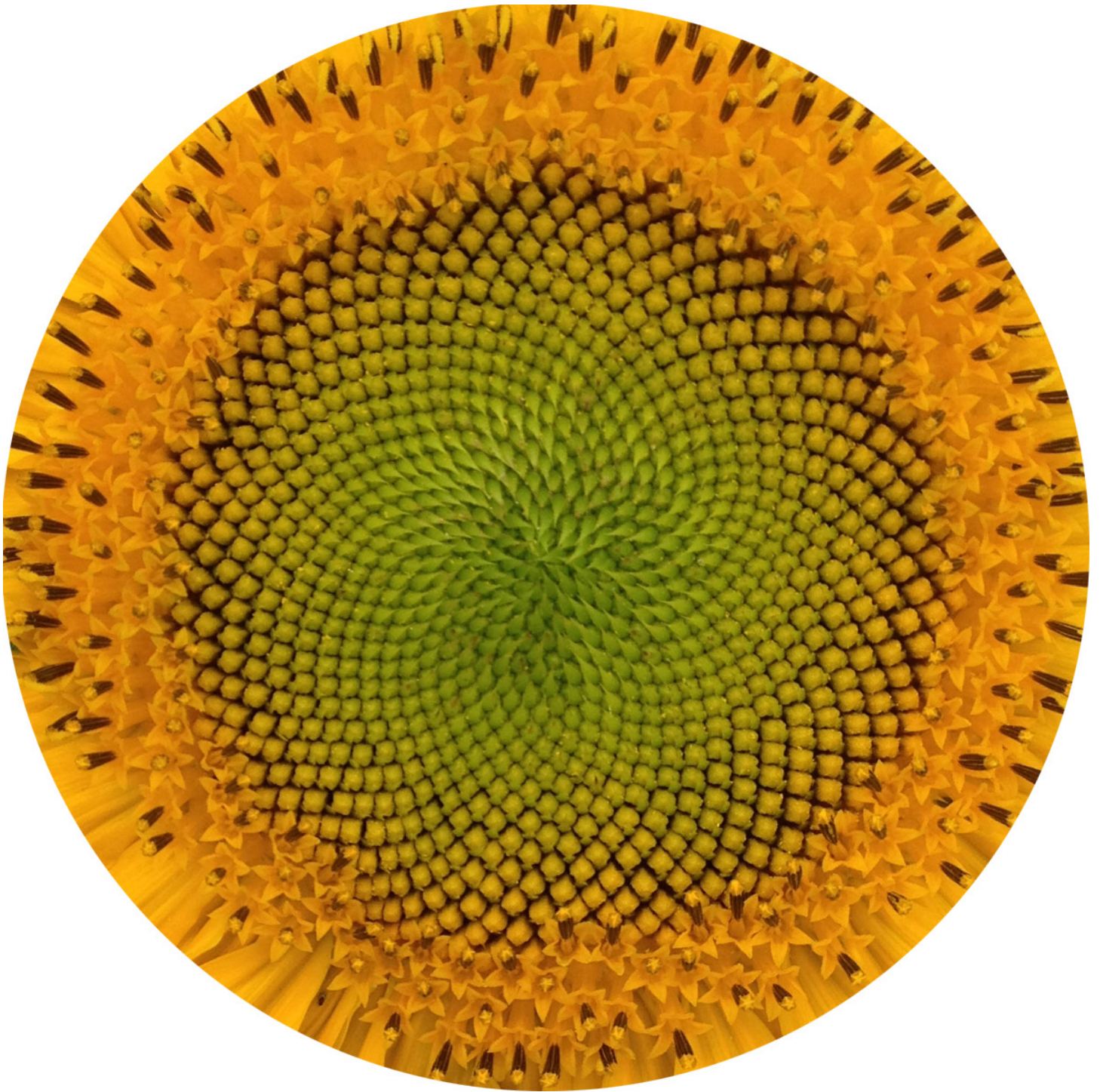


Rumble Fish Quarterly



Summer + Fall 2020

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Traveler, Traveler

Bill Schillaci

Annie and Ivy had scheduled their hike up the mountain two weeks earlier. But the night before our meetup, there was a storm, the first of the season and a half foot of snow. I hadn't a clue about their conditioning. They said they were hikers, but they also said they lived in Manhattan. What they understood to be hiking could be a Sunday morning power walk around the Central Park reservoir. The route they wanted to take was winding, windy and rugged, an eleven-mile loop and a twenty-five-hundred-foot elevation gain. With snow and even with fit hikers who followed every instruction I gave them, the hike could take eight hours or more. If they were anything less than they claimed to be, we'd probably get a couple of miles up the trail before turning around and then having an uncomfortable conversation about how much I should be paid.

In their emails, they gave no indication that they'd ever been on the mountain. Yet they were specific about what they wanted. The hike they envisioned would begin on the bullseye trail, the most direct of several routes to the summit. But instead of sticking to the bullseye, they wanted to divert to two offshoot trails that detoured north, adding four tough miles. For the descent, they described a fourth, infrequently traveled and unnamed trail, barely a footpath, only a mile in length yet so brutally steep, rocky and overgrown, it seemed to go on four-times that distance before a return to the bullseye and the final leg back to the trailhead. I'd been on that part of the mountain only twice and not in years, an unpleasant memory I talked about in social situations only when asked. The night before our meetup, I drove the Wrangler down to the parking area outside the outfitter on 9N where I work one of my half dozen jobs. From my cabin, it's the nearest spot with a reliable phone connection. I texted Annie and Ivy about the storm and mentioned several less arduous alternatives with views tourists raved about. I waited in the Wrangler for a half hour. Absent a reply, I drove home.

At first light, I carried my coffee up to the attic window where I could look across the fresh white blanket covering the abandoned logging road and past an annoying granite hump in the otherwise smooth ascent of the mountain. Through hemlock

branches scraped thin by the wind in this gusty belt of the forest, I could barely make out the grey cedar roof of Mrs. Lacroix's cabin. A twist of pale smoke trembled above the chimney I had relined for her in the summer. A sign of life. Though separated by a quarter mile of rough terrain, we were still, technically, next-door neighbors. My guess was that Mrs. Lacroix was a shade south of eighty. She'd also been ill. Months ago, I dropped off a basket of apples, Granny Smiths, the ones she favored for pies, and spotted fallen chunks of mortar that had accumulated in her fireplace. After peering up the stack with a flashlight, I told her that all four inner walls were going to wind up scattered across the exquisitely frayed braided rug on her living room floor if something wasn't done about the lining.

"How much?" she said.

"Two fifty. You can pay it off over twelve months."

Of course, that wouldn't even cover the cost of materials. Frowning, she studied the debris in the fireplace, her arms folded across her narrow ribcage, the same stern stance she assumed listening to group conjugation exercises over forty years of teaching high school French. She retired a few years after I sat in her class, near the window whenever I could so I could gaze dreamily at the football gridiron or the ski slope beyond or the little piston aircraft that took off from Marcy Field and threaded through the valleys to and from Albany and Rochester. It was in fact a rare day when Mrs. Lacroix's lessons took precedence for me over anything at all on the other side of the window. Arguably, I was the most hopeless student of the French language Mrs. Lacroix ever had. And yet, fifteen years later, we were tethered by our mutual love and fear of solitude, the only homeowners on the windward side of the mountain.

On my way out, I glanced a moment too long at the prescription bottles lined up on her bookcase.

"Lyme disease," she said once I was outside. She shut the door behind me before I could say a word.

It was cold, the snow powdery and easy to drive through when I went back down to the outfitter. It would likely be below freezing all day, and if Annie and Ivy and I got above the tree line, the wind would make it arctic. There were two messages, an appeal from the phone company to switch to paperless billing and one from Annie and Ivy that read "We're COMING! And no, we are not interested in anything 'less arduous!' Do we need snowshoes?" I replied that snowshoes probably weren't necessary but would bring two pair to the trailhead where we'd arranged to meet.

Heading back for my gear, I braked at the fork where Mrs. Lacroix's driveway, the length of two football fields, snaked to the left and mine, much longer, snaked to the right. The snowfall on her side was unmarked by tire tracks. Not that I expected it to be. Mrs. Lacroix had an eighteen-year-old Volvo wagon with about twenty-thousand miles on it because all she did with it was drive to the farmers market in Keene, her doctor appointments and the century-old Episcopal church to the south in St. Huberts. Still, if it wasn't for my hiking date, I would have hitched my plow to the Wrangler and be clearing her driveway. It was what I did after every significant snowfall, and never a word about it passed between us. I was careful not to overdo my visits, figuring that Mrs. Lacroix enjoyed company as little as I did. Still, she made an exception for me once or twice a month, or pretended she did, bearing library books or firewood or just to say "Hi, Teach." She'd flash a smile that conjured a youthful Quebec beauty and would invite me to share a couple of Adirondack IPAs on her porch in the summer or, around Christmas, a rum-laced hot toddy in front of the crumbling fireplace. She had a true backwoods appreciation for the medicinal power of liquor. Usually, before I left, we'd be laughing our heads off at her stories of vile student behavior, including mine, stories I'd heard her tell before but never tired of hearing again and again.

At seven in the morning I had no reason to visit except the vague dread I'd been feeling as winter neared that this would be the year Mrs. Lacroix lost her faceoff with age and illness and living off the grid. From appearances, she'd been declining. A small

woman to begin with, she seemed to be shrinking further every time I saw her inside thick sweaters and scarfs even in the warm days of late summer. "This is the life she wants," I spoke out loud in the Wrangler, hating the boring uselessness of the phrase, which, still, I couldn't stop automatically uttering to myself whenever I envisioned her slipping in the bathtub and knocking herself into a coma or setting her place on fire because she forgot to turn off her curling iron. She never said, never even hinted, that this life had become too much for her. It was something I asked myself, usually when my revenue took a dive. But Mrs. Lacroix was in far too deep, long past the time when she had other choices. On my last visit, with two ales coursing through my veins, I let it slip that I'd read an article in the dentist's office about how some older folks who fall down do not have the arm strength to stand back up. Wordlessly, and a bit drunk, she dropped to the floor, pumped out five military-style pushups and got back to her feet in one fluid motion.

"Sir!" she barked, saluting smartly.

"I see you've been killing the RBG workout challenge."

"Hah! Has that dame ever split cordwood?" Mrs. Lacroix sniffed.

I drove halfway up to my cabin before braking, muttering "fuck" and kicking open the door. I trudged back down my side of the fork and up her side to say good morning and whatever transparent excuse for visiting came into my head. Approaching her cabin, I saw tracks in the snow along one side. After a round of fruitless knocking, I followed the tracks to her backyard and then to the edge of the forest, where I stopped. There'd been no snowfall since dawn but the wind was blowing clouds of sun-splashed flakes from the branches, limiting my view. Still, for as far as I could see, the tracks were sharp, fresh and pointed to the stream-fed lake several hundred yards behind the cabin. Like everyone else in these parts, Mrs. Lacroix fished, usually from an old bar stool at the end of a decrepit dock that reached about thirty feet into the water. A few times I'd joined her, paddling her little jon boat out to holes where perch were known to congregate. It was too early in the day for fishing, which I knew and so did she. For a while I listened and watched for signs through the green, brown and white draping of the forest. There was only the rush of wind through the trees, like the sound of ocean waves, but softer. I know this place, the woods, the water, but only as much as it allows me to know and it's the same with Mrs. Lacroix. Holding that thought, I went back to the Wrangler as fast as I could without actually running.

I turned the Wrangler into the packed-dirt parking area notched out of the forest where a solitary figure was rummaging through a vintage U.S. Army canvas rucksack on the hood of a Ford Expedition, red and not much smaller than a fire truck.

"You must be Ivy or Annie," I said.

"Ivy." She extended a hand, bare, pink with the cold, as big as mine and, when we shook, just as firm.

"I'm Jack. Sorry I'm late."

Ivy was my height, six feet or thereabouts depending on the time of the day, and she had the thick, square shoulders of an Olympic swimmer. She observed me through icy blue irises beneath blond eyebrows and a hatless head of matching hair, short and knotted as a squirrel's nest. Fine curvy lines bracketed her eyes and lips. It was the kind of face toughened by the outdoors, devoid of makeup or anything else that would conceal exactly what it was. She wore an olive commando sweater with a German flag stitched onto the left shoulder, another staple in Army and Navy stores, and skin-tight wool leggings covered with Navajo patterns bent out of shape where they barely contained calf and quad muscles that could be fairly classified as stupendous on anyone, regardless of gender. On her feet were paint-splattered construction boots that looked like they'd been feasted on by mice. Overall, it was the kind of outfit you might throw on dashing out after you woke up to buy a carton of eggs or to drop off your kid at daycare. Normally, when people who hire me show up inappropriately clothed, particularly with

footwear, I politely point out that they are running the risk of slipping on the wet slopes and fracturing something or losing a toenail or, at the very least, getting their socks soaked in the brook crossings before the first separation break. But Ivy's face, both comely and tough as bark, and those wondrous legs, from which I had to yank my eyes, persuaded me to err on the side of silence.

"And here's Annie," Ivy said, nodding to a walker emerging at the trailhead.

"Hey," Annie boomed. "Jack, right? The trail's fine. Forget the snowshoes."

If Ivy was a poster child for a hiking novice, Annie looked geared-up to scale K2. She wore ultra high-tech mountaineering boots, the kind that start at half a thousand, waterproof shell pants, a bright-orange polar-cap expedition parka with a hood big enough for two heads and at least ten zippered pockets and goose down mittens that reached halfway to her elbows. Foldable Black Diamond hiking poles swung from each mittened hand. Looping her shoulders was a daypack I knew from catalogs was from France. A *French* daypack. Unless she was anemic or something, she was overdressed, at least for the first half of the ascent. But since I hadn't commented on Ivy's outfit, I thought it fair to extend the same courtesy to Annie. As she strode toward me, Annie shrugged off her hood, removed a mitten and thrust out her hand as had Ivy. With the addition of some hair care and a few strokes of makeup, she was a neatened-up image of her sister. I glanced from Annie to Ivy and back again.

"Let's get this out of the way," said Annie. "Yes, we are twins."

"Physically," said Ivy.

"Physically?"

"Well, we don't finish each other's sentences."

"Ah."

"Some twins do that."

"I think I've heard."

"But not us."

"I think he got your point, Ivy," said Annie.

"Oh?" said Ivy, pivoting hard to face Annie as if her sister had just jabbed her in the butt cheek with one of her poles. "How do you know that, Annie?"

"Because he just said so, Ivy."

"Did he?" Ivy moved a step closer to Annie so that their matching noses were at the same height and inches apart. Crimson plumes formed with spooky uniformity on their cheeks. From the shoulders up they were like two bookend shield maidens confronting each other over who inherits the throne.

Over the years, I've seen a lot of people losing their cool as the mountains exacted payment from those who would conquer them. But twin sisters who seemed itching to lop off each other's head before a single step was taken was a first. Feeling somewhat that I had tripped into an alternate reality, it occurred to me that whether or not I knew that twins sometimes finished each other's sentences had nothing to do with what was happening here. The impulse, which was quite strong, was to take a step back and watch this once-in-a-lifetime confrontation play out to a conclusion. Annoyingly, professionalism intervened.

"The trail's awaiting," I said in my best imitation of Mrs. Lacroix's taut classroom voice. "It's going to be a long day."

At the Wrangler, I shouldered my pack and then strode to the trailhead. I took out my Garmin, for which I had no need, at least on the first part of the trail, which I could walk in the middle of the night, but now toyed with so I had a reason not to watch while Ivy and Annie decided how and whether at all the day of hiking would occur. Behind me, there was intense whispering or maybe it was just the mystery of the wind folding her arms around the mountain. After what I thought was a respectful interval, I glanced back. They had moved into place, Annie behind me, Ivy several yards behind her, both watching me with the same insolent tilt of the head as if they had no idea what

I was waiting for. About here I deliver my little spiel about the ups and downs of the hike and the best views and safety, a lot about safety, and that this was not a race. But my sense was that both Annie and Ivy needed to be moving. So, with a curt nod, I led them into the forest.

On the trail, the snow was deeper, close to a foot in places where there were no overarching branches, yet free of boot-sucking melt and easy enough to kick through with minor extra effort. As we ascended, a steady twenty degrees, I kept checking on Annie and Ivy to be sure they were comfortable with my pace, but mainly to see if whatever thing was smoldering between them had passed. Both were high-stepping through the snow, their breaths easy and even. Whenever I turned, they met me eye to eye, heads up, alert and able, not staring at their boots or wobbling like drunks, hiker-signs that the trail was eating them up. Usually I take out big, extended families, the members spanning fifty years or more, who want to be in a wild place to celebrate an anniversary or graduation or wedding. The weddings are the best. If I can get everyone back to their cars reasonably happy with the day, the tips are lavish, enough for a month of dinners. A couple of times I've had to turn away someone who shows up inebriated or otherwise impaired. Once I had to pursue and seize by the collar one sky-high visitor who was trying to chase down and photograph a mama black bear and two cubs. I informed him that if he didn't behave, I would take him straight back to the game warden and ruin the day for everyone. But people who hire me generally are not new to the wilderness and respect the protocols. Parties of two are rare and getting an hour into the hike without a single word spoken by anyone had no precedent.

At the first overlook, I dusted the snow from a bench made of halved logs and sat at one end. Annie sat next to me, leaving room at the other end for Ivy should she chose to join us. Annie shed her pack and sipped from a stainless steel flask, another boutique item the owner of my outfittering store once stocked, but then returned to the manufacturer without a single sale because customers could not believe how much it cost.

"What's that mountain?" Annie said, aiming the flask through an opening in the trees at a white colossus against a flawless blue background.

"Tabletop."

"Sounds like a good place for lunch. Have you been up there?"

"I have."

"Is there any mountain you haven't climbed?"

"Yes, but not in this park, not that I know of anyway. You and Ivy are strong hikers."

"That's our mom. She's the reason we're here."

"Ah."

"She was on Estonia's cross-country skiing team before she ruptured her ACL and we all moved to America. She formed a hiking club for expats and as soon as Ivy and me could walk, she'd drag us along. She kept a journal describing the hikes she took, about a hundred of them. We think she wanted to write a book, but she never said. This one's dated Nine-Eleven, and she did it alone. When the Twin Towers fell, she was probably sitting right here, snapping photos of Tabletop. This is what we do on her birthday, follow her steps."

"Hey, now that's beautiful."

"Wish we could take credit for the idea, but it was hers. She asked that we do it in her note."

"Note?"

"Yeah, note. *The* note. The one people leave behind when they check out."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

Annie shrugged. "She was pretty sick."

"So how many of her hikes have you done?"

"This is the first, actually. Ivy's been too angry with her for years to agree."

She hasn't even looked at the journal. She finally caved but not without being a royal bitch about it. We've been snapping at each other since we left the city in that climate abomination she rented."

Annie sipped from her flask and I ate a handful of GORP and eventually Ivy joined us, approaching as stealthy as a predator and standing near the bench.

"Pretty mountain," said Ivy, gazing across the valley.

"Pretty name too," said Annie. "Tabletop."

"That's a name a woman would give."

"I never thought of that," I said.

After a time, Ivy said, "So *was* it? Given by a woman?"

"I don't know."

My ignorance of feminist natural history lingered among us for a time before we all returned to the trail.

It would be an exaggeration to say that after this the ice broke between Annie and Ivy. True, they started talking again, but it was mostly to disagree.

"It's gotten colder," said Annie.

"I think it's lovely," said Ivy.

"I didn't say it's not lovely."

"That's what you implied."

"It's not what I implied; it's what you chose to hear."

"What?"

"You hear what you want to hear."

"I'm sorry, my love, can you repeat that?"

"No."

And later:

"Oh, look, an eagle," called Ivy.

"It's a red-tail," countered Annie.

"With a white head?"

"There was no white head."

"Jack! What was it?"

"Hmm?"

"That big bird that flew overhead."

"Sorry, I didn't notice any big bird."

Of course I did notice. Any so-called wilderness guide who fails to spot and direct the attention of his or her flock to all appearances of iconic wildlife will soon be bagging groceries or, if lucky, grading roads for the county. Ivy was right about it being an eagle. Sometimes they drift east from their nesting sites near Tupper Lake to fish in the smaller ponds. They weren't a common site in the High Peaks but neither were they rare. Still, if an eagle entered any part of my field of vision, it was like a flash bang grenade going off in my face. But by now, I decided I would not be suckered into whatever sibling psychodrama was festering between Annie and Ivy. Which is not to say they hadn't set up camp in my head. As I strode through the stiffening wind—Annie, for her part, was right about the cold—I couldn't stop playing with their names. *Annie and Ivy. Ivy and Annie. Long and stout. And in need of a nanny.*

What Annie and Ivy did agree on, absent any discussion that I was aware of, was the need to push to the summit. Soon after we broke off the bullseye onto the blue trail, I felt them crowding me from behind. It was the crisp crunch of their following steps and their accelerating breaths, but also some woodland sixth sense that my personal space was being invaded and that it wouldn't be long before Annie was clipping me in the heels with her superior boots. I cranked up the pace a notch and not long after that another notch. With each upshift, the sisters matched my speed with no noticeable change in exertion. We swept up the blue in half the time I expected. I meant what I said to Annie about them being strong hikers, but that was only in the context of the average weekend

visitor to the mountains. Clearly, they occupied the next level and for all I knew a level above that. My level. Two bickering, Estonian Manhattanite twins were making me work hard, throwing me off my game. When we reached the junction with the yellow trail, the final two thousand meters to the summit, I braked and turned and raised my hands as if to discourage the charge of two angry goats.

"Look," I said. "This is your show. I want to do it your way. But I have a job. It's all scrambling from here to the top. You have to use your hands and there's ice. You fall here, and you're probably going to get injured. There's no helicopter rescue. If you can't descend on your own, I'll have to call in volunteers who will need to carry you back down the mountain on a rescue stretcher. They'll be eight of them, they work in shifts. Think about that, okay? All those people you'll be indebted to for the rest of your life. We need to stay in a tight formation and watch out for each other. Can you do that?"

Annie and Ivy considered me with curiosity and then traded glances.

"Annie, I'm wondering if Jack is having doubts about us," said Ivy.

"Which part of us?" said Annie.

"Hard to say. Maybe our competence as hikers. But let's ask him?"

"Let's. Jack did you overhear that?"

"Overhear what, Annie?"

"That Ivy and I don't know what your fucking problem is."

That gave me a jolt. Not the language itself, but that it came from Annie, not Ivy.

Here, the wind mercifully interceded, a powerful southern gust, fifty mph at least, that rocked the three of us from the side. I sought refuge in the sky, surveying the incoming clouds.

"There may be more snow," I said. "Best to get going."

Annie folded her poles and stuffed them along with her mittens into her French pack. She lifted her bare palms to me, spreading wide her fingers as if in surrender.

"I'm ready," she said.

"Me too," said Ivy with a grin, copying Annie's gesture so that now four large, pale and powerful mitts were held up to me as I had just held up mine to Annie and Ivy.

If Annie and Ivy recognized that my outburst had nothing to do with them, they kept it to themselves. They climbed as I climbed, steadily, without visible fear, reaching for the farthest handholds, one after another after another, pushing off a single boot toe anchored into fissures no wider than a hot dog, taking big, hungry bites out of the mountain. The vistas were there, to either side of us. It is said that the Adirondacks are young mountains built with old rocks, sharply chiseled anorthosite sculptures, a ring of craggy monuments that draws the eye outward farther and farther to the horizon the higher one climbs. No guide I knew of, including those who'd been at the job three times longer long than I, ever claimed they'd grown indifferent to the sights. But the real spectacle today was Annie and Ivy, and mostly Ivy. First, when Annie called for a hydration break, Ivy sailed right past her. I suspected what was coming next. There are certain hikers, usually guides or forest rangers, but sometimes visitors, who seem to gain strength as the climb gets meaner and the air thinner. I'm not one of them, but Ivy seemed to be.

"Hi, Jack," she said coming up beside me.

"Hi, Ivy."

"Mind if I take the lead?"

"Like I said, your show."

"I'll take that as a yes. I mean a no," she giggled.

She thrust herself upward with feline strides, ten feet ahead of me and then twenty. I could have kept up, for a while anyway, but of course there was Annie to consider and my own rule against racing. As I slowed, Annie neared and together we watched Ivy surging to the mountaintop.

"Ivy's a firefighter," said Annie.

“Okay, that explains a lot.”

“She also does the race up the steps of the Empire State Building. Five years in a row.”

“Holy crap.”

“We must seem weird to you.”

“Hey, I live by myself in a shack with an outhouse.”

“Isn’t that true with everyone up here?”

“Hmm. Could be.”

We stopped at a broad, flat rock and looked at the distant mountains. Annie pointed to the peaks, quizzing me, and I passed the test, giving a name to each one she stabbed at with her finger. At Giant Mountain, she said that’s a name worthy of a selfie, and we posed an arm’s length apart, Giant standing stoically between us. Back on the trail we found that Ivy was nowhere in sight.

At the summit, Ivy was waiting, sitting cross legged in the snow, a notebook in her lap, sketching a grand cairn that added another seven feet to the mountain.

“Would you mind taking a video?” Annie said, handing me her phone. Ivy jumped up and dusted the snow from her bottom. They conferred and then shoulder to shoulder faced the southern peaks. As instructed, I stood to the side and panned from the vista to a profile of the sisters, who began to sing. The language was unrecognizable, the music pleasing, but also harsh, perhaps a hymn to the natural world that was deeply aware of its cruelty. Still, they harmonized well, I thought, Ivy handling the melody. The song ended abruptly after only a minute. The sisters hugged.

“Wow,” I said. “What was that about?”

“It’s called ‘Traveler, Traveler, Traveler,’” said Annie, sniffing. “It’s about solitude and sadness. Standard Nordic melancholy. Mom brought it over from the old country. She’d sing it in the kitchen when she thought nobody could hear.”

We spread out a tarp behind the cairn to block the wind and ate lunch. I told them a little about Mrs. Lacroix and that I’d been worried and apologized for being an asshole. Annie and Ivy chewed their store-bought wraps and did what they could to make their piercing eyes appear sympathetic. We dug through the snow for rocks that we added to the cairn. After a round of photos, the gales picked up and we headed downhill before they knocked us silly.

Part two of the storm didn’t gather steam until we were a half mile shy of the cars. But before that, the unnamed downhill path was as mystifying as I’d feared. Whatever vague recollections I had proved useless. I resorted to my Garmin, which kept us going in the right general direction but provided no indication of a trail and led us into a maddening series of dead ends. Then Annie said, “Oh, wait,” and pulled out her mother’s journal. We needed a flashlight under the thickening cloud cover to read a page and a half of handwriting no taller than a halved grain of rice, describing this part of the hike, including what Mom saw at certain elevations. That was something the Garmin could work with. Matching the numbers, we found landmarks, boulders and outcrops, that helped point the way. As we closed in on the bullseye, the path widened and our spirits rose.

At the cars, Annie handed me my fee, two crisp one hundred dollar bills, and another twenty. I protested weakly, but Ivy was incensed.

“For fuck’s sake, Annie,” she said, digging bills out of her pack and shoving them at me.

“Ivy, this is too much,” I said.

“What? For the hike of a lifetime?”

“Maybe Jack doesn’t do this for the money,” said Annie.

“Oh, so he’s a foundation?”

“No, but he’s more than a business. He’s a person.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“You wouldn’t.”

They could have asked me why I do this, and I have a poetic little answer that I’ve refined over the years, which gives me the opening to mention that I am one-fiftieth Onondaga, which I also note is fractionally more indigenous than Elizabeth Warren. But Annie and Ivy had lost interest in me, preferring to segue into sniping about each other’s poor judgment of my character and thereafter human character as a whole. Waving at me identically, they slammed shut the doors of their rental, the second slam outdoing the first, and rolled into history.

The snow didn’t last long, but while it did, it was classic white out, forcing the Wrangler down to fifteen mph when I wanted to do sixty. During the long day, the unforgiving hike and my unpredictable clients combined to keep my thoughts of Mrs. Lacroix at a safe distance, most of the way. Then Annie produced the journal. The three of us hunched over the tiny script, artful descriptions of towering monoliths and courageous alpine flowers, and then out of nowhere, “I seem to be lost. Blessed be.”

“Blessed be?” said Ivy. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know,” said Annie.

Ivy took the journal from Annie and my flashlight and searched the rest of the entry for an explanation.

“Annie, what does it mean?”

“I don’t know, Ivy. I don’t know.”

After that, the rest of the way through the forest, the image of Mrs. Lacroix’s tracks in the snow reanimated, like one of her weekend homework assignment that I blanked out until Monday morning.

The Wrangler muscled most of the way up Mrs. Lacroix’s driveway before it went sideways into an icy declivity and got stuck, all four tires spinning pointlessly. On foot, I followed the beam of my flashlight toward her cabin. What it boils down to, I suppose, is that I’m superstitious. I look and listen for signs and sounds that have no obvious connection to each other or anything else in the rational world, and yet I believe all of it is of the same substance and the same spirit. Maybe it’s the trickle of native blood in me, something preverbal about the dominance of nature. Nature whispered, two women, walking alone in the woods, one in life, one in words, must arrive at the same destination, the same physical ending.

Nearing her cabin, I saw light behind the window shades and, once more, white smoke furling above the chimney through the black night. I stopped and watched for the movement of a shadow behind the shades. Then there was the unmistakable sound of a maul splitting hardwood. *Crack*. One and then another and another. *Crack, crack*. As I turned back to free the Wrangler, I nodded at the sound, a sign, I believed, meant for me.

Blessed be.

Thinking in Janet's Kitchen Garden

Megan Eleanor Evans

of dreaming and sickening, dreaming
and sickening swifter than cabbage stuck in
cold morning. This place of wanderers left
for dead, of sickening of catching ice of running
in trodden dirt, mounded hearths

born out of scarcity. Before fired world all stark and concerted
hummed and tied in black and white as snowed in
screens, before then even steps unknown to
deep cranial masses steering out sleek
boned stalls of 'having' forms,
people. By breath, we are

thimble-capped, jointed, yearned over our touchings,
our whist black sparkle; where shoulders once curved
warm shook and entrusted itself, beset
all still – crackling shards drawn
out hot fingers, out may we
ever cart shoals of a
drenched anatomy ever be
thrust under a salacious page

yet
if this skull was had, lived twice over,
might then it let slip a pearly palate
where misconceived flesh might also
wish not to manhandle conscious bones, as
the light touch of freedom
but orbits here like a tarantula,
like a lizard in the undergrowth
within the corner of an eye
over the blur of a nose
adjacent a crystal crown
yes
with a sweet wash laid over the late, cold morning
some worlds might still be born in grace.



Traffic Lightening

Paul Ilichko

Traffic between routes is set
is a paradigm of connectivity
dependent on the handshake
traffic is the apology weakened
is ice cold water
on a summer's day

* * * * *

Considering
the delicacy of birds in flight
navigating the world it's too easy
to imagine their bodies ripped
and torn a tracery of droplets
mapping out
a deathbed dream

* * * * *

The unbearable fever of life
dependent above all upon
the invention of liquidity
the rippling swarms of modernism
that swim above the lights
which congregate around us

* * * * *

Leaf color salvaged by autumn
trees savaged by traffic
a rearguard action of oxygenation
as streets connect like pipes
like glass rods of light
illuminating commerce

* * * * *

And
in this once and final world
this panicked suppression
of *only connect* this traffic
stained darkness
as eternity declines
to the measurable
we take your packages and stack them
in our warehouses clearly labeled
for someone else's future.



The Morning After

Raymond P. Hammond

I.

He looked like my father in his turtle neck sweater and tweed jacket but he was not a teacher like my father he was a preacher, and not even really a preacher but an actor portraying a preacher Gene Hackman played the rebellious minister who was along for the ride on the SS Poseidon who was the main character who was invited to give a guest sermon to the passengers where he decries praying to god for help and advocates finding the god within to help yourself help you who after the extravagant self-contained inner world of the ship is upended by a tidal wave and suddenly made conscious of life and inner reliance leads a band of survivors through a dark night of shorted out light bulbs and darkened corridors to the stern where they had been told through the mouth of a young boy educated by the captain that the hull was thinnest at the propellers and since the ship was upside down would be the only way rescuers could cut through the hull to save them like Moses out of Egypt Gene Hackman takes charge and guides the group based upon the teachings taught to an innocent child and then along the way they see in the dimly lit fog dozens of passengers slowly moving their rag-tag-selves toward the bow following the ship's doctor who obviously only knows doctoring and not ships but exclaims the mistaken belief that the engine room isn't there that it was destroyed because of explosions heard but unseen and unexamined and continuing on into his ignorance with the followers following blindly even with Gene Hackman yelling to them—appealing to them through reason that they are going the wrong way, they follow on like lithium filled lemmings to their death

II.

Years later as a dutiful son looking through his things after my father's death in his faculty apartment at Pikeville College I stood holding the photo of my father wearing his turtle neck and tweed jacket sitting beside Dr. Osvalts, his mentor, perched precariously on the rickety rising platform that he would rise and run around the room turning metal handwheels that look like they belong on a ship's watertight door to minutely adjust his seat as he followed the eyepiece of the twenty-six inch telescope in the ivy covered and domed McCormick Observatory at UVA where I stood as a child and would watch my father watch the heavens staring for endless hours, smoking his cigar to keep the midnight bugs away wearing his light windbreaker jacket to break the light fall-night chill showing me the pinpoint accuracy of science in the right ascension and declination directions of finding stars while always taking the time to teach me to marvel at the mystery of the dark space between I would listen at his feet as we searched above together searching until early into the next morning when my father would pack my mom and me into the warm car and I would lay in the backseat as my parents talked and the lights from overpassing streetlamps alternated predictably with the early dark of dawn lulling me into a deep, soundly serene sleep

Iceland

Carolyn Asnien

I felt the pull of the earth
in that grey expansive landscape
and it knocked me down
flooded me
tore at my heart
pressuring the delicately arranged
chemicals and fluids
maintained in saner climates
disrupted body rhythms
and blew away
all that was gratuitous
bringing me to my knees
leaving me breathless
in that icicle air
showing me the delicacy
of my structure—
that I was not the
romanticized
north-wandering waif
in tune with the forces
roaming the hinterlands
on a mythical white bear—
but a fragile system
that can be undone by
a chill wind
a steep step
or the silence of her children





Candlelit

Hannah Kinsey

My mother is on fire before us at dinner,
flames swallow the wool
along her forearm
mouths open.
Harris and I neither
spit prayers nor move to douse,
we remain sitting
at a cracked table
on a blue and pink streaked floor.
It is my father who smothers her,
collapses her back to yarn and skin.

What I mean to say is
later, she will walk upstairs
humming like flies
trapped in the whirl of a ceiling fan.

Later, after my father has died,

I will cross eyes with my brother
across the table
as my mother whisks eggs
and I'll think—
At dinner, my mother is on fire.



Wrong Side of the Tracks

Julian E. Riccobon

When I was eight years old, a little girl died up the street. A poor angelita, the neighbors called her. On the night she died, the entire barrio was gathered in the cemetery for Día de Muertos. The cemetery, with its honeycomb of graves carved from the hillside, with its buzz of voices and the press of bodies, thick like honey.

The perfect place to get lost.

When no one was looking, the angelita wriggled out of her mother's arms. She spun cartwheels in the grass. Till the grass turned to gravel, and the gravel to steel, and she kept laughing and kept going, because she was free.

The whole world open, without any borders.

She didn't hear the train wailing in the distance. And she didn't hear her mother wailing either. Because she never made it to the other side.

They found her lying on the gravel railbed, crumpled like a marigold petal.

My own bed felt like gravel that night, the mattress springs groaning beneath me. I could feel every tremble through the metal. My teeth buzzing with the rumble of the train. Somehow Celia slept through it. A heavy sleeper, under a heavy blanket. But my sheets were thin, my courage even thinner. When the brakes slammed down, the entire rowhouse rattled.

"Mama!" I cried, and I scrambled out of bed.

Down the stairs, I fumbled. Across the cold linoleum, till I found Mama at the kitchen door, her face flashing red and blue.

"¡Dios mío!" she breathed, and she held me tight.

Together, we watched the ambulance crawl away. Real slow, it went, like the street was paved with honey. Then came the neighbors. First the mother, with her eyes bleeding beads of amber, and then the papa, blinking hard and fast. I stared at him through the screen door, and he stared back with salty eyes.

“Don’t cry,” I told him.

Papas were not supposed to cry.

“Mi niña,” the mother wailed. In her hands, she cradled a tattered shoe, girl’s size

11.

It looked lonely without its amigo.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, tugging Mama’s hand. “¿Qué pasó?” But she didn’t have an answer.

“Nothing, mija,” she said finally, brushing back my hair. “Go back to bed.” And she placed her hand on her swollen belly, to cover the unborn ears beneath her skin.

*

Since that night, the story has been re-molded by a hundred mouths, like tortilla dough being rolled and rerolled.

Years have passed, but everyone still remembers the Train Girl.

Carlos next door says that when the train slammed into her, she burst open like a piñata. Smash! An explosion of candy and confetti. But Tito from two doors down told me that the wheels were giant rolling pins, and they flattened her into a tortilla.

I don’t know which story is true, but they both sound awful.

“You stay away from those train tracks, me entiendes?” Mama calls from the kitchen, and she shakes her rolling pin. “You stay away, or I’ll flatten you myself!”

Even with her no-nonsense face, Mama looks thin and tired. Like a string of spinach, wilting in the heat. It’s strange, because I remember Mama best as a pumpkin, her belly bouncing when she laughed.

“Up we go!” she would say, and she’d scoop me onto her lap. “All aboard!”

But now her baby bump is gone, and so is the baby. I haven’t sat on her lap since then. She hasn’t invited me.

It would be sacrilege, like sitting on someone’s grave.

*

Despite Mama’s warning, we still poke around the railroad tracks.

Not just me and my sisters, but all the neighborhood kids. Sunday morning, there’s a whole chain of us, wobbling along the steel tightrope. No school and nothing better to do, so we make our own playground. The rails, our balance beam, and the railbed, our sandbox.

My sisters like to sift through the gravel, hunting for pieces of the Train Girl. Fingers and bones, and things like that.

“We’re paleontologists,” Celia tells me. “And she’s the dinosaur.”

But me? I like to dig through the weeds, searching for marigolds. The ruffled flowers, for honoring the dead. Whenever I find a patch of gold, I pluck the petals and

scatter them around the Train Girl’s cross.

The cross has been standing there for years. A marker, for her gravel grave. But if you tilt your head slightly, then it looks like a railroad crossing sign, a warning to future trespassers. Look before you cross.

Sometimes I sit cross-legged in front of the memorial. Where were you trying to go? I wonder. What did you see, on the other side of the tracks?

But the dead can’t speak, and the flowers just sit there, shivering.

*

Sometimes I think I know how the Train Girl felt, when she stood on the edge of the tracks. On the brink of the world, ready to cross over.

Sometimes, I feel like I was born on the wrong side of the tracks. Because that’s what people say, when they look down on the barrio. That’s a bad neighborhood. We don’t want to live there. It’s wrong, wrong, wrong.

That’s what they say. But from the rowhouse window, the barrio looks different. When I gaze down on the sidewalk, I see Mr. García and old Mrs. Martínez far below, swaying to invisible tunes. Homesick.

I wish that I could swish my hips and dance along, but I don’t know the steps. I’ve never heard the click of claves or castanets. And I’ve never heard brass trumpets, just the blaring horns at rush hour.

I’ve only heard salsa from the jar.

And not even the good stuff, but the crappy stuff that runs all over the plate. Tostitas, Mango Picoso, Chich’s Chunky Salsa. Yuck! Try to preserve your culture in a jar, and it just won’t taste the same. All you get is this stale, crust-of-bread barrio.

We are all living in a jar.

*

There is only one man I know, who escaped the jar. Only one man who left the barrio.

Papa.

I don’t remember much about him. Just that he was tall and pale, with marigold hair. When I was little, Mama spoke Spanish in one ear, and Papa spoke English in the other. And now I speak a mishmash of both, because I only got one tongue, and it switches back and forth like a railroad switch. *Click!* One minute, traveling down the San Diego Line. And then *click*, en el tren a Oaxaca.

And the worst part is, I don’t even notice when the tracks switch.

Sometimes I hang out with the girls at school, and we talk about movies. The latest romcom or action flick. But when I get excited, then the tracks switch mid-sentence, and all my friends stare at me like I’m a telenovela. Waiting for the English subtitles.

Sometimes I wish my tongue followed only one set of tracks.

But which one? Sometimes English feels easier, with its smooth rails, first class all the way. I could just roll down the tracks, without rolling my *r*’s. But sometimes I wonder if Papa’s tracks are really so smooth.

When Papa walked out, all he left behind was a note on the fridge door. He said that he was heading for San Francisco. He said he was leaving on the first train and he was sorry.

The note was written in English, but the words sounded foreign to me.

*

When I was little, Mama used to jump rope with me and Celia. We would jump until our feet cracked the pavement, and chant until the neighbors plugged their ears, and the rope would stretch between us. The umbilical cord, never snapped.

But before long, we ran out of rhymes to sing. The same old lyrics, sweltering in the heat.

“I wish we knew more songs,” Celia said. Already the rope was beginning to droop.

“Then why not make up your own?” Mama said. “We’ll just sing whatever we want. And so what if it sounds silly? No importa. We are improvisando!”

“Improvisando? What do you mean?”

“Like this,” Mama said, and she danced in between the ropes.

*Brincar la cuerda, brincar la cuerda
Jump on the outbound train, all aboard-a!
Swing that rope, and pick up the slack
Follow the tracks, till they circle on back*

“You see?” Mama said. “Why don’t you try?”

So Celia swooped into the center, her arms spread like wings. The early bird, caught between a pair of thrashing worms.

*My mama bought me a new pair of chanclas,
So join the dancers and bring your maracas
And if my chancla soles wear thin?
Then I’ll just spin till I’m dancing on skin!*

Out went the bird, her sandals flapping.

“That’s stupid,” I grumbled. “Chanclas doesn’t rhyme with maracas. And who wants to dance in chanclas anyway?”

But Celia stuck out her tongue. And Mama gave the rope a snap. “Ay, that’s enough. It’s your turn now, Cruz. ¡Avanza!”

So I plunged into the spinning ropes.

*¡Avanza! ¡Avanza!
So you think you can dance?
Little girls steal the floor,
If they’re given the chance*

*Chica Chicana,
Where are you from?
Chica Chicana,
Speak a new tongue*

*¡Avanza! ¡Avanza!
We’re improvisando
When I speak from the heart,
It’s mi propia lingo*

There was so much more I wanted to say, but the energy was winding down now, our lungs burning. So Mama began to wind up the rope.

But we clasped our hands together, prayer-style. “No, Mama,” we begged. “Don’t stop now. Show us the tricks!”

And like every time we asked her, Mama would sigh. Shake her head at the clouds. “You know I’m getting too old for this,” she would say. But she would take the rope anyway, and stand poised on the sidewalk. Like a little girl, lost in muscle-memory. The pavement of San Diego, beneath her feet, and the pavement of Oaxaca, in her head. She would launch into side-swings and double-unders and crossovers, and we would cheer because our Mama was the best jump-roper in the whole barrio. In the whole world, maybe.

But Mama doesn’t jump rope anymore.

She tried to jump rope with the baby in her belly, and that was a mistake.

Now she just watches through the screen door as my sisters jump rope. She watches as their sandals slap the pavement. “Celia needs new shoes,” Mama tells me. But I don’t say anything. I just stare down at the threadbare laces of my own shoes.

Outside, my sisters keep chanting. Engine Engine Number Nine, and Criss-Cross Applesauce. The same old lyrics.

“Come jump with us!” Celia cries. But I turn on my tattered heels and head off towards the railroad tracks.

Who wants to dance in chanclas, anyway?

I wish that I could claim a seat on Engine Number Nine. Or maybe I could cross those tracks. Criss-cross applesauce, just like the Train Girl.

But every time I reach the railroad crossing, my feet stop dead in their tracks. *¡Para!* they scream, and the brakes come down.

There is a rope lying before me now, and I just can’t jump it.

Because jumping on a train is like jumping ship. Because when Papa jumped ship, he turned his back on Mama, and now she’s just a wispy spinach woman, hiding behind the screen door.

I can’t turn my back on Mama.

So every time I reach the railroad crossing, I turn around and crunch my way back to the barrio, with my soles thinner than before.

*

Back in Oaxaca, Mama won first place for a jump rope championship.

It was Single-Rope Freestyle. “Just like dancing,” Mama told me. “I was jittery, at first, but then I skipped rope like lightning.”

After the championship, Mama could’ve continued jumping rope. But she decided to spend her scholarship on studying inglés instead. Because she knew that her family would be leaving Oaxaca. And what good was jump rope anyway? It was a hobby, nothing more.

So Mama studied. And later, in San Diego, she attended vocational school. “I wanted to study engineering,” she said. “To become an inventor.”

She wanted to build machines, because in the barrio, everything ended up broken. When the bathtub faucet started crying, she patched it up with duct tape. And when Celia’s bicycle broke, she strung the chain back across its sprocket.

But when Papa left, Mama couldn’t patch her heart with duct tape. So she laid down a new set of tracks, over rough terrain. With three children dumped in her arms (and another on the way), she needed to get a job, and pronto.

So that’s how she ended up in the railyard, fixing engines.

When I was little, I liked to picture Mama as a superhero. A woman who could lift entire train cars over her head, or stop a runaway train with her own body. She was La Mujer Maravilla, the strongest woman in the world.

Sometimes, I follow Mama to work on Saturday, and when the whistle blows, I bring Mama her sandwich and café. It’s Mama’s job to keep the engines running, and it’s my job to keep Mama running.

The trains don’t wait for anyone.

Together, we sit cross-legged in the railyard, and we split Mama’s sandwich. She takes the turkey and cheese, and I take the bread (without the crust, of course).

“You can’t eat only bread, mija,” Mama clucks. But she laughs as I chew my bread sandwich, and she mixes her café. All around us, the trains are screaming, but Mama doesn’t spill a drop. The café blends with the cream, and my thoughts blend together. A muddle of Spanglish trapped in my head.

I can never find the right words for Mama.

“Mama,” I say finally, once the trains have passed. “How did you learn inglés? I mean, wasn’t it hard, hablar un lenguaje nuevo? Didn’t you wish you could speak just one language?”

For a moment, Mama remains quiet. Stirring.

“Being Chicana means rising above borders, me entiendes? No hay español o inglés. Everything blends together.”

Now that she’s finished stirring, I can no longer tell the cream from the café.

“It’s una mezcla,” Mama says. “And nobody knows el ingrediente secreto.” With a grin, she offers me the café straw.

No caffeine, is Mama’s rule. *You’ll be wired all night*. But just this once, it’s okay. So I take a sip, savoring the bittersweetness.

When the shift whistle blows, Mama sends me running ahead. “¡Vale!” she tells me. “It’s okay if you cross the tracks. Just remember to look both ways.”

And I always look both ways. Left and right. But also behind me, at Mama’s shadow, and ahead of me, at the setting sun. It helps to know where I’ve been, where I’m

going.

This is also part of being Chicana.

*

The night before Día de Muertos, my sisters come home from trick-or-treating. Their faces sticky with skeleton face paint, their loot bags swollen with candy.

“Don’t you want to go trick-or-treating?” Mama asks me.

But I shake my head, because I’m too old for Halloween. Besides, Halloween is an American holiday and Día de Muertos is Mexican. I’m still not sure how to celebrate them.

Día de Muertos is a holiday that was harvested in Mexico. It was canned and shipped over, by Mexican hands, but when I crack open the salsa jar, it always tastes wrong. Like maybe it went bad, a generation ago.

“No importa,” Mama tells me, as she tucks Luz into bed. “So what if you’ve never visited Mexico? You are still Mexican. This holiday, it’s in your blood.”

But what if it’s not? Maybe it came out when I scraped my knee. Or when I got that bloody nose on the playground. Because I’m pretty sure I would feel it, if it was still inside me.

But Mama just shakes her head.

“Tell you what,” she says. “I’ve got a special job for you, mija. All it takes is a little flour and water, some orange zest and aniseed...”

“You want me to bake the pan de muerto?”

“Why not?” Mama says. “You helped me bake last year. What do you say?”

“Yes, Mama. Of course, Mama.”

But when I start rolling dough the next morning, I feel hollow inside. Because I remember baking pan de muerto with Mama. Our fingers caked with flour.

It was just me and her, and the trains could wait.

And after the sweetbread, we would make tamales. The corn husk laughing beneath our fingers. “I always make my food with love, mi vida,” Mama whispered. “I tuck it in, between the dough. You might not taste it, but it’s always there.”

El ingrediente secreto.

It’s not easy, baking alone. If I could share the work with Mama, then we could shape our pain into bread. The yeast would rise and our laughter would rise, and together we would be the strongest women in the world.

But here I am, steaming in the heat. Wrapped up in my corn husk thoughts.

It’s not so hard, I tell myself. *Just add a dash of love*. But the doughballs ooze between my fingers, sweating milk and butter. Without Mama’s hands guiding me, they turn out fat and lumpy.

I don’t know el ingrediente secreto.

From the other room, I hear traces of laughter. Mama and my sisters, drowned out by the humming stove. It’s like a family get-together in there, with Abuela and Abuelo smiling down from the ofrenda.

As I watch, Mama’s lips begin to move. The pantomime of a story.

I don’t know the words, but it must be about her childhood in Oaxaca. From be-

fore she met Papa, and before she lost the baby.

There aren't any photos of the baby on our ofrenda. Because in the ultrasound, she was just a blob, and after she left Mama's belly, she was already pale and blue. Instead of a photo, Mama hangs a baby mobile over the ofrenda, a carousel of stars and angels.

The stars dangle, and the angels dance, and Mama follows them with her eyes. Still searching for her stillborn baby, still waiting for her airborne angelita.

The dough is wet and salty beneath my fingers.

I was such a brat. Always begging to sit on Mama's lap, always begging her to jump rope. All that time, the baby was kicking away inside Mama's belly, but I was kicking away at the outside. Mama, over here! Mama, watch me do cartwheels.

Mama. Are you listening?

"¡Ay!" Mama cries, and her voice snaps me back to life. Back to the kitchen, thick with smoke. "Cruz, the bread is burning!"

In she swoops, with her oven mitts. And out come the metal racks, the pan de muerto all crisp and blackened. Like a floury fetus, burned in the womb.

"Lo siento," I whisper. "I'm sorry, Mama."

But the bread crumbles in the pan, and Mama crumbles in her chair. The yeast sinking.

"Está bien," she says finally. "I'll clean up, and start over. Just entertain your sisters, okay?"

So I wash my hands. All my hard work down the drain.

Even after scrubbing, my hands are white with flour. Pale and rigid, like my stillborn hermanita. This is just what she looked like, on the hospital blankets. In the glass oven of the incubator.

I'm sorry, I'd whispered to Mama.

And the same answer, *está bien*.

But it wasn't "*bien*." There was nothing I could say to make it okay.

*

When Mama's bread is finished, it comes out of the oven light and fluffy. There are two batches, twenty-four. So plenty to spare. "Take a basket around to the neighbors," Mama tells me, "and give a little offering to everyone."

With a solemn nod, I accept the basket.

Of course, some of the bread disappears between our front porch and the neighbor's doorstep. But I give a generous helping to Carlos, and another to old Mrs. Martínez. Bread for the whole barrio.

By the time I reach the cemetery, my basket is lighter. But so is my heart.

The whole block is here, among the headstones. The calavera girls spinning cartwheels, and the picnic-basket mamas, and the papas with their brooms, swish-swishing the gravestones. Everyone mingles together, *una mezcla*.

Everyone, except one woman.

I am down to my last piece of sweetbread, when I notice her.

The Train Girl's mother walks alone, at the edge of the tracks. Drifting along, like

a beetle swimming through amber. Another year has passed, but she hasn't aged at all.

Her daughter will never grow a day older, and neither will she.

Down she sinks, in front of the cross. The wreath of marigolds, like a halo in her hair. And suddenly, I remember the emptiness on Mama's lap. The jump rope abandoned on the sidewalk, like a worm after the rain.

Next thing I know, my feet are walking towards her.

I can't let this woman grieve alone.

When I reach the tracks, I kneel down beside her and hold out my bread. "Here," I say.

For a moment, she can only stare at me, as if kindness is a foreign language. But she accepts the bread. Her fingers tremble, and the crust crumbles as she drinks in the warmth. Breathing it in, like incense.

Then she holds out half for me.

"No," I say. "You keep it."

But she presses the bread into my palm.

"By breaking the bread," she tells me, "our joy is doubled. By sharing the grief, our pain is halved." With hungry eyes, she gazes around at the other families in the cemetery. "Compartir es un regalo," she tells me. "Eat, *mija*."

And the last word slams into me like a freight train. *My daughter*.

I've heard the word before, on Mama's lips. But never with such tenderness.

We both dig into the bread, savoring the flavor, and I study the Train Girl's mother. Somehow, she reminds me of the marigolds that grow along the tracks. She is wilted and weak, but still she pushes up through the gravel. Still she turns to face the sun.

"Where's your family?" I ask her. And I think of her husband, with the blinking eyes.

"They're on the other side. Waiting for me."

"What's your name?" I ask.

"Esperanza. It means hope."

After that, we chew our bread in silence. But sitting there on the tracks, I begin to wonder. If I was hit by a train, would Mama visit the tracks every day, to leave flowers for her lost angelita?

Or would she just go back to the kitchen, and roll away her pain?

*

After the miscarriage, Mama did nothing but roll tortillas.

Even when the sweat poured down her face, she kept rolling, refused to rest, because the trains wouldn't wait for anyone. She tried to lose herself in the pounding and kneading. As if her labor in the kitchen would undo her labor in the hospital.

The doctors weren't sure how it happened, but somehow the baby fashioned a noose from the umbilical cord. She tied the knot with tiny fingers, and when the water broke, she dangled.

Strangled, by the cord of life.

"I killed her," Mama sobbed, the water breaking in her eyes now. "It was my fault."

And when I held her hand, all I could think about was Mama jumping, the rope twisting around her, and the cord twisting around and around in her belly. *Come jump with us, Mama*, I'd called, and she'd taken the rope.

It was my fault. Not Mama's.

Now my hands tremble as I prepare tamales. My fingers raw, from folding the corn husk. Outside, the sun is sinking, but I'm determined to finish these tamales, to fold my love into the masa dough.

I used to think that bread was just flour and water. But when Esperanza tasted the sweetbread, I could see the warmth return to her eyes.

This masa dough, it will bring Mama back to life.

When the tamales finish steaming, I place the largest one on Mama's plate. Then I carry it out to her place setting, where the angels dance above her head. "Mama?" I whisper. "I made some tamales."

And Mama blinks, waking from a trance.

But then her eyes drift back to the angels, and she places her hand on her belly, like she can still feel that noose inside her. "Lo siento," she says. "I'm not hungry right now, mija."

She pushes back her plate, and the masa dough sinks into a fetal position.

I leave it lying there.

Back in the kitchen, I stare down at the tray of tamales. The misshapen lumps of meat and cheese. "I hate you," I whisper to them.

Then I snatch up the tray. Slam, out the screen door.

The dumpster waits with an open mouth, and I scrape the tamales down its throat. The corn husk laughing as it flakes away.

Why did I think that some stupid tamales would fix everything? Why did I bother wrapping my heart in masa dough? No matter how I serve my heart to Mama, it will always end up broken.

So I turn my back on the kitchen, and its oven glow. I run away from the tamale on Mama's plate, and the stillborn angels over the ofrenda, and the wilted spinach woman behind the screen door.

The train tracks are waiting for me.

*

There isn't a train in sight when I cross the tracks. Not even a whistle in the distance. The chain link fence towers over me, the metal wire digging into my fingers. But I grit my teeth and I pull myself over.

Now that I've crossed over, I'm not sure where to go. I just wanted to get out of the barrio, out of the salsa jar. Pop the lid and take a breath of fresh air.

So I turn away from the border, and my shadow follows me into town.

All around me, children play along the sidewalk, soaking up the last rays of daylight. And I can see their mothers, too. Shadows behind the screen doors, calling their children's names.

But nobody calls my name. So I keep moving.

Finally, I spot some girls skipping rope on the playground. The rope smacks the

blacktop, and their earrings jingle-jangle. A pair of cross trainers, swinging crossovers. Then the black pumps, with pumping legs. I don't know how she jumps with heels, but the ground shakes like thunder.

"Hey!" I call, and the rope falters. "Hey, can I jump with you?"

And the girls size me up, studying my strong legs, my rope-burned hands. Slowly, the circle opens up. An invitation.

But then Black Pumps blocks my path. "Hold up," she says. "This is *our* spot. You can only join us if you're a good jumper. How fast can you jump, Spanish Girl?"

"Like lightning," I say, with Mama's voice. "Faster than you, I bet."

And I can see something rising in her eyes. The metal twinge of a struck nerve. She takes the jump rope, curling it around her fist like a whip. That's when I know that I've made a mistake.

"Like lightning, huh? Then prove it, Spanish Girl."

It all happens quickly. The ropes start spinning, and I start jumping, and the girls clatter around me like skeletons. "Spanish dancer!" they chant, and they call out to me, one by one. Telling me to do the splits, and give a kick. Then turn around, get out of town.

Spanish girl, get out of town.

The rope twirls faster, and the skeletons laugh themselves to pieces. Double-dutch and triple-dutch and crossovers and crossunders. And then the ropes grab my ankles. The pavement slams into me.

Suddenly, I taste gravel and blood. The laughter rolling over me, like iron wheels. I am choking on my tongue, Spanglish words spilling out on the tracks.

So this is what it's like to die.

Suddenly, I'm a baby, curled up in a fetal ball. When the world opens up beneath me, I reach out with hungry hands. But the jump rope is tangled around me.

Spanish girl, give a kick.

I am stillborn on the blacktop now, my knees tucked into my chest. But still the sneakers crowd around me. "Crybaby!" they say. "Should we call your mama?"

But the black pumps scuff the sidewalk. "What can her mama do? I bet her mama is too busy scrubbing people's floors. Bet she doesn't even speak English."

And something snaps inside me. Yeast rising to the surface.

What does this girl know about my mama?

"No," I say, and I drag myself to my feet. Wipe the blood from my chin. "You're wrong. All of you. Wrong, wrong, wrong. My mama is the best jump-roper en el mundo, and she makes the best tamales, and she can fix diesel engines — pan comido! She's La Mujer Maravilla. The strongest woman I know."

All around me, the ropes loosen, my bonds falling away.

"I wouldn't trade her for any of your mamas. Not in a million years."

With that, I leave them standing on the blacktop.

*

My mouth throbs all the way back to the tracks, and the trail of blood follows me up the fence. The tang of mi sangre, tomatoes with chunks of mango. The salsa, dripping

from my lips.

I've never tasted anything so sweet.

I straddle the wire fence, gaze around at the flickering street lamps, and I laugh. Because this side of the tracks is wrong, wrong, wrong.

Now I feel an ache for the barrio. This place, it's in my blood. And so what if it tastes funny?

"It's mi lengua," I say, my tongue clicking into place. "Mi propia lingo!"

When I jump, the fence falls away beneath me. The chain links trembling as I touch down gently on the tracks. Like a marigold petal, drifting down on the wind.

I've been drifting for so long.

But now the rails extend in both directions. My world is not defined by borders.

All this time, I thought I was switching between the San Diego Line and el tren para Oaxaca. But really, I've been laying down my own set of tracks, driving steel into the earth.

They've never seen a train like me before.

This is what it means to be Chicana. It means eating Halloween candy all night, and then baking pan de muerto in the morning. Twice the reason to celebrate. It means breaking the bread, and sharing the pain.

You see? the Train Girl whispers, and the flowers shiver around her cross. *I never wanted to cross the tracks. I just wanted to stand on them. To see the place where two worlds meet.*

But suddenly, a train wails in the distance. Thunder, shaking the flowers from their wreath. And a spotlight appears on the horizon.

"Mi viiida," the train screams. "Where are you?"

I stagger back, but the gravel shifts beneath me, the crossties clawing at my feet. My shoe is stuck fast, wedged between the wood, and the train is bearing down now. So I wait for the angels to take me.

But then a silhouette blocks the light. A shadow, from behind the screen door.

"Mama!" I cry, but her eyes are locked on the tracks. Her eyes, like steel.

She will not lose her baby, not again!

Here comes the train, tearing hell-for-leather down the tracks. But Mama yanks the laces from my shoe, and pulls with all her might. Hell-for-leather, leather tearing. The brakes coming down, but not fast enough.

So Mama stands, with her feet planted. And she braces herself for the train.

*

There's a legend in the barrio.

A tragic story, but true mostly. And it goes like this: when I was eight, a little girl died up the street. Don't ask me her name, cause I don't remember. They carved her name in stone somewhere, a memorial in the park. But stone wears away over time.

In the barrio, it's the whispers that matter. The back-porch gossip, behind the screen door. The words that slip between the cracks of your fingers.

Immortality, in its rawest form.

But there is also the legend of La Mujer Maravilla, the woman who lost her baby

once, almost twice. The woman who stopped the train.

It's just an urban legend, some people say.

But I know it's true. Every damn bit of it, true.

*

I didn't see the rest of it. Nobody did, really.

Nobody but Mama, and when you ask her, she just smiles slightly. "The train stopped, and that's all."

That's her version of the story.

But it wasn't so simple. I remember Mama rising from the dust. I remember the spray of gravel, and the metal grill, so close I could taste the rust. I remember the moment right before, right after, but everything else was hummingbird wings.

Some people say that she simply held up her hand. Didn't even touch the train, just stopped it from sheer willpower. Some people say the emergency brakes kicked in, just in the nick of time.

But I know how it happened.

In my head, Mama runs to meet the train. She grips the grill and clamps down hard, like a bullfighter grabbing the toro by the horns. She grits her teeth. Feet dragging, sparks flying. And the train screams to a stop.

Maybe it's stupid. No way that could happen.

But that's how I remember it. And Mama still has the bruises to prove it.

*

After the train, Mama and I break the bread. The masa dough crumbling between our fingers. Somehow, el ingrediente secreto found its way into my tamales. The leftover lump on Mama's plate.

Mama and I, we are hungry. Still shaken from the train, so we don't even bother with forks. We just sit together on the front step and dig in with our fingers. We savor the flavor, and the bulge of our bellies.

There are no words for what we are feeling right now. No hay español o inglés. So we simply chew together, and digest together, and, in this way, we make our own language.

Together, we stare down Columbia Street, and there in the night is a little girl and a woman, skipping rope. Off they go, down the sidewalk, until the click-clack of rope on pavement fades into the click of wheels on track.

We watch them cross the tracks, and the freight cars blur between us, and we know deep down that we'll never see them again. Mama is too old for jumping rope, and I'm too old for sitting on her lap.

All that's left now is the track ahead.

And there on the cracked sidewalk, lies the jump rope. Abandoned, like a worm after the rain. The ground is still damp, and the worms push up through the soil, eager for a taste of air.

When the rain slows to a drizzle, Mama steps outside to collect the rope. She

stands poised on the sidewalk, like the curb is a cliff and she just can't jump.

She stands poised. Like a little girl lost in muscle memory.

Now she is both girl and woman. With her schoolgirl-chest, her pumpkin-belly, her eyes lined with age. But her hands are the same, weathered from work, leather from the rope.

All night, it seems, Mama stands like that, floating in a bead of amber. Jumping rope in her head. Still doing side-swings and double-unders in the streets of Oaxaca, while back here in San Diego, the steel thunder starts up, yet again.

The trains, always trying to drown us out.

But still the marigolds push their heads up through the gravel, and still Mama stands on the curb, waiting for the train to pass, and still her chest rises and falls, like bread in the oven.

Still she rises.



From the author: "This piece is for my mom, La Mujer Maravilla. And I would like to give special thanks to Nelson and Cece Caro for helping with translations."

There Will Be Scarring

Kate Wright

The internet says
I was probably born like this—
with a weak stomach,
a small hole
my guts poke through
to escape.

The internet observes
that because I was never pregnant
or obese, and because my father also suffered
an abdominal hernia
my condition is genetic—
my offspring may also suffer.

With the guidance of the internet
and the help of a ruler
I determine
that the small lump of fatty tissue
outside my body sits
within three centimeters
of the umbilicus:
which the internet advises me
means there's a risk
too much gut will push out
the too-small hole
and get twisted around itself—
that I might die from this
exposure of innards.

But, the internet reassures me,
death is preventable
with elective surgery
and by staying alert
to new colors and pains.

After surgery,

the internet warns, my risk
for a surgical hernia increases tenfold,
and because even the most stringent
of disinfectants cannot sterilize
the mysterious microbes of the human belly button,
my chances of incision infection
are through the roof.

There will be scarring. I may lose
my bellybutton—which the internet regrets
to inform me, is one of the hardest things
for doctors to recreate. The internet notes
that I've been on this page too long
queries—*are you still there?*



After Birth

Tiffany Washington

Maybe if I made you,
grew you inside me –
I could love you better.

Maybe if I'd eaten for
two – I wouldn't be
so stingy when you want
the last bite of my
birthday dessert –
or really any bite,
of any meal,
because you think
my food looks delicious
and yours looks weird.

Maybe if I had stretchmarks
or swollen ankles
or if I had any corporal
connection to your creation.

But I didn't.
I simply said yes,
over the phone,
on a Friday afternoon,
before 4pm.

Maybe if I'd had to
sacrifice my body from
the start it would be
easier to make so
many sacrifices now.

I wonder if I'd lost sleep
to back pain or Braxton Hicks –
If I wouldn't be so resentful
when you wake at 3am just to play.

Or if it were your
umbilical cord that
was severed from me
that it would make me
worry less whenever
you left – knowing
that invisible rope would
always bring you back.

Or maybe if it were
my sore nipples or
lost chunks of hair – I
wouldn't carry so many worry lines
on my face – because my body
would have already paid the price
of loving you.

I cannot love you better
than I know how.
And maybe there is
limitation in a bond not
formed in blood.
For you, I am a second mother –
adoptive.
But for me – you
are the child I
have loved the only
way I've been given –
not with body,
but everything else.

Yes to that first day
Yes to the days before car seats and cribs
Yes to the school concerts and conferences
Yes to the vegetables hidden during dinner

Yes to the broken dishes and spilled dogfood
Yes to the tantrums and nightmares and carsickness
Yes to the flu and the stitches and appointment
after appointment after appointment
Yes to the baseball practices and Girl Scouts
Yes to the worry and fear and division
Yes to the “You’ll never be my real mother,” the “I hate you”
and, the “I can’t wait until 18”
Yes to loving you the best way I know how-
which maybe isn’t enough,
could never have been enough-
but it’s all I have.

Contributors

Carolyn Asnien is a psychotherapist/hypnotherapist/poet and a patron of beauty.

Megan Eleanor Evans is a student of English Literature at Exeter University in the United Kingdom. She enjoys writing about things which exist at the edge of human experience - especially those moments, coincidences or dreams which might otherwise be lost and unacknowledged forever.

Raymond P. Hammond is the editor-in-chief of both The New York Quarterly and NYQ Books. He holds an MA in American Poetry from NYU's Gallatin School and is the author of Poetic Amusement, a book of literary criticism. He lives in Beacon, NY with his wife, the poet Amanda J. Bradley, and their dog Hank.

Paul Ilechko is the author of the chapbooks "Bartok in Winter" (Flutter Press) and "Graph of Life" (Finishing Line Press). His work has appeared in a variety of journals, including Juxtapose, As It Ought To Be, Cathexis Northwest Press, Inklette and Pithead Chapel. He lives with his partner in Lambertville, NJ.

An original native of Vermont, **Hannah Kinsey** served in the Peace Corps from 2015-2017. After service completion, she

attended Chatham University for her Masters. Currently, Kinsey resides in Maine. She has work published in the Mojave River Review, Sons and Daughters Literary Journal, and Stone Canoe.

Julian E. Riccobon is an Executive Editor and Teaching Assistant for Polyphony Lit. His work has won first place for Short Prose in the Ralph Munn Creative Writing Contest, and he was a finalist for the Claudia Ann Seaman Awards. His work is also forthcoming from Alternating Current Press.

Bill Schillaci was born in New York City and attended New York University. He worked for many years as an engineering writer and freelance environmental journalist. His short stories have appeared in print and online journals. He lives in Ridgewood NJ with his wife.

Tiffany Washington is an 8th grade English teacher, mother of four, and sometimes poet. Her works have appeared in a number of print and on-line publications including Chantarelle's Notebook, Artis magazine, Long River Run and most recently Thimble Magazine.

Jennifer Weigel is a multi-disciplinary mixed media conceptual artist. Weigel utilizes a wide range of media to convey

her ideas, including assemblage, drawing, fibers, installation, jewelry, painting, performance, photography and video. Much of her work touches on themes of beauty, identity (especially gender identity), memory & forgetting, and institutional critique. Weigel's art has been exhibited nationally in all 50 states and has won numerous awards.

Kate Wright received her BA and MA in English from Penn State and her MFA in Creative Writing and Environment from Iowa State. She is currently a PhD student at the University of Tennessee. Her work has appeared in or is forthcoming from Okay Donkey, Up the Staircase Quarterly, Digging Through the Fat, Rogue Agent, Rust + Moth, and elsewhere. You can find her on Twitter @KateWrightPoet