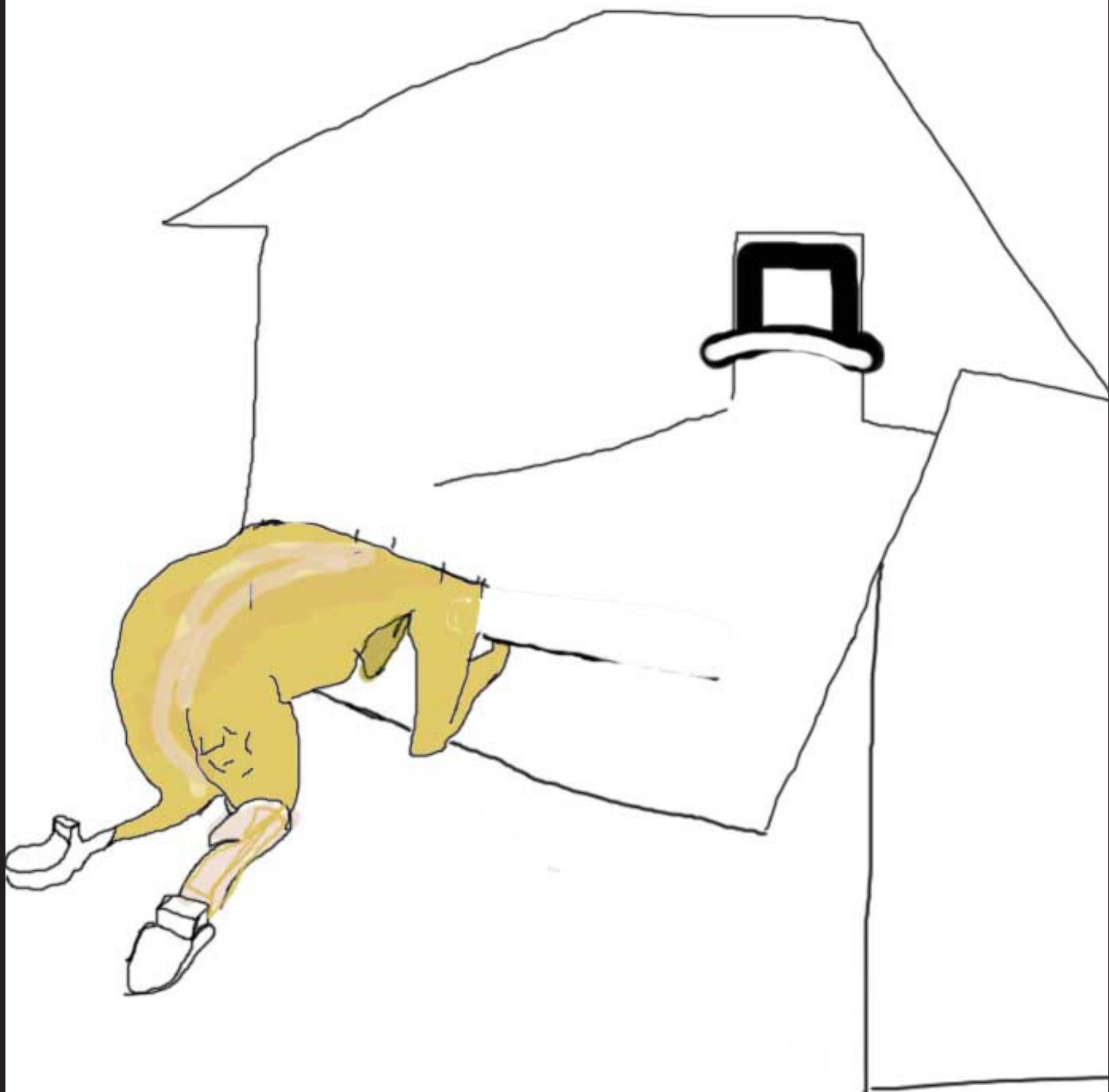


RUMBLE FISH QUARTERLY



SPRING 2020

Editor's Note

A few weeks ago, a friend of mine texted me that he had recently finished *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace, a book he'd taken on as a "quarantine project." The thought I want to have in response is "lol you need an unprecedented pandemic to make yourself read a long book." Unfortunately for my high horse, that falls apart pretty quickly given that I've been reading *Ducks, Newburyport* by Lucy Ellman, also known as "the book that covers 1,000 pages in one sentence."

So instead of gathering a pile of stones to throw from inside my glass house (where I'm, you know, quarantined), I'm going to go a different direction and ask, what is it about reading that freaks people out so much? It can't be the time involved - binge watching is so hysterically rampant that people are actually paying for HBO. And it can't be the dedication or consistency, or people wouldn't be lamenting the loss of their gym.

The conclusion I keep coming to is that it's pressure. Pressure to pick the right book, because it's such an investment. Pressure to have the reading environment perfectly quiet and coifed so that you don't miss anything. Pressure to read in large increments so that you can really get into it. Oceanic pressure, pressure that leads to waiting not for the amount of time necessary to read, but for the perfect time to read.

With all of us stuck in our homes for the foreseeable future, it would seem the perfect time has indeed arrived. In this moment, we submit to you the Spring Issue of Rumble Fish Quarterly. We hope you really sink your teeth into it, enjoy it like crazy, make references to it on Twitter, quote it to your parents, print it out, carry it around, read it over breakfast, dream about it overnight, and harass us on Instagram over when the next issue is coming out. But to be clear, no pressure.

M.J. Sions
Associate Editor

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Jordi Torres Barroso

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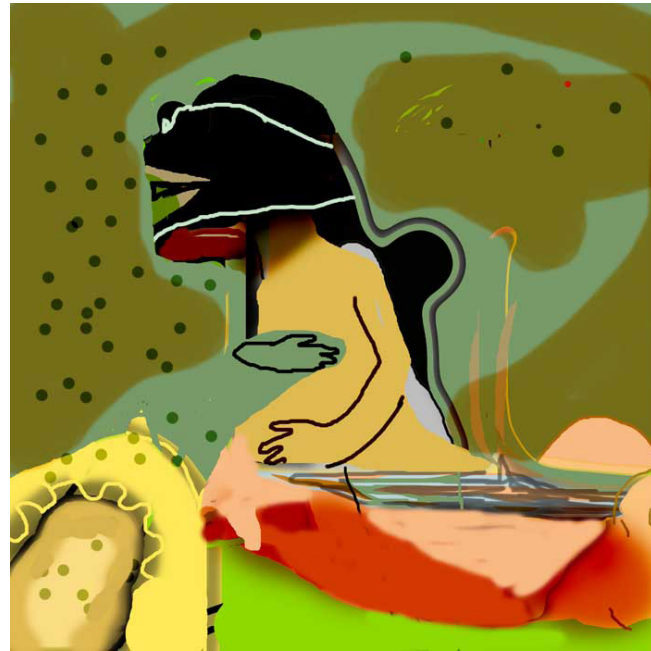
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Babies and Bald Eagles

Jordi Torres Barroso

These things have a way of playing themselves through to the outside. Nothing ever stays indoors, not if there's people who want the thing out in the open. Nora won't see me from my perch across the street. Maybe she could see me if she were looking, but she won't be looking.

A panhandler leans up against the wrought iron fence, working the sidewalk with his paper cup. Even if Nora were looking for me, I'm as invisible here as the liver spots spread like galaxies across the panhandler's cheeks. He watches invisibly as suited folks speed in and out of the courthouse. They don't see him and they don't see me.

I hate this car. Nora had insisted, down to the yellow paint. The leather steering wheel cover is stained around the stitching, and the grip is worn down to the plastic at ten and two. I spot a patchwork of smudges in the windshield, but I remember that we haven't replaced the wiper fluid in over a year, so I search the glove compartment for an old rag. I don't have time to find it.

The Judge comes out of the courthouse first. He almost strikes the panhandler in the face putting on his wool grey coat. It's January and the candy red leaves have fallen off all the crepe myrtles, but it doesn't quite seem cold enough for a coat like that.

This is the first time I have ever seen the Judge in person. I had seen his official photograph on the internet, of course. Searching for it was the first thing I had done the night Nora told me about him. In person though he looks so square—his jawline, his shoulders, his chest. Even the toecap of his black leather dress shoes is squared off smartly. Once he has his coat on, he rushes, bent forward, toward Wright Square, slicing through a line of people waiting at the hotdog stand. It's lunchtime, and I remember I'm

hungry.

Nora emerges from the courthouse. If he is a square, then she is a triangle. She has lost so much weight. Her cheek bones drip down sharply from her eyes and her shoulder blades jut out like little accent marks from an egg-colored tank top. Despite the distance between us, I can tell she's been crying. She nearly trips right into the hotdog line and an older man has to catch her by the elbows. The panhandler stops rattling his cup, and the coins rest silently on the bottom. He's watching now too.

Nora hesitates but she follows after the Judge toward the Square. Her steps are unmeasured. She struggles forward, manic and sideways, and I worry Nora might stumble to the ground. The Judge is at the entrance to the Square, beyond the wrought iron fence. He says something at two police officers, and the trio stares down the sidewalk. The Judge keeps walking and disappears behind a large stone monument.

The officers step toward Nora. She doesn't even see them. I turn the key over in the ignition and start the car. The officers insert themselves between Nora and the Square. They put their palms up toward her as if they'll have to stop her by force. She wavers. I pull out of my parking spot cut across traffic. I stop in the middle of the street and get out of the car.

"I'll take her home, gentlemen," I say. Nora is still searching the Square with her eyes. She doesn't register my voice. I tug her gently into the passenger seat. Several cars have piled up behind me, blaring horns. The officers don't really have time to ask questions. We drive off toward home.

"He didn't want to talk to me. He pretended I was crazy," she whimpers. I say I'm sorry, and I am.

#

Nora wasn't always triangular. When we met, she was made of perfect spirals, flowing through life like one of those ribbons attached to a maypole in the wind. I think about how I used to come home for lunch the summer we first moved to Savannah. She would be sitting at a lawn chair in the garden, reading poetry to our azalea bush. "It needs the love to grow, and I need the sunshine to love," she would say.

Our azalea bush is barren now. It's winter. I couldn't swear we'd had azaleas in the summer or the spring either, I guess. I wasn't paying attention. Nora walks past the bush without giving it a glance. She goes straight into the bedroom and locks the door. I hear her draw a bath and I check the time on the microwave. 11:21. I'll check on her at 11:28. Seven minutes is safe.

Work is expecting me in an hour, so I rummage through the cupboards searching for lunch. I haven't gone shopping this week. There's an almost-empty tub of Nutella. We're out of bread and bananas, so I lop two spoonfuls into a bowl of Cheerios. There isn't any milk. I pick at the stickiness with my hands, getting Nutella all over my fingertips. We're out of paper towels. The clock. 11:29. Damn it.

I knock at the bedroom door.

"Nora, you okay in there?"

There's no answer.

I go to the coat closet and grab a wire hanger. Locking the door is symbolic. Nora

knows that. I bend the hanger straight and poke the lock open through a small hole in the doorknob. The bathroom door is open, and Nora is in the tub, resting her chin on her collar, just above the waterline.

"I'll be out in a minute," she says, her eyes closed, tightly, almost as if she were making a wish.

"We have to leave in forty minutes or so."

"I'll be ready."

"Will you bring your notebook?"

"I don't know."

#

Nora brings her notebook. She sits in the back of the trolley as the tour starts. On Sunday mornings, when the house is quiet and Nora and I are drinking instant coffee and reading the paper, we put on a local radio station that plays sermons from a Baptist Church in our neighborhood. The Pastor, Reverend Martin, who grew up in New Jersey, calls Savannah a wrought iron city. When I'm restless I trace its squares in my head like a labyrinth or a Sudoku puzzle.

The trolley is mostly empty. It usually is on weekday tours in the winter. There's a family of four Europeans seated near the front and an older couple on vacation from Atlanta just behind them. I ask the Europeans where they're from, and they tell me they're Finnish, though they live in New York. I ask everyone their names. The older woman from Atlanta smiles at the Finnish children and tells them that their English is impeccable. The man tells their parents they have a beautiful family.

Tavon is my driver today. He's my favorite of the three. He gives everyone the safety brief.

"You gotta use the bathroom? There isn't no bathroom on this thing. Stay seated. You want to take a picture? Strike a pose, pick your angle, take your picture, but stay seated. You see a giant alien spaceship about to land in Franklin Square? Say your prayers and stay seated!" He laughs—jouncing and musical as a nest full of summer cicadas.

Tavon is from Savannah—born, schooled and grown up. He is a retired high school groundskeeper. He saves up to donate to the historical society and he drives the trolley tour for free. He is always waving at neighbors on the street. Before we start the tour, he asks me quietly how Nora is doing. "Poor girl," he says. "You take care of that girl. She's a special one, you hear?" I smile and nod. "Poor girl," he says.

I start my tour the same way I always do. I'm not allowed to deviate much from the script, though the trolley tour operators give me a little latitude since they know I'm a professional historian. We drive around Oglethorpe Square and I explain the city's early founding. The Finns are surprised to learn that slavery was banned throughout Georgia in its beginnings. The older couple from Atlanta beams prideful, nodding their heads as if my recitation of the facts is validating something they have always known and wish that others did too. Down Bay Street, I explain how the cobblestone roads and the brick buildings and the Savannah Cotton Exchange were built off the bodies of black men and women, enslaved and trafficked here by white men, and the Finns seem less

surprised. The couple from Atlanta shake their heads in disappointment at those other Georgians. Good thing we have come so far, they think.

Back where we started, near the museum at the Academy of Arts and Sciences, one of the actors climbs aboard the trolley and tells a ghost story. She is dressed in nineteenth-century clichés—a white lace bonnet and a ruffled blue dress. I can see Nora in the back, her eyes hidden behind her notebook. Her pencil is hardly moving, and I think she must be rereading a poem she wrote. She rereads them over and over and over until finally she is forced to let them go into the world and then she says she never reads them again. They aren't hers anymore. That's why she writes under a pseudonym.

The actress takes the tourists into the museum. They shake Tavon's hand as they exit the trolley and he tells them to enjoy their stay in the Hostess City. I divide up the green bills I've collected in tips, folded like origami, and I hand Tavon his share. He walks off to use the restroom inside, shouting as he goes at the back of the trolley, "I see you there, Ms. Nora! You let me know if your husband's giving you any trouble, alright?" Nora tells Tavon she'll let him know if I act up. "You take care of that girl," he warns.

"It's twelve years today," Nora says to me on our walk home.

"What is?" I ask.

"It's twelve years today since mom killed herself."

We had never marked the date before. Not in seven years I had known her. I'm not sure Nora had ever talked about it except for that month in the hospital, in the white tiled office of the therapist Nora never wanted to talk to in the first place.

Nora's mom died a few months before Nora's high school graduation, alone and in the winter. No one had called it a suicide, except for Nora. She had discovered her mom, after swim practice, reclining in the driver's seat of her Kelly green minivan parked inside the garage. The motor was still running.

The smell of gas fumes had stopped Nora from going inside. She had opened the garage and waited, her knees crumbling beneath her—the fumes dissipating and dispersing, but not enough. She tried calling the house—no answer. She tried calling her mom's cell phone—no answer. She could hear the cell phone ringing out from the car stereo. She looked closer through the rear windshield. She could see her mother's head slouched over the center console, motionless.

Nora had stormed the garage in that moment, holding her breath and tugging on the driver's side door. But the doors were locked and Nora had banged against the windows, breathless. She banged so hard she shattered glass. It wasn't enough to break into the cabin though, so she ran around the car and picked up the tool box. The box was heavy. Now she was breathing in what was left of the exhaust fumes and her shoulders heaved back and forth as if she were trying to fly out of that garage flapping wings she didn't have. She gathered her strength and heaved the box at the window. Her mom didn't move when the shards of glass hit her forehead. Nora had opened the door and climbed inside. She had dragged her mother's body out of the car and into the driveway. By then the neighbors were outside. Some were rushing toward her. They found Nora slumped over her mother's chest, still and silent.

#

The sun has set and the house is dark. Nora walks through the living room without turning on a single light. I follow behind her at a distance. She sits in the recliner by the window. Her green notebook is open and she chews on the end of her pencil. I stand at the doorway.

Before, at night sometimes, I used to spy her in the study, listening through earbuds to music. She would be swaying and dancing and spinning and mouthing song lyrics. She would swing her hips and wave her hands through the air. I would stand in the doorway to watch her in secret. I wanted to capture those scenes in a mason jar, like fireflies, and save them on the shelf. They had become an artifact of our lives, and I had forgotten them as blithely as a civilization forgets an ancient metropolis blown to dust and buried under a shopping mall, and so I had not been able to remind her of her happiness. I wished so many times I had it nearby like peanut butter, or a book chapter ready to be pulled down and referenced. But she had rediscovered that joy all on her own and made it hers again. And when she turned around finally on those nights I watched, she would bite her bottom lip and smile with her eyes. She would pull her earbuds out, laugh, and return to work. I wonder now whether it was the Judge who inspired her to dance alone in the study at night.

There's a knock at the door. The doorbell isn't working. I ask Nora if she's expecting anyone, but she keeps writing and she doesn't look up from her notebook. The knocking continues, louder, violence implied on the wood. I come to the door just as the person on the other side knocks for a third time. It's the Judge.

He's wearing the same fine herringbone coat from before. He doesn't introduce himself. Is he waiting for me to say something? Does he know what I look like? Has he ever searched for my picture on the internet? He peers over my shoulder into the house, and I edge the door shut toward him.

"Nora isn't here," I tell the Judge.

"I didn't come to see Nora," he says. His hands are in his coat pockets. He's wearing a dark blue scarf. His whole body is covered except for his square jaw and his eyes, squinting above a square nose and a straight square hairline of black-grey hair. His forehead wrinkles in straight lines above his eyebrows as he talks.

"She came to my work today. She was hysterical."

"That's not my problem."

His anonymous co-workers come to mind uninvited, whispering in the courthouse bathrooms about the Judge and the hysterical young woman. I think about how they must feel sorry for the Judge's wife and the Judge's children. I think about how to them my wife is the other woman and how I am no one—not a thing to be pitied, just an empty fact floating disembodied from an alternate world of alternate lives.

"I know you must hate me," he says. "But she'll ruin me. I don't care what she does about the pregnancy—that's her business."

How big of you, I think.

"But she can't come to work. I can't have anything to do with her," he says like it's a fact. "She did not seem well. Maybe she isn't taking her medication? You have to calm her down," he says, as if he could order me and as if I could comply. I can taste the hot saliva building in my cheeks and I want to spit it right out at his feet, but I swallow my words.

"Don't come back here," I say, shutting the door. The Judge puts his hand out to stop me.

"Please, talk some sense into her. I'll be out of your life forever."

I thrust at the door and the Judge stumbles back. I step onto the porch. I want to grip the Judge's square shoulders and drive his body down onto the lawn, like a signpost. I want to rub his face in the wilted azalea carcasses hanging off the bush. I taste the blood between my teeth. The Judge's square eyes squint into small rectangles, surprised, and I see his fists clenching. I imagine what it would be like to shove the Judge to the ground and to put my heel on his chest with one foot and to kick in his square face until it isn't square anymore.

Instead, I say, "Don't ever come here again," and I shut the door.

When I return inside, Nora isn't in the study. I hurry to the bedroom. She is seated on the edge of the bed. Her feet don't quite reach the floor. Her legs are locked together tightly and she has her hands buried between her thighs like a diver lunging back into herself. Nora's body is still, angular. You can almost see the roots growing out from her ears and her chin and her elbows and her heels—her own hanging garden of Babylon. She's planted there, and a part of her must plan to stay planted there forever, because the stillness bespeaks a sense of permanence.

"Tomorrow," she says, as if it won't interrupt Forever.

"Tomorrow," I reply, sitting quietly down on the bed beside her.

#

The Judge had entered our lives without me knowing it. He inhabited a shadow between Nora and I. I could feel him, I suppose, but the sun casts so many shadows that it's hard to know which shadows to look out for, especially in the afternoon when the whole world is like a shadow of the high-sunned afternoon. The Judge happened sometime after Nora and I lost our second. The first was an aberration, we told ourselves, but the second was a sign...a condition...a fact.

Nora and I met at a mixer for graduate students at the University of Washington in Seattle. It was still September and the rainy season had not begun, so the gathering was outdoors on the grounds of an old Victorian house on a hill overlooking Queen Anne. Rainier was visible in the distance, hazy and holographic and majestic. Not one cloud disturbed the light blue sky.

Nora was in her second year of a master's degree in creative writing. I was just beginning a doctorate in history. The only other person I knew at the party was a classmate from Lewis and Clark who had come to Seattle to write novels. He and Nora were in the same program.

"Finally someone who isn't a writer," she said when we met. "Quick, let's get out of here and leave all these writers behind. What do you say?"

I was mesmerized watching her maneuver between groups and people and trays of hors d'oeuvres. It was as though she was alive and everyone else was a prop in the performance of her aliveness. My friend and I decided to get dinner downtown and Nora joined. I thought she had a crush on him.

"Why history?" she asked me over a pot of mussels we were all sharing.

“It’s like detective work and it gives me some perspective,” I said.

“What does that even mean?” my friend had ribbed.

“It means he likes to remember that he is a small collection of atoms in a world filled to the brim with billions of recycled atoms, repeating and reusing everything,” Nora answered for me. “And that he read too many Nancy Drew novels as a kid.”

We all laughed and drank beer and ate mussels and fries from shared plates, and before I knew it I had fallen in love with Nora.

She graduated at the end of my first year. We bought an outdated bungalow together near Olympia. She taught a writing workshop twice a week at the university, but mostly she retreated to coffee shops, reading and writing. I passed my boards and began work on a dissertation about black Union soldiers who remained in the South after the Civil War. I wanted to teach American History for the rest of my life.

Outside school, Nora and I paid half-price for matinee plays on the weekends and met our friends at dive bars in the city on weeknights. We ate cold banh mi sandwiches for dinner from the Vietnamese deli next door. If I picked them up late enough, Mr. Trac gave them to us half-priced. We hiked in the rain and drove to the mountains to camp under the stars. For a time, we had a running competition for who could spot the most bald eagles in a single day.

Everywhere we went, I felt like a chronicler of something magical. I watched how Nora asked questions and how she imbibed the world. I observed her jump effortlessly from one stream of activity into another. I saw her be kind to strangers and forgiving of her friends. And when she turned her gifts on me, the warmth was overwhelming.

We lost our first on a clear morning in late August. Nora and I were out in the backyard painting a faintly rotted Adirondack chair we had filched from our neighbor’s lawn as they were moving away. Nora had only just started showing under t-shirts and tight-fitting sweaters. She thought it was indigestion, but then the blood. Her father drove up from California the following day. I had called to give him the news.

Father and daughter sat Shiva in the living room for nearly a week, strangely and silently. They knew death between them. I felt extraneous. My suggestions were trivial and staged and we only left the house twice—both times to restock the fridge. As he was leaving, Nora’s father pulled me aside on the porch.

“You have to watch her,” he said. “You have to talk. I never talked to her mother.”

I shook my head and helped him carry his suitcase to the car.

At first, Nora never seemed to want to talk. She wasn’t writing much either. When she did, she wrote from that half-painted Adirondack in the back yard. As the rains started with the autumn, she bought an oversized brown rain jacket at an Army-Navy surplus store. She covered herself with it like a tent in the rain, and she wrote on her notebook from underneath. When the rain became too heavy for her make-shift tent, Nora sat by the window and watched the drops of water drip slowly down the glass. Her notebook sat unopened on the ledge. I thought she might never leave the house. Then, she just did.

One Friday afternoon Nora texted me to say we were having dinner with our friend, the would-be novelist. We met back at the restaurant with the mussels and we ordered wine and our whole lives seemed to reset. We hiked and Nora wrote. She even started counting bald eagles again on our car rides up to the mountain.

By the spring, Nora had her first book of poems published. The imprint was thin and the cover was an oily black color fit more for a prayer book than a work of literature, but it was an unmitigated success. Babies and Bald Eagles. The poems were happy and sad; frivolous and beautifully tangled. The book received a short but laudatory review in a New York magazine and with that she was paid to write her second.

After news of the book deal, I told Nora I needed some time in the South for research. What I really needed was a change. The Adirondack taunted me from our backyard. The blue paint disgusted me, dripping wet off the chair because we hadn’t used the right kind of paint for rain. I could only tolerate our friends. They had all moved on from our loss without ever being all that sad. Even Nora drew my silent ire from time to time, writing poems about us for others to read on warm beaches and in crowded airports and in dusty cars along the road, not ever knowing us and still thinking they knew something because of us.

Nora agreed to move, and I got a part-time residency at the Georgia Institute for History in Savannah. I traveled the state, spending hours in muggy libraries, cramped with unopened books, leeching mold and dust. When I remembered, I searched for relatives of would-be subjects. Many didn’t live in the South anymore it turned out. Many of those who did had no interest in rehashing the disappointments of dead ancestors. They had enough disappointments of their own. The residency paid nothing, so I worked part time at the trolley tour company, circling the squares of Savannah over and over again to earn money for Nutella and Cheerios and the occasional glass of wine.

When we learned she was pregnant again, Nora was ecstatic. A part of her feared she would never be pregnant again. This time, she dispensed with caution and she told all our friends and family within the first two months. Nora said it was as if we had willed the last miscarriage by being afraid of it and worrying it into existence. This time would be different, she said. Her attitude relieved me.

Nora was regimented about her pregnancy. She swallowed colorful concoctions of vitamins and oils. She walked brisk laps around the high school football stadium nearby twice a day. She wrote poems with abandon, in the sunshine, and she read out loud because she said it would be good for the baby to hear beautiful language in the womb. For months, she smelled of spring and blossoming azaleas.

When it happened, it was like the earth had thrown a damp white sheet over our heads, loose with cruelty so that the sheet wouldn’t just suffocate us to death. It was so hard to see. It was even harder to breathe.

Nora called me from the hospital. All I heard were reverberating sobs. I don’t know if she wasn’t able to say words or if I wasn’t able to figure them out. Either way, we didn’t need words then. A nurse took the phone and urged me to come right away.

#

The clinic is in a strip mall, a mile or two outside of town. There is a hospital just down the road, but next door is a pet store with green and yellow parakeets in the window. Kittens, colored and soft like yellow cake, are playing with two employees on the floor inside a make-shift pen. There’s a shuttered pizza parlor on the other side. Two men in dark hooded sweatshirts smoke cigarettes in front of the restaurant, kicking a

plastic cup between them and grunting. We park and go straight inside without making eye contact.

The lobby is clean and brightly lit. The young woman at the front desk smiles and asks Nora if she is a patient. Nora tells the woman she has an appointment, and the woman hands Nora a clipboard with a few pages of paper.

“Do you need a pen?”

“No, I have my own.”

Neither mentions why we are here. Unremarkable chairs line the waiting room walls and faux wooden tables fill the center, covered with magazines and pamphlets. We sit in two chairs nearest the door. Nora fills out the forms and her pen scratching across the page is loud in the quiet of the waiting room. A nurse, dressed in light blue scrubs emerges and calls out Nora’s name before Nora has finished all the blocks on the paperwork.

“Don’t worry, ma’am. We’ll finish it up in here.”

“Do you want me to come with you?”

“I’d rather you didn’t,” she says.

I stay behind. I stand up and walk, tracing a path around the coffee tables. A woman comes in alone, studying her clipboard. She eyes me suspiciously as she scribbles something down. There is so much paperwork. The walls could be papered with the forms but instead they are lathered in glops of uneven eggshell paint, trimmed at the top with grey wallpaper, dark gold diamonds lined up symmetrically below the ceiling. I stop and stare at the diamonds, multiplying out from an unknowable center.

The diamonds blur together in my mind, and I am able almost to see myself in the rotting Adirondack, catching raindrops in Nora’s outsized Army jacket. The rain is cool on my hot cheeks and the earth fills with steam. The air is heavy and I slow my breathing, focused on the diamonds which reappear and pulse now in my dizziness. I put two fingers up to my neck and exhale.

Nora walks out into the waiting room, sullen and in a hurry. I shake free of the daze and catch up to her as she exits the door. A third man has joined the two smokers outside the pizza parlor. They exchange something small, big white eyes watching us over their shoulders.

#

I drive our sour yellow car over the Jekyll Island Bridge with the windows cracked. The sea salt whistles into the cabin and sticks to my lips. Nora curls her knees up by her chest and rests her temple against the door. We don’t speak. Nora’s eyes are closed.

I watch through the rearview mirror as the horizon sinks back under the marshes and disappears into a purple haze of fog. Our car soars over the clouds and then back down into the boggy beach. Thin stalks of uncovered seagrass line the shore until we come upon the live oaks, guarding the entrance to the island. The sandy road narrows, bobbing and weaving, imperfect and imperious. The tires bounce and the plastic dashboard, loosened by sun and age, rattles loudly. It shakes Nora awake and she sits up on her hands. She stares out at the green leaves just as the green leaves seem to stretch

up toward the skinny rent of sunlight eking painfully out from a thick layer of sage-colored clouds.

I park the car along an opening marked by two white fence posts. Predecessors had abandoned a pair of blue bicycles, unchained to anything. I press down on the car key, and I am shamed instantly by the beeping sound of the car alarm being set. It outs me as a foreigner intruding upon the locklessness.

Nora and I walk through a fortress of mangrove trees, shuffling in the sand. At the edge of the mangroves, the edge of the world. The fog is low and dark and bleeding into the white foam ocean, bubbling ever so slightly over into the grey sand beach. Nora rips her sneakers off and tosses them by a tree. I remove my boots and set them down next to the sneakers.

Nora wades her bare feet into a tide pool. The beach is a ruin of drift wood, contorting in and out of the sand. The big pieces look like disfigured willow trees, as if they’d been staged there as part of a twisted joke. Many of the tree limbs are covered in chips of white bark, decayed and preserved by the sea salt. Nora is leaning on a thick piece, staring down at her feet in the water. I walk beside her. The water is cold, so I keep my feet dry. Nora’s still staring at her feet, wiggling her toes just beneath the sand.

A dozen yards away, a large man chases his little dog. The man is wearing his sunglasses atop a head of closely-cropped hair. His chest fat jiggles as he runs behind his dachshund. His arms are sleeved with tattoos—the colors bright red and yellow and purple against the clouds and the fog. The dachshund jumps and splashes in the puddles of water, circling the man. The man dashes behind the driftwood pieces and hides. The dog jumps up and down in the sand, his little tail wagging violently, like an eel plucked from a river and left on the riverbank to convulse. The man tires and plops his thick legs down on the sand beside his dog. The dog leaps into the man’s lap and the pair reclines on the sand, sinking imperceptibly into the earth, as though they were a wet sculpture, settling into its base.

Nora chokes back a tinny laugh. She reaches beneath her toes. She pulls out a sand dollar, palm sized. She turns it over onto its back, placing the tip of her pointer finger over the sand dollar’s mouth. She recoils and she giggles, unashamed. She looks me in the eyes before she turns the sand dollar over on her bare arm. Nora lets out a little shriek. I see the muscles in her shoulders clench but she smirks. She waits a few seconds before pulling the sand dollar off her arm, and she lays it back down into the tide pool, shoveling sand gently over top of it with her feet.

The clouds are breaking slightly overhead and a cold blue slab of sky emerges, pinpricked by a crowd of hot white stars, vying for attention in a universe poor of attention to give. We sit at the edge of the tide pool and listen to the ocean rising and the sandpipers gathering in preparation for flight. The breeze paces back and forth closely behind us, watching the sandpipers and the tide and the moon and Nora and I...until finally one lone daring sandpiper comes to rest on the driftwood beside us and all three of us disappear into the fog.

To an Echo

Yejin Suh

There is a language of two arms dancing in tandem. There is a language of our mouths parting in frostbitten rings, concentric circles rippling

peace. There is a language of peace and a language of romance. You can speak neither or both and a language is only understandable to some, else

the world might hear. There is a language of the sweat off our backs dripping in trails, entrails of insides strewn across floors, because we speak

in the pain. There is a language for me, not really for you, a language I listen to when it speaks back to me. For you've never straddled the cosmic belt

between a language to speak and one to hear, a language through which I've lost centuries. My mother says she pities me in the motherland

because they wouldn't take me as their own: I belong not to the mother tongue but to the spangled banners. There is a language noisy sounding, brawling,

reminiscent of German that is the language I have learned like a roughened lover. I've brushed with my thumbs where his hips slope to thigh, and the

nook between jaw and collar. He slammed my head against the wall and embraced me in a lock and key I knew I might never fit again (The

Germans have a word *dasein* for the paradox of *being* like my mere state a pull between two hands that stretch). She says they wouldn't

take me as their own and neither would the Americans. The children of immigrants rise a new tsunami and these children know the feeling of

swallowing a tide of shame at their mothers' broken English. These children know to act the reluctant mediator, because when a mother

speaks broken English and the child knows it like a lover the mother becomes fragments and child becomes same, like switching

bodies except both are devoid of crucial parts like vessels without blood and brain. These children want to hear the pin-drop

in a cave that roars stillness to hear the echo of an echo. To look around, unmoving, in a city swarm, to seize a semblance of knowing, to

say I belong here, with you, with you all, not anywhere else, here, where any link that snaps homogeneity is an outsider, and I am not. To say,

I belong here, is a travesty. To the shade of your skin or the slant of my eyes. I wonder what it would be like to write a poem such as this, a long

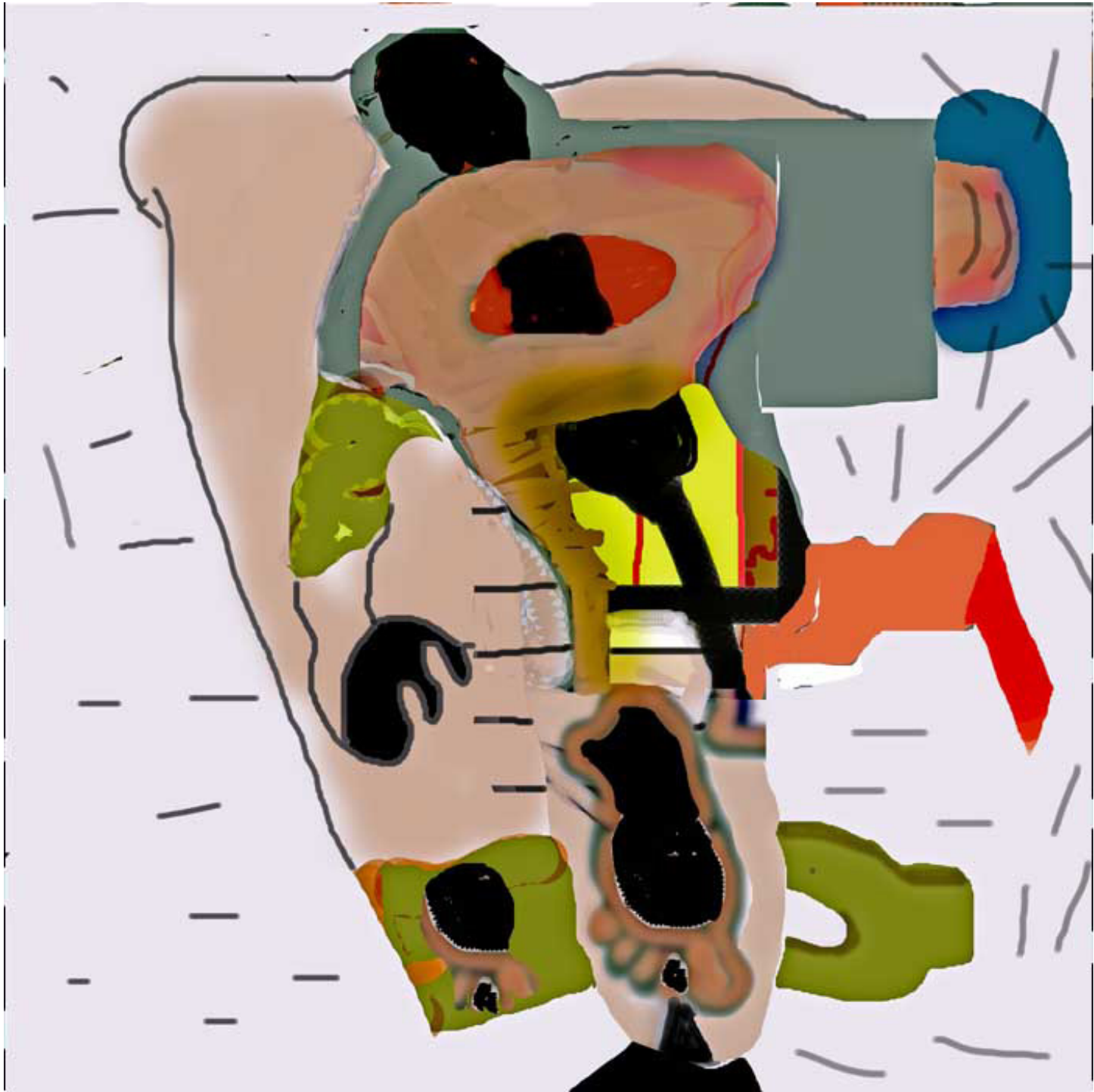
and lengthy poem, of curious words and stacked phrases, a poem of worlds and small rivers, to show it to my mother to know she can understand every word

and nothing less. I wouldn't know. Not in this lifetime. Maybe in another, we'll dismantle the walls that encircle us. There is a language of demolition, too.

Eyes, Junoesque stars tittering, like she knew I was one of them—
I was one of them—

I am one of them—
Of the galaxies that pervade us, not us, just me—To look inside out intimately and suddenly—

Once again strangers in a city—words crisped to nothings on my teeth—
I marveled myself, a wind borne of two nations, blowing eternal in neither.



‘intrepid explorer’

Timothy Fox

but my god if I could touch &
not fear this quiver this clutch
this rough thrust & your mouth
I'd know why the Inuit stay so far north
& even further





Out to Get Him

Ace Boggess

They were out to get him. All of them. The whites because he was half black, the blacks because he looked white. Even the Latinos, although he wouldn't say why and there were only three of them in the prison. Someone was coming for him. Somebody would send somebody. That's the way it went, he said. He had to watch his back. He said we, his cellmates, had to help him watch his back. He liked us. We weren't out to get him. *Not yet*, he said, but what would we do for some money on our books or a sack of tobacco? We assured him we were straight-laced. We promised to side with him in a scuffle. But who were we? Three cons in a four-man cell. Three khaki-suited strangers with our own lives and designs and agendas. What *might* we do for cash on wood if the offer came, if our noses sniffed that fruity scent of fresh Four Aces? What was he to us? Robert Randall, who called himself Rancher and everyone else called Bird, short for jailbird, or, pejoratively, Bobby the batshit bandit of POD 3B.... We owed him nothing. Any of us could be out to get him. He had to keep an eye on the likes of us. He told us to check ourselves. "Step up or step off," he said, then laughed or smiled as if it were all a gag. But no, really, they were out to get him, so he had to stay sharp, be ready. He went coatless on the rec yard, even in snowstorms and fierce February freezes so everyone knew how tough he was and could see his two muscular full-sleeved arms, both so clustered with swirls and spirals and sketches in blue-black jailhouse ink that the original images vanished into blurry, dystopic wastelands. He shaved his small round head with a disposable razor, and shaved his eyebrows, too, because, he said, at other prisons in other states—he did time in many—that meant he was prepared for violence if anyone said the word. Not that he had need for symbols. Not here in Boone County Correc-

tional. Not in medium security. This was where younger inmates came to await parole and older ones like Rancher came to wither until the state couldn't warehouse them anymore, either because their medical expenses grew too steep or ... the other reason. Rancher knew death would come for him here. Death was out to get him, one way or another. He spoke as if he had hell hounds sniffing his light-footed tracks. He spoke as if the ice-cream truck he robbed with a .38 in Martinsburg was one last desperate gasp from a man fleeing whatever version of hell still held his marker. Rancher glanced side-eyed at all of us as if the orange winter coats we wore were shrouds or might hide swords larger than the shivs he honed from toothbrushes before discarding them when he suspected a rat or said *the heat got hot*. The guards were out to get him, too. He called them guards, not correctional officers; referred to them as Mr. or Ms., never C.O. or Sergeant. The guards would come for him, he said—just watch—in the middle of the night, *en masse*, without warning or write-up in hand. They'd drag him off to some utility closet where they'd pepper-spray him in the eyes and stomp him, then say he tried to kill himself and strap him in the pickle suit—that protective mat with a neck hole cut through it that cons were forced to wear, otherwise naked, when a danger to themselves. Prison was a brutal place, he said, where all of us had bowls of boiling water and hair grease with our names on them, waiting for us in microwaves. He'd seen it, he said. And the socks full of batteries or soap. And the men set alight in barren cells because skin and hair still burn no matter what all else has been taken away. We asked him about these vividly horrible prisons in those other awful states where he did time over the last thirty-seven years since he first appeared in court as an adult. He wouldn't tell us much. "Convicts keep their mouths shut," he said, but assured us that wherever he went, the others were out to get him. One story escaped him, though. He couldn't keep his mouth shut about Columbia Correctional in Wisconsin, where he said he did time with Jeffrey Dahmer in the early 1990s. Two years, he said. Well, not *with* him, as Rancher was never in solitary confinement or protective custody. *It was a real shithole*, he said. *A barbarous village behind the wall*. Everyone hated everyone else, he said, but they all hated Jeffrey Dahmer more. They definitely were out to get *him*, Rancher said. The guards had to take him out at night for his one hour of rec because if the cons saw Dahmer over on the solitary-confinement yard, they'd launch missiles at him with homemade slingshots: chunks of blacktop, batteries, sometimes flaming balls of socks—even with guards right there or rifles silently steady in their aim from above. Later, once Dahmer was moved to protective custody, the whole prison seemed more intense. There were whispers of plots that rang as loud as gunshots, whereas now the snitches were silent. *The cool folks and the crazy folks, they were all out to get him*, Rancher said. *That was the only time I've been in prison when I felt safe. Everyone forgot about me*. Rancher said he discharged his Wisconsin time before Dahmer *got his for good*, but there were other prisons, other crimes. He alluded to having bodies of his own, although he never said the words or admitted doing time for any murder. He spent his life crossing the country, committing larcenies, heists, and small-scale atrocities, none of which explained why everyone was out to get him, why we all must have been filing shanks when he wasn't looking. In the end, the one that got him was a clot that pierced his heart better than any blade. High blood pressure was out to get him. So were processed meats, packets of salt, and frozen pizzas bought in commissaries all across the U.S.A. Rancher collapsed on the rec yard

on the icy first day of March, with the temperature in southern West Virginia down around twenty. He grabbed at his back as if he had been stabbed, then flopped around on the concrete near the weight benches. The guards made all of us get on the ground on our bellies as if in empathy while the nurses and members of the security team ran to check on him. We had to wait there, face down, pretending not to watch, for almost an hour before paramedics arrived, were escorted in, and did their work. When they carried Rancher out on a backboard, he was still alive, his eyelids and fingers twitching, but we could see from the blank oval of his face that he wouldn't make it. The ones who were out to get him had won. The squads of sinister guards at night and menacing hell hounds could rest easier now that their work was done.







Just once

Rose Auslander

amnesiac
neon god of off-season happy hours, of used needles' wine dark bloodsong

blind
god of fair winds, Ford trucks, twisted limbs

absent-minded
god of the swan shit floating in the pond behind our parking lot

beloved
god of the boy fishing there, of the bench where his mother used to smoke

yes you, good god
of mercy, come, sit—when you can

amen.

Weaving

Autumn Cooper

I am braiding three strands of ribbon
together for our hand fasting ceremony
tomorrow. Today

I want to ask you what time it is,
but before I do I sense a soft pulling
from a phantom of myself. There

I am, somewhere, invisible,
holding the three overlapping strands
arranged into an inverted braid

on the other end.
There are three strands of ribbon,
two of us, and one union, but

none of this feels mathematical to me.
I think I am only and wonderfully a bird
weaving a nest, weaving around the world.

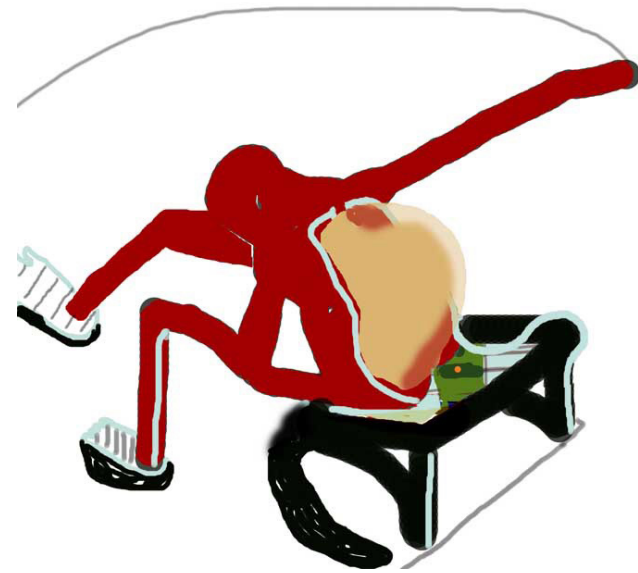
You are a cricket living in everything
good and green.
I want to put an end to my

surveying of your landscape,
dip down into it and gobble you up.
I want you at noon, but what I really mean is,

where? Both ends of the untied ribbons look
like branches and roots on a tree now,
the places where birds and crickets live

together. The braid in the middle becomes a thick trunk.
I meet you there for a little while,
forever.





Small Gods

Robert P. Kaye

I have always believed in creation as sacrifice, no real art achievable without payment in pain. My generative juice dried up about the time I lost the job at the frame shop, my sole marketable skill from an education in fine arts.

“Framing isn’t what it once was,” Diane said when she canned me. “People keep their pictures on their phones.”

“Fuck people,” I say.

That same week Alexi says he wants to do a laptop circlejerk thing with drum machines. So I quit the band.

Alicia left because poverty is no longer as romantic as when we were twenty-five. She says she is tired of sitting for unfinished portraits that look like electroshock therapy. “I see tornadoes in your eyes again,” she says. “And I need health insurance.” I can’t blame her.

Then someone jacks the CDs and CD player from my car. Sure, maybe I left the door unlocked that first time. Second time they jimmy the wing window and empty the glove box, containing the only sunglasses I ever truly loved.

The Romans believed *genius loci* linger in the dark corners of home or garden, small gods eager to instruct those capable of listening. I know something like that is watching me in the same way kids wait for the precise moment to throw firecrackers at the feet of the highwire walker.

So I resolve to fight back. Install a motion-activated 500-watt spot, aimed down at the parking strip. The portrait of Alicia I agonized over for a decade goes in the back seat as bait. Around midnight, I nestle into the recliner in my puffy coat, window open,

12-gauge cradled in my arms like a newborn.

I awake blinded by the light, which maybe isn’t pointed down quite steep enough. I rack the shotgun, groggy from the cheap Costco bourbon meant to keep me alert, a twitch away from blasting the shape by the car. My eyes unblur enough to see a raccoon standing on his hindquarters staring at me like he expects a chunk of Slim Jim. He clocks the shotgun and he’s gone.

It hits me that I’m so low I almost ended an innocent creature over a busted CD player and music in an obsolete format that I’m sick of listening to. I will never create anything worthwhile, my life a dumpster full of wasted effort. The harder I dig, the deeper the hole, the hole the shape of a grave.

I suckle down the last of the bourbon and decide to paint my final canvas on the bedroom wall. I peel off my sock so I can pull the trigger with my toes and realize that’s a Hemingway cliché. I can’t even die with originality.

“Okay, motherfucker, you win,” I yell out the window. “I renounce all artistic pretension. Tomorrow I get a job in real estate or telemarketing or landscaping. You happy?”

No answer, but they heard. I cut the juice to the spotlight, shut the window and go to bed, relieved the struggle is over. I think it was William Blake who said no art is ever complete, it just stops in interesting places. Or not.

In sleep, all trace of my passage vanishes. A stone sucked into black water, generating no ripple.

Next morning, the passenger side window is smashed, the door open, the car battery dead. The painting is on the lawn. Dead center is an enormous turd, and not from a dog.

I take a moment to appreciate my genius loci’s style. Simple. Direct. Appropriate. And still, I cannot accept criticism gracefully. Another of my many artistic deficits.

I replace the window and put in what looks like a new stereo but is actually a faceplate and some knobs. The laptop I ‘borrowed’ from Alexi goes in the back. I channel wires from the service panel through a seam in the lawn, up through the bottom of the car and behind the door liner to the wing window, left ever so slightly unlatched. For once, I do not second guess. A master smells authenticity a mile off. Raccoons are too smart to go near a 220-volt circuit.

I sleep like a stone and awake reborn. Burn all my crappy unfinished masterpieces in the firepit. Go to work in fugue state bliss. I even give Alexi his laptop back.

When I’m stalled, I imagine my small god touching the wing window. Acknowledging the shock of me, rising.

“Finally,” they say.

Duplex

Tyler Michael Jacobs

I rise and take five pills by mouth daily.
This I understand. My blood is no good.

I check again. The blood in me is not good
Like car oil after three-thousand miles.

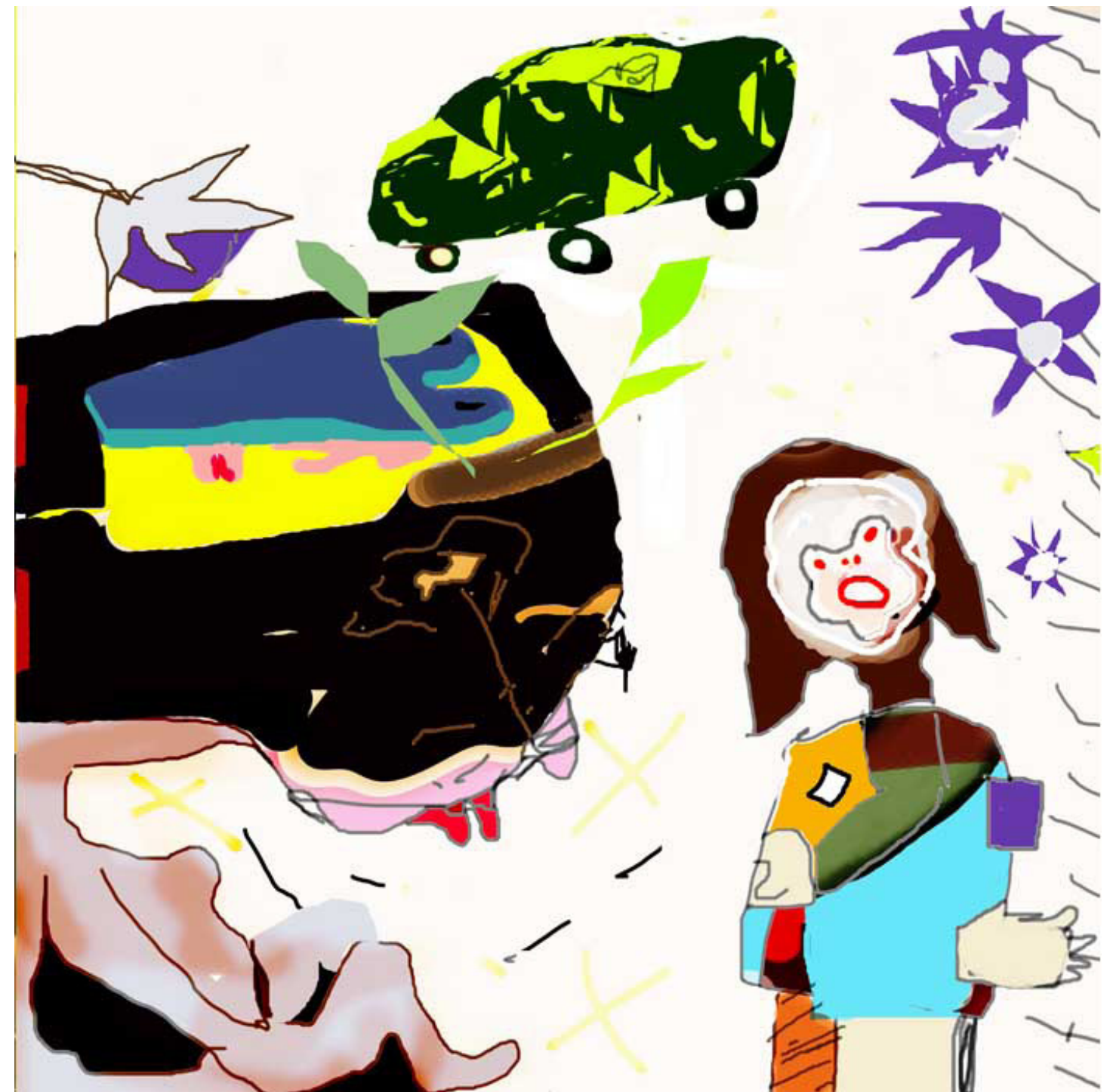
Unlike car oil driven on for miles,
My sap will remain my own poison.

Sap sometimes becomes its own poison
And leaves pieces of its bone in the hollow.

I'll leave my bones hoping they won't hollow.
The rain weathers everything that we build:

Whether right or not, we destroy all we build
To document what the wind tells us is gone.

Saved in documents that tell me I am gone—
I rise and take five pills by mouth daily.



the sacred & the unfamiliar

Sheree La Puma

At first directed towards the pleasures of sex, drinking, philosophy, music, they were all left empty. In all those directions I became emaciated. Kafka

the homeland
 [afternoon]/[an intersection] of ways
where i fail <you>
night
[a study]/in
how to be a better
mother
 my job [sacred]/[unfamiliar]
a life
sentence

if I say that [writing] might be redemptive
i mean that *hope is found
in the hands
 of a woman
praying for release
 nothing is/promised

gone are the soft
days
 of celebration
first step/first tooth/first word
[mama]

i am love
that stumbles & drifts

*this only makes sense if you
 understand how i identify
 a family's <ruin>

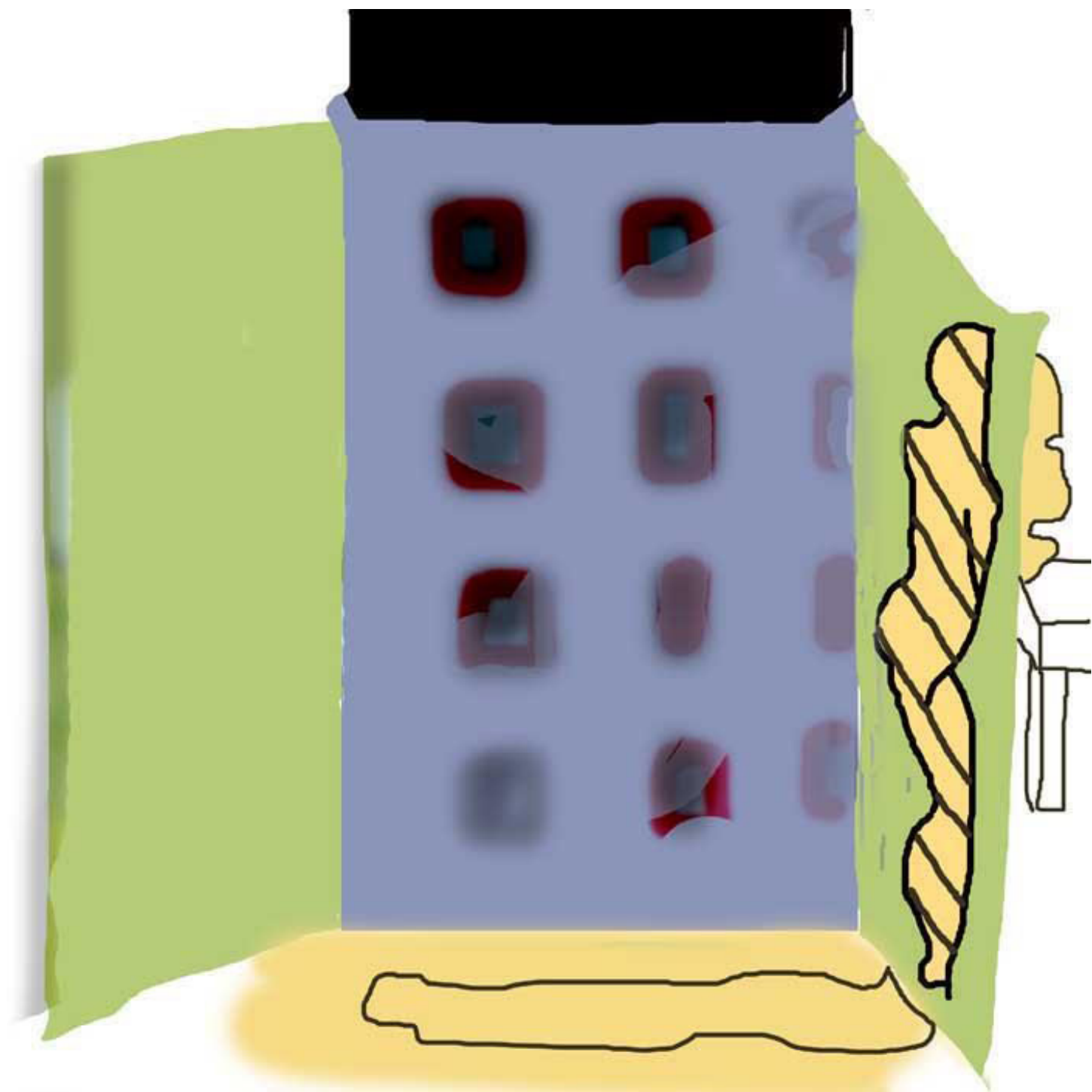
between hope & despair
 [i surrender]

don't speak of my leaving
to <anyone>
 with my back to the sun
my shadow
brings its bad conscience
 *forward

when there is nothing left
but [rubble]/[isolate] air
i follow a flock
gulls/to lands' end
 watch the world
fold itself into sea

before reemerging
as a new [wrecking] ball

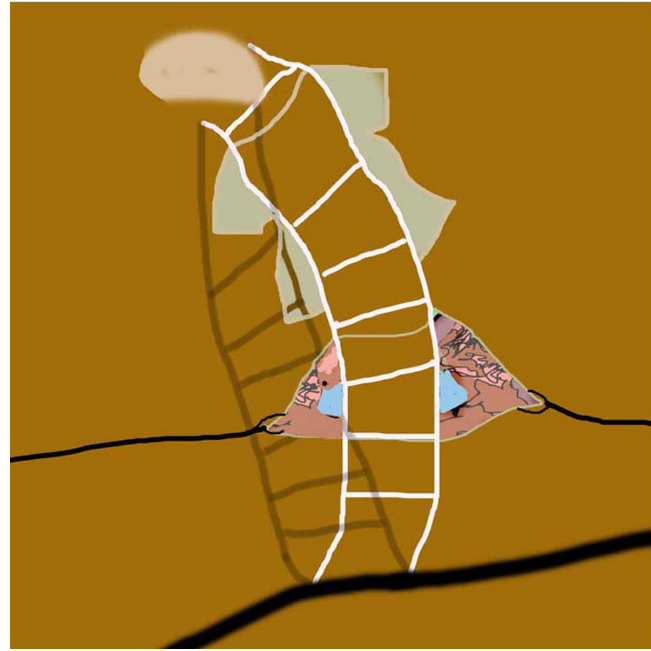




Wishes

Karla Keffer

In whatever time is left,
I wish for you soft, warm things,
cats, pillows, sweet potatoes.
May you sleep through the night
without having to pee; may a herd
of goats magically appear, mow
your lawn, and make you laugh.
May the *New York Times* crossword
lack those twee clues that end
in a question mark. May you live
long enough to see me called Doctor,
but not so long that *Seinfeld* no longer
makes sense. And when the time is ripe
to return to your home planet,
may you be able to look back
at us on Earth and witness a happier
ending than you were led to expect.



Transplant

Mark Keane

“Quinn will be fine, sis,” Philip assured her. “The liver is as good as new.” They had been told a liver was available but weren’t given any other information. Liz asked her brother to make enquiries as he was a senior administrator at the hospital. He found out the donor died in a car accident and had worked in a bank, something in middle management. “Teetotal and a health freak,” Philip added. “An arsehole by all accounts but that hardly matters. It’s a liver transplant, not a personality transplant.”

Quinn had ignored the symptoms. He had no appetite, his skin was itchy, his stomach hurt and he was out of breath just going up the stairs. When Liz found him slumped over the bathroom sink, coughing up blood, his condition could no longer be ignored. The prognosis was later stage cirrhosis, his liver damaged beyond repair. It was not a question of cutting back, not a matter of switching from whiskey to wine or from wine to beer. He could never drink again. A liver transplant was his only hope.

Quinn was under the knife for eight hours. Disconnecting the old liver from the abdominal tissue required the deftest surgery. He spent a week in intensive care. Drugs were required to suppress his immune system and different drugs to protect him from infection, a cocktail of medicine for the recovering alcoholic. Philip had spoken to the surgeon. “Quinn’s liver was in a shocking state,” he reported back to Liz. “Pumped up like foie gras, the surgeon said.”

In hospital, Quinn didn’t want any visitors. Liz brought him books to read but they remained unopened.

“You’re looking much brighter today,” she said in a cheery voice.

Listless, Quinn stared into space as she recited the bland dialogue she had prepared beforehand.

“The weather is picking up,” she told him. “We’ll soon be able to sit in the garden.”

When he was drinking, Quinn never willingly left a party.

“Don’t be such a wet blanket,” he complained whenever she suggested it was time to go.

“Loosen up, I’m just getting into my stride.”

He didn’t want the celebrations to end, an extra pint at the bar, two for the one had by everyone else. Whiskey as an apéritif, a digestif and, more often than not, to accompany the main course. He was hell-bent on oblivion. Liz stuck by him, lived with his mood swings, his incoherent rants and savage remorse. His self-abuse left her feeling undesired and superfluous but any thoughts she had of leaving him were fleeting.

She drew on memories of tenderness, simple things like breakfast in bed.

“You deserve a lazy morning, just leave it to me.” The offer from a hungover Quinn was always well meant.

She dozed while he made a mess in the kitchen. At some point, he’d appear, carrying a tray loaded with plates and cutlery and too many napkins.

“How’s that?” he would ask.

“Perfect,” she answered no matter if the toast was burnt or the eggs undercooked.

While Quinn was still in hospital, Liz received a phone call from Tom McCormick.

“How’s the patient doing?” McCormick asked.

“Fine,” she said.

“Hospital food not getting him down.” McCormick nimbly sidestepped the reason why Quinn was in hospital. Brawny, affable Tom McCormick was a heavy drinker but Liz had never seen him drunk or even confused. Quinn looked up to him and though he liked to think of the two of them as a double act, Liz knew McCormick took the lead and Quinn followed. She couldn’t imagine Tom McCormick lying apathetically in a hospital bed.

“You’ll tell the patient I called.”

“Sure, Tom, of course I will.” Liz wanted to say something about the liver transplant, holding McCormick at least partly responsible. She hesitated and the opportunity was gone.

“The patient won’t know himself when he gets out.” McCormick laughed. “If you need anything just give me a call.”

Philip brought Quinn home from hospital. Liz had the house ready and was there to greet him. She was dismayed by how delicate and helpless he seemed.

“He’ll be alright,” Philip said, “so long as he stays on the wagon.”

Quinn took his medication and sat, heedless in front of the TV. Liz helped him with his exercises and went with him on short walks, to the end of the road, then around the

park. What mattered now was Quinn's recovery. They could begin again with the benefit of hindsight. Gradually his strength returned and he could go out by himself. Liz watched for tell-tale signs of clandestine alcohol, worried he would start drinking again.

Six months after the operation, she no longer worried. Quinn was devoutly abstemious, nothing short of zealous in denouncing booze. He frowned whenever she treated herself to a glass of wine. One Sunday afternoon, he confronted her as she was taking a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc from the fridge.

"Show some self-control," he chastised her. "You need to curb your craving."

She discussed it with his doctor who saw nothing wrong.

"It's a natural reaction," he said. "Your husband is bound to be guarded and sensitive to the threat of alcohol. His caution is entirely understandable. There's no reason to be concerned. He's doing very well, he's back at work and has resumed normal activities." That's not how Liz saw it. Nothing was normal. Quinn was no longer Quinn.

She observed him as he methodically coated the bookcase with varnish. The varnish was not going on evenly and he tutted his annoyance. He reached for one of the brushes, which were laid out in order of increasing size. She was reminded of the night three years ago when Quinn upended the bookcase in a drunken stupor. Books and shelves came crashing down and a glass vase was smashed to pieces. Liz was in bed at the time. She rushed downstairs to see Tom McCormick picking books off the ground.

"Your husband has had a little accident," he said.

The two had been drinking all day and came back to the house after the pubs closed. Quinn walked glass into the carpet and stood on the books.

"Sorry about that," he slurred.

"A nightcap and I'm off," McCormick announced.

"What's your rush?" Quinn poured two full glasses of whiskey.

McCormick caught her eye and shrugged. Quinn fell into a chair, the bottle left uncapped and standing in readiness by his side.

The next day, she found Quinn sheepishly sweeping the broken glass and putting books back on the shelves.

"It won't happen again," he promised.

"Why do you do this to yourself?" she asked.

"That's it, I'm cutting it out." He made a show of taking away what was left of the whiskey and pushing it to the back of the kitchen cabinet. Liz knew he had bottles stashed all over the house. She kept coming across them, the hiding places haphazard, none of the bottles holding more than an inch or two of whiskey.

That was before his operation. Quinn was finished with whiskey, no more drunken abandon, dehydrated mornings and crapulent regret. The sober Quinn did all the shopping and appreciated a good bargain.

"If you go to Costcutter after six o'clock," he informed Liz, "you can get a loaf of bread

that's still fresh for a fraction of what they charge in the bakery. What I want to know is what happens in those shops that don't offer these deals. What do they do with the bread that isn't sold? Is it binned or reprocessed?"

The sober Quinn was a stickler for punctuality. Shaking his head as she ran to meet him, he tapped the face of his watch.

"Why can't you be on time, it's the least I ask?"

It wasn't all he asked. He demanded nothing less than total abnegation. The drunken Quinn never cared about time and didn't own a watch. He was impetuous, always up for trying new restaurants, surprising her with gifts of books and flowers. Theatre tickets left for her to find on the kitchen table or scarves that were the wrong colour or sweaters the wrong size. He didn't keep the receipts so she couldn't exchange them. That Quinn was not concerned with receipts.

This Quinn planned everything and left nothing to chance, drawing up schedules that he continually revised. He made lists of things to do, repairs to the garage roof, cracks to be sealed in the driveway, dates for planting bulbs to flower in March or June. He was kept busy as the house was falling apart.

"No harm in a little disrepair," the old Quinn would say. "Gives the place more character."

The new Quinn had developed a habit of grunting as he hitched up his trousers. He ended every pronouncement by saying "That's right". There were other mannerisms Liz noticed, like slurping his tea and grimacing when she filled the kettle for two cups or ran the washing machine with a half-load. He always turned off the light in the hall.

"What have I told you about wasting electricity?" he asked in self-righteous exasperation.

Uppermost in his mind was the household budget. He scrutinised every bill and sighed over every bank statement.

"We must cut our cloth to suit our purse. That's right." He questioned the cost of her gym membership. "I'm not necessarily saying you should cancel it. The exercise must do you some good but we need to watch unnecessary expense. That's right."

He was domineering and uncompromising. The only time she saw a chink in his armour was the day Tom McCormick called. Liz answered the door.

"Is your husband in and can he come out to play?" McCormick gave her a broad smile. She could smell alcohol on his breath.

"I'll go and see." She went back inside, leaving the door open.

Quinn was hiding behind the curtains in the front room, watching McCormick through the window. "Get rid of him," he shrieked.

"What do you want me to say?" Liz was taken aback by Quinn's panic, desperation in his eyes.

"Anything, just get rid of him. I don't want anything to do with him."

Back at the front door, McCormick met her with a grin. He must have heard everything.

“I’m sorry, he can’t see you,” she said
“Don’t worry about it.” McCormick put a finger to his lips to stop her from saying anything else. “Remember, give me a call if you need anything.”

Quinn never referred to McCormick’s visit. He made Liz feel like a scrounger, an unacceptable burden that he had to bear.

“You need to make a bigger contribution to the household costs,” he said.

To satisfy him, she took on extra translation work. She had studied French at university, which was where she had met Quinn. He stood out from the other students. Self-effacing and humorous, he spoke knowledgeably about different writers and had read all the difficult books. His drinking was part of his charm. Drunk or sober, he was carefree, never bothering about consequences.

Quinn with his new liver took no risks. Fearing infection, he lectured her on cleanliness. His dietary requirements governed what they ate. Salt was outlawed, meat over-cooked and vegetables over-boiled. He held the purse strings and pulled them tight. Liz started giving private lessons in French and didn’t tell him. It provided her with money for lunch with girlfriends and a relaxing glass of wine. There were no more impromptu meals out or bright yellow scarves. He pored over home improvement manuals and announced planned refurbishments. She was expected to assist him. Holding a nail as he hammered or gripping a plank as he sawed, she was subjected to his disdain.

“Concentrate, you’re here to help me. That’s right.”

She could taste his sourness.

They went to bed at different times and in different rooms. Liz took a glass of wine with her, which she concealed from him and read for an hour. She worried that one night he would sneak into the bedroom, lie on the bed, touch her and draw her to him. To her relief, Quinn stayed away. He ignored her except to deliver a derisive remark or correct a minor detail, the wrong setting on the boiler or scissors found in the wrong drawer.

Quinn slept downstairs in the study where he had converted the futon into a bed. He stayed up late, working on the computer. The old Quinn had no interest in computers or technology.

“Do you have to use it now?” he whined whenever she wanted access to the internet or to skype a friend.

What could he be doing on the computer? There was something stealthy and suspicious about the way he was acting. In the past, Quinn was furtive when it came to his drinking but this was different. She couldn’t ignore it, she had to find out what he was up to.

Quinn was at work. Sitting at his desk, Liz was careful not to disturb his arrangement of complimentary pens and to-do lists. He wouldn’t have covered his tracks, never thinking she was capable of finding the sites he visited from the history tab. She clicked on links that took her to pages on guttering, insulation, energy efficient light bulbs, ladders, screws and adhesives. Images of thermostats and radiators. Advice sheets and blogs on ways to cut fuel costs, FAQs about water meters, tax credits, savings accounts, broad-

band deals, free events and recipes using leftovers. This meanness was irreconcilable with the person she married. Before the operation, Quinn never cared about cost or prices. He wasn’t a penny-pincher. She closed each window on the screen and shut down the computer. This was not her Quinn.

It was Saturday morning and Liz was preparing breakfast. Quinn appeared, wearing a sweat stained old T-shirt and tracksuit bottom, the free local newspaper under his arm. He ran one mile each Saturday. On his return, he ate a bowl of porridge made to his exact instructions, not too thin or too chewy. With each spoonful of porridge, he smacked his lips, a wet smacking that shredded her nerves. He had a slice of toast with homemade marmalade. Reaching for the knife, his hand touched her arm and she flinched.

Quinn commented on offers and advertisements in the newspaper.

“There’s a sale of firewood this weekend. We should stock up at these prices and use the fire in winter.”

He was wearing the glasses he had bought in the supermarket. It cost less than going to the optician even with a discount coupon. Using glasses now he decided would preserve his eyesight and save money in the long run.

“I was talking to some of the neighbours. We’ve agreed to start a neighbourhood watch. They asked me to be chairman. It’s important we protect what’s ours. That’s right.”

Liz avoided his dead eyes behind the cheap lenses. How she hated him.

That night, she lay awake thinking about Quinn. She had wanted him to change, to drink less, look after himself and pay her more attention but not to change so drastically he became someone else. She could hear him moving about in the study. One night he was bound to come up the stairs. She pictured him standing outside her door, hitching up his trousers, grunting and telling himself, “That’s right,” as he built up his courage. She drank more wine, it helped her sleep.

When Philip visited, he asked how Quinn was doing.

“Healthier than he’s ever been,” she answered. “He follows every one of the doctor’s instructions religiously.”

Liz noticed the look Philip gave her and realised how unsympathetic she must have sounded.

“Has he got himself an organ donor card?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Considering the second chance he’s been given, surely he’d want to do the same for someone else.”

She said nothing, keeping her thoughts to herself. There was no likelihood of Quinn ever donating one of his organs. He would never give anything away.

Liz held the ladder as Quinn attached the neighbourhood watch sign to the lamp-post.

“Hold it steady,” he commanded.

She looked at the tightly clipped hedge and manicured lawn, the blocks of colour, geraniums and verbena, enclosed in straight-line borders. Order and routine were what mat-

tered in this purgatory. It struck her how much she missed the chaos that had been her life with Quinn. More than that, she yearned for companionship, someone who didn't judge her. If he had faults, it didn't matter so much. She could learn to love his faults.

It felt strange holding the telephone and pressing the numbers. Listening to the ringtone, Liz poured herself more wine.

"Hello," the voice that answered was good humoured.

She hesitated before speaking, "Tom, it's Liz."

Silence at the other end, she supposed he was trying to work out why she was ringing him.

"How are you Tom?" she asked.

"Same as ever," he replied.

Liz took a gulp of wine. "Could we meet, for a drink say?"

"This is unexpected," he said but his tone suggested otherwise.

"What's the name of the pub on the harbour you were always talking about," she pressed on. "The one with seafaring gewgaws and a library?"

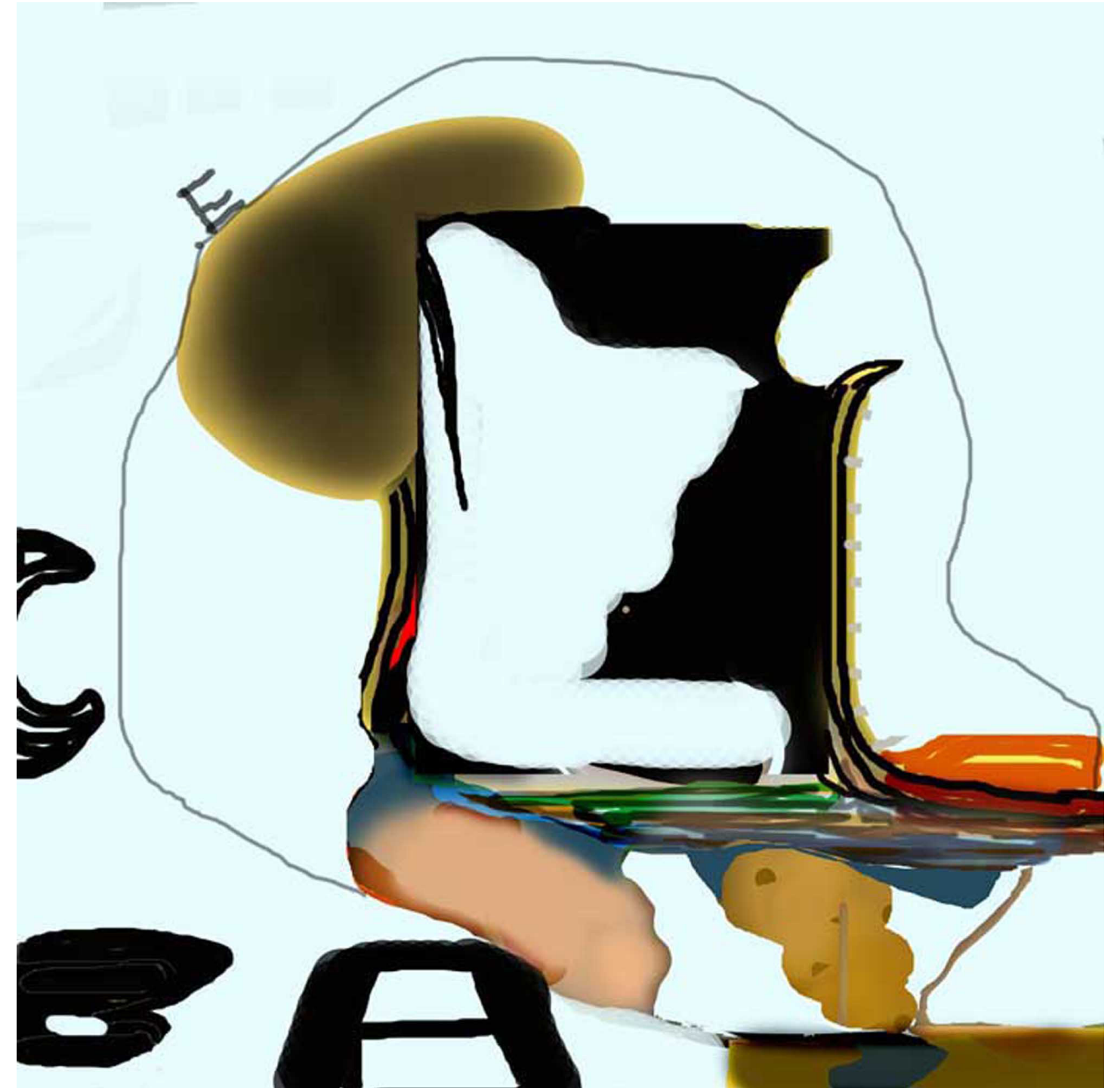
"Do you mean The Yacht?"

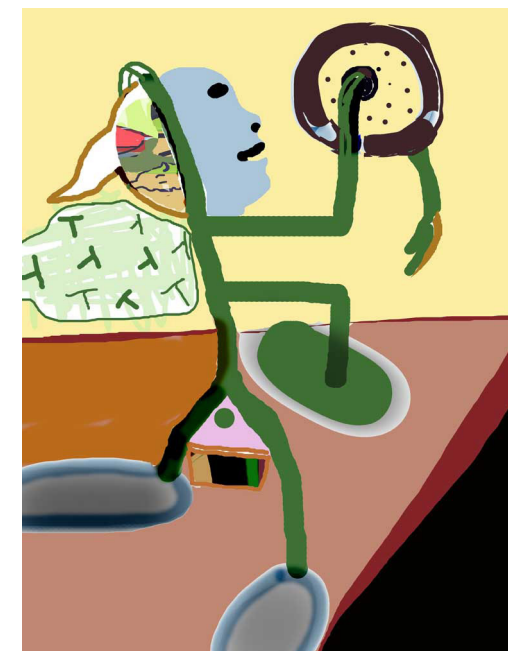
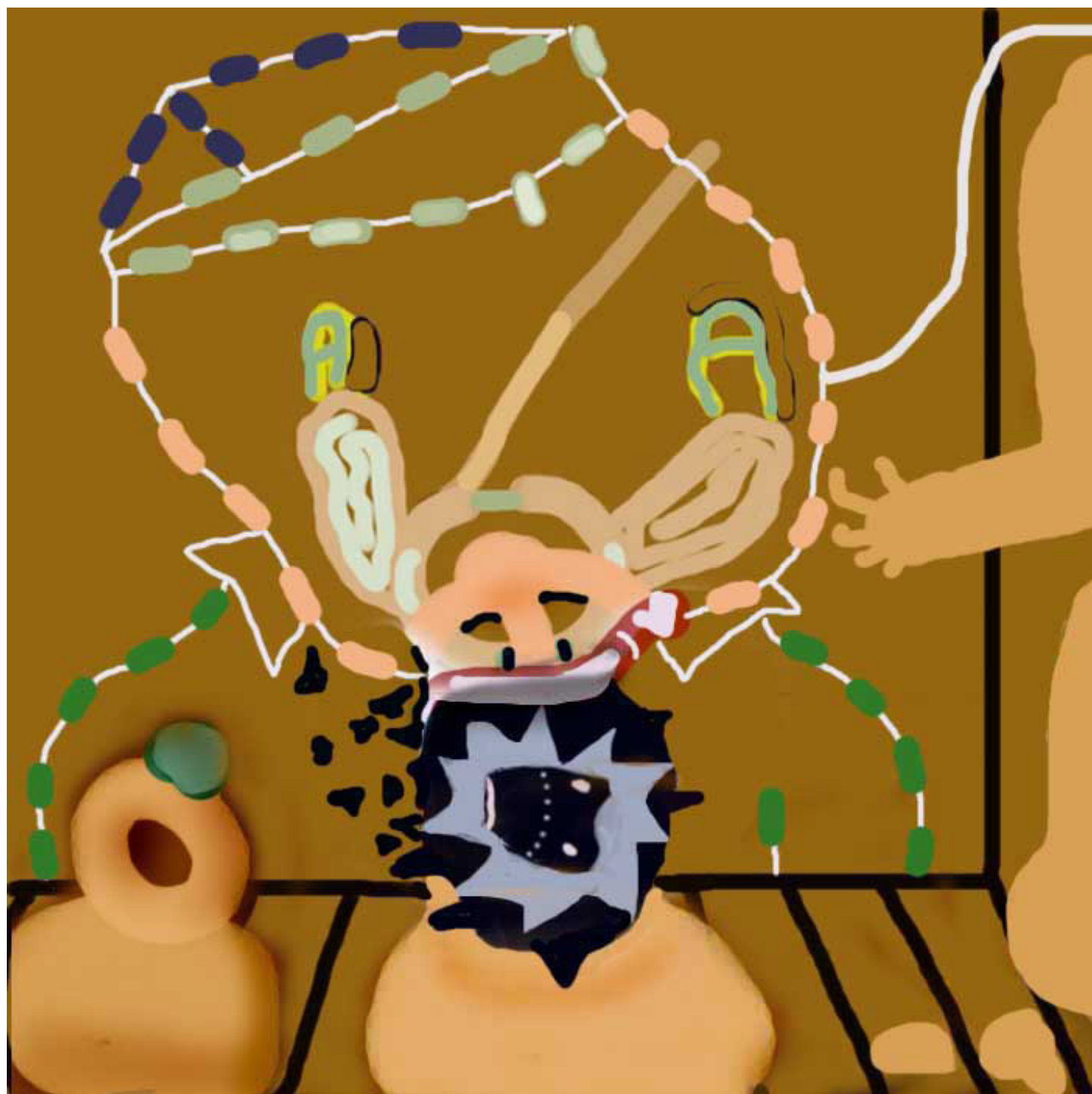
"That's the one. I'll see you there on Saturday at eight. We can make a night of it."

Liz drained her glass, the wine rushing through her blood.

"What about your husband?" McCormick asked.

"Don't worry about Quinn," she answered. "It will just be the two of us."





Contributors

Rose Auslander is currently sheltering in place in Cape Cod at Aunt Betty's Pond, and keeping an eye on the geese, goslings, swans, and cygnets. Her book *Wild Water Child* won the 2016 Bass River Press Poetry Contest; her chapbooks include *Folding Water*, *Hints*, and *The Dolphin in the Gowanus*; and look for her poems in the *Berkeley Poetry Review* (# 48), *Tupelo Quarterly* (TQ9), *Tinderbox*, *Scoundrel Time*, *Love's Executive Order*, and *A & U: America's AIDS Magazine*. Rose is Poetry Editor of *Folded Word Press*, and earned her MFA in Poetry from Warren Wilson.

Jordi Torres Barroso grew up along with his three brothers in Florida, Louisiana and Puerto Rico. He is a graduate of Brown University and Harvard Law School, where he met his wife, Genevieve, an education civil rights lawyer. While at Brown, Jordi translated poetry for the *Catalan International View*, and his translation of the novel *Act of Violence* by Manuel

de Pedrolo won a university prize. Jordi currently lives in the District of Columbia, where he is working on his first original novel.

Ace Boggess is author of five books of poetry—*Misadventure*, *I Have Lost the Art of Dreaming It So*, *Ultra Deep Field*, *The Prisoners*, and *The Beautiful Girl Whose Wish Was Not Fulfilled*—and the novels *States of Mercy* and *A Song Without a Melody*. His writing has appeared in *Harvard Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *Rattle*, *River Styx*, and many other journals. He received a fellowship from the West Virginia Commission on the Arts and spent five years in a West Virginia prison. He lives in Charleston, West Virginia.

Autumn Cooper is a creative-writing student, tree lover, and person who writes poetry from Minneapolis, Minnesota. Her poetry is an exploration of image, linguis-

tic meaning, and the spiritual embedded in the small details of everything around us. She has been published in Subterranean Blue Poetry, The Madison Review, as well as her school journal, The Paper Lantern.

Timothy Fox is a play-wright and theatre-maker. In 2015, he received a Houston Press Theatre Award for his play 'The Whale; or, Moby-Dick'. His play 'The Witch's Mark' won the Festival Spirit Award at Vault Festival, 2017. He lives in London.

Tyler Michael Jacobs currently serves as Editor-in-Chief of "The Carillon." Along with those duties, he also leads a continuing student creative writing workshop through the University of Nebraska at Kearney's Learning Commons' Writing Center called The Yellow Writers' Group for students interested in continuing their creative writing endeavors outside of the classroom. His poetry has appeared, or is slated to appear, in "The Carillon," "Poached Hare," "The Magazine," "The Hole in the Head Review," "Runestone," and "East by Northeast Literary Magazine."

Robert P. Kaye's stories have appeared in SmokeLong Quarterly, Gulf Stream, Penn Review, Hobart, Juked and elsewhere, with details available at www.RobertPKaye.com. He facilitates the Works in Progress open mic at Hugo House and is a fiction editor at Pacifica Literary Review.

Mark Keane has taught for many years in universities in North America and the UK. Recent short story fiction has appeared in Horla, Into the Void (Pushcart Prize nominee 2020), Lamplit Underground, Emerging Worlds, Potato Soup,

Raconteur and the Dark Lane and What Monsters Do for Love anthologies. He lives in Edinburgh (Scotland).

Karla Keffer is in her third year of a Ph.D. program in creative writing/fiction at the University of Southern Mississippi. Her poems and fiction have been published in Smartish Pace, Moon City Review, and Rappahanock Review. She is also the creator of the perzine The Real Ramona and the forthcoming semiautobiographical comic Charm City. Karla lives in Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

Sheree La Puma is an award-winning writer whose personal essays, fiction, and poetry have appeared in or are forthcoming in WSQ, Chiron Review, Juxtapose, The Rumpus, Plainsongs, Into The Void, and I-70 Review, among others. She has a micro-chapbook, 'The Politics of Love,' due out in August and a chapbook, 'Broken: Do Not Use,' due out in Fall. She received an MFA in Writing from California Institute of the Arts and taught poetry to former gang members.

Carol Radsprecher's images combine figurative and abstract elements. She earned her MFA in painting from Hunter College, CUNY. A longtime painter, she discovered the wonders of digital image-making and found that media well-suited to her need to make a succession of rapidly evolving, narrative images based on distorted representations of the human body, especially the female body. Her work has appeared in several solo shows and numerous group shows, and has been published in print and online publications. Her Web site is www.carol-radsprecher.com.

Yejin Suh is an aspiring writer from New Jersey whose work appears or is forthcoming in Half Mystic, Prometheus Dreaming, and Rising Phoenix Review, among others.