the way our ancestors
on some aboriginal plain looked down,
focused on the world below their feet
and then the looking up, bipedal for the first time,
rising to meet the gaze of stars: a hypernova
disintegrates, light exploding into a birth
of suns and planets. We breathe the ash
of dying stars, a sacred breath
in this, our time, before the worlds recede
leaving the night sky empty and black,
our stories, once again, nothing
but a blank, uncharted page.

Haircut DNA in the Twenty-Second Century

Keith Gaboury

After I left behind my buzzcut
DNA at Harry's, copies of me
kept popping up
like pimples
roaming my native San Francisco.

They tasted some
Saturday morning pineapple
at the Inner Sunset Farmer's Market,
drank a *Take It Black* coffee

at Howard's Cafe, and harassed
downtown intersections
as if they belonged
along the spine of her crosswalk.

Last night I confronted a fake
strolling past my stoop,
but he blitzed a punch
with his fist shoving a scoop
of pollution down my throat.

Skull split like a Fabergé
yet I still hauled down to Harry's
to break his barber shop pole
and twist my two eyeballs
onto that backroom expanse

where a 3D-printing machine
spat out replicas
from a mouth of mass production.
In a diminishing shadow,

Harry lorded over my blonde hair.
Sam, come join us.
My grandfather's rabbit-skinning
knife knew what to do.

Destrehan
Lisa Napolitan

She was looking at the back of his neck, thinking how soft for an older man, its creamy brownness, the crease when he lifted his head to wipe his tears. In forty years of marriage, she had never once seen him cry. Tears. The Mississippi in summer sun.

It was this place that did it. The sponge of green moss beneath enormous trees. Silver shag hanging from scrambles of branches. The grayed shack reduced to an insignificant museum. The iron bench upon which they sat and rested, the bench bolted into a patch of weed-whacked earth, parked beside The Great Home's walls did it. A thousand hurts caged inside purple tears.

'I've lived this life,' he'd said, and meant it. He didn't want to come. His long-fingered hands shook. Still plump lips quivered. Shame inside his look. Their shame. His. 'I too was a slave.' She could not find words. She rubbed his back.

She was Creole. Fair-skinned. He, black. Life had been different for them. It had also been the same.

'Shall we leave, my dear?'

'Yes,' though they did not. He had come this far. Made the trip. Was feeling what he had hoped to avoid. Needed now to feel.

The day was muggy. Thunderstorms threatened. To the west, the levee held back the prior night's delivery.

'Walk, my dear?'

He lifted his eyes to take in hers, again the soft silt of the Mississippi. 'I love you,' his eyes whispered.

'Yes.' She placed her hand upon his. Yes.

Notes
Christopher Gunderson

*D*ear Grace,

Will you go out with me? Circle one:

Yes No Maybe



Jack

Not the usual note I'd write, or among my best work, but I had joked about sending her exactly that when we spoke for the first time a week before. She turned bright red when I passed it to her in class, which I think meant she liked it.

I won't tell you what she looked like because you're better off imagining your own someone. Because it's subjective, right? Who's there when you picture yourself sitting across a small desk from someone you could fall in love with, too perfect for the room or maybe the world, maybe your one person of all the people who are, singular in a way that only you can appreciate because it's you whose heart speeds up and who sees the starbursts dance across her face lit by phosphenes from the back of your own eyes. And you ignore the professor and hear words you won't remember because there you are alone together in the midst of eighty other people, and all you can think about is that picture of her face half hidden by blossoms.

'I'd love to, but I have a boyfriend,' she said, and didn't circle anything but kept the letter because she thought it was pretty, I guess.

We went to Japan together the next week. Just her and me and ninety-eight other people from our class. We took separate flights.

We played hearts on a bullet train from Tokyo to Osaka. Then there was me wearing samurai helmets with my friends and pretending to fight with swords; octopus balls at Red Devil, and some fish pancakes, and four Kirin, and some egg dish with noodles and cuttlefish where the yolks were orange rather than yellow; a sumo tournament where I won 9,600 yen when Melissa doubled down on the matches eight times in a row and lost each time, an event the likelihood of occurring Mark calculated as one in two-hundred fifty six; lighting a prayer candle for 'love match accomplishment' instead of one for 'long life' because I was thinking of her; then I saw her again and the sun was in her face illuminating her freckles and flooding her eyes with shining blue, blue as blue notes, that made me hold my breath, and the roses in the garden around us looked a little wilted; soba at Honmura An, and sleep, and up all night, and up all night again, then a boat cruise for which I skipped my bucket list sushi reservation, and I'm so glad I did because she was there and told me how she liked the letter, and when we danced her eyes shone through the dark brighter than the neons.

As we left that night, I passed her a note:

Dear Grace,

When you smile I can see the future.

Yrs,

Jack

She knew I wasn't kidding.

When we got back, I wrote her more often. Soon she left her boyfriend and passed the first note back to me with an answer, the one I'd hoped for in the first place, circled.

We had thirty minutes to ourselves in the Saloon at Grand Central Oyster Bar. Fishiness and Old Bay replaced the petrichor from 42nd Street as we entered the great vaulted room and then reversed step when the maître d' motioned to from where we had come. The saloon itself smelled dry and neutral and looked like a secret. We sat down. Our knees were touching, I think. She ordered a vodka and water. I ordered a Guinness and six oysters. We looked at each other. I gave her the tiniest kiss.

'Raw oysters can kill you,' she said.

Dear Grace,

When I walked into the room last night, the window was still open, and the whole place was full of your smell, your real smell, your elemental smell, I guess. It's as unique as your face and as beautiful. The scent is so ephemeral that I can't describe it even though I really wish I could. The closest words that come to a literal description, without even approaching justice, is that you smell like charcoal and sweet leather and a new tank top just out of the wrapping buried in a cold field of wildflowers. It overwhelms my senses and evokes colours, shapes, tastes, sounds—synesthesia. It can make me cry. You smell like a faraway planet made close; like life on Mars; like my favourite memory, or a time I succeeded. It's the opposite of what missing you would feel like. It's so distinctive and important that you wouldn't believe me were I to tell you the whole truth. It's still here in the room with me. God I love it.

Yrs always,

Jack

She found it in the morning as the sun rose over Manhattan.

Dear Grace,

You look the same as ever—all my favourite memories personified. I miss you at the same time you're right in front of me, like the way something can be a wave and a particle at the same time. But those things aren't the fabric of my universe. You are. Happy birthday.

Yrs forever,

Jack

We went to a wedding together. I bought her a corsage of gardenias, and dragonflies thumped into the screen door at her threshold to get a closer look as she accidentally stabbed me twice on my chest with a pin before finally attaching my boutonniere. I regarded her eyes and realised I hadn't before seen them clearly, because now I was sure that they couldn't be a deeper blue, and then one of the dragonflies flew directly into her eye, and I realised I was wrong—when her eye's white turned crimson there it was in full definition: God's harmonious signature across the Red Sea, blue true as north.

The groomsmen took the L out to Williamsburg with the girls who'd replaced their previous long-term girlfriends and later did things for the first time they'd eventually reveal to whomever they married in a kind of gentle marketing confessional, a gleaming bow atop a box of mouse-traps. I waited with Grace in the emergency room and wouldn't let go of her hand. That night we went home with steroid drops and forewent a vignette of love in favour of the real kind.

As we grew up we'd walk together down the gloaming beach among the panic grass, and she'd pick asters and pin them to my shirt with more facility than she once did.

Dear Grace,

Will you marry me? Circle one:

Yes No Maybe

Love,

Jack

We wed in the Motts' backyard over which a stitching needle moon waxed against the darkening blue. When I kissed her I could smell her smell.

We ate oysters again during a different April, except the last time it was just me eating because Grace had refused to try. This time she took one of the Malpeques and looked at me like, 'How do I eat it?' then ate it with all the brine. She was about to ask, 'So...?'

I passed her some folded papers.

Dear Grace,

Just . . . I just want you to love me. Well, I know that you love me, love me in the way you can, the way you think you can. I just want your love in that perfect way, that ideal way I'm thinking of, the way that seems possible when you don't hide anything from me and we experience transference regularly. I'm pretty sure transference is what I mean—you're feeling an emotion and I know what you're feeling, and I can relate because you've rolled over and exposed all your vital organs to me, because you trust that I only want to pet you and not put you in any danger or anything. I want to be vulnerable to each other. Let me start over.

I listened to some song today that pointed out how leaves are most beautiful right before they die. At first the lyric seemed metaphorical, like it was trying to point out something aside from the beauty of doomed foliage. But then, eventually, after some time thinking about it (the maybe/maybe not a metaphor song lyric, I mean), it (the answer) became clear that the singer was being literal not metaphorical. I think so anyway. The lyrics made sense that way. The leaves became more pretty because they changed colour. That was it, it was physical. Leaves, I'm pretty sure, are green to start when the sun shines because they make chlorophyll to turn the

sun to food, and chlorophyll's green. Eventually the sun stops coming around so much because the seasons change and not for any ulterior reasons such as not liking the trees as much as it used to. So then the chlorophyll goes, and when it does it stops covering the other pigments that have been in the leaves the whole time—the same ones probably that make carrots carrot-coloured and berries red. The change is physical, that's why the leaves are prettier. Not because anybody thinks of how sad it will be when they're gone.

But then I thought of how the singer was being a little shallow and how the sun gets prettiest right before it sets, just like the leaves get prettiest right before they fall off the tree, and how the leaves and their demise and the sun setting are all connected. The sun changes colour, too, before setting. Before, you know, slipping away. But it's not the colour-change or the forced-perspective solar engorgement that makes the sun so breathtaking at the end. It's that you need the sun, and by 'you' I mean we all need it, 'you-generally,' and you (generally) don't know if it's going to come back in the morning. Everybody knows that it does come back, knows more or less about space and gravity and the earth spinning and how the sun doesn't actually disappear and how we just can't see it because it's behind the world. But still we need it to live, and despite what we think we know about solar mechanics there's a part of us realising that we might not see it ever again, and really one day we won't, because, supposedly, it will eventually explode. Professor Glassman used to put it like, 'Absolute truth is beyond the human spectrum of knowledge,' as in you can't guarantee that the walls of your house won't spontaneously combust or that your couch isn't actually a flaming cactus, because 'what's a cactus?' So when you see the thing, the sun, like that, impermanent, fleeting, mortal, you realise sunset might really mean goodbye.

I want to be that to you, you know? I used to be. I mean the sun. Not a leaf. I picked up the line when you spoke with Dr Odin earlier this week. I think he said, 'metastasis.' It could have been mega-something or even stegosaurus, but I'm pretty sure he said metastasis, because I searched the term later on my phone and it means when cancer spreads to other parts of your body, starts to take over, which makes sense in your case, at least more than stegosaurus does, because I can tell that something is falling down around me. Have you ever fainted? I did when I heard you on the phone. I at least had tunnel vision, where the edges go fuzzy and you can see your thoughts but not the pavement under your feet. My taste buds went yellow; everything was all gold and tangerine. It might have been a panic attack, and I only say so because the condition only came on right after I looked up metastasis. So maybe you have that now, metastasis, unless Dr Odin was talking about a different patient (to you, on our phone). Let's say you don't, because I don't want to think of you as fleeting or impermanent even though you are, from a solar-scale time perspective. But I will be sweeter to you, and I'll be more bare, or barren, emotionally, a little more often. At least I'll try.

Do you remember our first kiss? I know you do. I mean, it was both of our last first kisses. I went online at the time and looked and you lived two miles from my apartment, down safe avenues that were all sidewalked. I went to the closest florist and bought a bunch of roses all in different colours so you could see them all at once (the colours), and the lady wrapped them up in brown paper like I wanted, because I saw it in a movie, flowers wrapped in brown paper, and I rode my bike to your apartment with the roses tucked under my arm and out in front of the bike like a lance. It was probably more like three miles because the florist was in the wrong direction. So I got to your block and dropped the bike in an empty lot three lots down from your building and called you and told you I was there, a surprise, even though you hate surprises, which is stupid. When you came out I could see all the world's light walking toward me. Then I gave you a kiss in the empty lot while the sun was shining, and I don't know what happened to the flowers. Somebody has since built a condo there.

I could feel you then, and you could feel me, too. We were vulnerable. We had always heard our friends talking derisively about love in our situation. They called it a rebound or took psychic shits on the whole endeavor with a cynical, you-don't-know-what-you're-talking-about-because-you're-not-old-and-wise-yet sort of tone. They were wrong. In the lot where we had our first, best kiss, and in all those years after, some of our years together anyway, we said, 'I love you,' because we meant it, because we knew absolutely everything there was to know about each other and thought, 'I want to take care of you, because you're my very own personal sun'—revolved around each other and rolled over for each other to say, 'Here I am, I trust you, love me.'

It's been a long time since then. We aren't in school anymore, and when I bring you flowers it happens in a car and to a bedside. And I can't tell whether you're more beautiful now because you're becoming what you were underneath the whole time or because I'm afraid that one morning you won't exist when I thought you would. I don't know everything about you anymore. It's like missing someone, which if you asked me, 'What's the worst feeling in the world?' I'd say, 'Missing someone.' I want to (know you, I mean), and I want you to (know me) like we both do so completely anyway. I think it tastes yellow because you're the sun.

All my love,

Jack

She was gone when I looked up, and the shells were empty.



I Watched the Tide Leave

Phil Carney



Until Next Time
Phil Carney

Standing Alone in a Mirror

E. Hughes

— after Lucile Clifton

My legs are numb
when I wake.

I still use them, slide on,
left leg then right,

a pair of stretchy jeans.
My breasts are loose,

so I bra them & drag
my useless legs

down the hall. The head
of a toothbrush vibrates.

Copper liquid drips from
my mouth into a sink.

I stand alone
in a mirror, pushing against

cheeks, nose, clogged
pores, forehead.

Each morning, I come,
one at a time,

to myself, prayerless
& hurt, like returning birds

picking at rock, cracking
their beaks for worms.

Listening to My Mother Wash Dishes

E. Hughes

— *after Walt Whitman*

From my bed, I hear the high clangs of pots,
of pans, your tennis shoes slapping
against linoleum. In a few moments, your
hands, dark as sodden earth, will find your
jeaned thighs and rub soap suds on them. The work
is done when the hotbellied light
finishes washing into this room, the one I share
with my sister and brother. We all
shared a body once, your three children
at home and carried in you.
As my brother's head is curled under an arm,
my sister's lips spilling over
onto her chin, I listen for a familiar hum that signals
the day's end for a single mother, a hum
I remember from before I was anything but possibility.

Mama Vicky's Plants

Abby Schiano

Aged fingers thumb through
the worn pages of her bible.
Frank Sinatra croons from
of outdoor speakers as she sips
coffee. She's drank it black
for sixty-five years.

The morning breeze tangles
her blonde hair that she gets blown out
and colored once a month.
She pulls it into a large black velvet
scrunchy and stands, putting
her weight on the good knee.

She enters her empty home. Bare
feet, sprinkled with age spots,
glide over the cool tile. A pitcher
sits on her marble counter top. She
fills it with water before returning
outside.

Her deck is a greenhouse.
Hibiscus, Jasmine, Gardenias,
Petunias, Camille Bush, Sweet
Potato Vines, Scaevolias.
Each plant has a name.

Water trickles into dark soil
and she thinks of her children.
who are both in their forties,
gone now, tending to plants
of their own.

The Collector

Lauren S. Marcus

My father rummages through our neighbours' garbage for recyclables. Once a month, he drives miles to redeem them for cash, bulging bags bouncing around his car, pounds and pounds in exchange for twenty-three dollars. His eyes see treasure everywhere—the battered cabinet on the side of the road, the overturned shopping cart in an alley, rotting books in a gutter. They are all carefully harvested and brought back to the garage, where they sit forever, waiting.

My brother and I ask why he collects trash. It's worthless stuff, we tell him.

He is angry. We might need it one day, he snaps, it might be worth something. When we need it, and we don't have it, then, we would be sorry.

Wild black hair, unmistakably curly no matter how short he keeps it, crowns his head. He always wears long-sleeves, despite the Los Angeles heat, lest—*khas v'khalila*—his olive skin darken any deeper. His forearms are fuzzy with black fur. A stubborn wave of black chest hair crests at the collar of his shirt. Dark, almond-shaped eyes live deep in his wrinkled face, protected by bushy brows and long lashes. But most importantly: his nose, broad and hooked, with a bump for good measure. A nose so evocative of far away places that my father is constantly approached in foreign tongues—Armenian, Arabic, Hebrew, Farsi, each speaker convinced my father is from their homeland.

My brother and I are fair-skinned and blue-eyed and small-nosed. My father is grateful for this and tells us so. We look goyish, he says with a smile, like cherubs on a Vatican ceiling, like angels hanging from a Christmas tree.

It's important to blend in, he says.

In restaurants, he empties napkins from dispensers, folding them neatly and sliding them into his pockets. Condiments are next, packets of mustard and ketchup, little plastic tubs of pickles, then entire jars of hot sauce, which he wraps in a plastic bag he asks for at the counter. In hotels, the maid's cart sitting in the hallway stands no chance against him—he walks out of our room with a pillow case and fills it to the brim with mini-bottles of shampoo, body wash, Listerine.

He is an insomniac. One night, I find him in the living room at four a.m., sitting his personal shiva, his strange treasures scattered around him. He is arranging them: the back issues of *National Geographic*, chipped china plates, salt and pepper shakers made to look like dinosaurs. He looks up at me, irate, as though I've challenged his reign over this peculiar kingdom. I back out of the room without saying anything.

I am engaged to a kind man. I try to warn him. My dad is a little out there, I say. He fills our home with junk. My fiancé asks why. He had to flee two countries, I say. He didn't speak the language. He lost everything. Twice. My fiancé says he understands. It's impossible that he understands—even I can't.

You're a survivor, my fiancé says to my father.

My father frowns. After a long time, he says, No.

OWL: Of War and Love (in America)

Julietta Vitullo

Right around the time when I'm falling out of love with my husband, I'm standing at the PATH station in front of the Hudson River across from Manhattan and a man tells me, 'An airplane hit one of the towers, bang, and then another airplane hit the second tower. One is plenty bad luck, but two?' He says this in Spanish and I ask him where he's from. 'From Ecuador,' he tells me. I have the feeling that neither of us wants to be there right now and that we would choose to never have left our home countries if we could. But I don't buy his story. This wasn't just a random conjunction of really bad luck, although the situation seems so unreal that what else is there to think. Twenty minutes ago my brother and I received a desperate email from Argentina, our parents inquiring about our wellbeing: *Kids, send us a message to tell us you're okay, we're worried. Apparently there was an attack at the Twin Towers.*

The internet is slow and we don't have TV. The home line isn't working and cell phones aren't the law of the land yet. I just moved to the U.S. with my husband to start an MA in English. I don't have any money beyond a \$1,000 monthly fellowship stipend. Three quarters of that go towards renting the one bedroom apartment we just took in Jersey City. The rest pays for trips on the PATH train and NYC subway, cheap Goya-brand frozen food at the Latin supermarket around the corner, and occasionally some fresh vegetables. I don't have enough money to buy books and I'm fascinated by the fact that the university library system has almost every title I'm required to read, so I don't buy them. I wait for the books to be shipped to my campus or to become available, often missing the deadlines to read them.

We take our time, my brother and I. My parents tend to be alarmists. I remember that a few years back there was some kind of terrorist attack at the World Trade Center, with a car bomb, I believe. Was it five years ago? Ten? It wasn't that big a deal, I seem to recall. I think about the bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires in '92. I think of the Jewish Mutual attack in '94, the year I was taking my exams to enter college. Car bombs in all three cases. The WTC attack must have happened right in between those two. I think there were only a few dead. I know I was still in high school when it happened. I learned at the time that WTC stood for World Trade Center.

We walk a few blocks to Journal Square station. There's a blue sky and a pleasant late summer morning air. There's the smell of cigarettes and piss, and the usual congregation of black homeless men gathered at the steps of the station, fooling around and saying things I don't understand as we walk by. We see smoke far away to the east as we approach the back of the station, the side that has a view of the New York City skyline. Where there used to be two towers there's now only one. There are birds flying by and some boats crossing the river. Birds unaware. Boats unaware. A few minutes later the second tower disappears in front of our eyes as I take pictures with the three megapixel digital camera I bought after I found out that I had won a fellowship to come to the States for two years. MGP stands for megapixels, I learned when I bought it.

At home, we chat with our parents through MSN messenger. I don't hear from my husband until later in the day. He left early that morning to attend his ESL class somewhere Midtown Manhattan. He is now at a friend's place in Brooklyn and he'll head back to New Jersey whenever they reopen the PATH trains—PATH stands for the Port Authority Trans-Hudson, I happen to learn as I look for news on what means of transportations have been shut down. I'm relieved to hear he's all right and glad to know I'll have enough time to check on my new friend Saed. He and I became close a few weeks ago while we both attended a culture immersion program at

Ohio University. I was learning the names of the different parts of a typical university campus in America—including what ROTC is and what the acronym stands for. I was putting on some extra pounds at the all-you-can-eat style cafeteria—which offered unlimited portions of soft serve ice-cream, an exotic delicacy that back home you could only find in the relatively new chains of McDonalds. I was surrounded by students from all parts of the globe. And in the midst of all that, it so happened that I also felt prettier than ever before and realised I no longer wanted to be with my husband.

Saed is from Palestine and he's worried about what the terrorist attacks will bring to Muslims at his campus in Buffalo, NY. It's from him that I first find out about Osama bin Laden. My brother tells me who bin Laden is and how unlikely it seems that they already know who did it. We talk about the fact that he, my brother, was planning on going up to the observatory at one of the Twin Towers just that Tuesday. (Later I would use that word, *just*, a lot to describe my experience back then: I got to the States *just* two months before 9/11. I was living *just* across Manhattan when it happened. I watched the second tower collapse *just* in front of my eyes. Are they going to say this is a *just* war?) My brother is here for a conference we both attended the week before in DC and he wants to do all the touristy things. He was at the WTC the day before but he didn't go up to see the view because it was cloudy. 'Tomorrow will be a better day,' we had both agreed that September 10th.

I receive communication from the university that classes have been cancelled. This is the second week of school and now that I don't have to take the train to go to campus and attend a three-hour seminar on Literary Theory, it will be easier to get caught up with readings for the next day. I go back and forth between checking on the news and finishing my reading of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. My brother and I have empanadas for dinner that night. All you have to do is take them out of the box and heat them in the convection oven. The result is a smashed-meat-filled cardboard-like pocket that collapses on the plate. While we eat, we talk about the attacks and what will happen now. On the way back to the apartment from the train station that morning we saw American flags booming out of yards and storefronts—*That was quick*, I had thought. We talk about my crumbling marriage—'He's kind of a loser,' my brother says. We talk about Osama bin Laden a bit more. We don't talk about my crush on Saed.

The next day school resumes and I attend the second class of 'Crime and Punishment in America,' an interdisciplinary seminar taught by professor Bruce H. Franklin, one of the country's leading cultural historians, an anti-war activist, Vietnam War lit expert and Melville scholar. 'We are going to war,' says one of my classmates at the opening of the discussion. Dr. Franklin has made it clear that before we talk about our assigned readings of Douglass and Melville we will discuss what's going on. 'Who is *we*?' shoots another student from across the oval table.

Over the next few weeks I hear a lot about the issue of the pronoun *we* coming from the mouths of students and professors at spontaneous campus meetings and organised debates. I engage in discussions about the use of the name America. I'm also American, *americana* from South America, I explain, and if we are going to discuss how the U.S. is embarking in yet another imperial enterprise we better call things for what they are—more than discussions, these are exercises in self-confidence. I find that even the smartest of interlocutors raise their eyebrows at this, as to say, 'I've never actually thought of that.' I find that I can hide my weak language skills behind my righteousness.

I continue to struggle to check my books out from the library in time for the assigned discussion dates. I check out other non-required books instead because I find it unbelievable that

the library has so many books that I can take home just like that. I can even ask for an ILL, an interlibrary loan, I learn, and get any books I want from anywhere in the world. I fill my backpack with heavy volumes that I carry on the bus to the PATH and I never get to read because I can barely keep up with the amount of readings required for the three classes I'm taking. I discover that reading in English takes me five to ten times longer than reading in Spanish.

I learn more about the geography of the Middle East than I ever knew before, as the terms *mujahideen*, *Taliban*, *Al-Qaeda*, *Jihad*, *Sunni*, *Shia* enter my everyday language. I hear from the superintendent of my building that the nice men in turbans at the local delis are not Muslim from the Middle East but Sikh from India—the superintendent himself is Bengali, as is a vast part of the population around that section of Jersey City, probably the most culturally and linguistically diverse place I'll ever live in.

I try to keep up with class discussions but my decent TOEFL grades do nothing for me now because a test is just a test and this is real life, and because, after all, English is no longer supposed to be a foreign but a second language for me. I spend two weeks wondering what the *Asian* revolution is and how come if it's so significant for the development of black history in the Americas I never heard of it before. I find out one day that there's no such thing as an *Asian* revolution and that instead what they've been talking about is the *Haitian* revolution, which, of course, I have heard of before.

I march around the campus quad in front of the Paul Robeson student center. I learn that Paul Robeson was a brilliant actor, singer, football player and activist who became an anti-fascist activist when the Spanish Civil War broke out. Students and professors unite to protest the impending invasion of Afghanistan and to demand a minimum fair wage for janitors on campus. I help found RAPJ, Rutgers Acts for Peace and Justice, ever amazed at how the English language is so prone to catchy acronyms.

On the elevator on my way to class, I meet with one of my classmates. She's blonde and pretty with rosy cheeks, and her damp hair smells like she just got out of the shower. She asks if I'm from Colombia and I say no. As students start socialising around the oval table waiting for the professor to arrive, she shows a big brand new rock on her manicured hands. A week ago I was prompted by the professor to talk somewhat extensively to the class about my country of origin and, as I now watch the student show off her rock, I wonder why it is so hard for someone to remember such simple piece of information from one week to the next. I find myself getting angry and wondering if the reason Americans have acronyms for everything, including for their own country, is to assist with remembering.

For the first time in my life, I go to an outing with an all-English speaking crowd. The graduate students have organised weekly hangouts in the bar around campus. There's karaoke, beer and chicken wings. I'm going to attempt to sing a Shakira song and the guy who is acting as the MC asks me my name. I tell him slow and clear, as I always do 'Ju-lie-ta.' 'Hoo-leeeee-ta?' I repeat, 'Ju—lie—ta.' The guy's 'j' vanishes and the 't' gets shy, as he tries again, 'Ooo-leeeee-da?' The routine repeats itself until I explain that it's like Juliet with a soft 'j' and an 'a' at the end. He attempts one last time and more or less gets it. 'Pretty good for a white dude,' he states proudly. Countless times over the years I will go over the name routine with people. No matter how much my English has improved, their Spanish has not, and the 'not bad for a white person' pitch becomes routine as well, in various circumstances. Over the years I've thought about the many levels in which this makes no sense (my skin is white; non-white Americans don't necessarily struggle less with Spanish than white do; the colour of your skin doesn't determine your language skills, etc.). Over the years, I've come to realise that Americans have not only appropriated the name of an entire continent, America, to call just themselves, but they also believe that they own they colour white.

On a cold autumn night standing in the corner of Avenue of the Americas and 4th St in NYC while we wait for the light to turn green, my husband and I kiss, a last kiss that fails to reignite the long gone spark in our marriage. Some kids drive by and yell to us: ‘PDA! Get a room!’ I find out later what PDA means. Of all the strange things I’ve come to learn in the last couple of months, this one is perhaps the most perplexing of all. America the prude.

Although I have stopped talking to Saed a while ago, my husband decides he’s had enough of us and he’s grown sick of the lies, a few from me and some more from this country, and returns to Argentina. There’s no more *we* there.

The U.S. launches OEF, which stands for Operation Enduring Freedom, and the War in Afghanistan begins. The truest part of that acronym turns out to be the Enduring one: the war in Afghanistan would officially last thirteen years, until the end of 2014, although in reality it never ended. Another catchy acronym would later justify the criminal invasion of Iraq by the U.S.: WMDs. I haven’t heard of an acronym that explains the suffering of the Iraqis caused by the relentless bombing, the devastation of the land, the lost limb of a U.S. soldier or the very fact that Iraq did not have any weapons of mass destruction—another fucking lie. When the frat boys in the Bush administration wanted to call the invasion of Iraq ‘Operation Iraqi Liberation,’ OIL, the distastefulness of their *joke* became too grotesque—perhaps just too apparent—and they settled for Operation Iraqi Freedom. OIF didn’t catch on.

Over those weeks I have a recurring dream: I’m inside a space capsule flying over the ocean. I don’t know how to pilot the capsule and I make sudden maneuvers to control it. In the distance I see a tall building. I try to move my course but I can’t. I crash into it. I die. Time stops. I wake up, most of the times alone.

§

It’s been sixteen years since that late summer turned to fall and that fall became winter, my first winter living in the U.S. As I’m trying to wrap up this piece to send it out, my mind keeps going back to those days in September: the images of the airplanes hitting the towers—images that the media obscenely showed, time after time, and then ceased to show as it suited them—the feelings I felt, the voices I heard, the smells, the fear and the strangeness of it all. I struggle with how to end this story, what part of the many years of my life after 9/11 to recount, what acts of world violence to remember, what lovers to mention, what words vanished in translation to conjure up, what events, what people, what trips, what grief, what joy. I live in a country that has a short attention span and a short-term collective memory. But I am—as perhaps most people are if we look at them as individuals—very bad at forgetting. What to remember and select out of the last sixteen years? Bittersweet sixteen. Too many arbitrary thoughts, a list I type frantically in my phone as I go about my day—doing the groceries, sitting in front of a red light, running from one meeting to the next:

The fling whose name I no longer remember.

The insane amount of books I continue to check out from libraries because I think libraries are one of the best things USA has to offer.

The journey to some remote islands caught up in their own 200-year-old imperial rendezvous.

My lost baby.

The time I opened my Facebook account and received a message that would change my life forever.

The day I went to the hospital because I had hurt my ankle and they asked me—rightfully so—where my uncle was.

The drones in Yemen.
 The war in Libya.
 The war in Syria.
 The PhD, my OCD, the GOP & the DNC, the DoD . . .

DoD stands for Department of Defense. One night before bed I see two things in the news that disturb me deeply: the U.S. military brass has pushed the threshold of what collateral damage means, turning war crimes into legitimate acts of aggression, and in Syria U.S. planes have bombed a building filled with civilian families, killing over 200. I don't know about the living conditions of the people in that building, neither do I know if the attack happened in the day or at night, but I picture some kids in their PJs and some women trying to get water to wash the kids' faces before bed. Earlier that day I had listened to a series of history presentations from ninth grade students at the school where I work, a private school that sits in twenty acres of gorgeous land adjacent to one of the many Indian Reservations in the Puget Sound area, in the beautiful Pacific Northwest. One of the students has done her research on the Watergate scandal. She explains the context of the conspiracy and describes the chronology of events and the role of the different people involved. She shows several of Herblock's Nixon cartoons. She goes into painstaking detail about the wiretapping procedures undergone by a team headed by former CIA officers E. Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy. Several other students have researched the U.S. involvement in some of the many wars of the 20th century: WWII, Korea, Vietnam. One of the boys has focused on the chemical weapons utilised by the U.S. in Vietnam. He presents to an auditorium full of students from 6th to 12th grade the Pulitzer prize-winning photograph of the Vietnamese kids running away from their village just as they've been hit with napalm. One of the girls has torn off her burning clothes—her name is Kim Phúc, the boy says while he uses a laser pointer to signal the figure of a naked child running towards the camera. Napalm, he continues to describe, is a gel-like flammable agent that sticks to everything it touches and burns at 1,500 to 2,200 degrees Fahrenheit. Kim Phúc survived and lives happily in Canada, he goes on to explain.

A dream that night provides me with a way to end this piece.

I'm standing in a balcony at night, presumably in my old apartment in Buenos Aires, with my seven-year-old son Martín. (After many years of bad relationships, I've finally married the man of my dreams. We had a son together and we often tell each other our dreams to try to figure out their messages while we lay in bed together in the house he built for us in the woods. He too happens to have watched the towers collapse from New Jersey, although we weren't aware of each other's existence at the time. He too organised against the war—his group's spirit captured by the word ASAP, Architecture Students Association for Peace. Interesting how he too had his own Muslim friend and crush at that time, but of course I knew none of this back then.) In the dream, Martín and I are getting ready to go to bed. Right in front of us there's a beautiful old building flanked by two Greek columns. It looks like some kind of government building but perhaps it's a cathedral. As I'm pointing out to my son a detail in the building, the left column suddenly collapses. There's an explosion, then a moment of silence, then the second column collapses as well. I think, holy shit. I grab Martín and we go back inside and get down on the floor. We lift our heads just as an airplane brushes off the side of our building. We see it go by through the side window. It misses us by a few inches. We are in a state of shock. We need to get out of this building before *they* come and bomb *us*. We know that they are going to do it, even though I'm holding my son in my arms, even though he's wearing his PJs and he's only seven. We go to the elevator. I grab pants for Martín to put on over his PJs. If we are going to become refugees in this war, I think, my boy better have extra clothes to wear. We go down to the street. There's con-

fusion as we wander around. There are no more signs of planes and bombs so after a while we go back to the apartment. As we gather at the balcony—more people have joined us now, strange and familiar faces, as is often the case in dreams— we look at the ruins in the old building and *where there used to be two columns now there are none*. The airplanes seem to have come a long time ago now and things are normal again. We collect ourselves. It's a beautiful night and the sky is wide open in front of us. Then we notice hints of a shower that starts to come down, tear-shaped sparkles falling from somewhere far in the firmament, a shiny snow-like shower in the middle of summer. It feels dreamlike, as it should. There are just a few drops at first but then there's a ton of them and they start getting everywhere. They get inside the apartment. We laugh, we cheer. But then we look at the walls: the beautiful sparkles have turned into sticky gel. We look at each other. We know these are bad news. The gel—I know with the sudden epiphany that can only be had in dreams—contains small particles of wiretapping: microphones, cameras, sensors. This is how *they* are going to know everything *we* do. We figure that even if we clean everything up, it's going to be impossible to remove it all because the gel sticks to every surface, the walls, the couch, each piece of furniture. WTF do we do now? We're SOL!

I don't tell this dream to my husband while we lay in bed because he has gone to the city to spend the night with our two older boys—our son's brothers from another mother. Instead, I recount the dream to him in a long text as I wait for the coffee to brew. I'm a morning bird, he always tells me. But he's a night owl, so his response doesn't come until an hour later when he wakes up and reads it:

Whoa...good morning, Julieta.

So what do you think?

The columns seem like the WTC

pillars of civilisation.

But also stability in your life in general, perhaps.

The snow crystals seem like pleasure, wonder, mystery...

But it gets corrupted, it becomes something sinister.

Very haunting.

Wow, an amazing interpretation!

Not bad for an architect.

TX, I♥U.

LOL...U2

FIN



Boat II
Ronan McGeough

Hemingway

A.M. Arndt

How many writers are drinkers?
Is this why Hemingway drank until the chamber was empty,
for the art?
Or was it really a 7:30 a.m. accident, unlikely as it seems?

How many others harbor this pocket razor,
this bottle curse,
this sense of what is good
and not being able to find it anymore,
or make it?
It's such a thin edge,
falling over the other side seems likely
when it all rests on something that'll cut you either way.

The elephants are marching in line,
one grabbing at the other's tail.

The writing grows to a fevered plague,
a fit of maddening blindness.
Hand out, I grope for glassware.

Whittling away at the work
is its own form of bloodletting.

Hemingway had rum.
Faulkner kept whiskey near.
I chase vodka down the hall to an ice vendor.
If they knew, they'd snort, disgusted,
only to flock to my too early funeral
to discuss art and liver failure.

The Strong Man You Asked For

Padraig Parkhurst

In my dreams
 the air stinks of lilies
 As Lazarus again rises
 from his damp and musty grave
 Un-maimed. The Dead fears are arisen
 and fear is of Death once again
 Death hangs on the air like lightning
 and the ash of cities hangs on the air like snow,
 The Dead smarting on the tongues of confused children,
 tasting dust in the place of ice crystals.

And here is the Strong Man you asked for
 proud of hairy balls dangling tween flabby thighs
 Here is his pride made manifest
 the blinding light, then nothing

Here is the word made flesh
 melt and bubble

Here is the Strong Man you wanted
 with madness impeccable and forthright
 Here is the Leader fit to strike fear in the hearts of our Enemies
 with conscience dry and flexible
 with a heart like blue cheese
 ready to smite on a whim
 ready to make the tough calls
 and press the button
 If provoked.

And there is the Strong Man they asked for
 thin skinned and thick necked
 There is the Leader fit to strike fear into the hearts of their Enemies
 Ready to spit in the face of Imperialist Aggression

Steely eyed with chubby thighs
 chafing his hairy balls
 ready to smite on a whim
 ready to make the tough calls
 and press the button
 If provoked.

For a brief moment it's beautiful
 and deathly silent

as it all comes whistling down
and the dead fears are arisen
and the death fears are made new
and they stain the air with the stench of lilies

Fascination

Mike Fox

I always return to her. There were times, of course, when it was not possible. She disappeared during a few brief months of marriage, then came back to me towards the end, as if to something illicit. Then, as before, I had no access to her thoughts, but could see each passing mood like the transient shadow of a cloud. Sometimes a tear would trace the curve of her cheek, but once committed to a pose she would never abandon it, and the tear remained for me to capture. I would echo its path with the very tip of my brush—yellow, crimson, blue, ash grey—as it caught the pale winter light.

It was at this time that tiny symmetrical cuts appeared across the inside of her thigh—she made no attempt to hide them—and for a while the skin of her face grew taut across her cheekbones. I suggested, as though the thought was casual, that I could increase her rate, but she refused. After all, we had agreed a contract.

We met in my final year at art school. I was the only mature student in my cohort, and rather apart from the rest. By then I had learned not to be intimidated by the youthful talents around me, or daunted by their head start of more than a decade. Spending those years in the city had nearly broken my spirit, but at least let me save enough to live modestly while I looked for some other footing in the world. I turned to painting to become whole again. Or so I hoped.

The life class, held every Thursday afternoon, was a thing of contrasts: intimate but clinical, focused and yet, with repetition, casual. We sat in a broad semi-circle, our gazes converging on the model like beams forming a hologram, while our tutor, a gentle sculptress, stood behind us silently then whispered her suggestions.

We were a diverse group. Overt careerists, stylised and driven, strugglers who had stayed the course but would never become artists, and the odd one or two who could already render soul onto canvas. We all, evidently, cradled some internal idea of success.

The models sat or lay before us, like the human condition. Pensioners cramping up, muscles flickering. Acned youths with uncontrollable erections. Girls from the local ballet school, flexible and muscled, at ease in even the most demanding pose. The bold, the modest, the sad, the defiant. These were our subject matter.

She came at the end of the year, when we were preparing our final portfolios. She was young then, barely older I guessed than my classmates. And yet she was nothing like them. To me she was unfathomable, while it was they who were naked in their ambition and greed for life.

The others gave no sign that they thought her any different, and perhaps to them she wasn't. But her way of placing herself before us, her detachment, the sense she gave off of occupying space and no more than that, immediately held me. It was like painting an object superimposed on a tableau, except that the object breathed, had interiority, but chose to be merely visible.

'Will you sit for me privately?' I asked, when she emerged from behind the dressing screen at the end of the class.

She looked at me for a moment. 'Tuesday evening is the only time I'm free,' she said eventually. 'I can do six-thirty to seven-thirty, same rate as I get here.'

I gave her my card. She glanced at it then said, 'I can come next week if you want.'

'Please,' I said. 'I'd be grateful.'

My flat was small; top floor of a city tenement. What would otherwise be the living room became my studio, lit during the day by the industrial skyline through ill-fitting French windows, which opened onto a tiny balcony. I slept in a box room just off the front door, and, when not

painting, washing or cooking, spent the rest of my time in a white-walled room with only a sofa, laptop and bookcase. Such was my life. All else I'd left behind.

She arrived wearing a cream raincoat above a thick Aran sweater. I could feel the winter air from her as she passed me in the narrow hall.

'It's through there,' I said gesturing, and followed her into the studio, thinking that she was much smaller than I remembered, tiny, neat, and, in fact, plain.

'Will this be warm enough for you?' I asked. 'I can turn up the heating.'

'It's fine,' she said, and I noticed a faint dew of sweat on the skin of her throat.

'Let me pay you before we start,' I said, realising that my palms were also damp as I reached for my wallet.

'No need,' she said, 'we can do it at the end. Where do you want me?'

She was businesslike. I found that helpful. 'In this chair please, just sit how you wish. I'll leave you to change.'

When I returned she had arranged herself side-on, one leg outstretched, the other lifted over the chair's arm. Her clothes were folded neatly on the table. I could smell her deodorant.

'Is this okay?' she asked.

'It's perfect,' I said. 'Could you hold it for twenty minutes?'

'As long as you like,' she said. She tilted her head slightly and rested her gaze at a point on the wall opposite. Immediately I had a sense of her withdrawing into the immediate perimeter of her body. She was present but utterly contained. There for me to paint.

But instead I sketched. It seemed to make sense. All she offered that evening was her outline, close and vivid, so I set myself to learn it: its shape, its shades, its promise of depth and density.

And so it began. Sometimes she came each week, sometimes each month, sometimes after an indefinite break that I would inevitably end with a phone call.

We are always becoming something else. Everything, ultimately, is transitory. You realise this if you look intently at an individual human form over a long period of time. The body changes, and with it the life it carries. Things appear and then are gone. But I learned that something glimpsed need be no less real for its brevity. Each canvas, I felt, held its own truth. I watched as her figure slowly grew fuller, the belly more convex, the nipples widening, their surface becoming minutely more coarse: a girl maturing through her own particular passages of womanhood.

Gradually, too, her feelings unlocked before me, like gifts for me to depict. She was always still, always impassive, and yet I came to know things that somehow, over time, she ceased to conceal.

There was disappointment. I read it on the map of her brow when she tied her hair back to show her high, pale forehead. It showed in her breathing too; more shallow, infinitesimally less trusting of life.

By the time the cuts appeared, she had taken to viewing my progress at the end of each session. I had recorded them: small and carefully aligned; my painting a document and I her witness. She stood, as if considering, for a while. No others followed. I noted that she never passed comment, other than the occasional almost involuntary nodding of her head. And then one day this changed.

'You're beginning to recognise me,' she said, as I held the door for her to leave.

I was astonished. And gratified. Perhaps I had seen something that was mine alone to see. By now a good many people had looked at her image on canvas, but no painting is a person, after all.

At this point my work was selling easily. The portraits of her always went quickly. Art, I've come to feel, can be a mechanism for vindicating dreams, for making hope tangible. Perhaps my buyers felt this too, and hoped for the same things that I did.

‘Is she your lover?’ I was sometimes asked by a client or a gallery owner.

I would always laugh and shake my head. Then one day I heard myself say, ‘No, but perhaps I’m hers.’ This was not so implausible. Surely I knew her better than any lover could? And yet in my mind was an image of railway lines tapering to the distance: always promising to converge, never converging.

Then, perhaps eight years from our first meeting, she disappeared. When I called there was no reply, not even voicemail. I knew her so well and yet not at all. Between us was nothing more than an ad hoc verbal contract: date, time, duration, fee. Beyond that she was not mine to seek or trace.

There had been spaces before, of course, but never a sudden void. I knew of her marriage, and of its end. I knew that sometimes she was just going away. But also that she would be back. Not now.

For a while I painted her memory, and then other things. In dreams she often sat or lay before me, her image never constant, always elusive. I could only look on, as if looking would keep her before me. I hoped, because I was afraid not to.

And then at last she called. I lifted the phone, and for a moment it was hard to realise I was actually speaking to her. There was no explanation, and no acknowledgement that time had passed.

‘I can come if you want me to,’ she said simply.

‘Why ever would I not,’ I said. ‘Come tomorrow, come any time.’

‘Six thirty then,’ she said, and the receiver became silent in my hand.

She arrived, bringing the past with her, but also something new. The lustre had gone from her hair, and her coat hung differently across her shoulders. But neither of us had ever commented on her appearance, unless brush strokes are comments, and so I kept silent. I followed her to the studio—nothing there had changed in her absence—and then left her to prepare herself.

When I returned she was sitting facing my easel directly, but her eyes were cast down. Her pose, if something so uncontrived could be called a pose, might have been that of someone waiting for a bus or a train. She was thinner than I had ever remembered, the musculature of her legs diminished, and the skin of her chest lay flat across one side, a neat fading scar running from her sternum to her armpit.

I began to paint. Once again she was before me, and once again I absorbed myself in her image, as if resuming a story.

I no longer felt her distance. Perhaps she had been robbed of it. It was as though the five or six feet between us contained different air, less dense, less separative, like the moment when a marriage becomes just two people together. She sat very still, and I felt that I was looking at all the moments of her life, condensed, made actual in that immediate space and time.

When the hour had passed, as ever I thanked her and left her to dress. I hesitated longer than usual before returning, and found her standing at the easel. She had not put on her coat. I came to stand beside her, and we looked together silently at the drying canvas. Eventually, at some indeterminate point, I felt the warmth of her shoulder against my arm, like something entirely new, that begins again.



Restarting
Rita Melo

Journal, 2017*
Dante Modaffari

Aug. 20th, 2017. Shot two moose today. Decided to keep journal because time is winding down. Will update frequently.

21st. River is overflowing; cannot cross. Mary is one who suggested I keep journal. Moose drying; being cured. Second may have been superfluous.

23rd. Making furs, in case of worst possible scenario. Will bury caches for return trip, if necessary.

24th. Saw two lynx.

26th. Herd of elk passed near; couldn't get up hill fast enough. Energy low.

28th. Eyes becoming hazy for some reason. Could not distinguish between beaver tracks and wolverine tracks.

29th. Eyes continue to hurt. Out of salt and butter.

30th. Shot a lynx.

31st. Unforgiven Trail is lost; grown over. Must remain here for while. Will not survive winter.

Sept. 5th. Wolverine stole all meat from cache. Possibly wolf.

8th. Tried again for trail. It is definitely lost. Ate berries; got sick. Will walk back to cabin tomorrow, if weather allows.

10th. Rain.

11th. More rain.

12th. Rain again. Eating biscuit mix to stay alive; no sign of game.

15th. Retrieved last of supplies from cabin: canned tomatoes (no can-opener); Pilot bread; peanut butter; two .45 rounds (last); and a picture of Mary. Also *Plant & Field Guide*.

19th. Lost sight of wolverine. Finding berries plentiful; picking right ones.

20th. Shot at black bear; only wounded it.

22nd. Sun but no trail. Still stuck.

Oct. 3rd. Am not sure ever found Unforgiven Trail: my eyes seeing what is not there. River looked like road today; things far away are fuzzy.

Oct. 5th Lost sight of two birds. Wasted bullets. May have been eagles. May have been vultures.

Oct 10th. Weak. No energy.

Oct 13th. Peanut butter gone. All that remains is berries and bread. No sight of game.

Oct. 17th. Hearing things at night. Possibly wolverine.

Oct 22nd. First sign of termination dust. None here yet.

Oct 23rd. Wasted last bullet on chimera: thought it was wolf. Not wolf, not anything.

Oct. 26th. Rain. Sat under tree & looked at Mary's picture.

Oct 31st. Eyes weak, no energy to walk, much less write. This may be it.

[no date] Realised today that *Plant and Field Guide* lists hallucinogenic mushrooms under the rubric of 'poisonous.' They are not poisonous: they are wonderful. It also occurred to me that my hands are wondrous beings, full of intense, sharpened light. Mary said to keep a journal and this is what I will do, although it seems silly, as it will disintegrate and I will disintegrate and she will move on—but *that* is what matters: that things flow, that things move on. Mary is eternal and will move on to new men, new hands, new journals to be found by races distant . . . The stars are out, though I do not know their colour because there is no such thing, only our interpretation of it. Light, music—sound, for that matter—all just vibrations we interpret as something meaningful. White noise and radio static could be to alien races Metropolis and Mahler. And we search for meaning, in the woods, on the highway, in skyscrapers and foxholes, we search for kind truth and glad hands, the truth elusive to man, the warm genuine affection marked absent. And what do we find? Trails that go nowhere. Eyes that don't work. Things healthy marked poisonous . . . Mary is full of intense light; it beams from every pore, and I realise now, looking at this picture, that I do know what love is and that it is not an interpretation: it is the guilt that you could not do more. Mary deserves heavens and shining earths. Mary deserves hands illuminating over her, intricate puzzles only she should solve, complexities raveled. Hands that shine with the capability of races that understand interpretation. Who is it to say that we did not *decide* to make gobbledygook Mahler? Or Liszt? Or Brahms or Carl Orff's Carmina Burana out of a dung heap? Who is to say we did not *decide* to evolve? I am not to say. I am here to shout under the silent sun, with hands bright, that we are forevermore, near and never, that we chose to surrender ourselves to a planet, a name, a place in the woods. We wanted the finality of a woman who says, 'Here—here is my picture. Think of me always.'

* *This journal was recovered near the body of an unknown man—possibly a trapper—in the interior of Alaska, near the Kahiltna woods.*

After Visiting Dice Road Cemetery in Hemlock, MI

Zachary Riddle

I received my first handjob
in the cemetery cold, our bodies

tucked in the driver's seat
of my handmedown car.

Our mobile coffin. Engine dead
among the old trees.

It was raining and no one came.
On the drive home, I explained:

*Supposedly, this land is
haunted. A witch hanged*

*herself in an outhouse.
That's what the internet said.*

The streets were
lightless mouths.

It wasn't anything she
hadn't already heard before.

Sometimes it is impossible
to acknowledge the pain we are in.

Cadaver

Donna-Claire Chesman

I want to love you
through fat and bone.

As your larynx becomes unhinged
from the trauma,

my tongue
becomes the latch.

The luck-lines decorating my palms
sheath your shoulder blades and set them back.

Spiderwebs spun from his wilted fingerprints
fill the space of your rib cage,

until they dissolve beneath the curled skin
of my pursed lips.

The nebula of our hot breath becomes hot air
and you float and become the sun.





Pink Swans
Julia Soboleva

Without the Love

Dory Lieblein

without (→) prep. **1.** In the absence of: You see, I have gone *without* expectations of how the world should work for as long as I can remember. When you have expectations you get let down by putting others up where they don't belong. However, I still hope. **2.** Free from, excluding: I hope and pray for a world *without* double standards, and policies that pretend to protect but do more harm than good. A world *without* hate for those who are simply trying to find themselves, but God forbid they want to use a public bathroom. Hate for those who are simply trying to find love, but God forbid they want to get married because God says they shouldn't (but forget that much of what you do, God says you shouldn't.) **3.** Not accompanied by: You see because the hate is *without* sense, the public *without* truth, nothing accompanied by what it should be. The Internet says it's true, and it's smarter than you. Sit on your hands and listen to your elders, young lady. Ladies don't swear. Ladies don't speak up. **4.** At, on or to the outside of: Within or *without* the house I cannot find a single true explanation of what it is to be a **lady**. I can, however, tell you what it is to be me. And I swear. And I speak up so loud that it sometimes hurts my own ears. What I lack in tact I make up in the ability to form sentences that can charm you like a snake. I am sexually active and if that offends your sensibilities then stop hitting on women relentlessly and expect them to have saved themselves for you. **5.** Beyond the compass, limits, range, or scope of (now used chiefly in opposition to within): If being within the know is what's ideal I admit I am *without* the knowledge to combat the inequality in America. It is beyond the range of my abilities as a single being, 75% made of water, 25% made of unadulterated sass. I can make but one promise, and that is to continue to raise my voice loud enough to hurt my own ears, until someone finally hears me.

After Breaking Up

Andrew Wildermuth

Drove back
home to the farm—
passing field after field,
a view of stars,
exhaust shivering into
December—
away from traffic lights
and malls, and
all that noise
of the suburbs
where I have history.

now
small rocks of my driveway

against the old metal of my Ford
coming to a still like these stars must
be

flaming cooling quivering

& me in my car
an arm out the window
a hand opened, up

the engine off—

my wide eyes
my foot, still on the gas
shaking

Picture Album

M.A.H. Hinton

a poem begins
as one thing
but almost always
ends up
as something else

it's like when you are going
to take a picture
of a magpie
sitting on a fencepost

but by the time
you've raised
the camera
to your face
and snapped the picture
the magpie has moved on

and you find
you have just taken
a picture
of a lonely fencepost
leaning into an alfalfa field
that tells more
about your trip
to Montana
than you intend

Anarchies

Sergio A. Ortiz

The past burns.
I, fertile, heroic, immense

tentative domain, pronounce
my farewell to illusions.

These days, paradise is for thieves
and haunted travelers.

The new, a creature of magic.
We invent the sequence,

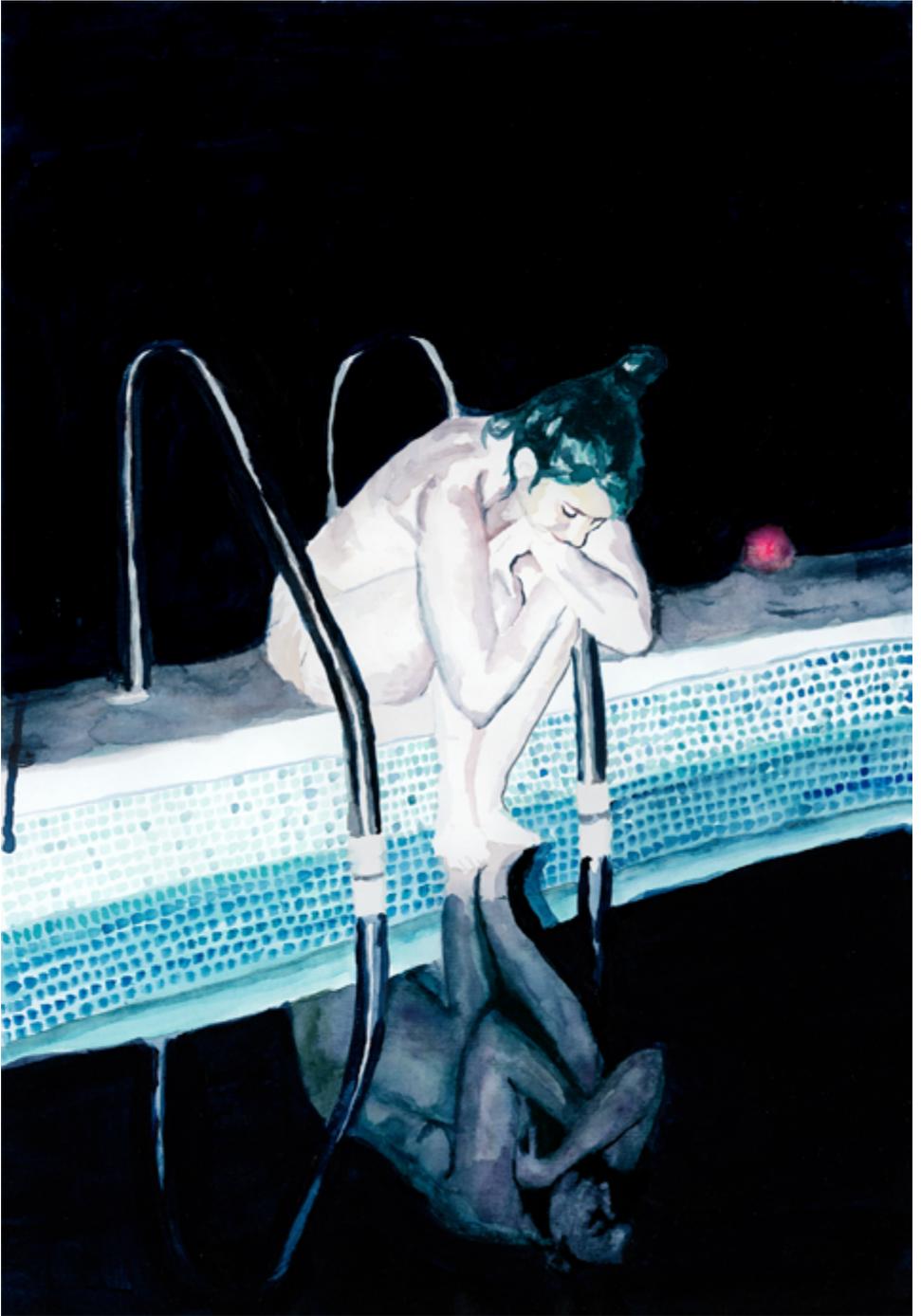
another temple, convincing doubts.
Managing the world requires solace

as we search for forgiveness.
This novelty has the structure

of a heartbreak poster. We stand up,
fight, deceiving ourselves

without accomplishing anything,
disappear escorted

by the past dressed
in blue.



Nocturnal Thoughts
Tamar Shahar



Stable Ground
Tamar Shahar

Crossing the County Line

Richard Manly Heiman

Long overgrown, burnt windrows shelter crawling life. Pale manzanita flowers are so easy to pass by, unnoticed. At the jump-off point, out past a sagging sea of clouds, through splintered raptor lookout snags you see them—lined-up monuments to gold lust. Strip-mined hills, enduring scars of avarice. They shadow hidden shafts, long played out

but so fancifully named—the William Tell, the Chipps, Kentuck, the Lucky Boy. What adds up to thirty million 1870 dollars now? How many whiskeys do you have to buy him 'til the sour-faced grizzled and stumpy-toothed E Clampus Vitus coot starts mumbling legends? *There's a half-mile long 3000-foot deep virgin vein down there . . . somewhere . . .*

Syria and 'Walls'

Josh Christian

Walls are the human's knife
dragged across the soft earth.

In between walls, bombs
drop, dousing homes with sarin rain.

Those left alive drag themselves
onto boat or plane,

where they smuggle themselves into
more walls.

There, they face stone gates
and a sign detouring them, pointing them
to another gate, more walls,

and *anywhere* but here.

This Savage God

Joan McNerney

Calamity hides under cover
lurking in corners ready
to rear its head.

It lies in neat lab reports
charting white blood cells
run wild.

*What is this savage God
who pushes us down to comas?*

Sneaking along icy roads
daylight ends while sea gulls
circle steel grey skies.

Brake belts wheeze and whine
snapping apart as we careen
against the long cold night.

*What is this savage God
who lunges us into storms?*

An official white envelope
stuffed with subpoenas
waits at the mailbox.

Memories of hot words
like razor blades slash
across our faces.

*What is this savage God
who rips open the heart?*

So we stand on the edge
breathing mean air
smelling fear.

Fires leaping out of rooms
where twisted wires
blaze from walls.

*What is this savage God
who stabs us with flames?*

An Epic Understanding of Death

Zachary Slingsby

I am tempted to say something great.

All bad writers are in love with the epic, someone keeps telling me, quoting someone epic and great. I want to get in there, root the dross, come back with a pearl, one dead-true thing that no one can take from me because it is not even mine.

‘What are you writing?’ My mom is over again today, doing what she can, trying to laugh, crying in the bathroom. No one else has cried. Not in front of me, at least.

‘I’m writing the eulogies I would have given for you and dad if I’d outlived you.’

Ever since I found out I am not going to make it, this boiling feeling has become intolerable. It’s not the boiling of fear, rather fear’s grating cousin from the Midwest: dread. I dread that I won’t figure this out. People who don’t know how to think about themselves are coming out with *gold*, and I can’t conjure a single damn good fact even in the face of cosmic finality.

She sits down. ‘Do you know who this is worse for?’ I am not keeping track of tears. I am on a ruthless hunt. One fact before dusk. ‘Answer!’ she yells.

‘I’m not angry, mom. I am trying to get at something. *They say it is impossible to find enough peace to look back on your whole life at once . . .*’

‘I don’t want to hear it!’ She stops her ears. She picks up a set of Bose speakers and smashes the glass coffee table and it breaks like a back windshield in a movie shootout. ‘You’re cruel. You *bastard*!’

I tell her again what I am doing but she locks herself in my bedroom, which I think is especially rude, since this is an apartment I pay for with money I earn. She is so used to living at home where everything is lawfully hers. Maybe there is something to this . . . A mother’s love turns to ash when she realises the thing she’s loved is not separate from herself, but . . . No. Ordinary grief. Worthless. I take off my slippers and socks and walk across the scattered shards.

My fat friend Ed picks me up to go to the new Woody Allen movie. He isn’t an awkward guy so he gives it to me straight: ‘You have to start saying fuck it, man. Whadduhyagot, six months? Eight?’

‘Three.’

‘Three months. Blow. It. Up. Whadduhyagot, you got a prick? Use it. Can you drink?’

‘I can drink, I can’t get drunk.’

‘Why? You might get sick and die?’

I shrug. ‘Good point.’

‘Let’s do this and then get sloppy slutty at the Mud Castle.’

‘I need to figure stuff out. I don’t have time for that.’

‘This will help.’

‘How do you know?’

‘It helps anything.’

The movie has all that nice music that he puts in. I hope it will dislodge something and I will leave with goosebumps or a fervor, and plunge into the business of impermanence.

No dice.

I wrote one good poem one year ago when I was twenty-nine. I wrote many poems in twenty-nine years and eleven months, but just the one good one. I don't know anyone who read it, but I am sure it made honest women cry. My writing has always been criticised, by people who know, for never trying to say anything small and true. I only excel, apparently, in the grand and false. Not this time. That's the beauty here. The grandness isn't sham. Endings are grand by their very nature. Endings spawn glory. Glory is always true. This is my moment.

I get drunk with Ed and tell him all this, and he says I sound like the character in the movie we saw.

The next day I set myself in front of my TV and download old Woody movies, hoping for the dislodging feeling I know is possible, the one that's come before. Three in a row fail, but in the fourth a character talks about a memory of sitting in a living room with the window open and the warm air drifting through and how happy she was. I squeeze my chest and run to the computer and pour it all out. I breathe, and reread it. It is worse than false. It sounds nothing like the music in the scene that broke me.

Ed comes over again that night and we get drunker. He wants to invite a bunch of others, but I refuse because I want to be able to talk about the things I need to talk about it. Which is hard in the company of people who don't hear as well as Ed.

'Do you have a list?' he says.

'What list?'

'Like a final, you know, like your last list of things.'

'I don't know. Maybe in my head.'

The glass is mostly cleared away from when the table broke, but a few pebble-specks still sparkle in the riffs of the carpet.

Ed drinks faster than me. He drops thick cubes into his glass and spills good bourbon on top of them and I hear the rim clash against his molars as he tips it back. He tastes the air after he swallows and says, 'We have fun together, brother.'

Even though I know how he will act, I find it consistently touching. I wonder if he was going and I was staying, would I try to get us to look backward, venerate every thrilling night, or would I try to make new nights for him? Would I help him feel like he's already gotten so much out of this, or keep adding to the till so as to make him forget everything dreary and lethal? Then I realise he has never asked himself these questions about me. He just comes over and tosses them and talks if he can.

If leaving is going to unearth even one little verity of the universe, comradeship must be a pickaxe. I stare at Ed's face and it makes him uncomfortable. I don't want to hug him. I don't want to know what he really feels or if he truly cares. I want to know what is happening between us, around us, beneath us. I want the essence of the bourbon and the splinters and the gone days of motiveless love. I stop responding to what he's saying. I take in the room. *A friend sees me.* What is it? What are we really doing? What are we doing.

'Talk to me, man. Talk to me.' He is shaking. 'This is why I didn't want to sit here and be depressed. We can't waste time anymore.' His voice is clenched.

'I don't need a list,' I say. 'I need a fact.'

A guy is left behind by a girl who falls for someone who makes her laugh. They flirt and take long walks to get pizza at night and are not even aware of anyone else on the sidewalk. I wrote an early poem like this, from the perspective of the guy who was left. I got it down not when I was in pain, but rather when I was in love. New in love. Far in love. This is when it is easiest to write about heartbreak. Not when you're actually feeling it. But when you're imagining it. Knowing it could come, and how awful it would be. Living with asphyxiating new affection sets the best conditions to imagine the saddest possible existence. All that has to happen, you know, is for someone to rip it away. And you're through. New love only ever arrives in a strongbox of fear.

*She's met someone/She tells me now...
 'He makes me laugh . . .'
 And I know she loves him
 for the reasons she used to love me.
 . . .
 And in that way . . .
 It's really very flattering.*

On Sunday night, I go to my family's house and we sit on the back deck and the air feels purple and the bugs don't come.

The conversation dances. For a while it's easier than the breeze at my sideburn.

Then: 'I don't say that to lecture you, I say it . . . and I miss you.'

My dad thinks if he shows how hard it is to express something during the expression, it will weigh twice as much on my chest.

'I'm here, dad. We're all here. These are the nights you're talking about. Can't we have them? Do I have to come here and do what you're asking and then talk about how I never come here or do what you ask?'

'We should pretend you're you?'

I say, barely to anyone, 'I want to—what's it really like.'

'What what's like?' asks my sister, because my dad never would.

Another problem is I don't believe the sensations of my memory.

I feel them, but they don't have my trust, not anymore. I can pick up a book and remember vaguely what I figured out when I first held it. But I'm not remembering the plot. I'm not remembering my favourite scene or the thickest character—not even the moonlight of the prose. I'm remembering what I think I felt. What the smell of the first page tastes like to my mind. I remember what every leaf of literature has in common: the anticipation of nostalgia.

But if a book is an object, and no more, can't I at least trust the sensations of my own history? Still, no. The false exhilaration of college. (I was always anxious.) The false cheer of last Christmas. (I was there, it felt like a Monday.) The lie of the sting in my chest the first time I could tell she wasn't going to cry if I left. (My heart was not in pain, but at war.)

So I remember the thrill, the cheer, the sting, but now I know, because I've been forced to go back through it: There was none of that. What was real were the facts. Sensations live in my mind as embankments against the acids of meaninglessness. Luckily, they won't have a chance to co-opt this moment, will they? The brief epoch called dying can never be kidnapped by the emissaries of a graceful memory.

In theory, this should make my task even easier. I don't have to wade through the sense's

shallows. I have the facts to contend with, right up front, stripped down to their natural splendor. The one fact, really. The fact of the mirror. The fact of a red light. The fact of dusk.

It's so true that everyone has already known it forever.

There's something wrong with taking a shit at night. I avoid it if I can, but my gut throbs after dinner on the deck.

So I go in and sit there, my toes webbed on the contour bath rug, my insides peaceful, full. The stray brown hair in the hexagonal floor tiles is coiled through grime and the shed fibers of cotton balls. Probably my mother's—the hair and the cotton, that is. The grime is dad's godlessness.

I finish and do the indecencies, and go back to the kitchen to ask who is driving me to the train.

'You're not staying?'

'It's ten o'clock. What's left?'

'There's—we'll watch a movie. What are you going to do at the apartment?'

'Well, it's that, then I'm at *home* for the morning. I wake up and don't have to, like, start with a commute.'

'All right.'

'You don't want me staying cause you want me to. That's just a weird peace of mind thing, it's not—let's do what's rational.'

'We could have had a nice night, it's over.'

'What were we going to do, it's ten o'clock! Start a movie at eleven? Eleven to one? That's when you guys watch movies now? Then, I wake up at ten, not starting my day until noon.'

'I had cookies I was going to make and no, we probably would have fallen asleep.'

I got back to my apartment by 11:45 and went up to the roof with a notepad.

'This is a great piece.'

'Thank you.' I smile.

The bar is as wide as a train, red oak tables, a baseball game on the overhead speakers, and how I wish they would put on some freaking music instead.

I love how the narrator is addicted to this notion, this idea of the secret self. The secret self, he calls it?

'The second self.'

'I love that.'

'Thank you.'

'We would love to publish this.'

That's nice, but, 'Do you feel the second self theory . . . I mean, does it apply?'

She blushes. 'Do I have a secret?'

'Is it obviously true to you that no one says what they really want to say? Almost ever?'

'I think it's true that everyone has things they *don't say*. I wonder about your iteration. I like to think I say what I want to . . . what I mean.'

'But you can't.'

'I'm doing it right now.'

'Are you?'

'Yes.'

I rub my face. I fish the ice out of my glass and press it to my eyes. The whiskey burns me

good and I reach for the napkin. She hands me hers, too.

‘The February issue, I think,’ she says, smoothing the pages. ‘This will be great for February.’

‘Can you do one thing for me?’

‘What’s that?’

‘Destroy it.’

I walk into the street. I stare at people. They look away first.

‘You’re extremely romantic,’ she told me in there, ‘and that’s just too ordinary in this busi-
nesses.’

I come to the edge of a one-way street. I walk in the middle. There’s nothing I wouldn’t give.
The night before I tried:

True death is a tragedy because . . .

Death takes everything.

Death is only sad for the ones left behind.

*You weren’t here once, and you won’t be here again. It’s actually more normal for you not
to be here than anything else.*

You won’t have to bury anyone you love.

You won’t love anyone new. Not ever.

I read the Russians before bed. Death is laced through their stories, their dialogues, even
their ironies. Death is the deadweight atop their syntax, making each opus too heavy to lift, too
tiring to grasp. Anything that I have come up with they seem to already take as granted. The
given which they use as a salt-free solution to glimmer their own gemstones.

Me: Will I see something beautiful before I close my eyes?

Them: *It is amazing how complete is the delusion that beauty is goodness.*

Me: If God can see me, am I doing it right? A lot of people die for truth, I’m trying to die
with it.

Them: *If there is no God, everything is permitted.*

Me: I’ll never love again.

Them: *What is hell? I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love.*

Me: . . . the air feels purple and the bugs don’t come.

Them: *We shall find peace. We shall hear the angels, we shall see the sky sparkling with
diamonds.*

Me: The lie of the sting in my chest . . .

Them: *If a violin string could ache, I would be that string.*

Me: So I sit up straight, waiting for the mother of beauty to make me wise.

Them: *I shall be dumped where the weed decays, And the rest is rust and stardust.*

I could have had a great career if I lived on—I think now, shutting off the light, throwing
pillows I don’t need to the floor—being extraordinarily impressive to mediocre people.

Ed has a habit of telling me where to meet and failing to mention who else he is already
with. When I get to the bar, two of his coworkers talk on stools next to him and a mutual friend
of ours, Joy, drinks vodka on ice through a straw.

‘Our boy! Tyson, Greg, this is my boy, better known as The Man. Everyone calls him The
Man. Not in the corporate way, he’s a fucking poet. No, literally, a poet. Or whatever a poet is

these days—an internet writer. But he's The Man in the other way. The Man at life.'

'What's left of it,' says Joy.

Ed rocks his stool around and lets his stare talk.

'He wants us to treat it that way,' she says, brushing her arm down my back.

'It's fine,' I say. I smile.

'You're a walking fucking drunk,' says Ed.

Greg says to Tyson, 'I've never seen Ed serious. Like ever.'

I shake hands with Tyson. Greg tries to high-five me instead and our fingers knot confusedly and I pull back and my heart races with social shame until I do the now-daily mantra: Who cares. Not the point. Find the point.

Ed: 'Catch up, man. Beer and a bump.'

Joy: 'Who talks like that.'

I sit on the far side of Joy and make sure Ed gets the message I don't like that he brought extras. We drink and it's only seven. We drink and it's nine. We drink and Ed works up a *carpe noctum* scenario that gets Joy offering to kiss me. We do. Ed works up another and they whisper and she laughs and says he's ruining the joke.

'You've never wanted to pull a Betty Draper in the backroom of a bar,' he yells, and the bartender watches us. 'You're the *only girl* who's never wanted to pull that. Right. *Right*, Joy.'

She moves on and he knows he's ruined it. At the same time, she's warm and wonderful with me, and it's the closest I've come to forgetting how bad I am at my job.

'Ed told us, man. I'm sorry as shit,' says Tyson after I say no, I don't want to go outside for a cigarette. 'You're brave, brother.'

'Why?'

'Facing it.'

I see potential to see something through how a drunk stranger sees me. I perk up. I take one of his smokes and we stand under a bodega awning as hail pelts our slick dress shoes.

'How would I not face it,' I say, after he probably thought he had gotten through this already.

'I don't know.' He checks his phone. 'I know dudes that would plug it up. Fucking put themselves away.'

I don't understand the way he talks.

I hazard: 'So it's brave to finish out the months, you mean.'

'Super brave, brother.'

'What would you do?'

He shrugs. 'I'm just not in that situation.'

Ed and Joy come out. Joy wants to go somewhere else, and I can tell she's sick of Ed.

'We're going to another bar where they have good drinks,' she says, grabbing my arm.

Ed gives Tyson the finger. 'I'm not staying with these pigs. I'm rolling with The Man.'

'It's cool, man,' I say. 'Stay here. I don't care.'

Tyson: 'We'll all go.'

Joy: 'Please, no.'

He tries to laugh off the direct hit.

'I don't care what any of you do,' says Ed, 'I'm doing what you do,' he says to me.

We've spent so long making plans. Joy grabs me again and we walk through the weather. Ed scrapes after us, and I hear Tyson saying, 'Wait up,' and following, and Greg comes out of the bar yelling how no one paid, and he follows too. My hair is rinsed. And all the thousand raindrops have faces and names.

I wake up sick. Booze, to the dumb extent I used it, could precipitate the end, stem my search, lessen my allotted exam time. I am furious at Ed for every part of last night. He's heroically fat. I used to admire him for being fat and cool about it. Now I think he's fat and oblivious.

I text him: *I have no time, man. Why would I want to be with your fucking friends who I don't know. Ask yourself that. When you wake up, sit there and ask yourself if I have no time.*

I wait and send another: *Don't pull that shit again.*

I go to the freezer, take out and toast some frozen waffles. I eat them in front of my laptop where I find a new rejection email:

Thank you for thinking of . . . While we enjoyed reading. . . tastes are subjective, and you should not feel discouraged from . . . deserve an enthusiastic advocate for. . . All best . . . Onward, forward . . . Sincerely . . .

I spend the afternoon on YouTube.

I watch an eloquent entrepreneur talk about containing your weaknesses. The side column shows a video of a dead British journalist, which I watch for about twenty minutes, and he is hilarious and erudite and explains politics in new ways and has anecdotes on any subject. From there I watch two TEDTalks that cannot hold my interest, and then a few decade-old talk show appearances of a favorite comedian, and the side column leads me to an eccentric entrepreneur who is mostly an asshole, and that column shows the original entrepreneur whom I liked more, so I go back to where I started.

Ten minutes into his video podcast, I press pause. I click the search box and type Dead People. I get hits on people who've come back to life, and 'shocking postmortem photos' of the rich and famous. I go back to the search: Dying Men. I click the first hit and watch a man singing to his 93-year-old wife on a hospital bed. The song is *You Are My Sunshine*. I grip the table. The side column: Men's Hair Dying Tips: GO BOLD.

Ed texts back: *I'll call you tomorrow about this. Always better to have a calm, rational discussion.*

I take a long walk with my music going. The people I pass are actors in a scene I'm scoring, and they don't even know it. A conspiracy takes hold. We are together in something. The song in my earbuds hits a tingling pinnacle. I smile, I blush.

The pit is cracked open and dug out of me, and I scribble down five premium notes in my phone.

I run home, get my laptop, and go to the park.

The woman from the bar who said the thing about my ordinary romanticism also told me once *The thing you're about to write will always be better than the thing you just wrote . . . until one day it's not anymore, and you kill yourself with a shotgun*. I don't know whom she was referencing.

But that's the rat race I've deigned to run. Good today, better tomorrow. Or, maybe, shit tonight, piss in the morning. Incremental fecal refinement. That's what I've hoped for. And I gave myself all this room to run. Because everyone else had it—a green open field and torrents of sunlight—so why wouldn't I? Why shouldn't I have expected to play the full eighteen? I took it slow and thought her wisdom was my north star. Now I'm in need of a fact and ain't she sweet? She'll publish the shit. I didn't get good enough to say what it's really like. And by her measure, it's not even my fault. But the way I see it, it's a haunting.

A few more summers and I could tell you what it's like to have death on your calendar.

What did the Russians have that was so great? A few more summers. What does Ed have that I don't? What does my dad have that makes him a prick? What gets Joy out of bed? What makes these videos so damn watchable? What do I need to find my fact? It's all the same.

This was the first passage I wrote. It was too cerebral and weird, so I hid it towards the end here. But it was the first that came out. And how unequal to the conspiracy of that afternoon.

I was there and I left. I shut the music off to grab the computer. I left the park to get to work.

I see the editor lady at a cocktail party and she brings other people over to talk to me and they all watch me as I answer benignly, pathetically, and I wonder if they are deeply kind or macabrely curious.

'I told them about your piece and what a shame that you won't let me run it!'

'How old were you,' I ask a writer by her side, 'when you started to write your best stuff?'

She demurs and starts and demurs again. Then she cuts off someone answering for her: 'I guess I hope I haven't hit it yet.'

'Like I always say,' says the editor, 'the thing you're about to write—'

I pretend to drop my glass and it shatters and we don't have to hear anymore.

By the exit I tap the writer: 'The Buddhists say, In the beginner's mind, there are many possibilities, in the expert's, there are few.'

She smiles. 'Buddhists say that?'

'Yes. Or . . . a Buddhist.'

'I had a professor who said it a lot: The young shit, he would call it. The young shit is the energy shit, the do or die shit, the blow up the world shit. To me, it's mostly shit.'

Other professionals are crowding around us. The servers have gone home. The music is off.

'What's the truest thing you ever wrote?'

She wants to leave. 'I once wrote a two-word poem called Why me.'

Alone in my apartment, I pour out my thick manila envelope of every letter anyone's ever written me and scraps of ideas for poems I never wrote. I spread them all out on the rug. I try to look for the sum total. This was where someone like the girl at the party and I parted ways. Like so many MEtheists, she searched for another partial truth about herself to pass off as a greater truth about the world. I know better. The 'me' part is dispensable. It's only the sum total that's worth anything, the grandness of the whole chessboard, all these scraps pieced back together. I fiddle with them and manage the aches.

I can feel the epic current swaying me to and fro on my bedroom carpet. It is not the martini I had, nor the one I spilled, nor the perfumes I inhaled. It is the grand sway. The oceanic trueness of my full life. I settle back and move. I sit still and dance. I feel the pull with my fingers and the night makes the windows black and I'm so fucking close.

A poet with cancer said, 'Life means mostly waiting for life, or remembering it . . .'

I am finally free from both modes of failure. I no longer wait. And remembering is hardly the point. I am here to seize the now. But I don't want to *confine* it, see. I want it to trust me. And walk with me into the ether.

We poets knock upon the silence for an answering music.

That's all I'm trying now. Humble in its way. But necessarily epic. Epic as the current. Epic as the wave.

That's why I dropped the glass. That's why I left the park that day. It was worth it, even though I didn't get anywhere. I left to get to work. Wasting what was left of the afternoon trying to explain the act of wasting it.

I text Joy and Ed and we go to brunch overlooking the river. By absurd chance my parents and sister are at the next table.

‘What are you doing?’

They laugh, they hug me, they shake hands with Ed and Joy.

‘We drive in for this place once a month.’ They say it like I already know this.

We don’t join tables. I offer it, but we don’t do it.

Ed says after a few mimosas, ‘So have you fully quit your job? All your gigs and shit?’

‘Yeah,’ I say. ‘But I’m still working.’

Joy drinks. Says, ‘You’re a worker bee.’

‘You do work hard man,’ says Ed.

‘Really?’ I say.

I hear my parents talking and my sister is animated about something. It sounds at first like maybe they are arguing, but then my mother erupts in laughter. The argument was faux-serious. A fun debate. I don’t know what about.

Ed fills up my glass. ‘This is amazing, isn’t it?’ He looks out at the river, the sailboats gliding toward the bridge. ‘I love coming here, just lifts me up. Just . . .’ he takes in a breath, ‘heaven.’

Joy says, ‘Susannah and Josh were asking for you.’

My dad sounds angry this time and I turn slightly to listen. But my mom cracks up again and I realise he was teasing my sister. They were all teasing.

‘What do you want to do tonight?’ says Ed.

And Joy waits for me to answer.

We talk about our options. I wait for my parents to start up another cross-table conversation, because I think I will tell them to join us for a drink. But I turn around a few minutes later and see my dad already has the check. He must have asked for it with just a hand motion. Because I didn’t hear him ask.

A few hours later Joy goes home. Ed is very sick and he’s saying it’s because his steak and eggs weren’t cooked right. He needs a nap.

I go the movies quite drunk. I fall asleep in the back row and wake up during the last few lines of credits. The overhead lights are on. I think it’s a good idea to sit there until the next one starts. So I sit up straight, waiting for the mother of beauty to make me wise.





Cuento de una ciudad 84 (04/2014 Londres)
SEIGAR

Three Sketches of Someone Who Will Die Young

S.R. Aichinger

Bees circle his head, building him a living halo.

— Vasko Popa

1

In your last year of life, you're concerned
with more conventionally dramatic narratives:

your devastating revelation of sexual assault,
your permanent disappearance from family life,

your inevitable heroin overdose.

2

'In the beginning,' you say,
'it was dark.' There was nothing

but your quiet heart. A castaway
from the beginning, you say
it was made of hardened clay.

'In your chest, stitched shut with string,
is where I begin,' you say.
But in the dark there is nothing.

3

You speak of trees
to say goodbye.

Eva Penner is a photographer and videographer who likes to look at simple things and show them in a new way. She is inspired by the 1950s cinema and modernism. evapenner.com.

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To everyone who submitted to, purchased, talked about, and read from *Into the Void Magazine*: thank you. Without you there would be nothing.

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