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Brandon Lewis
Suicide's Grave

We agree it's the right thing,
a year later, and in a swarm

of mosquitoes we take turns
with a shovel off-trail at a stand

of cedars, take turns throwing
handfuls of dirt into a hole whitened

by your ashes, a sapling stuck
in its center. Rain patters

on leaves and drooping ferns,
drips from your father's bald

head as he kneels down
and smooths the earth level

around the stalk, his touch caring
and precise like a gardener's.

Everything he wishes he had said.
On the walk back to our cars

in the parking lot, the green
slopes of Mt. Pilchuck showing

through clouds, we give each
other quick looks, we nod not only

because you beat these trails,
or because you weren't granted

a funeral service—not even a party
where everyone who knew you

could get shit-faced and blast
your favorite metal songs on the stereo--

but because a mind, whether
conscious or dreaming isn't suited

to be a grave, and finally we needed
to put you someplace else.

Carl Scharwath

Countdown to Darkness

Translucent and awake
Lost in broad daylight.
The sun will vanish
Flickering, unseeing.
Blurring at the edges
Darkening, hesitant
And shinning curious.
The light evanesces
In a trace of sadness.
For how long
Will a stranger stop
In a different light
As the end announced.
Looking for landmarks
Talking to himself
At the edge
Of the world.
Insanity feels good.

Charles K. Carter

Wolf

Imagine the natural
pull of the wolf to the
moon, a pull so deep, the
wolf cannot contain its
affections but must howl
to let the whole world know
that though he does not know
why, he is in love with
that moon.

I am that wolf and you
are that moon. I, a trapped
wolf in my cave, weeping
the spring high tide and the
unwitting loss of a
new moon.

Chelsea Poole

Across the Street: An Autobiography

The house was glazed with an icy sheen that shone in the sun and surprised naked hands and feet in the dark. She stared up at it, brow furrowed, contemplating whether it deserved a goodbye. She never loved it. She doubted it held any room for love for her within its walls. It barely held enough room for her, alone. She always found herself stuffed into a corner, the voices of others swelling to fill the rooms, pushing her into closets and under beds. She blinked up at the house, watching it shiver in the winter.

The cold had arrived early that season, both inside and outside the house. Green still clinging to grass poked up through the white snow. Red and brown leaves lay preserved in the ice lining the driveway. She surveyed the yard through the haze of her breath as it floated through the air. A squirrel desperately dug through the snow, searching for any surviving acorns to take back to his understocked nest.

She cast one more look at her old home, narrowed her eyes at the frost on the windows and the chimney emitting no smoke. *No*, she thought to herself. *If I'm going to freeze, I will meet the cold where it belongs. My bones may turn to ice but at least I can see the sun out here.*

The squeal of tires behind her pulled her eyes from the house. A dark vehicle slid across the slick road, narrowly avoiding a nearby mailbox. She flinched at the danger before noticing the house that owned the barely safe mailbox. The same glaze clung to the bricks and shutters, but the window bore a fog that she knew meant warmth. The smell of burning firewood drifted across the road to fill her nose with heat.

The house sat directly across the road from her, ten or so footsteps from the spot she was occupying on the lawn. The only problem lay on the road in between. A road that also happened to be a backcountry highway. The road was mostly clear, no issue for the four-wheel-drive trucks barreling through the countryside. But a select few patches of ice hung around, ready to leap out at smaller vehicles like the mailbox swiper she had first noticed. She stared at the house, its heat calling to her. Her heart sped up under her coat, her eyes locked on the warmth glowing from across the treacherous blacktop. She had one foot in the street when the truck blew past, scattering bits of ice up and into her hair.

The hair on the back of her neck stood to attention as she scattered back to her place in the yard. She cast one last desperate glance at the radiance of the neighbor's house, her face awash in the glow of the brightly lit windows. But as she felt the familiar tendrils of cool air whisper against her back, she turned away and back to her cold, dark home.

Darlene Holt

The Fortune

“It might not look like much, but they have some killer Kung Pao,” says Maria as she exits her Prius, her heels clacking tastefully on the asphalt.

Stepping out of my own car, I’m careful not to hit the black Volvo parked crookedly in the spot next to me as my gaze drifts to the peeling paint and tilted letters of the restaurant’s signage. “Wok Away,” I read out loud. “I think it’s trying to tell us something.”

“You expect five-star dining in this market? Maybe when houses start selling again and we’re back to making the big bucks.” Maria gives an exaggerated wink as she smooths out her Versace pantsuit. Slate gray and wrinkle-free, as always. “Besides, these holes-in-the-wall are always gems, Mal.”

We enter the tiny establishment, and I survey the “gem” of a restaurant in all of its glorious mediocrity—the brown quarry tile, the dull hum of fluorescent lights—nothing like the Carrara Italian marble or recessed halogen lighting in my model homes. As we step up to order, we’re greeted by an elderly Asian man. His pointed eyebrows are sparse and sprinkled with gray, as is the tiny patch of hair beneath his lip.

“This your first time in restaurant?” he asks after I finish ordering. His speech is slow—deliberate—as he tiptoes across his words with a thick Chinese accent. He smiles politely and waits for my response.

“Oh. Yes.” I want to add: “And probably my last,” but don’t.

“Oh!” he exclaims, reaching under the counter. His hands rummage below and return a moment later with two fortune cookies. “For you and your friend,” he says with a smile. “Enjoy.”

I thank him and grab a seat in a flimsy plastic chair across from Maria. “Here,” I say, chucking a cookie at her. We both laugh. “And next time, we’re opting for sushi.”

During our meal, we talk business for a bit, about how we both desperately need a vacation, and how the lo mein could have used a little less oil.

“Geez, it’s already quarter-to-one,” I say with a glance at my watch. “I gotta get ready for the open house.” With a final bite of my egg roll, I grab my car keys and stand up to leave.

“Wait!” Maria tugs my wrist. “Our cookies!” She gives a cutesy smile and opens the packaging.

“Eh, why not?” I sit back down and follow suit. “I need a little luck in my life.”

Maria cracks hers open and pulls out the tiny slip of paper. “Please be lotto numbers, please be lotto numbers,” she chants as she smooths it out before reading. “‘A small fortune will come your way today.’ Wow. Could these things be any more generic?” She lobs half the cookie in her mouth. “So, what?” she says in between crunches. “Am I gonna find a quarter on the street or something?” I laugh.

“Alright, whatcha got?” asks Maria, tossing the other half into her mouth.

I break my cookie in two. “Fingers crossed!” I pull out the slip and hold it out in front of me as I read to myself: *Today, you will lock eyes with death. Huh?* I feel my face contort in confusion as I read it again. *Lock eyes with death? What the hell kind of fortune is this?* My eyes dart toward the front counter. The old man is still standing there, smiling.

“Well, are you inheriting an island in Bermuda or what?”

I give a half-hearted chuckle as I focus back on Maria, trying to mask my sudden apprehension about the tiny piece of paper. “Uh, great things will come your way if . . . you believe in yourself,” I lie.

“Wow,” she says, stone-faced. “Enlightening.”

I feign a laugh and pocket the fortune as we both get up from the table.

“Oh, Mal, I forgot. I have a meeting in Belmont today, but I’ll see you at the open house, yeah?”

I nod, and with a jesting pageant-girl wave, she clacks her way back outside and drives away. I walk back to the counter where we ordered earlier, but the old man is no longer there.

“Um, excuse me?” I call out, pulling the paper slip from the pocket of my blazer. “Sir?” I tap my heel impatiently and glance over my shoulder, searching for an explanation to the man’s whereabouts.

“Hello! May I start an order for you?”

My head snaps forward. The old man’s suddenly standing in front of me with his resilient smile. “What? No, I already—my friend and I were just—” I take a breath and regain my composure. “What is this?” I say, handing him the fortune as if it were my business card.

“Oh, yes, yes! We have very true fortune here!” He nods agreeably before handing it back to me.

“This isn’t funny. What, you hand these out to random people, telling them they’re gonna die?” I snatch the piece of paper from his hand and tear it up, throwing the remnants on the counter. And yet, despite my showmanship, that stupid smile is still plastered on his face.

“May I start an order for you?”

Okay. These types of things don’t usually upset me—I don’t even believe in the stupid piece of paper. But at this point, it’s the principle. Seriously, what the hell is wrong with this guy? “Well, you, sir, just lost yourself a customer,” I say coolly, re-situating my purse strap on my shoulder.

The man merely stares, his smile unfaltering.

My phone jingles, so I reach into my bag, happy to turn my back to the man. “Mallory Devlin,” I answer.

“OhmyGod, ohmyGod, ohmyGod.”

“Maria?”

“Mal, the deal! The Manchester house—the deal went through! It freakin’ sold!”

“Oh my God,” I echo.

“Exactly! They just called me. Eleven months on the market, and I finally closed the damn thing!”

“That’s amazing, Maria. Really. Congrats!”

“Thanks, Mal! Now just sell the Clover Street house, and we’ll both be sittin’ pretty. C’mon, let’s celebrate. Drinks tonight, yes?”

“I’ll be there.”

Despite the pressure of the upcoming open house, I start feeling better about the whole death-cookie situation; that is, until Maria adds, “Guess that fortune cookie was right, eh?”

My heart sinks. I stand quietly with the phone still pressed against my ear. It’s only a crazy coincidence, that’s all. These fortunes—they mean nothing. They’re just pieces of paper, for Christ’s sake. *Today, you will lock eyes with death.* With death. Who the hell would write such a thing? I have to focus on the open house. I shake my head, as if that would bring some blood back to my brain.

“Mal? Mal, you still there?”

“Yeah, yeah, sorry. Um, yes on the drinks. I’ll see ya later. Congrats again.” I hang up and turn around to find Smiley McGee is gone. Who is this guy, Houdini? Whatever. I have more important things to worry about.

The drive to the open house is a long one. The fortune echoes in my brain as I come across a sea of brake lights on the 101 north. *Death. Lock eyes with death.* I’m being ridiculous, mulling over this thing like it’s a puzzle. I shake my head and stare out the window at the station wagon next to me. A mother is yelling at her two boys who are throwing tantrums in the backseat. Her hair is tousled with stress as she slicks it back in frustration. I watch them for maybe a minute, her turning around to them, shaking her fist, until she turns to me. We lock eyes, and I quickly avert my gaze to the car in front of me. *Lock eyes with death,* my brain echoes again. So, what? This lady is going to take out her anger on me in the middle of a traffic jam? Kill me with her piercing glare? I laugh at the sheer absurdity of it.

As the cars slowly begin moving, I spot the source of stopped traffic: a motorcyclist lying on his back on the shoulder of the freeway. Paramedics arrive and load him onto a stretcher. He looks at me helplessly as they lift him up, as if his eyes are pouring into me, begging me to take his pain away.

HONNNNK!

I cut the wheel as I start to swerve in front of a semi. “Jesus!” I yell. The driver gives me the finger as he speeds up next to me, his eyes dark and menacing.

“Watch it, lady, or you’ll get yourself killed!” he shouts as he slowly passes me. I take a deep breath. *Lock eyes with death.* “Stop!” I cry out to myself. “It’s not real. That was a stupid coincidence. Everything is fine.”

Continuing my self-talk for the remainder of the ride, I finally reach my destination: 613 Clover Street. “Okay,” I say, getting out of my car. “Time for business.” I walk across the street to my latest project: a pale-yellow California bungalow, completely remodeled with a front bay window and wrap-around porch. I’m just hoping the last five months of blood, sweat, and money that went into this place is worth it.

As I approach the driveway, a redheaded boy around seven or eight is biking down the sidewalk. I stop to let him pass, but instead of riding by, he stops as well. He stares at me . . . and stares . . . and stares . . . and here I am, having a staring contest with a freakin' child, neither of us backing down.

“Okay, kid, what’s this all about?”

He looks at me through dark green eyes for several more seconds until he begins pedaling again, as if the last minute between us never even occurred. Seriously, what the hell? The stupid fortune pops up in my head again, so I try to stifle it with nonsensical humming as I continue up the driveway and unlock the front door. “Stupid kid,” I say, closing it behind me.

By 4:00 PM, the house is bustling with potential clients. I find myself answering a hundred questions a minute, but the thoughts of the fortune still plague me. “Why, yes, there is central air and heating.” *Today . . . lock eyes.* “This room could easily be converted into a spare bedroom.” *Lock eyes with death.* “These countertops? Travertine, of course!” *Death . . . today.* As I begin to feel overwhelmed by the watchful eyes of the onlookers, Maria arrives, and I’m relieved to see a familiar face.

“Am I trippin’ out, or is everyone here looking at me weird?” I ask her as I restock pricing pamphlets on the front porch.

“C’mon, Mal, you’re running around like a madwoman. Take a breather.”

“Despite the chaos of everything, the thoughts of that stupid fortune aren’t going away. Everyone’s eyes seem to pierce into me, and I can’t help but think—”

“Oh, great,” says Maria. “This lady thinks she’s gonna take her dog on our marble floors? I don’t think so.”

I turn my attention down the street to an older woman whose face is just as scrunched as the pug she’s walking. “The customer’s always right,” I say to Maria, trying to compose myself. I exhale, then greet the woman and offer to watch her dog outside while Maria shows her the house. The two of them enter, and I’m left outside with—I bend to look at the dog’s tag--Lucky. Of course.

Standing on the porch, I tug Lucky’s leash as he pulls toward a stray cat lurking across the street. “Stop pulling, dog.” The cat’s golden eyes glow in the shade of a large oak—fixated on me. Judging me. I swiftly shift my focus from the demon cat to the surrounding neighborhood. It seems to have quieted down now that many of the people are leaving, but something suddenly catches my eye. I watch as a Volvo, raven black, creeps along the road up the street. It comes to a stop a few houses away, but I can still hear the whisper of the engine. It’s getting later now, and the nearby trees have casted eerie shadows over the car as the sun retreats behind the hillside. The headlights flash—once, twice, three times—in the looming darkness. I wait anxiously, but the silhouetted figure of the man inside the car merely sits there.

“Don’t freak out, don’t freak out. It’s just a strange man . . . sitting in his car . . . looking this way.” The pug looks up at me with bulging eyes and an ugly overbite. *Today, you will lock eyes with death. Lock eyes with death. Today.* “No!” I shout as a couple walks out of the house toward their car. They stare at me with alarmed expressions. “Don’t look at me!” I yell, averting

my eyes. *I'm overreacting. Everything is fine*, I try to tell myself. But that man is still there. He's still sitting. He must be staring. I can't lock eyes with him.

"Mallory?" comes Maria's voice. "Is that you yelling?"

She pokes her head out the door and locks eyes with me. She locks eyes with me! I can't take it. Against my will, I look into her eyes as she approaches, and I see myself reflected back—miniature, distorted, crazed. *Death. Lock eyes with death.* "Don't look at me!" I shriek. I release the dog's leash to cover my eyes. The dog jets towards the cat across the street, and I run out after it. *Death. Today. Lock eyes with death.* "Stop!" I cry, more to myself than the dog. I reach for Lucky's leash in the middle of the road, but the headlights come too quickly. Maria's piercing scream feels distant—muffled—and I lock eyes with him . . . the man in the black car. The man with the resilient smile.

Ellen A. Grazioso

Nevermore

A child on a tricycle hears her mother:
"Stay on the path. Don't talk to strangers."
The teacher warns: *"Buddy up.
Beware of wolves in sheep's clothing."*
The pastor preaches: *"Love thy neighbor.
Help those in need."*

A young woman is riding her ten-speed
to a park. A feeling of change is in the air.
Wispy gray clouds whiten with sunshine.
Along a stretch of meadow, field daisies
have won the battle of the buttercups.

An annual barbecue is on her agenda.
It's a popular event. Crowds surge,
eager to sweat over smoky barrel grills.
The pretty bicyclist speeds, but she's late.
All the best spots are taken.
She settles for a sunny patch of grass.

Nearby, an unkindness of wolf-birds conspires.

Soon a shadow eclipses her light.
A man with an arm in a sling stares at his prey.
Like a wolf he engages the "conversation of death."
"Miss, could you help me unload a cooler?"
Caution aside, she leaves with the stranger.

At sundown, gates inch toward closing.
Folks converge and hurry home,
oblivious of the lamb that strayed.

A lone ten-speed waits in moonlight.

Emma Lee

Blurred Borders

McAllen Refugee Camp, Texas, 2019

He grows wings.
They make a safe bubble,
a small den aside
from the bigger children.

He feels dizzy,
shaky, caked in grime,
but no longer hungry.
His body doesn't seem like his.

His wings
create a downy bed
on the concrete floor.
It's too noisy to sleep.

He looks up.
His parents are gone
and the guards speak
a strange language.

His wings
are white feathers. He wraps
them around himself and waits
to become light enough to fly.

Emory D. Jones

The Look of Death

When I was flat on my back
In the Critical Care Unit,
I had a vision of deep dark
And a figure coming out of the fog.
Coweled Death slowly approached--
He stared into my face.

With skeletal grin
And cold breath on my face.
He reached boney hands
Toward me,
But then I heard,
“My Child.”
And I turned into
The warm light.

Ferris Jones

Parents Are Gold

Lush the memories of nights tucked in
With days free and without sin.
Candid tears sit as your parents leave
With uncertainty you grieve.
They always came home with a small kiss
And once again, you exist.
Remember those tears, the love you hold
They will pass, then they'll be gold.

Jacob Frommer

Very Little Like Alan

There was no offer to pick me up from the station, so I walked the two miles to Alan's beach house. I had not been to the Hamptons since college and as I passed each blonde mansion hiding behind its tall green hedge, I was reminded of their self-importance and why I had not returned. Alan's house was at the end of Dune Road, where the street meets the ocean. A grey box of shiplap and glass tilting toward the sea, I remember when his parents bought it. We were in ninth grade and his father had just made partner at Booth Capital. I climbed the wide wooden steps, knocked three times, and after a moment Alan appeared. He gave me a weak hug which brought me back to the hollow of our shared childhood. He was stockier and had fully gone bald. His eyes were small and sharp like a beach lizard. He turned inside as if we had seen each other that morning. I kept my breath in my throat and felt I had made the wrong decision in coming. I dropped my bag by the door and followed guardedly as he showed me the house, pointing to signed baseball jerseys in shadow boxes hanging next to photos of him and his father holding tightly to celebrities looking to get out of frame.

Simone came in from the den at the back of the house, by the ocean. She was bigger than I remembered and for some reason, this made me happy. She was clutching a braid of dry brown hair and a distressed cotton shirt hung designedly off her shoulder. She had a dark, round face and green eyes that weren't Jewish. We had met once, when I visited Alan in college six years before. It was the last time I had seen him. As she hugged me, she held my neck and whispered how thankful she was that I came. Then she held my hand as though we were friends. Alan watched as he twisted the caps off two beers, and I could not tell what he was thinking. He looked haggard, as though years of the wrong choices had finally stepped out of his interior. We had used him, our small group of friends, at first for his toys and late bedtimes then for his money and apartment on 83rd and Park. I suppose that's why I agreed to come, to make amends.

Simone showed me to the guest room. A fastidiously made bed, clearly unused for many seasons, sat opposite the door. The room was decorated in shades of tan and grey beneath a low white ceiling and was clean bordering on sterile. My window looked out over the driveway, a cobblestoned circle from whose center thrust a rusted sculpture of a dolphin jumping over expensive rocks. Across the street was a golden marsh that stretched inland for a half mile to a row of small, local houses. The sky was bright blue and the distant, colorful homes looked inviting. Black wetsuits dried on bleached porch railings. Wind chimes swayed easily across the marsh and tickled the closed window. I tried to gain a sense of why Simone had called me here, something to do with Alan's depressive moods or his space-filling drug habit, both of which I ignored, we had ignored. Or just as often benefited from. When we were seniors in high school, Alan would carry a roll of cash and offer to pay for us.

I showered and returned downstairs. Despite the pleasant view at their backs, Alan and Simone were in the den facing the television. Simone was looking at her phone while Alan's back formed a mound as he bent over the coffee table. I took my beer from the island in the

kitchen and walked past them to the porch. The beach was crowded with visitors, some on bright blankets only feet from the house. The wind was warm, and I tasted seaweed. Alan knocked on the window and waved me inside. The air in the house was freezer burned and I wanted to go back outside but I was their guest now. He had rolled a joint and offered it to me but I declined so he stood and went outside. After he left the room, Simone told me with pride while still looking at her phone that Alan recently began leaving the house to smoke. When I didn't respond she looked up and said again how thankful she was that I came. When I asked why she had called and was so insistent on my coming, she was evasive to the point of irritation. "I felt he needed a friend," she repeated. "It gets lonely out here, just us, by ourselves." As though they were forced to remain at the beach. She spoke with a childish lilt despite being twenty-four or twenty-five. I could tell by how she sat on the sofa that she hadn't grown up with money, that maintaining this indolent lifestyle was a priority and possibly, though I could not see the angle currently, one reason for her calling me here. Or I could blow it up, I thought. A few words and I could put Alan in his BMW and send us all back to the city. I had that power over him, we all did.

Last I heard, Alan was working for his father but that seemed improbable since it was early Monday afternoon. I asked Simone what Alan did for work but before she answered she asked if she could take a photo with me. She had wedged into our brief phone call that she had a large social media following. I thought it was not difficult with white walls and beach views to trick people into believing your life was pretty, you were pretty. I said maybe later. "He talked his way into managing Beach Bar. To stay busy." *Stay busy*. As though Alan didn't have to work. He didn't, few people from our community did, but they did. Wealth as a tool, not a crutch. She muted the television and turned toward me. "In the beginning he was good at it. I think he liked being around people, but like all his jobs he got bored and quit. That was three months ago." She said this with no judgment, as though it happened weekly, and until then I hadn't realized Alan was living full time at the beach. That was the sort of thing one heard about after synagogue or over brunch. "What do *you* do for work?" I asked, trying to assemble a day in their life. She turned toward the television and lay back down, stacking two velvet throw pillows beneath her head. "Online classes," she said before turning the volume back up and continuing with her phone. I went outside to Alan who was leaning on the railing and looking toward the ocean.

"Beautiful," I said, coming up next to him.

"She's pregnant. That's why she called."

"Congratulations," I said too quickly, unsure of the right tone.

"She wants me to shape up or stay the same, I honestly can't tell."

"Don't you speak to each other?"

"Of course, we do." He left it there.

"Was it planned?"

"Shit. You know it wasn't. We're keeping it though." His face was serious like a child's

He turned back toward the house. He took a long drag and offered me some, but I waved it away.

“Do your parents know?”

“They know,” he said as though I were Marcy or Donald. He was rolling a pebble beneath his sandal and blew an impressive cloud of smoke. The sunbathers nearest the deck turned at the sour smell.

“When’s she due?”

“December.” He stretched upward revealing his belly. For the first time since I arrived we made eye contact. “I’ve been feeling lately like I have a calling to be a father. I can give the baby everything it needs. I’ve got my fuck ups but--”

“Fuck ups? You’re a good person, Alan. You know that, right? I wouldn’t be out here if you weren’t.” I immediately regretted saying this. It shone, in my mind, and I’m sure in his, a bright light on all the years I was not there, not me or any of the others. And when we were there, we weren’t really. Alan and I stood in silence and I felt a great chasm between us. If he asked me to leave in that moment I would have.

“You sweet asshole,” he finally said, breaking into a smile. He was shorter than me by half a foot. “Look at Jack, look at Goldberg and Steven and Danny. All you guys have shit going on and I’m in my parents’ beach house.”

“So, you live in a beach house. Everyone would love this,” I lied. “Look at this view. And I hear you had a job. Fuck ups don’t get jobs.”

“It wasn’t even the alcohol,” he said, heading off my assumption. “AA solved that. It’s these locals. I couldn’t stand them talking about nothing anymore. The city’s two hours away. Get on a fucking train.” He had never been able to control his temper. My chest grew tight but instead of his face reddening as it always had he relaxed his shoulders and smiled. “But you’re here now. Richie Geft, in my house. Let’s celebrate. Please, for me.” He held up the joint and I took it.

The rest of the day passed in surprising camaraderie. Alan and I went into the ocean while Simone stayed inside. We took a drive around town and he showed me a small storefront just off the main drag he was considering buying. He told me about all of his failed ventures over the past few years, each an attempt at fulfillment without doing any work. That evening all three of us sat on the porch, Alan and I drinking beer and recalling our time together as children and teenagers. In the romance of the dimming beach, it felt to have been a genuine friendship. Occasionally, Simone would look at me over the candles. When Alan went to the bathroom, she took my hand and held it in her lap. I was drunk and let her. When Alan walked out, I quickly moved my hand and Simone relaxed back into her seat. I felt like he had walked in on us. I knew he had seen but he stayed silent.

The next morning was overcast and wet. I came downstairs and Alan was sitting on the porch. I had plans to walk the beach and do some writing. That is also why I came, to write. In our community, teacher must be a step to something more. The sound of the sliding glass door made him turn.

“Fun night” I said as I took the chair next to him. The sun was behind the grey ceiling. A wind blew off the ocean, snapping the nautical flags on the property next door. Alan had a beach towel draped over him.

“Very fun,” he said. Without taking his arms out from beneath the towel he turned in his chair to face me. “She likes to do that.”

“Do what?”

“Hold other guys’ hands in front of me. Kiss other guys. I don’t mind. She’s not fucking them or anything.”

“Are you sure?”

“Where would she do it?” he laughed. “She’s with me all the time. She called you out here to help me with this baby, didn’t she?” I didn’t know if that was why she called me but I couldn’t argue nor did I want to. Before he mentioned it, I hadn’t remembered her taking my hand. It soured the night in my mind, and I thought this was the moment of confrontation, but Alan sat calmly and stared, lost in thought beyond the black line of the horizon. We sat on the porch for a while before Alan said he had a meeting with a local real estate developer. I spent the rest of the morning trying to write in my room. The air conditioning was on high and the carpet was plush and still had vacuum tracks in it and now my footprints. Despite the gloomy day the light was generous from the large rectangular window. Simone stuck her head in twice to ask if I was hungry. Without turning I said I wasn’t. The second time she came in I realized she hadn’t moved from behind the door after she closed it. I stopped breathing and we were both suspended on either side of the wall, listening for the other.

Over the next few days, Simone was aloof and sometimes flirtatious, and Alan and I held easy conversation. In the mornings I would walk along the beach by myself and in the afternoons, I split up my writing by taking a swim in the ocean. Alan sometimes joined. Aside from a night out at Beach Bar, Simone didn’t leave the house other than to accept food deliveries on the front porch. My impression of her shrunk as my feelings for Alan grew. An introspection lit our conversations and I felt small because I had been too harsh in my view of him. While we walked with our feet in the green ocean, I apologized for our friendship, but he wouldn’t hear it. By the fifth evening, I found myself coming around to their way of life.

On Saturday, when Alan was out of the house, Simone knocked on my door and came in without waiting for a reply. She came over and leaned against the laminate desk. She had yet to tell me she was pregnant, and I hadn’t brought it up at Alan’s request. After a brief, confusing silence she kissed me. I kissed her back more out of shock than desire then quickly pulled away. She looked at me with what I think she believed were searching eyes then said in a rush, “I’m pregnant.” I said I knew and felt that if I did not move, we would go further so I stood and walked over to the bed. She remained against the desk looking very young and I sat on the bed with my hands tucked beneath my legs. As she stood there, I grew to detest both her and me. She had lured me into their melodrama, and I had let her. After a few minutes of expectant silence, she left. I booked a ticket for the morning train.

Alan came into the room about an hour later with his hands held up. “It’s okay” he said. “Please don’t leave.” I was surprised that he made the leap to my leaving and knew as soon as he said it that he would never become more than he was, not for this baby or ever. I realized how many times he had over the past week excused what should have been confronted. He kept putting himself after Simone, after me and the few people who had watched him stay in one place all his life, as if he were hoping to become so small that nobody would pay him any attention or expect anything at all.

“I didn’t even have time to react,” I said, not knowing if this was true.

“It’s the hormones, right? Isn’t that what they say? Let’s hit the beach.” He smacked my thigh and stood from the bed.

“It’s not fine, Alan. Not for me or you or her. I never asked to be involved in your relationship.”

He quickly looked hurt. When we were children, if a teacher reprimanded him, he would push out his bottom lip and feign sadness and it worked every time. At that age it was some great trick but now it was terrible to witness.

“She’s carrying my kid.”

“She can’t go around kissing your friends. You need to talk to her.”

“We do talk. All the time.” They had barely spoken during my stay. “You haven’t been through what we have. You wouldn’t understand.”

I wanted to ask what they had been through but didn’t. It seemed that neither had been through very much, that even their hard times, whatever they might have been, were beige.

When I came downstairs the next morning with my bag hanging from my shoulder, Alan jumped from his chair.

“Not yet, Rich. You just got here.”

“It’s been almost a week.”

“One more day. A few more days,” he pleaded, forcing a smile and going from foot to foot.

Simone came down the stairs clutching her braid. She had just come out of the shower and smelled warm and floral. After I spoke with Alan the night before, he had called Simone into my room and they apologized together. It was surreal, this pregnant girl and her boyfriend, my old friend whom I had for so long treated like a doorman, a chauffeur, an ATM, both apologizing for her having kissed me. To rid us of the discomfort I suggested we walk the beach. It was a clear night with enough stars and a warm breeze to soften the preceding few hours. The three of us walked in silence for a long time. Eventually Simone jumped on Alan’s back and we began to laugh. We ran in and out of the surf. We ground our elbows into the sand and stared silently at the constellations. We felt we had gone through something. I fell asleep to the sound of their laughter from the master bedroom.

“You can’t go,” said Simone, holding my arm. Their pleading embarrassed me. I had booked my ticket and said so but they rebutted that a ticket was good for any day of the week. That I could at least stay through dinner. That we hadn’t even been to any restaurants. When he

said this, Alan smacked his head as though he had forgotten about restaurants. He looked like one of my students searching frantically for an answer. As I stood watching them press me to stay, I recognized what I had been feeling throughout my time with them. It was not easy creating a full life, not in the Hamptons or the city or anywhere. They wanted to feed off my efforts and I had no intention of letting them. Not that I or Jack or Goldberg or Steven or Danny had our lives perfectly together. But Alan didn't have his life together enough to even look like he didn't have it together. His life didn't register outside of this house. There was a poisonous malaise that colored everything they did. My other friends' beach houses were empty.

Whether in anger or ignorance, neither offered a ride to the station. As I walked, I realized that the guilt I felt was the result of a manipulation they were not even aware of committing. Pulling into the shimmering, muggy city, I held nothing against them.

A few days later, Alan called to thank me for coming. I encouraged him to find a job and move back to the city. I told him he should call when he did. Soon the school year started, and I had no time to think about Alan. Four months later, during winter vacation, he called me, but I ignored it. He left a voicemail saying that he had moved back to the city and that he was looking for work. He stated with pride that his father had offered him a job but that he had turned it down. He ended the message asking if I would get a drink to celebrate his new baby, Charlotte. When Steven and I went to dinner that night, he told me he had bumped into Alan, his girlfriend, and their baby on the street. I said his girlfriend's name was Simone and his baby's name was Charlotte. Steven said that Charlotte looked very little like Alan.

Jan Ball

Episcopal Bath

He spurts the Johnson's Baby
Shampoo into his soft palm then
caresses her blonde head while
supporting her little back with his
other hand, concentrates to wash
carefully between her toes,
under her arms, between her legs,
lingering there as she giggles,
then, as elated as when he raises
the monstrance after consecrating
the host, he rinses her and dries
her damp fingers one by one
with the fresh pink towel provided
by her parents.

Downstairs, Kate and Robert smile
with pleasure that Father Joe has
once again asked to bathe
 their little darling.

Jillian Danback-McGhan

On Progress

We draw lines in the ocean
And corridors through the air.

Spin time around spindles to
Weave latitudes, longitudes.

Such beautiful beings we
Send to the slaughter, to make

Ink out of marrow, and write
Down the same stories on tablets

Of bone. Mining for knowledge
Yields hope as wastewater and

Ore smelted to guild emblems
Of loved ones who left us to

Draw lines in the ocean and
Corridors through the air.

Jisun Lee

I Want to Break This Weight

I want to break this weight.

I wanna shed this burden
that makes each step heavy with sorrow.

I smile
at the thought of a million shards flying through the air.
I'll smile through my tears.

I'm not a baby.
I'm not a toddler.
I'm not a child.
I'm not a girl.

I'm a woman.
But sometimes, I don't feel like I am, especially not now.

Tick-tock, tick-tock.

The weight gets heavier as time passes.

Time was invented to mock us.
Humans are fragile things.

Joan Gray

The Creature on the Wall

10:07 PM.

The time was late; I know that much. I was sitting quietly in a rocking chair in my room.

I hated being alone.

How did people do it, and all the time, too?

Jesus Christ, how late was it?

I went back to reading. The story was interesting—a twisted tale of two sisters, spiraling slowly into insanity. What was this story again? I looked back at the title. Who knows? Some story that hardly anyone knew of anyways, as always.

A bunch of words that get scrawled out onto a page just for a few, minuscule amounts of people to read. Hardly ever earned a buck, I bet. What a twisted world. What a weird world. I put the book down on my chest. I was staring at the ceiling, counting the indented Pizzelle's in the ceiling. My dog was laying like a hotdog between my legs stretched out on the ottoman that came with the rocker. I always loved this rocker, even though it felt like it was made for a mother, or someone with a child, you know.

The rocking made me feel like I was doing something, it took my mind off the world, the ticking at me again and again like a relentless time machine. I always had to be doing something or another, counting syllables of words I spoke, or checking all the locks in the house even though Taylor had already told me that they were locked, or following the same pattern every night, you know, the normal stuff.

I figured we all did these things, probably, in one way or another. Ah, oh well, I sighed.

I looked at my watch. 10:08 PM. Only a minute had gone by. Damnit.

I felt something tickle the back of my neck. I patted my hair, it went away.

Tap, tap, it tickled back.

Wack, wack, I patted back.

Go away fucker, I don't have time for this. There are too many locks to check and indents to count and papers to scatter in a way that I hate people touching them. You know. The normal things.

Tap, tap, tappity, tap. The creature was back.

The hair on the back of my neck tickled back this time. I sighed. It didn't go away.

I stood up in defiance, anger, or just to pass another minute by.

And I saw it, of course, that's what it was, who else would it be?

A spider.

The good old-fashioned ones, you know. The ones that sized up my car wheels. I laughed. Of course, that was what it was. The creature didn't stop there, either.

He wanted to tap, tap back, and back.

I sighed and knew it was time to run. He was fast.

I felt his furry, fringy legs graze the back of my ankle in the way that my dog used to do when she was excited.

Oh yeah, my dog. She just stood there watching. Come on, aren't you supposed to help? The spider kept coming, ignoring the other furry beast that could've taken it on any day. The spider wanted me, and the spider was too fast for me.

I sprinted around the house, shoving chairs in front of it, catching myself some distance. "Get out of here! Can't you see this is my house?!"

He didn't care.

He didn't reply.

Why would he, you know?

I jumped, he missed. He jumped up onto the wall and then the ceiling and paralleled me throughout the house. Tracing my patterns, making a mockery out of my humanity.

"What do you want?"

His large, human-sized eyes stared back at me, into my soul. Why do spiders even come into people's homes?

I heard the garage door open. Thank god, it was Taylor. He'd get it out of here for sure.

"You're in trouble now." I stared at it. It just stared back. It knew I could do nothing to it. He just followed me back and forth until I curled up in a ball on the floor, hands cupping my ears, rocking back in forth, passing time like my rocker, and saying, "just go away, just go away, please, just go away."

Taylor opened the door.

"What are you doing?" He yelled at me.

"Get it out!!!" I yelled at him.

"Get what out?"

"You see it!" I pointed up at it. "The life-sized spider that's been following me back and forth, grabbing my ankles. Have you ever seen a spider that size?"

He looked around. He checked the walls. He looked up and down. He spun around in the patterns I traced. One, two, three, no he has to spin one more time. Damn it.

Great, he was making a mockery out of me, too.

"It's right there!" I yelled. Above me stood the largest spider known to man. His legs sprawled out the size of my five-foot arm span. He could swallow me whole if he wanted.

Taylor squinted and pulled one of our metal chairs from the table to stand on.

"You mean this guy?" he asked, half smirking.

He picked it up. When he brought it down to my eyes, the spider was the size of his fingernail.

10:09 PM.

Jonathan Ferrini
Tea with Old Friends

It was a weekly treat for me to attend an elegant, afternoon high tea at the beautiful Mark Hopkins Hotel after church services across the street. The Mark held a commanding view of San Francisco from its location atop Nob Hill and provided a beautiful view of the iconic bridge, bay, and city below.

I was always welcomed by my waiter, Franco, a fifty-year employee, who reserved my favorite, long, green, silk-covered chaise lounge, which included two long arms and a matching footrest. With charm and grace, Franco would gently roll up a brass serving table with a glass top, displaying my assortment of English teas, finger sandwiches, and exquisite pastries. Franco always included a glass of sherry which oftentimes induced an afternoon nap, and dreams of our exotic travels as a family.

Across from my chaise lounge, was its “sister,” a beautiful, vintage, velvet, bright red sofa with gold leaf accents. It looked as if it previously held a prominent place within the palace of Czar Alexander. The red sofa was so elegant; it appeared to be a museum piece, and only on occasion would people sit upon it with reverence. Both furniture pieces were handcrafted at least one hundred years earlier. I always admired people with an appreciation for fine furniture who would photograph and admire the beautiful red sofa.

We were situated in a quiet corner of the magnificent hotel lounge where I could sit alone with my memories, nap, or watch the hotel guests come and go. My heart was always warmed by watching a young mother introduce her daughter to high tea, reminding me of my precious moments with my daughter, now grown with a lovely daughter of her own, attending Stanford. Franco wore his spotless, white waiter’s jacket, white shirt, black bow tie, pressed black trousers, and shoes shining like mirrors. Franco put two children through college working at the Mark and was the last of a dying breed of professional waiters. He felt like family and treated me like royalty, greeting me as “Madame” and always nearby at my beck and call. He remembered the many private dinners my husband and I shared, our anniversary celebrations, birthdays, and lavish New Year’s parties we hosted. He was careful to remind me of these precious memories because it always brought me tears of joy, albeit, bittersweet, now that I’m elderly and alone.

The chaise lounge and I became friends because I believed it had a soul. Its armrests were like the embracing arms of a loved one, comforting me as I reflected upon my long life; a depression-era teenager, soldier’s wife, mother to a beautiful grown daughter with an equally beautiful granddaughter, and a handsome son killed in Vietnam, whose untimely, and unnecessary death, left an open wound within my heart. We had a comfortable life in San Francisco and managed quite a bit of international travel as my husband was transferred around the world in the course of his business. We fell in love with San Francisco and decided to make it our home when we retired.

I often fell into a deep sleep within my chaise lounge and awoke to find a blanket carefully placed over me by Franco, and a plush pillow beneath my head. I had a dream that my

departed husband was calling for me from the opposite side of our home, as was his custom. I hadn't dreamed of my husband for decades, and surmised, I was being called to join him shortly. I welcomed the day when we might be reunited in the afterlife. I missed him, dearly.

I was ninety-years-old and watched my friends die over the years. Except for church, periodic visits from my daughter and granddaughter, I lived a reclusive life but was content. I returned one Sunday afternoon for high tea to find the entire hotel lounge had been remodeled. I walked about, hurriedly looking for my chaise lounge and its "sister," the red sofa. I believed that I might have entered the wrong hotel until Franco met me.

"Franco, what happened to the lounge? Where are my chaise lounge and the red sofa?"

"The hotel management remodeled the lounge last week to attract younger guests. I miss the old décor, as well, Madame."

"Where did the chaise lounge and red sofa go? Perhaps, they're in storage? I would like to purchase both immediately!"

"The work was completed during the overnight hours so as to minimize our guest's inconvenience, but I will inquire on your behalf, Madame."

The General Manager, a young Swiss hotelier, soon thereafter, approached me, apologizing.

"I'm sorry, Madame, but the previous furnishings were taken away by a moving company to an undisclosed location at the behest of our interior designers who don't have any further information on their whereabouts."

The General Manager and Franco knew I was heartbroken by the loss of my favorite chaise lounge and its "sister" sofa. They provided me with a beautiful Queen Anne chair adjacent to the fireplace and graciously provided my high tea at no charge.

I considered my favorite furniture as friends and was thankful for the privilege of knowing them. I prayed both the chaise lounge and red sofa met a beautiful fate, perhaps displayed with honor in a vintage furniture shop, soon to be purchased, hopefully together, and appreciated by new owners for decades to come? If I knew which store, I'd immediately purchase them both and move them into my Pacific Heights home.

At ninety, I had grown accustomed to losing friends and loved ones, but the loss of two inanimate, beautiful, vintage, furniture pieces, providing the only comfort, never the pain and sorrow humans mete out, devastated me. I dreaded the thought they may be sitting in a landfill, slowly decaying, like an elderly woman. I prayed they did in fact, have souls, and would fondly remember the many guests they comforted, including me.

Kenadi Blake

The Little Girl

Once I met a little girl
Her biggest dream was to conquer the world
But she was held back by rusted chains
As I stood there gazing, I could feel her pain;

Day after day, she begged to be let go
She asked me where the key was
I told her I didn't know;

Tears spilled onto her rosy cheeks,
As the days and nights turned into weeks;

Her captors were named Pain, Fear and Sadness
She fought back hard
Sometimes she felt it was madness;

I sat by the little girl and held her hand
Because she was so small, she didn't understand;

Soon the light faded in the little girl's eyes
She stopped fighting back; she didn't even try
The little girl finally accepted
That she'd never conquer the world
As the hideous nightmare around her unfurled;

I closed my eyes, then opened them again
I prayed for her and for this to somehow end
But I was dragged away from my thoughts
And realized I was now in chains
That little girl was gone
But I could still feel her pain.

Maeve Barry

The House on Westdale Avenue

The door was locked the afternoon that I arrived at the house on Westdale Avenue. The door was locked, and I did not have a key. I paced around the yard for a bit, stretched my arms and stubby fingers out and up. The sun was bright, it was August, and the house was in Eagle Rock. When I awoke later, I was coiled into a ball on the straw that was intended to be a lawn that had all dried up. *Do you wanna go inside?* He asked, standing over me, his shadow casting a dark shadow. He pushed the door open easily and looked back at me. *I swear it was locked....* I think before a garage door leaves its hinges and clambers down at the auto shop next door.

The house on Westdale Avenue was green and had a straw yard in August. An arch formed by shrubbery framed the kitchen window that was also green. My walls were yellow, Leah's were grey, and Sonya and Lara shared a room with white walls that were covered in pictures. Alex's room was purple, and His had no color. His blank walls left my yellow paint no longer cheery but blinding. We moved into the house on Westdale Avenue for our final year of college. The house was built on a colony of anthills. A homeless man passed out on the front lawn our first week living there. We found him on our way to class pressed up against the bushes and sleeping. Someone had shit in our trash bin. Flies swarmed around it like someone had died and we couldn't turn on the hose to clean it.

We loved the house on Westdale Avenue with its stacks of dishes and textbooks and bongs and plain penne pasta. The front door never quite closed, and the back door to the porch that was adjacent to my yellow bedroom swung open erratically, a condition only worsened with the onset of the Santa Ana winds. We loved the house on Westdale Avenue and its bulbous Christmas lights that wrapped their way through and around the living room, which doubled as Alex's bedroom. They weren't very efficient at giving off light, and one bulb burst onto Alex and so we worried the house was filled with lead and ammonium. No one was ever poisoned at the house on Westdale Avenue, not unless you include the kind that is self-administered until someone is no longer living.

During the day, we mostly left the overgrown house on Westdale Avenue, and walked four blocks over. We'd pass the bar that was once a family plumbing business that now housed vintage pinball machines and hard ciders priced at fourteen dollars a can. Men with handlebar mustaches and ironic hats turned towards us. Women in sundresses and floppy hats clutched designer dogs and stared at us. We'd walk four blocks and reach a campus with benches and grass that never turned to straw. There were sometimes roses around the benches, but they only bloomed when parents were scheduled to visit or there was the potential for prospective students.

Sometimes, I heard whispers on the wooden, well-kept benches. There were other women who didn't live in the house on Westdale Avenue who sat on them. They didn't sleep near Him or his colorless walls. I heard whispers about what He did to *that girl at that party*, about *what happened* during his sophomore year. Whispers formed through passive voice, wary of names, wary of solidified accusations. One time on a bench on green grass, underneath an oak tree, I

heard the word *rape-y*, but I ignored it because of the extra ‘y’ tacked onto the end. I walked home, passed the handlebar mustaches, and floppy sun hats. They stare quietly.

I slept differently at the house on Westdale Avenue. At first, I thought this was due to there being too many bodies. I’d fall asleep in the empty bathtub inside the purple bathroom. He came and stood above the tub and I knew that He was there even though I was still sleeping. He covered me in a blanket instead of waking me, instead of asking me to get out. I woke up with a crick in my neck and I smiled.

The air got cooler on Westdale Avenue, the lawn was no longer straw, and I was still not sleeping. It was during the Kavanaugh confirmation hearings, when the country decided to let another rapist onto the supreme court when I listened to professors and uncles and Him and Alex discuss the validity of rape accusations for entire. He finds me crying on the black-and-white checkered kitchen floor, and I tell him about the first time I was raped. He rubs my back for a little too long, two inches too low, and my earlobes are shorter. They are attached when I always knew them to be detached. Then I’m not sleeping because sometimes I hear him walk towards the purple bathroom beside my bedroom door. I hear him open the front door and I lay still until I hear it close again. I decide to no longer sleep but to take inventory instead.

The couch in the living room at the house on Westdale Avenue is mud brown and slouchy. It’s the sort of couch that is easy to get stuck in. You must either engage your abdomen and remain vigilant when watching television, or you are lost to it. I vomited on the slouchy mud couch on my third weekend living in the house on Westdale Avenue, but it was the color of wine, a refreshing purple, and so I fell asleep in it. I sit erect on the quick-sand couch one night with His head in my lap while we come down from Molly. I want to be comfortable and to sleep, but instead, I draw circles on his scalp so that He is comfortable. I stay like this until the sun is all the way up and I can move without him waking.

My yellow room inside the house on Westdale Avenue becomes stale. He comes to my room most nights. We smoke in my bed, thigh against thigh, only five steps from the door that leads onto the porch where we could smoke without ever stinking up the room or setting off the smoke detectors. But he doesn’t want to get up. He puts his ashes in my vase that only once held flowers. He leaves me to sleep in my stale and clouded room with remnants of smoke and breath swirling above my head like a wreath. I curl up and let what’s left of him settle around me while I pretend to sleep. On nights when He doesn’t come, I sit there waiting.

Our thighs are pressed together and so I know that I need to ask about the whispers that I hear on the benches. I ask Him about the whispers and their sources, but He calls them crazy without ever asking who they are. “A crazy girl who caught feelings,” He explains, still touching me. He says that he doesn’t know why this keeps happening to him. He is glad that I’m not like them; that I’m not her. That I’m not crazy. That night, we go out, and I spread glitter on his eyes, sliding the sticky, shimmering potion across lids. The curtain that separates the living room from the kitchen crashes down. He sleeps in my bed and his body is longer than mine; it doesn’t mold and squish like mine but is firm and flat, and I want to keep squeezing closer into it. I can’t make

eye contact, but his hand slips up my shirt and grazes my skin. A gurgling noise comes from low in his throat as He borrows into my bed with sheets that never quite reach the corners.

His steps are louder, and I no longer feign sleeping. He is in my room at night. Things are better when we leave the house on Westdale Avenue and drive to Koreatown where I cat-sit. I coil around Him like a snake and he cups my breast, but it's ok because we're not in Eagle Rock. He kisses my mouth: teeth first, breath hot, and it's ok because we're not in my mockingly yellow bedroom. The washing machine on Westdale Avenue floods the morning that we leave for Nevada City for His grandmother's house on a dull Thanksgiving Day where everything is grey. We fuck on his grandmother's basement floor; the air is cool and there is nothing but farm and mist. Rain pools and dribbles and pools on the wide glass door until it dissipates and repeats. I look down, and I cannot find my fingers.

There aren't mornings or beginnings or starts or finishes when we return to the house on Westdale Avenue. He stomps around the kitchen and slams doors that are already breaking. He pops up at the foot of my bed most nights once everyone is sleeping and the walls become less yellow. All I know are yellow ceilings with chipped paint, and all I know is to check the indents on my mattress and my skin to see if he was in them—in me.

On the morning that He tells me not to tell anyone, he came in through the porch door that's always creaking; the porch door that slams open so hard and fast that Alex once shut it so hard and caused it to shatter the mirror on my yellow wall. When He finishes, says that I cannot tell. He leaves through the porch door again, then loops around to the front before entering his bedroom next door, slamming his door that is not broken.

Strands of hair wrap around my rib cage, but they can't be mine because my hair only reaches my collar bone. The hair is dark and full, and mine is blond and dry. He is on top of me and doesn't seem to notice. He is moving fast and doesn't see that I'm not there, won't acknowledge my clenching and silence, doesn't notice that I'm not me, and that the full lips of the girl who He called crazy are creeping across my own, taking their place, clamping them shut. My eyes tilt up and backward, find a crack in the yellow ceiling until He is finished. They are no longer green but deep and warm and brown.

The toilet on Westdale Avenue is broken on the day that I can't stop vomiting. My fingers tap the edges of the bowl while I wait for more bile, and they are long and slender and would probably have an easy time playing piano scales. I know mine are short and can never reach the correct key. A test that I take in the purple bathroom on Westdale Avenue tells me I am pregnant. I bury it deep in the trash bin that someone once shit in so He won't see.

That night, I wake to distinctive thumping. A twin-size mattress ramming into a wall, saliva swishing between opened mouths, a light moaning and Him mumbling that he's almost finished. An announcement and never a question, without a pause or ever waiting for an answer. I can't move, and my hearing is heightened, maybe because of my attached earlobes and expanded auricles, and it's like I'm in the room with Him, with her, a younger girl we both know, who I identify through muffled giggles. My stomach constricts as I listen to them fucking. I stomp around the hallway, slam my full water bottle into the sink, empty it, and refill it. I sit

over the toilet, dry heave, and listen to her small pretty moans that were mine, only less pretty, the night before. I wait for her to leave, wait for the front door to creak open before closing, for Him to drive her home. The next day, I take a test at the Health Center near the green grass and well-kept benches. I am no longer, was never, pregnant.

He is back in my bed the next night and my teeth are no longer mine when He calls me a bitch for complaining about the girl inside of his colorless bedroom. My stomach that is doughy and pale cinches and tightens and it's as flat as the girl who is crazy. I'm inside her tanned rib cage on the first night with Him that I cannot, or will not, remember, on the morning I wake up covered in bruises. But they aren't on my own skin, and so I cover them with concealer and look elsewhere.

This night repeats until the Wi-Fi at the house on Westdale Avenue stops reaching the bathroom. My toes are no longer partially webbed, and my jaw softens, and He continues coming and the porch begins to rot. The kumquat tree is dead, and Alex shatters another light bulb. The bruises are back, and He slams my door even though He says that I need to be quiet. The bruises don't matter much though because they're no longer on my neck but on a neck that is long and slender. The bruises no longer cover my breasts that are large and heavy; I look down and see small, shapely breasts that are bruised and point skywards.

It's been months and it takes longer to recognize because it is happening to a body that isn't my own. I eventually tell him that He hurt me, or the body that I occupy. I tell Him because I miss seeing my own face reflected in the mirror. I tell Him in the car park that only has space for two cars when the house on Westdale Avenue needs five. He yells at me; yells that I'm crazy, that I need to get over it, but I'm no longer there, and I watch the last of my original face melt and mold into hers in the reflection of his car window. I am not there, I am only the crazy girl, and He can't see that my nose now has a hook instead of being straight.

I am the crazy girl, and I'm four inches taller and three waist-sizes smaller, and my face is not my own. But I sleep in the yellow bedroom on Westdale Avenue, and no one seems to realize. They look at me like my nose is straight and my stomach is doughy, and like my hair is still blond and short and dry. No one can see that I am now the crazy girl until I imply that He hurt me. Then I watch their faces twist and so I know that mine must be twisting, too. My features are shifting, and they creep backward and away.

My face is gone and the house on Westdale Avenue is still standing. You can see it on Google Maps. The paint is still green; you can't see that it's peeling unless you zoom in. The colony of ants never took over the house, and it was never boarded up due to asbestos concerns. The year is over and so is our lease. The cilantro plants will not make it. He moves into the tall pink house across the street and two blocks over. He moves into the house that is pink and tall, and I am left in a body with a face that is not my own. I watch as the woman in the pink house who is with Him becomes doughy and blond, with detached earlobes and partially webbed toes. As I watch, her face becomes mine. She sleeps in the armpit where I slept, and I imagine her crying in the closet where I hid. I walk up Westdale Avenue, past the bar that was once a plumbing company where the men with handlebar mustaches and the women with floppy still stare. They stare

longer and harder as I crinkle the face that is not my own. But it is me; I am her, and the green house on Westdale Avenue is still standing. The pink house is two blocks away, on Eagle Rock Boulevard, and it is also still standing. I know this because my face is inside it, because I've already lived there, and its kumquat tree is dying.

Mary Kathryn Shanley
Shelby Said

Yesterday, there was a café here
and now, suddenly, there isn't.
Life disappears while we sleep.

Homeless live on many corners.
Shelby plants a mattress and pillows
on the corner outside the building where
I live. Neighbors donate sheets, pillowcases
a woolen blanket and a warm winter coat
to help Shelby, as she takes yet another night ride
through vulnerability.

“Better the street than the shelter,” Shelby said.
“I keep all my belongings in a shopping
cart, where I can keep an eye on them.”

Another bank opens
Another Starbucks opens
Another Duane Reade opens
Another nail parlor opens.

Another bookstore closes
Another family restaurant closes
Another record store closes
Another hospital closes.

Shelby moved across the street
to Starbucks, where the scaffolding
will help protect her from the rain and snow.
She placed her mattress on top of
A heating grate, to help her stay warm.

For the time being, Shelby is doing
alright, though she lives on the cusp
of the destruction of her meager
way of life.

This morning I crossed the street to say hello
to Shelby and was surprised to discover she had
disappeared.

The mattress, the pillows, the hand-colored signs,
all gone.

I went into Starbucks and asked
the manager if they were responsible
for the disappearance of Shelby,
but he didn't even realize she was gone.
Shelby is gone.

Like the brick and mortar stores
that disappeared on our block;
she probably won't be coming back.

Megan Mary Moore

After the Accident

I smell my blood before I see it.

Blood and gasoline swim
metallic and thick above my head,
tangling hair, warming my scalp.

Men rip the door from my car,
throw a sheet over my body for modesty,
I'm sorry I'm heavy.
The men I don't know laugh
and take me to the ambulance.

I'm breaking out in hives
and the doctor asks me if I want children.
Big red bumps bubble on my skin.
I watch them grow, my body a new planet
red and rocky.
I may.

Nurses don't give me a chance to feel pain
You didn't say you were allergic to morphine.
I've never eaten morphine before.
They groan, start a line of Dilaudid.

Children.
Your pelvis is shattered.
Odds are you won't be able to carry.
Carry?
Children.

The rest of the day I fall in and out of sleep,
and I can't stop remembering
I was a baby once.

Noah Farberman

Lees and Patterson Save the Sports Movie

The elevator door closed on Todd Lees before he could step inside. The defeated and tired screenwriter waited a few seconds before he pushed the mocking down arrow. After an hour-long thirty seconds, the silver doors opened once more. With his chin against his chest, Lees slouched into the corner opposite the already resident suit, his mind oblivious to the chance that they weren't both headed to the lobby.

"Lees, right?" The suit had blessed him with attention. Lees looked up and recognized the high-level producer. A real top floor type man. "Loved your work on *Flagship*."

"Thank you, Mr. Patterson." Todd Lees used his rehearsed elevator tone. "Thank you for making our weird little show."

"Call me Adam. Little producer secret, some of us still actually like to watch TV."

"I genuinely would have never guessed."

Adam Patterson, the producer, laughed. A comedy writer's dream.

"Tell me, Lees, what are you working on? What can I get excited about?"

A comedy writer's nightmare.

Todd Lees always had a few answers to this question. Arrows in his quiver, an old writing professor called it, parroting himself weekly. Always have your bow ready to fire. The prof was crazy and also taught them how to cook Sloppy Joes with nothing but ground beef and a hotel lamp. But he was right as much as he was racist, and Lees made a note to thank the old nutcase before he passed on after thirty years of slowly dying.

There was the action movie, the sitcom, and the family drama pilot his agent suggested he pump out in a time of writer's crisis. The plethora of eager stories jumped to his frontal lobe, all equally begging to be told. He likes *Flagship*. Lees made the note to siphon out only the ideas that felt tonally similar. We're looking for smart comedies that mash nostalgia with satire. He instructed the tiny librarian in his bustling head. But the librarian was on break, of course, it's noon. He knew he was paying them too much, but mental pay cuts would have to wait.

"It's about a—" The words escape him without control. Through the fog and blood and cartoon violence a single-story burst past the mental barrier and out of his mouth. A script he'd worked on in college that pushed him ahead of his lazy classmates. One he fantasized about in high school during nights when he'd miss a night of weed and speed-running *Half-Life 2* because of an early swim meet the next morning. A film he'd dreamed about making alongside his former favourite crews with wide-eyed visions about changing the genre of the world. Nothing special to anyone but him, but Todd Lees knows better than most how strong a story can be when at least one person cares.

Out of his mouth came an elevator pitch that Todd Lees had not rehearsed in years. "It's about a very popular high-school athlete forced to play a horribly unpopular sport. I call it: *Greaseboy*."

For a moment Lees couldn't breathe. He had just exposed a deep and embarrassing part of himself to a man he hoped very much to work for again. And then Adam Patterson smiled and looked up at the floor number on the elevator wall. The glance said: *There's still a good twenty floors, kid, keep talking.*

"The sports movie is not dead, only knocked down with a hemorrhage in its head. And we can shock life back into the greatest genre of all time."

Patterson had given him full attention; he held a sly smile that could be interpreted as patronizing when not paired with the full body turn.

"When his full-ride scholarship is put at risk, high-school jock Jeffrey-Harrison "Jeff-Harris" Anderson is forced to form a very motley team of breakfast weirdos and win a championship in the only sport that will still take him this late into the school season: Greaseboy. Can Jeff-Harris win back his scholarship? Personally, I cannot wait to find out."

"Greaseboy is the sport?"

He asked a question! He was listening! "Greaseboy is the sport." *Calm. Cool. Winning.*

"What is it? Does it exist?"

He has fallen directly into the spidery web of a successful pitch.

And then the elevator shook to a stop. And the light turned out. And they waited a fearful second, Lees fearful that his first so-far successful elevator pitch would end in death, Patterson probably fearful that his choice to fund M. Night Shyamalan's 2010 flop *Devil* was coming back to literally haunt him.

"I knew I should have pitched my movie about people stuck in a broken elevator. Universal knows how much you like those flicks."

"You're quick, Lees." Patterson's laugh relieved some of their fear. "Can you see the help button, kid?"

Todd Lees whipped out his cheap and cracked iPhone and scanned the Christmas tree of buttons. Near the bottom, he spotted a little fire signal next to a phone signal. He quickly chose the phone signal, hoping the choice appeared a lot more fluid than it had felt.

Several rings before a muffled god answered them through the panels. "I see you, Mr. Patterson, no reason to fret, just a minor power outage. We'll have this thing back online very shortly. I have some calls coming in from the other lifts, do you mind if I put you on hold? You can call back should anything change." Twenty dollars says those other elevators are a box of donuts. Front desk has no power over this, bunch of half-wrought pages.

"Thank you. We should be fine here, son."

"I'm so sure you will be, sir. Have a nice day." *CLICK!*

"Sorry about that, Lees."

"It's no problem, Sir."

"You didn't set this up, did you?"

Is he joking? He better be. "I mean it's hard to get you alone, but not break an elevator hard."

"You remind me of my favourite wife—don't tell my prostitute I said that."

Todd Lees genuinely laughed.

“Talk me through this movie.” *WHAT?!*

“You want me to keep going?”

“It’s not often I get trapped in an elevator with a writer I know, let alone like. Don’t let that go to your head.”

“I’m a TV writer, sir, there’s no way my ego can get any bigger.” Hack and easy. Now bring it back around. “Are you serious? You want me to start from the top?”

“Start from the start. This is cutting into my TV time, might as well hear a good story.”

“You’re in for a great one.”

In the dim phone light, Adam Patterson smiled and nodded. His older face still held the eager charm of a defiant thirteen-year-old, the words ‘nothing pleases me’ hidden in a high layer of skin just below the jaw. “Turn that little light off.”

The light was extinguished, and the iPhone was then returned to Lee’s cleanest slacks.

In the haunting darkness of the elevator, Todd Lees took a deep breath. I am Spielberg stealing an office. I am Shyamalan threatening to pull the Sixth Sense script. I am ’92 Mamet and ’76 Stallone. I will do Dowd proud and put Scott Armstrong to shame. I will save the Sports Movie. He would save the Sports Movie. “We open in a bar...”

At ten-thirty that morning a higher-level executive pulled Adam Patterson into his giant top-floor-corner-office and told him not to bother sitting down.

Always a tired combination of media mogul and man of the people, there had never been any company, studio, or filmmaker who did not know or understand that the aging producer always had their best interests at heart.

“The director really didn’t like your last set of notes, Adam.” The executive, Derrick Johnson, was direct, tall, lean, and young. Very young.

“That’s alright, Johnson, I’ll go straighten everything out.”

“He asked that you not be allowed to contact him.”

That was an attack. An accusation. A fatal puncture. There was already nothing Patterson could say. He’d seen the other side of the conversation enough times to know it wasn’t a conversation.

“He wants you off the project.”

“Can I fight this? Should I?” The old man pretended to hold onto a humble tone. Years of being respected stripped him of empathy or understanding for the weak. He still respected those hard workers, of course, he could always see himself in the ones who cared, but there had come a meeting where Patterson finally accepted that he was better. He had earned his place as better. Derrick Johnson was weak. A child actor’s child who took a different name with the claim that he didn’t want to ride coattails and yet still happily took the starter job at his father’s agency. The Director was cocky, rude, riding enough festival wins to get funding from anyone. The Director had Patterson Power on loan. Johnson had daddy power. Patterson had himself. In a fight between who’s hot right now, who’s got the team behind them, and the money man’s subsidiary; things looked broken for Producer Adam Patterson.

Derrick grabbed a stack of papers off his desk and handed them to Patterson. “Read it, take your time, call my secretary if you want to accept. Call my lawyer if you want to negotiate.”

Patterson took the papers with calm hands and shaky nerves while Derrick returned to his desk for a cigarette. “I mean read it somewhere else, Adam.”

Patterson tucked the document under his arm and stumbled to his office two floors below.

Posters of his proudest decisions layered the walls. Half framed, mostly just personal prints presented by persons appreciating him as much as he did them. Years of doing what he can to help the little guy make the big movie or show. To tell the personal story. To feed his desire for entertainment. A shepherd for art. The building owner at the construction crew afterparty. The money man’s subsidiary. And still, everyone loses touch eventually: for Patterson it came with nepotism and over-saturation. It took him thirty-three years to cover those walls. It took him thirty seconds to tear it all down.

The idea that not every idea has to appeal to everyone was lost on the older producer. He started in a decade where you had to work for your place and in this industry that meant entertaining the whole world. It wasn’t hard to see his effect on the world. He helped create a society where everyone can make what they want without the backing of the big guys.

The severance package was very nice. It gave him the feeling of respect that had become a drug over the years. A final ounce of ‘power’ before a long and humble fall into a home.

Adam Patterson picked up the phone and dialed the extension for Derrick Johnson’s office.

Around two in the afternoon Adam Patterson shook limp hands with a man who never respected him. Angry, tired, greedy, Patterson took the package.

Adam Patterson was fired that afternoon.

Tucked behind him, on his final elevator ride from the high floor, hidden and barely visible through his spruce sapling legs, a box that held his career. When some young writer entered the elevator, Mr. Patterson tucked the box further and closed his legs. A final line of powder respect produced through assumption. A real top-floor snort.

Reed Williams

Weight of Seeds

Dad's bedraggled beard hairs dangle
between beady gems: rainbow-colored
droplets streaming down a lengthy
crimson mane. Mom's head hairs bind
themselves in brilliant lemony ringlets.

Dahlias and daisies scatter
grandma's garden—a floral field
forgotten of fruit: an acute
desire for the peach's leafy foliage
and the apple tree's looming,

protective branches. To scoop
their shady defenses for a basin—pouring
my tears, pouring my fears, wishing
for sincere security dissimilar
to the faulty refuge of dad's face hairs.
Those pointed beads bleed me like his blade

bleeds mom, her lemony hairs
mobbing leaking fluids. And to sit
in my eyes is to see grandma's garden
clearing dahlias and daisies for peaches
and apples: embedding seeds that nurture
instead of seeds that shine.

Robert S. King

The Way the World Is

—after the mass murders of 8/3/2019

The death of Joe
may not cause a tear in God's eye
or mean much to whoever designed us.
The slaughter of Jane means little
to the stars and may not send a ripple
through the fabric of deep space,
but the empty space in someone's living room
means the world.

Sarah Jean Valiquette

Home as a GIF

at the edge of the grocery store parking lot where she worked at fourteen
snow blowing in sideways and drifting over her boots up to her knees
she looks out over an expanse of scrubby farmland and wind turbines
the hole in the ground where a truck stop used to be
the black steel cutouts of cowboys on horseback
the Snake Trail through the Porcupine Hills
and Frank Slide somewhere beyond all that
she holds the camera up to her face
then lets it hang by her side, thinking
there is no lens in all the world
that can capture this much
nothing

Sibanda Ndaba

A Poor Person's Precarious Paces and Spaces

Her efforts to hold back, to hold herself back
Against hurtling and hurting herself helplessly
With a hungry, tiny child strapped to her back
Are a betrayal, as she bursts into tears and fury
Her hiding husband betrayed her, battered her
She is on the brink of soundness, she is shaky
Hoping to ward off hunger and helplessness
Famine weighs on her fragile body, her mind
As she takes precarious steps that are oblivious
To the world of lockdowns and social distancing
She is dead, deaf, defenseless against a new reality
Ushered in by an eerie, unseen virus, she wobbles on

Tiffany Washington
Gram's Anniversary

Tonight, a fiftieth anniversary
celebrated on trays—
One held on a lap,
the other balanced across a bed.
The man screaming
down the hall, “Help! Help!”
serenading 50 years well-spent.

Bickering loudly over vanilla pudding
And the doctor's refusal
to let her go home.
His speeding before dark,
to keep the bird company—
Missing weekly card games
and swimming classes.

Once, years ago,
she'd duck below the window
to avoid the gaze of salesmen.
Now flipped and prodded,
poked and turned—
glass walls separating her
and the rest of the world.
Privacy lost in a phone call made in panic.
50 years spent behind closed doors
—now divided
by a broken hip and fear of the dark.

William Ogden Haynes

A Garden Bench in Early Spring

Walking through the back yard, I gather the scattered
dry sticks from one more winter. I inspect the perennials,
shocked from the cold, everything above ground faded

brown. And as I clip off the dead fronds, I know that
life persists in the bulb beneath. These plants have
many more lives than a cat, and will no doubt outlast me.

The weeds, often the first to emerge, wait patiently
under the dead autumn leaves to organize their annual
takeover of the garden. Soon, daffodils will be rising

from their beds, and the greening trees will re-form
a canopy over the yard as they have done for decades.
And then there is the garden bench, frail with rust,

riding a downward spiral, waiting for the wire brush
and Rust-oleum, so it can last another season. But
eventually, it will be cast into the street after I am

no more. I'm not a perennial. I never sink into the
ebb and flow of dormancy and regeneration. I am
built more like the bench, always there, through

all the seasons, flourishing for as long as I can,
but steadily deteriorating. For unlike the perennials,
once I leave this life, I will never come back to it again.

Yash Seyedbagheri
September Song

deep dusk beckons fresh in spring
footsteps flitting with youthful
love of space and moonlight
but darkness comes early in September
a curtain snapped shut
legs waddling around crumpled leaves
in the mud
soon winter will leave them
frozen in deep ice castles

Zachariah Claypole White

Party for the End of the World

You were beautiful when the world ended: half-asleep, fingers curled into the lake's gray sand. Your breath, soft and damp, pressed against my neck. I can't remember what we said, or even if we tried to speak. When the sky changed, I saw heat lighting, saw the storms of my childhood roll across endless trees, felt the sound engulf us. Windows shattered.

The world emptied.

You're dead, have been for two weeks, maybe three. I try to keep track, but the days fade together, become as pointless as headstones.

We had to improvise; you know—when we marked the graves. We started with oak branches. The first were sanded down real nice and etched with names. If we didn't know a name, we pulled one out of our asses. Jack Torrance is buried near my window. Still makes me laugh. Thing was... everyone kept dying.

We switched to initials, tried to keep up. That lasted a few days. Eventually, we stopped pretending it mattered and used twigs, stuck deep into the clay. Until there was no one left to gather branches or shovel a half-decent grave.

I don't remember where we buried you.

I don't remember if we marked the ground.

I hope we did.

...

In the dorm basement, Rob pours shots. Hardly anyone drinks them, but the bastard lines them up anyway. Soon they cover the plywood counter. When the glasses run out, Rob switches to tiny plastic cups, the ones with little measurements on the side for cough syrup. I try to drink as many as I can. Feels like I'm being helpful.

You remember Rob, right? Full-ride scholarship, decent guy. Used to spend hours in the library, memorizing chemicals, parasites, and anything with a name too long to pronounce. Probably sees the periodic table when he closes his eyes. And what did that get him? A prime gig as a bartender for the apocalypse. Yup. Sounds about right.

Judy and I sit at the bar, mainlining whatever he hands us.

"You want to dance?" she says.

"Three." I pause. "Four more drinks, then I'm all yours." I grin. At least, I think I do. My lips are rubber cement, crawling back against my jaw.

I'm sorry. I know how you felt about Judy, how I felt about her. But you're dead—two weeks, maybe three—and I can't find your grave and the music's too loud and the tequila or vodka or watered-down whatever-the-fuck tastes of nothing. And that leaves Judy. I wish it could be someone else, but pickings are slim. Slimmer if you don't go for the dead ones. That was a joke. Mostly.

Time moves slowly in the basement; trapped down here with the rest of us and just as useless. Rob measures out shots. The mountain of batteries for his shit speaker erodes to anemic foothills scattered along the floor. I think of you, how you always kept an extra pair of socks in your bag—for emergencies. Funny, what haunts you at the end.

Judy and I dance. She grinds up against my cock, and I slide my fingers under her shirt. A dozen or so people are left in the basement. Two are vomiting. That happens more and more. One guy, I think he might have been in the honors program, sits in the corner crying. No one comforts him. Hell, why would they?

“Fuck me?” Judy bites my ear.

In the half-light, with Rob’s liquor gnawing at my vision, I can almost believe she’s you. I nod.

On the second floor, we find an open room. It’s not like housing is in high demand, but most of the doors are locked. No one bothers to force them. The smell reminds us who’s inside—who stopped waiting to die.

The bed is dirty, recently used. Desperate minds think alike, huh? The sheets are bright blue, same as yours, same as the sky used to be. Who lived in this room? Whoever he was, he’s dead. Lying in dust and ash-mud, with his bright blue sheets left to us, and the luckless asshole who uses them next.

I imagine Rob, two floors beneath us, lining up glasses long after the alcohol is gone, pilling them a million high, till the basement disappears, and each cup fills with forgotten names.

Judy straddles me, and I push into her, slipping from one oblivion to another. I roll my tongue along her bleeding gums, taste coppery breath on our lips, feel her sigh on my neck. I sob into her matted hair. She doesn’t speak.

Beyond the window, clouds like untouched cities fill the horizon. Somewhere, birds hover above a lake’s gray shore.

It is still beautiful.

Even now.