VOL. 6, ISSUE 3 SUMMER 2018

CATAMARAN

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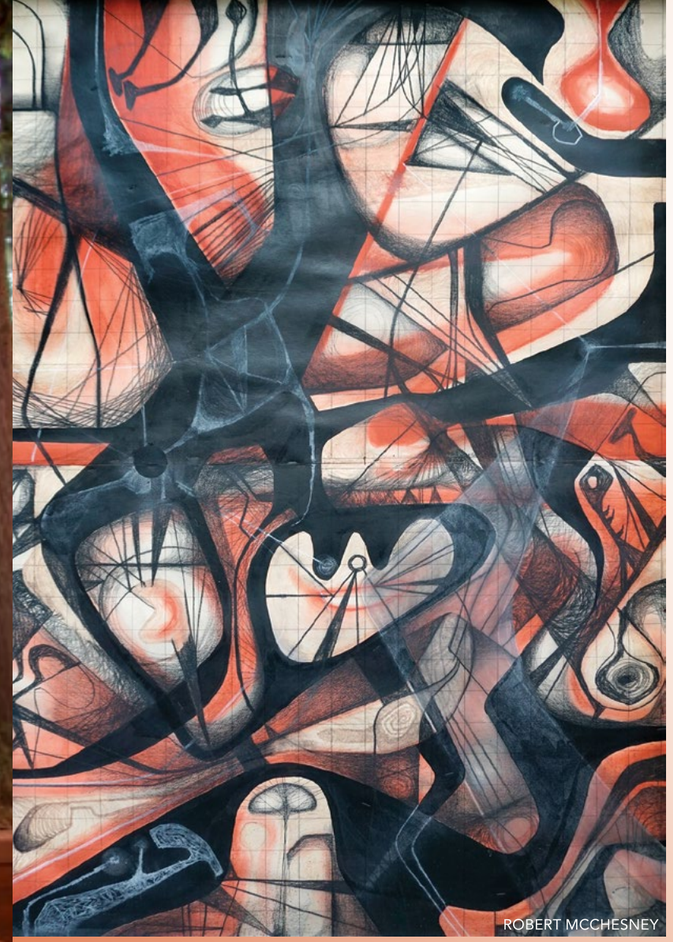
LITERATURE ART


ROBERT MCCHESNEY

reverberations

A Visual Conversation

An exhibition of exquisite fine art selected from private collections of Sonoma County collectors paired with poetry inspired by these artworks.

View works created by some of the world's greatest artists.

Experience *ekphrastic poetry* – descriptive and inspirational poems written specifically as homage to the emotional impact of a work of art – crafted by some of the literary world's most respected wordsmiths.

Listen as the poets read their poems. Reflect on this conversation between the art and the poem.

Visual Artists
Pablo Picasso
Viola Frey
Bruce Conner
Juan Gris
Ed Ruscha
Julie Mehretu
Enrique Chagoya
Francis Bacon
Diane Andrews Hall
Odd Nerdrum
Kathe Kollwitz
Hung Liu
(partial listing)

Poets
Mathew Zapruder
Matt Gonzalez
John Briscoe
Ed Coletti
Terry Ehret
Jonah Raskin
Zack Rogow
Sara Mumolo
Robert Perez
Candice Diaz
Katherine Hastings
Iris Jamahl Dunkle
Gwynn O'Gara
Charlie Pendergast
Maya Khosla
(partial listing)

Opening Reception
Thursday, October 25, 2018, 6–8 PM

Closing Reception
Sunday, December 2, 4–6 PM

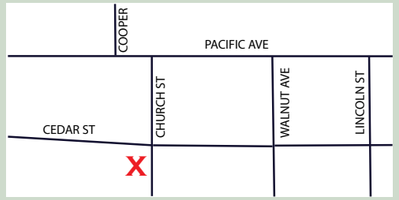
SEBASTOPOL CENTER FOR THE ARTS

282 S. High Street
Sebastopol, CA 95472
707.829.4797
Sebarts.org

Gallery Hours
Tues–Fri: 10 AM–4 PM
Sat–Sun: Noon–5 PM

BIRICHINO
WINERY TASTING ROOM

We started Birichino in 2008, and are very fortunate to pursue what we love: to make distinctive wine from carefully tended vineyards dating back to the 19th and early 20th centuries, as well as a few from the Late Disco Era. If we can do right by the vineyards we are fortunate to draw on, and impart the wonder and excitement we feel for what we do, we have succeeded. Above all, we aim for deliciousness, and hope in some small measure, to add a little joy to the world.



"Thinking about the bottle I'd had in Big Sur, I wondered if vacation brain had clouded my judgment. Could the wine really have been so delightful? I asked the winery to send another bottle. And while sitting on the couch at home one night, I poured a glass for my sister. "What is this?" she asked, impressed, and I knew the wine really was that good, sans cliffs and springs and wood-fired anything."

- Megan Krigbaum, **Food & Wine**

"They produce incredibly intriguing wines, often rather light and elegant."

-Matt Kettman, **Wine Enthusiast**

"Birichino, a Central Coast négociant, has appeared regularly in the 20 Under $20 columns for the simple reason that its wines are always good and good values."

-Eric Asimov, **The New York Times**

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FRIDAY	1-8pm
SATURDAY	1-6pm
SUNDAY	1-6pm

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Detail of exhibition "At Bay" by Ann Hazels. Photography by Dusty Nelson.

Wednesday – Sunday
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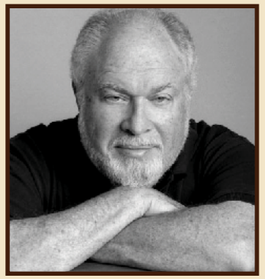

6th Annual Morton Marcus Poetry Contest

Title: **Poetry Contest**

Judge: **Danusha Laméris**

Prize: **$1,000**

Fee: **$15**

Submission: **One poem up to two pages, online only, at https://phrenz.submittable.com/submit**

Eligibility: **All poets over the age of 18**

The winner will be announced in early November, published online in phren-z.org, and invited to read the winning poem at the 8th Annual Morton Marcus Poetry Reading held at UCSC.

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LETTER FROM THE FOUNDING EDITOR

Allies live in the wilderness. That is a good place to find them. Don't get hung up looking for jaguars: mountains can be allies, rain is an ally, minerals are allies.

—from *Pharmako/Poeia* by Dale Pendell

We have frequent *Catamaran* author Jerry Martien writing about the tragic loss of old-growth redwoods at the hands of the corporate logging industry. His essay "Song of the Redwood Tree" describes the efforts of poets and others to save these forests and the small victories that come from their diligence. And last, he pays a visit to the *Poetry House*, a temple made of fallen redwoods by sculptor Bruce Johnson and inscribed inside with the poetry of Elizabeth Carothers Herron, one of the founding board members of the Climate Protection Campaign (now Center for Climate Protection). Maryam Barrie's poem "At Prairie Creek Redwood State Park" echoes the tremendous healing power of these sacred forests; one visit to a grove of fallen redwoods reverberates for her long afterward and thousands of miles away: "where people / starve for what trees feed us, for that certainty that we are."

This year we lost a redwood of a man, a polymath wizard of all things animal, mineral, vegetable, and mythopoetical—Dale Pendell. Pendell's writing appeared in past issues of *Catamaran* on subjects ranging from a young man's days in a prison in Hermosillo, Mexico, to exploring all manner of creatures that create holes in the ground, a history of stained glass, and sniffing out rocks in the Sierra Nevada. In this issue, Andrew Schelling, one Pendell's many friends, reflects on their friendship, Pendell's writing, and their last few exchanges. Pendell and his encyclopedic mind will be missed by many.

Also in this issue we are honored to have an interview with novelist and Pulitzer Prize–winner Andrew Sean Greer. Karen Joy Fowler talked with Greer at his recent stop at Bookshop Santa Cruz while on his worldwide book tour. Greer's novel *Less* is about a middle-aged gay novelist who goes on a rather droll speaking tour of many countries after hearing the news that his lover has dumped him. We can assume that life does not imitate art given the celebrated tour Greer is currently enjoying after winning the Pulitzer.

San Francisco–born and Paris-based author David Downie appears in this issue with a whip-smart, lacerating letter from an ex-lover to her former partner living the good life in Paris. Downie is most well-known for his nonfiction writing on travel, food, and culture. You will likely chuckle (and wince) with every venomous jab from the narrator in Downie's story "Me Jane."

This year we offered our first-ever Catamaran Poetry Prize for a full-length book of poetry, and we are pleased to feature poems in this issue by the winner, Michelle Bitting, and four other finalists: Farnaz Fatemi, Charles Jensen, Gabrielle Myers, and Helen Wickes. We congratulate the five finalists and extend our gratitude to all those who entered the contest. The depth of poetic talent out there is truly inspiring.

Our poetry contributing editor, Zack Rogow, whose labor of love it was to read the submissions and make the selections, had this to say about Bitting's chapbook *Broken Kingdom*: "There is a sense in Michelle Bitting's *Broken Kingdom* that the poet is announcing the advent of something both gorgeous and horrific. It's very much a book for our time. Repeatedly, these poems astound me with the power of their pronouncements and with their new and voltaic use of language. *Broken Kingdom* restores my faith that life can be miraculous, even when—or especially when—it's as mundane as a father and son unstopping a clogged bathroom sink." Check out her poems in this issue and see for yourself!

—Catherine Segurson
Founding Editor

CATAMARAN
Literary Reader

interview

in translation

poetry

fiction

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Inquiries
1050 River St. #118
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Cover art
***Garden Grid,* 2016**
by Hearne Pardee,
Acrylic and collage on paper,
50 x 38 in

nonfiction

art

HALLIE COHEN

I (Blue Series), 2012
Watercolor on Yupo paper, 11 x 14 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST
PHOTO CREDIT: CHRISTOPHER BURKE STUDIOS

KAREN POPPY

A Single Note in the Infinite

Flapped and whiplashed onto shore,
Then tenderly pulled back and within,
Like a child tucked into place at night.
But here, there are no stars,
And the sea slaps and washes
You clean of dreams.
Salt-beaten and cracked-lipped,
You pray against its blind thrash.
Smoothed like a pebble,
Opened like a shell.
Awake, awake.
Hungry prayer,
Angry fire of dying sun upon waves.
Honed and honed
To a perfect grain of sand.
Minute. A single note
In the infinite.

Karen Poppy has work published or forthcoming in *ArLiJo*, *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, *Parody Poetry Journal*, *Young Ravens Literary Review*, and *Voices de la Luna*, among others. She has recently written her first novel. Karen Poppy is a writer and attorney licensed in California and Texas. She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.

BARBARA BLOOM

Falling

Crows are playing in the thermals,
that's how my friend puts it, as we sit on a bench
on cliffs overlooking the Pacific.
Odd to see birds swooping below us—not above—
and otherwise just empty space
between us and the breaking waves
a hundred feet or so down,
and the ocean stretching out to the horizon line,
broken only by the jagged smudge of the Farallones.

A girl of maybe five or six
walks by, crying, *Hold me!*
I'm going to fall! And two men—
I'm guessing her father and his friend—
reach out their hands, as if they've practiced this,
and she swings happily between them,
her fears forgotten.

I pull out my notebook
and write the names of the flowers we've passed,
plants my mother taught me years ago
when I'd walk with her, a child as young as the one
who's gone on ahead now—only when I was scared
I never asked her to keep me from falling.
I had to pretend to be brave.

Still, she gave me the names of the flowers—
Indian paintbrush, *lupine*, *California poppy*—
which I hold to now, on the cliff's edge, writing this.

Barbara Bloom lived for forty some years in Santa Cruz, California, and taught composition and creative writing at Cabrillo College until her recent retirement and move to Bellingham, Washington. She has published two collections of poetry—*Pulling Down the Heavens* (2017) and *On the Water Meridian* (2007)—and her work has appeared in various small magazines, including *Phren-Z*, *Monterey Poetry Review*, and *Porter Gulch Review*.

HALLIE COHEN

III (Blue Series), 2012
Watercolor on Yupo paper, 11 x 14 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST
PHOTO CREDIT: CHRISTOPHER BURKE STUDIOS

HALLIE COHEN

For P.C. Above, 2018
Ink on Yupo paper, 15 x 60 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST
PHOTO CREDIT: CHRISTOPHER BURKE STUDIOS

SUSAN SOLOMON

State of Mind, 2018
Gouache on panel, 8 x 8 in

COURTESY FRAMEWORKS GALLERY IN SAINT PAUL, MINNESOTA

ANDREA DONDERI

Rivington

For a while there hadn't been much out the window but skunks and fog. The last audiobook ended this morning as we'd crossed down into California. Now there was nothing on the radio but talk shows for getting riled up or ballads for crying and by this point even those were sputtering out.

Rivington's email had mentioned two roads. They'll both get you there, he said, but the one you want cuts straight across the pass. The wrong one squiggles up into the mountains. I must have mixed them up, because the farmland gave way to forest twenty minutes ago. Now things were getting narrower and steeper and twistier. The first few spatters of rain were steadying into a downpour. It was getting dark fast and there wasn't anywhere to turn around.

I'd hoped we could make it through this last stretch without stopping, but in the seat behind me, Tupper was whimpering and panting a little. He probably had to pee. I did too. The headlights lit up a diamond-shaped sign, warning yellow, with the silhouette of a leaping deer.

It had been a couple of months since my job had evaporated. Our whole company had folded. I hadn't been attached to the work and I wasn't panicking yet about money, but "folded" was the right word for me too. I had no idea where to go next. My parents had owned a garden center near Louisville when I was growing up; sometimes I missed it. I'd posted something about maybe working with plants again.

And then Rivington (for the dozen-odd people who might have heard of him, that's *the* poet Will Rivington) piped up with a comment. His sister's husband's family ran a wholesale nursery out here, he wrote. They were expanding, they needed someone sane to help run the place. Why didn't I come visit and check things out?

Rivington had taken over our porch swing during his fellowship in Bloomington. My sister, Beth, and I adored him, but we hadn't heard much from him after we left town. Right around the time he signed the contract for *Value Propositions*, he'd moved away too: all the way back to California, near his family. His relatives ran gas stations, taught school, staffed vet clinics. They zoomed up and down the coast in convertibles they'd restored themselves, arms resting lazily on the window, music pouring from the radio, past seagrass and lupines, artichokes and cypress trees.

We'd seen an entire textbook of geology. Plains, mountains, strata thrown up sideways, bare snow-swept fortresses of rock, and then suddenly this morning we were in California and there were trees again.

At least that was how I imagined them, based on postcards and music and odd things he'd said. I'd never been west of the Mississippi.

I wasn't sure whether he was serious, so I called him.

"Of course," he said. His voice sounded as happy and comfortable as it always had. "At least come out here and see what you think. Seriously, Abby, what's keeping you in Cincinnati? Or in the Midwest at all?"

I didn't have a good answer. Former job, long-gone boyfriend. He knew that.

He went on. "Even if you and the Cruzes don't hit it off, you're within interview range of geek central if you want to do that again. Or hey, you could join the police department like me. We've been known to hire non-poets from time to time."

"What about Tupper?"

"Bring him out. He'll be fine here, and on the way any Motel 6 takes dogs. You've never done the cross-country drive, have you?"

"In the middle of winter?"

"Where's your sense of adventure? Bring chains for the mountains."

Chains? I had no idea what he was talking about.

That was Monday. Amazon had me fully equipped by midday Wednesday. On Thursday morning, Tupper and I headed out. We'd seen an entire textbook of geology. Plains, mountains, strata thrown up sideways, bare snow-swept fortresses of rock, and then suddenly this morning we were in California and there were trees again. Christmas trees, cedar and white pine, all perfectly frosted, and a long, slow sweep down from the Sierra into the valley. The signs told truckers to "Let 'er drift." I laughed out loud.

The afternoon stretched out bumper-to-bumper, past stripey fields and bright water, then along the edge of metropolitan sprawl and thousands of cars moving fast all together, light through rare breaks in the clouds slanting more obliquely as evening closed in. After that, more agriculture, more clouds, and now this mute, overcast landscape. I thought I was done with mountains but now that the light was disappearing, we had one last ridge to cross between here and the ocean.

Every pit and puddle in the road was glistening. Millions of drops on the windshield stretched and re-formed as the wipers sloshed them around. Now and then a car would spiral down a bend in the road, cloaked with spray, headlight beams swinging as it turned. Sometimes they'd zoom up from behind, these people who knew every turn of the road, seething with their lights in my mirror, furious if I missed a chance to pull over, eventually barreling ahead into the void. The way to keep steady was to focus on the white line painted between the road and the ditch. It was glittering too, but solidly, like a ribbon.

Were those *eyes* glinting at the side of the road? For someone who grew up with plants, I sure didn't recognize any friends in these woods. Just a throng of giant conifers thrashing their branches around. I'D TURN BACK IF I WERE YOU!

There was a shadowy hulk in front of the car. I don't remember putting on the brakes. I do remember hearing them screech through the rushing in my ears. I also remember a rubbery smell. I remember a distant part of my mind thinking, "This could be very bad," and another part of my mind answering, "Shh, there's work to do." We spun and scudded into a stately, unhurried curve.

Eventually we came to a stop. There was no sound except the rain. We were on the wrong side of the road, facing the wrong way, but we were still upright, unharmed, a few inches from the guardrail. The abyss was at least a yard away.

After my breath settled, I eased the car back into my side of the center line. I wanted to call someone. I didn't want to call Rivington, or maybe I did want to, but I couldn't because there was nowhere to stop. There wasn't a shoulder, just wet gravel and underbrush, then a wall of forest on one side and a flimsy rail and chasm on the other. Occasionally there'd be a hairpin curve and the wall and chasm would swap sides. I crept along with my flashers on, pulse pounding, and eventually, after two or three switchbacks, there was a turnout. I stopped.

I checked my phone. Nothing. I couldn't call Rivington anyway, or anyone else. We were in a dead spot.

I hopped out into the rain and opened both passenger-side doors. I leaned in, unsnapped Tupper's seat harness, snapped on his leash. Then I tucked myself between the two doors to pee. Tupper did the same. Something cracked underfoot. It sounded like plastic. I looked down to see what I'd broken. I'd crushed and killed the biggest snail I'd ever seen. It was striped, the size of a horse chestnut, writhing horribly.

I'd read about these snails. Their ancestors were French, farmed for eating, brought to California by entrepreneurs. A few had managed to break out—look at that S car go!—and many generations were thriving in the wild. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, snail," I said, as my urine and Tupper's joined the rivulets in the gravel.

Once we'd settled back into the car, I started the engine and reached for the turn signal. Suddenly I had a lurch of doubt: was that really how the turn signal works? It was exactly like hearing yourself use a word—*excessive*, perhaps, or *claw*, or *application*—and then panicking: Is that a real word? Does it mean anything like what I intended? But my hand was right. The signal was clicking and flashing. We pulled back onto the road.

I rolled down the window. Rain was splashing inside but I needed to wake up. Tupper strained at his seat harness so he could lean his huge head on my shoulder. The air was heavy and aromatic: deep resinous evergreens, whiffs of eucalyptus and sage.

We kept going. The road was no less narrow and no less twisty. It was still raining, still dark, but at some point the switchbacks started taking us down instead of up, and along with the cedar and eucalyptus, there was a tang of salt and kelp. Eventually through the branches, far away and a long way below, there started to be glimpses of tiny lights spread along a curved edge, and finally a blackness that had to be the ocean.

* * *

Heading into town I had to remind myself to slow down. The rain was softening into drizzle. I pulled into a gas station and called Rivington. Half a mile further along, he said, was an open restaurant. He'd meet me there. I spotted the place moments after he'd hung up. Just as I was scratching Tupper between the ears and cracking the window for him, headlight beams swept across the lot. The patrol car rolled up, making crunching sounds on the gravelly surface.

The way Rivington looked was going to take some getting used to. I remembered him swathed in fleece and flannel, shaggy hair, baggy khakis, flopped in an armchair or shambling down a hallway, grinning. Here in his blue uniform, he loomed with angular shoulders and that menacing belt. He'd buzzed his hair short, exposing strange edges to his head. There were bursts of white in his hair. Against them his eyes looked pale, intense, sea green. Behind him was another cop: much smaller, sturdy, with a broad, careful face and smooth dark hair pinned up behind her.

Rivington was still grinning, but his mouth seemed to take up more face than it used to. He held open his arms for a hug.

"Abby! Welcome to California!" His ape arms and my kangaroo arms wrapped around each other. Then, as we let go: "This is Sonia. She's Luis's cousin." I had no idea who Luis was and I hadn't counted on having to be polite to a stranger. I shook her hand and smiled at her inanely.

"Are you hungry?" Rivington asked. Before I had a chance to answer, he said, "Me, I'm about ready to eat my boots."

I looked at his boots. They were black, pebbled leather, unimaginably huge. Sonia's were the same type. On her tiny stubby feet they looked like old-fashioned baby boots, the kind that might get bronzed.

"Ravenous," I said companionably, though I wasn't sure if that was true.

We all clumped inside. I picked a booth next to the window so I could keep an eye on Tupper in the car. I spotted his silky ears, silhouetted behind all the reflections. Those beautiful, alert ears. I felt a gust of what might have been oxytocin.

The place was lit with milky, translucent fixtures like drippy noses. I tilted my menu to keep the glare off the laminate. What did I want? A panini? A spinach-and-crab salad? Beer? I closed my eyes. When I opened them again, my contact lenses were haloing and there was a twitch in my left eyelid. The sound of forks scraping on plates across the room hurt my ears.

Rivington and Sonia were talking about some guy who'd *drilled right through his car's fuse box trying to mount a red plastic ooga horn on the side panel.* I'd forgotten Rivington's "I'm thinking" expression: he'd squint and open his mouth at the same time, like a kid making a monster face. Beth used to call it his piggy look. I wondered if I should tell him.

It occurred to me that though the rest of me liked traveling, my gut hated it. In the morning, I promised myself, I'd score some kale at one of those famous farm stands and eat all of it. Rivington and Sonia burst out laughing. Apparently I was talking out loud.

"You know," I said, "I nearly plunged off the road just up there in the mountains. It was wet and windy and I thought I saw a deer. Maybe I did, I don't know. I braked and skidded out. I'm fine, we didn't hit anything, but I guess I was kind of thrown by the storm."

"Storm." Rivington scratched his nose, unimpressed. "You're a midwesterner. Since when was that a storm?"

We'd had an evening back in Bloomington, right after Rivington arrived there, when the sky turned greenish and the wind came up.

In those days, my sister, Beth, and I shared a place. I'd graduated a couple of years earlier and was writing code for a biology lab on a grant; Beth was staying on for a master's, practicing like a demon and not only getting more gorgeous by the minute but also playing really, really well. We lived in a ramshackle house on a leafy corner south and west of campus, divided into three apartments. Each place had its own entrance. She and I got the limestone porch in front, covered with honeysuckle. There was a basement apartment, too; someone called Delphine lived there, an amiable folklorist from Seattle with heavy eyeliner and black ringlets who belly danced at Casablanca every other Friday. A little stoop around the side, with an address on the other street, led right into Rivington's kitchen.

As soon as the sirens started, Delphine banged on Rivington's door, then on ours. "Come on down to my place," she said. "We can all wait it out. I've made a huge pot of chai."

And we did, the four of us sprawled on her futon and papasan, admiring Norton the cat's camo stripes and yellow eyes. We listened to cars whooshing along the street outside and sirens on top of the school a few blocks away. Delphine poured us tea from a brown glazed pot. This was fantastic. No one else in our generation made tea in pots. Rivington was laughing uproariously at everything we said. I'd heard tornado sirens every year of my life, and it didn't occur to me till years later—actually, not till that moment, right there in the restaurant—that Rivington, being new to these things, had probably been terrified. He'd kept making jokes about Oz.

I remember looking up over Delphine's head at a huge op art piece on the wall: black, neons, pastels, all pulsating in zigzags and asymmetrical stripes. Delphine followed my gaze.

"Look closely. It's a quilt. From around 1960. My mom found it at a yard sale somewhere in the middle of Alabama. Unbelievable, isn't it?"

A floor lamp angled toward the schefflera in the corner. Beth reached elegantly over to tilt it up at the quilt, but spotted something on the schefflera. "Check this out, Abby," she said. "It's covered with scale."

We'd grown up in a plant nursery. Bad news. We sprang into action.

Do you know what scale looks like? If you didn't know better, you'd think you were looking at bumps on the plant. Beth and I requisitioned Delphine's cotton swabs and some dish soap and spent the next half hour obliterating the evil little knobs. While we did it, Rivington got out a piece of paper. He and Delphine listed different things the word *scale* can mean. Among other things, there was music, of course; any graduated series; climbing a rock face, which my boyfriend was off in West Virginia doing; indices such as the Beaufort scale, which is how you measure weather such as the storm outside, or Bloomington's own Kinsey scale, which Delphine said she was right in the middle of; the device that tells you you're too fat, a constant concern for Delphine; the flakes on a fish; the illusions that fall from your eyes. (Rivington spent the rest of the summer writing poems about these things and put them in a collection called *Scale*.)

* * *

When the power went out we gasped. Not because it was suddenly dark, but because it wasn't. There were tiny halos of light trembling everywhere. Around the room, Delphine had set up half a dozen tea lights in salt-crystal holders, a couple of tapers in filigree lanterns, and most impressively, emerald green and enclosed in glass on the bookcase, a botanica candle: The Seven African Powers.

We'd finished the tea. "Ooh, here's what we should have," Delphine said. She shimmied over to the kitchen, ringlets bouncing, and came back with four tiny glasses on a tray and a bottle marked TAYLOR FLADGATE. "You know why?"

We all said it at once: "Any port in a storm!"

We couldn't put on any music, but there was wind roaring through sycamore branches outside. Beth and I told our string of Jewish-at-a-Catholic-girls'-school stories. Norton the cat padded from lap to lap making everyone massage the base of his tail. Rivington leaned on his beautiful forearms and talked up the summer poetry course he was about to teach: there were still a few slots left, we could audit if we didn't want grades, we should all register. (We did, all three of us. It turned out to be great.) Eventually the sirens stopped. We kept on talking. In the candlelight everyone's faces flittered; Delphine's sweater, bunched around her backpack on a peg near the door, looked like a warrior bird from Teotihuacán. Nobody wanted to leave. How could we possibly divide ourselves up?

But here in the restaurant, all that seemed even longer ago and farther away than it really was. Rivington himself seemed only to have a shadowy resemblance to the guy I remembered. I couldn't believe I'd just driven all the way out here. I looked back up at the gloppy ceiling.

The waitress brought me a Coke; it perked me up a little. Rivington and I swapped stories about people we knew. I remember thinking I should be explaining more, or doing something to include Sonia, but all that seemed too difficult. Rivington asked about my parents.

Rivington leaned on his beautiful forearms and talked up the summer poetry course he was about to teach: there were still a few slots left, we could audit if we didn't want grades, we should all register.

"Who knows. After they sold up they moved of all places to Savannah. My dad's teaching a couple of adult ed classes, they've got this dog I don't even know." I took an agitated gulp of Coke. "It's like they got divorced and married strangers, only the strangers are each other. We didn't even get together for the holidays. We talked about going to see Beth in Sweden this year, but the money didn't work out for any of us."

"Beth's in *Sweden*?"

"She didn't tell you? She's playing with the symphony in Malmö."

He grinned. "That's great. I'm glad she didn't get sidetracked. I loved hearing her play," he said.

Everyone loved hearing Beth play. About getting sidetracked, I wasn't sure what to say. Rivington had joined the police after a stint teaching at some local college. I'd loved reading his stuff too. Instead I told him that even now when I drifted off to sleep, I still sometimes hallucinated Beth's arpeggios. I wondered if she and I would ever live in the same city again.

The beach is the color of the loose material it's made up of: sand, pebbles, shells, crushed-up bits of coral. But a stretch of sand by itself isn't a beach. You need water.

I looked out the window. Tupper must have curled up to snooze on the back seat, because I couldn't see him.

"Playa Azul," I read on the taqueria sign across the street. "Blue beach?"

"Yeah," Rivington said. He cocked his head. "But that doesn't make a whole lot of sense, does it? The *beach* isn't blue. It's the *water* that's blue."

He and I riffed on that for a while, just like the old days. The beach is the color of the loose material it's made up of: sand, pebbles, shells, crushed-up bits of coral. But a stretch of sand by itself isn't a beach. You need water. The shore of a body of water isn't necessarily a beach either, unless there's a relatively flat stretch of loose material along it. You need both. Do the prepositions tell us anything? You lie *on* the beach, but you swim *at* the beach. You don't do anything *in* the beach. Even if you bury someone in sand, you bury him or her *in* the sand *at* the beach. What role does the water play? Is it part of the beach, or does its proximity allow the loose material along the shore to constitute a beach?

"In my line of work," I said, "we'd call the water a zero-length lookahead assertion." I thought that was pretty funny but all I got from the two of them was a tolerant smile. Sonia got up to go to the bathroom. She walked the same way I'd seen other cops walk, each leg swinging like a pendulum.

"Beth could hardly believe you joined the police," I said.

"Well, after a few rounds of adjuncting, I begged them to take me," he said. "And I love this community. But Beth . . . how's Sweden working out?"

Back to Beth as always. I was about to tell him, and to ask Rivington if he knew where Delphine was now, but Sonia reappeared, followed by the food.

"I just scared the bejesus out of some poor Guatemalan woman in the john," she said. She unclipped her hair. It spilled straight down her back, darker than Beth's but equally long and silky. Then she twisted it up, reattached it, and sat down. "She was shaking all over."

"What happened?"

"The stall door wasn't locked. I walked in on her. She screamed, I backed out and apologized. I still have to pee but I didn't want to wait back there. She's probably still afraid I'm going to turn her in."

She sat down. She picked up a forkful of fries but a call came in so she put them back down. As she talked, Rivington took a second to draw me a map on a napkin. Then he handed me his house keys and some cash for the bill. "I'll call in a while," he said. They zoomed off. I watched the car leave the lot: lights, no sirens, moving fast.

I finished and paid up. The streets were still wet but no rain was falling. I climbed into the car; a dog barked in the distance. Tupper woofed back, then settled down.

Rivington's place was a townhouse in a wooded complex. I didn't unload; I just took Tupper and my backpack and stumbled up to the door. In the pooled lamplight, the walls were bile colored. The sofa was dark like chocolate or dried blood, segmented, glistening like an intestine. But I was glad to recognize the Turkish flatweave rug from his old place, rich zigzaggy reds and olive and gold and blue. It softened the greenish walls. And the hall toward the kitchen was lined with plain white bookcases, brimming with old friends.

I scanned the bookshelf, then stopped when I realized I was looking for clues. What was I hoping for? *Criminal and Poetic Justice: Prosody and Image in Law Enforcement*? I giggled.

Beth once told me she thought I was potentially a competent musician. I was no math whiz but I did have a knack for computation as a kid, the way some people pick up languages. If you're a girl who's comfortable with quantitative stuff, there will be scholarships. Then one thing follows another. Beth would have managed fine in a STEM field too. But if she'd done that, I bet she'd still be playing scales most nights. Me, I just did my job and nothing else. So who was I to judge?

I poured Tupper a bowl of water. Then I spread his blanket on the intestinal sofa. He hopped up and settled with a snort. I kicked off my shoes and joined him. I closed my eyes and started to drift: my brain fired up images of roadsides rushing past as it suspended consciousness.

Maybe forty minutes later, I woke up from a confusing dream. It involved Sonia, I think: there were forearms, long black hair, and, oddly, the scent of crushed basil leaves, or at least the *idea* of the scent of crushed basil leaves.

A few texts had come in while I was dozing. It was Rivington. My room was at the end of the hall to the left, he said. He'd forgotten to set it up so I could read and plug in my phone; I should look under the bed for an outlet and extension cord. The light-blue towels in the bathroom were for me.

It occurred to me that I'd better get my stuff out of the car.

It also occurred to me that I'd better find it in my heart to forgive Rivington for being a good friend, for trying to help me figure out what to do next, and then failing to be Jesus Christ Almighty and the communion of the saints. Also for having a staggeringly ugly couch. I had to admit, however grudgingly, that it was comfortable. And any furniture looked all right with Tupper sitting on it.

There was a rustling noise outside. Tupper sat straight up, ears angled out the window. He barked once sharply, then a couple of throatier woofs, then nothing.

I waited a while, then tapped 911 into my phone in case there was a problem.

Moonlight beamed between and bounced off clouds overhead, illuminating trees I didn't know: one with dark berries and lilac-shaped leaves, another with weeping fronds. The breeze brought a gust of night flowers. It wasn't honeysuckle. I didn't think it was jasmine either. Citrus. I wanted to grab Rivington's arm and say, Hey, isn't it nutty and wonderful that the monoterpenoids that they exude to mimic hawk moths' sex and congregation pheromones should smell so lovely to us? I'd also tell him that I'd never imagined the combination of citrus flowers with cedar and eucalyptus after rain. I was almost prepared to say it was the best thing I'd ever smelled.

There was the rustling again, by the visitors' carport where I'd parked. It looked like a big, leggy dog poking around the underbrush and dumpsters. Only it was much too spindly and skittish to be a dog. It was a deer, a young male one, with little antlers! I put my phone away.

Sirens sounded in the distance. It occurred to me that these weren't ordinary night sounds like freight trains. Sirens meant that somewhere there was trouble. People, Rivington and Sonia maybe, were rushing out to deal with it.

I don't know how they calculate "points" out of branching antlers. The little guy had one Y per antler, so maybe that's two, or maybe four points total? He stood stock still and looked straight at me. I stayed there for a while, looking back.

It wasn't till he danced off, trampling the ivy, that I opened the trunk. I hauled out my duffel bag and slung it over my shoulder. It was time to bring everything inside.

Andrea Donderi grew up in Montreal and arrived in California via Toronto, Chicago, and Bloomington, Indiana. She lives in a ramshackle backyard cottage on the San Francisco peninsula and writes manuals for the guts of the Internet as well as essays and fiction. This is her first published story.

NILS PETERSON

Musings

A blue Mediterranean sky—immense
but not infinite—maybe the world is understandable,
thinks the would-be rational man.

But even at midday—moonbeams,
so the sky starer, beneath his azure roof, wonders,
and, following his thought,

thinks he'd prefer those beautifully bodied gods
who lived *beneath* the sky, even if on a mountaintop.
One could become immortal then

and have a place around the eternal dinner table,
though that required great labor or beauty. A god
for a father could help. The thinker

watches the sun move along its way.
He sees no chariot pulling it along,
nor will he assent to a kingdom

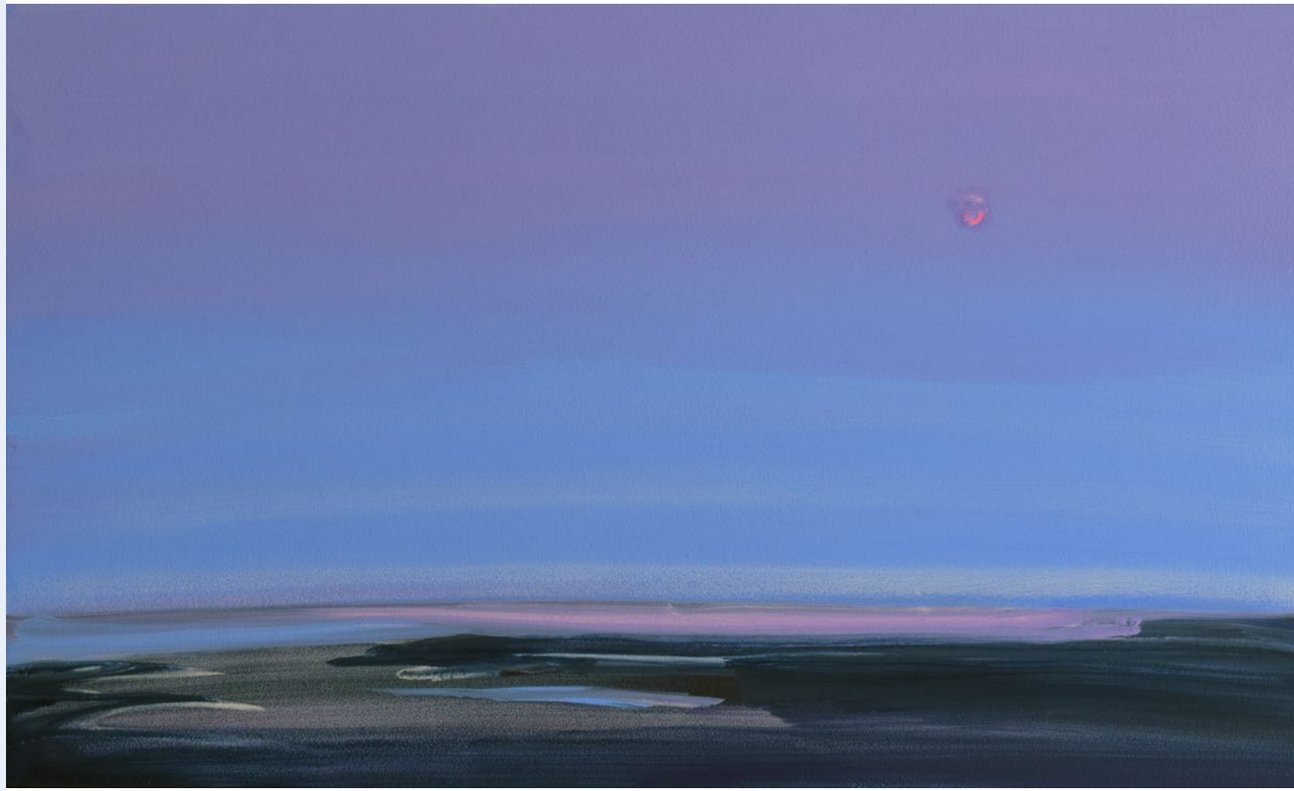
beyond the blue save the realm of star stuff
and the workings through of the big bang.
He sighs a rich sigh

at his thought and at the riot
of bougainvillea in his sight and at the sound
of the sea beyond the near hill.

Nils Peterson is Professor Emeritus at San Jose State University where he taught in the English and Humanities Departments. His publications include *The Comedy of Desire* with an introduction by Robert Bly, *Driving a Herd of Moose to Durango*, *For This Day*, *A Walk to the Center of Things*, and a collection of poems with watercolors called *Earth Fire Water Air*. Wordrunner Press published a memoir in 2014 entitled *Talk in the Reading Room*.

SUSAN SOLOMON

Planetary Beach, 2018
Gouache on panel, 12 x 20 in



COURTESY FRAMEWORKS GALLERY IN SAINT PAUL, MINNESOTA

JULIO MONTEIRO MARTINS

From The Porthole

—Translated from the Italian by Donald Stang & Helen Wickes

Julio Monteiro Martins was born in Niterói, Brazil, but lived for many years in Italy. He was a prominent teacher, publisher, and writer of essays, stories, theater works, and poetry. In his home country, he worked as a lawyer for human rights and environmental causes; in Italy he was director of the online journal *Sagarana*. Almost none of his work has been published in English.

Donald Stang is a longtime student of Italian. His translations of Italian poetry have appeared or are forthcoming in *Carrying the Branch* (Glass Lyre Press); *Silk Road*; *Pirene's Fountain*; *Newfound*; *America, I Call Your Name* (Sixteen Rivers Press); and the *Dreaming Machine*.

Helen Wickes's work has appeared or is forthcoming in AGNI, *Atlanta Review*, *Boulevard*, *Confrontation*, the *Massachusetts Review*, *Sagarana*, *Soundings East*, *South Dakota Review*, *Spillway*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *Westview*, *Willow Review*, *Zone 3*, and *ZYZZYVA*, among many others. She has also published four books of her poetry.

To be in the world
as on a ship:
to attend to the well-being
of the passengers,
inspire their confidence
in the crew.
Attend to the engines,
which mutiny and rebel
just as people do,
and to the passengers,
who get jammed
just like machines.
Feel at home
in the kitchen,
in the laundry,
not allowing the wind
to shred the flag,
and if that happens,
replace it immediately.
Then, once in a while,
glance outside,
through the porthole.

Because beyond the small world
inside the ship
is the larger world
swirling around it:
other ships,
distant torches
in the night,
fireflies that float by.
And also the currents, the winds,
clouds heavily charged,
pregnant with lightning,
and the terrors of the sea,
mountains of water
that suddenly rise
like a god staring at you.

The men
peel potatoes,
the women
tidy the beds
for the children
asleep in the life jackets;
every man and every woman who,
without the will or the courage
to look outside,
has forgotten
that they are aboard a ship,
that they are few in number—
every man and woman
will be protected.

They will have to be put ashore
in some port
before the storm.
They will have to learn to swim.
They will all have to get into—good God!
the little lifeboat:
women and children
first.
But then,
who will paddle?
Who will carry them to safety
past so many horizons?
And if the drinking water
runs low
who will choose—what bad luck!—
those to be
thrown into the sea?

But for now,
no one thinks of that.
One is at home
in the world,
even though on board a ship:
warm the milk,
reattach the arm of the doll
and the wheel of the tractor,
sweetly kiss
the breasts of the beloved
and, innocently,
smile at her.

But the corner of the eye,
tactfully,
peers out of the porthole.
And the eye knows
that out there it is dark
even at midday.
A giant wave?
A passing cloud?

Inside one plays
in the darkness.
But outside
everything is moving.

SUSAN SOLOMON

Salt Marsh Near Sacramento, 2018
Gouache on panel, 8 x 17 in

COURTESY FRAMEWORKS GALLERY IN SAINT PAUL, MINNESOTA

GABRIELLE MYERS

Early Fall's Failed Elegy

Disproportion:
Her self taken by herself
to the remnant carpet's threads,
Remington rifle at her mud-winged boots,

while the Christmas lima vines
flourished, complicated the string trellises
we spent an afternoon tying.
The pods we pulled
deflated, barren.

Sparse rain was liquid for the watermelon.
Charcoal orange in the sky,
a peel burned for the tomatoes' negroni.

She wasn't the land, after.
Now, the Sacramento Valley
is the white siding of rushed housing,
crushed tomatoes on highway shoulders,
preschool soccer games in mowed-down plum orchards.
The sun, dry gold-straw,
turns into sugar pie pumpkin and delicata squash.

In memory, her sorrow
shadowed by a tooth-full smile
over eggplant bells, her lips and cheeks
browning tough,
loosening from her mind:
a heavy fruit's skin
separating from seed.

Gabrielle Myers is an Associate Professor of English at San Joaquin Delta College, writer, and chef living in the Sacramento Valley of California. Gabrielle's memoir, *Hive-Mind*, which details her time on an organic farm, is published by Lisa Hagan Books and available on Amazon. Access links to her poems, essays, articles, interviews, and seasonal recipe blog through her website:www.gabriellemyers.com

ROBYNN SMITH

Song of the Mud, 2016
Solarplate etching with Chine-collé, 16 x11 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST

CA CONRAD

On All Fours I Am a Seat for the Wind

most of my family's
international travel is
being sent to war if
we judge love we
can kill off anything
dragged by our hair
across the days until
they make their way
inside our dreams where we get to evict them I
want to thank the one who invented knocking on the door
but no one remembers their name to tattoo across my knuckles
I asked an archeologist about the first time she stuck a shovel in the
ground her answer had same restorative powers as the gravedigger's
when we die we can no longer wipe the muck off just
lie there becoming shit of the world
eat a chip of your own dried blood
join me in the cannibal sunshine
fully persuaded by the
world through song
each morning a blue
jay screams at the
edge
of the clear-cut forest
I scream with her at
the bleeding stumps
scream inside something
borrowed like ocean like skin
I want to see before I die a
mink wearing a human scarf
skin from a handsome
hairy leg

MEOW

CA Conrad is the author of nine books of poetry and essays. The latest is titled *While Standing in Line for Death* (Wave Books, 2017). A recipient of a Pew Fellowship in the Arts for Literature, they also received The Believer Magazine Book Award and The Gil Ott Book Award. CA is currently working on a (Soma)tic poetry ritual titled "Resurrect Extinct Vibration," which investigates effects the vibrational absence of recently extinct species have on the body of the poet and the poems. They teach regularly at the Sandberg Art Institute in Amsterdam.

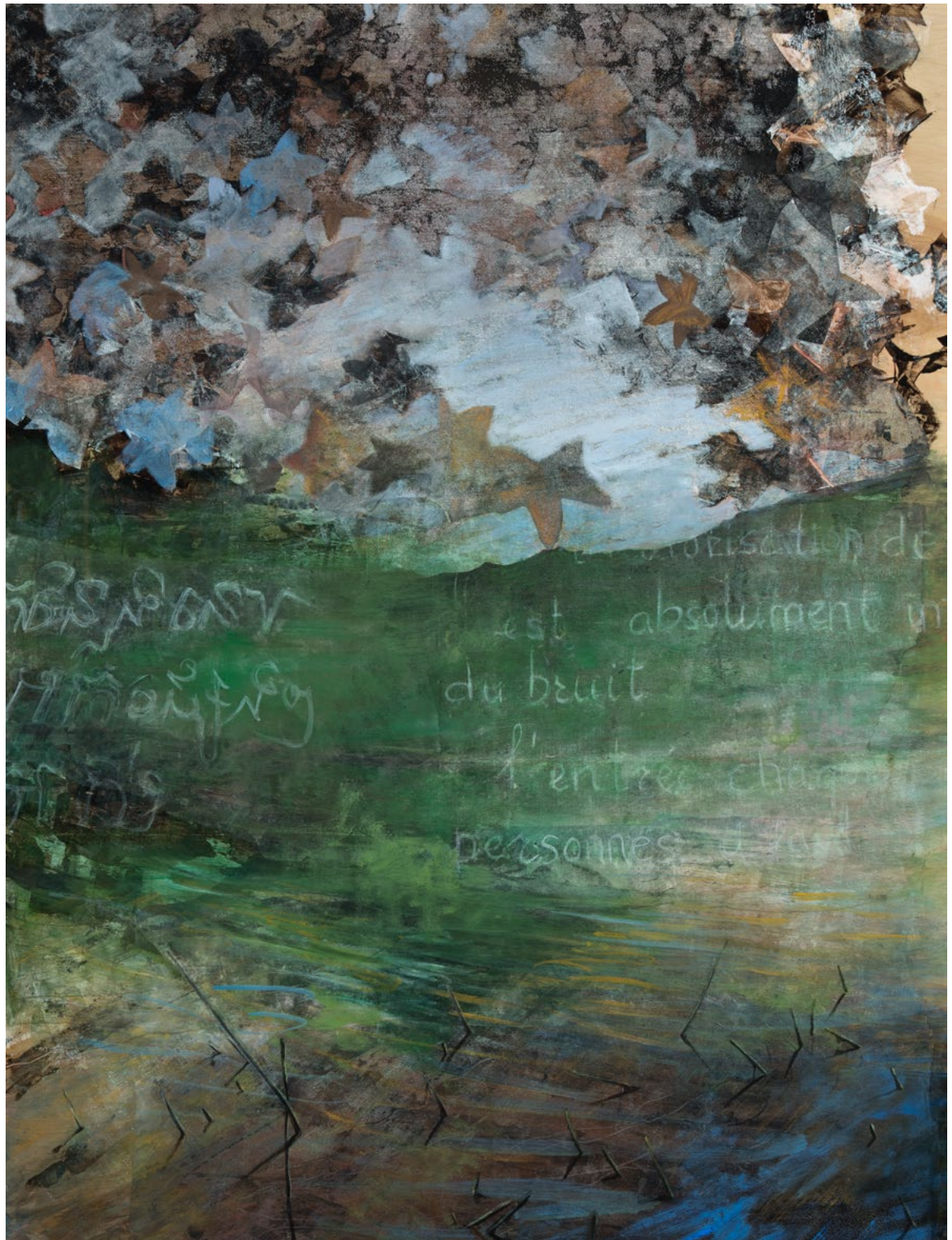
ROBYNN SMITH

Rising, 2014
Mixed media on wood, 48 x 48 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST

ROBYNN SMITH

Lessons, 2017
Mixed media on wood, 48 x 36 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

JERRY MARTIEN

Song of the Redwood Tree

Language and the Loss of Our Forests

Santa Rosa. July, late Anthropocene. Except for a few remnant oak, the only shade I find is a parking lot under a half-acre array of solar panels. Along the Redwood Highway, at the edge of the city's sprawling suburbs, the only redwoods are sickly freeway trees and enormous sculptures in a roadside culture park. History watching the traffic go by.

Stunned by the transition from coastal fog to inland heat, I wander among them like a visitor from another planet. Placed at intervals along a paved walkway, huge old-growth stumps and root wads, cantilevered and stacked, solitary and in clusters, salvaged remnants of a watershed I had traveled this morning. Washed down from logged-over hills, shaped by water and time, and now again by sculptor Bruce Johnson.

At once sacred and playful, *Root 101* is a tribute to redwood: the wood itself, the trees they once were, and the forest they still belong to. Their grain smoothed and polished and stained, trimmed with rivulets of copper sheathing, they stand as a palpable memory of the ancient woods and the great cycle of life that sustained them. A life we think we've forgotten, though beneath the drone of traffic we still hear its cry of separation. The history isn't over. Not for a long time.

* * *

When I began this journey, I didn't know it would be a pilgrimage to loss. I intended to stop and view *Root 101*, then head over to the coast to visit another of Johnson's redwood creations—*Poetry House*. Maybe I'd write a poem about it. But I wasn't prepared for the knot of feelings evoked by Johnson's work and my own history with redwoods—as an ardent tree hugger as well as a carpenter (a wood butcher)—and most entangling, a writer about them. The poem brought up decades of witness and complicity, which eventually devolved into a redwood rant. By the next summer, another scorcher, I'd decided it might be more helpful to tell this story instead. Then I heard that *Root 101* had been in the path of the wildfire that destroyed thousands of homes in Santa Rosa. A forest fire burning in a forest we'd forgotten we lived with.

But even the ashes aren't an ending. Up and down the Redwood Highway, as constant as the logging and lumber trucks, the story goes on. Around the same time as my

visit to *Root 101*, I traveled with some of my neighbors to a meeting room in a concrete-and-glass building on that same flood plain, on behalf of the second- and third-growth descendants of those same redwood stumps. It's a journey my neighbors have been making for two decades.

In Elk River, home of the famed Headwaters Forest Reserve, a horizontal forest still rolls past our houses on logging trucks. Most people think the Headwaters deal saved the redwoods. The spotted owl was protected, Julia Butterfly Hill came down from Luna, the tree she had sat in for two years. The corporate raider who liquidated thousands of acres of old growth went back to Texas with his profits. The new owners, Humboldt Redwood Company, promised no more clear-cuts, no logging of old growth. My neighbors point out that the definition of *old growth* is inadequate, and *group selection* is another name for death by a thousand cuts, but HRC has been very successful at public relations and marketing. A friend from Oregon, where they are not sentimental about logging, asked: "Do they still cut redwoods?"

So at the meeting at the end of the Redwood Highway, we were not hopeful of victory. For twenty years, despite the testimony of hydrologists and geologists and their own staff, disregarding the experience of residents, the clear evidence of flooding, and failing coho salmon populations, our Regional Water Quality Control Board had continued to permit logging on steep slopes in a watershed still bleeding silt from the last billionaire owner. Regulatory relief was promised and board members offered words of consolation—they felt our pain—before consistently voting against us.

Root 101 might be gone, but its story isn't over. We still live with redwoods. Still share the earth with trees. Rootless wonders, we're about to realize we can't live without them.

Putting Together the Pieces

In Petaluma, early the next morning, I wake to a picture puzzle of a redwood forest. I was too fried last night to even see it on the bed table, in an unopened box, three hundred pieces. A generic park scene of huge trees, ferns, a trail. I know there are more pieces—not in the box, part of a larger picture. A few hours later, over on the coast, I begin to find some. Groves of big old second growth, somehow not logged in the forty years since the Cazadero mills closed.

Down a dirt driveway, in one of those stands of mixed redwood, a house such as a sculptor might build. In one corner of the clearing, a big shop building, a crane, and large machines. Where *Root 101* was created. Below the house, fruit trees, then a yard and a little redwood structure. Another piece of the puzzle.

Bruce Johnson had dreamed for years of creating a space that would represent the sacredness he found in salvaged remnants of redwood. The dream became palpable with a gift from a neighbor, another missing piece: a split log from the old forest. When he cut into it he saw the posts and beams of his house. The heavy timbers and the upturned eaves evoke a traditional Japanese teahouse, but it has five corner posts and strangely peaked clerestory gables. It's both habitation and message, an enclosure and a runic emblem—the sort of house you might come upon in an enchanted wood. *Poetry House*, he called it and invited poets to visit. Why not, I thought. Am I not a poet of the redwood? Actually, I'm not sure it's a title I want or deserve.

* * *

When I went to the woods in midlife, it was to a canyon of coastal redwood a few miles out of town. My guide was Lew Welch's *Hermit Poems*, particularly his vision of letting "the clear stream / of all of it" flow through the poet. I was an abject failure as a hermit, but despite serious lapses, I pursued the vision for most of a summer in a canvas tent beside Jacoby Creek—until one September morning when I woke to the sound of tractors and chainsaws. A clear-cut was beginning on the ridge above my campsite. At the end of that day, I climbed the steep slope to survey the damage. I returned after the next day, then stopped going. I didn't want to see it and tried not to hear it. By the end of a week, I could anticipate the moment when the saw shut off, the forest held its breath, and a deep subterranean *wump* shook the earth beneath my tent.

In October, when the rains began and the logging stopped, I had already moved to a dry barn loft upriver. That winter, from neighbors and friends and public agencies, I began to learn the story of this little canyon and its redwoods. How the first enormous logs were dragged down the riverbed by teams of oxen. Years later, how they dammed the flow and tractored the huge stumps—most of the trees had been cut a dozen feet or more from the ground—into the new log pond, then blew up the dam. The ensuing flood delivered the logs down to the flatlands, where shake and shingle mills and a barrel factory provided jobs during lean years. The postwar housing boom and tractor logging ended the watershed's incipient recovery and by the 1960s the steep hillsides were showing up in the town's drinking water—and as far away as Sacramento, where Jacoby Creek was said to have been a persuasive argument for California's 1974 Forest Practice Act. Five years later, from my loft overlooking the canyon, that legislation looked like much too little, way too late.

Up Creek / Clear Cut / Stump Speech / Rain Song was a rustic thing: 8½" x 11" mimeographed pages, a cover woodcut printed by my neighbor. Its contents were also rugged: shock and outrage, expressed in a language of undisguised pain, flawed in predictable ways. Whatever strength it had, like the monosyllabics of the title, came from the deep roots of English—a language for centuries spoken by people intimate with wood and woodlands. From the "shire wood" of Robin Hood ballads to the Arden of *As You Like It*, forests were a place where magic prevailed and social norms were overturned. Even in the aftermath of the Puritan's arrival, trees were as integral to English speech as the wood of the ships that had brought them to North America.

But the book was also prose, derived from another English that regarded the forests of the new world as the abode of devils and witches. It reflected a fallen and entirely material world, a language that suited spiritual accountants intent on turning trees into money. We have inherited that language in the discourse of timber harvest plans and the Forest Practice Act. Weasel words, my neighbor called them. English as a dead language.

In this dialect of the regulatory bureaucracy, I learned that cutting trees is called *timber harvest*. Logging is *management*. Loggers are *operators*. Poisoning unprofitable species with herbicides is *treatment*. Mud is never as plain as mud. If you must mention it, say *sediment*. A damaged watershed is *impacted*. A ruined river *impaired*. A TMDL—well, if I tried to explain that total maximum daily load is a tool of sediment budgeting, it would defeat its purpose, wouldn't it? During the European Middle Ages, priests spoke a vulgate Latin to protect ignorant souls from things beyond their understanding. Today's regulatory priests speak the language of THPs—timber harvest plans—and a thousand acronyms of forest and water accounting.

Not surprisingly, my book didn't stop the chainsaws. Poetry—even investigative poetry—is not journalism. It lives somewhere beneath the muck that others rake. But not even the best reporters can dislodge this zombie English. The pace of logging has been slowed by regulation, and even more by scarcity, and some brave journalists have brought light and occasional outrage to the issue. But the soul-numbing discourse of resource governance continues to mask the true condition of our watersheds.

It's not only a problem for redwoods—it's old-growth Douglas fir, unentered stands of madrone, acorn-bearing tan oak. And it isn't only trees, or even salmon, another iconic species that we've nearly regulated to death. It's soil loss and habitat destruction, unnamed streams and unseen creatures, the whole web of life that doesn't find expression in the English that's supposed to protect it. As much as greed and blind stupidity, our "environmental crisis" reflects a language problem. So it's also a problem for poets.

Poet at the Threshold

It's already late morning. Bruce Johnson is in the shop, then off to town on an errand of mercy. Moss-covered stones are awakening from the dry grass. A chorus of gangly dandelions sings to the sun: *love me, love me*. At the fence line a couple of young firs regard a utility pole—a tree forced to carry messages. Beyond them a madrone poses at a seductive angle. Columns of tan oak with a tall redwood center post hold up the sky. The world is open for business.

Except for the poet. He's sitting on the porch doing nothing. Or more accurately, trying to do nothing. He's traveled over two hundred miles of river and forest to get here but something is telling him he hasn't yet arrived.

It's all that old poetry he can't let go of.

* * *

Walt Whitman's "Song of the Redwood-Tree" appeared in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, February 1874, for which

he asked and received the princely sum of one hundred dollars. The poem declared that Americans had at last found a tree worthy of their axes. Walt had never seen a redwood, so he can be excused for imagining that this one can sing. As she's about to fall, she sings an aria welcoming the species about to replace her ancient kind: "Our time, our term has come," she sings. The Americans, Walt predicts, will be around as long as redwood trees.

> And leave the field for them.
> For them predicted long,
> For a superber race—they too to grandly fill
> their time.

Whitman's superbist nonsense reflects an element of his poetry deeply at odds with the visionary grace of his best work. We go to his poetry for transcendent crossings of the ordinary world, for lines like "there is no object so soft but it makes a hub for the wheeled universe." Or instead of giant singing trees, a catalog of the humblest forms of creation: "mossy scabs of the worm-fence, heap'd stones, elder, mullein and poke-weed." "Song of the Redwood-Tree" gives voice to a Walter Whitman, patriotic huckster and self-promoter who projects a rotten bravura at the heart of the American pastoral. It lives on in our monuments to the glory days of logging, a romantic vision as destructive of trees as the dead English of accountants and lawyers. The only thing possibly more harmful is the romance of saving them.

America was already looking backward, toward its mythic frontier, when John Muir and Teddy Roosevelt popularized conservation at the outset of the twentieth century. Indians and buffalo and other vanishing life-forms were in vogue. Tourism was being invented by Harvey hotels and railroads seeking passengers. Americans were motoring to natural wonders enshrined in the country's first national parks. A touring car of conservationists, driving the newly built Redwood Highway, discovered to their horror—not the response Whitman had foreseen—that the now-sacred giants were being removed as quickly as axes and two-man saws could do the job. Alarmed citizens rallied to the cause, seeking ways to preserve the most picturesque groves. Newton B. Drury, director of the recently formed National Park Service and one of California's first advertising executives, became the Save the Redwoods League's director and began to persuade wealthy citizens to buy tracts of redwoods from other wealthy citizens who were marketing them as lath and railroad ties.

This year marks the one hundredth anniversary of the Save the Redwoods League, an auspicious time to note that its bravest leaders were not San Francisco executives but the Save the Redwoods League as Organized by the Women of Humboldt County . These great-grandmothers of Julia Butterfly often faced off against their own male relatives, who heard nothing but Whitman's aria and the eagles that jingled in their pockets on payday. Through a century of struggle, they joined with the California Federation of Women's Clubs and the Save the Redwoods League to preserve some two hundred thousand acres, which now form the basis of our state and national redwood parks.

* * *

But myths often outlive the truths they once represented. Ecology has shown us that preserving fragments of forests may be no more viable than the idea that we'd never run out of trees. Yet both delusions live on in popular culture. Ninety percent of the original redwoods have been cut down since they began to be saved—yet busloads of tourists drive the Avenue of the Giants and gawk at the industry's demonstration forests while just over the ridge, mills are turning out millions of board feet of product. Eroding hillsides and dwindling fish populations, the slow collapse of ecosystems, plus climate change—an increase of 2°F in global temperature might mean the end of redwoods altogether—could be a prelude to the endangerment of our own species. Save the Humans, says the bumper sticker, but the cause seems to have opened no offices in our region.

Capitalism claims to regulate itself by saving as much as it sells—while its money and lawyers make sure the agencies of our salvation don't go too far—but its products reveal the lie. Our own backyard deck is built of cedar, not because cedar forests are better off, but because the lumber yard's common redwood was crap, and Trex® was the other option. Humboldt Redwood advertisements, between innings of Oakland A's games, tell us the plastic composite is inferior to their real wood, but the straight-grained clear-heart redwood in the TV picture is so costly and rare that only hedge fund managers and Saudi princes can afford it. You'll learn that when you get to the lumber yard. The ads are paid for by Headwaters Fund money the feds gave Humboldt County to make up for lost jobs. The county gives it to John Fisher, owner of Humboldt Redwood Company *and* the A's, to make up for trees that he might be prevented from cutting.

So we have idealized *virgin* forests, and we have idealized *clear heart* lumber, two halves of truths that belie the true condition of our watersheds and our own lives. Together with the regulatory language that pretends to balance these lies, they obscure the work of ecologists and activists and restoration councils trying to reweave our connection to forests. To living *and* working with trees. With wood. With shelter and shingle. Threshold and door. To reconnect us to the silent millennia of human hands shaping wood, holding the wooden handles of tools replaced and handed down generation to generation. We struggle to hold on to that memory so our connection to wood doesn't end in flea market conversations about tools whose uses we've forgotten.

Or people in cars talking parts per million of sediment while speeding down the Redwood Highway to a meeting where the forest ends and the roadside stumps are art.

Our species had agreements with forests. They were the first poems.

In the Poetry House

Please Remove Shoes, the sign says. He takes off his sandals, then can't stop unburdening himself. Folding and laying aside clothing, unmediated except by notebook and pen, the poet slides open the door and steps into the dark light of wood. The fifth element. Heart wood. Mind wood. Spirit wood. A river of time running through its grain. Riffle and pool and eddy of time.

Feel of oiled wood grain. Touch of tool and hand. Ripples chiseled and planed, carved and rubbed by hand. Edge and trim of hammered copper. A large circle in the plank floor with a pentagon of redwood burl at its center. Raised by screw jack from the floor, the circle is a table where he sits writing. Light enters through small windows of rippling glass.

Sculpted and polished wood reflecting the light of ages. A time when ancestral speakers of this language had moved from earthen to wooden houses. When words were still spoken to fires. A time when the pale green light of window glass was sand at the bottom of an ocean. The copper buried under a mountain. The redwood on which his pen and notebook rest still waiting to be born.

What a poet best learns from the ancestors is when to stop. Then how to go on. To learn from Whitman's original genius, but then be grateful to Robinson Jeffers for giving the redwood tree back to us. "The Summit Redwood" is no idealized tree infected by human sentiment, but a creature rooted in coastal rock and the American vernacular. A single huge snag on a hilltop—hollow, storm broken, lightning struck, its power and history witnessed and lived with. Jeffers's redwood comes to us in the way nature reveals itself over time, revisited till its story is inextricably tied to our own. "Only stand high a long enough time your lightning will come."

* * *

But of course it doesn't end there. The poet next learns from Jack Spicer how to parse this lesson of Jeffers's, how to make it new. *Language* lets us see Jeffers's redwood through surreal juxtapositions of life and death, trees and parking lots: "Trees and the cliffs in Big Sur breathe in the dark. Jeffers knew the pain of their breath and the pain was the death of a first-born baby breathing." Spicer warns against a language of Whitmanesque monuments, of turning redwoods into bronze: "If they had turned Jeffers into a parking lot death would have been eliminated and birth also."

Not ending there, he puts it even more plainly: "True conservation is the effort of the artist and the private man to keep things true." So the conservation of trees and the conservation of language are twin tasks of stewardship. Restorationist and poet are engaged in the work of reconnecting us to our sources, root and branch of our deepest woods.

And it's still not over. The poet must move beyond Spicer's formulation of the task, beyond the "artist and the private man," toward a vision more balanced and communal. For many centuries, in this region the relation between forests and "wood products"—houses of split redwood, canoes carved from fallen redwood trees—was governed by cultural agreements about value, arrived at by the exchange of shells. We are probably not going back to the use of mollusks for money, but the survival of people

and forests will require that we find some equivalent form of those agreements. Here, in this house of redwood, is the next form of that endeavor.

The Poem Inside The House

Bruce Johnson worked on his house for a long time without having a name for it, until he came across a poem inscribed in the guest book of the Sonoma Mountain Zen Center and realized he was building a *Poetry House*—or as he put it, "an empty space where attention resides." He invited the author of the poem to collaborate on the project.

The work of Elizabeth Carothers Herron has always evoked poetry's wildest roots and deepest language, and she embraced this project. But she found it difficult to get into. After many months of contemplation, she accidentally called it the *Poet's* house and that happenstance possessive noun, by the logic of contraries, was her entry into the poet's necessary dispossession. "From a state of mind so personal," she wrote, "it passes through itself and shapeshifts to something larger, something I cannot call my own."

Once it started, the poem grew large and feral, refusing to be typeset. A bookbinder was enlisted to gather the 184 pen-and-ink pages into a volume that now resides in a wooden box inside the house. During the house's construction, friends were invited to take words and phrases from the book and inscribe them on the house's beams and inner walls. Except for the paper ceiling lamp, most of the words remain unseen. Like prayers on a prayer wheel, Johnson says, the words have an ongoing resonance. Like a deeper building material, Herron's words hold *Poetry House* together.

The Poet's House weaves the deeply personal with the cosmic and universal—or as the poet might say, through her self and out again. It's a culmination of her work, and of qualities that make her a cultural treasure of our region. With a voice that ranges from lyrics of inner life to the georgics of domestic living, and from dispatches of war to a fish kill on the upper Sacramento, she is able to create something like a whole human attention—as when we endeavor to speak of what is most near and dear to us.

* * *

Poetry comes from a forest where the roots of words, like mycelia in the soil, have been talking to other roots for a long time. In an opening in that forest, we find the poet's house. The poem brings us to its door. When we open and enter, we find instead we have come out into another space. And we've left our usual selves at the door—along with our usual descriptions.

The Poet's House might sometimes be owls over the fields of night

> or rests in music—
> an echo, a footprint, the emptiness inside a cup—
> and the words are the cup.

In the unfolding of the poem, as we read it phrase by phrase, we reenact its composition. Like words on a floor joist, unseen by the person seated above, the poem is continuously at work. *The Poet's House* is a performance, constantly being recomposed and performed again. (Some of the words I'm quoting are from a chapbook, others come from performance notes.)

The work being done by the poem is the unending task of all the arts: to keep things true, as Spicer said. To reconnect us to the blessed particulars of the world and the great mystery that speaks through them.

> Fallen petals, lost sandals, winter storms, rush-hour
> traffic, forgotten endearments, evening news, the
> war you hear from the backroom of your mind, the
> baby crying on the plane all the way to Chicago,
> stars strewn to the edge of the universe, the first
> windfall apple.

The flow of words, like the flow of polished wood grain, brings us to our senses. Words reattach us to the earth, and we are reembodied with them.

> The Poet's House is your name
> forever floating on the summer dusk,
> an incantation
> to conjure you out of the mystery of your lost shape,
> calling you back to this earth house, this house
> without walls

Embodied, then disembodied, the poem takes us away and brings us back—forever changed. "Arriving and leaving, forever at the threshold," it recalls listener and reader to our own shifting essence—"you are pollen and ash, seed and stone."

* * *

And once again, it doesn't end there. Our disorder isn't going to be fixed by simple rearrangements. As readily as the poem brings us to our senses, it is obliged to derange them. The things we think we know, as Coyote stories remind us, are the things that keep us from knowing who we are and what we're really doing. The poem repeats the caution of the thirteenth-century Zen monk Dōgen: "Do not suppose that the ash is future and the firewood past." Order may be found in what we thought was disorder.

> The poet's house is in the stacked twigs and chaotic
> debris left at floodtide
> where water rats make nests, curl up and listen to
> the wind.

Like our inward house, our public and social order, too, is fragile and precarious. "Come, Coyote," the poem says to the trickster spirit: "We need your luck / for the world spins on the rim of chaos." Our way lies "through the broken gate, the Doorless Door of the heart." The outer and inner journey are inseparable, and equally perilous.

The poet also invokes Mnemosyne, mother of all the muses. Coyote, always pressing forward, says, imagine, imagine. But don't forget: Remember, remember. Don't lose our history. It could be what is about to happen.

> Hope and heartache sleep together, each day
> a book we close before we sleep. Waking
> we rub our eyes at the miracle of return and renewal.
> We weep. We open our empty mouths.
> And so, when the next line returns us to the
> world, we are back in the wet particulars of
> a familiar forest.
> In the redwoods, calypso orchids fill their
> empty purses
> with cool damp air. Deer trails, scat, ferns and
> fallen branches.

On the forest floor we return to the foundations of what we know. "May we love fearlessly," Herron prays for us. "May we find the true nature in all things."

* * *

The Poet's House brings us back to our place in the world. Lets us see it and not look away. This is the necessary reordering to which all of us—readers, listeners, poets, speakers at meetings—are called by Herron's words. They should be inscribed at the entry to every forest trail, inside the walls of every public building.

Words in the Wood

I step out and slide the door closed, put my disguise back on. I face *Poetry House* and bow—not a thing I usually do—in response to this powerful knot of words and wood. A confluence of form and energy, as Bruce Johnson characterizes his work, the house is solid and feels deeply rooted, yet it's designed to be taken apart and moved. Like Elizabeth Herron's poem, exactly right as it is, yet changing each time it's performed. Wood and words together again, a living lesson our culture urgently needs. Nothing less will save us. Nothing less will save the forest.

I leave Johnson's place around midday, drive north along the coast, a cool fog rolling in over the highway. Summer and climate change seem far away. The poem hasn't begun as I'd expected, but instead I feel as if I've bodily entered a poem and been changed by it. As if I'm carrying with me the house of words and wood, perhaps to be a refuge in the struggles that lie ahead.

* * *

We meet at the Park and Ride in the morning dark, drive four hours down the Redwood Highway, sit in the back rows of a windowless auditorium, wired on coffee, waiting. Beside me, Kristi, whose grandfather's apple orchard is buried in the silt of logging, and Andy, long-time organizer and videographer who documented the redwood wars and hundreds of meetings like this. In the row behind us, with papers and documents spread out, Vivian is watershed conservation director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations and is married to a fisherman. After nearly two decades of studies and reports and

hearings, the five members of the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board are set to approve *Elk River* TMDL *Action Plan*, a nearly unreadable document that has been gutted of every protection we've fought to include: an end to winter logging, a ten-year moratorium in the most severely damaged subwatersheds, a two-percent annual harvest limit—meaning they have to wait fifty years before logging a parcel again. All that is gone, replaced by dead language.

John Fisher's timber boss and a lawyer are explaining the meaning of *zero*, estimated to be the amount of erosion that Elk River can assimilate beyond the 640,000 cubic yards of mud now filling its channel. "*Zero* can't mean zero," the lawyer tells the water board, and they nod agreement as if confirming the number of angels in the room. Finally, the member from Red Bluff cuts through the imaginary math to the real issue: Humboldt Redwood Company's profits. "I'm afraid we're not leaving them enough trees," she says. Agreement is unanimous.

The river, the fish, the inhabitants, get some restoration money and a long ride home.

* * *

After the corporate raider had liquidated thousands of acres of redwoods and driven Pacific Lumber into bankruptcy, a Texas judge rejected a bid by a local group proposing to manage the forest cooperatively and sustainably. Instead he accepted the bid of John Fisher, scion of the wealthy Gap family and already the co-owner of Mendocino Redwood, whose brother Robert was cochair of Governor Brown's Strategic Growth Council, a keystone of California climate change policy. The Fisher offer was based on flawed estimates of money and trees, meaning more logging, so despite Robert's credentials, carbon sequestration in brother John's forests has continued to decline. But for the judge, the cooperative's proposal was simply unimaginable—as if it had come from a foreign nation and no translator could be found.

The poem inside the walls is still working on that translation. For a moment, from our seats in the back row of the windowless meeting room, I can see it: *Poetry House*. Inside the house I hear new ways of talking about forests and rivers, a new poetics of regulation. The Golden State was founded on resource extraction and its agencies of public trust still routinely issue permits to trash our forests and rivers, so this miracle may be a long time coming. But the transition to this new regulatory ethic has already begun at the local level. In the forty years since I camped beside Jacoby Creek, the city of Arcata has expanded its ownership to include the entire watershed and has pledged to manage it sustainably. The forest is logged to support its recovery, and there is heated argument about this contradiction, but other poets walk in the woods and speak for the trees far more knowledgably than I was able to do.

Ground truthers, these poets call themselves. They work for advocacy groups like EPIC, and they sue the bastards. Or they affiliate with Earth First! and engage in direct action. Over in the Mattole Valley, calling themselves forest defenders, they've assembled a structure of logs and rope that blocks access to a grove of old-growth fir that John Fisher wants to log. It has been compared to a giant wood rat's nest. Rigged to a tree platform, if it's moved, a person may fall to their death. Last summer some of these young poets joined with elders and indigenous people to carry a redwood log from Mendocino over the coast range and up to Elk River, more than two hundred miles, stopping for ceremonies at critical and endangered places. It was an act born of a dream that saw this as a way to save trees. A beautiful and impossible poem, it would follow the Pacific Northwest's great forest all the way to Alaska, preserving our last best defense against a warming planet. The Ghost Dance was just such a poem.

I heard the poem as recently as last week, at a local water district meeting, where commissioners faced a crowd of people questioning their plan to extend development into the forest. The talk of converting woods into housing took me back to Santa Rosa and the fire that burned through *Root 101*.

* * *

At the end of another hot summer I stop again along the Redwood Highway, walk among the charred remnants of Johnson's sculptures. Great masses of ancient redwood have burned down to bare earth, leaving only melted copper and powdery ash. But some pieces are still intact, others only partly blackened, as if licked by a dragon in its wrathful passing. They'll go back to the workshop and be renewed. Off in the distance, half a dozen houses are being built where the fire cut across a subdivision. Already sheathed with wafer wood, joined by new glues and plastics, waiting for the dragon's return.

In the year following my visit, I've had plenty of occasion to draw on the strength of *Poetry House* and Herron's poem. Our TMDL action plan went to Sacramento and was approved, with a better definition of *zero* promised in the near future. A state-sponsored restoration group fell apart, while a feasibility study ate up the remaining grant funds. Logging, some of it clear-cut, continues in the upper watershed. I struggle to hang on to the marriage of wood and words—to carry the memory of loss into the imagination of what is possible.

Along the trail through Headwaters Forest Reserve, where the liquidation logging stopped, second-growth redwoods grow out of enormous stumps, trees that were cut not long after Walt Whitman's "Song of the Redwood-Tree." Two or three together, sometimes half a dozen or more, from a single stump. I can easily reach around some of these offspring, others are more than twice my arm span and over a hundred feet tall. Sprouted from knotted growths of burl, clones of the mother tree—"they grow like weeds," the loggers like to say—some will split off and fall, others may fall because they're not well rooted. Some have almost entirely taken over the parent tree. Its age-old bark is barely visible above the forest duff and salal, black from a long-ago fire, greenish blue where it's slowly being eaten by mold. I stand and listen for a long time.

Jerry Martien lives in the Elk River watershed, site of Headwaters Forest Reserve. He is the author most recently of *The Price of a Life: Shell, Gold, Carbon Notes and Weed* and a collection of poems, *Earth Tickets*.

MARYAM BARRIE

At Prairie Creek Redwoods State Park

I was off the path, and hidden. The fallen redwoods
made a three-sided room, a slanted couch,
with sunken floors, and filtered lights, and a quiet that
had lived there for thousands of years. It was a place to rest,
and let my head fall back onto the fallen tree. It still buzzed
with energy—its molecules still hover through the force
of life, and all those years of quiet were solid beneath my head.
I could breathe, I could listen, but this little moment, in this large
land, resonated out past me, and reaches me even now, a
continent away. There is a living line that starts in my heart
and stretches past the prairies, past the mountains, past the drought,
past the fires, and past all the crowded cities, where people
starve for what trees feed us, for that certainty that we are
connected and through that we live, each moment pulsing
in the air around us. I am there still.

Maryam Barrie, married with two grown daughters, lives in an Oak and Hickory woods in Michigan. She has taught at Washtenaw Community College in Ann Arbor since 1985. Her poetry has been published in *Big Windows Review*, and she has a forthcoming chapbook, *To Connect in This Dark World*.

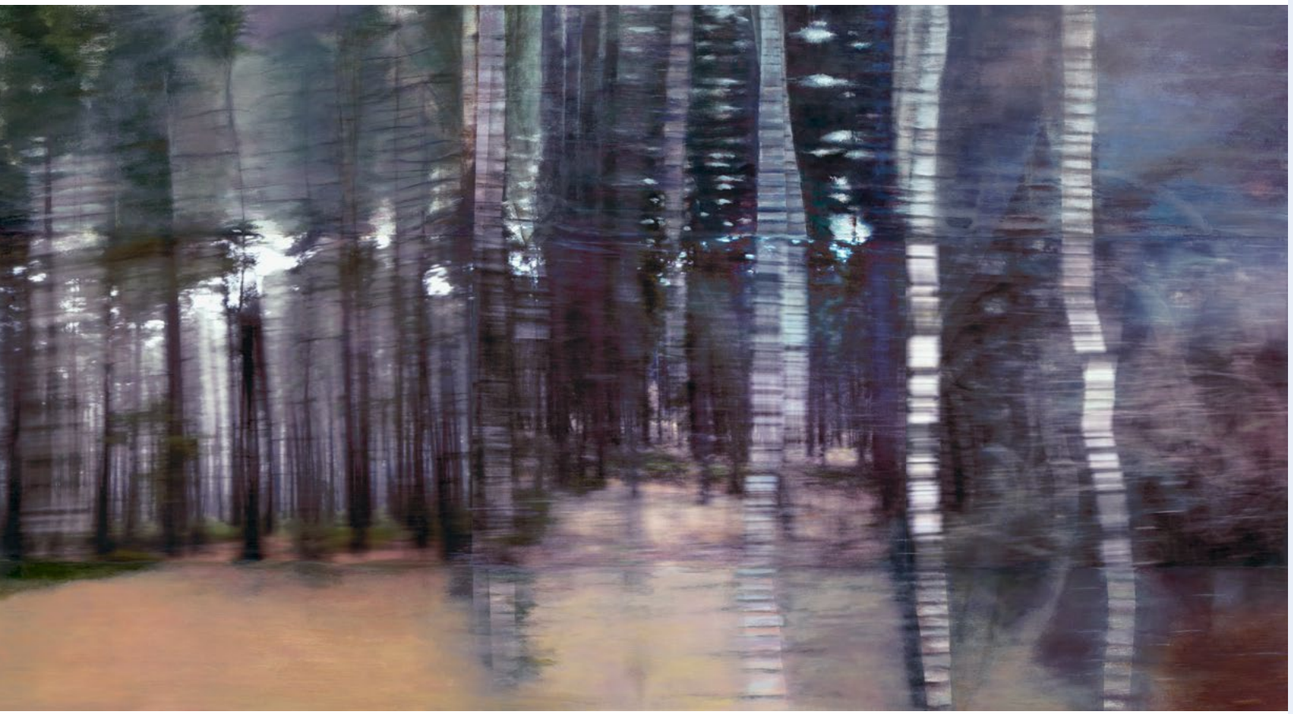
SARA FRIEDLANDER

Blurred Landscapes — Dreaming Palo Alto, 2010
Original photo and paint on wooden panel,
26 x 48 x 2 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST

SARA FRIEDLANDER

Blurred Landscapes — Czech Woods, 2009
Original photos and paint on wooden panel
26 x 48 x 2 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

SUSAN HEEGER

I Let You Go

Lessons from my Monther's Death

When my mother died, I didn't know what to do with myself, but I had to do something. After clearing my house of all her medicines and equipment, I set up a kind of memorial in my office. Along the bookshelves, I propped pictures of her—as a toddler hugging a cat, as a three-year-old being cuddled by *her* mom, who would die within months. I tried to represent the eras of her youth, from the early terriers and pet chickens to the grim reign of a stepmother, to sorority sisters and fellow Navy WAVES, who, arm in arm, giggled with her at the camera. Later, on her wedding day, she poses in a blue suit, looking grave, as if she knows she's making a mistake.

I tucked battery-operated candles among the photos, with bowls of water ("The dead get thirsty," said a Buddhist friend of my sister's) and chocolate, her favorite food. Next came shells she'd gathered on beaches, china dogs from her childhood, and the amber beads she was wearing when she died. And though they'd been divorced forever and he'd married again, twice, my dad's picture joined the rest on the three-year anniversary of his death, which fell a week after hers. Once he was there, of course, I had to add my brother, John, who died before both of them.

* * *

In her final days, Mom assured my sister and me: *I'll never leave you. I'll always be here.* Touching first Laura's heart, then mine.

I was used to her exaggerated comforts, which tended to skip past the realities of suffering.

Oh, sweetheart, darling! Tomorrow's another day! When I'm sad, I clean out a drawer! You'll see, you'll look back on this and laugh!

This time, as her body failed, I sensed her trying to console herself, hating the thought of our grieving.

After she died, her promise stuck in my head. *Would* she somehow hang around? Shouldn't I consider the possibility?

I began to do things to show my openness.

I went to a yoga studio for a ritual called "Finding Your Spirit Guide," described as out-of-body "journeying," led by visions of "power animals."

While I'd read Carlos Castaneda in my teens, and experimented with acid, I didn't actually expect a visionary

trip to Mom. But once I arrived, I thought, why not? She loved animals. She believed in their powers.

It was October, a windy fall tipping into winter, a time, said the shaman/facilitator for the group, when veils between worlds (other planes of consciousness, the realms of the dead) grow porous, making it easier to communicate with spirits.

Before admitting us to the studio, she smudged us with purifying sage. As instructed, we'd brought rattles, to summon the spirits and shake loose our inhibitions, and symbolic objects for an altar at the center of the room. My rattle was a pellet drum that had been my son's, my offering the amber beads from Mom's shrine.

The shaman directed us to make noise, facing the earth's four directions, then lie on mats around the altar, radiating out from it like spokes on a wheel. She asked us to imagine a "power place" near a hole in the earth or pool of water through which we could descend to "lower realms." (Mine was a wooded lakeside in New Hampshire where I'd gone for a writer's retreat.)

While she beat rhythms on a drum, we set off, armed with questions for any animals who showed up.

Are you my spirit guide? Where am I going? What is your message?

During the first of several "journeys," I felt the drum's vibrations as waves in the lake and pictured animals that lived around it. Turtles, red foxes, loons.

I was breathless but alert, ready with my prompts. *Where is my mother? How can I reach her?*

Fleetingly, I caught the flash of a striped cat, then wondered if I'd imagined it.

During a break, we gathered in a sharing circle.

"I was swallowed by a giant eel," one woman said.

Another: "I was body-slammed by a sea lion."

"I saw a hawk," said a third. "Then I *was* the hawk." She added, "I was hoping for something less . . . carnivorous?"

Of course I know how this sounds. Ditto on some of the other roads I took off on, somewhat indiscriminately, after she died.

I floated in a sensory deprivation tank laced with Epsom salts, hoping my body consciousness would melt, leaving my spirit receptive. Bored by my own company, I moved on to "sound baths," held in the yoga studio, where crystal bowls, gongs, and drums were played to produce vibrations meant to "open doorways to the soul." While these *were* deeply, mysteriously moving, my mother did not attend. Nor did she show, in any recognizable form, as I sat with Korean and Tibetan Zen masters, hearing that suffering is inescapable and no one avoids death.

"Don't overthink this," our shaman advised. "Let your *guides* do the work—and your intuition."

After a second journey to the lower realms—uneventful, again, for me—she was preparing us to "go high."

"This time, you may see certain of your ancestors. You can ask them how they are and if they need your help."

I closed my eyes and pictured myself back beside the lake, looking up through pine boughs and broken sunlight. As the drum grew loud, I imagined my body lifted and carried, traveling up into airy blueness. My throat closed. My eyes filled. Abruptly, I seemed to feel my mother's presence. A chilly wind. A humid sorrow.

I choked up, confused. *Was this my grief, or hers? Her tears, or mine?*

What "help" did I possibly have to offer?

The next moment, I froze. *Was it wrong of me to even try to call her back? Couldn't my longing trap her, keep her from going where she was meant to go?*

At the break, when I managed to voice these fears, our leader said, "You need to know that your mother came to you voluntarily. Grief is a form of love. Yours *and* hers." Sweeping her hair aside she eyed me mournfully.

"The Mayans had a saying: 'The dead must travel on a river of tears.'"

* * *

When my mother talked about death as she lay in a railed bed provided by hospice, she assured us she wasn't sad or afraid. "I just worry about you girls."

Laura and me, both in our sixties.

But one night, as we stood on either side of her, awakened by a cry, she begged us to let her go. "Say it. 'I let you go.'"

We said it.

She lay back gratefully. Then her eyes popped open. "What are you two still doing here?"

The room was stuffy and hot, antiseptic and fruity smelling from the creams, wipes, soaps, and pads cluttering shelves and tables. A wheeled device swept oxygen from the air and tubed it up her nose with a mechanical clack.

A commode sat beside a wheelchair, near nebulizing and suctioning machines. There were stacks of towels, sheets, books Laura and I read to her, cds we played, pictures we propped where she could see them: of her eternally young mother; of ourselves and John, little.

I slept in the twin bed that had belonged to my now-grown son, Simon; Laura, during visits from Germany where she lives, camped on floor cushions. We never turned out the light, which glowed like a fuzzy moon in its paper globe.

Mom catnapped during the day. At night, we got up with her the way you do with your baby, rocking on your feet, startled by shadows.

One particularly haunted hour, Mom announced, "I'm going to die tonight. In my little red chair."

We looked at each other. I said, "You mean your *white* chair? Your recliner?"

Until recently, Mom had slept in this, in her room in a retirement home. At age ninety, in an accident caused, I was sure, by the shock of my brother's death, she'd broken her back. Lying flat hurt. (The hospice bed was adjustable.)

The white chair. Yes. Calmly she said, "I'm going to die in that, tonight."

The next morning, she looked sheepish.

* * *

No mother should outlive her child.

I heard my mother say this many times. When a friend's daughter got leukemia. When a neighbor's son died in a car crash at twenty-one.

Nevertheless. Four years ago, on a busy workday, I picked up the phone to hear a stranger stumble through the news that my brother had "passed away."

None of us had seen it coming. We hadn't seen *him* in ages, since he'd married and had a baby in his fifties. With his new family, he seemed finished with ours, especially Dad, unrelentingly critical and depressed, a bully and a drinker John could never please. What had Mom done? Stayed mute. (John told his wife both were dead.)

He was, sporadically, in touch with me, because, I think, I had a child and he wanted to talk about his.

Only two days earlier, he'd called as he was shopping with this boy, whistling and cheerful, about to leave for vacation after some quick business in New York.

I heard the two chattering in the background about fishing poles, lures, bait. John kept putting me aside to ask a salesman questions.

How could he be gone?

In a panic of disbelief, I began to hunt down testimonials from people who'd had communication with the dead. One book I found, called (ironically?) *Hello from Heaven*, emphasized that contacts usually happened when death was fresh, while the dead were still transitioning out of life.

In John's Chicago apartment, where I stayed a few days before his funeral, I lay awake in a storm, listening, waiting for him.

The next morning, breathing the hothouse funk of lilies, I was gripped by the flower-decked portrait in his living room. Larger than life, his face swollen by undetected heart disease, he caught my eye.

Can you believe this shit?

A month later, in Munich, where I went to grieve with my sister, I sat in a church under painted saints and heard his voice. A little raw, but clear. *I'm safe, Sooz. I'm in a good place. Don't worry.*

I never did hear from Dad, who died a year after John, from Parkinson's disease aggravated by drinking. Having failed his son and lost his third wife, he was bitter and afraid, alone, though I was there with him.

* * *

I knew I was lucky. I'd always known. Not to be the boy in my family. Not to lose my mother when I was small, leaving me at the mercy of a stepmom. Not to lose her later, when Dad moved out. Like a sailor in gale-force winds, she shouldered us through our teens alone. I was awful to her, as if daring her to leave too. But she didn't.

She lived to ninety-four, long enough for us to bury a lot of hatchets.

As she aged, along with dumping most of her possessions, she shrugged off layers of herself, becoming brighter, more concentrated, less shy with her affections.

"What *is* she living on?" my sister and I wondered when she stopped eating much of anything but ice cream, in tiny spoonfuls.

She claimed not to be in pain. But it clearly hurt to move her even a little. Hospice gave us "comfort meds," intimidating at first, less so as she grew sicker.

"Oh, my sweethearts, my girls," she often crooned while she still had breath enough. "It means so much, to be together."

Her dying took forever, almost three months from the day we moved her to my house, though the staff at her retirement home believed she was already "actively dying."

Here, she rallied, reminisced, sang old sorority songs (*When at the door a boy makes passes, I simply slip on my glasses* . . .). She fretted (*Did John ever feel loved?*). While she could still sit up, she wanted to be rolled to the window to watch the birds (*See the yellow ones? What are they? What kind of tree is that?*). She insisted on playing cards, even when she couldn't hold them or keep the suits straight.

Once, picking nervously at her amber beads, she forgot who I was and told me a story about myself (*I have a daughter your age* . . .).

Another day, I walked in on a caregiver telling her she'd soon be "in the arms of Jesus."

I had a word with this lady. "Can we leave Jesus out of it? She's mad at God."

She'd reported this matter-of-factly, when asked if she wanted to see a hospice chaplain.

God took my mother! *People would say, He needed her, to be an angel.* I *needed her!*

Sometimes, it was John she thought of. *No mother should outlive her child.*

These moments, though, were rare. Mostly, she focused on her gratitude to be with us, her beautiful, blessed life.

I remembered how, when I was younger, her tendency to blow past darkness on a raft of cheer struck me as maddeningly superficial—evidence of a flawed, inferior (to mine) intelligence.

Now I wondered if it wasn't her secret weapon.

She basked in Laura's visits. She loved having her grandson pop in, loved the daily presence of her "granddog," Bunny, who hung out watchfully by her bed. She had a stack of mail from retirement-home pals and made friends with all her caregivers.

The day she died, in bed, as it turned out, she was finished talking. Just once, when my husband, Rob, came home from work, did she open her eyes.

I told her I was going for a walk. As I headed back, she left, slipping away almost imperceptibly, with the ghost of a smile.

For several hours, until the mortuary van arrived, the back of her neck stayed warm, as if right there, in that one spot, she was still alive.

I couldn't stop touching it, struck with terror that she would disappear as fast and utterly as John and then my father had.

I tried to hold on, to hear her voice, to *feel* her without pulling too hard.

After all, I'd promised. I had let her go.

Her vision of death: *All this,* she'd say, lifting bony fingers, *is going to pass. I'll see my mother, John. My dogs. Everyone I've ever loved. They'll come for me. They'll be here.*

She believed this.

Was it what happened? Had they?

Are these even the right questions?

In my latest attempt to find out, I went for a Reiki "healing." I knew almost nothing about the practice, except that it involved touch, or possibly *near* touch, someone's hands hovering in the air above you.

As I lay on a white table in a dusky room, the healer worked her hands beneath my head. I felt tense, confused as to what I wanted, why, really, I was there.

Her hands conveyed heat—to my brain, my neck, my throat, where, even then, tears had begun to press.

After a few minutes of quiet, I felt a sudden, almost seismic forcefulness, around me and inside. Abruptly, my family seemed to be there, my mother gathering everyone around—John, Dad, my sister, all in some younger version of themselves. Radiant, innocent. *Trusting.*

I was smacked with sadness, as if I were seeing, what? Something like my family's birth, back before we came apart. Before what was going to happen happened.

My mother, the quiet power in the room, invited me to witness. *No one starts out wanting to be cruel. Assigning blame misses the point.*

This is what she offered.

An opening for forgiveness.

Recently, I read that Houdini, master of self-imposed shackles, threw himself on his mother's grave, talking to her through his sobs, for months after she died.

I get it. I talk to mine every day. Like Houdini, who, absent when she died, was reportedly desperate to learn his mother's last words, I have questions, some small, some enormous.

Were Mom and Dad (whose proposal began, *I have no right to ask* . . .) married civilly or in a church? What was life like when they loved each other? Have she and John and Dad and the other wives achieved some afterlife détente?

Are the dead the ones who move on, or are we?

A psychic friend recommended that I get a candle and scratch my questions into it with a pin. When I burn it, I'll have answers.

I have the candle. I just can't decide, given limited space, which questions to ask.

Or maybe I think it's time I left her in peace.

She's already given me plenty.

I hear her in my head when I visit her pictures.

Keep busy. Listen. Be kind. Forget yourself.

The words mean more to me than they used to, since there won't be any more. So do the pictures, which I change out sometimes so I don't stop seeing her.

The last one I added is my favorite. Instead of my young mother, she's old in it, every year carved in her face, every tragedy and trial. But there's also happiness.

It's Christmas. She wears a red sweater with a bear on it and her Winnie-the-Pooh watch. She holds a deck of cards and smiles beatifically. Directly at me.

Hello.

She loved her life. She slipped out when it was time.

In between, like a goldfinch hopping in a sycamore, she wore her being lightly.

Susan Heeger is a Los Angeles fiction and features writer and her work has appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, *McSweeney's*, the *Virginia Quarterly Review* and other publications. This piece and another upcoming in *O Magazine* are part of a book in progress about her mother.

SUSAN TERRIS

from Dream Fragments . . .

Epiphany

Cooper Grove along the Big Sur River and the monarchs have returned. “Hold me close,” I say. “Dance with me here . . . now.” Eucalyptus leaves bruise beneath our feet, and you hum as we waltz until a blaze of butterflies rises and flames the air around us.

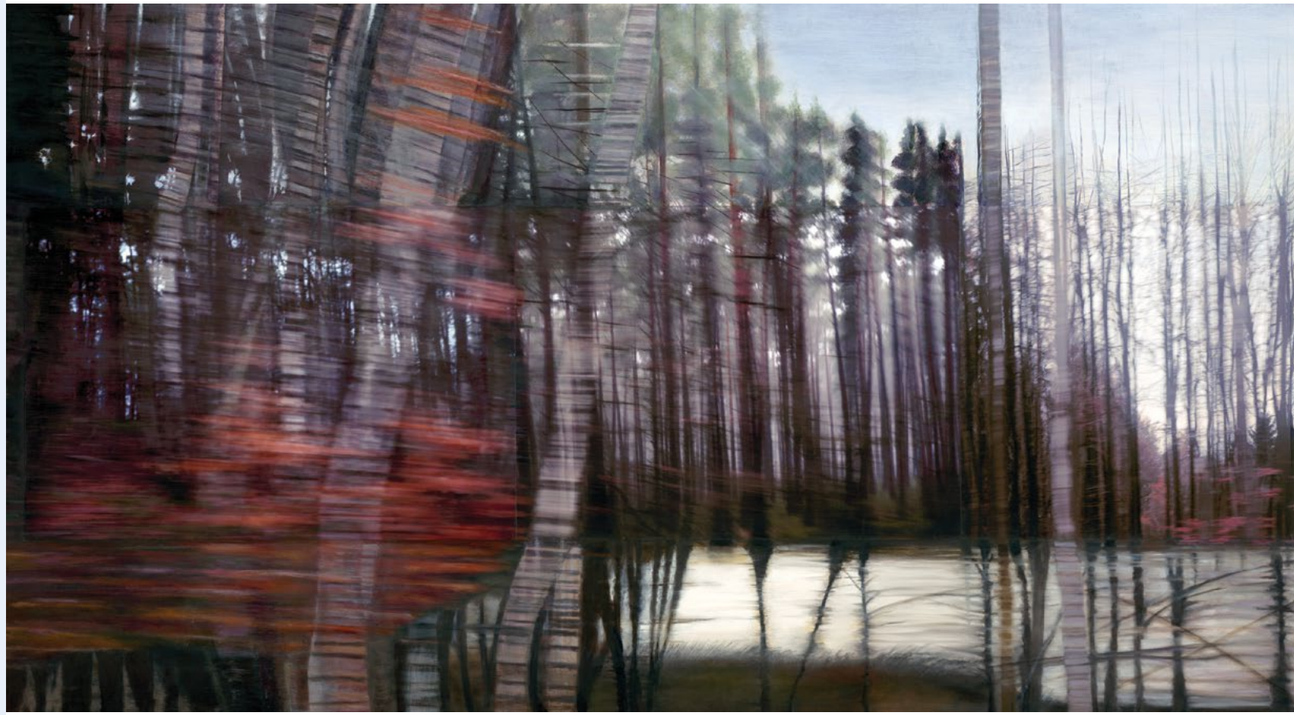
Well

No oasis. No cartoon of men in undershirts crawling toward a mirage across the dry cracked surface of what was once an ancient lake bed, but a well, a kind of Jack-and-Jill-with-no-hill shingled well. Bucket up. Rope—yes. Handle to turn. We peer down but don’t see ourselves mirrored. Instead, little shape-shifters floating there. “Oh, Jack, they know the future we can’t see.”

Susan Terris’s recent books are *Take Two: Film Studies* (Omnidawn), *Memos* (Omnidawn), and *Ghost of Yesterday: New and Selected Poems* (Marsh Hawk Press). A poem of hers appeared in *Pushcart Prize XXXI*. A poem from *Memos* was in *Best American Poetry 2015*. Terris is editor emerita of *Spillway* and a poetry editor at *Pedestal Magazine*. www.susanterris.com

SARA FRIEDLANDER

Blurred Landscapes — Frozen Lake, 2009
Original photos and paint on wooden panel, 26 x 48 x 2 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

HEARNE PARDEE

Garden Grid, 2016
Acrylic and collage on paper, 50 x 38 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST

KATHLEEN DE AZEVEDO

Bad and Beautiful

The transformation of John McClaren Park in San Francisco

On my daily run through John McLaren Park, I pass the sign that reads: *No Dumping, Punishable by $1,000 Fine.* One day, I continue uphill past a broken easy chair, the next day, it's a microwave and a purple toy helicopter, then it's a couple of empty boxes of Thug Life firecrackers and a plaster statue of three cherubs, one missing a head. I climb to the top of the hill, where coyotes poised on the road give me their bitch face before ducking into the trees.

Finally I arrive at an overgrown section with knee-high wild oats, rattlesnake grass, and wild mustard—the neglected part of the park. I take the trail that runs down, down, past a man pushing an old bicycle through the tall grass, through a dark tunnel of cedars, and along a backyard fence belonging to several houses. A yellow-and-orange mural with black letters painted along the fence reads: *Art comes from ur soul but most importantly ur heart. Art gave me birth. I am a cultural activist, who Is here to explain and help. Because 2 make a change I can't do it myself. George Hurtado,* RIP. *Class of 2007.* JJSE.

I don't know when the mural was painted, but eighteen-year-old Mr. Hurtado was killed just before his second semester at college, a targeted assassination by a gang member. JJSE, or June Jordan School for Equity, is a nearby alternative high school. Hurtado was a poet. His artist friends, the ones who knew he spoke out against the gang lifestyle, brought some paint and brushes to pay homage. Perhaps some of the artists worked for Precita Eyes, a program getting otherwise graffiti-prone kids to fill dim city walls with colorful murals telling their stories. An artist first created a grid and sketched the design on paper then transferred the design to the fence. Hurtado's friends may have asked permission of the property owners or not. If the owners had lived here for ages and saw the artists painting away, they probably thought: "What a great idea! Anything to brighten up the area." If the residents worked long hours, they may have not been aware of the youthful chatter on the other side of their property. Yet Hurtado's friends had worked reverently, even though this mural would not be seen by many people because it is hidden within the park. McLaren Park, a sprawling 312 acres of hilly open space, lies in southernmost San Francisco, among working-class and immigrant neighborhoods. Until a few years ago, city maps of San Francisco

Open spaces near urban areas have a bigger variety of invasives than rural areas because heavier populations are more likely to introduce foreign plants onto their properties.

left out this portion of the city, including my street. We had literally dropped off the earth.

When I began jogging in John McLaren Park, people warned me about the dead bodies. The park and its weed-covered hills was to San Francisco what the East River was to Al Capone in hiding murderous deeds. There is some truth to the dead body rumor. In 2016, police found the dead body of a thirty-two-year-old woman and are still looking for her two-year-old daughter. In 1983 the body of a gay man was dumped in the park; the murder remained a cold case until 2017. The other day, a woman walking her dog told me her neighbor once found a dead body half-buried in weeds and had to testify in court. A 2008 Yelp review of the park reads:

DEAD BODIES
MUGGINGS
GANGSTERS
AL QUAIDA SATAN
DOG SHIT

I hope I scared away all the FOCALS *(fake locals)*
This is a 5 Star park
Tha second largest park in The City, one of the best places for dogs, hoops courts, diamonds for softball/baseball practice, tennis courts, walking/biking trails, BBQ*/picnic areas, a kids playground and a golf course.*
If your from here you know whats up if your not keep being scared and stay away

For many years, we of the grass-choked spaces poured our resentment into the landscape. Besides the household and body dumping, playgrounds were silent. Aggressive dogs chased after the few humans who traversed the park's trails. Abandoned cats fought with raccoons. Since weeds dominated the scene, I got to thinking of the role weeds play in neighborhood self-respect. Obviously, we had work to do. We couldn't just depend on local government. We needed to see ourselves in a better light. We needed to embrace our inner weed.

Author Sally Roth, in her book *Weeds: Friends or Foe?*, writes that "the word *weed* is an epithet of purely human invention; in the botanical world it simply does not exist," meaning a plant is called a weed when it becomes intrusive and undesirable in the landscape. In fact, botanists replace the word *weed* with *invasive species*. Nick Graver, an Invasive Plant Early Detection Program team leader at the San Francisco Bay Area Inventory and Monitoring Network, part of the National Park Service, explains the conundrum, "A lot of weeds are not weeds, they are just natural plants that have grown in this area for thousands of years. But I think *invasive species* is not such a good term either. Yet I haven't heard of a better one." Invasive plants do have features in common. They produce seeds, and lots of them. The seeds don't all germinate at once but are perfectly happily waiting underground for the right conditions to emerge. Poppies can lie dormant for eighty years. The roots of invasives are overly ambitious. Plants with stolons, or runners, sprout above ground first, and then send down roots as they go. This is why the blackberry bramble can take down a backyard fence. Rhizomes grow underground stems that bud, even if a section is cut. This is how nettles thrive to chemically burn our fingers. The horizontal roots of the bindweeds (like morning glory) form a network similar to a street grid. Taproots can grow deep, so forget about permanently digging up dandelions unless you have a backhoe. Plus weeds can really get around town via animal fur. Shit. Shoes. White parachutes.

One could see the behavior of invasive plants as stereotypes of the marginalized, which in our neighborhood includes immigrants and people of color. In fact, my neighborhood has a higher percentage of foreign-born people than any other part of the city. This includes me. I am an immigrant from Brazil, as was my mother. My paternal grandparents were from Russia. British nature writer Richard Mabey, in his book *Weeds: In Defense of Nature's Most Unloved Plants*, claims that our attitude about weeds, or invasive plants, "stems from a kind of botanical xenophobia." Mabey continues that "the archetypal weed is the mistrusted intruder," part of "'the great unwashed.'" Weeds have traveled so much in our history that all areas have foreign nationals. They survive wars and sprout in the cracks of destruction. Weeds do not care how long natives have been around. They want to belong. Because they come from far away, they are more resistant than native plants. In other words, sometimes, the weakened health of blue bloods gives way to healthy immigrant stock. Open spaces near urban areas have a bigger variety of invasives than rural areas because heavier populations are more likely to introduce foreign plants onto their properties. Pampas grass, a thick ornamental with white plumage from Argentina, was the darling of many gardeners until it took over the hills of the Bay Area. Now we can't get rid of these interlopers.

* * *

I wanted to know a thing or two about weeds. I was tired of blaming them for our urban lack of love. I drove to the Marin Headlands, part of the Golden Gate Recreational Area on the Marin County side of the Golden Gate Bridge, to work on a weed control project. I waited in the parking lot for other volunteers to arrive. The Marin Headlands hugs a small bit of coast just north of the San Francisco Bay. The pounding ocean carves out peaks and broken fingers and sea tunnels from the jutting cliffs. Fog buries the tops of dry rolling hills. Here in the parking lot, the few empty cars probably belonged to those trotting their dogs on the trail. An alto squawk of a raven and the soprano twitter of birds were broken by a hidden human voice gushing, "I've never seen so many rabbits!"

The goal of this mission was to eliminate the oxeye daisy. Maria Alvarez, environmental biologist for the National Park Service and head of this invasive weed patrol, showed me the mug shot on a weed identification form.

The park and its weed-covered hills was to San Francisco what the East River was to Al Capone in hiding murderous deeds.

The oxeye daisy, or *Leucanthemum vulgare*. The *daisy*? The daisy of the daisy chain, of bridesmaid bouquets? But oxeye daisies are ambitious; these perennials can remain viable in the soil for thirty-nine years and replace fifty percent of the grass in a pasture. They can choke out the silver lupine, the host plant where the endangered mission blue butterfly lays its eggs. A fence surrounds Hawk Hill, a mission blue sanctuary and part of the site where we were working. Maria pointed to a patch of low-growing lupine looking like a green toupee. Underneath the leaves, Maria said, were bunches of molted caterpillar skins.

I grabbed a plastic bag to collect the oxeye. If the blossoms were old, if the yellow center was rimmed with black, I was to slip my index and middle finger just under the blossom and pluck. Sure enough, seeds from the older flowers exploded into my work glove like aphids.

Then, I took a small grub hoe, followed the daisy's stem down to its feet nestled in the weeds, and chopped the whole thing up. Then, I mulched the bare spot with straw. However, I did this process only about a dozen times. To my untrained eye, the surrounding hills seem devoid of the oxeye, because other volunteers had scoured the place. But Maria knew that one couldn't be too complacent. Her ranger fedora exuded toughness yet its broad curved brim reminded me of kindly Forest Service guys coming into my kindergarten class and doling out Smokey Bear coloring books. In her official park jacket, Maria looked like my athletically inclined sister, the shot-putter and butterfly stroke

Observer Pro allows the user to draw a red polygon perimeter around a group of invasives, then sends the information to Calflora, a massive online resource on California wild plants.

swimming champ. Maria turned to the hills and rattled off the names of weeds as if taking potshots at them. I followed her as she jaunted up the trail looking as cool as I hope I do when I hike. Her footsteps ate up the hill. Suddenly she turned from the trail and disappeared among poison oak and bull thistle. A half an hour later, she emerged again with her bag bulging with loot: not just daisies but other offenders like Harding grass. She extolled the cleanliness of the hills, "Can you imagine how ugly the hills would be if they were covered in daisies?" She stood with arms akimbo like Wonder Woman seeing the ruins of her vanquished bad guy. "If it weren't for you volunteers, the hills would be a mess." But her voice softened at the sight of far-off coffeeberry shrubs. "Look at those babies," she cooed, though for me, they were lost in the riot of plants.

Only a portion of weed management involves mechanical removal, like plucking, digging, burning, and spraying. Another portion involves knowing where every plant lives. In another invasive patrol foray, I took the Matt Davis Trail at Stinson Beach with Nick Graver, the Invasive Plant Early Detection Program team leader. The invasive plant mapping was done on his smartphone, through an app called Observer Pro. Nick turned on the GPS, which located our position down to the longitude and latitude. Observer Pro allows the user to draw a red polygon perimeter around a group of invasives, then sends the information to Calflora, a massive online resource on California wild plants. Within the polygon's border, invasives are tagged with dots from Priority #1, the really prolific plants that need to be eliminated, up to Priority #4, for plants that don't need immediate attention. I followed Nick with my low-tech clipboard and invasive plant list, marking the species we'd spotted along the way.

Nick is lean like a dancer and his golden ponytail, rolled into one obedient curl, hangs down his back. He paced up and down the trail, because lately he'd been finding a lot of invasive *Ageratina adenophora*, a brush with furry white flowers. At one point, he went off the trail, heading toward a white bush, possibly *Ageratina*, with me close behind, sloshing through fallen branches and tangled foliage. Meanwhile a host of tanned joggers pranced past us. A woman whispered reverently to her two kids, "Look! Rangers!" Our off-trail find ended up being the licorice plant, or *Helichrysum petiolare*, the prettiest thing I'd ever seen. The leaves and stem are covered with silvery down, and the small leaves sprouting from the whorls belong on a baby's christening gown. But Nick would tell me later, "I think that we ascribe beauty based on whether we think it is a weed or not." So right then, to me, the licorice plant was not a weed. But further up the trail, the mass of yellowish silver plant had absolutely choked the hill. Still Nick's affection for these miscreants came through. On our way down the trail, Nick walked quickly ahead as the two interns working on the Dipsea Trail were having trouble with Observer Pro on their electronic pad. But he stopped and looked up at the carpet of English ivy covering the ground and encasing the trees, and burst out, almost in song: "I know they are invasive species, but I marvel at the crazy things they do."

I wondered how limiting plant species could connect with making a place more diverse. In human terms, different ethnic groups contribute to the richness of society. However, it does make sense if you think of what would happen if only one ethnic group were allowed to thrive. Stephen Meyer, in his book *The End of the Wild*, warns that when weeds adapt and take over, they create a monoculture. Nick reminded me, "You get a picture in this part of an ecosystem that if you left it alone, it would not return to nature, it would get further from nature than what it used to be. So you have these heavily managed ecosystems that are closest to achieving something which is *natural*. Which is not natural anyway. A lot of the times I try to get away from what is natural at the time and think of what would maximize diversity with these plants." In other words, the logic is this: controlling populations artificially gives us a wider assortment of plants. And this does make sense, really.

William Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* follows two couples who run off to the woods to escape their stultifying Athenian society of arranged marriages and powerful dukes. In other words, a social monoculture. They become disoriented in the world controlled by spirits who have humanlike fits of pride and malice. The young Athenians become the invasive species, disoriented in a world of sprites and weeds. Oberon, the king of the fairies, instructs Puck, his apprentice, to look where the snake throws her enameled skin, Weed wide enough to wrap a fairy in.

> And with the juice of this I'll streak her eyes
> And make her full of hateful fantasies. (II.1.263–66)

With this weed, Oberon puts Titania, his lover and queen of the fairies, into an unfamiliar world, where she falls in love with the first thing she sees: a man wearing a donkey head. Thanks to the same plant, the young men and women pursue the wrong partner. Lust becomes raw and passionate. Only through the help of an antidote, another plant "whose liquor hath this virtuous property" (III.2.388), is all made right again. At the end of the play, all lovers—human and fairy—unite in one big wedding scene and inadvertently break apart the monoculture of Shakespearean Athens by introducing to the population a host of magical beings with an amazing knowledge of weeds.

* * *

Eventually things started to change in McLaren Park. In 2012, San Francisco voters approved the Clean and Safe Neighborhood Parks Bond to repair citywide park infrastructure. The restoration has taken a long time. A few years ago, I could start to see the improvement. Now I realize that the weeds are still there but are managed to show off their diversity.

A few months ago, Ellen, a retired groundskeeper of McLaren Park, hopped out of her pickup, the back loaded with chopped-up branches and general plant flotsam. I remembered her from way back when she tended different areas with her "park dog," which would sniff at my heels. She was heading toward the park operations facility, a small green house tucked into a grove of Monterey cypress and white pine, to join her peeps for a day of work. She had thrown on her canvas bucket hat and oversize cloth jacket. Ellen loved the outdoors and this morning was no exception. Pleased at my compliments that the park had cleaned up its act somewhat, she peered through her oversize glasses and explained yes, the bond measure had helped, but credit went to the neighbors, fed up with being San Francisco's neglected orphans living next to the notorious "dead body park." They say "you can't beat city hall," but they don't know the tough nuts from this area. The residents spoke out and the city supervisors listened. Even I complained about the runaway dogs and suggested a dog run. As a result, the city hired garbage collectors and plumbers, leaving the gardeners to the "yard work" as Ellen calls it. And yes, dogs have their own play area now.

McLaren's reputation hasn't completely diminished, which is why the dumping still persists, but Ellen insists that most of the dumpers are a few repeat offenders. These guys, hired to clean basements, instead of taking the garbage to the dump, which is part of the cost, do a night run up the park's John F. Shelley Drive and push the stuff onto the road. I beg to differ: a lot of slobs are still out there. A groundskeeper complained that after one picnic, they hauled off two truckloads of garbage that had been tossed in flimsy bags and broken open by crows. That being said, the groundskeepers and gardeners have been caring more about the park and work to keep it clean since the passage of the bond. The result: we care more too, about our space and about ourselves.

Tangled grass, reddish-brown curled dock, and pimpleyleaf oxtongue cover much of the park. But vegetation is cut to a bristle in the more well-used areas like the new toddlers' playground with its bumblebee spring riders and mini playground set. Alongside a section of John D. Shelley Drive, tamed pampas grass flutters from winds coming

off the bay. Tall flatsedge, yellow primrose, and wild sweet pea—normally invasives—behave themselves in a cultivated patch alongside a rain ditch. Traffic control bulb-outs serve as mini gardens for the medicinal-smelling mugwort and sea-urchin-like spiny rush. For the first time, I walked along the high ridge, the "unkempt" end of the park that slopes down to Visitacion Valley, a neighborhood of modest homes and government housing projects. From a distance, I could see the nine-hole Gleneagles golf course, which a friend told me is one of the most challenging in the city as the green was built on a slope. As I descended the hill into the valley and walked along the street, a woman sitting in a car opened her window and shouted, "Are you lost? " a bit concerned, I think, with suspicious characters, but when I answered, "No I'm from the other side of the hill," she smiled. We were neighbors after all. I had just checked out the community garden coming off McLaren Ridge, a garden it turns out, that her husband had cultivated for years. The weeds looked pretty dismal, snarling up the broken-down planter boxes, but the zucchini flowers optimistically blossomed in splashes of yellow, waiting for the garden's slated renovation.

* * *

Now they all come. The hipsters in their tie-dyed T-shirts for the Jerry Day concert, the early-morning walkers who clap their hands to get the blood flowing, the tai chi group who sweep over the tennis courts with long swords, the dog people who rescue the strays dumped in the park, the exhausted Asian parents with their two autistic sons holding small radios to their ears, listening to Latin music sung in Chinese. Blue herons, no longer skittish, wait patiently for me to jog past. The Canada geese break into the mallards' pond home, eat, poop, and move on to the next migratory party scene. It's true most who traverse this part of the city don't directly appreciate the ingenuity of invasives. I was one of those people, until I met those who knew the virtues and faults of these botanical wonders. Now I see open spaces, especially McLaren, as a reflection of those of us who walk along the untamed paths.

Kathleen de Azevedo's nonfiction has appeared in many publications including the *Los Angeles Times*, *Amèricas*, *Urban Mozaik*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Under the Sun*, and *Broad Street*. Her fiction has been published in magazines such as *Gettysburg Review* and *Boston Review*. Her novel of Brazilian immigrants in the United States, *Samba Dreamers*, won the 2006 Pen Oakland Josephine Miles Award, given to work exploring diversity and human rights issues.

HEARNE PARDEE

Corner, 2016
Acrylic and collage on paper, 19 x 25 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST

HEARNE PARDEE

Bench Diptych, 2016
Acrylic and collage on paper,
12 x 40 in (two parts)

COURTESY THE ARTIST

ALBERT GARCIA

Offering

Here, take this palmful of raspberries
as my gift. It isn't much

but we've often said our needs
are simple, some quiet

time alone on the patio
in the cool morning, coffee,

a few words over the newspaper.
I've rinsed these berries

so you can tumble them
right into your cereal, one minute

on the vine, the next in your bowl,
my hand to your mouth.

Let's say my words were as simply
sweet as these berries, chosen

as carefully, plucked and held,
then delivered as perfect

morsels of meaning. Not
what comes from my mouth, not

what you hear, which is never
what I mean to say. Will you take

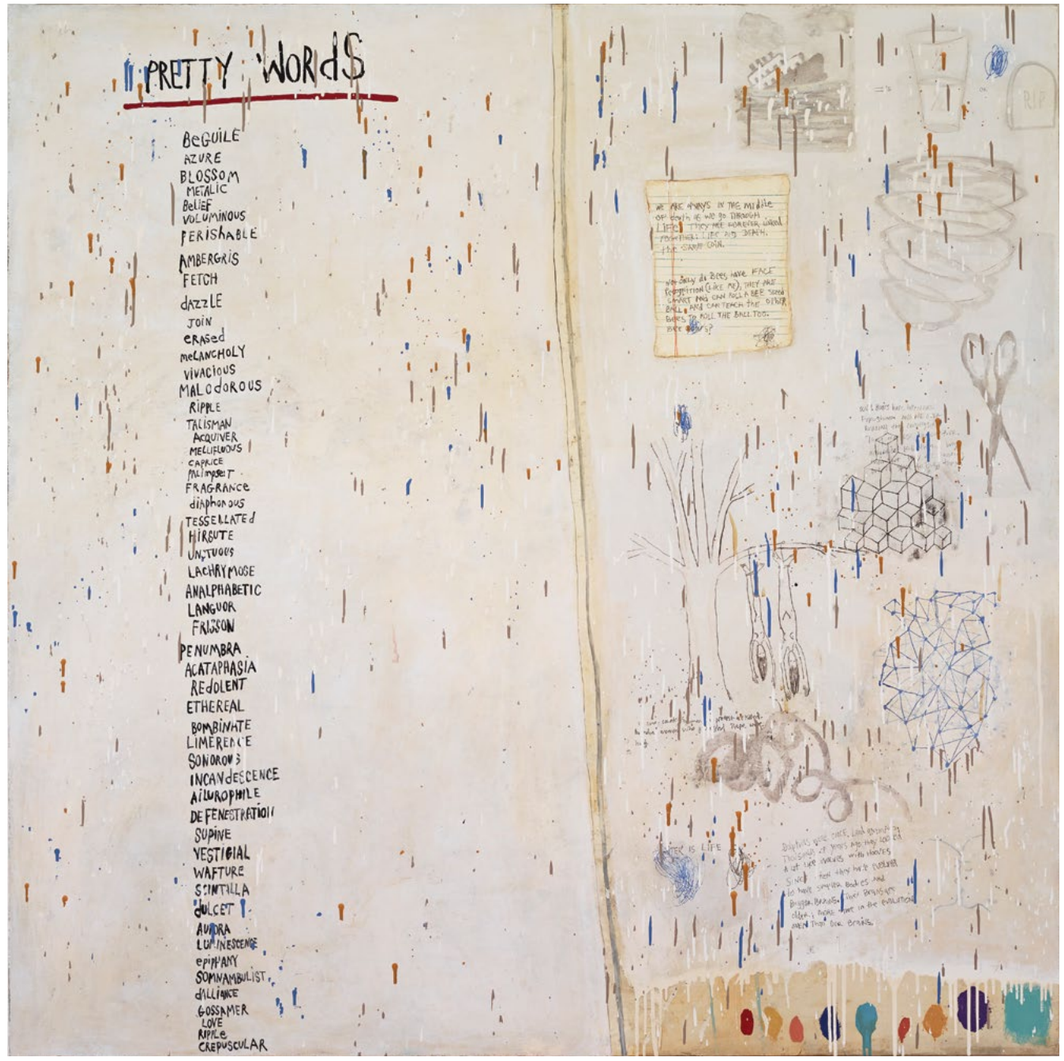
these berries? Will you feel their weight
on your tongue, taste their tang

as they slide into you, small, bright,
honest: the only gift I have to give?

Albert Garcia is a Northern California poet with three book publications: *Rainshadow* (Copper Beech Press), *Skunk Talk* (Bear Star Press), and *A Meal Like That* (Brick Road Poetry Press). Individual poems have appeared widely in journals such as *Prairie Schooner*, *North American Review*, *Poetry East, Yankee*, and *Willow Springs*. His work has been featured in Ted Kooser's American Life in Poetry and other online sites and anthologies. Having taught community college English for many years, he now works as an Vice President of Instruction at Sacramento City College.

SQUEAK CARNWATH

Tools for Poetry, 2016–2017
Oil and alkyd on canvas over panel
70 x 70 in



VIVIAN LAMARQUE

Miraculous Excavation

—Translated from the Italian by Zack Rogow

Among thousands and thousands of years studying your
history the overlays of
strata the leavings of the
fossils the concentric
rings of your years discovering
that delicate scratch you
left the broken traces the timeless
engraving that you are the nervous system of
your leaves studiously I'll seek you in the
unchanging architecture of the bright halo
of your madness of the breath of your
poetry trembling I'll excavate
and find the imprint of your initial T,
right here, I see.

Vivian Lamarque (1946– , full name Vivian Daisy Donata Provera Pellegrinelli Comba) is a contemporary Italian poet known for sharp social commentary, and an engaging, intimate, and direct voice. Author of eleven collections of poetry, she is also an important translator of a range of works from Baudelaire to Oscar Wilde to the Brothers Grimm.

Zack Rogow was a cowinner of the PEN/Book-of-the-Month Club Translation Prize for *Earthlight* by André Breton and winner of a Bay Area Book Reviewers Association (BABRA) Award for his translation of George Sand's *Horace*. He teaches in the low-residency MFA in writing program at the University of Alaska Anchorage.

SQUEAK CARNWATH

Unlock Love, 2018
Oil and alkyd on canvas over panel, 30 x 30 in.

SQUEAK CARNWATH

Confidence, 2013
Oil and alkyd on canvas over panel, 60 x 55 in

PHOTO CREDIT: LEE FATHERREE
ART © SQUEAK CARNWATH/LICENSED BY VAGA, NEW YORK, NY

JYOTIRMOYEE DEVI SEN

The Mistress Wife

—Translated from the Bengali by Apala G. Egan

The awaited invitation embossed with the royal seal arrived at last. She tore open the envelope in feverish haste and pored over the details. Rani Chandavatji, the third queen, had requested the pleasure of her company at a dance performance to be held at the palace. When Shethanijee was young, she had attended these festivities with her family, but, for some reason, the summonses had ceased. Throughout her childhood, during the afternoons when time hung heavy, her grandmother would unlock a treasure chest of tales and weave stories replete with castles and kings, and queens and concubines, to an audience of enthralled children.

The fabled abode loomed large over the kingdom and cast both its shadow and its spell over the inhabitants. During her preteen years, she would gaze as though in a dream at the edifice from her rooftop, impatient for the overtures to resume. When the maharaja and his sons rode on their elephants, the gilded *howdahs* on the pachyderms' backs swaying gently, she, along with her brothers, sisters, and cousins, would race to the veranda to catch a glimpse of the procession in the distance.

Holding the card in one hand, she waltzed to the wardrobe to select clothing fit for a royal visit. Long skirts, *choli* blouses and veils in yellow, green, and cerulean reflecting the seasons glimmered inside the armoire. Which outfit would catch the maharaja's eye, she wondered, as the silks and muslins rippled through her fingers. The crown prince of her childhood was now the king.

She heard her husband downstairs call out to a servant. The visions of regal opulence vanished to be replaced by the visage of her spouse; he was a plain man, some might call him ugly. Short, hunched, more dwarf than person, Shyamnath Sheth was the only son of a wealthy businessman whose property holdings alone might put some hereditary landlords, the *zamindars,* to shame. She had been given in marriage to him when she was barely in her teens; it had been an advantageous match, her parents said, that of all the moneyed families, his had been the most prosperous. Besides, what he lacked in looks was more than made up for by his financial acumen. Unkind people called him an impotent midget, but he had a son and daughter by her to prove otherwise.

Shethanijee opened all the jewelry boxes and drew out diamond-studded tiaras, pearl necklaces, gold chokers,

earrings, bangles, ruby rings, and emerald bracelets and laid them out on silver platters.

The woman's face stared back from one of the yet-empty gleaming trays and she lifted it up and continued gazing at the reflection, an absent frown on her brow. She was still attractive, but would her looks rival those of the king's concubines? Beauties from the entire kingdom were culled and brought to the palace, indeed many a family sold or gave their daughters to swell the harem ranks. Would the maharaja even glance in her direction? If only the invitation had arrived a few years earlier.

She scrutinized her countenance again with care—were there any crow's-feet? Her hair was no longer as luxuriant as in her youth, but in her expressive eyes lay hidden depths of emotion. The summons had come too late; she twirled the round tray and her mouth drooped. The lady gave a start when she realized that she was not glancing at a real mirror and replaced it on the table with a thud, but a while later picked it up and gazed at herself again. The sun's last rays through the window bathed the room in a rosy glow and she smiled. Her features were still charming, with arched eyebrows, curling lashes, a full-lipped mouth, all framed by a mass of dark hair.

Her husband entered the room in silence and stood nearby. He was very proud of his beautiful, witty wife and her exquisite taste in clothes.

"Going through your jewelry, I see. Do you want me to order some more for you?" he said.

Seeing her spouse's reflection, she lowered the make-believe mirror.

"No, I don't want any new necklaces, I will choose from these. What I would really like to wear are things that would appear unusual even to the queens."

Mr. Sheth seated himself while their two children, a stripling of a boy and a girl in her midteens, entered the room.

"I myself have never seen all our family baubles, although I do recall that there are a few stunning pieces," the man said. "My mother once heard my father mention multiple strands of pearls as well as a sapphire bracelet that my grandmother received as part of her dowry. She was the daughter of a prosperous businessman in Kathiawar. They should be here somewhere as she wore them on a palace visit."

"But that will be old stuff, nothing new to people there," the youngsters said.

Their mother laughed. "Yes, they are antique pieces no doubt, but those who have seen them before are long dead."

Both husband and wife sifted through the many boxes that lay strewn on the carpet. The woman opened marble containers inlaid with jade and carnelian, as well as carved wooden chests, and pulled out necklace after necklace. Mr. Sheth squinted at each one with a professional air before setting it aside.

His wife extracted some pearls. "Is this the one?"

The piece dangled from her fingers, rivulets of glistening milk-white globules. The outsize gold locket set with rubies and diamonds shot back fire in the rays of the setting sun.

Mr. Sheth's eyes widened and his jaw dropped. "Yes, that must be it. The local jewelers often send us their wares for approval, but I have never set eyes on anything like it."

The children stroked the pearls. Their mother selected that gem-studded creation, a hundred-year-old sapphire bracelet still in its original setting, gold chokers, some bangles, and a jewel-encrusted *tikli* for her hair.

She began daydreaming about her impending visit. The concubines no doubt were good-looking, but were the queens attractive as well? She had heard that women remained veiled at all royal festivities, except for the maharani. The beauty of the harem residents was legendary and their clothes, too, would be gorgeous. She herself would have to cover her head and face, but do it in such a manner so as to be able to peer at the assembled ladies.

Late one evening, the domed wooden carriage, pulled by two white oxen and accompanied by an escort of crimson-clad men holding flaming torches, made its way down the street. The conveyance, with heavy curtains cloaking its sides from top to bottom to shield the women from public gaze, came to a halt by Shethanijee's house. She had been busy with her toilette since midafternoon, and when the coach came, she climbed in with a handful of her maids. Once they reached the palace gates, they were whisked through a honeycomb of deserted passages by the eunuch who was the sole bridge between the outside and the mysterious world within.

The king and his queens sat at one end of the inner courtyard. Troupes of dancers, some in lime green, others in pinks, mauves, and blues, glided in and performed their routines to the tinkle of hand cymbals and haunting music. Enchanted, the merchant's wife drank in all the details through a tiny gap in her veil.

The show ended and the chief eunuch brought each guest, in order of her social rank, before the royal personages. The newcomer's turn arrived and she was escorted to their majesties and, at a signal from the guide, she bowed and raised palm to forehead, then extended her hand and presented the king the customary *nazar*, the token gift of a coin wrapped in spotless white linen. The ruler reached out and brushed his hand against her fingertips. His eyes swept over her figure as she bent over, the pearl necklace hanging low over the form-fitting blouse, the sapphire bracelet winking in the lamplight. She proceeded toward the maharani and half knelt; the queen, a frown creasing her brow, accepted the woman's homage.

No, Shethanijee was not mistaken; time had not yet passed her by. She might no longer have been in her first youth, but she was still attractive nonetheless; her lissome grace had been replaced by a voluptuous maturity, the virgin blushes, by a deceptive coyness. Kohl-rimmed eyes downcast, face hidden by a chiffon veil, she returned to her seat, demure and deferential.

Invitations began pouring in from the palace. The junior queens invited her to their private festivities as she always brought tidbits of salacious gossip from town, until the day came when the maharani herself sought her presence at a soirée. The ranis, who had never set foot beyond the palace walls, were fascinated by this woman from the world outside. Her manner was pleasing and her gifts more so. Garlands of fresh marigolds, still moist with dew, and bunches of jasmine were the frequent offerings she made the queens and, on occasion, she would present them with a choker or bracelet fashioned by her personal jeweler. Such pieces had a unique and distinctive charm, a change from the ornate items worn by royalty.

During the afternoons when the queens and their ladies-in-waiting played cards or chess, Shethanijee joined in and very wisely lost every game. If the king's consorts complained of poor health, she sat by their bedsides and soothed their fevered brows. Her largesse was not confined to those born to the purple; for their attendants and the many dancers she brought homemade pickles, spiced dumplings, vegetable fritters, and other edibles. She wore a new outfit for every visit and her long silk skirts, blouses, and veils shimmered in rich colors and were well matched. During the evenings she regaled her extended family with tales from the august abode, indeed, at home she was not the supplicant, but held court like their majesties.

The king's curiosity, too, was piqued. He had heard some of Shethanijee's stories through his queens and courtesans. The joys and sorrows of his subjects as well as the daily trials and tribulations of the common folk were news to him, so he would ask for more through his wives.

To the ladies of the harem, family life and the world outside were foreign. Shethanijee's chatter about children, husbands, wives, shopping, bazaars, and mundane domestic details evoked a vista of a forbidden world and in each woman, queen or concubine, sprang an unbidden longing. Curious, but with a sneaking sense of envy, they panted for more.

With kohl-rimmed eyes alight behind the filmy veil, the visitor poured forth a wealth of heavily embellished tales. Some were pure inventions, yet others bore some semblance to the truth, but all were recounted in a melodious voice. Her whole body quivered as she spoke, her *mehndi*-painted hands fluttered as she gestured and her earrings swung to and fro. At times she would give a coy toss of her head and with one hand tug at the veil—just enough to ruffle the brocaded edge.

The day arrived when the ruler himself, keen on meeting the person who had caused such a sensation, summoned her to his presence.

Before the king, she dropped her veil. She remained a frequent visitor to the palace, but now primarily to his apartments.

The maharani and the lesser queens, furious at this presumptuous woman, vented their anger at Rani Chandavatji. She had, after all, invited this creature into their midst. Their marriages were political alliances and none could claim to be the maharaja's darling, but nevertheless there was a nuanced hierarchy in the royal residence.

The third rani, incensed by Shethanijee's impudence, sent word through a messenger to the interloper's husband. He merely laughed. His wife was mistress to the maharaja, what a great source of pride, his own business would flourish even further, now that she had the royal ear.

The concubines were no less outraged, the monarch had barely a glance for them these days, so taken was he with the newcomer.

One afternoon at the third queen's villa, a young dancer approached Shethanijee. "You have such lustrous hair. May I show you a new type of coiffure?"

The lady, pleased at the compliment, complied. The teenager removed the older woman's filmy scarf. With great care she took off the gold *tikli* with the gleaming medallion from her head, then unclasped the earrings, uncoiled her tresses, and removed the brocade ribbons. Something else shone too, as the hair hung loose—a few strands of pure silver.

The girl giggled. "Oh, Shethanijee, you are going gray!"

The guest grabbed the *tikli*, put on the earrings, and quickly covered her head with the veil, the braids undone. In the sunlit room, her glance fell on her reflection in the mirror on the wall—the lines beneath the eyes seemed as pronounced as the furrows in the barley fields after a downpour.

Rani Chandavatji, reclining on a silver bedstead overlooking the inner courtyard, saw the tableau; while the maids wielded peacock-feather fans and a masseuse tended to her ankles, a faint smile appeared on her lips then vanished in an instant. Some of the attendants gave derisive smiles, others sniggered, and all those who had been discomfited by the visitor's brazen attempts to usurp the coveted position of the king's favorite could scarcely contain their glee.

Later that day, Shethanijee wept in mortification before the maharaja. The story tumbled out: how she had been tricked into loosening her hair and how the women had tittered, and the tales, all duly embellished, she poured into his sympathetic ear. She was careful to omit mention of the chalky streaks, but rather gave him to understand that the mirth was occasioned by her disheveled appearance deliberately caused by a danseuse in the third queen's entourage.

The tears were not shed in vain. Over a period of time, the privileges accorded to women of status ended for Rani Chandavatji—no longer did the maids arrive with a tray laden with betel leaf wraps from the royal refectory for her ladies-in-waiting to munch on during the afternoons. Offended, she repudiated all special benefits.

The scorching heat of the Rajasthan summers gave way to autumnal mists, presaging a crisp winter. The third rani caught a severe chill, and, as she lay supine with a raging fever, her cowives visited her from time to time.

The sovereign also received news of his spouse's sudden illness. The chief eunuch was dispatched to her bedchamber with a tray-load of medicine as well as unguents for her aching limbs.

One day the man arrived at her door, his manner deferential and tone solicitous. "His Majesty has enquired after your health, Your Majesty. The doctor will be coming soon. Do you have any special request or message for His Majesty?"

The queen, still smarting from the maharaja's slights, said, "He is very kind. I have no desires that he can possibly meet. Just tell him to remain ever hostage to that upstart, that would-be concubine."

Within a few weeks she succumbed to her malady. Ill health plagued many women in the harem, so her death caused no surprise. A grand funeral was held in her honor and there was a great public ritual display of sorrowing, but a while later the palace returned to its well-worn routines.

The ruler had no dearth of women to flatter, charm, and console him as the need arose, so the monarch's wife was soon a mere memory, but her parting taunt had hurt his pride, and continued to rankle. The precise details of his mistress's hair-loosening incident also came to his ears through his concubines, who themselves had heard the story from the maids. The number of snowy strands in the lady's hair had, moreover, multiplied tenfold in the local gossip.

One evening as Shethanijee came for her daily audience with the king, he kept gazing at her face for long periods of time in silence. During their amorous dalliances she had always managed to keep well coiffed, even when the gold *tikli* and hairpins ran askew. She was a breath of fresh air in the gilded dwelling. Her musical talent might not compare to that of his courtesans, who were well versed in the arts, but her tart wit and news about town were enlivening. She was a born conversationalist and knew how to please her royal lover. That night, however, the easy chatter and glib flattery bored him; the novelty of having a townswoman visit him was beginning to pall.

He interrupted and faced his companion with engaging curiosity. "You have children, don't you?" Without waiting for a reply, he reached out and twisted a strand of her long curls around his forefinger. "How old are they? I have heard that you have a daughter. Is she as attractive as you? Why don't you bring her along one day?"

He gazed at his mistress's heart-shaped face framed by her sleek tresses, and in him stirred the longings for a more youthful, nubile Shethanijee with gleaming limbs and clouds of dark hair.

The lady started. Her smile vanished. Protective maternal eyes glittered at the maharaja through a courtesan's veil. Her coquetry disappeared and her lower lip quivered.

The silence was broken by a trembling voice. "But my girl is very young, besides, she just got married."

"Young? How old is she?"

The woman's voice was muffled and she looked down at the floor. "She turned fifteen last year."

Her paramour's tone was amused, his manner teasing. "Fifteen or sixteen! Oh, then it is true what Rani Chandavatji's ladies said, that you are getting on in years."

The mother remained wordless and her head drooped. It was at her behest that the queen's privileges had been taken away. Face flaming she bore her lover's snubs in silence.

"On your next visit please bring your daughter along. I will order the carriage for you," he said.

The royal conveyance arrived at Shethanijee's doorstep a few days later and returned to the palace, but with only one passenger not two. The eunuch guided her to the maharaja's villa where a dance performance was in progress. She bowed low before the king and begged forgiveness for her lone visit and explained that the teenager's in-laws had taken the girl to meet relatives in Bikaner, a town some distance away. Jewelry glittering, ashen faced behind her veil, she gazed at him in anguish.

The sovereign, enjoying the pirouettes of his courtesans, barely glanced at her. When the evening ended, a servant escorted the visitor back to the waiting carriage and informed the lady that the monarch had commanded her to visit him every night.

A separate suite was set aside in the women's quarters. Daily, she sat awaiting her lover but his visits were infrequent, and she sat in unaccustomed solitude most of the time. A few days later, word came through an emissary that she was to make her home there for a while.

Shethanijee's new residence was a room furnished with an ivory-inlaid bedstead and enameled brass tables. Her youthful liveliness had vanished, her eyes were bereft of their sparkle, and the tiny wrinkles by her mouth were more pronounced. No longer could she regale the cloistered inhabitants with gossip from town, she was a prisoner like the concubines. Her hand trembled when applying kohl around the eyes and her hair had lost its sheen.

The ladies in the harem were stunned by the metamorphosis. She, who had been a much feted guest, an object of both admiration and envy, now shared the fate of a discarded mistress. Some whispered among themselves that the woman was unwell and needed a doctor.

One day the eunuch stopped by. "How are you, madam?"

"Please ask His Majesty to allow me to go home. I am not feeling well," she said.

He left the room and returned some time later with a tray of tonics. "The maharaja has sent these. The doctor has been summoned, so please convalesce here. You can return once you are better."

She squinted at the cups. "What kind of medicine is that?"

The man remained silent. The woman had been guilty of *lèse-majesté*. Why, so many people in the kingdom were eager to offer their daughters to the palace. He stroked his upper lip. "I don't know."

For almost a month, Shethanijee languished in that room. Her hair loose and lank, and her face robbed of its habitual gaiety, she stared unseeingly at the distant hills visible from the window. Questions arose in her mind, but she stilled them with difficulty. Her self-assurance had vanished and the lighthearted banter with the king was now a mere memory.

One evening when the eunuch arrived to ply her with the daily potions, she turned and faced him. "When can I leave? How long do I have to swallow this stuff? It doesn't make me any better."

The attendant eyed her in silence. "You must drink it, as it is His Majesty's command. He only wants you to get well before he orders the carriage to send you home. This herbal extract is used for the fevers and chills that sicken so many of our women." He paused for a moment. "Why, Rani Chandavatji used to take this medication."

Shethanijee swung around and stared at him, her eyes widening. She sat in silence while the many tales of the

harem she had heard as a child crowded into her brain. She tried to speak, but no sound emerged from her throat.

The aide, motioning the maids to remain quiet, turned and left.

The royal guest passed a sleepless night, drenched in a cold sweat. The golden moon, large and full, bathed the rooftop gardens in an ethereal glow, but she saw only monstrous shapes and deep shadows.

Next morning, the doctor made his visit. He sat on one side of the curtain hung to protect feminine modesty while the maids by Shethanijee's bed answered his questions and received instructions.

Suitable invalid fare must be given, heard the sick lady, who lay weak with fatigue. She almost cried out to the physician for he was the only link to the outside world, but she could barely lift her head from the pillow. Would he listen, or would he dismiss her fears as the imaginings of an overwrought patient? The women who attended her also tended to the draperies and the callers without. Could she trust any of the servants and plead an audience with the monarch and beg to be sent home? Were there any allies within these luxurious walled precincts? In her heyday as a much-awaited visitor, she had spawned enemies, not friends.

Midday, the maids brought vegetable broth ideal for an invalid's palate, but the aroma merely sickened her, and the bowl remained untouched. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she lay outstretched on the divan; she longed for her misshapen husband's tenderness and the children's laughter.

When evening arrived, female servants lit the oil lamps in the room and the eunuch entered with a tray of herbal tonics.

Shethanijee half rose and clutched at the pillows. "That medicine tastes bitter. I am not going to take it anymore."

The man averted his face and fiddled with the items on the bedside table. "You will get better, my lady. Drink it up. It has been sent to you by His Majesty."

The attendants crowded in. One lifted her up and another pressed the glass to her lips. Afterward, the male aide left the room with the empty container. The patient sank back against the cushions and the women cooled her with long-handled fans.

Confused thoughts screamed inside the prisoner's brain. It had been her ardent wish since childhood to be invited to the palace and here she lay, at the mercy of the man she had sought to enslave. Was she being punished for not procuring her offspring to whet the maharaja's appetite? Would she be released if she did? The teen lived with her in-laws' extended family, besides, it was better that she alone suffer. The king had a surfeit of women, was he being merely punitive at her defiance? Or perhaps this was mere royal caprice, and he might release her at some future date? He was surrounded by beauties adept in the art of coquetry . . . what if he forgot altogether?

The shadows lengthened on the rooftop gardens and the mynah birds took wing.

Jyotirmoyee Devi Sen was born in 1894 in the kingdom of Jaipur, Rajasthan, where her family worked at the royal court. She wrote in her native language of Bengali under the pen name Jyotirmoyee Devi during her long widowhood. She also spoke Hindi and English. Her stories are based on her personal observations and experiences and deal with the timeless challenges faced by women and men in all walks of life. She won several awards including the prestigious Rabindra Puraskar for Bengali writing in 1973. Her work is part of the Women's Studies curriculum at Jadavpur University, Kolkata. She died in 1988.

Apala G. Egan grew up in India and is fluent in Bengali and English and also speaks Hindi. A former community college instructor, she devotes her time to translating and writing. She has visited Rajasthan numerous times to research the backdrop of the author's fiction and memoirs.

SQUEAK CARNWATH

Our Beautiful World, 2011
Oil and alkyd on canvas over panel, 70 x 70 in

PHOTO CREDIT: LEE FATHERREE
ART © SQUEAK CARNWATH/LICENSED BY VAGA, NEW YORK, NY

SARA MICHAS-MARTIN

You Can Do Everything Right

In the backyard of the backyard party in the dream
I applied sunscreen encouraged a bathroom stop
kept carrots and cheese from touching
measured potential encounters with sharp or
partially falling objects confirmed there wasn't
a helmet for the spine how bikes don't work well
in water and then left my child too long
very long in the pool *Mom. Look.*
he said pulling back his towel
a red peony bloomed large from his chest
a feathered injury raw chemical burn
heart beating wetly through the pleats
I'd been practicing distance because
eighty percent of my visual field
conscious/unconscious is him squared
and muscled divided from rocks darting
between wheeled figures climbing on solid
or flexible structures *Look Mom look*
he said earlier raising a leg over the edge of a pool
with no visible bottom I watched him balance
saw him pleased with his effort at balance
before moving on to the pool sloshing out
artificial waves turbulent and too loud
I trailed behind collected dropped crackers
at the shallow pool children stalked around
like alligators which was of interest to him
which for me (me me) meant
I could practice distance I could
aim for adult conversation unbroken
until a dog abruptly without cause
got up from the grass and not really then
did I turn around or look closer
I followed through without fracture
being over here and without disturbance
him being over there without circling back
as one does to the difference between
a scream or exaggerated sneeze
hearing unreliable also time being what it is
wine tampering with my hold of it then
a ball sailed over a lawn chair a forgotten
pie fork and a dog without visible cause
got up from the grass and not then
did I put my glass down did I go over
I held out my necessary attempt
the length of 20 paces I was loosening
my radius and I thought coming next
was the tedious exchange of wet
to dry clothes and I was not ready
to bargain or wrestle not yet.

Sara Michas-Martin is the author of *Gray Matter*, winner of the Poets Out Loud Prize and nominated for the Colorado Book Award (Fordham University Press, 2014). Her essays and poems are forthcoming or have appeared in the *American Poetry Review*, *The Believer*, *Best New Poets*, *Harvard Review*, *jubilat*, *Kenyon Review*, and elsewhere. She teaches creative writing at Stanford University and lives in Carmel Valley with her husband and son.

JOSE DE JESUS RODRIGUEZ

Untitled, 2017
Acrylic, airbrush, and oil on canvas, 48 x 50 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST

CHARLES JENSEN

Our Mission Statement

We pledge allegiance
to the cause; we pledge our lives
for lives we do not own; we pause

in line for groceries to stare into
the eyes of homeless vets, their
bodies pooled like heavy drapes outside

the store; we brake for
animals, especially the baby ones;
we set our minds to making good

where only bad resides; we pledge
our faith to all, give all to all that
faith implies; we harvest what we

sow and pass it on to those with
nothing of their own; we build up
houses where there's never been

a home; we place our hands where
even doctors fear to heal, our skin
on skin as thick as Naugahyde or

lemon peels; we pledge ourselves
to everyone and all that work requires;
we go to bed and dream although

we never really tire of work for work
is not a curse; it calls us
from ourselves the way the mentally

disturbed hear voices whispering
conspiracies except our voices have
a conscience and a mission and we

never seek to harm; we prop the world
up on our shoulders; we live beneath
the mountain where we know we'll have

to spend our evenings returning lost,
untethered boulders to their craggy little
moorings; and when we wake each day,

the cause awakens too, all over again,
is born anew inside of us; we live
the cause and pledge allegiance to its

promise of a world in which a problem
fades away the way a comet points its
nose and flies into the distance,

so determined, so composed.

Charles Jensen is the author of six chapbooks, including *Story Problems* (2017). His second collection of poems, *Nanopedia*, is forthcoming in 2018 from Tinderbox Editions. His poems have appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *New England Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*. He lives in Los Angeles.

JOSE DE JESUS RODRIGUEZ

Untitled, 2016
Acrylic, airbrush, and parachute cloth on canvas, 46 x 50 in

JOSE DE JESUS RODRIGUEZ

Untitled, 2016
Acrylic, airbrush, sculpy, and oil on canvas, 49 x 48 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST

PAUL SKENAZY

Temper CA

It was July—not the skin-scorching July I knew as a child growing up in Temper but the overcast chill of San Francisco summer mornings. I was at my kitchen table feasting on my usual Saturday breakfast of self-loathing, wondering why I needed to drink myself into a hangover every weekend Angie was away. Dad's call was a relief.

"Joy, your grandpa died last night."

"He finally drank himself to death?"

Grandpa Isaac presided over Temper General, the family store, and the mines and houses my ancestors accumulated over the last 150 years. When I knew him he smoked cigars and drank bourbon, every day. "Never before noon," he liked to say, though only about the cigars.

"Seems that way," Dad said. "I wanted you to know. You used to be close."

"Not that close," I said.

"Don't rewrite the past on my account," Dad said.

I let that go.

"How's Boise these days? The camera store? Madge?" Madge was wife number three.

"Fine, fine, and fine. But I'm in Temper. Been here for a few weeks."

"Doing what?"

"Visiting old friends," he answered. "The memorial and burial will be next Saturday so your uncles and their families can get here. Come. Stay a few days."

A memorial? Grandpa was a crotchety bastard who made Dad's childhood a horror and put an end to mine. It would be good to see the old man six feet under.

I told Dad I'd be there by Friday afternoon.

"Come to the house," he said.

"What house?"

"Ours."

The last time I saw our—Dad's—house in the mid-1990s, the windows and sliding doors were gone, the paint chipped and yellow. The roof split under me when I tried to climb to the second story. The surrounding woods were a tangle of broken branches and narrow paths that led nowhere.

"Are you camping out?" I asked.

"Just come to the house."

* * *

I was sitting at a stoplight that afternoon when I burst into tears. Once the crying started, it didn't stop. I couldn't predict when the bawling would come on: at my desk, cutting radishes and jicama, watching Jon Stewart. Bourbon didn't help.

I thought of calling Mom for sympathy but she was off on her annual month of volunteer work in Yosemite, far from a phone line. My one and only Angie was in Houston. She'd become the golden girl of the American Culinary Institute, financial handywoman who patched up accounting leaks that were costing the company tens of thousands of dollars. Her rescue missions for ACI were lined up like planes waiting for a runway: Houston, Las Vegas, Boston. She'd disappear for three- or four-week immersions in one school after another, then fly home for a week in town with me. I felt pinched into the intermissions of her life like someone stealing a kiss during TV commercials.

The two of us had learned long ago that we ended phone calls feeling farther apart than when we started talking. Saturday night I called her anyway.

"I don't get it. You hate the man."

"Right. The tears are crazy."

"Do you need me to come home?"

I paused, staring at the calendar. It told me that Angie was off to Las Vegas in less than a week.

"I'm not even sure I'll get out of here on time," she said. "There's talk of a law suit."

I ended up holding Angie's hand, virtually at least. It took her ten more days to sort through the mess. By then I was with Dad in Temper—sleepless, but not from grief.

* * *

That Sunday I had a gig photographing a wedding. It was after-hours work I did to supplement what I earned writing grants and handling newsletters and publicity for the local food bank. Temper Photography, my card said. Weddings, bar mitzvahs, christenings, funerals—whatever you paid me for. The extra money let me travel, buy clothes that weren't on sale, and eat out when I wanted.

This one was standard stuff: a large hotel ballroom, tuxedos for the groomsmen, pale-green dresses for the bridesmaids. I wandered the room, took portraits of everyone who would stop long enough, and sat at a table with kids playing tic-tac-toe during my breaks. I was packing up my equipment when one of the bridesmaids came over to me, introduced herself as Penny, and asked me for my card. I'd noticed her, and noticed her looking at me. She was tall, thin, narrow shouldered, and small breasted. She took a great photo: a lean, sharply featured face with unusually full lips that looked even better on my DSLR screen than in real life. I found a card, handed it to her.

"Do you have an event coming up I can help with?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," she said. "How about a drink downstairs in the bar, or I call you in a day or two?"

What is it about weddings? This wasn't the first come-on, woman or man. But it was the first time I said yes. Do I thank Grandpa for that, or my ongoing if unexpressed loneliness with Angie and her travels? I'm still not sure.

The bar led to her room, which led to a game of spin the bottle, just the two of us. I left with my clothes on, hers mostly on, the bed messed, a hickey when Penny's lust turned aggressive, and a date for drinks two days later. The drinks led to her house, an introduction to her roommate, Alf, and another evening of almost before a last, long goodnight kiss. We took little time to fill in biographical details but I found out that Penny grew up in Virginia, escaped to college in Austin, and worked in IT. I let her know about Temper, my recent flood of tears, my job, my divorced parents—and Angie. She didn't blink—just gnawed at a new spot on my neck and went to see if she had any more wine in the kitchen.

I knew if I went back to Penny's again I'd stay the night. So I made a date with her for a downtown bar the Thursday before I left for Temper. We sat next to each other, our hands resting softly on each other's thighs. When we walked to our cars, we held each other for a long time.

"I'll miss you," I said.

"You don't have to. At least not yet."

I smiled and repeated her words back to her.

"Not yet."

She hugged me.

"Text me," she said before she rose on her toes and opened her mouth briefly against mine.

I kissed her back. She reached into her pocket to pull out a miniature silver railroad spike on a chain.

"I saw this. It made me think of what you've told me about Temper."

I let the chain dangle from my hand, then put it around my neck.

"There was no railroad running through Temper," I told her.

"That's okay. It's there now. Or will be once you arrive."

I hugged her, rubbed my hand down the length of her back, to her butt, then back up to her neck before I let go.

* * *

I loved to dazzle friends with stories about Temper.

"You really lived in tie-dyes and overalls? Built your own house? Smoked dope all day?" I'd nod and add tales of black bears and wolves—some of them true.

The Temper where I grew up in the 1970s was a far cry from the mining town it once was. My great-great-great-grandparents Constance and Solomon founded the place in 1848 when they opened a general store to cater to the gold seekers who poured into the Sierra foothills by the thousands. When the placers gave out, most of the miners headed elsewhere. Hard-rock mining followed and left the area honeycombed with underground tunnels famous for their ghostly moans. For my fifth birthday, Dad and Mom gave me a human skull they claimed came from one of the deserted mines. I called it Solomon, after the family patriarch. I'd rub the top of its head for luck and talk to it every night before bed. I left it behind when I took off with Mom.

I hadn't been to Temper for thirteen years, hadn't lived there for thirty. When I last saw it in 1995, it still seemed a backwash bypassed by time—rundown and vacant, almost as tiny as when I grew up there. But as I turned east off Highway 49, my car air-conditioner on full blast in the ninety-eight-degree heat, I passed two billboards advertising new housing developments. One offered glimpses of townhouse units encircling small pools; the other pictured two- and three-bedroom luxury homes alongside a golf course. Where would the water come from for the lawns and fairways, I wondered: all I saw around me were the dry, late-summer hay-colored California grasslands. Moreland Properties offered both developments. Cheryl Moreland, the real estate mogul Dad ran off with. I didn't drive all this way to have to deal with her again.

Temper circa 2008 was . . . a town, not the jumble of worn roadside buildings I remembered. A small park of young oaks and sycamores had replaced the grocery. There was a stoplight where Main and Vein, the renamed county roads, met. I drove by a candy and ice cream store, a wine bar, and a bank—a real bank, not the counter and metal grate in a corner of Temper General that had passed for a bank in my day. The former filling station was a two-story building, Temper Historical Museum and Jail. The sidewalks were filled with men and women in shorts and tees carrying packages and holding children's hands. Temper General was a comforting eyesore: the front porch with its wooden steps, the double doors, and the worn exterior in need of paint. It was the only thing that looked like I remembered. I drove through as fast as I could, anxious to find Dad.

* * *

In the 1970s, Bitter Root Road was a thin dirt byway to and from town: two miles of muddy, potholed swamp in the winter and a parched, dusty, rock-strewn path in the summer heat. It dead-ended at our house, an A-frame surrounded by a forest of oaks and pines.

When I turned onto Bitter Root that Friday, I found the road had been paved and renamed Ivy Lane. The entry to our house was surrounded by two gated, brick-walled properties that sloped uphill where no hills had existed when I lived here.

I braked as soon as I turned into our gravel driveway. The house had had a face-lift. Redwood steps led up to the deck. Sliding glass doors reflected the late-afternoon sun. There was a coat of fresh paint on the outside walls. The roof looked new.

Dad was sitting on the deck, dressed as always—jeans and a T-shirt, wire-frame glasses slipping down his nose. He'd lost some hair since Christmas when Angie and I had visited him in Boise. He got up and headed my way. There was more pride in his smile than he usually let show—or felt, if I knew anything about him.

"Surprise!"

"You did this? When? How?"

"The last five or six years."

"Why?"

"I'd rather you'd have said, 'Wow!'"

"Sorry. Wow. Wow. Wow! Now why?"

One of Dad's shrugs.

"It seemed the right thing to do. And I could finally afford to rebuild."

"Someone die? Besides Grandpa, I mean."

He smiled. "Sort of."

He turned to look at his work, then down at me, still sitting in my car.

"There's watermelon and fresh lemonade inside," Dad said.

I grabbed my bag and camera. Dad led me through the sliding glass doors into the kitchen: a table I'd never seen before, new Mexican tiles on the counter, a polished oak floor.

I was in shock. I sat and picked at the melon and drank a glass of lemonade.

"Want a tour?" Dad asked.

"How about I just wander?"

He nodded.

* * *

I walked through rooms that no longer resembled my memories: 2009 upscaled versus 1979 dropped out. The raw plywood floors of my childhood had been covered with oak. The living room was spotless. A large metal storage cabinet and a folding table stood in one corner. A few enlarged photographs of Grandpa and Grandma were spread across the table. The fireplace sparkled. Dad or someone had ground out the dirt and black stains from the brick hearth. There was a mantle now, with two photos of me: one as a child, one from last summer. Director chairs sat across from the couch, a small oak veneer coffee table in

between. They made a discreet social arrangement in an otherwise vast room that used to be stuffed with oversize pillows and mattresses.

The rest of the house followed suit—open space, new floors, repainted walls, clean windows. There was nothing in Uncle Thomas's old room. Mine had a twin bed and frame with a chair alongside, a lamp sitting on it. Upstairs in Mom and Dad's room there was a platform bed, two low night tables, and a few clothes hanging neatly in the closet. There was a towel drying over the shower curtain rod, a throw rug on the bathroom floor. The bed was made.

This was not where I grew up.

* * *

Though Dad left Temper when he was sixteen, the town never left him. It lingered in ways Mom had no hint of until the opportunity to return arrived in a letter from his grandfather's lawyer, along with a two-sentence note from his father.

Mom and Dad met in Berkeley and fell in love working for McCarthy in the '68 campaign. (Dad still has a McCarthy pin on the denim jacket he wears everywhere.) When they graduated in 1970, they got married and went off to Europe to lick their political wounds. Nixon was in the White House, MLK and Bobby Kennedy were dead. Altamont had turned Woodstock into a sentimental memory. Vietnam went on and on.

"We had to get out," Mom said to me when I'd ask about those years. "The U.S. wasn't the world we wanted to live in. So we went looking for another one. Little did we know it's just the same crapshoot wherever you go."

It was the spring of 1974 when the letters found us. We were living somewhere in Spain, a small town between Barcelona and Valencia. It was one of many European villages we wandered in and out of those first years of my life, almost interchangeable it seems to me when I try to recapture that time through Dad's photos.

I was supposed to be asleep. Mom was sitting at the table, her hands folded in her lap. Dad was walking back and forth, papers in his hand.

"This is our chance to make a home for ourselves. For Joy," he said.

"We've got a home, David. Here. The three of us. Wherever we are."

"But Temper is where I grew up. It's me, my roots."

"It's not you, not anymore. And certainly not me. You left Temper because you hated it. And your father."

Dad didn't answer her, just continued to walk back and forth, slapping the envelope and letters with one hand while he held them with the other. I lay there quietly, not wanting either of them to notice me.

Mom got up and stood in front of Dad so he had to stop moving. She tried to hug him but he pulled away, stepped around her, and went over to the table. I watched him put the letters down, then pat them again and again. Then he banged his fist down on the table. I let out a cry and sat up, so suddenly that they both turned to stare at me. Mom came over and hugged me.

"It drives me crazy that my father stands in the way of us moving back to California and living off the land the way we've always dreamed we might," Dad said.

"Then don't let him."

Mom said that softly, in a whisper. And with so much love, I've always thought, looking back. Dad must have felt it, that heart offering itself to him.

Mom stared at him.

"Just answer one question," Mom said.

"What?" he asked.

"Are you going back to make a home for us or to spite your father?"

"You know the answer, Harriet."

She did, pretended she didn't, and we moved to Temper.

* * *

It was Mom, not Dad, who kept those letters and showed them to me years later. I was thirteen, we were moving to San Francisco, and Mom was sorting through boxes of photos and papers. Dad's grandfather Amos left Dad five thousand dollars and a parcel of prime farmland. Along with the behest came an offer from Dad's father, Isaac, to buy the land from him for ten thousand dollars. "The money should support you and that socialist you married until you both grow up and get jobs," he wrote. I've often wondered what Dad and Mom would have done if Grandpa had just offered the money without needing to needle. But that was as impossible for Grandpa as it was for Dad not to return to Temper.

When I finished reading, I looked up at Mom, who was wrapping a small perfume bottle in paper. At that moment in time, 1984, Mom the socialist worked in a yarn shop in Sacramento. Her hair had turned white. She spent her nights knitting afghans in front of the TV.

I asked Mom why she agreed to live in Temper.

"We were young enough, or I was, that I thought we could do anything. Even handle Isaac."

She paused for a moment, staring down at Grandpa's offer.

"We wanted out," she continued. "Any way we could. And there was not much more out than Temper, California. It was horse and buggy in a convertible world."

"More rusty pickup if you ask me," I said.

"Your dad wanted to show Isaac he could make a home for himself and us. Something better than the way he grew up."

"How did that turn out?" I asked, knowing the answer.

* * *

At the end of my tour, I stood on the deck outside Dad's bedroom, looking out to the trees and creek. Dad came up behind me and leaned in the doorway: "You approve?"

"It's not something to approve or disapprove of, Dad."

"But it's not what you remember."

"No. No one is where they used to be."

"You don't like it."

"I don't not like it. I don't know it. It's come back from the dead like in a zombie movie."

"It's yours. I've rebuilt it for you."

I stared at him, looked back at the bedroom, then at him again.

"I wasn't there a lot of your life, Joy," Dad said. "That haunts me. I know those years can never be reclaimed. But building is what I'm good at."

"What am I going to do with a house in Temper, Dad?"

"I don't know. Live in it, I hope. Or use it as a way to get out of San Francisco when you need to. Or sell it. I suspect Cheryl would be happy to take it off your hands."

That let me change the subject.

"Why didn't you tell me that Cheryl is in town?"

He was surprised by the question.

"Did you see her?"

"No. Just her billboards. New housing projects, a golf course?"

He nodded.

"And she wants to buy Temper General," he said.

"What does she plan to do with a general store?"

Dad stopped me.

"How about we postpone that topic until dinner. That will give you time to get used to your new home. I opened some wine, put out chips and salsa, and bought a rib eye to grill. You used to like to shuck corn when we lived here."

I smiled, went over, hugged him, and told him how amazing the house looked.

"It's a beautiful gift, Dad. I'm just in shock."

"Good. Stay that way for the time being. At least until after dinner."

* * *

We ate quietly, both I suspect waiting for the other to start.

Finally I said, "Okay. Before we get to Temper General: the money for this remodel? And what are those monstrosities where the woods were?"

"They're the money. About ten years back, Madge and I were strapped. So I called Cheryl. I had heard she was doing a lot of real estate in town. I asked her to put most of my land up for sale. She told me I'd get a lot more if I sold it all instead of holding on to the area right around the house. But I said no, and she managed to make me more than even she expected on the deal. Madge and I paid our bills and the rest went into rebuilding. Unfortunately you don't have control over what people do once you sell."

I nodded.

"Now back to Cheryl and the store?"

"From what I hear, Cheryl wants to convert the store and the warehouse buildings around it into a mini-mall. Dad wouldn't sell. You know Isaac when he's decided something."

"Uncle Aaron and Uncle Saul will?" I asked.

"First chance they get. I've been trying to talk them into holding on to the store until the dust settles. They won't listen. The recession hasn't been good to either of them. They could use the cash."

Dad started piling dishes in the sink. I pushed him away, told him to sit, and found the soap.

I found him sitting in the living room sorting through his photos.

"I've made copies of all the Temper photos for you;

I thought you might like to have them around once you start using the place."

The world through a viewfinder: Mom and Dad bought a banged-up Airstream for us to live in while they built our house. Once the house was livable, the Airstream turned into Dad's darkroom. Dad's camera turned into his life obsession.

I was looking at some photos from the years after we first moved here when Dad glanced down at his watch and put his hand on my shoulder.

"I'm glad you're here. Really glad. Keep looking at these. I have to go."

"You needed at the Nugget?" I teased, mentioning the local bar.

"Something like that," he said with a smile. "I'll see you in the morning. The funeral is at nine."

And that was that. Out the door, into his truck.

I went to the kitchen, opened a bottle of beer, and went back to the photos. They brought back the smell of Mom and Dad when they'd take me on their lap at the end of a day, with sweat wetting their T-shirts, a beer in hand, Mom with her cigarettes, me with sawdust powdering my hair. They bought me a miniature tool set—hammer, screwdriver, ax and saw—and let me help pull out bent nails and have my way with scraps of board. I would carry sandwiches out for the crew and munch my way through my days on potato chips and Kool-Aid. Late afternoons I'd try to escape the heat by standing in the creek or wandering off into the woods.

In the few photographs Dad let someone else take of him, he wears shirts torn at the neck, has a Paul McCartney beard and John Lennon glasses, and grins awkwardly at the camera. What I didn't notice when I was younger is how much he looks like his father. I stared at the blowups Dad had made of Grandpa Isaac for the funeral service. The resemblance was unmistakable. Dad did his best to disguise it with his beard, glasses, and long hair. But the pointed shape of his face: that was Isaac. The eyes weren't quite the same: Isaac's were round and recessed, Dad's more narrow, almost pointed ovals. But the nose, the slightly protruding ears, and the forehead and receding hairline were a match. I wondered if Mom recognized the similarities those years we lived here, and if she ever mentioned them to Dad.

My Polaroids: where were they? I think it was my sixth birthday when Mom and Dad bought me the camera. All their friends chipped in for what seemed an unlimited supply of film. I would snap pictures for a while and then forget about it. I'd find it again and shoot everything I could, night and day. Then I'd misplace it. Eventually I lost it somewhere, or left it behind when Mom and I left town.

I hadn't thought about those photos for years. I couldn't imagine Dad getting rid of them; he was meticulous to a fault.

* * *

I felt disoriented: Dad, the house, Grandpa, Temper. I took an Ambien and texted Angie: *Surprises. Could use you and your bookkeeping skills.*

Houston was two hours ahead, so I didn't expect an answer that night. Then I sent another text, to Penny: *You're on my mind.*

She wrote back immediately: *Too heady. Let me know when I'm on your lips.*

* * *

Temper, Saturday morning. A perfect day for a funeral.

It was already hot when the sun woke me at 6:00 a.m. I heard Dad upstairs. A bag of coffee and a French press were waiting on the counter. While the water boiled, a beep told me I had a text. It was from Angie.

Crazy here. Might get to SF *next Wednesday if you're there.*

I texted back.

Depends on Dad.

Angie must have been near her phone.

Let me know. If not I'm going to Vegas. A hint about the surprises?

I'm house rich. And Cheryl's around.

OMG!!! Can't wait to hear.

Dad had showered and was dressed for the funeral.

"I didn't know you owned a suit, Dad."

"This is your Uncle Saul's. I asked him to bring an extra for me."

"The tie and shoes?"

"His too. Shoes are a little tight but otherwise a good fit, right?"

"You'll do," I told him, giving him a hug before I went off to dress myself.

* * *

As we drove through Main Street, I saw that all the stores were closed, with signs saying they'd open again at noon. Black ribbons were draped over one entrance after another, the flag in the park set at half-mast.

Dad saw my surprise.

"It's always been this way for the Tempers, though I've never been sure if the town closes down from respect or fear. Doesn't matter, I suppose. This is likely the last time."

"Last of the Mohicans," I said.

"What?" Dad asked.

"Grandpa said that to me once, about himself. We were walking in the cemetery. I didn't get what he meant. 'The end of the line,' he told me."

"Sounds like him," Dad said. "Managed to forget me and my brothers, and you."

He didn't forget. I decided not to tell Dad the rest of what Grandpa said to me then. "Aaron and Saul ain't coming back here except to put me in the ground," he told me. "Your dad—I don't know where he came from. And you're a girl. Not your fault."

I changed the subject.

"I couldn't find my Polaroids in the photos. Do you remember where they went?"

Dad didn't say anything for a moment.

"You gave those to your grandfather."

That rang a vague bell.

"Why would I do that?"

"Your mom and I wondered the same thing."

"What'd he do with them? Any idea?"

"No," he said. "I can't say."

* * *

When we arrived in Temper, Dad's high school friends awaited us: Amy and Bobby, Gwen and Charlie, and Preacher, who moved through too many women those years to keep track of. Josiah Baldwin II was his full name but we already called him Preacher because of his dad, minister of the local Congregational church we went to each Christmas Eve. I remember nights around an outdoor fire when I would fall asleep with my head in Mom's lap while the adults imagined their utopias. Next morning I'd wake up huddled between my parents, encircled by three or four couples sleeping on mattresses strewn across raw plywood.

Dad liked to say he was a redneck by day, a hippie by night, a student in his dreams. Mom hadn't so much as nailed picture hooks to the wall, but she learned fast.

They designed as they went. You could do that in Temper then—no one to inspect, or no one you didn't know. Work halted for days at a time from lack of funds, then would leap forward in more flush times. Downstairs consisted of a kitchen and living room along one side and two bedrooms on the other. Steep stairs led to a narrow hallway, bedroom, and bathroom. We had a small garden where Mom grew broccoli, beets, lettuce, tomatoes, and corn.

And cannabis. Dope was our cash cow. We didn't bother with details: CBD, THC, ACDC. Life was simpler then: plant, nurture, harvest, sell. In plastic bags or Saran Wrap. At the Nugget, our local tavern; at Tony's Diner; behind the grocery; at our front gate. Even behind Temper General if we were sure Grandpa wasn't around. Everyone knew, no one said.

Mom's brother Thomas arrived the summer after we settled in town. He'd just come out of the Navy. Mom told me that in his twenties, Uncle Thomas had been a good amateur boxer. Those days were long gone, though he still looked muscular. But he was slow, vague. Soft in the head, Mom said. Will-less, it seems to me looking back. He had a way of holding my hand that I cherished—not squeezing, not asking for anything, just holding. He called me Miss Why because I asked so many questions.

The day we met he walked up to me and formally introduced himself: "Hello. I am Thomas. Your uncle. I am coming to live with you."

I giggled, then curtsied, as I was learning to do in kindergarten.

"I'm Joy Constance Temper. Your niece."

Then I hugged him and we were friends.

* * *

Uncle Thomas moved across our lives erratically, like a listing ship in need of a port for repairs. He'd leave, return, and leave again. No one except Mom and me took much notice. I asked him a few times where he went but got no good answer.

"I get this idea there's something I need to find," he'd tell me.

"What?" I'd ask.

"Not something like a thing. Just something. So I go look for it."

"And you come back after you find it?"

He'd smile.

"No finding. Just looking. When I get tired of looking, I come home."

When Uncle Thomas was at home he'd go off for hours in the afternoon, tromping around the hills by himself.

"Still looking?" I would ask him.

He'd smile.

"Under every rock," he said.

* * *

The church was nearly full, family on one side of the aisle, townspeople on the other. Dad sat with his brothers and their wives in the front two pews, the rest of us spread behind. Cousins I barely knew whispered to each other while their kids played with devices in their laps, ear buds hooked into iPods. Everyone was sweating. The surprise was to see Cheryl Moreland standing at the back of the church. She nodded her head when she saw me staring at her.

It was hard not to stare. Cheryl was dressed in dark blue denim jeans and a checkered shirt. She was tall and thin-waisted, with breasts that stood out as straight and pointed as if she were a teen. Or had them fixed, I thought to myself, as I turned around and saw Preacher rise to begin the ceremony.

I hadn't seen Preacher for years. He looked like he belonged here in church, the robes accenting his height. His deep voice carried down the aisles and commanded attention. He started the service by recounting the generations of Tempers who had left their mark on the town.

Uncle Aaron and Uncle Saul spoke briefly about Grandma and Grandpa's dedication to the store. Dad's homage was a row of photographs of Grandpa and Grandma that lined the altar. Preacher got up again at the end.

"Isaac loved this town. He was skeptical of outsiders. He did not suffer fools gladly, and he thought most people who disagreed with him were fools. But he was not unkind, at least not always, and not to everyone."

Did I catch Preacher glancing at Dad? Dad turning his head down for an instant to avoid the glance?

"Not unkind, just impatient," Preacher went on. "He didn't have time to waste. He said to me more than once, 'Preacher, I'm a dinosaur. I've lived too long. My world's gone.' But he refused to sell out. He never wavered."

Preacher let the silence settle and turned to the closing prayers.

* * *

A backhoe waited alongside the grave. It was a smaller crowd now, the family in their suits and ties, a few older men in jeans and checkered shirts. The coffin was lowered into the ground and people took turns shoveling dirt over it from a mound of soil. Some stopped after their shovelful to mumble something. Dad didn't take a turn and neither did I. At the end, Preacher picked up a large shovelful of dirt, put a pint bottle of bourbon on top, and dropped them onto the coffin. "For the journey ahead, Isaac," he said, and all the old men laughed.

Then we stood quietly while the cement slab was lowered into place atop the coffin. I glanced sideways and noticed a woman standing alone about thirty yards away. She was wearing a white dress, white cloak, white hat and white gloves. It was hard to make out her features. I remembered seeing her in the church as well, sitting near the back on the family side. I elbowed Dad:

"Do you know who that is?"

"No idea. I noticed her myself."

Just as he said that she turned and walked away.

This story is taken from the first pages of a novel, *Temper CA*, that recently won the Miami University Press Novella Prize for 2018. It will be published by MUP in January, 2019.

Paul Skenazy taught literature and writing at UCSC for thirty-five years. He has written critical pieces on writers as diverse as James M. Cain, Saul Bellow and Maxine Hong Kingston, and published more than three hundred book reviews in newspapers and magazines nationwide. He lives in Santa Cruz with his wife, poet Farnaz Fatemi, and an old cat and young dog who aren't yet convinced about the value of coexistence.

JOSE DE JESUS RODRIGUEZ

Untitled, 2017
Acrylic, airbrush, oil, and textile, 48 x 58 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST

MICHELLE BITTING

I went behind the scenes . . . [and] found there the violet coffin

—George Bernard Shaw, from a letter to Stella Campbell

Actually, it was an old red shoe box
mined from the cave of a musty closet
and my son stood by as I lit a stub
of sage over the puffed pink breast
of a dead robin he'd found, supine
and stiff on the backyard brick. Had it fallen
from the purple crown of a nearby jacaranda?
Maybe it was that shadow of a hawk
I'd seen circling, eying nests clustered high
in the arms of the eucalyptus. The roaring,
feathery draft, honing in on heat and noise.
Some think it strange that Shaw watched
the remains of his mother being burned,
but if it were me, my bones, I wouldn't mind.
Others making a moment of it, the *materia*,
the fire of life forcing change. The way
mothering this boy has worn us both
to something precious that glints,
if a bit battered around the edges,
like a favored antique spoon reached for
from the drawer of all others. The door
of the furnace is beautiful. It looked cool, clean,
sunny, though no sun could get there. Nails and ashes
and samples of bone. My son wants to see
into it, the bird, its stopped clockwork,
the real thing. *People are afraid to see it*
but it is wonderful. Shaw laughed and felt his mother
laughing right behind him, her feet to the flame,
bursting miraculously into ribbons of streaming,
smokeless scarlet. Sifting dust, the hours, my son and I
inspect death, *little tongs* in our hands, *little handles*
without misgiving. Scattering ourselves eagerly
across the garden, sudden wings and the shadow
of a bird passing over, sweeping us up
into its sieve as if to say: *Oh grave, where is thy victory?*

Michelle Bitting has published three poetry collections, *Good Friday Kiss*, winner of the DeNovo First Book Award, *Notes to the Beloved*, winner of the Sacramento Poetry Center Book Award, and in 2016 *The Couple Who Fell to Earth* with C&R Press. She has won the Beyond Baroque Foundation, Virginia Brendemuehl, and Glimmer Train poetry contests. She is the winner of the Catamaran Poetry Prize for her collection *Broken Kingdom*, which will be published in September 2018.

IVA HLADIS

I Am Afraid of Your Love, 2001
Mixed media on recycled wood, 5 5/8 x 5 5/8

COURTESY THE ARTIST

MICHELLE BITTING

Everything Crumbling Becoming Something New

When my baby told me she wanted to be a boy some part of me
had to die slip away like good mourners do politely monk-like the mother
of monasteries drowning myself my crushed head a vat of liquid
smoke tasting like saffron paint letting it choke me taking up the green
knife the Spain in me I was born to slice myself into little infinite
mirror stabs cracked again I'd have to fall on it muffle my cries
rushing wings of birdsong memory the hour's dusky passing my girl
taking off changing form mid-flight misty vestiges shed letting her go
so a son could enter letting it go just as we did your every dress cave of
my closet's harkening skirts and gold-flecked minis the black velvet strapless
poofs of yellow tulle even the blue taffeta from the chic boutique
in the Jewish Quarter where the old Algerian in fedora and double-breasted
suit directed us back to the Seine walking us half way there his simple
kindness wanting to slap myself my American offense offering money
his eyes crushed blossoms where I come from another shade of green
gets worshipped more than being human imagine selling your birthright
America my mess of pottage imagine giving birth all over again
the two of you going through it again child woman now man
all your multitudes I'm learning to sing you little green little shorn-headed hero
your mother an orphan now shrouds for my gone girl my vanity my mirage
a desert of selves boundless and bare we bury ourselves thinking greater than
a shattered visage not you your fledgling harmonies bold your beauty your many
within sometimes sad sometimes scary refrains thank you thank you
for teaching me to listen sounds who knew I no who knew you could make

IVA HLADIS

Blood Type, 2001
Mixed media on recycled wood, 11 1/2 x 11 1/2

COURTESY THE ARTIST

LUCAS ELMER

Santa Carla, 2011
Woodcut/Lithograph, 14 x 11 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST

CARL SCHIFFMAN

Gold Dust—Summer 1955

Remembering a lost era in San Francisco history

I had been working as a fruit tramp in the orchards south of San Francisco when the season ended and left me unemployed. Artists talk about a figureground relationship. For me, the ground of this sixty-year-old narrative is forgetfulness. The images I retain leap out at me from pure oblivion. As though I have been picking cherries this very afternoon, I find myself in the pit at the target end of a wooden lane, people are rolling balls in my direction with considerable force. I am sitting on a padded shelf behind and well above the target. I have to lift my legs out of the way to keep them from being hit by the pins when the ball strikes.

Not that it affected my getting hired, but I knew something about bowling. I had bowled for years with friends on 96th Street near Broadway, had been on a team in a high school bowling league that met once a week at lanes near Yankee Stadium in the Bronx. (I was fair for a spindly kid, an average in the upper 140s; years later, I rolled a memorable 252 on lanes in Hamden, Connecticut.)

The technology of the lanes was more advanced in California than it had been in New York, although still only halfway to the completely automated lanes we have now. My responsibility was for two adjacent lanes that shared a single ball return. The fallen pins would have to be cleared manually after each roll, but rather than being set by hand, the pins were put into a rack above the target area and then the entire rack was pulled down at once. There was a pedal at the back of the lane, just behind the last row of pins, that you stepped on at the same time you pulled down the rack. A row of tiny metal pins, matching tiny holes in the bottom of the wooden pins, would rise up to secure the pins' balance and make sure they were perfectly aligned.

Because the bowlers paid—and, more importantly, tipped—by the line, that is to say, by the complete game, it was in our interest as pin boys for the games to go quickly and for the bowlers to do well. Our skill consisted in the speed with which we could clear and rack pins and lift the bowling bowls to the height where the return track began, gravity then carrying the balls back to the rack at the bowlers' end of the alley. Even with two alleys going at once, which was generally the case, the work never got exhausting. The most difficult part was lowering the rack to set up for a new frame. The racks were poorly lubricated, unnaturally heavy, resisted being pulled down.

Sometimes the rack would come down slightly off-center and then the tiny metal pins, rising, would tumble the whole set of tenpins over, as though someone had just bowled a strike. Other than getting hit in the face by a pin, which did happen occasionally, although it never did to me, having a whole rack of pins tumble over was about the worst thing that could happen to us; especially since it looked as though our incompetence was to blame. How we were perceived by the bowlers was very important because a substantial part of our income came from tips. My memory is that we were paid ten to twelve-and-a-half cents for a line that cost the bowler forty to fifty cents, afternoons being the cheaper time. We would expect a nickelaline tip and hope for a dime. Some pin boys would make themselves visible, strike up conversations with the bowlers, compliment them, in hopes of getting a larger tip. Women bowlers were easier to pin for than men because the balls they threw were lighter and knocked over fewer pins. Women and couples were also better tippers than men alone, but their tempo was slower too, so things balanced out. We could only see the pins and not the bowlers from our perch behind the rack, so we would have to duck low to look up the women's skirts as they dipped to release the ball.

One dangerous trick I learned from the other pin boys became my stock-in-trade when the men's leagues bowled. The men threw a lot of strikes anyway, which meant one ball return fewer for me, a faster tempo to the game. A man who threw a lot of strikes was apt to end the evening in a better mood too, give a larger tip. (The practice was to fling the tip in coins down the gutter the full length of the alley.) The trick was to use the moment of impact as a screen behind which you kicked over a pin or two to make sure the bowler got a strike. It wasn't easy. We were constantly running the risk of being spotted or getting our leg or foot badly hit by a pin or worse, by the ball itself. Usually it would be enough to kick over the seven or ten pin, whichever was nearer our perch between the alleys. Sometimes though I would risk kicking over an embryonic baby split. I never got caught, nor as far as I know, at least for the month or so I was there, did any of the other pin boys.

It was during this time that I had an encounter with the San Francisco police in which my pay stub from the alleys (or possibly my room receipt from the dollar-a-night Eddy Hotel) kept me from being arrested for vagrancy. That encounter took place just outside the San Francisco Public Library, where I was lying on the stone shelf that skirts the building, resting my eyes and head after two or three hours in the main reading room.

I was not so much frightened or furious as incredulous when the cop hit me across the bottom of the feet with his billy club. I had been upstairs reading the Greeks, I probably told him, after I proved I wasn't a vagrant. We wound up having a long, not necessarily friendly, discussion. "I don't understand people like you, Schiffman," he said finally, in a tone that mixed genuine bewilderment with a kind of disgust. The quotation marks owe nothing to present invention. The cop's exact words have stayed with me through the years.

I was sufficiently frightened by the incident, by what it said about my appearance, my collapse from middleclass status to life as a plausible vagrant, to consider hitchhiking back to New York right away, even though my apartment, which I had sublet, wouldn't be available to me until mid-September. What made it possible, even desirable, for me to stay on week after week in San Francisco was that I was doing so well in the poker games with the other pin boys at the bowling alley.

There was a large windowless room with old chairs and benches, coke and coffee machines, where we pin boys would wait to be called to the lanes. Each of us had a number that the man at the desk in the alley would write on the score sheet of the bowlers to whom he was assigning a lane. That was how our pay was calculated. He then pressed a switch and that same number would appear on a screen in the pin boys' room. For whatever reason—summer doldrums, leagues in recess, uneven flow of customers—there were usually five or six of us sitting around that room waiting for our number to come up. The nickel-and-dime poker game was the pin boys' major pastime, an institution at the alley.

(I seem to recall a time when I was obliged, due to a lack of pin boys, to work four alleys at once. I remember the sweat pouring off me, the unrelenting haste, the impossibility of keeping up, and the certainty that I was doing so inadequate a job that the diminution in my tips would surely cancel out the extra money I was earning for all those frames. Did that really happen? Was it a dream I had at the time? A nightmare? I would like events to come back whole and fullblooded, instead they come back as ghosts, weightless and transparent, full of doubt.)

I don't mean to suggest that I was a particularly brilliant poker player or that I made large amounts of money. What was true was that I generally won, and though the amounts were small, they usually added up to more than I was making setting pins. My life became much easier. I even made a friend, not among the pin boys, of whom I'm ashamed to admit I retain not a single face, not even a hint of age or nationality. I probably spent more time looking at—or for—face cards than I did looking at faces. My friend was a Canadian, several years older than myself, who had come down to San Francisco after being released from jail in Vancouver. He worked as a kitchen helper or counterman at Foster's, the cafeteria where I had begun eating, and that was probably where we met. I would drop by during his breaks, time my lunch so we could share a table, and he might share some of the free food he got. We would spend evenings I had off roaming the city together; we had late dinners in Chinatown, visited North Beach looking for girls.

There was always a considerable delay between the time a pin boy's number appeared on the screen and the time the customers on his lanes were ready to bowl. Serious bowlers had their own bowling shoes, a custommade bowling ball. The majority though had to rent shoes, change, then go hunting all over the alleys for a ball with the weight and finger-hole placements they liked. They had to clip the paper sheet to the scoring table, decide on what order to write their names. It could take them easily fifteen minutes to get ready. That time, for me, was more profitably invested in a few extra poker hands than in sitting idly on my shelf at the foot of the alley. One day I either delayed so long getting out that the customers complained or I forgot entirely that my number had come up. Either way, one of the managers came back to the pin boys' room and found me playing cards, fired me on the spot.

My temptation was to head right back to New York, but the farm buses were running again from downtown. I didn't need to last in San Francisco that much longer before my rented-out New York apartment would become available. I delayed my return to crop picking until I had nearly worn through my savings from the bowling alley.

The Department of Agriculture gave us day laborers no advance information about where the buses were going, what fruit we were going to pick. Perhaps the department realized that some of us, had we known, would have been smart enough not to get on the bus. After a long rattling ride in the direction of San Jose, we finally arrived, not at a hillside this time, but at a wide, treeless valley, rows of low green plants receding in the thin light.

We were given bushel baskets and assigned rows. Unlike fruit trees, string bean plants were picked over several times in the course of a harvest. We were to pick only the mature beans, those closest to the ground, nearest to the stem. We were not to touch the younger beans that grew higher up and closer to the periphery of the plant. What this meant in practice was dragging a bushel basket behind you from plant to plant and having to kneel and reach under the leaves for the pitiful double handful of ripe beans each plant supplied. Within an hour, my arms were aching in a way they never had from setting pins, my kneecaps were sore.

We were paid—this I recall with certainty—fifty cents a bushel. By noon, when we broke for lunch, having been working since before seven, I had picked three bushels. That is to say, I had earned a dollar fifty. When I subtracted the dollar the bus ride back would cost me, I had earned fifty cents. That worked out to ten cents an hour and would probably have been equally intolerable at the height of the Depression. I ate whatever lunch was provided and then cashed in my three slips. I was surprised they were willing to pay me before the bus came back. I walked dirt roads to the nearest highway and hitchhiked back to San Francisco.

That was the end of the West Coast for me. I telephoned collect to my best friend in New York. He wired me seventeen dollars, probably all he had, to pay my way home. As soon as the money arrived at Western Union, I found a piece of cardboard and wrote NEW YORK CITY on it in large black letters, took my stand on the approaches to the Bay Bridge. I never bothered carrying a road map; I assumed that if drivers knew my destination, they would know whether they were going my way. This to explain my uncertainty as to where exactly I was when I got the lift that took me off paved roads and out into the desert. A man in his late fifties or early sixties, driving an ancient

pickup truck, its bed piled high with camping equipment, stopped for me and then, after we'd talked a bit, asked if I'd like to spend a week or two panning gold with him in the streams that run down from the California mountains. I figured out afterward we were in the Plumas Sierra or maybe just across the Nevada line in the Virginia or Nightingale Mountains. I know we were only a few hours drive from Winnemucca, Nevada, because that's where I wound up not much later.

The man described himself as an itinerant cook and preacher, who felt the need from time to time to get away from the habitations of men and restore himself. He said there was gold, in small amounts, in many of the streams washing down from the Sierra. There was no El Dorado in view, he had found only two or three small nuggets worth maybe a few hundred dollars each in the ten or so years he'd been doing this, but he could earn a reliable three or four dollars for a morning's work and have the rest of his day free for contemplation and to sketch out the sermons he would deliver when he returned to the world.

We were at work in a streambed within an hour or so after leaving the highway. My memory of the man, blue-eyed and rangy with graying hair, is much clearer than my memory either of the landscape around us or the exact process of panning gold. I think the land was bleak and slightly rolling, the stream shallow; there may have been some scrub foliage along the banks. The panning has been so infiltrated by movies seen before and since as to wipe out my own concrete experience. I probably did just what they do in the movies: I sieved and sifted sediment from the streambed and studied it in my pan; learned to tell gold dust from iron or copper pyrites, fool's gold, by seeing whether it still glistened under water.

The potential consequences of a week or two in the desert, of the preacher's healing influence, will remain forever unknown. We had finished our day's work and were driving toward our campsite when the truck broke down. The repairs, he told me, would take days, possibly as much as a week. He would have to move into town himself, look for temporary work as a cook. I think we were able to drive with difficultly back to the highway, I have no recollection of footing it across the desert, and from the highway I caught my lift to Winnemucca. The man had paid me two or three dollars for the gold I'd panned. I lost that, as well as most of my travel money, in a small casino in Winnemucca. At about two that morning, still in Winnemucca, I got a lift in a car that was going all the way to Albany, New York. They fed me, even though I couldn't drive.

Carl Schiffman is a native New Yorker, a graduate of Yale Drama School, and has had five short plays produced off-Broadway. He has published short stories in *New England Review*, *Missouri Review*, *Antioch Review* and elsewhere. His first online story is on Jewishfiction.net, based in Canada.

LUCAS ELMER

Sunshine Limited, 2016
Woodcut/Lithograph, 11 x 14 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST

LUCAS ELMER

Sweeping Hollows, 2012
Woodcut/Lithograph, 14 x 11 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST

RICHARD HUFFMAN

The Inner Dark

Annie saw the baby roll up the tidal sandbank with each new wave. At first she thought it was a small seal. She approached it carefully and watched it roll back and forth a few times before she waded in after a wave receded. It wore a wet suit, which was a surprise to Annie. She never imagined wet suits were made that small.

She waited for Adeena to say something, or even Fierce, though it was still early in the morning and he seldom showed up until later in the day. But one never knew. He could be unpredictable, and if he did start yammering this early it was always about something prickly. He seldom had anything to say that wasn't a complaint. Though Annie had to hand it to him. The advice about her meds was spot on. "Do you want to just go on and on and on feeling like this slug, like somebody just bashed your head in with a hammer and you act like one of those zombies on TV? Really? Is that what you want?"

Of course Adeena would not agree to this, but then where was she whenever Annie did take the meds? At least Fierce was always there, meds or not. But Annie loved Adeena so much. She *never* complained . . . about anything. Her heart was pure. She had delicate wings that sparkled in the sunlight, glinting gold and lavender, vibrating faster than a hummingbird's. Sometimes there was confusion about Adeena and hummingbirds. They were alike in so many ways.

Annie carried the baby back into the fern grotto that opened to a cave where she had stayed the last two nights. The rainy season had not yet started and the winter waves that would inundate the grotto were still a month or so off. It was a cozy place. Once, years and years and years before, she had brought classes of children here and told them tales of bootleggers using the grotto to store barrels of whiskey. Then she would tell them to look at the cliffs around the beach that led to the grotto where swallows built their nests and on the other cliff where cormorants stood on tiny ledges hour after hour, staring at the cliffside.

Sometimes she would tell one of the boys—it was always the boys—to stay back from the waves. There was a riptide there and it would only take one slip. Most listened. Only two did not. They were best friends.

"You don't have to bring that up," Annie said. She should have known. Fierce was such a downer when he

showed up sudden-like. "I'm going to do CPR," she said and put her mouth on the baby's mouth. She felt its little chest fill up with her breath. Still it did not breathe on its own. She turned it over and unzipped the back of the wet suit and pulled it down and patted the baby's back with the palm of her hand. Water trickled out of its mouth.

"C'mon . . . you can do it," she said and breathed into it again and again, each time the chest rising, then collapsing back. Annie turned it over and pushed against its back. More water came out. It was clear except for small frothy bubbles.

"CPR," she said when Adeena asked what she was doing. "I wondered where you were," Annie said. "This baby just rolled up out of the water."

Annie could tell Adeena was very nervous about what was going on. Adeena didn't like being in jail, even for a night, and she didn't want any more trouble from parents and park rangers and people who didn't even know Annie.

"It's okay," Annie assured Adeena. "I was trained in CPR. Don't look so worried. Look . . . I think it's breathing a little now."

Fierce wasn't so sure and said as much.

"I think you're only happy when I do something bad," Annie said. "Why don't you just leave me alone?"

Fierce shrugged and went back into the interior of the grotto where it was dark and old logs lay scattered on the sand and water dripped from the ceiling where the ferns grew. Still, Annie knew he was there, waiting for things to go bad.

Adeena was very nervous. It was her one fault, Annie thought. Sometimes Adeena just could not bask in her own light. She let shadows interfere, like an unexpected solar eclipse. "You know I love you," Adeena said, "but are you sure about this? Maybe it isn't a real human baby. Maybe it's just a doll someone dressed in that wet suit and it fell off a boat and the little girl who owned the doll is sad but she is okay on the boat with her father and mother, so no one is worried too much."

Annie shook her head. Sometimes she didn't know about Adeena. Anyone could see it was a real baby with soft skin that was just a little blue and lips that were too purple from not having breathed right while she was in the water. But babies were good at that when they were cold. "They go into this kind of hibernation," she explained. "They get cold and their breathing slows so much you think they're dead but they're just waiting for someone to wake them up."

There was a loud, sarcastic laugh from the back of the grotto. "And maybe you just need to go back on your meds!"

"I'm going to ask you to leave," Annie said to Fierce.

"All right, all right. I won't say anything, but . . . well . . . never mind. It's your funeral."

After a while the baby began taking little gaspy breaths. "See," Annie said, wagging her finger at Fierce, or where she thought he was, in the back of the grotto. "You don't always know, Fierce," she said.

There was no answer. Of course not. He was like that when he was wrong, but then Adeena had gone too, which surprised Annie. "It's just you and me," she said to the baby and picked it up and held it against her chest and watched its eyes close when she tilted it back. "You must be very tired." She wrapped her coat around the baby, letting it snuggle against her. There were little baby snores coming from it. Annie laid down on the tarp she had spread over the damp sand just inside the grotto's entrance. She looked up at the green ferns growing from the roof of the grotto and watched waterdrops form on the tips of the ferns and slowly fall, and she listened to the whoosh of the waves coming into the beach and falling back again. She closed her eyes and slept.

* * *

"Hey!"

"Hello . . . wake up."

Annie tried to pretend she didn't hear them.

"C'mon, lady, you can't camp here. It's a state park!"

"Don, take it easy."

"Well then you get her up. I'm tired of dealing with these people."

"Miss . . ."

A softer voice. Someone nicer. A woman who would understand. Annie opened her eyes. The one park ranger was squatting and smiled when Annie opened her eyes. The other one was standing, shaking his head, his hands on his hips.

"I'm sorry but you can't stay here. We'll help you load your stuff into the truck and take you into town. You know where the homeless shelter is?"

"Yes," Annie said. She pulled her coat tighter around the baby. She hoped it didn't start crying. They would take it from her. They always took things from her. She felt afraid. "Adeena?" she said. Where was she? She needed her.

"No. I'm not Adeena. I'm Marie. Is there someone else with you?"

Annie shook her head. The fear was beginning. Fierce . . . Fierce, leave me alone.

"She's hiding something under her coat," the one standing said. "Probably something stolen."

"Like what? Seashells?"

"We should search her."

The woman ranger put her hand out and touched Annie on her elbow where the coat had slid up her arm. "Don't worry. We aren't going to search you."

"I don't have the baby," Annie blurted.

"What?"

The one standing came in closer. He bent over and looked hard at Annie's face. "Hey . . . I know you."

"Told you," Fierce said, laughing.

"She's that college kid . . . a volunteer . . . who took a class of thirty-five third graders here without any of the regular docents. Two years ago. She let two kids drown." He shook his head in disgust. "They should have locked her crazy ass up."

Marie ignored him and smiled at Annie. "Listen . . . it's all okay. We're here to help you. But I need to know about this baby. Do you have a real baby under your coat? You don't have to hide it if you do. It probably needs to eat, don't you think?"

Annie thought about it, that the baby needed to eat.

"They're going to lock you up for sure this time," Fierce said. He was so smug about it. Happy almost, but yet not.

"It's okay," the woman ranger, Marie, said.

Her partner shook his head in disgust. He was like Fierce.

"I think it's okay too," Adeena said. "I can see her essence. It is filled with light. A good golden light."

Fierce laughed so loud that the grotto shook like an earthquake rolling through.

Annie saw the woman's hand reach out and finger the edge of Annie's coat and slowly peel it away. Annie's eyes went wide. "I'm afraid," she said.

"It will be all right. I promise not to hurt you," Marie said as she opened one side of Annie's coat. And what it was that Annie saved, and held so dear, tumbled out and into the woman's hands.

Annie saw then the sadness in the other's eyes and knew it was her own sadness reflected back and saw even Fierce, in all his darkness, bow his gnarled head and slowly dissolve away, leaving only an inky vapor behind, and that too faded on the salty breezes that swept through the cave.

Richard Huffman completed his undergraduate work at Eastern Washington University. His graduate studies in Sociology and Creative writing were completed at San Jose State University. His short stories have been published in *Catamaran*, *The Reed*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, and elsewhere. He lives in Santa Cruz, and has completed a gritty Western Novel. He is currently working on a novel about love and race relations in and after the Vietnam war.

KIT EASTMAN

Femme Fatale, 2016
Photo-intaglio print,
9 x 9 in image on 15 x 11 in paper

COURTESY THE ARTIST

DAVID DOWNIE

Me Jane

Okay, I'm an unlikely Jane, and maybe that's why it didn't work between us. I still can't believe the first thing I said when I introduced myself was, "Me? Jane." And then you laughed and said, "Tarzan." While we were still shaking hands, you leaned over and kissed me on both cheeks, in front of everyone at that party full of French people, even Professor Lafayette, who turned out to be gay. I thought you might be too, you were so suave and so like a Frenchman.

Actually, you kissed me twice on one cheek, left-right-left, for a total of three. I felt your stubble. You said in that lilting tenor of yours that was the way you greeted people in Paris, whereas in the provinces, where your Huguenot grandmother came from, it was four. Four kisses among strangers? I hated you instantly, because you had a French grandmother and would boast about it in public to a stranger who'd made a fool of herself. My face flushed the same red as my hair.

Since I see the reviewers describe you as an "expatriate Franco-American intellectual," I think you'll understand me when I say hatred is as strong as love. I'm sure I've misquoted someone important, but you get what I mean.

You are possibly not aware that we met exactly twenty-one years and seven months ago, give or take a day. How could you be aware of it or remember? People wrote letters back then and mine were returned undelivered. I wrote three that first fall, after it happened, and while I would never hold you responsible for the two sent to Paris, Texas, I made sure to underline "France" on the third. I watched the woman at the post office in Des Moines and told her not to add "TX." I still have them in my sewing basket.

Do you even remember me? Jane. The girl from Iowa, not Ohio, as you kept saying. Idaho you knew because of the potatoes and because Hemingway blew his head off there. But those other I and O states were all the same to you, a West Coast guy from Northern California. Jane? The girl with red toenail polish and carrot-colored pubic hair? Those were the two things about me that seemed to excite you most.

Brace yourself and blame this on Rich, or the Internet and social media and your website if you prefer—I sure haven't hounded you over the decades. Our daughter will be in Paris the day after tomorrow. She is determined to meet you. Yes, I said, I mean, I wrote, "our daughter."

From your website I can see that you still have a sense of humor and are good at arithmetic—you always looked twice at the check before you paid at Chez something or other, that bistro on the Left Bank, where else, with the butcher paper on the tables, as if that made sense in our day and age, even back then. You always ordered from the bottom of the wine list, the cheap end, like the other stubble-cheeked student guys I could barely see through the smoke. You said your grandmother had taught you that only a fool doesn't add up the bill twice, and you tried to teach me to count in French, "four times twenty nineteen" just to say "ninety-nine." So, I'm sure I needn't instruct you about the gestation period of human beings.

Twenty-one years and seven months ago I was what, twenty-three years old? Of course, I was twenty-three and slim and you said "pretty" though some said "gorgeous," like Ginger in *Gilligan's Island*, though I felt like Mary Ann, the plain Jane. You were twenty-eight, much older and *très* sophisticated. Why I had to meet you the first night of that summer session abroad I don't know. Why I had to meet you at all I can't understand, though it may have been destiny and beyond my control. I still have some skepticism in me, but Father Christianson may be right. The fact is, back then I was on the pill. I did not lie to you about that and believe me I had no intention of wrecking my career. Mistakes happen, not that I regret having Samantha. I don't. What I mean is, I obviously forgot to take a pill, or maybe two in a row, probably because of all that Côtes de whatever you had me drink that night on the Pont des Arts midstream over the Seine. Let me rephrase that sentence, because I wouldn't want you to think I'm a victim-type personality or bereft of humor—Samantha calls me the Punching Bag for reasons that may become apparent. Believe me it's not easy to write this, and I wish Sam was not forcing my hand.

Put it this way, I made a conscious choice. I never sent the private investigators out to find you after those letters came back, because I thought my responsibility was greater than yours, and you were against marriage and families anyway. Besides, there was Rich to think of.

You and I drank a lot of wine despite the heat, so it wasn't just that one night on the bridge, with the barges and tour boats going by on the Seine, the slow water lapping at the riverbanks, and people dancing on the planks, many of them rotten and unsafe as I recall. I look back and find it hard to believe I stripped to my bra and slip and laughed at myself when you stared at the little butterfly on my unfashionable undies. I was far from a virgin, so I won't pretend otherwise. I could laugh at myself then and hey, I try harder now, though it's not easy when your daughter calls you a coward and a hypocrite. Where I grew up, everyone drank milk and coffee, not necessarily together of course, and though I did spend four years in New York City before that summer session, I never got used to wine.

Just so you know, I finished my architecture degree at Columbia, but because of Samantha it took me an extra two years. I never got the PhD, not that you should care, since as I remember, you got one and then tore it up. After I'd been working in an architect's office for three years—basically as a glorified draftsperson—my husband, I should say my ex-husband nowadays, got offered a job in Omaha. That's in Nebraska, in case you've forgotten your US geography.

Rich took the job because it was a smart move for a marine engineer, believe it or not. We moved with Samantha to Omaha and had Ken a couple of years later. I've been in the legal department at Mutual of Omaha ever since. Remember *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*? I'll bet you watched it too, and *Gilligan's Island*.

No, I'm not a lawyer—I never had time to finish graduate work in architecture, let alone go to law school. I'm a paralegal, but they pay me well, because I can handle the claims involving structural collapse, usually of grain elevators and silos but sometimes of real buildings too. That's why I spent so much time in New York for the company, when the marriage fell apart, and maybe that's when Samantha slipped from my grasp, I mean she slipped out of my life, meaning she went from teenager to grown-up and decided it was time to rebel against momma. After the high-speed craziness of Manhattan, I was glad to get back to the safety of Omaha and grain elevators, believe me.

There's a nice hoppy scent to the air around here, once you get away from downtown and the cars and trucks. And yes, since you asked, there are skyscrapers, about as good as the ones in that ridiculous suburb of Paris called La Défense. And we also have a river. You may have heard of it. The Missouri? It's bigger than the Seine, and the whimsical, wiggly pedestrian bridge over it is actually a lot more interesting from the architectural standpoint than the Pont des Arts. But you're right, it's not romantic, it has no ironwork arches and rickety planks and benches with views of medieval towers and the Louvre and its spotlit sculptures. And I have never fallen in love on it and drunk wine and dreamed of a lifetime with a self-adoring, hyperintelligent louse.

But I am straying. With what Rich contributed in alimony and child support over the years, and the house, I've done all right. He got Ken, by the way. Sam stayed with me until she moved out six months ago.

I'm telling you this, I mean I'm writing you this, because I don't want you to think I'm after your money. I don't need your money and I don't want it, and furthermore I don't believe you have any, or you'd do something about your teeth, as seen on your website, and in that program that aired on Franco-German TV, the station called ARTE. Boy, talk about pretentious.

What happens between you and Sam is up to you. I don't know what French law is like. I emailed the head of our legal department in Paris—yes, a little company here in Nebraska has offices in Paris—and he said it was complicated. As I recall, everything is complicated over there, from the counting and the plumbing on up. Even the cars have yellow headlights or at least the older ones did twenty-one years ago. Are there still those urinals on the sidewalks under the trees, with the domed green newsstands, and do Parisians bathe now?

Anyway, Rich was the nice, boring guy I told you about when we met. I didn't think it appropriate that you and I should have sex, out of respect for him. Well, that idea clearly didn't resist temptation for more than a few hours, any more than I could resist eating chocolates from those stores that looked like jewelry shops. Rich and I dated in New York, before I went on the summer abroad program. His last name is Hanley, from Philadelphia. I mention it because that's Samantha's last name, and mine too, and it might come in handy to know, in case she needs your help or something. I sincerely hope she doesn't try to change her name to yours, now that she knows the truth. Rich told her, not me, by the way, I mean I did not tell her about you, Rich did. Nice present, huh? "Happy twenty-first birthday, Sam, you're not my daughter after all." I'm not sure how he found out, but probably it was from Jeanie, my roommate at Columbia. She knew the truth. That I loved you and not Rich, I mean.

Though I'm delighted you're her biological father, I just can't see her as Samantha Pomquist. I realize you didn't choose your last name, but you could have at least done something about the "J. Randall." Heaven forbid anyone call you John or Randy, though you certainly were randy, and I guess I was, too, or I would not have had to drink cranberry juice for a month and walk bowlegged. I remember thinking how stuck up you were, because you wanted to be J. Randall or JR and that was before the TV show. You did like being Tarzan when we were alone, though. That was why I knew you weren't who you pretended to be, and could be loved, though not forever, and not as a father.

It took Samantha a couple of seconds to find you, by the way, and she downloaded everything worth reading. Sam was weaned on a mouse though she now uses a touchpad and smartphone. She just Googled and typed in "J. Randall Pomquist Paris" and got about 8,000,000 hits in 0.67 seconds. Actually, hold on just a minute, I'm getting

You and I drank a lot of wine despite the heat, so it wasn't just that one night on the bridge, with the barges and tour boats going by on the Seine, the slow water lapping at the riverbanks, and people dancing on the planks …

Enigmatic smiles were your specialty. You must have studied your expressions in the mirror every morning, and I don't mean while you were smoking and shaving that scratchy blue stubble off your cheeks …

exactly 3,214 hits in 0.48 seconds, so you see, she's not always right. There you are on the lower part of my screen, with your neat, close-cropped salt-and-pepper beard, your gray teeth, and, wait, are those the same wire-rimmed glasses? Gosh. I guess they were expensive and high quality. That's incredible you have the same glasses. Parenthetically, your website is on screen three—it's not in the top twenty Google hits when I search. You might want to hire some SEO people. I know a couple in Madras—the real Madras, in India. We had snail-mail problems with them too, even though Madras, Oregon, is nowhere near Paris, Texas, and the letters were never returned stamped with French words meaning "unknown at this address."

Why you opted to call your site www.jrandallpomquist.com I don't know and it's none of my business. Maybe people wanting to hire you know to look up your name, or somehow associate French movies with "Pomquist," not that I know many people interested in French movies here in Omaha, or anywhere else for that matter. The Nouvelle Vague was a long time ago.

You've done pretty well for yourself, at least in terms of peer recognition. You may not be making those art films or "*films d'auteur*" you used to get excited about. Doing documentaries on farm issues, and those TV commercials, isn't bad, is it? I'm trying to be charitable. Truth be told, I can't help wondering how you square the advertising campaigns with the spiel you give about "progressive social policy" and global warming and all that other fine stuff in those interviews? The *New York Times* called you a "lock-step intellectual," it's in an article on screen four, whatever "lockstep intellectual" means. That petition you signed—it's on screen two and if I were you I'd do something to get your name off it. Why do you bother fussing with our little problems of democracy, if I may ask? I sure wouldn't dream of telling the French what to do. If they want to say "four times twenty nineteen" instead of "ninety-nine" and elect an oligarch mafioso, that's fine by me.

I can imagine you smiling enigmatically. Enigmatic smiles were your specialty. You must have studied your expressions in the mirror every morning, and I don't mean while you were smoking and shaving that scratchy blue stubble off your cheeks, your perfectly symmetrical cheeks. A "smirk" is what I would call your Mona Lisa smile. Why you were blessed with such good looks, and an ability with languages, and in bed, I don't know, given that you are, or were, such a heel. I've sworn off blasphemy, and I'm not kidding. It's easier than giving up milkshakes or fries. I'm joking of course, kind of, but you wouldn't get it, and you probably don't know what a modified Atkins is. Diets never worked for me anyway.

A lot of things have changed since you left the country. Judging by the bio sketch on your site, I suspect you might be aware of some of what's going on. You probably travel back to see your family in New York, or for work. I notice you made a documentary a couple of years ago called *Tracking the Elusive* GM *Soybean*. The French title definitely sounds better. Just think, you were nearby and didn't know how close you came to running into me under a grain elevator or in the dark corners of a silo. Corn is what we're really good at here in Nebraska, not soybeans, if you must know. Amazingly you and I probably agree about genetic manipulation, but for different reasons. I'll bet you're out of touch with your native country in other ways, nonetheless, and just as cynical as ever. You never called it cynicism. You called it "realism" and "irreverence." Whatever. I am trying to smile, but I refuse to use

KIT EASTMAN

Paris in Love, 2014
Photo-intaglio print, 9 x 9 in image
on 15 x 11 in paper

COURTESY THE ARTIST

Unlike you, or the you I knew, I am not embarrassed by my background.... You're the castaway. I hope you're a happy one.

ALL CAPS or those silly smile marks and other emoticons or shortcut buttons.

I've attached Sam's email with her flight information and cell number. There's also a JPEG of her from about six months ago. It would be nice if you could pick her up. I think the airport is Charles de Gaulle, which is where I flew in. I suspect it has changed since then and gotten even more confusing for young foreigners. Do those "people movers" still work? The unsupported spans in Terminal A seemed way too long, but I'm not an engineer and didn't even build the home I live in. I just never "got" French contemporary design. Remember that huge textbook we used? Mine is now a doorstop.

I suggested Sam make a sign with "Pomquist" written on it, but she refused and said if you weren't at the airport she would go to your office during her stay. Sam is a spirited young woman, as you'll see. I think you'll recognize her easily enough. For one thing she looks an awful lot like you and me. She's nearly six feet tall and has my red hair, which is still red and not gray yet. Otherwise she has your narrow long nose and small ears and even your big green eyes, luckily without the black single eyebrow on top, like Milton the Monster, which is what I called you sometimes when I was feeling in an unfriendly mood. She wears red-rimmed designer glasses when her eyes are too tired for the mauve contacts. I think you wore glasses when you drove your little motor scooter, didn't you? That may have been an affectation, but it's probably a necessity now.

I don't want you to think I approve of tattoos and body piercing. She did that on her own, I mean she had it done while I was gone, in New York, and now it's too late. She says it's a real diamond and I don't know how she can stand to chew.

You'll be wondering why I'm so sure Sam is your child. Beyond the fact that women just know such things, and we really do, I had genetic testing done the year Sam turned eighteen, meaning three years ago, to put my mind at ease. I had a feeling Rich wasn't her father and that he'd find out sooner or later and blab. There was an outside chance he might have been, I mean, he and I did know each other in that way before I left New York for Paris, and we picked up again when I got back, once I got over the urinary infection. "Honeymooners' curse" is what the doctor called it, as if you and I had been married, as if you believed in something that "bourgeois," which is a word I've never actually heard anyone else use except when joking. Not that I approve any longer of sex outside marriage, nor do I think you know what you're talking about in that other petition you signed, on screen two if you do a Google search on yourself. Rich is shorter than I am and blond with blue eyes. He's also not exactly an alpha male. He refuses to drive my red Cherokee Sport for instance, and he stays slim whatever he eats. Sam could not be his daughter. Besides, like I say, I knew it was you. Rich says that's why I kept her.

What I did was, I took that hairbrush of mine, and that pair of boxer-trunks you left behind, and I had samples analyzed. Do not shake your head. First of all, it was you who left the underpants at that dingy little walk-up. Remember—on Rue de Rivoli, down at the unfashionable eastern end? No way was I going to wash them for you. I thought you'd at least have the decency to come back and pick up your clothes before I left. This was years before Monica Lewinsky, so when that mess came along I understood her behavior in relation to Bill's semen on her dress, and that's another reason I never bought that "vast right-wing conspiracy" stuff Hillary Clinton came up with.

What I'm saying is, when a woman loves a man desperately and hates him too, maybe because she sees a life with him and he doesn't, she might be inclined to do something like keep his dirty underpants or a dirty dress. So, yes, I did save your boxers. I took them back to New York, deluding myself into thinking you'd show up one day. I kept them in my sewing basket, where Rich would never find them, and if he did, he'd think they were a rag, which they were, because I had cut them into strips. I used the same hairbrush for twenty years. I still use it today on Fred, my sheepdog. Rich never has so much as touched that brush and he's blond, like I say, like Fred, so it's not contamination from him. It didn't take long to scrape down to the bottom of the brush between the bristles and find a couple of black hairs. Your hair. There's no question you're the father, and there never was in my mind, even though I convinced myself otherwise, for the sake of Rich and Sam and Ken.

Just so you know, she is not named for Samantha in *Bewitched*. Rich's sister is named Samantha, and whether she's named for *Bewitched* as my roommate was, I don't know. Ken was my Uncle Ken's name, so it has nothing to do with the doll, which was invented when Uncle Ken was already born. "John" was never an option for Ken nor "Randall" and certainly not "Tarzan." Speaking of which, I'm proud to say I enjoyed *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom* when I was growing up, though I can't remember the host's name, the elegant man with the mustache and dark suits. I guess I could find it on Google. I did watch *Bewitched*, and I can still sing the theme song from *Gilligan's Island*, which was not some dumbed-down show but very smart, and, as everyone now knows, a precursor to the survival reality shows.

Unlike you, or the you I knew, I am not embarrassed by my background, and I'm sincere when I say I identify with Mary Ann, I mean the original Mary Ann, not the "real" one, meaning the one pretending to be the fictional one in that old TV series. You're the castaway. I hope you're a happy one.

Don't worry, Samantha is not planning to stay with you. You probably live in some loft with no guest room, whereas I have two—both nonsmoking. She's meeting a couple of friends from Los Angeles and plans to party hard. That's where Sam lives by the way. LA. (You'll notice I refuse to use "BTW" and "FYI" and you'll be pleasantly surprised that your daughter is literate, if not exactly a good Christian, but that wouldn't bother you, unless there's been some change in your nihilistic outlook.)

To be precise, Sam lives in Manhattan Beach, which is not Los Angeles as she keeps telling me. So, if I'm reminding you of your callous misplacement of Iowa, I think in fairness I should at least attempt to be accurate. Apparently, the house she shares with fellow art students is one block back from the beach and does not have much of a view, but she doesn't care because she's hardly there. While I'm not familiar with Manhattan Beach and its surfers, I'm guessing you are, probably for negative reasons. San Francisco is somewhat north of there, and you always did say you were a city boy and hated nature and especially surfers. You said something unpleasant about Southern California, where I assumed at first you were from. Everyone at Columbia I met back then was from somewhere near Los Angeles. You said SoCal was "ranch style" through and through—one story, two at most, with brains to match, whereas New York, San Francisco, and Paris were multistory. I'm sure it was something cavalier like that, because I remember thinking that kind of architectural metaphor was facile and typical of you, when you were playing at being tough-minded, and it reminded me of what you said about Ronald Reagan's dyed hair. I liked *General Electric Theater* for your information, even though it was reruns by then, and I even liked *Bedtime for Bonzo* and won't deny it.

The fact that I have a ranch-style home in Omaha may come as no surprise to you, since the suburb where I grew up in Iowa is only five hours away from here, and I'm sure my intellectual credentials fall short by Paris standards. But it is ironic that your brainy, arty daughter has wound up in a one-story beach house, or near-beach house, and that she voted for a Republican representative because he's pro-choice, without realizing that if I had "chosen" the other way, she wouldn't be around, and I would have my career, and I might even have flown back to Paris and stuffed your dirty underpants down your handsome throat or convinced you to marry me and come home. We could have lived in New York and been architects together.

That's one reason I tell people the French do not understand how complex our American society is. You told me your grandmother didn't dislike the Germans during the war and occupation, but that her brother, your great-uncle, whose name escapes me, was a Resistance fighter. It's the same kind of thing over here now, though we're not turning people in yet or anything.

For a long time, I wondered when Sam had been conceived. I blush to think of what you and I got up to, but let's not be coy. Everyone did it back then, especially in

New York and Paris, and I sincerely hope they've seen the error of their ways by now but I doubt it. You probably still smoke, and you may be living with some chain-smoking, glamorous intellectual French woman twenty years your junior or maybe twenty years your senior, which is also fashionable I hear, a woman who is incapable of putting on weight. I'm glad I quit smoking even if I did plump up into a punching bag, and I wish Sam had never started smoking or reading Nietzsche. Genes are amazing things.

You must be curious about when and where. I'm sure when it was, and where. Of all those sticky afternoons in my nasty little narrow-walled oven of a maid's room with peeling paint and a slanting tin roof, or the nights at that even narrower place you rented over a bookstore, where I heard the toilets flush overhead all night, I'm certain it wasn't there and it wasn't then. It was the night after the Pont des Arts, the night I unstitched the butterfly from my underwear, and stabbed my thumb with the needle doing it.

We'd gone to the Louvre, but it was too late and the museum was closed. You said you wanted to show me I.M. Pei's pyramid. You claimed one day someone would come along and blow it up and return the Louvre to its original state, whatever that was. I thought the pyramid a successful conversion, and I told you so, but if the company sends me over now to check damages after a blast, in case you arrange one, we can discuss the aesthetics in person.

I expect you knew the park gates would be open at night, or maybe they're always open at night in summer, since the sun goes down so late in Paris. People were walking in the dusk under the trees, those long rows of trees aligned on the diagonal, with beds full of red and yellow and purple flowering shrubs that smelled so sweet. I think the trees were sycamores, but they might have been something else, horse chestnuts or lindens, maybe, hung with sweet blossoms. There was a pond full of mosquitoes that bit my bare legs, and a bench, a mossy stone bench that you straddled so you could look back at the pyramid and hold forth on how crass and stupid and American it was even though the designer was born Chinese. I straddled the bench facing you, and you stopped midsentence and leaned forward and brushed a long red bang off my pale forehead. And we kissed. Our lips brushed softly. Our tongues touched with a sparkling electric current. And then somehow, I was in your lap and the tip of my nose met your ear lobe when you lifted my skirt. You must have used the technique before, on other girls, because you were so smooth I didn't know you'd done it, and it wouldn't have mattered if I'd known, because it was heaven on earth and that's not blasphemy. People walked by and no one seemed to care, like it was the most normal thing ever for a couple to make love in public, and when I thought you'd stop, you didn't, and I didn't. I can still feel how it felt, and remember the sunset through the leaves, and the lights in the cafés behind, and the laughter, and the feeling that I would never do this again, ever.

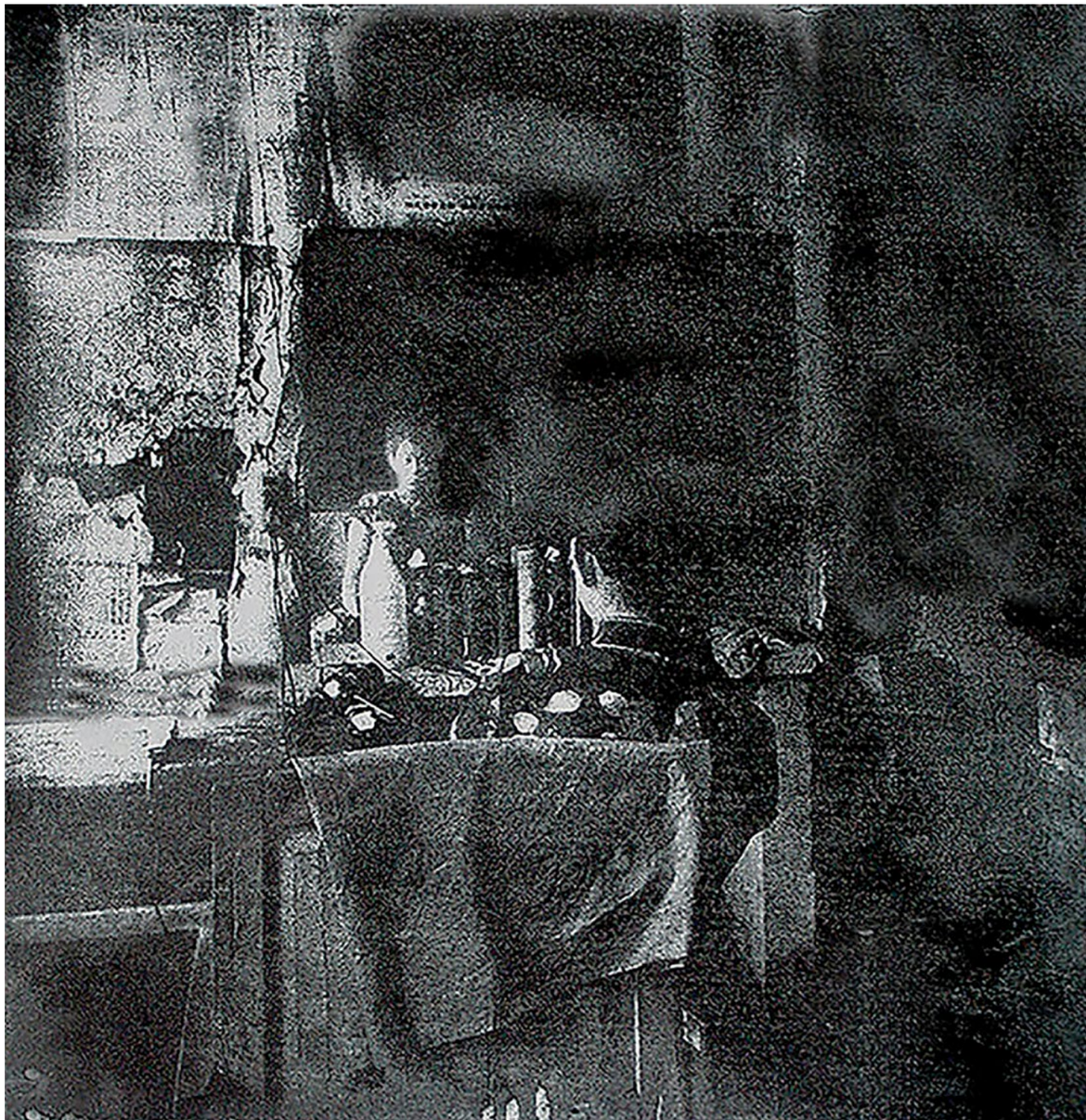
And the result is Samantha. For twenty-one years I have looked at your face in hers. Now you can look at mine again, at least once.

I will send you by Priority Mail the results from the lab tests, plus several strips from your underwear, if you wish, but the others I think I should keep. I do know a lot about corn by the way, in case you want to make another documentary, and wouldn't bother you in the guest room. If you do decide to come over, you'll have to smoke outside.

A native San Franciscan, **David Downie** moved to Paris in the mid-1980s, where he lives with his wife, photographer Alison Harris. His travel, food and arts features have been published worldwide. Downie is the author of *The Gardener of Eden* (to be published in January, 2019), two previous novels, and over a dozen nonfiction history, travel and food books, including the highly acclaimed *Paris, Paris*, *A Passion for Paris*, *Paris to the Pyrenees*, and *A Taste of Paris*.

KIT EASTMAN

Femme Comme, 2016
Photo-intaglio print, 9 x 9 in image
on 15 x 11 in paper



COURTESY THE ARTIST

MINERVA ORTIZ

Siblings 2, 2006
Alkyd on masonite, 36 x 18 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST

KAREN JOY FOWLER

Interview with Andrew Sean Greer

Winner of the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction

Andrew Sean Greer is the Pulitzer Prize winning author of six works of fiction, including the bestsellers *The Confessions of Max Tivoli* and *Less*. Greer has taught at a number of universities, including the Iowa Writers Workshop, been a TODAY show pick, a New York Public Library Cullman Center Fellow, a judge for the National Book Award, and a winner of the California Book Award and the New York Public Library Young Lions Award. He is the recipient of a NEA grant, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. He splits his time between his home in San Francisco and the Santa Maddalena Foundation writer's residency in Tuscany, where he is the Executive Director.

KAREN JOY FOWLER: My first question is, because you are hysterically funny in person, why did it take so long to get hysterically funny in your books?

ANDREW SEAN GREER: That's a good question. My book *Story of a Marriage* does not even crack a smile.

KJF: It is a beautiful book, I love that book.

ASG: Why did it take me so long? The real answer is that when I wrote *Less* I was too sad to write a sad book. I was really low, and to have to work on another wistful, poignant novel, I just couldn't do it. The only way out was to make fun of myself. You might notice that Arthur Less shares some of my attributes, so to make fun of Arthur was to make fun of me. I just didn't want to make fun of other people. I wasn't comfortable with that, but when I finally figured out I could make fun of myself, that was great for me. It changed my daily life because I could make use of small humiliations that would happen to me that would normally get me down.

KJF: And now it's just inspiration.

ASG: Yes. It would take like a little bit, and then I would start making something sad into a funny thing. This is how comedians must work. I always wondered why all these funny things happen to comedians, but the things that happened to them are not funny. They probably just figured out how to make them funny to get through the day.

KJF: You talked to me about this book prior to writing it, or possibly when you were writing the poignant, wistful version, and you told me that it was going to be a book about the generation of gay men right after AIDS who grew up without the preceding generation. Funny is not what I expected.

ASG: In the novel there's only one paragraph that actually talks about that, because I decided it was the saddest thing I could possibly think of for a book to be about. So many of these men in the generation ahead of me died, tens of thousands. It was the first generation to

come out in force. So there's no generation before that of out gay men in significant numbers. The current generation, now we're in our forties and fifties and we have no role models, and that is really tragic, because to make it you often really need a role model. Well it's hard to plan the future. You can say you're writing a book about AIDS, apparently that's what I told you. But writing this book made every day a little easier to get through. I had a really hard time, so it was fun to write this book or I would have become a dystopian, that's the other thing that's happening.

KJF: Another thing that I've been seeing is that it's the book we need at this moment when everything is so grim and dystopian. But of course you can't plan those things in advance. You can't possibly have known how much we would need a funny book when you wrote this one.

ASG: In Europe they would ask me if this was my response to America. And I would have to explain that I wrote these things five years ago. It wasn't such a bad America when I wrote it. A lot of people have told me that they were really happy to read it, that it gave them some sort of faith in humanity. That's very moving.

KJF: It's got some lovely sections on love. There's a discussion in the book about love as the kind of sweet, subtle thing or the lightning strike, and I don't know that the book takes a position on that in the end.

ASG: No, I don't think so because I don't have a position. There's a character whom I make go on a long rant because her girlfriend has left her. This girlfriend has met the love of her life. So this woman asks if this is the good, dear thing, or is it the lightning strike? Is it that you can just get along with someone, or do you have to meet some particular perfect person? She's in a rage about it. I don't have the answer to that one.

KJF: A friend of mine has been complaining because he wrote a sort of Frankenstein-Austen mash-up about Mary Bennet, and some Austen readers are complaining that there's not an HEA ending to the book, which he did not know was a thing, much less a thing that was required.

ASG: How could you ever write a "happily ever after" ending? I don't know how you'd pull that off. You'd have to kill them. In a funny, happy way.

KJF: I can imagine writing the kind of happily ever after ending that sort of carried the message: "Here you go, if you are fool enough to believe it."

ASG: Or it had some kind of time loop, where you know it loops forever in this happy moment.

KFJ: That sounds kind of horrific, doesn't it?

ASG: See, no one wants happily ever after.

KJF: What everyone wants is the vicarious thrill of hearing how you learned that you'd won a Pulitzer Prize. Can you tell us?

ASG: I'm happy to tell you. I have to say, though, that there's a character in the book who wins the Pulitzer Prize, but it's not my main character. I gave the Pulitzer Prize to a much older, established, famous poet deep into his career. I have him shocked to learn the news, because to me it was just the thing that could never possibly happen to anyone. Arthur comes in the room, and then Robert is holding the phone. He says, "I've just heard from the Pulitzer committee." Well I didn't do my research very well because they don't call you, and you don't know when it's happening. I was in Italy working at my job at the Santa Maddalena Foundation in Tuscany. My job sounds very glamorous, but part of my job is I work for a *baronessa* who's ninety-two, and she has an incontinent dog. I decided that I would get pajamas with the built-in diaper for the dog for bedtime. It's a pug, it's not like a big dog. Pugs are squirmy, and I worked it out with this dog. The pajamas, by the way, are blue with polka dots and rainbow suspenders that I bought online from China. So I got her into these and got her up the stairs to the *baronessa*'s bed, said goodnight to everybody. This was after dinner. I came downstairs and a friend of mine showed me his phone, and someone in San Francisco had sent him a picture of the *San Francisco Chronicle* that said "Andrew Sean Greer wins Pulitzer Prize." I said, "Well that's not true." I told him his friend [had] doodled something funny and sent it to him. Then I looked at my phone and there was something like one hundred and fifty messages, and ten of them were from people whose last name is Chabon.

KJF: Big family.

ASG: Yes, it's a big family and they all seemed to have my number. So I called Michael Chabon because I thought he won the Pulitzer Prize fifteen years ago, he's going to know. I said, "Michael, what's going on?" And he said, "You won the award, dear boy!" And then he said, "Am I the one telling you?" And I said, "Yes, yes you are." It took a lot of convincing. Then I drank a lot of Tuscan wine. A lot. The next morning at eight, as my job requires, I went into the *baronessa*'s room and I took the dog out of the bed, downstairs, and out of the pajamas.

KJF: I will admit, the job did sound more glamorous. Don't they get in touch with your editor?

ASG: No, no, no, they have a luncheon at Michael's restaurant in New York, which is like a publishing restaurant. It's live streamed, so I think publishers watch it. And newsrooms watch it, because a lot of journalists win Pulitzer Prizes. That's why we're only allowed to bring one person to the ceremony, because there're around forty of us getting them. I'm bringing my mother.

KJF: She must be pretty excited.

ASG: Some of these former Pulitzer Prize winners in fiction got a hold of me, like that night, to write me. Jeffrey Eugenides wrote me and Donna Tartt. Michael Cunningham called me. They all said the same thing, they said, "Enjoy yourself."

KJF: And are you?

ASG: Yes. Well, Michael Chabon said, "There's no downside. It's all good." And then Michael Cunningham said, "It's going to be a little hard. Don't waste any time doubting whether you deserve to win the Pulitzer Prize because you'll just end up years from now deciding that you do, so just go there right now." I did have my doubts because of the articles that said, "In a rather surprising decision . . ." I agree with them. It was a surprise.

KJF: I think it was a surprise, but circling back to the beginning, it's because it's such a funny novel. We're just not used to the big prizes going to novels that are so funny. That's the only reason it was surprising to me. And I was thrilled. I also read that Michael Chabon told you that now you could write whatever you want. Haven't you been writing whatever you want?

ASG: That's a good question. He did say that.

KJF: Hasn't he been writing whatever he wants?

ASG: Yes, he definitely has. I mean, yes, for sure, because now he's written a book about fatherhood, for instance. Which is surely not what his publisher wanted him to do. They want another book about comic books, which I think he's going to write also. But that's not what he did. I think maybe what he meant was that I didn't have to dress pugs in pajamas at my day job.

KJF: Leading to the obvious question: how much are you enjoying dressing pugs in pajamas?

ASG: I quit the job.

KJF: Wow, that was fast.

ASG: I know. Well, I thought I had to tell her right away, because I was leaving four weeks later on this paperback tour, and I wanted her to prepare herself for someone to take over. I made a long list of notes about what dog took what pill on what day, and where the light bulbs were hidden, and where all the extra keys were hidden. All the little things that I knew, about where the circuit breaker is, the tower, you know, things I always tell the writers when they come that are going to be lost.

KJF: Well, it's nice that you were thinking about her. The dogs, I feel, are the ones who will suffer.

ASG: I think so. There was one dog, Carlotta, who's eighteen years old and I did say goodbye to her and I was like, oh, this might be the last time I see Carlotta. But knowing her, she's going to go on and on. Also a pug, very sweet.

KJF: You talked about where somebody in the book wins the Pulitzer Prize and there is a sentence where his wife says to Arthur Less, "Don't win [one of these] prizes." But there's also an earlier section in which Arthur Less is interviewing another writer and says "What literary writer would agree to prepare for an interview and yet not be paid? It had to be someone terribly desperate." Explain yourself.

ASG: It was slightly based on an event where I interviewed Anne Rice and there was no money involved. It somehow had to be in New York, where I happened to be. There was a certain point where I was wondering why me? Why am I being asked? And the answer was that I guess I'm desperate enough for the attention. Even though you get no attention as the person interviewing Anne Rice, but I was certainly aware of her fans, and I wanted to be someone who had interviewed Anne Rice. It was pathetic.

KJF: There are just enormous pleasures in the book for other writers, some of them involving your prose and your sentences, which are incredible, but a lot of them involve the endless humiliation that Arthur Less faces. One literary event after another.

ASG: It's terrible to complain because writers lead these very charmed lives, doing exactly what we want, but at every single event, there's a little humiliation built into it every time. In Amsterdam, I once accidentally pushed the person interviewing me, and it seemed to the audience that I had pushed him offstage. Like really far, too, like he fell really far because I touched him, and then off he went. That kind of thing, where you're just ashamed.

KJF: I just came back from a conference in New Zealand where I was just treated beautifully, and I say this because I told them they should ask you next year. So I want to make it clear that they just could not have treated me better. It was really wonderful. In this case, the only tiny little bit of humiliation came when I realized that the person being treated even more wonderfully than me was an Indian congressman, who, the day that he was supposed to get on the plane to come to the New Zealand conference, had been charged with murdering his wife. The people at the conference kept saying to me, "We don't think he did it." The opening panel was this big session on the Me Too movement, and the next night was him.

ASG: I'm realizing an irony now, which is that I actually have been helping to run a literary festival in Florence, and this year George Saunders was one of the finalists who won, actually, he won the prize—it's called the Gregor von Rezzori prize for work translated into Italian. And he was up against foreigners, like, great writers from around the world, and I always try my hardest to help out the writers. Like, I write a letter to leave in their hotel room that says here are your free times together, otherwise no one tells them when they're free. They just get this calendar that's jam-packed with nonsense that is all going to be in Italian, and they're in a city they don't know. So I try to write and say something like you only have to do those three things, and then other than that you can go eat whenever you want. Once they get the writers there, then they kind of don't take care of them anymore. They don't tell them things like you're supposed to dress this way for this function, or that way for this other event.

KJF: But, back to your question, there's a humiliating point in the book when a fellow writer tells Arthur that the reason his book hasn't made it into the canon is because he is a bad gay. It's wonderful. He [basically] says, "I think maybe it's because I'm just not a good writer." And the fellow writer says, "No, no, you're a very good writer, you're just a bad gay."

ASG: Arthur doesn't know what it means. He's thinking, "I was a bad lover and a bad son and a bad boyfriend, and even a bad writer. But now I'm bad at this? What am I?" I was certainly told by a writer that I was a bad gay once, and by a writer I admire a great deal. And I have thought about it now for a long time, and I can't figure out exactly what she meant. I think it's that I wasn't into the politics of it.

KJF: Do you think it's because of the way *Story of a Marriage* ends?

ASG: I think that there's a tough thing that you do when you're writing about a community that you're a part of, and you feel strongly politically in one way, but your writing instinct takes you in another way, and you know you have to follow that other way. You might write something where the guy doesn't get the guy, you know. I think that's very frustrating when there are not very many gay books out there for people who are searching for curriculum books in which the right things happen for characters. My books aren't fitting into what they're looking for. Must be very frustrating, I think. I'm a bad gay for a curriculum. But this one redeems it, maybe. I don't know.

KJF: Absolutely.

ASG: And my students, of course, are from all kinds of backgrounds. I tell them, "You're going to have to write your community and you're going to have to let them down. You know, you're going to let them down. Or you're going to write propaganda, would be the other way to do it. And by 'your community,' I also mean your family. You're going to let them down if you tell your version of things." You must have done that?

KJF: It's a cruel, heartless profession. There's no doubt about it.

ASG: Sometimes you even have to scrap things that aren't working.

KJF: I don't scrap things. I always feel it can be saved. I never give up. Sometimes the thing I end up with bears so little resemblance to the thing I started with that I would be the only person to know because I never gave up. Pages for me are too hard to come by to just carelessly toss them away just because they're not working.

ASG: Sometimes I do just go forward, but I certainly have books I feel like giving up on. With *Story of a Marriage*, I called my agent and I said I would like to give the money back, there's no book. And she said, "I think you're reacting strongly to the editing process." And I went on, you know? Michael Chabon famously wrote he was writing his big, big novel, which was titled *Fountain City*. He was three hundred pages into it and then he abandoned it and just turned in *Wonder Boys* to his publishers instead. They never said a word, they just said, "We love it." I was at a kitchen table with Michael Chabon and Amy Holmes. I told them, "I feel like I need to abandon this book, *Story of a Marriage*, it's not working." Michael said, "Just abandon it. Write the book you really want to write, the book that's in the back of your head. That's the one you should write." And then Amy Holmes said, "No, no. You finish it. You finish the book and you do your best job." She said, "I have books that I wrote from my heart and I have books that I just made it through, and no one can tell the difference. That's writing." I took her advice, if you can believe it. I thought, "I'll do it, I'll do it, I'll just make my way through."

KJF: I feel that your character Arthur has an experience writing his book, which I think may mirror the experience that you had between the book you told me you were writing and the book that you actually wrote.

ASG: Yes. For every book I have a total nervous breakdown. My husband can tell you that that happens. It's awful and I'm on the couch for weeks and can't move or something. Then I figure it out and move on. Usually that happens halfway through the book, or sometimes near the end. This time I front-loaded it. I did it before I wrote the book, so it was a breeze after. I spent a year writing that other book I told you about, of which three pages remain in *Less*, the book I published. But they're exactly what I wrote from that first book and I threw everything else away, and I wrote this one.

KJF: Will you share the section that survived?

ASG: Arthur used to date this famous poet, Robert Brownburn, for a long, long time. He was much older, fifteen years older than him. Arthur was twenty-three and Robert was forty-one, something like that, when they met. And he describes living with a genius:

It begins with "What was it like to live with genius?

Like living alone. Like living alone with a tiger... (continues for 3 pages)." See that's not very funny right?

KJF: No, but it's very beautiful. You and I were on an identical publishing schedule. We were writing the books, taking the same amount of time, they were coming out in the same year, and then you dashed off this, a Pulitzer Prize winner.

ASG: It took me four years. You and I were at a writing retreat together, the one that burned down in Napa, and I was doing workshops or something, and you came up and you said, "I haven't written a word of my new novel, have you?" And I said, "No, I haven't." And we both went, "Oh my god, whew, whew."

KJF: It was a great relief to both of us. The literary community has sustained some big losses recently, and I wondered if any of them are people whose books really mattered to you in a personal way. Are you a big Philip Roth fan, Ursula Le Guin, Tom Wolfe?

ASG: Ursula Le Guin, I mean absolutely. She was one of the most important writers.

KJF: Yes, she was astonishing.

ASG: And I have to say, I am a big Philip Roth fan. He seems like he was a rat bastard, and I could never manage to read two in a row because the way he writes about women is just hard to take. But as a writer, I learned so much from him in every book that I read that I just go back over and over. I think even for this book I read Philip Roth's *Zuckerman Unbound*, which is a comic novel about a writer. I wanted to see what that was. Not his best, but still good enough. What did you think of him?

KJF: I have to admit that I read him several years ago, and the misogyny was just not fun for me and I stopped. I know that he's really important to a number of writers who are really important to me, so I should give it another go.

ASG: A book like *The Human Stain* is both amazing and disgusting. There's one chapter that's all focused on one woman, and you think, "I don't think he thinks women are human beings." She doesn't even act like other characters in the book. She's so artificial that it's clear he just couldn't figure it out. It's so strange. I read books to learn from them for my writing; I'm not going to necessarily assign them for students. But for me, Philip Roth was not a fan of gay people for sure.

KJF: It may be best to know as little as possible about the writer. My friend Stan Robinson believes strongly that there shouldn't even be an author photo. The spell you weave is broken by your face appearing on the back cover, is what he thinks. We should all be Shakespeare. After we're dead, people should argue about whether we actually wrote those books.

ASG: I know what you mean. I stopped putting acknowledgements in my book because I thought it just ruined the spell when people turned the last page, you want them to go, "Ah," but instead it says, "I would like to thank [my] agent . . ." It's this terrible thing.

KJF: Put it at the beginning.

ASG: I put it in the Library of Congress description.

KJF: Arthur covers a lot of ground in your book, and I wonder why you chose the locations that you chose. And also I read that there was another chapter in which he goes to Vietnam, that did not make the final cut.

ASG: I cut that chapter almost at the last minute, I have to say. I cut out a whole chapter. I have been to all those places I send Arthur to because I was trying to earn a buck being a travel writer. I took a lot of notes because you're alone in a foreign country. Vietnam I went to twice. I just took lots of notes and at a certain point I thought, well, maybe a character of mine will remember a trip he had or something. That's where it came from.

I thought every alternate story will be him visiting some place, but then that all went away. I had two rules for myself, and one was that I could only put objects and details in the book that I had written down in my notebooks because I didn't want to write a fantasy about another place—I think that leads to real trouble. My other rule was that the joke had to be on Arthur, that it couldn't be on the people in the country because they're perfectly normal. Things are working fine for them. He's the thing out of place, and when things go wrong it's because he's misunderstood. The people in the book certainly speak more languages than he does, which is what you find abroad. They'll speak four languages even when they're working in a retail job. And you just think, "God, you're a better person than me. More sophisticated, well-read, and kind." That's what my rules were for myself.

—From a conversation at Bookshop Santa Cruz, May 24, 2018

Karen Joy Fowler is the author of six novels and three short story collections. Fowler and her husband, who have two grown children and seven grandchildren, live in Santa Cruz, California.

MINERVA ORTIZ

Wild Dogs, 2007
Oil on muslin-coated masonite, 36 x 20 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST

MINERVA ORTIZ

Pig Man, 2007
Oil on muslin-coated masonite, 30 x 36 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST

JUSTIN J. ALLEN

Eternal Life

She was standing in her nightgown on the deck with coffee steaming, brightly rimmed by the morning sun.

"Kevin," she said. "Are you all right?"

He came up the path to the house from the woods that the house sat on the edge of, clutching his left shoulder with his right arm. His face, already gaunt, was tight with pain.

"Drive me to the hospital," he said.

She did not move or respond right away. As he climbed the stairs to the deck, he couldn't see her face with the sun behind her. He felt a terrible, irrational fear that his wife would refuse to help him.

"Vanya," he said at the top of the stairs, "please."

She stepped forward and put her hand on his other shoulder. "What happened?"

"I passed out. When I was running, and fell down. I think I've broken my shoulder."

She walked with him to the car. Then she went into the house and got the keys. He sat in the car sweating from the pain. She seemed to take forever.

* * *

Even at this early hour on a Tuesday, the emergency room in Palo Alto was scattered with people waiting—the poor, uninsured, usually African American or Latino, who the hospital could not legally turn away. Visits to urgent care, Kevin reflected, reminded you of how inefficient the health-care system was. *These people should be taken care of*, he thought, *but is there any reason why I should have to wait with them?* Why on earth wasn't there an express-lane system for those with premium insurance plans, similar to the elite status system that let him jump the registration line at the airport? His shoulder was an alarm, a signal that rose and fell, but wailed without relent.

Vanya sat silently beside him. He closed his eyes, waited, took deep breaths, opened them.

The minutes dripped. Vanya left to go to the bathroom. A woman in her fifties sat across from him. Kevin, without trying to, made eye contact with her. With a slight smile of sympathy, she asked, "Is it cancer?" She had a story ready to extend, he could see. Maybe someone she loved. Maybe her own. Kevin almost regretted shaking his head no. "Broken shoulder," he forced out. He saw the knot of confusion pass through her—"Oh!" she said, and looked away.

It was his gauntness. The lack of flesh between his knobby knees and his running shoes. The emptiness of his frame. The hungry-looking eyes in a face with every bone outlined. All that, and the smooth head, which he'd long kept shaved to hide his male-pattern baldness. Yes: He already knew it. His appearance was something people found alarming.

* * *

Kevin had not broken his shoulder, he had dislocated it. He was given anesthetic, X-rays, and in what felt like a crude, archaic procedure right out of the Middle Ages, a doctor had physically, forcefully, pulled on his arm to jerk it back into its socket. He'd felt a shaft of pain and nausea pierce the haze of medication. More X-rays verified the shoulder was back as it should be. His left arm was immobilized, put into a sling.

All of this involved long intervals of waiting. In the rush and disorientation, he'd left his smartphone at home and had nothing to distract himself with. He anxiously pictured the emails that would start flowing in, the confused follow-ups when he didn't respond. Kevin often worked remotely, but this was predicated on an unimpaired ability to do rapid response. This was not a quiet time of the year.

A doctor he hadn't seen so far today, whose name tag announced him as Doctor Singh, entered the room. He had a tense, intelligent gaze and stiff black hair with streaks of gray, and without anything to announce it other than his demeanor, he made it clear he was a head doctor of some sort, had some special responsibility at the hospital.

"Hello, Kevin," he began, "I've looked at your medical records and we have a note that you're practicing caloric restriction."

"Yes," Kevin said, "that's correct. For almost two years now."

"If we didn't have that noted, my questions for you would be very different. Given your appearance I would assume you have a wasting disease or some other serious undiagnosed condition. Or severe anorexia or bulimia, which is less common in men but not unheard of. In fact—you may not want to hear this, but *anorexia* is the accurate term medically for what you are doing to yourself with the caloric restriction diet."

"With all respect," Kevin said. "I'm a senior software engineer with twenty years of experience. I'm very capable of research. And I've done a lot of research into this. All my studies lead me to believe that this is the best way of extending my life span."

"You may be putting yourself at risk of malnutrition."

"I'm aware of that, and I'm staying just short of malnutrition and have a very nutritious and well-rounded diet, just very minimal in size. Caloric restriction has been proven to extend life span in a range of mammals. It's proven to lower free radical production by the mitochondria."

"Yes, well, if I remember correctly, the life-extending studies of caloric restriction were first based on yeast. The human organism is a lot more complex than yeast."

"It's been confirmed with rats, rhesus monkeys. Up to fifty percent life extension." Singh took a deep breath.

"As a physician I can only warn you of the risks, I'm not here to argue with you. I appreciate you're looking at the science. But please also understand you don't have the background a medical professional does, don't see how the full spectrum of nutrition, lifestyle, and disease pathologies fit together to create health and well-being. You're here today because you fell on your morning run, that's correct?"

"Yes."

"Did you feel lightheaded—dizzy or faint at all?"

"No," Kevin lied, for the second time today. He'd omitted, repeatedly, mention of Senutri, the appetite suppressant he was taking and which he had obtained illegally on the Internet.

"I already answered that question. I just tripped."

"All right," Dr. Singh said. "It's up to you what you do with your body. All I can say is, be aware of the risks. Continue your research. Don't rely simply on advocates of this life-extension technique for your information. It would defeat the purpose of aiming for longer life if you compromise your health along the way."

On his way out, Doctor Singh gave him a last stern look and handed him a brochure about the health risks of anorexia. Clearly, Kevin thought as he glanced over it, it was aimed at women with a host of body image concerns that weren't relevant to him. He threw the brochure away before leaving the hospital.

* * *

He was overdue for his midday dose of Senutri, and as the pain from his shoulder subsided, hunger had come roaring into the void. As she drove him home, Vanya was silent. They passed a row of palm trees on Junipero Serra near Stanford University and came gliding to a slow stop for a red light. She was a good driver, assertive but calm. Kevin looked at the sharp lines of her profile and after a while, she glanced at him, then down at his arm in its sling. A flicker of disgust registered on her face before her gaze moved back to the intersection.

There was an implacable otherworldliness Vanya had, five years after she came to this country. Six years after they met online, and started corresponding, and Kevin took his first trip to Kiev. Her coldness and stiffness in person had been an immediate and shocking departure from her initial, typo-ridden warmth online. But her intense physical beauty—she was by U.S. standards something of a mismatch for him—made him overlook this and suspend disbelief.

He had suspended it all the way through marriage and years of cohabitation. And the effort continued. If only she would say something. Just ask, "Does it hurt much?"

"It doesn't hurt much," he said. "The medication finally kicked in."

"That's good," she said.

Something was preoccupying her. "What's on your mind," he said.

Vanya glanced over and the light changed and she drove on, giving him her profile again.

"Just worried about you."

Her voice, hollow. Hands tight on the steering wheel. A terrible fear overtook him—bottomless, yawning like an abyss. He was powerless, weak, and could at any moment be crushed by a pitiless universe. *Crushed but not extinguished*. Merely humiliated. Reduced to a ghost that peered, impotent, into the windows of his former life. A house of new things half-unpacked but already gathering dust. Curtains thrown open, lights growing dim. He tried to exert control over his psyche, master his mind, but it squirmed willfully back to its negative vision.

"This woman," he thought, not for the first time, "does not love me."

* * *

Back home, he immediately called Sam, his boss at DynTek. Sam had already guessed that an emergency had kept Kevin away. Normally such a clockwork man, it was completely uncharacteristic for him to be absent or unresponsive or even late.

"I can still email," Kevin said, "using voice-to-text. I still have one hand free for typing slowly or correcting the voice-to-text."

"Come on, Kevin," Sam said. "You're out of commission. That's the breaks. Don't worry about it. The company really values your consistency over the years. We want you to make a solid recovery. Alex is ready to step up and he'll do fine while you're gone. It's just a few weeks."

"Alex."

"Yes," Sam said. "We just had a meeting and he's already talking about how he'll make sure things are running smoothly. He's got some fresh ideas. Gonna move forward on implementing Q and Qline on the corporate ecommerce properties."

"But Q's a very new technology. This is just what I'm worried about. The elegance and parallelism of Diamond-Cut are proven, performative, and horizontally scalable."

"I'm the CIO, Kevin, it's for me to worry about that. If Q is good enough for Verizon, Exxon, and Siemens, it's good enough for us. Alex is up-to-the-minute with this stuff and we have to leverage that. We can't afford to let our competitors get an advantage."

"No downtime and a maintainable stack are an advantage."

"What are you worried about? Getting up to speed when you get back?"

Kevin didn't respond right away. The answer was obvious. He paced the living room in front of the windows and realized that Vanya was standing, pale and still, by the door to the dining room. Sam was repeating that everything would be fine, smoothing him over with a little flattery, saying that it would be "child's play to jump back into it after a break." Kevin forced out his thanks and promised—threatened—that he'd be back soon, and hung up.

The grandfather clock struck the half hour. It was a Victorian anachronism, the clock. Everything else in the house was clean, modern, midcentury or later. But the clock, a family heirloom passed down to Kevin that he

was sentimentally attached to, was old and unfashionable, polished cherrywood and brass.

"What's going on?" Vanya said.

"Alex is taking over at work," Kevin said, "the junior engineer, while I'm on leave." Vanya said nothing, waiting for him to go on.

"Is there something else you're worried about?" he said.

"No, it sounded like you were concerned."

"I am concerned."

Kevin took a deep breath.

"Alex is half my age. He's inexperienced but he's sharp. I've taught him a lot. In addition to that, he's got an insane level of energy because of his prescriptions to Adderall and other medications. He can work a fourteen-hour day without breaking a sweat. By the time I get back he'll have overhauled the infrastructure in ways I don't even understand and I'll have to struggle to keep up with."

Suddenly he felt so tired he could barely stand. He sat down by the picture window, with its view of the woods where this morning, he had fallen.

"Could you get me my lunch, please?" he said.

Vanya blinked. She was not used to him asking for this. "I . . . don't know what you want."

"There's a bottle of green soup in the refrigerator. Just warm it up. I usually have that with a half cup of walnuts."

"All right. You don't want anything else?"

"No thank you."

She turned and went into the kitchen. When he heard the microwave beep, he started salivating like one of Pavlov's dogs.

* * *

Kevin looked out the window as Vanya left for work. The hard California light had a soft-focus gauze from the pain pills. She was dressed in plain, loose-fitting pastels and tossed her hair behind her as she got into the gold Lexus. There was no set uniform for a dental hygienist at Silicon Valley Smiles, the Mountain View clinic owned by Dr. David Malouf—a charismatic transplant from Beirut whose own smile was the fiercest white. Kevin had worming suspicions about Vanya and David but he so far had avoided letting them torture him and there was nothing, really, they came from but shadings on faces and inflections of voice on his rare and awkward visits to the office. Insecurity was the soil they grew in and half-consciously Kevin set his mind to ignore these thoughts over the coming days of homebound paranoia.

Kevin was ill-suited to idle time. He did not enjoy passive activities like reading books, watching TV or movies. So he detached his laptop from the bay of screens in his home office, propped himself up on the living room couch with his injured arm wedged between pillows, and resigned himself to one-armed web browsing. It had been a while since he had logged in to the LongLife forum. For a while he'd been a very active contributor. Much of the discussion was devoted to caloric restriction, but that was not the only topic. Vitamin supplements, research into wonder drugs, and the science of aging were also popular themes. The rest consisted of speculative thought on transhumanism, cryogenics, and nootropics.

He frowned as he browsed a thread on resveratrol, a supplement that was said to duplicate the effects of the caloric restriction he was currently practicing. He had taken it before going on the diet and was planning on taking it again afterward. There was a new trial he hadn't seen with limited but negative results. "RSV treatment did not lower circulating levels of hs-CRP, interleukin 6, or soluble urokinase plasminogen activator receptor in plasma," the conclusions read, "and inflammatory gene expression in adipose and muscle tissues also remained unchanged. RSV treatment had no effect on blood pressure, body composition, and lipid deposition in the liver or striated muscle. RSV treatment had no beneficial effect on glucose or lipid metabolism. RShigh treatment significantly increased total cholesterol ($P < 0.002$), low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol ($P < 0.006$), and fructosamine ($P < 0.013$) levels compared with placebo."

This still didn't mean anything conclusive, he thought, when it came to life extension specifically, though it wasn't encouraging. Life extension was very difficult to study in clinical trials, simply due to the length of the time frame. But of course, treatment of the "symptoms of aging" or "age-associated illnesses" was difficult to separate from the attempt to combat the aging process itself. A new iteration of an ongoing debate on this matter was raging on the forum in comments on the resveratrol results.

He surfed to the forum home page and unspooled a thread titled "How likely is it that radical life extension will happen in our lifetime?" The results made his gut feel even emptier. It was a rehash of old information that got sidelined into a pessimistic and, in Kevin's judgment, naïve and obscurantist view of consciousness extension into the electronic realm. He decided to weigh in and slowly tapped out a response with his right hand.

While I do not expect it to happen for many years to come, I do not see any reason why hardware will not advance to the point where the brain can be replaced with mechanical hardware with the same ease as a hip replacement today. We already have neural networks that can recognize a face. And are close to achieving a full artificial heart replacement. These technologies will converge. There is no mystery to consciousness, simply an algorithm we haven't cracked yet. Once we do, we'll be able to liberate and extend the software programs currently confined to the fragile and limited hardware of our human brains.

He clicked Post Reply, feeling validated by a sense of action. He was part of a tiny vanguard that one day would be looked back on—by the great minds of the future, which would defy current comprehension—as prophetic ancestors, tiny and bright, glittering on a dark beach of ignorance.

* * *

Over the following weeks, Kevin's homebound condition brought on a terrible lethargy: a lack of motivation that seemed, now that it had arrived, to have been lying in wait for him all along. He filled the days by surfing LifeLong and other forums, poring over his investments, and doing calculations on spreadsheets to refresh his assessment of his financial security. Kevin had been, if you added up the total value of his assets and equity, a millionaire since before he'd turned forty. The majority of that was locked up in the house, which had nearly doubled in value since he'd bought it—and at the time, he'd feared he was buying at the top of the market. Much of the rest was in stock options for companies he'd worked for, investment accounts, and 401(k)s.

Not that it had given him peace to reach the million-dollar mark. When he'd reached that magic number—which had beforehand been a sort of goalpost he was intent on reaching someday—it had instead triggered a major depression and turned his attention inward, to his body and to his mortality. Memories of his mother's illness and disappearance had flooded in. It was after he'd become a millionaire that Kevin had become interested in life extension. Yet that interest had kindled slowly, because first he had been preoccupied with securing another marker of completeness.

One pursuit had grown out of the other; it was on a meandering thread on the topic of "mind-body wellness" on the LifeLong forum, which had turned into a discussion on depression and loneliness and the search for companionship, that Kevin had learned of online matchmaking services that connected American men—often introverted technology professionals like himself—with "appreciative" and "traditional" women from Eastern Europe. One man shared his experience as a life-changing revelation. Another said he'd been laughed at, mocked, and rejected in his own country, only to find a wonderful wife abroad. *You can't strike out,* the men said, *these women are incredible.* And Kevin, to whom linear, engineered solutions to messy human problems were an easy sell, soon was booking a trip to Ukraine to meet the women in person that he'd been introduced to online—including Vanya.

He had not particularly enjoyed his trips to Kiev, from the first glimpse coming in on the plane and seeing it overhead. The whole city was a jumble of spooky medieval-looking architecture set against hard slabs of Soviet concrete: both equally alienating to his California eyes. He found the people unfriendly and the cuisine unpalatable. It had not been hard for him to imagine that he was rescuing Vanya from that place.

* * *

Fall came suddenly to the Bay Area that year. One morning in early November, it was no longer merely crisp, but cold. Breath trailed in jets, layers went on, and the coastal grayness gathered into something leaden. The sky, the woods, the house—all seemed to creak like a machine fallen out of use, the morning when the first rain came.

"Is that thunder?" Vanya said, coming to the window. Her face shone with an anticipation he rarely saw; it provoked him, not only because he felt it concealed something, but because his response to this weather was the opposite.

"It's just the wind dragging the bins down the driveway," he said. But a minute later, as the rain increased, there was an audible roll.

"Back home," Vanya said, "we had always summer rains like this. The sky, almost black."

"Rain in the summer?" Kevin grinned, shook his head.

This was a running theme—the bad weather and horrible food Vanya had escaped. At first, it had been a mutual joke. But as Vanya came to miss Kiev, it went one-sided, a way of Kevin reminding her she'd traded up. A short while later, he watched through the window as she got into the Lexus. The wipers pumped as it backed away, lights neon-warm in the tree-shaded driveway. This was now his routine: watching his wife go to work, waiting for her to come home. It was not something he could stand much longer. The need to do something was becoming unbearable. He got his keys from a drawer, went to the garage, and got into his Tesla as the big door yawned open. Pulled out, and sped off—but not too quickly—minding the curves in the road and needing to steer one-handed. Soon, taillights appeared below him through the trees. He slowed, not wanting Vanya to know he was following behind.

He trailed at a distance as she descended the hills, got onto the freeway, then off in two exits, then cruised down Lytton Avenue into downtown Palo Alto. Inexplicably, Kevin felt himself harden and realized it had been weeks since he'd had an erection. This state of excitement slackened as the drive continued, but he remained agitated. He did not know where exactly Vanya was driving, but she did not appear to be going to work. She made a right turn into a parking garage, and he kept going, then decided to risk parking illegally in a handicapped zone around the corner; precious moments and he would risk losing track of her, and he was already seized with anxiety that she was out of his sight. He crouched like a voyeur in the shrubs adjacent to the garage with a view of the entrance, and soon breathed in relief as she emerged.

He took care, now, to drift behind her undetected, not wanting to spoil his somewhat incredible act of tracking her across the city. She went into a café on University Avenue, and he waited, crossed the street, then peered from behind a car to see if she was meeting someone. Stomach aching, legs weak, he set his eyes on a dark-haired, dark-skinned man, unable to see full on, certain it was Doctor Malouf, there for an illicit rendezvous with his wife—the face shimmered, he blinked—and for a startling moment, he was instead sure it was Doctor Singh from the hospital, ready to single out and admonish him. But as Vanya abruptly left the café with her coffee, he caught a clearer view of the man and realized he was mistaken on both accounts.

Vanya continued down University, and Kevin matched her steps from across the street and behind, past sycamores already wrapped in glowing Christmas lights. She passed a pharmacy, a new age bookstore, and stopped at a Western Union office and went in. Kevin watched, coming close, no longer worried about being caught spying, and stood in the glass as Vanya went to a window and filled out a form, handed over cash, and conducted what could only have been an international money transfer. She paused at one point and tucked her hair behind an ear—an unconscious gesture whose simple innocence sent Kevin first into a well of mystery, then back into a pure, liquid rage. Vanya smiled at the cashier, turned, and not noticing her husband standing staring from the sidewalk, walked right past his face in the glass and to the door.

On exiting the Western Union, she turned and then, seeing him, her face crumpled in horror. "Who are you sending money to?" he shouted.

People walking by stopped and stared. Let them. He moved toward her; she shrank. He repeated his question.

"My brother," she said.

"You expect me to believe that?" He laughed, bitter. "You expect me to believe it's not some Ukrainian pimp?"

With that, her jaw literally dropped in disbelief, and Kevin knew he had done something irreversible. Images of her brother he'd almost forgotten came back to him: short, bloated, white with hangover, wearing a tracksuit and a short-brimmed cap—almost a tough guy, but his eyes, washed-out and wounded, were too weak. He was her little brother by some years, and he had been unpleasant, even hostile to Kevin, but Vanya had obviously liked him a lot, cracking jokes in Ukrainian when, before the wedding, he seemed extremely upset.

"Yes, I expect you to believe it." She was so quickly again her soft, measured, unprovoked self. "I sent money to Sasha. Not a lot. But to him, it makes a big difference. It's my own money. And it's no concern of yours. It's really not."

She moved toward him, reaching out, but not to touch him—to show him the receipt for the money transfer. He tried not to look at it, but he glanced over and it was true: her brother's name and the amount. Her face was drawn, full of concern, but otherwise impossible to decipher. The people who'd stopped to watch this domestic drama were losing interest and drifting on. The rain was again starting to drizzle.

"You're sick, Kevin. You need to take care of yourself." He turned then and walked away.

* * *

His hunger was a flickering light in a dark cavern; tiny, yet casting huge shadows in the enormity of the space. Having nothing else to do, he'd returned home, paid the parking ticket that had been left on the Tesla windshield, and after a couple hours of job searching, restlessly paced the house. His shoulder throbbed, so he took a painkiller along with his dose of Senutri, then sat in the easy chair in the living room and did absolutely nothing.

The wheels of the Lexus rolling on wet gravel woke him from a reverie in which he had dreamed of building a new application. Happily lost in a labyrinth of code, he'd been busy setting up a brand new architecture—without any idea what the application was for, that part of the dream left entirely unsketched. The house was silent, and in the starless evening, completely black. He reached out and switched on the lamp next to his chair, not really wanting to, but not wanting to appear strange or sinister when Vanya came into the room.

He heard her walking up to the door, which would open right on the living room. A jumble of thoughts came clattering through his brain; it renewed his exhaustion, and he realized he could not face Vanya just yet but did not have the time to get up and leave the room. As he heard her key rattle the lock, he closed his eyes, leaned his head back on the chair, and played dead. He kept his eyes shut tight as he heard her enter, move through the house. And then, in the other room, taking a shower. He imagined her naked body, walled off from him in every sense, luminous gold in the bathroom steam.

Hours later he woke to the grandfather clock—louder here than in the bedroom. He wanted to go to bed but did not want to disturb Vanya and felt a need to atone. So he went to the hallway closet and pulled out a sleeping bag, went back to the living room, and unfurled it onto the couch.

The next morning, Vanya was not as he expected. Instead of distant, she seemed almost lighthearted. She took Kevin by surprise, first by asking him if he wanted juice—he declined, but thanked her for asking—and then, just before going to work, when she suggested they have dinner out that night.

"You want to have dinner?" he said. "Are you sure?"

It slowly dawned on him that this was, perhaps, not something to feel uncomplicated about. "We need to talk," she said.

So it was like that. He could not object. And as he agreed, asking her where and when, making plans, he resigned himself to a day of gnawing anxiety followed by something he could never really prepare for.

* * *

They met after dark, downtown again in Palo Alto. The act of making the same drive as two days before, remembering its edgy excitement followed by such a feeble anticlimax, made Kevin's heart sink. At Perry's, Vanya led the way into a long, low-lit dining room, large yet somehow intimate. Once they were seated, their waiter brought water with lemon slices and menus. Vanya looked Kevin straight in the eye for longer than he could remember. Directly. Which made him feel cautious relief. But her look was not without a certain hardness—and ultimately, he did not know what to make of it.

"It's time, Kevin. I'm sorry. I can't do it anymore."

"Do what anymore?" he said, his voice rising.

The waiter glanced over. This was the reason she had wanted to go out to dinner. Avoiding a scene.

"Are you talking about our marriage?" Kevin said, more quietly.

"Yes. I want a divorce."

The room rocked silently. Reality shifted. "How long have you been planning this?"

She closed her eyes, opened them, and moved on. "I don't want anything. Your money, your house."

"Is there someone else?"

She paused again, then kept speaking.

"No. And I don't want to be enemies. I don't want drama, or tears. I just want to go."

Not able to face her—calm, resolute, sincere—he broke her gaze and looked around. The candles burned on the

tables. There, by the bar, was a man pouring drinks, looking timeless in his white shirt and old-fashioned haircut. There was an eternal world here in the present moment. It was the hum, the vibration, of the infinite possibilities of the future that were trembling on the verge, swirling, ready to swallow the illusory stability of the present. This terrifying, magic world was one he'd been suddenly thrust into by the upending of his life. For the second time, recently.

She was looking at him. Not with anger, or her customary self-protective opaqueness, but with sorrow—even pity. It was not a way she'd permitted herself to look at him before. He found that in spite of himself, he liked it. It was so much better than the quiet resentment he'd grown so used to. He tried to steel himself. He had to be a man, didn't he? Not even a "man" but a person, with some self-respect. He had to hold her to account.

"You've got your citizenship," he started. Then stopped himself and took a breath. "Did you love me a little? I want to know the truth."

"I used to think I could grow to love you. I told myself I could. I really tried, Kevin." He nodded. Tears were welling up.

"I do care about you," she said. "I think you deserve something real."

He felt very thirsty and took a long drink of water, every gulp ballooning his stomach, filling it out from absolute vacancy. Was it strange that this moment did not hurt as much as he had thought it would—or should? A few tears, wipe them away, and already acceptance was coming. No urge to fight at all.

"I know. It was foolish of me to think I could find a shortcut to a perfect life."

"Well," Vanya said and smiled, giving her face a radiance that took his breath away. "You have a long life ahead of you, Kevin. This is just one chapter."

The waiter reappeared and asked, very quietly, if they were ready to order. He looked from Kevin to Vanya.

"If you need more time, I can come back."

"Nothing for me," Kevin said.

"I'm sorry," Vanya said. "Just the drinks tonight."

The waiter said, "No problem," and took their menus with grace.

* * *

Ever since college Kevin had been an early riser. Thrust into the groundless place that was the world beyond his parents' home and his hometown, he'd embraced wakefulness, vigilance, alertness as his savior. His departure for Texas, to attend his third-choice school (Stanford had rejected him, so had Berkeley) and pursue an engineering degree, happened to coincide with the diagnosis of his mother's breast cancer. He'd almost cancelled his plans, in favor of staying home and attending San Jose State—his mother's vehemence practically forced him to leave California.

He saw little of her before the cancer took her, sooner than anyone expected, within two years.

In the early morning sometimes Kevin looked out to the east—especially now, with Vanya gone and the house empty—at the light crowning the distant clouds, the jagged tree line, the rolling hills. He would feel the wind rushing over the land, and the coming of the day would fill him with an unspeakable dread. The thin edge he'd coaxed out of himself by waking early, by sacrificing his sleep, would in precious moments be lost: the world would inexorably wake and join him, all the masses around him. The sun would come, nothing could halt it, and bring him one day closer to the end.

Justin J. Allen was born in California in 1979, studied creative writing at San Francisco State University, and has worked as an editor, designer, and technologist for leading arts, activist, and news organizations. His short fiction has been published in *Crannóg*, *Fiddleblack*, and *Transfer* and is forthcoming in *Spectrum*. His journalistic work has appeared in *Full Stop Quarterly*, *EdSource*, *Sacramento News & Review*, and other publications. He lives in Oakland, California.

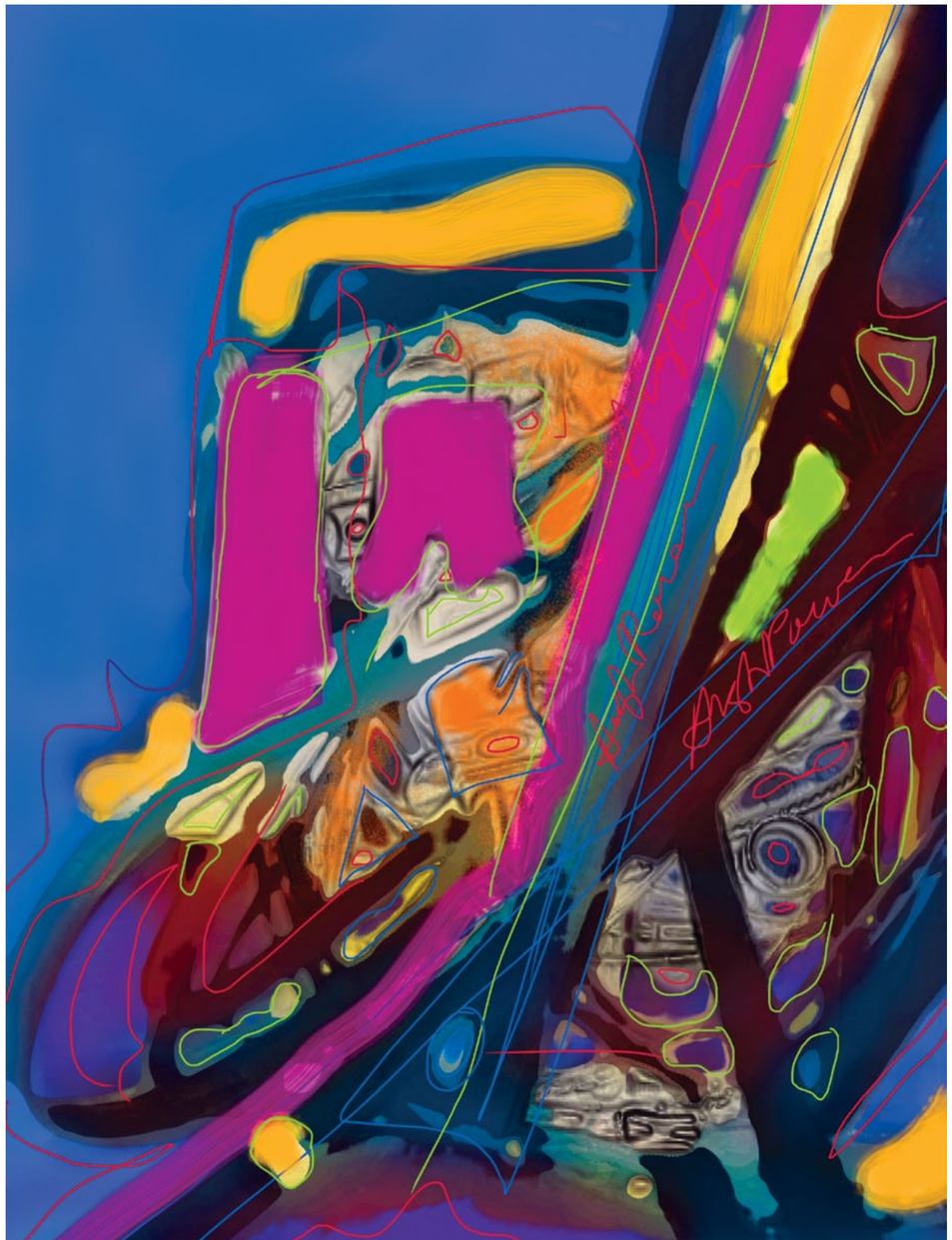
MINERVA ORTIZ

Cat Food, 2007
Oil on muslin-coated masonite, 30 x 20 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST

KATHLEEN FORSYTHE

High Power Gadget, 2016
Digital on acrylic, 30 x 40 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

FARNAZ FATEMI

The Woman in the White Chador

stands on the flat roof of a house in Masuleh.
She left lunch on the stove to walk out

on the layer cake of terraced houses on the hillside,
one row above the other, roofs turning into roads below.

She is not an idea.
Erect, draped, one arm crosses

the bright white of her chest to hold the swath in place.

Leucistic bird: occurrence.
The windows below her are wide open.

The fog rolls up the hill below us,
peers over our shoulders and into all the houses

as if to move us inside.
She could call us to prayer and I would.

She was born where I wasn't.
She is so white she shines

through the muck of others' disbelief. The day stays foggy.

She is not an idea, and I didn't
put her there. She's not there to jump.

She's there to say she did not jump.

Farnaz Fatemi is fortunate to write with others in Santa Cruz, California. Her poetry and lyric essays have been published in *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Delaware Poetry Review*, *Comstock Review* and other anthologies and journals, and have been recognized by the Litquake Poets of the Verge Writing Contest and Best of the Net Nonfiction, among others.

KATHLEEN FORSYTHE

New Life, 2017
Digital on aluminum, 20 x 16 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST

ANDREW SCHELLING

Ethnobotanist and The People With Bones

A Tribute to Dale Pendell, 1947–2018

A man walks into a bar. His chestnut-colored hair is secured in a bun with a long wooden pin. He turns to a table, draws a red bandana from his pocket, and spreads it out. He arranges five whitish-blue mushrooms, slightly bruised, from smallest to largest on the red cloth. After a few moments he looks at his friend. "What do you see with these mushrooms?" His friend studies them. "They look like the same species." The friend looks up. "You've arranged them smallest to largest. Maybe youngest to oldest." The first man lifts three with a deft motion. "These," he says wickedly, "are delicious. The other two," he pauses, "will kill you. It will be a slow death. They will bore holes in your liver. It will take two weeks. There is no antidote."

* * *

I met Dale Pendell in 1977 at a primitive arts festival he helped organize in Jackson Meadow in the Sierra Nevada foothills, after a bright poster caught my eye in Berkeley. At Jackson Meadow, he taught a workshop on poetry by a fire ring. At some point he asked for a poem of mine. I read one. "A lot of poems these days with the polestar," he said drily. That was all I needed; about the most helpful poetry instruction anyone ever gave me. Dale was living on the San Juan Ridge with his family in those days. Like many of the folk up on the ridge—along the South Fork of the Yuba River—he did a bit of manual labor, wrote poetry, worked on restoring land that had been badly damaged by hydraulic mining in the nineteenth century, and sat zazen. Dale had trained himself as a botanist. Already he was making collections and doing experiments nobody else had thought of. He'd gone up the Mad River looking for a plant ally, got directions from an elderly Indian woman, and found the wrong plant. It became his ally though. Back of the shack in the mountain meadows where he lived with his family (he'd built it out of an old chicken coop), he had a metallic trailer with several windows. This was his laboratory and his study: plant specimens, plant presses, a thermos, radio, typewriter, and books.

When Dale's time on the ridge came to an end, he decided to return to college. Some divination pointed him to UC Santa Cruz. Those days I lived in the mountains outside Santa Cruz in a steep valley bristling with redwoods. There was a cabin on the property with a rare albino redwood near

its door. We offered the cabin to Dale. He spent about a year in it, before he moved his family down from the ridge, into the house on Myrtle Street where Marici still lives.

When he was resident in that wood-plank cabin back in the trees, he'd come late from town in the evening, often with some sort of tincture to share with Kristina and me. Sitting by an oil lamp or woodstove, listening to winter rain pour loudly through the woods, we learned about Chartreuse. The sweet herbaceous yellow infusion that softens your tongue, or the fiery green that bites the back of your throat. Dale taught us B & B—Bénédictine and brandy. And Frangelico, compounded from hazelnuts. Potions distilled by herb-specialist monks far off in France or Italy. Sometimes he brought a flat basket of mushrooms he'd harvested.

How much this man, five years older than me, seemed to know! He was a poet. He had produced a fine book of poems and images, *The Gold Dust Wilderness*—the designs modeled on California Indian rock art—silk-screened and hand-bound with marbled paper and leather. He edited *Kuksu*, the first bioregional poetry journal. We didn't call it that in those days, but people had just begun to identify the term *bioregion*. Dale studied mushrooms, ethnography, where to find rock art. Herbs and flowers he knew; he even had a laboratory with beakers, retorts, burners, microscopes, slides. And file cabinets full of plant specimens from his flower press. He owned a library of poetry. He read mathematics, astronomy, ethnobotany. He'd been to prison. He played chess and read calculus.

At the university, Dale developed a curious, contentious, and I think enormously fruitful relationship with a professor of classics, Norman O. Brown, whom everyone called Nobby. Nobby had started out as a Marxist scholar of Greek mythology. He studied the Western tradition of visionary outsiders and prophets, from Hesiod to Teilhard de Chardin. He wrote a book, *Love's Body*, built on aphorisms, puzzles, formulas, a mosaic of everybody from the Greek pre-Socratics to Emily Dickinson, with William Blake, Freud, Laozi, and the Christian mystics taking part in a grand bricolage. The book made him a counterculture hero because it called for a liberation of the body through poetry. It was a shaman's book. Nobby was a shaman of the library. But a shaman in a 1960s world that wanted gurus. Nobby had no interest in gurus. He fled from anyone who came hoping for spiritual counsel. Worse, if you tried to impress him with something you'd learned or thought up, he'd cut you where you stood.

How did Dale get close to this loner intellectual medicine man? I can only assume it was Dale's eye for mischief—a kind of archetypal mischief that would slyly pierce a conversation, leaving it in fragments and riddles. Sometimes the glint that came into his eye made me think I had a real coyote in front of me. After Nobby's death in 1993, Dale wrote a book of dialogues between himself and Nobby, *Walking with Nobby*. You can see the sparring, jousting, wit, competition, and razor-sharp humor forging a wary friendship. It is a terrific book. But it's Nobby's method of writing I want to talk about.

I think Dale got right away how important Nobby's aphoristic style could be. A form "so perishable," Nobby said, "that it cannot be hoarded by any elite or stored in any institution." Few of us believed in institutions in those days. They lacked the wildly dissident voices we wanted to hear. We hated poetry institutions, we hated political institutions, as much as we disliked banks—all of them housing such narrow views. Dale took to the use of many voices, many, many voices, as Nobby had, and did something unique with them. He set them in a kind of contrapuntal, contentious dialogue—not the thunder, brimstone, and prophetic tones of Nobby, which Dale would have disfavored (his father was pastor of a megachurch in Southern California). The voices in Dale's writings, from this point forward, were quietly wicked, fiercely partisan, trouble and mischief; they laughed, barked, contradicted each other, mocked, insulted, goaded, and instructed.

One day he said, "I've got a book I wrote. Want to read the manuscript?" This was the first volume of his *Pharmako* trilogy, *Pharmako/Poeia*. I took the manuscript home, got tangled up in its pages, and for the first time in my life felt a burst of pride at what a friend had accomplished. "The book is fantastic," I told Dale. "A real contribution." Its pungent brevity, the verbal deftness, the circular architecture, the feeling you are inside an alchemist's retort. The wry mischief it's salted with. The voices, the people, animals, minerals, heavenly bodies, scholars, medicine-singers, and of course, plants . . . plants . . . plants.

However—I said, "You need to document all the sources. So much ethnography, chemistry, poetry, divination, botany. Scholarly voices, wise voices! Who is going to know where it all comes from? You need to document this stuff if you want anyone to take it seriously."

Then I saw the glint of coyote mischief in his eye.

When the book came out, he had not documented anything. But it did get taken seriously. Recently I heard that an introduction to psychology course at Berkeley assigns it. It is required reading for 650 undergraduates. I was wrong.

Dale was right.

Pharmako/Poeia is a great projective poem full of echoes, presences, and archetypal lore. After that first volume came two more: *Pharmako/Gnosis* and *Pharmako/Dynamis*. In the trilogy he invents a system of mind-and-plant-ally classification that people will study for centuries. I once told a small group of people that it reminds me of the Wordsworth adage: "Create a system, or be enslaved by another man's." "Not Wordsworth," Dale corrected. "That's William Blake."

Once I moved from California to Colorado, I saw less of Dale. Whenever I could, though, I'd visit him and Laura, first in Oakland, then at their Mantis Hill ranchstead in Penn Valley. He gave me bottles of his home-brewed absinthe, with Greek letters on the labels to throw federal agents off the scent. We sent each other postcards and books. He made me a beaded bracelet—his own design, which he called "poison path."

When he got liver cancer and needed a transplant, we spoke all the time by phone. When cancer returned last year in his spine, we were able to visit on a few occasions, when I made it out west. But small lesions began to reduce the bone in his spine—first weakness with little twinges, then terrible pain. I saw him take a dropper of morphine to a little glass in a restaurant in Berkeley; it reminded me of the nights of green Chartreuse, but with a grimmer edge. He phoned one day and asked, "Where is that story about the 'people with bones'?"

People with bones. It is a story I got from Jaime de Angulo. In a letter de Angulo wrote Franz Boas in 1933, he calls it a Shasta story. On the *Old Time Stories* KPFA radio broadcasts, he had Antelope Woman tell it: a Paiute tale. It shows up in several of his linguistic studies.

A man loves his woman dearly. She dies and he follows her spirit to the edge of the ocean, even though she keeps turning around and telling him to go back home. One day after running up and down the seashore, she dives into a wave and disappears. He pursues her, diving into the next wave. Under the sea is a tunnel, and he follows it to the land of the dead. When he gets there, he stands behind a tree and studies the people, until they all file into a pit house, including his woman. How can so many people fit into that house, he wonders. He goes into the house and there is nobody there. Except way in the back, on the other side of the fire, a figure lying on the ground in the dark. It is Coyote Old Man. Coyote says to him: "You shouldn't have come. I don't know how you got here. Nobody with bones gets here. The people are all afraid of you, because you have bones."

Dale began to identify with those people. He told me he was having a hard time relating to people with bones. Not easy to be around them. They have different ways to them. The deterioration of his spine—most fundamental of bone structures— must have made Dale feel he was one of the people without, like the dead in the Shasta story. When de Angulo wrote that letter to Boas, he was recovering from a shattered pelvis, broken shoulder, and crushed ribs. A car had plunged into Torre Canyon at Big Sur, killing his son and wrecking his own body. He seemed to have no bones either, those years . . .

His whole life, Dale was a master of puzzling little aphorisms. When he spoke them there was a mix of Lao Tzu, Kuan Yin, Hermes the thief, Spinoza, Emily Dickinson . . . A hundred or a thousand times, sitting by a flame, by the woodstove, at the dinner table, out of some silence he would lift his head, stare you in the eye, and pronounce something that sounded old and formulaic. Archaic, cryptic: little gnomic puzzle riddle sayings. I'd lean my head forward and try to study out what it meant. Then there it would be. That twitch of a smile. Like an old coyote.

This New Year's I stayed several days with Dale and Laura at Mantis Hill. The oaks were green and the grasses. Dale spoke of the Chinese, shooting off fireworks at New Year's to drive evil spirits away. Old karma, bad things; however you want to say it. Mostly Dale would sit quiet or sleep on the couch. Once in a while he'd make one of those remarks, a formula, a little puzzle. Maybe a math problem. "Andrew told you: Six, Seven, Eight."

He no longer glinted with mischief. His eyes were huge with a scary wild astonishment—like he had gone to land

of the dead and could not figure what to do with what was left of his bones. I began to wish I had written down the hundreds of puzzles or riddles or aphorisms I'd heard over the forty years we had been friends. They'd make a tough old poem, built out of small steps, like Wittgenstein, or a Zen handbook. One night I jotted a few things he said into a notebook—

there's a corpse to float
how do they make the code reported
Howard said he never knew who put the acid in
we gotta let them mice run a long way
don't get airborne
getting complicated reminds me of brothers

That last day, I kissed his wild head when departing. His hair smelled like meadow grass. He was very thin. A couple of weeks later, Laura sent a card with something Dale had dictated on January 11th. He'd asked her to send it to me. I separated it out into lines, like a little song. I see what it is: a ghost dance song.

I'm glad this
shitty thing
didn't stretch out past
twilight

jesus christ

if we can
still help each other
and I think we can
let's

Editor's note

Dale Pendell was a regular contributor to *Catamaran* since its inaugural issue in Fall 2012. For that issue he contributed an essay, "Solitary." Despite his solitary nature, Dale was the best company a person could have: generous, kind, thoughtful, and creative. The breadth of his interests is reflected in his work that was published in *Catamaran*. "Solitary" is a personal memoir that describes his coming of age in prison. Winter 2014 saw "Broken Symmetry," his reflections on John Piper's windows for the baptistery of St. Michael's cathedral in Coventry. "Holes in the Ground," which appeared in the Spring 2016 issue, was a catalogue of creatures living in the soil of his home in the Sierra foothills. In Spring 2017 he continued his exploration of that region with "Tracing the Pluton," an investigation of its geology. Maybe Dale wasn't so much solitary as unique. He created a unique personal style that effortlessly combined poetics, historicism, and scientific exploration. There will not be another like him.

—Thomas Christensen, Contributing Editor

Andrew Schelling has published twenty books, most recently *Tracks Along the Left Coast: Jaime de Angulo & Pacific Coast Culture*, a folkloric account of West Coast ethnography, linguistics, bohemian poets, and California Indian lore. Forthcoming in November is *Some Unquenchable Desire: Poems of the Buddhist Hermit Bhartrihari*. Schelling lives in the Southern Rocky Mountains of Colorado and teaches at Naropa University.

KATHLEEN FORSYTHE

High Power Graffiti, 2016
Digital on aluminum, 16 x 18 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST

NOTES ON THE ARTISTS

Squeak Carnwath draws upon the philosophical and mundane experiences of daily life in her paintings and prints, which can be identified by lush fields of color combined with text, patterns, and identifiable images. She has received numerous awards, including the Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art (SECA) Award from San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, two Individual Artist Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the Award for Individual Artists from the Flintridge Foundation. Carnwath is professor emerita at the University of California, Berkeley.

Hallie Cohen is a New York–based visual artist and curator. She is professor of art and director of the Hewitt Gallery of Art at Marymount Manhattan College. Cohen is a graduate of the Tyler School of Art (BFA) and the LeRoy E. Hoffberger School of Painting, Maryland Institute College of Art (MFA), where she studied with the painter Grace Hartigan. Her subjects are abstract topographies of real places and either frozen or dynamic bodies of water.

Lucas Elmer is a California-based sculptor, printmaker, and ethnographer currently exploring the oceans and cultures surrounding them. Through traditional techniques, across multiple mediums, he draws attention to sustainable practices and pressing oceanic issues. He is also a commercial salmon fisherman in Bristol Bay, Alaska, for the summer sockeye season. His work is currently exhibited at the Post Gallery in Big Sur, California.

Kit Eastman is a contemporary painter and printmaker based in Santa Cruz, California. She earned bachelor of arts degrees in fine art and art history from the University of California, Santa Cruz, in 2009. Eastman's figurative prints and paintings have been exhibited across the country. Her work explores the physical and emotional elements that define our perceptions and shape our actions.

Kathleen Forsythe is a Vancouver, British Columbia poet, novelist, artist, and educator with a lived commitment to creativity as a way of life. Over the years she has written and published extensively in the areas of cybernetics, systems, and epistemology, always interested in how creativity and the imagination lie at the heart of learning.

Sara Friedlander has been a photographer since 1969. Her work combines photography with painting and most recently sculpture. Whether her subject matter is Chinese women with bound feet, America's immigrant past, or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, she treats the viewer to a fresh new perspective. In this series, *Blurred Landscapes*, she explores a moment in time that only the camera can capture and tries to pay homage to the camera itself as well as the landscape.

Iva Hladis was born in Communist Czechoslovakia in 1965. Her exposure to art began early in life; both her father and mother were artists. In the summer of 1985, Hladis escaped and made her home in Rome, Italy, and a year later she was granted political asylum in the United States, where, upon her arrival, she began pursuing her passion as an artist, the reason behind leaving her country. In the last thirty-one years, her art has gone through many phases—from dark symbolic expressionism to more realistic representation, world destruction and global warming issues, and history preservation through drawing and needle-felted jewelry—after settling in Sonoma County, California.

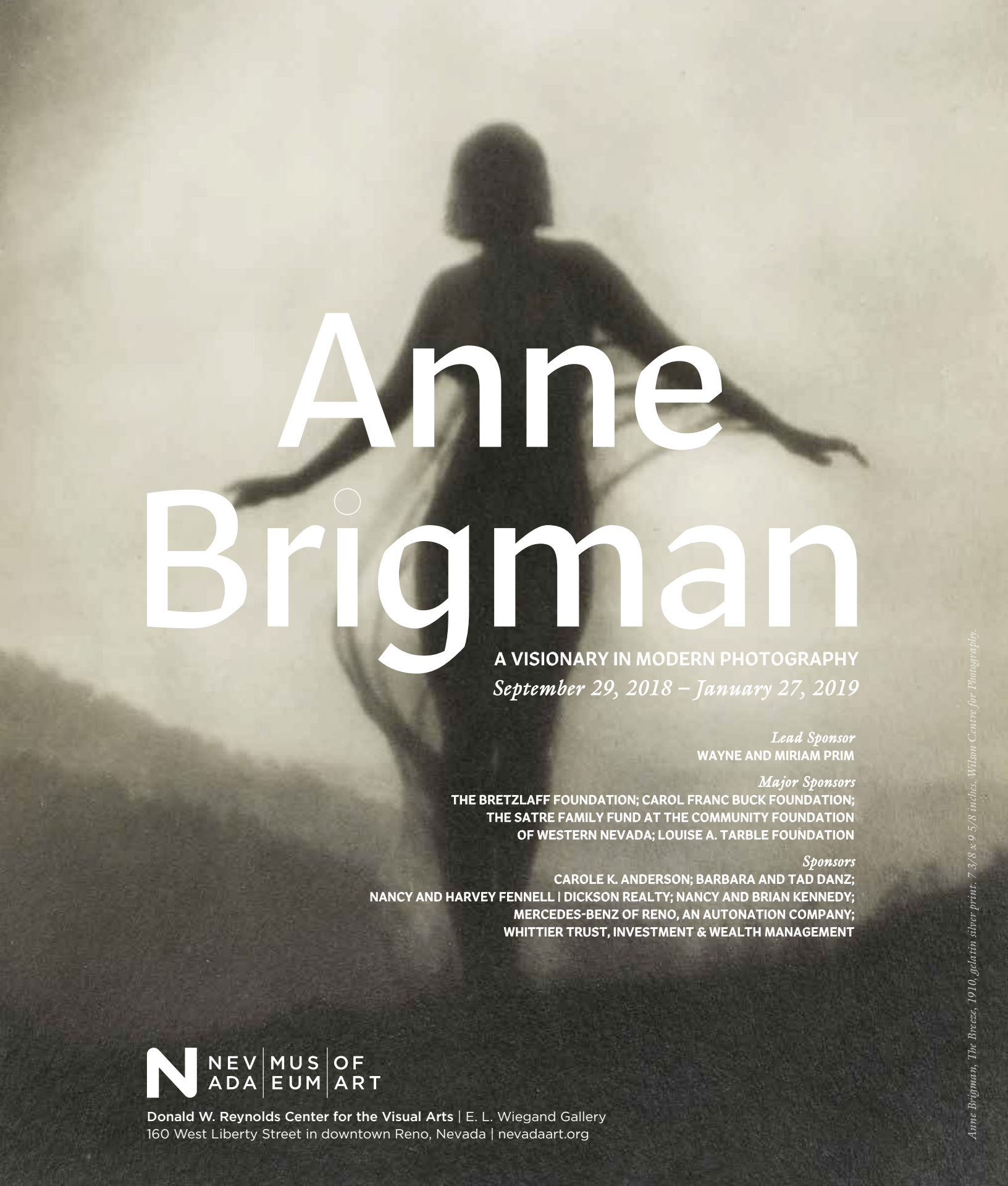
Minerva Ortiz was born in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico, and currently lives and works in Watsonville, California. She received a studio art BA from the University of California, Santa Cruz, and a painting and drawing MFA from the University of Kansas at Lawrence. Currently she's an apprentice under the tutelage of Holy Spirit.

Hearne Pardee, professor of art at the University of California, Davis, was educated at Yale, Columbia, and the New York Studio School. His paintings and collages create connections among disparate sites and question assumptions about the visual field. He also contributes to art publications, including the *Brooklyn Rail* and *artcritical*.

Jose de Jesus Rodriguez's paintings place family photos, Catholic imagery, and Chicanx iconography into surreal but convincing landscapes that examine how personal narratives are created, and challenge identity politics, otherness, and oversimplified and singular definitions of identity, especially visual identity. His vivid colors and complex compositions suggest the lucid strangeness of memories and dreams that further complicate the ways in which we write and rewrite our personal stories. He has been the lead teaching artist and muralist at Groundswell in Brooklyn, New York, since 2013.

Robynn Smith received her BFA from Rhode Island School of Design and her MFA from San Jose State University. She is an internationally exhibiting painter and printmaker, recently retired from her teaching position at Monterey Peninsula College. She is the founder of International Print Day in May and Blue Mouse Studios in Aptos, California.

Susan Solomon is a freelance paintress living in the beautiful Twin Cities of Minneapolis and Saint Paul, Minnesota. Her paintings are in the university collections of Purdue and Metropolitan State. Solomon has done many collaborations with writers, and she is the founder and editor of *Sleet Magazine*, an online literary journal.



Anne Brigman

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Anne Brigman, The Breeze, 1910, gelatin silver print, 7 3/8 x 9 5/8 inches. Wilson Centre for Photography.