

Dogwood  
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“Indigo Insomnia.” Collage with archival image of artist’s father among  
Chinese-Filipino youth and a diagram (Figure 17) from *Geometrical  
Psychology or the Science of Representation, An Abstract of the Theories and  
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## Editor's Note

THIS HAS BEEN AN EXTRAORDINARY YEAR, one in which writers and artists have confronted personal and community trauma. During these long months of quarantine and illness, of social unrest and demands for long-needed change, many creatives have wondered what their personal work--crafted syllables, lines on paper, carefully-wrought images--might have to add to the world's upheavals. For that reason alone, we're inspired to introduce these pages, which offer testament to our writers' abilities to keep seeing the world anew.

Each of these pieces offers, in some small or large way, commentary on how we might live in the world together. Whether it's the weaving of heartbreak and violation with the larger narrative of war and international conflict in Roberta Gates's story "Little Black Dress" or the contemplation of miracles and faith in Maria Zoccola's poem "ten-foot drop," the writers in this issue of *Dogwood* have worked to process, to imagine, and to move forward. Marcos Villatoro's "My Hundred Years of Solitude," the prize-winning entry in our nonfiction category, speaks directly to the way in which literature can help the individual find or re-map their place in the world's narrative.

I and the student editors at Fairfield University who worked on this issue have been sustained by these images and words throughout this difficult year. Unlike most years in which we gathered in a publication lab to proofread over shared tables, we connected solely online, stitching together both this journal and the bonds that created it. Looking back through the Zoom log-ins and the e-mails notifying us of quarantines and safety precautions, and of all the unfamiliar that became strangely everyday, I am amazed that we managed to nonetheless make another issue of *Dogwood*. We lowered the entry fee and therefore had to lower the prize money, understanding that in a time of widespread economic difficulty, the last thing we

wanted to do was to present an additional barrier. Planning the issue in Summer 2020, I didn't think that we'd be able to put together a print edition. We had no idea, at that time, that vaccines would begin to release us from the safety precautions that had kept us so distant from one another for a year. But as the months wore on, we found reasons to hope, and reasons to celebrate the hard work of first responders and healthcare workers, scientists and activists, as #BlackLivesMatter rallies and other movements called our attention to the ways we need to work together to make a safer and more equitable future for all. It's been a deeply frightening year, and we hope that you've come through it, dear reader, without too many losses. We mourn along with you those who did not make it, and we celebrate the memory of everyone gone too soon. We're so pleased to present the treasures in these pages, the work of writers who used their imaginations to sustain them. May their words inspire us all.

Sonya Huber, Editor

## 2021 *Dogwood* Award Winners

OUR JUDGES' ROSTER INCLUDES three gifted and experienced writers who we were grateful to have on our team this year.

Fiction judge James Tate Hill is the author of a memoir, *Blind Man's Bluff*, coming July 2021 from W. W. Norton, and a novel, *Academy Gothic*, winner of the Nilsen Prize for a First Novel. His essays have been listed as Notable in the 2019 and 2020 editions of *Best American Essays*, and his fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Story Quarterly*, *Hobart*, and *Waxwing*, among others. He serves as fiction editor for the literary journal *Monkeybicycle* and contributing editor for *Literary Hub*, where he writes a monthly audiobooks column.

Nonfiction judge Sejal Shah is the author of the debut essay collection, *This Is One Way to Dance* (University of Georgia Press, 2020). Her stories and essays have appeared in *The Guardian*, *Brevity*, *Conjunctions*, *Guernica*, *the Kenyon Review Online*, *Literary Hub*, *Longreads*, and *The Rumpus*. The recipient of a 2018 NYFA fellowship in fiction, Sejal recently completed a story collection and is at work on a memoir about mental health. She teaches in the Rainier Writing Workshop low-residency MFA program at Pacific Lutheran University and lives in Rochester, New York.

Judge Lauren K. Alleyne hails from the twin island nation of Trinidad and Tobago. Her fiction, poetry and non-fiction have been widely published in journals and anthologies, including *The Atlantic*, *Ms. Muse*, *Women's Studies Quarterly*, *Interviewing the Caribbean*, *Crab Orchard Review*, among many others. She is author of *Difficult Fruit* (Peepal Tree Press, 2014) and *Honeyfish* (New Issues (US) & Peepal Tree (UK), 2019). Her work has been awarded many honors, most recently, the Phillip Freund Alumni Prize for Excellence in Publishing from

Cornell University (2017), the Green Rose Prize from New Issues Press (2017), the Split This Rock Poetry Prize (2016), the Picador Guest Professorship in Literature at the University of Leipzig, Germany (2015), and an Iowa Arts Council Fellowship (2014). In 2015, the journal *IthacaLit* named its annual prize the Lauren K. Alleyne/Difficult Fruit Poetry Prize. Alleyne currently resides in Virginia, USA, where she is an Associate Professor of English at James Madison University, Assistant Director of the Furious Flower Poetry Center and Editor-in-Chief of *The Fight & The Fiddle*.

FIRST PRIZE, FICTION: "LITTLE BLACK DRESS" BY ROBERTA GATES

In his citation selecting Gates' story, Judge James Tate Hill wrote, "Selecting this year's winning story for the Dogwood Prize was not easy. 'Streetlight People' engaged me throughout with its wit and sense of surprise. 'Small Destinies' seduced me with its lush prose and deep wisdom. 'Little Black Dress' weaves a layered tale of disappointment and acceptance, but after reading these entries multiple times, it's Donna with her little black dress, torn and triumphantly abandoned, that lingers with me most vividly. I look forward to reading more work by this writer—by all three of these writers—out in the world."

FIRST PRIZE, NONFICTION: "MY ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SOLITUDE"  
BY MARCOS VILLATORO

In her citation selecting Villatoro's essay, Judge Sejal Shah wrote, "This essay, a beautiful example of the subgenre of bibliomemoir, describes the narrator's relationship with the book *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a text the writer reread frequently, experiencing it anew each time. The essay is also a meditation on being mixed: half Salvadoran, half white in San Francisco, in a small town in Tennessee, and in Los Angeles. I

loved the manner in which this essayist's personal mythology unfolds organically through the narrative, and the reflections on home and heritage as they relate to self-definition. The writing has a momentum and energy that drives the essay forward as well as a strong, lyrical voice."

FIRST PRIZE, POETRY: "TEN-FOOT DROP" BY MARIA ZOCCOLA

The editors are pleased to announce that judge Lauren K. Alleyne has named Maria Zoccola's poem "ten foot drop" as the winner of the 2021 Dogwood Literary Award in Poetry. Our finalist for the award was Sheree La Puma.

In her citation selecting Zoccola's poem, Judge Lauren K. Alleyne wrote:

The pandemic moment is an interesting one in which to be the judge of a poetry contest. The complexities, ambiguities and frailties we've all inhabited with varying degrees of awareness and impact have been made all the more visible. At the moment I am writing this, over five hundred and thirty-four thousand people have died from coronavirus, and millions more are living in the aftermath of infection. I despair that I may not see my niece in Trinidad before she's lost her baby fat and worry about my mother whose vitality over Zoom does not convince me of her immortality. I worry that we've become such slaves to capital we've lost sight of the fact that caring for each other through simple acts is priceless in the economy of love. I don't know about you, reader, but faith in this moment is such a vexed thing.

And yet.

I hope this note finds you and yours well and safe. I hope that by the time you read it, we are on the other side of this global horror—that we are seeing the long-covered faces of

strangers and embracing our beloveds. I believe that our planet is sighing with relief as we've stilled the congestive bustle of our everyday, allowing imperiled ecosystems to thrive. I believe something good—no, better—can come from all of this. And it is this constant negotiation of faith and fear that makes a supplicant of me over and over again, that makes me greedy for more and more grace even as I count my blessings.

It is perhaps why the poem I've selected as this year's Dogwood Prize winner speaks so deeply to me. ten-foot drop is a poem that brings into a fantastic collision the "i" that is clear in its own fullness and power and the "i" that knows that so much lies beyond its reach or control. With admirable technical dexterity, the poet uses line breaks, images and formal play—a veritable toolkit of poetic devices, really—to successfully evoke this negotiation. The poem opens thus:

i was raised within a kettle already shrieking  
with love, so i've never been sure how to pray.

The initial line brings us immediately to urgency, the "already shrieking" kettle conjuring heat, smoke and cry, the i "raised within" it boiled/scalded/steeped into lower case. When the sentence continues, "with love," what was urgent is immediately calmed, the temperature dropping significantly, the relief palpable, so that we, too, are not sure what to pray for or how. This ambivalence is wonderfully captured in the image of the creek behind the church and the "leaves swept away into what could be infinity but is really a rusting brown drain." There's something delightful in the irreverent phrasings, "I've chewed up every blessing," and "oh holy turtle in the man-made creek." The speaker's self-assured-ness cools, kettle-like, into a confession of intractable inadequacy:

i'm teaching my neck how to bend.  
i'm preaching mercy to my own proud knees.

The poignant lyric question with which the poem wrestles— “how do you come to the divine?”—is answerable thus: as you are, “hands...always outstretched,” “yes. yes. yes.” on our imperfect tongues.



## NONFICTION



DOGWOOD LITERARY AWARD IN NONFICTION

My Hundred Years of Solitude: An Essay

*Marcos Villatoro*

THE PAGES ARE YELLOWED. The spine is broken at least a dozen times. Decades-old, crisscrossed rubber bands hold the book together. They've stayed stretched for too long and have dried brittle. I should change them out. But they've become part of my art piece, this disintegrating copy of *Cien años de soledad*. In English, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

It's a paperback copy, the eleventh edition. I keep it in a zip-lock plastic bag and pull it out only after washing my hands. It's a pitiful thing and the most important book in my library. I've never shelved it. It's on a countertop in my office, always in sight. My talisman. Not that it brings me good fortune; it simply helps me settle into one of my two bloods, the once-hidden one, undiscovered until this book came along.

I can't read this copy anymore. It would crumble into dust. There are at least five other editions spread throughout the house, each in its own gradation of decay. Their spines are more or less intact. Each one taken in succession has fewer notes, fewer needs to write vocabulary in the margins, unlike this first copy, which I ravaged with two ball point pens, red and black. The last copy I recently bought in Colombia, a fiftieth-anniversary hardbound edition with artwork. I've yet to read it. I want to read it without a pen, without underlining lines of poignant moments in the story. I'd practically underlined every sentence in an earlier edition, during a time when I had to rely less on a dictionary and was more freed-up to read it through without so many vocabulary-seeking interruptions. With the special edition, I plan to keep all writing instruments out of arm's reach. It's too beautiful to be marked up.

But it's not as beautiful as this first copy, this decrepit thing, this old man of a book that still whispers into my ear, in Spanish. It's not a book, but a parchment, an aged document that since December of 1982 has unfolded before me. I have read it every three years for over three decades. And it continues to unfold.

I have two bloods, white and brown. It's a silly image, as though a chocolate-vanilla ice cream swirl pumps through my arteries. Blood is a go-to metaphor to describe those of us who are mixed. I don't hear it much these days, not here in Los Angeles, where most of us are "impure". But the teaching is still ingrained in me, from a childhood spent in a territory where bloodlines define how human you are.

I've been away from the Appalachian Mountains for a long time, but my father's world still pricks at me every so often. Perhaps that's why I read *Cien años de soledad* every few years—so my mother's El Salvadoran world can continue to unfold. There's blood in that parchment. My blood.

MY GRANDMOTHER INTRODUCED me to the prostitutes. I was four years old. I remember my hand stretched upwards, clasped in hers. We were walking down Capp Street in the Mission District of San Francisco. Two women were standing at the corner, talking and looking up and down the street. My abuelita—grandmamá—called out to them, and we stopped to have a chat. The two rented a room in Abuelita's house and always paid on time. They fussed over me, called me all the things a Salvadoran woman calls a little boy, *¡Ay mi corazón, rey de mi vida!* They bent down and kissed me on the cheeks, leaving lipstick on both sides of my face.

I was born in San Francisco, California, and lived my first childhood years in the Mission District. I have memories from there, though they are scant, but they're enough

to keep my love for the barrio alive. It was a Latinx world: Mexicans, Guatemalans, Nicaraguans, Hondurans, and in my grandmother's three-story Victorian house on Capp Street, *guanacos*, or Salvadorans. She had bought the home three years after leaving El Salvador and had paid it off by renting all the rooms. There was a constant hustle and bustle of tenants, mostly Central Americans who had immigrated to the United States, living under the same roof. And how the women loved me! I was the gringo-guanaco child, a special mix of Salvadoran and white blood—as though I had the best of both worlds.

Suddenly—that's how I still feel it—we left the Mission and moved to my father's home state of Tennessee, to Rogersville, a small Appalachian town of four thousand souls. We were three thousand miles away from the Salvadoran diaspora in California. Tennessee is where my second childhood began and tried to kill the first one.

Dad said to Mamá, as if he had spoken for the first time after the San Francisco years, “Never talk to this boy except in English. No more goddamn Spanish, not in *this* house.”

This hurt Mamá but didn't surprise her. He was an Appalachian white man to the bone, and knew by instinct to follow Southern rules. He had already broken a big one by marrying a brown woman whom he had met in a coffee shop in San Francisco after World War II. That was tolerated on the West Coast, but in Tennessee, to marry outside of his race was a form of white apostasy. He set out to cut the Salvadoran umbilical cord in two. But my mother, being a *guanaco*, was a natural subversive. Dad had tried to slam the door on San Francisco, but he couldn't strip his wife of her culture. She couldn't talk to her son in her native language. But she had other strategies.

The stubbornness of a Salvadoran woman is something to behold. Although we lived in a deep corner of a monolingual

region, in the hermetically sealed Appalachian Mountains, where whites lived out the racist laws of the American South against African Americans, Mamá, as much as she could, sowed her El Salvadoran customs in the parched land of Tennessee. The pulse of her small country ran surreptitiously through the house, a house that they themselves built, Dad with his hammer, nails, and saw, Mamá with a brush and paint. She planned the inside. She drew the blueprints herself. It didn't have as many interior walls as our neighbors' homes. There were large spaces between the rooms and a plaster arch between the kitchen and parlor. It was a strange house with the architecture of two cultures coming together in an uneven structure. Dad was a mechanic, not a carpenter. It tilted a few inches to the east. The circuit box exploded from time to time. The cheap linoleum cracked. But the house had character, with its Latino interior decorating the Appalachian shell.

We ate rice, black beans, tortillas, tamales, and pupusas; my grandmother mailed sacks of cornmeal flour to her daughter every month, something you couldn't find in the local Piggly Wiggly Grocers. Mamá decorated the entire house with artifacts from the Central American countries: gourds, maracas, a bucolic painting of a Salvadoran countryside with a volcano in the background, a fishing net that covered an entire wall like a gigantic blue and white web. And we danced, she and I, an act that, in an evangelical world, made us minions of Satan. Mamá had records of Carlos Gardel's tangos and the more-or-less Mexican music of Herb Alpert. She sang in Spanish. She cooed at me with the old phrases, "Vení mi corazón," as she had me climb her lap for a sudden hug. She talked with my grandmother on the phone every Saturday. Through these acts of trickery, I heard, from time to time, the forbidden language.

As the years passed, I lost the meaning of the words. But the sound of the language, its rhythm, didn't escape me. Still,

the separation was happening. Something was being lost, no matter how much Mamá threw hooks of memory between the El Salvador of San Francisco and the Appalachian Mountains.

Then in my seventh year they made a decision that, given my father's moratorium on Spanish, made no sense at all: to move to El Salvador. It was a spontaneous and desperate idea. My parents had suffered months of unemployment in Tennessee. Mamá sold him the idea with job opportunities. In El Salvador, she could be a translator—for whom she didn't say—and Dad a mechanic or manager of a small farm. We spent the summer in El Salvador to check out the possibilities of living there as well as visit family in her hometown of Usulután.

I was afraid, of course. Three years had passed since we'd left California, and for a child, three years might as well be three decades. But I started to like it. El Salvador didn't look like the Mission District, but it had what I needed: the women. They were a little quieter than those in my grandmother's house, but they still spoiled me with their coos and sudden embraces.

San Francisco had been my garden of Latino delights. El Salvador was the root. The smells of roasted meats, tamales, and refried black beans soaked the air inside my great-grandmother's adobe house. The images, sounds, and odors flood me now: The emaciated cows, the hourly ringing of an old tin bell in the church tower, the men who left their houses at dawn to work in the corn fields with their machetes that hung from ropes that were their belts. The bleating goats, the scampering chickens, the roosters that made their *¡Ki-kiri-kiris!* (Spanish for *cock-a-doodle-doo!*) whenever they wanted, even at noon,, the women who filled baskets full of fresh cheese, tamalitos, pupusas, and cigarettes, who balanced the baskets on their heads and walked the streets selling their wares. The ruthless heat. The sudden rains that thickened the humidity. The Spanish that sounded strange and recognizable at the same time, a mirror of sound

that reflected the cooing and laughter of the women in San Francisco.

I remember the black and red train that took us from the capital of San Salvador to Mamá's hometown. It looked like a locomotive from the nineteenth century and hauled us through the mountains and valleys with its *CLACK CLACK CLACK* and the acrid, black smoke that billowed from the stack. A goat sat next to me. Poor farmers carried their animals on the train: chickens, a pig, and that goat. I drank a thick red soda that was more sugar than liquid. It didn't go down well. I vomited the soda onto the goat's head. It looked at me with glassy eyes while licking the sugar-thick beverage from its chops.

Everyone was dark like Mamá. A whole country of brown people. We were so far from my father's world. After having lived in a white monolingual world for three years, I was timid. But the maternal love of the country calmed me. Women loved me without knowing me, except through the pictures my grandmother had shown them.

I know I see that trip with a deep romanticism and don't apologize for it. If there were bad moments during our stay there, the memory of my heart has undone them. Even the goat licking the vomit-soda is a treasured image.

Unfortunately, a war broke out while we were there, "The Soccer War" between El Salvador and Honduras over land issues at the border.

"I'll burn in hell before I live in this fucking country," Dad said, or something to that effect. We returned to Tennessee.

Mamá continued to feed me as much of our culture as she could, but the Appalachian world worked against her. In my teen years, the need to blend in with my classmates became an obsession. But there was no blending. Our family was too strange for the locals. The culture I had so loved in childhood became something to avoid. I left everything Salvadoran behind

until I turned nineteen, and we traveled to Mexico. An uncle in Mexico City had invited us to spend Christmas with his family. He even sent us money to cover the tickets.

We arrived on December tenth. On the twelfth, we along with half of Mexico visited the Catholic church in Tepeyac. Thousands of people—mostly indigenous—walked on their knees to the church, where Juan Diego’s four-hundred-year-old serape hung inside a glass cube. The image of a pregnant Mary had, according to legend, penetrated the garment. She was indigenous, or perhaps mestizo, a mix of Spain and Mexico. I didn’t understand. But I was moved to see thousands of people on their bloody knees, singing and praying rosaries. I didn’t know what to think, but I was thinking. There, in the church of Tepeyac that was flooded with pilgrims from all over the nation, I felt a strange and overwhelming shame.

And that uncle of mine didn’t help. Tío Paco was a *pendejo*. At the time I didn’t know that term. I had to murmur *asshole*, which doesn’t even begin to grasp the power of *pendejo*. According to my mother, a *pendejo* is a singular hair of the scrotum. Quite the insult. Everyone saw Tío Paco as a charismatic man, full of life, a gentleman who liked his wine and danced with every woman in the room. But for me, Tío Paco was a *pendejo*.

In El Salvador, he had been a teenage guerrilla during a failed insurrection in 1932. The dictator, known as “El Brujo” (The Warlock) had ordered the massacre of more than twenty-thousand indigenous men and women, all who were killed within two months. Like many, Tío Paco had been exiled from the country. He fled to Mexico, where he established a small bookstore. But his love for the Old Country never waned. Every year he made clandestine trips back to see family and old surviving revolutionary friends. Now, during the Christmas

vacation, he told us the histories of El Salvador, Mexico, Cuba, and the United States, like an enthusiastic professor—no, *ecstatic*—something that appealed to me, although I didn't understand his lightning Spanish.

Suddenly he turned to me and said, “Y ¿qué, vos sos guanaco pero no te conocés?”

Mamá translated for me. Her interpretation was, *You're Salvadoran, and you don't even know it?* though an exact translation would be more *You're Salvadoran, but you don't even know who you are?* I turned mute. Shame and anger rose in me like bile.

I walked to the other side of the bookstore, trying to escape into the shelves. I was surrounded by books, all in Spanish, and I didn't recognize any titles or the authors, except one. Not his name, but the prize, *Nobel*. Gabriel García Márquez had won it that year. I pulled the book off the shelf and studied the cover. It was a surreal portrait, with at least fifteen characters cluttered together. One man was reading a large parchment, another sat at a table and fiddled with little fish made out of gold. An old, short, strong-backed woman scolded a giant man, and another young man was holding a baby that had a coiled pig's tail. I read the title aloud, with my mother's accent mottled by a monolingual gringo world.

Tío Paco heard me. He looked at me, glanced at the copy of *Cien años de soledad* in my hand and laughed. He said something between guffaws. It bothered my mother. I could see it in her eyes, but she didn't say anything.

I ran to her side and asked, “What did he say?” She didn't want to translate it. Uncle Paco was still laughing. “What did he *say?*”

She hesitated but finally answered, “Your uncle says you don't speak one word of Spanish and you're going to read *that* book?”

*That book*, the one that I was about to reshelve. Now I clutched it like a grenade, shook it at my uncle's face and said to Mamá, "You tell *him* I'm going to *read* this book, and someday I'll *understand* it!"

Mamá translated. Tío Paco quit laughing. He raised his eyebrows. His mouth formed an *O*, as though he recognized something in me, in my anger. Then he smiled. In that moment I saw something in his eyes. Hope? Pride? He turned to his cash register, took the book from me and read the price.

Mamá translated, "He says you owe him fifteen pesos."

I think Tío Paco saw a few drops of Salvadoran-ness in my tantrum. He quit harassing me. Now, he hauled me from one corner of Mexico to another. The Templo Mayor, Teotihuacán, The Museum of Anthropology. He talked to me through my mother's translations. He spoke of the Aztecs, the Mayas, the Pipiles, and Nahuatlés with authority and veneration. He said "your people" while we stood before a Central American exhibit. *Your people. Your ancestry.* Mamá was exhausted, but she kept translating, as though recognizing the importance of the moment. I was worn out as well. So much Spanish. So many magnificent places, so much driving on dusty roads outside the city. Within the weariness, the root that Dad had tried to rip out of my ground, sprouted. A thin stem was breaking through.

One night, at Tío Paco's house, I went to bed and took a look at the novel. I translated the title in a whisper, "One Hundred Years of. . . *soledad.*" I didn't recognize that last word. One hundred years of something. I opened the book and read aloud one of the most famous first lines in the history of global literature:

Muchos años después, frente al pelotón de fusilamiento, el coronel Aureliano Buendía había de recordar aquella tarde remota en que su padre lo llevó a conocer el hielo.

Which is in English,  
*Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Coronel Aureliano Buendía remembered back to that long-ago afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.*

I recognized *muchos, años, and frente*. “Pelotón” sounded familiar. . . *pelo?* Ah, yes, *hair*. And “fusilamiento. . .” fuselage? Airplane, yes, of course. I wrote:

*Many years, in front of the airplane hair, Coronel Aureliano Buendía recorded a far-away tart inside his dad and they had some ice.*

I was on a roll and kept going, guessing the words of the first ten lines, and wrote the translation in my journal. The next morning, I showed it to Tío Paco. He could read English. He read my translation, pressed his eyelids closed and handed the journal back.

He said, “Ay, púchica.” (A Central American word, which can mean “Wow,” “Oh man,” “Jeez,” or in this case, something akin to “What a mess”). He walked to a bookshelf, took out a Spanish-English dictionary, said, “Tómalo,” handed it over and didn’t charge me.

Mexico and Tío Paco had given me a focus. I longed to know my Salvadoran culture. But we returned to the U.S., back into a one-language world. There was no one to practice Spanish with.

But I had that book.

In Mexico, with the dictionary, I had translated the first three pages. Now in college I pushed my homework to one side, placed the novel on the desk, the dictionary beside it, and my journal at arm’s reach. I recorded each word and its translation in columns of vocabulary. I memorized, ten, twenty, then thirty words a day. I read the pages of the novel aloud, imitating my

mother's accent, and understood some of it, but not exactly. How strange the scenes were. The book began with a new world where things had no name. It was like Genesis, but not really, as there was no god. I kept translating, memorizing, reading out loud until the words sank into my brain and made their way into my heart. So many strange characters, such as Melquiades, a fat gypsy who sells strange artifacts to José Arcadio Buendía: two magnets, a telescope, and other everyday products of our world. In the world of the book, they were magical objects. Even a block of ice causes the characters to marvel. Yet other incidents, such as Remedios the Beauty, who is too beautiful for this world, and who rises to the heavens with bed sheets as sails, were for the characters, nothing to be amazed about.

I knew nothing of its history, how, the moment it was published, it spread across the Latin Americas like a California wildfire. I didn't know that Gabo, as he is affectionately called, was Colombian. As I kept reading it became apparent that this novel didn't follow many of the rules of fiction. The naming of characters, for instance: a novelist should be careful to give each of them distinct names so as not to confuse the reader. But in *Cien años*, names keep repeating themselves. There are no less than eighteen characters all named Aureliano Buendía. You have to stay on top of your game when reading, especially when the narrative leaps from one major event to another in the same sentence. Main characters die halfway through. Incest is a real worry throughout the book. The dead come alive. An insomnia epidemic wipes out everyone's memory.

It was like no other book I had ever read. "Magic realism," they call it, a mix of the real with the other-worldly. I didn't understand, but I craved to. It wasn't just the story. As I relearned my Spanish, I came to recognize the poetry of the book. Each line was carefully wrought to be pleasing to the ear, even during a scene of a massacre. It's a book that demonstrates how human suffering can, in the right hands, be turned into art. The story

fascinated me, but something was missing: the community in which the novel was born. I was in the U.S., living in a gringo, monolingual, magic-less world. The book couldn't become fully alive here, not for me, a young man whose need to return to his Latinx roots ached to the bone. Three years after the trip to Mexico, I moved to Central America.

I lived there about four years and worked in grassroots communities of poor people in rural areas. The work was all about justice, land reform, human rights, and the fight to end poverty. It was a passionate time, though the reality of infant mortality rates, corrupt government officials, soldiers walking the streets, and eyeing locals with suspicion, tempered my idealism. Central America was no longer a romantic notion. It was a time of war. Life was as real as birth and murder and love. All the people of my San Franciscan childhood, and those I had met during the summer when I was seven, and that enervating voice of Tío Paco, rose in the eyes and voices of my Central American colleagues. Wherever I traveled, I carried the book in my backpack. Those years not only educated my reading of *Cien años de soledad*; that book fell open and its parchments spread over the ground of my mother's earth. I can't fully express how the book reflected the Latin American world I was living in—I witnessed no women flying off into the sky with bed sheets—because *Cien años* is beyond explanation. It has eluded interpretation ever since it hit the market. Just check the internet to see the infinite studies of its characters, plot, history, politics, Latin American cultures, mythology, superstition, U.S. intervention, and feminism. No analysis will ever exhaust the book of its magic. It's not meant to be interpreted, but lived. Another romantic notion, I know. Just like this one: Gabo wrote the book for me.

I LIVE IN LOS ANGELES NOW and teach literature at a

small university here. I'm in the English Department, but one semester they loaned me to the Spanish Department to teach a Latin American literature class. I chose *Cien años de soledad* as my text. The student body is eighty percent Latinx. Everyone in the class spoke Spanish. Still, the book challenged them. They needed their dictionaries, for Gabo's vocabulary is wide and deep. We took the entire semester to read it. I told them that to truly sink into the experience of the book, you've got to read it more than once. It also helps to move to the Old Countries for a while.

It was fun to teach. But it was the only time in twenty-two years as a professor that I decided to use it in the curriculum. It's a book that I love so much, I don't want to share the experience with anyone. In the class we inevitably ended up in analysis and the grand-old question: *But, what does it all mean?* It doesn't mean anything. It simply *is*. It's a book that one doesn't simply read, but rereads and rereads to live it all again.

Recently I visited Colombia. My goal was to reach Gabo's hometown of Aracataca, which is the model for his imaginary village of Macondo. Aracataca is way off the beaten path. It took five hours over pock-marked roads to get there. I drove through miles and miles of mangrove swamps. These swamps are in the novel. The patriarch of Macondo, José Arcadio Buendía, travels through the mire to find the sea. The thick marshes go on forever. No wonder he got lost.

Aracataca, which had taken on "Macondo" as a nickname, was similar to the small towns I lived in during my years in Central America: Adobe buildings, cobblestone streets, muddy roads, a few paved ones, roosters, goats, the people who walked slowly and in shade, who stayed in during the afternoon siestas, while I, the only gringo passing through at the time, meandered under a blistering sun. The tropical forests, swamps and banana groves trapped the town in humidity. I sweat without moving. That too was familiar, as were the small markets, the women

selling wares from their head-baskets, music blasting out of a pool hall. It was a bit spiffier than the towns I lived in in Central America, all cleaned up for the trickle of tourists who came through. A statue of Remedios the Beauty stood in the front of a park, her arms raised in the launch of her flight into the heavens. *Cien años de soledad* was everywhere, on murals, with quotes from the novel written in stone in the park, and yellow butterflies painted on walls—all of them references to moments in the book.

I visited the author's home, which had been made into a museum. It was a simple house, well kempt. Images from the book were all over, just enough to give a visitor a taste of Márquez's literary masterpiece. A small table was covered with a school of brass fish that had been painted gold. A fake bunch of bananas hung from a hook with a sign next to it, "These are called bananas. You need to peel them before you eat them" (in the novel, the locals explain this to a gringo who is passing through). Outside was the chestnut tree, huge, with roots that spread like a solid web from the trunk. It was the tree that, in the novel, the Buendía family had tied José Arcadio to when he went mad.

I imagined a little boy running through the house and across the backyard. But that wasn't quite right. Gabo was a shy, bookish child, not one to play much with other kids. He was usually sitting somewhere alone with a book in hand. So I imagined him sitting under the chestnut tree, in his bedroom, in the kitchen, reading.

I wept a little. I was here, where the novel had begun in the mind of a five-year-old. But the tears dried soon enough, for all of this was real, tactile. Even though it was the birthplace of the story and my literary hero, I could touch it with my hands, could feel the gravel under my shoes. And I was a gringo tourist, one of the few in town, so people gave me surreptitious

glances and sold me trinkets that had the name “Macondo” branded into the wooden key rings. I was both an intruder and a source of income. I bought more key rings than I could carry.

I also bought the fiftieth anniversary, illustrated copy of the novel there, the one I brought home to Los Angeles and plan to read soon. I’ll read it out loud, the entire book, for it is music and poetry as much as it is story. I won’t share it with students or friends. *Cien años de soledad* and I will curl up in my reading chair, where the book will come alive once more. We’ll spend several days together. In solitude.

## God Country

*Padya Paramita*

2016: A City in Pieces

IT WAS THE LAST FRIDAY BEFORE Eid, a holiday and holy day for Muslims to celebrate after a month of fasting. My friend Shaafique was hosting a party at his house. After a series of video game matches, it was finally sundown and time to eat in celebration. The food in Dhaka is everything – both restaurants and home-cooked meals. So much of the culture revolves around eating meals together, whether in celebration or mourning. Whether it is the traditional rice, lentils, and curry, or different cuisines influenced by globalization, food is what Bengalis always turn to. That particular Friday, I made sure to be home in time for dinner.

When I returned home, my parents' worried faces were glued to our TV screen.

"Thank God! Why didn't you pick up your phone?" Ma asked.

"Uh," I said, pulling out my phone to see four missed calls. "What's wrong?"

"I know you weren't in Gulshan, but I was still worried."

"Wait, what's happening in Gulshan?"

"There's a hostage situation in Holey Artisan Bakery," Baba said. "They're reporting that some armed youth stormed in yelling, 'Allahu Akbar.' They have taken over the place."

Allahu Akbar. God is Great.

I don't know if I believe in God. I was raised in a relatively religious, heavily spiritual, Muslim household. My Nanu has always been very religious while my parents are less rigid. I struggled with Islam as I was figuring out my queer identity.

I was becoming more comfortable with my sexuality, openly admiring girls, and beginning to recognize my own worth. But with attacks on LGBTQ activists in Bangladesh, suddenly I realized I came from a place where God's teachings were being used to justify horrific violence against people like me.

My heart pounded against my chest. I could feel goosebumps creeping up my neck. For over forty years, Dhaka has been loyal to the secularism the country adapted in its constitution. In the last five years, however, social media fanned the flames of radicalism and extremism tremendously. Despite anti-sodomy laws installed by the British, the internet encouraged queer and atheist writers and bloggers to express themselves freely. To fight this emergence of "outcasts," religious extremists began to call for an Islamic state. Teens or adults who felt rejected due to heartbreak or career dead-ends follow a path that called for the murder of non-believers.

I had felt God come to my rescue before, when I desperately wanted to attend college in the United States, or when I wished for an ill family member's recovery. But on July 1, 2016, God really let me down because he/she/it/they allowed carnage like no other. Gulshan, a few miles away from us, was where the diplomats and businessmen lived. It was especially popular among foreigners. Gulshan had the finest restaurants, including Holey Artisan Bakery, where God's supposed defenders were holding innocent people hostage. They had the best croissants and famously hospitable staff. Horrified, I sat down. TV channels broadcasted live updates from outside the building. Police surrounded the cafe, but they were unsure what weapons the attackers had, and were unable to assess the situation.

Police tried shooting over the walls. A policeman tried to barge in by propping his head over the wall, but he was immediately shot down, dying on the spot. The attackers had

crude bombs, machetes, and pistols. Estimates emerged. Forty hostages from Bangladesh, India, Italy, and Japan. By now my parents were on the phone with various friends who were journalists. They heard that our family friend, Faraaz, was inside catching up with high school friends.

A Holey Artisan Bakery staff member posted on Facebook that some of them were hiding in the bathroom, and that the attackers were asking people to recite surahs—prayers in the name of Allah. Those who didn't know them were being hacked to death or beheaded. I was scared as hell, and I couldn't believe that Allah was being used as an excuse for this violence. God surely did not ask for people to chop off each other's heads.

"Faraaz knows surahs," Baba said, getting off the phone with my uncle. "He'll be okay."

I couldn't shake off my fear. Even if Faraaz was okay, what about everyone else? The foreign guests? The other kids my age?

I had just started dating my partner. We were communicating across 8,000 miles of space and twelve hours of time zones. Technology helped, but it was hard. I struggled to reconcile my queerness and my family's Islam. There was no one I could talk to. No one at Wellesley, the college I was attending for undergrad, really understood (my friend group at the time was strikingly white), and people at home were even worse. In Bangladesh, being gay is okay, as long as it doesn't run in your family. I wasn't out to anyone in my family, but I did ask Ma if she was more open to queerness now. One of the brutally murdered queer activists had been her friend.

"It is still strange to me," she said. "But nobody should have to give their life just because of who they love."

The night passed, and nothing changed. We were six miles away with our eyes glued to the television. The government sent force after force—police, army, Rapid Action Battalion.

Defense squads surrounded the place. I checked online for updates. I switched between channels to get more news. I could not sleep.

### 1971: Under Attack

MY GRANDMOTHER, NIPU, had just stepped into the living room after preparing dinner when she heard the first shot. It was so loud, as if the trigger was released in her own home. There had been nothing peculiar about that night. Nipu had put the baby, Luna, to sleep and prepared a dinner of vegetables and rice while shooing her oldest daughter, Annie, away from the knives. Her husband, Mansur, had been intently listening to the radio since Sheikh Mujib had started dreaming of a free Bengal. Sheikh Mujib had won the 1970 democratic elections but had been denied a seat.

Nipu barely remembers the language revolution of February 21, 1952 when Bengali students gave their lives to protest the government declaring Urdu as the official language of Pakistan. The carnage and chaos that Nipu experienced during the 1971 Liberation War, however, remains vividly stamped in her memory. Sheikh Mujib had announced independence earlier in March. Nipu listened to the speech from their cottage in Dogachi in the Pabna district, in a neighborhood known for its skilled weavers. Nipu began to pick up weaving while Mansur was at work, talking to the local women about their craft, the tricks and tips behind each technique. She was also learning to use their handmade loom, but her progress had slowed as she devoted her time to taking care of Luna. Annie, almost ten, was mature for her age and loved to help Nipu in the kitchen. Her second and third daughters, Nini and Bonnie, preferred to play hopscotch rather than even entertain the idea of housework. She appreciated Annie's efforts, but it was Nini and Bonnie's carefree spirits Nipu longed for sometimes, dreaming of her

days in the cricket field in Chowgacha with her beloved gang of boys who called her Little Dynamite.

She had grown to love Mansur more than she could have ever imagined since the day he arrived at their wedding ceremony in a traditional palanquin. He had become her best friend. He understood and empathized with the way her hopes and dreams had been shattered by the pressure of familial obligation. His job was to be the breadwinner, the one who works, the one who did the grocery shopping. She was the homemaker, caretaker of the kids, and the one who cooked. Her parents had instilled the power and importance of prayer within her since she was very young, and she carried Allah's name with her wherever she went.

Nipu was eight weeks pregnant in March 1971. They had lived in Pabna for a few years because Mansur was posted there for his job at the East Pakistan Civil Service, where he helped recruit Bengalis for government jobs. Nipu and Mansur had been married for ten years, and their initially cold and unfamiliar bond grew subtly every day through nighttime chats about their days, Mansur reading the newspaper to her every morning, Nipu expressing love through cooking his favorite food. Nipu liked living in Pabna, near the Ganges. Dhaka was only five hours away by bus. She didn't trust the local healthcare system, so she went to Dhaka to have her first four children, all daughters: Annie, Nini, Bonnie (also called Baby, also called Marina, whom I also call Ma) and one-year-old Luna.

On the 26th of March, as gunshots rang out, Nipu, prayed under her breath, and clutched Luna, who had woken up in all the commotion.

"Get the baby and hide under the bed!" Mansur yelled. "I'll gather the other kids."

Mansur brought the radio and Annie, Nini, and Bonnie, who were confused by the noise. They fit their bodies under

the low bed, the girls screaming at each other to make more space. One by one the kids fell asleep. The radio announced that under “Operation Searchlight,” Sheikh Mujib had been arrested. Bengalis were tortured. Nipu shivered—women raped left and right children shot dead on the spot. Bengali members of the military disarmed and killed. Students and any able-bodied Bengali male gunned down. Nipu called for Allah to keep everyone she loved and the rest of East Pakistan safe. Then, she remembered the rice still cooking on the stove.

Nipu must have fallen asleep. She woke with a start when she heard a knock on the door.

“Don’t open it!” she yelled at Mansur who had crawled out from under the bed.

“It’s okay, the military is after able-bodied, young, Bengali men. We don’t qualify,” Mansur said. “Wait here until I come back.”

Every second he was gone felt like a year. Nipu was a housewife and a mother. He was the breadwinner. She couldn’t lose him.

Finally he came back.

“It was the man from next door. The neighbors are all leaving town. Let’s go to the high school now—there’s a big group. Your brother’s family is also going there. Grab whatever food you can, and we can decide what to do after things have calmed down.”

Even then, Nipu couldn’t believe that Bengalis across the land were really under attack by their Urdu-speaking countrymen. She woke up her daughters, gave Luna to Mansur and went to the kitchen. The rice had overflowed. She grabbed fermented rice from another pot, something she was saving for Bengali New Year’s breakfast, and a jar of sugar.

2016: Endless Wait

1 AM: WAITING.

2 am: Hoping.

2.30 am: Praying? I guess.

Was God up there, watching? If so, what was possibly going through their mind at that moment? Could they hear me?

3 am: More waiting. My only connection to prayer were the ones I was taught in middle school.

They sometimes worked for me, but currently, they were futile. I was furious. God just let so many people die, God left so many people's families, friends, and children in a massacre, God did nothing to stop people preaching their name only to murder.

I shivered, and the minute I closed my eyes, I was gasping for breath. I couldn't stop weeping. I texted my partner with updates, grateful I had someone to turn to who was away from all this. It wasn't a distraction, but it was good to talk to her.

4 am: Weeping.

4:30 am: Waiting.

The night seemed endless. All international news channels covered the incident. Friends abroad texted me. What could I say to them? Dhaka was not a place of intolerance and bloodshed. Dhaka was rickshaws, cricket, six seasons, and the love of the people. I couldn't believe it, but I found myself praying through the night. Even though God had let me down, it seemed like God was the only one who could stop this madness. In the midst of all the confusion, it seemed like the only logical thing to do.

## 1971: Hiding

THEY TOOK SHELTER IN THE LOCAL high school and impatiently waited. On the third day, Mansur went to the local market to get snacks for the children and food staples because they could not survive on fermented rice anymore. He hadn't gone back to work because the country was under emergency rule. People were asked to evacuate.

"There have been no protocols," Nipu's younger brother Joy complained. "The government doesn't have time for us."

"Can't blame them," Mansur said. "Students, farmers, lawyers, everyone is joining the war in the name of a free Bengal."

The high school had been all right. They heard the occasional shooting, but nobody disturbed them. They needed a more long-term plan. Between countless prayers, Nipu consulted Joy and decided they should move to Kushtia, Mansur's hometown farther south.

"Let's go to Kushtia," Nipu suggested. "My brother is also going there, he said it's safe. We can stay at his in-laws' place."

"Okay," Mansur said, a little sad. He had lost both his parents a couple of years before. His siblings lived all over the country. Nothing was left for him in his birthplace, but memories. He hadn't gone back since he had attended the funeral.

She knew he was hesitant and placed a hand on his shoulder. It was rare for them to show physical affection, but Nipu knew that Mansur was torn about going back.

"Think about the kids. We have to keep them safe."

"Okay," he repeated. "I'll talk to the other guys and see how we can arrange transportation across the river."

A few families gathered together the next day to cross the river in bull-drawn carts to Kushtia. They stopped to get out of

the carts and hide in the bushes, away from the soldiers who sometimes passed by. They stopped at villages, ate whatever food they were offered, stayed the night huddled in small rooms, and started in the morning. The journey took three and a half days.

It was hard for Nipu, with one baby constantly needing her attention and another on the way. Every time they were near soldiers, they ran to the fields and hid, especially the women. Mansur and Nipu's brothers-in-law and older nephews joined to help the Mukti Bahini Freedom Fighters every chance they could.

They were almost near Bot Tola, in Kushtia where her brothers-in-law lived. They stopped to buy food when they heard military members approaching.

"Back to the carts!" someone yelled.

Nipu was about to hobble back to the carts when she saw her nephew, Kollol, taking a bathroom break in the fields. She struggled to walk as fast as she could back to him, and dragged him by the arms.

"You don't have time to clean up, son," she shouted. "Pull your pants up. They're just over a mile away, we have to go!"

That was the closest call. They slowly made their way back to the boat with the confused boy crying and an unborn baby tossing in Nipu's belly. They had taken the risk in hopes that war could not reach them in Bot Tola. Their living situation was chaotic. They were staying in Nipu's sister-in-law's house. The family connection was distant. Worse, the house was crowded with almost fifty people counting all the adults and children. Nipu stayed with some of the women, most of whom she didn't know. Nipu's kids were growing impatient. They missed their friends and playing outside. Their only source of news was the radio, and it often brought word of disaster.

The one thing Nipu did love about staying in that chaotic big house was when the freedom fighters would stop for shelter. She'd help the hosts cook, and she'd serve them

heaps of rice, lentils, and chicken curry. The soldiers borrowed Nipu and Mansur's radio and in exchange gave them updates about the war. They would tell her about the weapon supplies they received from India, about the rise of Bengali political parties who opposed independence and how these parties were outnumbered by the young men dreaming of a free land.

"Just imagine," one of the overnight soldiers told Nipu with baby Luna on her lap, "A country where we're free to read and write in Bangla. When we don't have to worry about pleasing the Pakistani administration. Where we can sing in Bangla all the time!"

Sometimes the Mukti Bahini were headed to India—for training and ammunition. The soldiers brought in injured comrades in search of medication or just a place for rest. April rolled into May, and they grew impatient. Nipu was in the middle of her second trimester, but everyone around her was too busy to pay attention to her growing needs. The host family had to buy groceries for the people staying at the house plus the soldiers. They began to run out of money. Nipu moved into a room with two other women after two families moved away, but they still had ten children between them. She didn't have room to pray sometimes, which bothered her. She was going to ask Mansur about moving mid-May when Mansur came up to her room with the news.

"The soldiers here said the Pakistani military are coming to Kushtia." He was out of breath from running up the stairs. At forty, Mansur had begun to show more signs of aging than Nipu had expected. The twelve-year difference between them didn't usually bother her, but with the war, her pregnancy, and his gray hair and shortness of breath, she worried for his health more and more each day. "We need to get out of here."

"I'm weak," Nipu admitted. "But it's hard living like this. Where should we go?"

“I was thinking your family home,” Mansur said. “Jessore. To Chowgacha. There shouldn’t be any military there.”

“Oh,” Nipu said, surprised. She had gone back once since her wedding, after her Nini was born. She was sad to see that her parents had grown weak and senile, no longer the uproarious presences they once were. She hadn’t even seen her friends and would have loved to. “That sounds good. The kids would also probably love to see it.”

“Okay then,” Mansur replied. “The village is remote enough to be away from fighting. Gather staples and the mud stove. We’ll take a boat first thing in the morning.”

## 2016: Bodies

AN AMERICAN COUNTER-TERRORISM agency called SITE claimed at midnight that they had hacked into the phones of the terrorists at Holey Artisan Bakery. They were apparently part of the Islamic State. I was disgusted and heartbroken to see innocent citizens decapitated, soaked in their own blood. Faraaz and his friends’ bodies were among them. I threw my phone across the room and cried into my pillow. Everything felt empty and dark. It was shocking that a young boy with a bright future had been murdered in the name of “God.” His grandfather frantically called us insisting it couldn’t be him because he knew the surahs, yet this 20-year-old boy’s decapitated corpse was the subject of Facebook posts and gossip. Disgusting speculation was spreading that he had been one of the terrorists.

My father broke down. He didn’t know what to say. A writer out of words. Ma kept going back to the prayer mat. I hated watching my parents be vulnerable. I had barely ever seen Bengali adults, especially men, show emotion. Nothing made sense. We were lost, confused, and broken. Dhaka as we knew it was being destroyed.

Ma said, “This is like ’71 all over.”

Fuck. Had the 1971 Liberation War been like this? For nine months? This was the closest I had come to experiencing the fear and suspense my parents and grandparents had felt during the war. I wasn't even directly involved here. The kids at the bakery had been my age. They were home for the summer just like me. They were kids whose parents were waiting for them to come home, kids whose friends were waiting for them back in college—Emory, Toronto, UC Berkeley. Why behead these kids? How were we, as a nation, supposed to answer to their parents and families? How were we to explain to the Italian and Japanese governments that their citizens cannot survive a simple Friday night dinner on our soil?

### 1971: Moving Once More

NIPU'S HOMETOWN OF CHOWGACHA was part of the Jessore district, which was located further south than Kushtia. Mansur arranged for an early morning boat for Nipu and the kids, plus Nipu's sister's family who had tagged along. After four pregnancies, Nipu expected to be better at it by now. But with the war and travel, this was proving to be her hardest one yet.

More narrow encounters with the military followed them. Nipu's nephews, in charge of looking out, asked the boatman to turn to the nearest forest whenever Pakistani soldiers were around. Nipu was in no condition to run. She prayed for her children to be safely hidden in the jute fields while she stayed with her sister under the spoon-shaped hull of their little country boat.

The journey to Jessore took two nights and two days. Annie began to sing different songs that she had picked up from the radio. She had a talent and passion for music, and Nipu told herself that if this war ever ended, Annie would go to music school. Baby Luna had grown a few inches. Nini and

Bonnie were more used to being older sisters now. They loved to amuse the baby. Nipu could not wait to bathe in cold water and lie on a soft surface once she reached home.

The fighting stayed away from Chowgacha. Nipu's health stopped deteriorating now that she was at her sister's home surrounded by people she loved. She went to visit her parents as much as her swollen belly allowed. The summer months were tough. Handcrafted fans were all they had to cool down, and the kids were not patient enough to fan her.

Disgruntled that the children couldn't go to school due to war, Nipu requested that Mansur to sit down with them and review alphabets, writing, and math. The condition of the country fluctuated. Mansur would read her the paper or update her on the events. He often met with fighters. He was well-connected due to his job in the East Pakistan Civil Service and was even considering fighting if needed. One night Mansur sat down by Nipu and read her the newspaper.

"The nation is seeking diplomatic recognition and intervention. There are rumors that India is going to help," he read. The three older children ran into the room and joined them.

"The US is aiding Pakistan," Mansur continued.

"I can't believe it," Nipu said, shocked. "I thought America was a friendly nation!"

"It's because Nixon resents Indira Gandhi," he said.

"Who?" Nini asked.

"The Prime Minister of India, silly," Annie said proudly.

Over another dinner, Nipu had hobbled over while Mansur was eating and sat down. The children soon joined.

"The Pakistani army is trying to conduct more raids," Mansur told his family. "Increase as much casualty as possible. They're also trying to hinder their economic growth—attack rail lines, storages, power stations."

"What's economic growth?" Annie asked.

Nipu smiled endearingly as Mansur began to explain supply and demand while Annie listened with her mouth wide open. Like father, like daughter.

As the war moved into its fifth month, Mansur gathered the family in Nipu's room once more and talked about how neighboring youths joined the Mukti Bahini.

"I wonder if my friends have joined the freedom fighter training camps," Nipu wondered out loud. "O Allah please keep the boys safe!"

"They're doing better than we could have predicted," Mansur said, placing a gentle hand on Nipu's shoulder. "Mukti Bahini were endangering Pakistani mobility."

"You see what the strategy here is?" Mansur asked his attentive audience. "Trying to spread the Pakistanis all over, so that they can attack detached locations."

Luna began to cry. "Shit," Mansur said, laughing and shaking his head. "I woke up the baby with all this war drama."

July brought air raids to Chowgacha. Bonnie screamed and shouted in confusion, during each raid.

"Please Allah," Nipu prayed every day. "End this madness. Save my family. Save our country."

To Nipu's horror, Mansur announced that he had to return to Dhaka to get money. He placed his hand over hers.

"I'll be okay." Mansur had hired a bull cart to take him and his brother-in-law to Dhaka.

Nipu couldn't sleep the whole time Mansur was gone. If she closed her eyes, she had nightmares of the military capturing him. East Pakistani soldiers were doing fairly well. The Indian Air Force were aiding East Pakistan in the aerial battles, and Pakistani soldiers were spending less time patrolling the streets looking for men to kill.

"He'll be okay," she told herself, as much as she told her children.

Four days passed without word from Mansur. Nipu cried all day. She couldn't remember to write properly and was unable to write him a letter. Even if she could, where would she send it?

"Please," she prayed. "My children need his presence and guidance. I need him"

He finally came back after a week.

"I slept in a Mukti Bahini camp for a night!" he told her, all excited. "I even assisted in helping them carry out an operation."

"Oh God!" she said. "Are you trying to die?"

"Hey, I'm okay," he said, holding her against his chest. "Besides, it's for a free country. So that we can go back home. So that we can have a proper life again."

1971: Bangladesh

NAYAN WAS BORN IN OCTOBER. Nipu had considered names surrounding words of battle, victory, war, but she went with Nayan, meaning eye, because this child had seen the war through her. This child, he was her eye, the thing that had kept her seeing and believing. So, he was Nayan.

Every day the radio was bringing in more positive news. There were many rumors of a victory incoming. In early December, swarms of planes flew like a colony of ants. The 14th of December brought a setback. The Pakistani military stormed into the houses of hundreds of intellectuals and professionals—doctors, writers, artists, and teachers. They blinded them and murdered them. Nipu was horrified, especially hearing that more than a hundred people had been murdered in Jessore, the very district they were taking shelter in. But Mansur had a different take on it.

"They can sense defeat coming," he said gravely. "One last attack."

Indeed, two days later, the radio announcer was elated to announce that the Commanding Officer of Pakistani Army located in East Pakistan had surrendered and signed the necessary documents. They recognized the independence of the new country, and Bangladesh was its name.

“Bangladesh,” Nipu said, trying it out. “Thank you, Allah. We have a free country. Bangladesh.”

“Bangladesh! Bangladesh! Bangladesh!” Her kids yelled, including the now two-year-old Luna while Nayan slept in his new cot.

## 2016: The Save

FINALLY, AROUND 8 AM, the police, with the help of the army, navy, Rapid Action Battalion, air force, and border guards, executed Operation Thunderbolt, a plan they had hatched around three in the morning. Tanks stormed the bakery. The TV showed them breaking in. Reporters talked about an exchange of bullets. In an hour or so, five terrorists were dead. Thirteen hostages, all Bangladeshi, escaped alive. Among them Tahmeed, who had gone to Sunbeams school a grade above mine. He told news outlets about how Faraaz knew the surahs, tried to stop his friends’ death, and had been hacked to death himself. The list of those killed began to surface, among them a 7-month-pregnant Italian woman.

I had been praying until the morning operation, but I didn’t understand to what extent praying was supposed to work. I couldn’t believe that these people had chosen to murder those who didn’t have the same beliefs as them.. If God celebrated difference and equality, how was this mass murder allowed?

## 2016: The Aftermath

AFTER THE WORST TERRORIST ATTACK in Bangladesh since the war, nobody remembered that Eid was around the corner.

It was shocking to find out that the five men who attacked Holey Artisan Bakery were all around my age, from privileged backgrounds and English medium schools. I obsessively read about them on social media. They had felt rejected, whether they had been neglected by their families, devastated by breakups, or bullied. They fell into the depths of the extremist propaganda—some at local mosque communities, some through lectures on YouTube. The Islamic State claimed the attack and released gruesome videos of the attackers promising to get rid of democracy and the government; people soon realized that cases of missing students and youth could be attributed to militant training by the extremist group. They also specifically targeted foreigners and non-Muslims.

For a month after this act of violence, I couldn't close my eyes without visualizing a killing spree. I've tried praying, but it hasn't helped. I keep having nightmares of the kids in the restaurant, the pregnant Italian lady, and the Japanese businessmen. The helplessness, the severed heads, the lack of humanity. The government has since increased security around Gulshan. The Holey Artisan management was forced to release many of their chefs and servers. The attack increased unemployment. Two of Bangladesh's biggest booming industries—food and tourism—were shaken.

It could have easily been my friends or I at the scene of the attack. We go out to eat all the time. It's the only fun social thing to do in Dhaka. It was a matter of luck and fate that we weren't there. Had I been in Faraaz's place would I have given my life for my friends? Would I have succumbed to the terrorists' pressure to say prayers out loud? Do I even believe in prayers?

Every night I am grateful for all I have and all I've been through. I think of how my friends, or maybe even I, could have fallen under the fallacy of the extremist propaganda that was being preached as religion. The terrorists targeted students studying abroad who felt lonely; they targeted introverts; they targeted kids from all economic backgrounds. My thoughts feel unfinished because I still don't know how to comprehend the violence and the damage the incident left me and my country with.

### 1971: The Aftermath, Homecoming

MANSUR GOT REPOSTED IN PABNA by his civil service office after the war, much to Nipu's relief. She had a home there and they had all their belongings there. She was so happy to be going home that she even sang along to all of Annie's songs during the journey.

Her heart shattered into pieces when they came back to their old house to find disorder. Household items were missing from the kitchen. Thieves had taken advantage of the empty houses, her neighbors told her. Her belongings were destroyed in the war, chickens in the courtyard shot down, their clothesline outside torn apart. The only thing left in one piece in the kitchen were her shil bata, a wooden utensil pairing similar to mortar and pestle.

They slept there for a couple of nights. Mansur's colleague helped them find a new home soon. The kids returned to school. Luna stayed with Nipu, and the two bonded in ways they couldn't during the war and Nipu's pregnancy. They didn't move to Dhaka until the '80s. Pabna, although never quite the home Nipu longed for, nonetheless holds a special place in her heart. Pabna waited for them while they sought shelter, and Pabna was there when they were ready to come back.

2016, 2017, 2018...: Many Sleepless Nights

PRAYER KEPT MY GRANDMOTHER calm during the war. Even now, Nipu claims that God protected her family in 1971. I didn't feel that protection in 2016. After the attack, I spent months terrified to sleep alone. I couldn't handle being alone with my thoughts and continued to struggle with my religious beliefs. How could God have let it all happen? The bloodshed, the beheading, the loss of young lives that could easily have been my friends' or my own?

I don't know what scares me more-that I could have been on either end of that attack, or that God wouldn't have done a thing to stop it.

## A Line of Immeasurable Width

*Ellen Graf*

“Let’s just share it,” my neighbor said. “It doesn’t matter whose is whose.” The south boundary between our lands was fabled to lie down the center of a grassy path amid a thistle field that runs to the forest edge; there the path forks, leading to our separate woodlots. Our deed dates from 1832. Measuring in chains and links, surveyors reference a crooked oak, a blue boulder, and an iron pipe. The boulder has since rolled, the oak’s telltale limb broken off, and the iron pipe toppled and gone to rest under fallen leaves. The deed refers to our neighbor’s deed for the exact location of the south line created after he and his brothers lifted their chins and waved their hands in the direction of the grassy path, splitting the land in two.

My neighbor Dan and I had maintained peace for years: I tolerated his morning ritual driving of his tractor past my bedroom window at dawn; he tolerated my dog’s howling through coyote nights. I ate my rooster because his wife complained about the crowing. He agreed not to fire his gun at woodchucks while sitting in a lawn chair facing my house. His sons hunted our land and we cut through the corner of his woodlot to get to ours. My neighbor taught me to use a chainsaw and came running on his gimpy leg when our house caught fire. I washed their windows and vacuumed their floor.

But it was not out of good will that I overlooked a boundary wire strung by my neighbor across the surface of a beaver pond he owned with the neighbor to the west. The wire signified nothing legally; no one can own the surface of a pond, just the mud on the bottom. It signified a feud, and it seemed prudent for me not to mention it.

One morning I was weeding the carrots when angry bellowing filled the air: "It's mine, it's mine. Go Away!" I ran up the dirt road and beheld Dan rearing over a much smaller, bespectacled man who pleaded, "Come now, I am your neighbor, let me pass." This neighbor to the east had committed the sin of hiring a surveyor some years back, which had deeply insulted Dan's childhood memory of where he and his own stopped and others began. "No!" Dan planted his boots wide apart in the middle of the road. "You cannot pass." The fellow turned away and I hung back, glad I was not him.

From China, my husband entered this pastoral scene. As a boy growing up under Chairman Mao, he fertilized fields by carrying buckets of pond sludge on a pole across his shoulders. He survived famine by eating leaves, chewing the ends of grass, and killing birds with a slingshot. Our neighbor, born in the bedroom that is now ours, has settled not a hundred yards away and never ventured far for any reason. He hunts five-point bucks, catches bullfrogs for supper, and can split an oak log just by looking at it. His biceps are as thick as the oak's boughs. My husband repairs mufflers with Cola cans, rebuilds chainsaw engines others have thrown to the curb, and bends steel with his bare hands. His waist is as thick as the oak's trunk. My husband prefers gravel to grass and treasures junked cars, which attend our house. My neighbor keeps his 1959 Ford pick-up in the woods along with several bathtubs and boiler tanks. His outdoor decorations include a six-foot high plastic lighthouse and some droopy daffodils surrounded by chicken wire. It would be hard to say whose yard is uglier.

On just such rocky, wooded terrain as ours, traveled the future Buddha, Prince Five-Weapons, the day he encountered the ogre Sticky Hair. Infamous for eating trespassers, Sticky Hair loomed above the young prince like a moss-covered cliff: "It's mine, go away."

The future Buddha remained calm: “I am Prince Five Weapons. Let me pass!”

The prince struck the ogre with excellent martial moves. Both his flying fists stuck fast to the ogre’s sticky chest hairs; both kicking feet stuck fast, and then his stomach-butting forehead stuck between his fists. Unable to separate himself from the ogre, the prince dangled calmly as if his were nothing but a natural predicament, neither unbearable nor shameful. He remarked, “If you are thinking of eating me, I don’t think that is a good idea. We both could die. In short, my death will involve yours.” Sticky Hair looked pensive, or, at least didn’t answer right away.

Shooting pains in our neighbor’s ankles make him irritable. Constant ringing in his ears makes it impossible to decipher words through my husband’s foreign accent. As time went on, watching my husband move slowly and lovingly over the landscape, transplanting forsythia roots, sifting the soil through a screen for gravel, mixing his own mortar, and moving more stones than any of the sheep corralling ancestors of the land, our neighbor Dan became more and more agitated. Every time my husband spotted Dan shoveling snow or cutting brush, he rushed over to offer help. “No, I don’t need help. Go away,” Dan cried, flailing his arms in front of his chest. My husband couldn’t understand and felt terrible—Doesn’t everyone need help? His sense of self includes family, friends, and neighbors. “Other” applies only to distant entities, like governmental agencies. My husband was baffled when I bought a new pickaxe—Didn’t Dan already have one in his shed? Passing daily on the grassy path, my husband and Dan simultaneously greeted, offended, and stuck fast. Both seemed wounded that the other did not behave in a manner familiar: Dan looked disconcerted when my husband did not seem intimidated; my husband looked perplexed that Dan was not friendly.

Folklorists have categorized the two-thousand-year old Jataka tale number 55 from India, starring the future Buddha and the ogre Sticky Hair, as a “five-point tar baby story.” It is one of hundreds worldwide that fit the category and is considered the original “stick-fast” tale. Stickiness is the meaningful thing to consider, scholars insist, no matter whether the sticky substance is white gooey clay or black tar, no matter whether the wearer of stickiness is a living being or a dead, pitch-oozing stump, and no matter whether the living being or stump is inherently sticky or is made sticky by contrivance. There are four, five, and even six-point “stick-fast” stories—the last requiring that the wayfarer gets stuck by his stomach as well as all four limbs and head! In Lithuania, a witch sticks to a tarred horse; in Alaska, a rabbit to a wolf. In Cherokee country, a wolf sticks to a stump smeared with pitch, while in the African-American version, a rabbit sticks to a person crafted out of tar. In the Himalayans, a monkey gets stuck to his habitual path, which has been smeared with lime plaster. Getting stuck fast is a common experience. A situation always ensues—”situation”, a word that even sounds sticky.

I can only describe this land by its heaps of stone. Where stones of random sizes flank heaps of fist-sized stones, rural historians know that tenant farmers clearing a field have but added to a pile of Mohawk spirit offerings. The resulting aggregates of the carelessly tossed and reverently placed have gathered moss through the centuries along with the lovely ruins of stone walls, the discontinuous, but still legal boundaries on many old property deeds. Shifting evidence of time and effort, the stones bedeck the uneven forest ground, evoking hours of strain and moments of reprieve, lonely moods and sudden thrills, shooting pains and dull aches in the bodies of the ancestors of the land as they bent their backs to the business of living.

Stones make for moveable boundaries. Non-sticky and

disengaged, they nonetheless are agents of contact and conflict. The name of the Greek god Hermes means “stone heap” and Hermes is known for his versatility, mutability, and knack for creating sticky situations. He promoted commerce, if not communion, through instigating conflict.

Our neighbor Dan told me once that he hated to see the old stones being moved from where they had been placed. In these parts, if a stone is visible above ground, then it has probably been held in the hands of men long dead, perhaps scraped against iron pry rods, rolled over leather boot toes, or warmed by weary buttocks, or ringing under the blows of pickaxes. Dan said he felt kinship with the men who touched stones when he looked upon the heaps and walls. He did not concede that by touching stones my husband could become his kin. Within a few years, the Chinese imposter, my husband, had muscled as many stones as a whole clan of ghostly farmers.

Eighteenth-century surveyors in America were often backwoods characters capable of trekking the wilderness for months in solitude. People suspected them corrupt, and some may have been, but inaccuracy of boundaries was not all their fault: they had to rely on tools that didn't always work and reference points that wouldn't stand still. The line between two landmarks on rugged terrain cannot be sighted. Magnetic North is the direction the needle points on a compass toward the North Pole. But underneath the surface, scattered lumps of iron ore draw the compass this way and that. True North is the direction along the surface of the earth to the North Pole, the place where the imaginary axis of the earth's rotation breaks the surface. The angle between magnetic and true north, called magnetic variation, is always changing. It can be measured, but only for the present place and moment.

The earth is not a perfect sphere—it spins with a hitch on its abstract axis. It wobbles and bobs, perturbed by the pull of

the moon, its own fluid core, and wind driven ocean currents. Astronomical North is the direction that the earth's axis points to a point marked in the sky by the star Polaris. It differs from True North only by a few arc seconds. Five thousand years ago, the closest visible star to the celestial North Pole was Thuban, and this was the reference point for True North. Eventually, by wobbling and bobbing through space, the earth's axis will point at a different star, a Lyrae. Any star, when sighted by a human being, is subject to "the aberration of light," which causes the star to appear somewhere other than where it really is. Where we are is, at best, imagined. Even if trees never fell and walls never crumbled, the surveyor's work could not be repeated with the same result.

The trait that my neighbor found most exasperating in my husband was his commitment to storing junk cars against future poverty. You could always sell the windshield or the hubcaps and buy some groceries, he reasoned. My neighbor's junk is out of sight—sort of—featured at the foot of a rock cliff adorned with dripping hemlock boughs. It would cost him to have it hauled away. I offered to buy the small triangle of land burdened with the offensive heap of trash so I could clean it out. "Nah, there might be some useful stuff in there," he mumbled. Our neighbor was even more exasperated by my husband's zeal behind the push mower: "Don't go over the line, don't mow my side!" he growled, waving his arms. He meant his side of the grassy path. My husband waved back and smiled big, not getting it. When my husband began building an eighty-foot retaining wall, and our neighbor took to roaring up and down on his garden tractor glowering at it and exclaiming "Jeez!" They boldly stood, casually strolled, or drove over the imaginary line down the center of the grassy path. My husband started saying "Jeez."

I, on the other hand, could not bring myself to boldly stand or casually stroll. I resented being stuck in a boundary sensitive zone. I hid behind dark glasses and flipped down the driver's side sunshade in order to get past my neighbor's house on my way to work without looking at him. My idea for fixing the problem, which I impulsively acted upon, was to force my neighbor to show me exactly where the boundary was so that we would trespass no more and once more rest as good neighbors.

As my neighbor rumbled into sight I called out, "Hi, Dan. Would you show me the boundary? Then we will not cross it." It pained me, talking like this, so I added, "But you can still go on our side."

"I don't want to," he said and frowned.

I shrugged. "That's OK. I'm just saying..."

My neighbor looked pained too. "Under those stones somewhere," he said at last, pointing with his chin. He looked up the grassy path toward the road. I followed his eyes.

"There?"

He shook his head, as if there were a troubling obstacle that could not be told. "I don't know exactly. It's got covered up somehow or other." He rumbled away, his familiar flannel shirt fading into the landscape.

When Sticky Hair declares, "I will eat you," and the Prince replies, "My death will involve yours," he was talking about the sword in his belly with the brightness of a thousand diamonds. "You cannot digest me. The sword will tear you to bits." The ogre does not desire a double death.

All along, the Prince seems confident that the conflict between them is nothing but par for the course. He accepts the predicament as one sort of relationship. The ogre can see that the prince has no fear of him. Perhaps the ogre's respect for

fearlessness is one ingredient of the solvent that dissolves the stickiness. The ogre releases the prince and does not eat him, not really out of charity, but because he agrees that their fates cannot be separated. The prince adopts the ogre as his spiritual student and appoints him “Guardian of the Forest.” A lifelong relationship unfolds.

Worthy opponents are capable of seeing into each other. They are essentially the same and fundamentally different. My husband is like the Prince, not because he is nobler than Dan, but because he truly believes that if Dan has a pickaxe, then he has a pickaxe for the picking. Dan is like the Ogre, not because he is any more of a bully than my husband, but because he wants all strangers to stay away.

It dawned on me that I was the only one of the three of us who had not realized early on that the boundary line was so vague as to be imaginary. I was sure we could just fix this problem with an absolute. Boundaries, it turns out, like the magnetic force field of the earth, dip under the skin and loop out into space. Boundaries, like meanings, are partly made-up—temporarily useful for the situation at hand, but not exactly real. Paid for their trouble and their trouble making, rustic surveyors knew this and must have had the intimacy with life that comes from tracking the unknowable. We hired one, who, as it turned out, was an old friend of our neighbor’s father. Fifty years ago, he had been lost on a subzero night and stumbled up to the old farmhouse. The door was unlocked and he entered; snow from his boots melted on the slanted floor. The fire blazed as the family snored upstairs. The man warmed himself by the hearth as if it were his own, until our neighbor’s father awoke and, upon discovering a stranger in his house, gave him a hearty welcome and offered him a drink and a bed.

The result of the survey: the entrance from the county road to the grassy path belongs to our neighbor. From there,

the boundary quickly veers southwest and cuts off his access to the woodlot. That part belongs to us, along with the rest of the grassy path. Our neighbor can enter the path but not pass through. We can pass through, but this would depend on being able to enter in the first place. Unless, of course, we just share.

I had a dream around this time. My husband and I were in the deep cool forest cutting firewood. We hefted cut logs onto the cart, sundrops falling on our boots as we stepped silently on a cushion of leaf mold. Oh, there's Dan! He's just there, down the slope doing the same thing, only he's choosier and has only cut straight-grained oak. The evening shadows fell on the emerald bounders and we were all dogs in a skin.

My husband found himself right behind Dan at Ace Hardware and gave him an exuberant, "Hi Dan! Long time not see you!" Dan frowned and looked at the jackknife display.

At the counter, the clerk said to my husband, "What was his problem?"

"Oh," my husband said, with a wave of his hand, "he probably didn't see me."

My husband continued to patch the cavernous potholes in Dan's part of the road. He dug gravel from the ditch and carefully raked it smooth. Sometimes the kitchen curtain moved and he saw Dan's head, gray and bowed. I didn't know what to do. I guess I thought there had to be words, but I didn't know where they were. The months and years went by. It's amazing how seldom you see someone who is right there when you really don't want to. Dan stopped patrolling on his tractor, bellowing "Jeez." I trudged past his house to our twin mailboxes. There was nowhere to put the sadness. It belonged to us. The road looked good, though, with its holes packed full and raked smooth.

The grassy path became each summer a more and more lush and bounteous cacophony of weeds: wooly mullein spikes

and tall sweet white clover, clumps of daisies and purple thistles, curly dock and shepherd's purse, mugwort, and vetch. I dwelt in that dreamland where we had known each other's goodness and kept each other safe. Words were easy to find and easy to understand: "Watch out for that branch" or "Need a hand?"

But then I did see Dan, out in the real world on his tractor in his flannel shirt and jeans and heavy boots. He was having a go at his favorite thing to do—patrolling the neighborhood. In slow motion he drove right into the ditch. I was about to say it, "Need a hand?" when he lurched back out onto flat ground and stopped. He looked right at me and waved and waved. In slow motion, back and forth, make no mistake.



POETRY

DOGWOOD LITERARY AWARD IN POETRY

ten-foot drop

*Maria Zoccola*

i was raised within a kettle already shrieking  
with love, so i've never been sure how to pray.  
all of us dream ourselves different lives. in mine,  
i was born on the inside of a turtle, locked up tight  
against the small bones of the spine, hidden  
from credit reports and cable television  
by an immutable trick of anatomy.  
how do you come to the divine? with a grateful heart,  
says my friend who is a pastor. but i've never been grateful  
for a thing in my life. i've chewed up every blessing  
to spit into the creek behind the church,  
a ten-foot drop to the rushing leaves  
swept away into what could be infinity but is really  
a rusting brown drain. on the lawn out front,  
a wind-flapped banner: are you curious about faith?  
yes. yes. yes. i have a swirling fog behind my eyes  
and a tongue not meant for singing. oh holy turtle in the man-made creek,  
i am a stranger to the tender belly of the world, full of hurting  
and hunger and shining dark wood,

but i'm teaching my neck how to bend.  
i'm preaching mercy to my own proud knees.  
i've come for miracles, and taking is my specialty.  
my hands are always outstretched,  
empty and full and empty once more.

Before Death, there is no justice.

*Sheree La Puma*

Listen child to what a Midwest breeze  
will carry  
until it temporarily camps on the streets.  
Every drowned-out promise,  
ash-gray amid cardboard  
like a man struck down in the road.  
Slowly dying. Girl  
who watched the small  
unfolding of wings,  
exactly the color of a city  
crow, blackness & blood  
the crust of death  
disloyal as a stray bullet.  
The murdered  
never leave us. How they bloom,  
& brandish. I believe in the redworm,  
the canary, the delicate prayers  
of childhood, still unsung.  
If wisdom does not come  
to every white politician,  
here is a brick pressed from brown, clay,  
Minnesota.

Come girls & gather  
march with us, mothers.  
There is power  
in our bodies leaning outwards,  
together.

## Butterfly

*Christine Chen*

For forty-five years, my mother didn't want to pierce her ears.  
She said she didn't want to ruin her chances  
of becoming a butterfly in her next life.  
Legends say that women with pierced ears are marked  
to come back and live again as women  
in their next life and maybe the one after.  
She wanted so much to fly free  
in the mountain woods, away from it all,  
that not even beauty could stand in her way.  
I did not understand her then,  
why she would exchange long life as a human  
for a brief passage as an insect  
perishable at the fingers of a wandering child.  
But then time snuck up on me like a shadow,  
pouring ice down my back,  
sprinkling my hair with judgment and shame  
they force on my name  
for leaving home and speaking a foreign tongue—  
a runaway, a rebel, a stuck-up, a traitor  
to a country that raised me in blood,  
a culture that runs in my blood  
and boils it for how *different* I've become.  
When I walk down the street and feel  
a thousand eyes on my shoulders,  
broad and prominent for a Chinese girl,

on my hips and legs dubbed Western in shape,  
I want to grow back the wings they snipped before I learned to fly  
and soar fast and high—  
away, away, away—  
into the woods and far in the mountains,  
among the flowers that no one will pick,  
and dance till the sun dips down the horizon,  
where those who cast me out can never reach me.  
For I will be a butterfly,  
even with my beautiful, *pierced* ears.  
I will flutter my wings and fly free!  
Your nets will not and cannot ensnare me

Short Talks: Antarctica  
Variations on a Theme by Anne Carson

*Anne Hampford*

On Independence

Yellow-flowered, herbaceous, and cushiony, Antarctic pearlwort survives the extreme cold of 66°S with little sunlight, moisture, or good soil. Growing in the rocks and relying on the wind to bring pollen, often from one of its own flowers, it doesn't need much else.

On Determination

Lush, layered, and slow-growing, Antarctic mosses live on meltwater, then survive without it for months, desiccating almost completely and retaining heat even in the frigid winter. They can be revived with exposure to light after being frozen, and seemingly dead, for a thousand years.

On Relativity

Compressed ice, ancient air trapped within, scatters and transmits the short waves of white light and absorbs the long ones. The bluer the ice, the older its stories.

## On Patience

Antarctic lichens are colorful, composite organisms, a symbiosis between a fungus and alga that can photosynthesize while frozen and are the first colonists on bare rock. They grow at a glacial pace—as little as one centimeter every thousand years in harsher environments.

## On Survival

A fine-leaved, vascular plant, Antarctic hair grass is tufted and grows in rocky areas. It can withstand the disturbance of elephant seals, wind, and penguin guano without withering away. A deep and complex root system keeps it anchored and nourished.



## On Being Asked, *Are You A Boy Or A Girl?*

*Court Castaños*

again and again and again, always  
like licking a battery. Taste the memory  
of running, my arms wrapped  
around that pickle jar, not a pickle jar,  
a terrarium, packed with garden snails,  
shells striped, black and amber,  
not tiger fur, but just the same,  
each body heavy like a child's heart.  
Imagine holding it, staccato beating,  
small and sticky in your rough hands,  
but they were mollusks  
hand picked from moist caves  
of purple allium and marigold,  
plopped one by one into a wonderland  
of torn grass, snapped twigs and  
plucked leaves—all bruised and wilting  
I was running back home,  
a slimy gift for my mother, I'd not tied  
my shoes, loose, wild,  
when the pavement yanked,  
wonderland fell, burst beneath me.

I threw my hands forward  
to catch my fall and a shattered protest  
screamed thousands of tears, holes  
into my hands, my legs, my head.  
Splinters and gashes, some deeper  
than others and thinking back  
on it now, you know,  
I can still feel the glass  
in my hands.

departures

*Mitchell Evenson*

*for my father*

acceleration: the robin discovering its wings;  
like a knighting, an earned thing, but in place  
of sharp steel and 'dignity' and 'kneel,'  
a plummeting: the everyday violence of gravity.  
the bird, its baby days over, can no longer risk  
caution—there is only lift.

disintegration: a universal trend; the lift  
and heave of bodies into earth so winged  
leaves may decorate a thin, green wisp.  
at her grave today, my absence; in place,  
your stoic face—no tear conceding to gravity;  
prayers recited to a crowd of closed mouths and locked knees,

and i know: it's difficult to admit you need  
someone—the steady breath, the way they lift (left)  
you to better views of what gravity  
cannot contain; your mother, now winged,  
ascends beyond pillow-white crowns and takes her taste  
of infinity, realizing life's laughable risk.

you will grieve—go to great risk  
to do so quietly. you will shape and knead  
each doughy moment: every emotion flattened in place,  
rehearsing the dignity of closed fists that refuse to lift  
or leave your side. if asked about her death, take wing  
or change topic; seek solace in brevity.

next fall, when trees dream of a world without gravity;  
when leaves line the streets and branches shiver for wrists  
bare and unsheathed; when feathers and wings  
are erased from the landscape; when every knee  
to ankle is covered in cloth and people give lifts  
to strangers who'd walk; perhaps then, in the place

of my infancy, of my awkward days; perhaps that place  
will return to me some way through your voice: the gravity  
of the moon reminiscent in every choke and lifted  
syllable. or perhaps i have underestimated the risk  
of your patience—is mine still a name you need  
to speak? perhaps it is not me, but you who has sprouted wings.

in its steady lift, the robin finds its place  
among other wings; i surrender to gravity,  
bend this risk, my body, and kneel.

## Every Time You Cry, I Pay Attention

*Mitchell Evenson*

limbless / frogs flipped on / their backs a sudden  
freeze / of all movement save the seizing / nerves  
/ feeble bodies / within a body / all memory of  
/ air and / earth and / momentary / flight and the  
glare / a sun so / arrogant her / body bags / pain /  
buckshot swallowed so / no surface / may break the  
sharp gulp and ache and / oozing inside welling /  
up through the eyes / body leaking / tears body /  
swearing / it's okay / body hold / still and soft body  
breaking through / its skin as if / cocoon  
in / the periphery

I see / the signs / face turned / sideways smile / fingers  
flicking / other fingers unmoved / re moved / able  
to reveal the static / space between your mind and  
/ your body and / your spirit meant / but your eyes  
said / and here / I am reaching / to touch / the  
field / between your shivering / shoulders you / look  
at me / your body / relieved / weep

## Via Negativa

*Leslie Williams*

You know about the longing to be made new,  
to shuck the kind veneer and zeal to be a part  
of things and instead to burrow in, to speak the fears  
of early-onset, spark-showering harm, your fuses  
blown like an old TV: alone watching  
basketball in the days of knee socks when  
hints rushed by in winter flurry, as Venus  
and the sickle moon show then hide then show  
themselves season after season, without which  
this minute can't exist. You know everything  
will come to be spit out, especially the histories  
that thrilled and mattered most, none of this a big deal  
by itself, like the unpaved road you drove today  
for the umpteenth time when nails sank deep  
in the tires, and what that represents.

## Darwin's Convex Mirror

*Vanessa Haley*

i.

So weary of teacups and talk of beaks' variations,  
the serpentine line of admirers and curiosity seekers,  
he mounted a mirror to a sycamore, positioned  
it to reflect oncoming visitors who made him weaker,  
exhausted his remaining resources, he thought,  
so, he avoided unnecessary social occasions except  
those involving his wife and children. He sought  
a cure from twenty different doctors, and kept  
a detailed journal of his symptoms: dizziness, pain  
in his digestive track, flatulence and fatigue, heart  
palpitations and insomnia. While observing brain  
surgery at Edinburgh, he fainted. That was the part  
his father could not abide, that Charles swooned  
*like a girl* in anatomy class and never completed  
his medical studies: "Had you been marooned  
on the Galapagos, forced to struggle for survival,  
you would have wilted like a flower, ill-suited  
for tropical heat, each petal shriveling; pistil,  
anther and filament powder-dry, useless."

ii.

When Emma played Chopin, Charles reclined  
on the divan, imagining her as a girl  
taking lessons in Paris. He dreamed  
of sea storms, iguanas, a giant tortoise's  
ancient leathery face; Milton going blind,  
dictating line after line of *Paradise Lost*,  
*Paradise Regained*; barnacles meticulously  
catalogued and shelved; his cousin, Fox,  
holding in the palm of one hand a golden  
scarab, reciting couplets from the dichotomous  
key to discover the insect's taxonomy.

Then Henslow whispered from a cloud:

*Charles, examine the evidence.*

*What do we know of angels?*

*Nothing. Absolutely nothing.*

*Yet what could be more numinous*

*than the venation of a dragonfly's*

*wing? Remember, "larva" means ghost,*

*or mask. Why do you ask?*

*Flight is inevitable. You divined*

*a habituating kingdom in the flow*

*and flux of fluttering finches.*

indemnity:

*S.M. Ellis*

any future better than this salt : tongued :  
off a fat lip : a small town in the endless dusk :  
of church bells : a frisbee in :  
the aster : might be worth losing :  
after all : here : a bag of chicken bones :  
is almost sick : but the robins :  
so close : mind their business :  
till one says : an octopus :  
has three hearts & I have :  
you : curiously luminous :  
wherever you are :

## Guest in the Riddle

*S.M. Ellis*

suppose we reduce again to this “I”  
abask in the faux opulence of smiling neon  
not quite “moon” though somewhere mars  
totters behind my ostrich neck:  
so we ease the grim slanderous  
birds from their final nesting place:  
where I swallowed my twin in the womb  
& grew & let’s agree  
whatever is the plural of consent  
is allowed: each bolt of basil, each  
mustard seed locked in their doppel  
can sense its alien will,  
a blubbery yolk nailed to  
a stud, is wearing out this fur:



## FICTION



## Little Black Dress

*Roberta Hartling Gates*

THREE DAYS BEFORE THE BIG New Year's Eve party that will usher in 1968, Hal's mother leads Donna up the stairs of her lavish house. And Donna, though she tries to be nonchalant, can't help being impressed by everything she sees: the celadon walls, the brightly polished sconces, the oriental runner that's anchored by long brass rods at the back of every step. She's been dating Hal, a law student, since the end of October and this is the way she imagined his house would look: elegant and restrained with none of the cheesy knick-knacks that clutter up her parents' house in Mt. Greenwood.

At the top of the stairs, Hal's mother pauses and gestures toward an open doorway. She is as elegant as her house, from her neat hips and dainty profile, to the plume of smoke spiraling from her cigarette. "This is your room," she says. "I hope you'll be comfortable."

Donna peers into the room, which is beautifully blank, the walls a quiet shade of gray, the canopy bed as high and white as a very tall wedding cake. "Thank you, Mrs. Burwell, it's lovely."

But Hal's mother is quick to correct her. "No. Call me Phoebe, please," she says in a tone that's more neutral than friendly. Then, waving her cigarette in the direction of Donna's bell-bottom jeans, she adds, "Oh, and by the way, we dress for dinner."

Donna glances down at herself but before she can say anything, Phoebe is on her way downstairs. Stunned, Donna creeps into the bedroom feeling more like a trespasser than a guest. When Hal invited her for the weekend, she'd been

nervous about meeting his parents. This is Lake Forest after all, where the per capita income is probably four times what her father brings home as a Chicago cop. But Hal had pooh-pooed her fears. "Don't worry," he said, "they'll like you just as much as I do." But now, only twenty minutes after arriving, she's doubtful.

She finds her suitcase which Hal brought up earlier and starts rummaging through it, pulling out some of the smaller items as she goes: her bras and panties, the Chanel No. 5 that her brother gave her for Christmas, a couple of letters from Phil that she still needs to answer. When she gets to her new dress, though, she pauses.

Carefully, almost reverently, she lifts it out of the tissue paper and studies it, wondering what Hal will think of it. He told her the party on New Year's Eve was a big deal and that she should wear something "tasteful but sexy" so that he could show her off.

Donna has no desire to be shown off (blending in is more what she's after), but Hal is her first real boyfriend so she'd done her best to meet his requirements without going overboard. She started by searching the dress shops close to campus, but anything made of silk was out of her price range and she hated polyester (too stiff and cheap-looking), so she finally opted to make the dress herself. It was a simple pattern: a little slip dress that skimmed the body rather than clinging to it. The only problem had been the spaghetti straps, which made wearing a bra pretty much impossible. But Donna solved that difficulty by deciding to skip one altogether. She wasn't exactly what you'd call busty, and besides there were plenty of girls who had stopped wearing bras, especially if they were into the hippie look.

At home, when she'd tried it on, the dress had seemed perfect. But now, hanging it up on one of Phoebe's padded

hangers, she's not so certain. What she'd had in mind was one of Audrey Hepburn's little black dresses from *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, but of course there's no comparison. Audrey Hepburn's dresses had been custom-made by Hollywood designers, not run up on a Singer sewing machine in the basement of a Mt. Greenwood bungalow.

Sighing, Donna returns to her suitcase and digs through it some more, eventually coming up with a dinner-worthy gray skirt (short, but not really a mini), a pair of matching tights, and a plain white blouse, which, together, make her look more like a fourteen-year-old Catholic schoolgirl than an eighteen-year-old coed. But maybe that's good, she thinks, glancing at herself in the mirror. At least no one will be able to accuse her of putting on airs or trying to look seductive.

She opens the door, ready to run downstairs, then stops, remembering suddenly that she's a guest in this house. It's always possible that someone might wander in, and if it were Phoebe, well .... Quickly Donna shoves her underwear into a drawer, then tucks the letters from Phil underneath. Phil is more of a pen pal than anything else, so his letters aren't exactly contraband, but all the same she wouldn't want to have them discovered. They're just too intense. Even the first one was like that, so compelling and almost pushy that she couldn't refuse.

*I don't know if you remember me but I used to hang out with your brother Tom a lot. Part of the reason was because I had a big crush on you. You probably didn't know that but now that I'm 10,000 miles away in Vietnam I'd like you to. I know you must be busy now that you're in college but if you ever get the chance I'd love to hear from you.*

When Donna comes down the stairs, she finds Hal at the bottom of them, looking like an H&R Block tax preparer in his

white shirt and striped tie. “C’mere,” he says, catching her hand and leading her into a book-lined room off the living room. “I want you to meet Dad.”

Hal’s father, ensconced in the lap of a massive wing chair, folds up his newspaper and gets to his feet as soon as he sees her. “So this is the young lady,” he says, his smile huge, so huge it must be genuine. Donna, smiling back and offering her hand, is amazed at how much the two men resemble each other. The father—another Harold, it turns out—is thicker and fleshier, but his sagging face is still quite handsome.

He picks up a cut-glass tumbler holding something amber-colored and rattles the ice cubes. “Hal tells me you’re on scholarship, a full ride,” he says, and Donna nods. It embarrasses her to have people talk about this, as if she’s some sort of charity case, but Hal’s father seems impressed.

“Hey, pretty and smart both,” he says, lifting his glass to her and glancing briefly at her legs. “You can’t do better than that.”

*You know what I love about your letters, Donna? It’s the way they’re so detailed. Like when you wrote and told me all about your lit class and how much you like Emily Dickinson, that was great. Even the ordinary things you do are interesting, like going to the record store and listening to a Laura Nyro album or having burgers at Joe’s Place. Actually I like hearing about everything you do because it helps me to imagine you better. It makes me feel like I’m there with you.*

Coming home from a movie the next night, Donna watches as snowflakes spiral into the windshield of Hal’s car. The sight of them, gauzy and buoyant, makes her feel dizzy, even a bit high, though it’s a natural sort of high.

She starts to sing: “Su-zy, Suzy Snowflake, look at her tumbling down,” then giggles because the song is so silly.

Hal laughs. He is in a good mood. “What, *Garfield Goose*?”

Donna is surprised. “You didn’t actually watch that show, did you?” she asks as he turns into the long lane leading to the Burwells’ garage, actually an old stable that’s been converted.

“Sure, didn’t everybody?”

“Not my brother,” says Donna. “He thought it was too stupid for words.”

“Well, that’s an older brother for you,” Hal says. He pulls into the garage and cuts the engine but makes no move to get out of the car.

“I guess,” she says, “except most of the time he acts more like my father than my brother.” She laughs a little, then adds, “But what can you do, he’s practically a clone of Dad.”

“So he’s a policeman too?”

“Well, he wants to be. He’s at the Academy.”

“Hmm,” says Hal, twisting a piece of her hair around his finger. “I hope that doesn’t mean he’ll be making you go out with a whole lot of brother officers.”

“Well, he might,” she says, only half-joking. “He’s sort of like that anyway.”

Hal seems surprised by this. “You mean he’d tell you who you should date? He’d actually do that?”

“Well, no, not directly,” says Donna. “But he has a lot of opinions, let’s put it that way.”

Hal considers this. “And what is his opinion of me?” he asks, unwinding the piece of hair he’s been playing with.

Donna has no idea how to respond to this. She knows that her brother is leery of Hal—he doesn’t like lawyers just on principle and he thinks four years is too big an age gap—but those are external things. They’re not really the things that count.

“Well, you have to understand Tom,” she says finally. “I mean, I love him and everything, but he can be pretty old-fashioned.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning if he had his way, I’d only date guys from the neighborhood. Known quantities, more or less.”

This is true, it’s how Tom thinks. What he tends to forget, though, is that nobody from the neighborhood was ever that interested in dating her. Yes, she’d had a date for the prom (a cousin of hers who took her just to be nice), and there had been a couple of other boys, too—boys that she’d dated once or twice but were every bit as backward as she was. Her mother always said it was because she was smart, that she should just be patient and wait because once she got to college things would change. But Donna, who’d always been shy, thought she was doomed. So, when Hal appeared out of the blue in the periodicals reading room, she was amazed. It didn’t seem possible that someone who wanted to date her would also be someone she wanted to date.

“But there’s nobody like that now, is there?” asks Hal.

“Like who?”

“I don’t know. An old boyfriend maybe? Somebody you used to go out with?”

She shakes her head, noticing suddenly how cold her feet are. “No. Nobody like that.”

But Hal seems unconvinced. “You’re sure?” he asks, and for a single irrational moment she thinks about Phil. But Phil’s different. He’s in Vietnam and a buddy of her brother’s. If she writes to him, it’s only because he’s in danger and she can’t help worrying about him.

“Did somebody say something? Because if they did—”

“No, of course not. It’s just that . . . well, I wondered, that’s all.”

Donna is baffled. She can’t imagine why Hal is so suspicious. “I don’t know what you’re worried about,” she says, “but you don’t need to be. Except for you, I’ve never even been in a relationship.”

As soon as the words are out of her mouth, though, she's sorry. One look at his face is enough to convince her that, however she meant it (as a token of trust?), he's not taking it that way.

"Really?" he asks. "I'm your first boyfriend? That's what you're saying?"

Donna can feel her face heating up. "Well, no, not exactly," she stammers. "There were a couple of other boys, but they were"—she shrugs her shoulders—"well, it was pretty platonic."

"But you'd been kissed before, right?"

She laughs weakly. "Yeah, sure."

"And that's about it?"

"Yes."

For a moment, Hal is quiet. "Well, actually, that explains a lot," he says, staring at the garden tools hanging on the garage wall in front of them.

There's a long silence and eventually Donna, against her better judgment, asks him what he means.

"It's just that everything is always so shocking to you," he says. "French kissing even. I could never figure it out."

Donna hangs her head as his verdict sinks in. She's tried to be blasé, willing, whatever she thought would please him, but he's right, she had been shocked the first time he removed her bra, or put her hand on him when he was hard, or slipped his fingers inside her panties. She likes their secret intimacy and how it draws a tight circle around them, but she never feels wholly herself when it's happening. Everything is so disorienting then, like trying to learn the rules to a game when you're playing it for the first time. But of course it's her fault too. If she were more experienced, more sexually mature—more like other girls!—she'd know what to expect. She wouldn't have to be so "shocked," as he put it.

She lifts her head, risking a quick look at him. "Hal, I'm sorry. Really, I am," she says, but then her voice breaks and she

stops.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” he says. “You’re not going to cry, are you? Not about something like that?”

But Donna, hearing the irritation in his voice, hides her face in her hands and cries that much harder. A moment later, though, he relents, reaching out for her and pulling her into his shoulder.

“You’re crazy, you know that, Donna? I mean, what do you think? That I want a girl who’s been around the block a hundred times?” He kisses the top of her head. “No, of course not. I want someone like you. Someone sweet and unspoiled.”

For a fleeting moment, Donna wonders if what he actually means is naïve and malleable—a girl he can boss around and mold to his liking—but then he is kissing her, his tongue inside her mouth, and the thought melts away as she surrenders to the soft urgent coaxing of his mouth.

*You want to know the first time I noticed you? Really noticed you? I think I was around 15 so you must have been about 12. It was in the summer, a really hot day. Your grandma was over and she was out in the yard hanging up some clothes. But then for some reason she got scared. I don’t know why. A bumblebee maybe. She was practically hysterical though, running all around with her apron up over her head. Tom and I just stood there. We didn’t know what to do. But you came out of the house with a glass of water and took charge. You got her to calm down, take a sip of the water. Then you sat with her awhile on that old glider of yours. You talked to her so quiet. It was almost like singing. Sort of the way you’d sing to a baby.*

*You were just a skinny little kid then. But I noticed you all right. It’s when I started to think of you as special. And you’re even more special now . . .*

The New Year's Eve party is hosted by a girl named Heather, who has high, sharp cheekbones and a neck so long it seems almost springy, like one of those bobblehead dolls. "Hey, Hal, look at you," she gushes as they arrive, then kisses him flat on the lips. She gives Donna a quick peck. "Watch out for this one," she says, indicating Hal with a quick flutter of bracelets.

Hal sweeps Donna through the house—a house even larger than his—and it's clear that everyone knows everyone else. They all went to school together. Their parents are friends. They are a tribe, sharing the same rituals, the same language. Donna pastes on a smile and tries to remember the names coming at her. John, an MBA student at the University of Chicago. Sandra, his date, who goes to Wellesley and wears a tight silvery dress that makes her look like a mermaid. Bonnie—or is it Bunny?—a tall, tennis-y girl with a faint mustache and a bored expression. And Scott, a medical student at Rush who actually smiles at her.

Hal guides her around the dining room table, loading up her plate with delicacies: thick glossy shrimp with their little pink fans, rosy slices of roast beef, stuffed mushrooms smelling of garlic, chocolate truffles in silvery paper.

Halfway around, though, he stops in front of a tray of cucumber slices decorated with cream cheese and bits of pimienta. "Here, open up," he says, thrusting a slice into her mouth. And suddenly, out of nowhere, she wonders if Phil ever has a chance to take communion, if there's a priest with them out there in the jungle, just in case.

*It's sort of funny the way you get used to things over here. Waking up in a hole for instance. After a while it seems normal. You even get used to the leeches. They can attach in some pretty private places (if you know what I mean). We tuck our pants into our boots and cinch up our belts as tight as we can but in the morning there they are, black slimy things about 2 in. long. You*

*can yank them off but they've got some sort of spit that thins the blood so you'll bleed for a long time if you do. Lt. Graham showed us how the Vietnamese do it. You take some salt and put it in a piece of cloth and then wet the cloth and apply it. After a while the leech just falls off. But it can take a long time. I'm generally not that patient. You wake up and you just want those mother-suckers (joke!) off you.*

A couple of hours later, Donna finds herself drifting back into the dining room where Hal and his buddies are huddled around the bar. So far he's danced with her only twice, and she can't help wondering why he even bothered to bring her.

She is standing there, staring bleakly at the table with its tall candles and tasteful arrangement of greens, when Sandra, the girl in the mermaid dress, glides up beside her. She is tall, much taller than Donna, and wears carmine-colored lipstick that makes her look like a movie star. She picks up one of the chubby stuffed mushrooms and slips it into her mouth.

"By the way, I love your dress," she tells Donna. "It reminds me of Holly Golightly. You know, that movie with Audrey Hepburn."

Donna, buoyed by her comment, is happy to return the compliment. "I love yours, too. It's really gorgeous, the way it sparkles."

Sandra glances down at herself, as if knowing how fantastic her dress is, then launches into the story of its purchase. What happened was, she'd been shopping for Christmas presents, looking for a scarf for her mother, or maybe a blouse, when she saw this dress, which just happened to be in her size, and so . . .

Donna nods, trying to look interested when, out of the corner of her eye, she notices that Hal has disappeared. Where? she wonders, feeling vaguely uneasy.

"And what about yours?" Sandra says finally, having come to the end of her story.

"Mine?"

Sandra nods in the direction of Donna's dress. "Yeah, where did you find a dress like that? I'd love to know."

Donna stands there blankly, not wanting to say that she made it herself.

"It's not a secret, is it?" asks Sandra. "Some little shop on Oak Street you don't want me to know about?"

Donna shakes her head, ready to say that the dress came from Field's—she knows they sell nice things there—when Sandra's date swoops down on her. "Hey, enough feeding your face," he says. "We need to dance."

Sandra, laughing as she's led away, gives Donna a small wave. "I'll make you tell me later," she says, disappearing into the next room.

*I think I've been telling you too much about what it's like to be over here. Like what happened to McNally when he stepped on that mine, I never should've told you about that. You didn't need to know the details. But something happens when I write to you. I start out answering your questions and it's like I can't stop. I don't even know what I'm going to say until I've written it down. Writing to you is my therapy, I guess, a way of putting things in perspective. Without you, I don't think I'd know how I felt about anything. That's how essential you are to me.*

"You look lonely," says a voice beside Donna, who jumps, nearly overturning her plate of Swedish meatballs. But then she sees it's the med student—what was his name, Scott?—and relaxes, remembering his smile from the introductions.

He hands her a glass of champagne and asks what she thinks of the party. "On a scale of one to ten, what would you give it?"

"Right now, right this minute?" she asks, and he nods. "Oh, I don't know, a six or a seven maybe."

"Really?"

“Okay, a four or a five.”

He grins. “How about a two-and-a-half? That’s what I’d give it.” She looks at him in surprise and he explains. “Heather’s been having these New Year’s Eve parties since, I don’t know, the Middle Ages at least, and nothing ever changes. Some of the girls even wear the same dresses. Like that girl over there, the one by the piano who’s wearing a dress that looks like it’s made out of gum wrappers.”

“You mean Sandra?” says Donna, and he nods.

“Every year, the same dress—”

“But she told me she bought it this Christmas.”

“I swear,” he says, holding up his palm like a Boy Scout. “Every year, the same tinfoil dress.”

Donna senses then that he’s joking and laughs, realizing that for the first time tonight she is actually having fun. He finishes the rest of his drink and gives her a lingering look. “Hey, dance with me, will you?” he asks. When she hesitates, he adds, “Hal won’t mind, will he?”

She looks up at him and laughs. “I don’t even know where he is,” she says and follows him onto the parquet floor.

*By now I’ve told everybody in the squad about you. Maybe even the whole platoon. I’ve sort of lost track. And they all say the same thing, that I’m incredibly lucky to have a girl who’s so pretty and sweet and also faithful. A lot of guys out here have gotten Dear John letters. And not just the single guys either. Some of the married ones too. You feel real bad for them. A guy who gets that kind of letter loses it. Can’t sleep, can’t concentrate, forgets to look where he’s walking.*

When they get back from the party, Hal makes a fire in the den, and Donna, feeling drowsy and contented—a little tipsy actually—watches as the flames take root, pretending to

herself that this is her house, her fireplace, her beautiful sofa. She even kicks off her shoes and tucks her feet underneath her. It's a defiant act, something that would pain Phoebe if she were here. She's not, though, because she and Hal's father are at a party of their own.

Hal sits down beside her with a bottle of red wine in one hand and a pair of wine glasses in the other. "I was watching you at the party," he says. "It looked like you and Scott were having a good time."

"Yeah, I guess," she says, having heard the accusation in his voice. He starts to pour her some wine, but she shakes her head. "No, none for me."

But Hal pours her some anyway. "I guess the two of you had a lot to say to each other."

"No, not really. Just party talk, that's all."

Hal downs his glass and pours another. "You were dancing with him, too."

She shrugs, wondering how much he's had to drink. "There's no law against that, is there?"

"You even had your hand on his neck. I saw you."

Donna stares at him, incredulous. "Well, what do you expect, Hal? If you'd hung around instead of going off wherever it was that you went, I wouldn't have been dancing with Scott. I probably wouldn't even have talked to him."

Donna, who's surprised by this outburst, can see that Hal is too. For several long moments, he scrutinizes her, his face so close to hers that she actually feels the heat of his anger. She braces herself for something sarcastic or cutting, but then, unexpectedly, he relaxes. "You're right, I'm overreacting," he says. "Scott's harmless."

Donna doesn't answer but manages a smile. She doesn't want to fight. Not on New Year's Eve. Not in his beautiful house.

He puts an arm around her and pulls her toward him. Grateful, she nestles into the well of his shoulder and closes her eyes. He smells good: a mixture of alcohol and English Leather cologne, along with something fainter that must be the smell of sweat. She lifts her head, offering him her mouth and he starts to kiss her, small darting kisses that tingle like snowflakes.

But then she pulls away: "Wait, Hal, when are your parents coming home?"

"Don't worry," he says. "It's New Year's Eve. They won't be home for another hour or two. It gives us plenty of time."

Suddenly she feels weightless. "What do you mean, plenty of time?"

He lifts the curtain of her hair and kisses the rim of her ear. "I mean, here we are on New Year's Eve, just the two of us, and upstairs there's a very nice guest room, the one you're staying in actually." He pauses for a moment, his tongue in the hollow of her ear, then adds: "So why don't you just go up there and wait for your guest."

"No," she says as a cold, sick dread spreads through her. "No, it's too big a step. I couldn't—"

"Sure, you can," he says, taking one of her hands. "Just say yes, and the rest will be easy."

She stares at her hand, mute and white, like a little mouse trapped inside his, and shudders. So this is where her neediness has led her. She had thought that he wanted to show her off to his friends. To have his parents meet her. To spend uninterrupted time with her. But now she wonders: was it only a strategy, a way of arriving at this moment?

"I know it's your first time," he says, his tone so earnest it sounds like something from a movie. "But I won't hurt you, I promise. I'll go in slow. You'll like it."

"No," she says, yanking her hand away. "I can't. It's too much."

Beside her, Hal's anger cracks open. "So what are you doing? Saving it for that guy in Nam?"

"What?"

"It's that guy, isn't it? Phil or whatever his name is, the one you write to all the time."

Donna freezes. Everything around her stops. The fire stops crackling. The clock stops ticking. Even her breathing is suppressed. "How do you know about him?" she asks.

Hal snorts. "C'mon, you leave his letters all over."

Donna is shocked. He has been in her room, he has looked through her things?

"Who is he anyway?" asks Hal. "Some dip-shit kid you went to high school with or what?"

"Well, sort of," she says in a kind of daze. "Mostly, though, he's a friend of Tom's."

Hal laughs scornfully. "Somebody from the neighborhood."

Donna stares at the fire, pretending she hasn't heard him.

"So what happened? Did he get drafted?"

"No, he enlisted."

"Enlisted? You're kidding? Who the hell enlists these days?"

Donna starts to tell him about Phil's father, how he fought his way across France in the last war, but Hal interrupts her.

"What do you think this is, Donna—a war against Hitler? We're not saving the world from Communism or anything else, we're napalming a little country the size of Indiana right out of existence."

She glares at him, outraged that he's appropriating the liberal argument and using it against Phil as if he were the one who'd started this war. "Well, maybe you're right, Hal. Maybe we shouldn't be there. But I do know one thing: if it weren't for Phil and a lot of other guys like him, you'd be the one out there sleeping in holes and hobbling around on rotten feet. You'd be

the one waking up in the morning covered with leeches. You'd be—"

"So he's a hero, is that it?"

Donna says nothing. A hero? She's not even sure what that is.

"Okay, Donna, if that's the way you feel," he says, throwing her a tight, narrow look. "But when he's touching you, think about the villages he's burned and the babies he's killed. Because no matter what you think, he's no different, he's not special. The dirt from this war is all over him."

Donna stares back at him, her fury contracting to a hard, sharp point. "You think you know everything, don't you?" she says, so enraged she starts drumming his chest with her fists. "I hate that about you. I hate it, hate it, hate it." He laughs—it's a game to him—and catches her by the wrists, squeezing them hard. Then, all of a sudden, his mouth is on hers and he's pushing her backwards onto the couch. Gripping her shoulders, he kisses her neck and the tops of her breasts, his mouth voracious and big.

"Hal, don't," she pleads as he tugs on her dress. But it's too late. The strap gives way and his tongue starts flickering over her nipple as if she had planned to bare her breast at that exact moment. She turns her face to the back of the sofa, feeling numb, almost as if she'd slipped outside herself and were watching from a distance. *This isn't happening. It can't be.*

But then she feels his hands under her skirt. "Hal, no, what are you doing?" she cries, but she knows what he is doing: he is pulling down her pantyhose. She tries to twist away, but he has her pinned down.

"Hey, relax, will you," he says, grunting as he struggles with the pantyhose. His voice is light, teasing almost, but his breathing is heavy, like an animal's.

She tries to sit up, to back herself into the corner, but it only gives him more leverage. One or two quick pulls and her

pantyhose are gone, he's tossed them onto the floor.

She thrashes against him, but he manages to wedge his hand between her clenched thighs.

"No, get off me," she screams as panic seizes her and she starts to sob.

Then, without warning, light floods the room. It is Hal's father, he's switched on the overhead. "Well, well," he says, surveying them with bleary eyes, "this is a pretty little scene."

Hal leaps off Donna and she sits up, hastily clutching the top of her dress.

Mr. Burwell looks at them for another moment or two, then says: "Tell me, son, is there such a shortage of bedrooms in this house that you can't find one in which to maul your little houseguest?"

"Dad. We were just talking."

"I guess that's why her tit was hanging out of her dress," he says, loosening his tie and looking unsteadily in Donna's direction. "Quite a pretty little tit, I might add."

"Dad, for God's sake," she hears Hal saying, but she is gone, out of the room, running up the stairs, not looking back, not listening.

*You are such a sweet girl, Donna, that I find myself caring more and more about you all the time. I am trying my hardest not to fall in love with you because I know you said we should wait. But I'm not sure how much longer I can hold out. It's just there inside me, like a little seed, but I won't let it grow unless you say it's okay.*

Donna sits on her suitcase at the end of the Burwells' long lane, waiting for Tom to come get her. Huddled against the cold, too exhausted even to cry, she feels flattened, ashamed, worthless. She thought she could visit Hal in his world and fit in, but that was a joke. *She* was a joke: too trusting, too stupid,

too out of her league to have any inkling of what could happen. And then, when it did, she wasn't ready. She was helpless. The depth of her inadequacy fills her with a shame so pervasive and heavy it feels like paralysis. She tries to think ahead to tomorrow when she'll wake up in her own bed, but comforting as that thought is, she knows it won't change anything: she'll still be the girl whose tit was hanging out of her dress.

It has started to snow, big idle flakes that fall as gently as feathers. Watching their leisurely descent, she thinks about Phil who keeps telling her how much he misses the snow now that he has to live in a hot steamy jungle. He is such a sweet guy, writing her two or three letters a week and always saying the nicest things in them. So nice, in fact, that they almost make up for the times in her life when she was ignored or passed over or not seen at all. It's hard to fathom, but she could probably tell him anything and he'd be interested.

With Hal it was different. All he ever did was find fault. She was boring at parties and her clothes weren't right and she wasn't sexy enough and so on and so forth. But she never contradicted him because she thought he knew things that she didn't. And she let him boss her around even when it came to little things, like her dress. He'd told her it should be "tasteful but sexy"—two things that are basically opposites—and like a fool she'd tried hard to give him what he wanted. But it doesn't matter anymore, because even if she could repair the strap, she'd never want to wear— But here she stops, wondering if she even packed her dress. She tries to remember, but she was in such a hurry, throwing things into her bag one after the other, that she has no idea. But it's not like it matters.

The snowfall is still very light, but a snowplow clanks by nevertheless, its orange light rotating as it momentarily fills the air with commotion. But then it moves on, leaving the street even quieter than it was before. Donna has never felt more alone. The houses, massive and a little sinister, are so dark they

could be abandoned. It's almost as if a silent army has swept through the neighborhood, extinguishing everyone but herself.

Donna stamps her feet just to make a little noise, then hears a car in the distance. She peers down the street, hoping for Tom's VW Beetle but realizing, as soon as she sees the car's shape, that it's a Pontiac Firebird. Donna is generally not that good with makes or models, but she knows a Firebird when she sees one because it's the car Phil has his heart set on. He's saving up now so he can buy one as soon as Uncle Sam cuts him loose. He says it will be a reward for all those months he's spent "humping the boonies."

*And is she also a reward?* The question, darting into her head out of nowhere, cuts through her like an electrical charge. It's as if something she'd understood only vaguely has suddenly taken on a solid shape. Because isn't that what he's been trying to tell her? Doesn't he manage to work it into every letter he sends her? She feels a little guilty (shouldn't she be pleased, or at least flattered?) but it's not that simple, because even though Phil is nicer than Hal—a thousand times nicer—in one way he's not that much different. If Hal wanted to change her, then Phil is counting on her to stay the same. And it's too late for that. In his mind, she's still Tom's shy little sister, a girl who might be able to keep him alive if she just loves him enough. And, who knows, maybe she will fall in love with him, maybe it will be for keeps. But she's different now. Not the timid little creature Hal always accused her of being, and certainly not the fantasy girl Phil thinks about just before falling asleep. She's someone else, someone who's still emerging. She doesn't know who that will be, but for now she's content to wait and see.

A light comes on in the Burwells' house, and for a moment Donna panics, afraid that someone might see her. But then the light goes out. Just someone getting up to go to the bathroom, she thinks— And then it comes to her, where her dress is. It's in the guest bathroom, hanging by its one remaining strap from

a hook on the door. Fleetinglly, she thinks about Phoebe and wonders how she'll react when she finds it. It's sure to be an ordeal for her, like opening up a drawer and finding the molted skin of a snake in with her undies.

Donna smiles at the thought—no, she doesn't just smile, she decides to laugh. She looks around at the snow that's still coming down. Layer by layer, it's coating everything in its way—rooftops, tree limbs, even the tiniest of twigs—and transforming them into something soft and radiantly white. Donna doesn't know how much longer she'll have to sit here and wait, but she's comfortable floating in this blank world where she's at the center of something new and fresh and promising.

## Small Destinies

*Cristina Baptista*

IN THE FIRST PHOTOGRAPH MY FATHER and I take together in 17 years, we look like bleached bone. The sun is overbearing, a shocking flash gone off at the wrong time. We are two embracing ghosts, our limbs a fading plasma enmeshed with the dry landscape that blurs behind us, entwined with concrete houses and blue sky, also faded like it's been left out too long, or washed too often, beat on the scrub board with rock-hard soap like my grandmother, Avó, used to do until her raw hands bled on the handkerchiefs, which had to then be bleached. My grandfather had wanted to beat her for it, but I knew he didn't because I had been there, watching with my four-year-old eyes. That was years ago, but time offers no promise of forgiving or forgetting.

It's a fitting image, this photograph my cousin took, posing Papa and me with arms awkwardly angled for some unknown leap towards posterity—I look half-ready to soar; so does my father, who has always wished he could fly, since he was a little boy living up in the craggy cork-tree covered hills of Alcaravia. The day we arrive, I let my cousin go further South, to the Algarve, without me. He does not try hard to convince me to go. I remain behind in my ancestral, paternal hometown. The first few hours back, my suitcases still in the driveway, I make the rounds visiting relatives who remember me only as a child or teenager. I am thankful that no one tells me I look like my mother. I don't, anyhow. But I know that people seem to think it helps me to say it anyway.

Then, we are left to ourselves. And I am left to relearn a life with a father whom I have not seen in seventeen years, a house I have not seen—or felt—in eighteen. It is like regaining

a lost bone that I had not noticed was taken in the first place. I had gotten along well—but was that enough? I was conscious of the deprivation only now that it was made known.

It is quiet here.

We enter through the backdoor. Stepping into the house, I feel as if no time at all has passed. Doilies are arranged behind the paned glass of the kitchen hutch, hanging over shelves in a scalloped pattern. Still there from last time, when I was playing at being Mãe, but—no dust. I had tried to make this place homey, compensating for the missing mother. He had tried to keep up with the tasks. That's how we've always been—rhythmically plugging away at holes, anxious to staunch the flow that gives what we don't want or takes what we do. We had always moved like synchronized fire fighters ready with a hose and buckets before the flames even started. This is what death does: it makes those left behind over-prepared for more.

I look into the cabinet and try to avoid my reflection, and his behind me. My father may have broken four (by his count, he tells me) decorative plates in the intervening years—my fault for putting them on the lower shelf right by the back door where they are wont to be kicked by accident. The remaining ones are still birds on their perches, albeit looking a bit faded and resentful; lost time has only brought them bare patches.

When he steps away to wash his hands at the sink, I turn to better examine where I am going to live for the next month. With whom. I try to imagine myself in one of the simple wooden chairs at the square table with a cloth either too late or too early for Christmas: it is covered in poinsettia prints. I try to imagine what the parquet will feel like underfoot once I take off my sneakers. I do not ask about J. I do not try to imagine him there, and me taking his spot. I half wish I knew which of the four kitchen chairs he preferred, so I could pick another.

But I know better. It may have been J's unexpected death that brought me here, but it would not be the glue binding me back into my father's book. I was not some new chapter to replace the old. I was my own story, deserving of my own tales.

The town that has claimed us, where our roots begin, is a place ashamed, although it does not know it. It is really a collection of hills called a "civil parish," and it arranges itself among thin curves of flaking Portuguese roads, hollow grounds, and the shadow of as Colinas, the Hills, as if the stucco houses themselves are an outcropping. It is a place worthy of gnomes or humble creatures. Grass seldom grows here, and the ground is red and parched, dotted with lagartixas, or geckos; portly orange millipedes; and squat, black spiders that flatten like stains upon a swarthy skin. The summer I return to Alcaravia, it hadn't rained in so long that the ground had shed, cracked, and crushed itself into a series of veins and arteries meant for nothing to flow. The animal life fills the spaces and makes homes in the new holes that offer protection. Now and then, slim snakes slide from a pile of abandoned terracotta bricks or a heap of fallen cork limbs after a rainstorm that has happened so long ago no one remembers it, not even in dreams.

In the heat, the town is still, a parched throat moving painfully up a body, the wind like a strong clearing of this throat. In the air, there are words understood before they are spoken.

Such is always the case in a religious country. Among Catholics, the holy is ubiquitous. There is no way for a Portuguese Catholic to study anything within view without overlaying it with a sacredness that is felt before seen.

We all have our idiosyncrasies, our foibles. The goal is to surround ourselves with as many people who share them as we can so that no one notices.

While inside our house, I glance at the windowsill facing the street—and now I know what Papa does with the cards I write, the photographs I or other family members have sent over the years. Sheaves and sheaves of faded papers, birthday cards, Christmas cards, postcards. Every one of them sanded-looking. “Papa,” I say in a shocked way. I forget that we are basically strangers. “Anyone could look into the window and read the cards! These are private notes!”

He laughs. “Oh, I like people seeing that I’m worth writing to. Anyway, not enough of the old snoops around here are left and those who are don’t know English.”

“How about the young people?” I remind him. “They all know English these days.”

“True,” he says, “but there aren’t any young people, really, left in Alcaravia. They’ve all gone to bigger cities like Lisboa or left the country.”

While I’m there that summer, I don’t touch the cards on the windowsill, though part of me wants to sweep them into a neat stack and put them in a drawer. I am not one to disturb the ashes of the household gods of memory. I notice that most of the words are too faded by month after month of sunlight, the cheap cards too warped and images too disfigured to really attract even the nosiest neighbor’s attention. One card with a grinning snowman set in the forefront of a New England green, complete with congregational church-and-steeple and iced-windows, looks curiously misplaced in this dry country where “winter” connotes grayer, rain-filled skies rather than snow.

It’s the photographs that shock me most because I am everywhere, fixed on the refrigerator beneath magnets, or on the mantelpiece, or framed on bookshelves without any books. I am looking out from my 18-year-old face here, from beneath my college graduation mortarboard there. Here I am at three,

elbowing my way against two of my older cousins whom I haven't seen in years, trying to find the camera. How young my mother looks here—not fully smiling, to hide crooked teeth. Here she is again, unsmiling once more, sitting on an afghan spread across a strange bed in a windowless pickle-green room. I recognize it as the house I'm in, before the renovation. And here, holding a bundle that can only be me, or maybe a sack of laundry, or a bag of flour she would not know how to do anything with. She never could bake without burning something. I do not see any of all three of us, nor any photographs of my father himself, save a few from his childhood. They are black-and-white, square, and crimp-edged. They curl like the autumn leaves I'll have to sweep from the sidewalks once I get back to Connecticut.

I pick up one in which he appears about two and looks strikingly like me (or vice versa), and he says, “oh, I was so frail then. They had to prop me up against that tree there. And those shoes and that coat? Borrowed from the photographer. I never saw those again. We couldn't afford such things.”

That first day passes with such niceties and continuous circling around each other. I want to hug him, and I know he wants to hug me, but there was already one deep embrace at the airport that caught us both by surprise and we know that that will be enough for today. When I ask my father—who is now, I notice more fully, pencil-thin with a scraped look, his once thick curls cut far too close to the scalp, and even missing a bit in the back—if I look old, he says, kindly, in a voice that sounds like it needs water, “You have the same smile.”

I joke that I shouldn't. He'd missed the two years I wore braces, thanks to baby teeth that had to be pulled to make room for permanent teeth—the braces forcing room where the incisors would take root.

“I'm sorry I missed all that. But—now, here you are. Aqui, comigo.”

His smile is the same, too, and as I get used to his new thinness (he's always been rail-thin, but this is a new hungry look, whittled and wasted), I start to see the old him taking form beneath, like what I see before me is only some sort of mirage or a chiseling away of soft stone and it's fading and falling away to reveal the real Papa—the real Tiago Bettencourt who hasn't heard me call him Pai in person in years.

I spend another half hour sifting through photographs. There is no order to them—he simply puts them where there is room. He leaves me to it and takes my suitcase and carry-on upstairs. With him gone, I take out my smartphone and snap a few shots of photographs I have not seen before. I will spend my nights in bed, in the dark, zooming in on those images and learning nothing I couldn't already guess.

I only find one photograph of J. He is with my father. It had been taken in Hartford, Connecticut back in the late 1990s. I recognize the park behind them, the blue teardrop dome atop the Colt Building. J is standing next to Pai looking tall and elegant, even though both men are about five-foot-nine or –ten. Papa is shouldered squarely against J. It is hard to see where one of their arms ends, and the other begins. They are not smiling or unsmiling; they are simply looking straight into the camera in an aloof and serene way. Relaxed as schoolboys, a look betraying their ages. A shadow falls halfway across their bodies, the lower parts of their legs and shoes darkened to an indiscriminate black.

That's when I remember: I had taken this photograph.

BECAUSE OUR HOUSE IS HIGH in the mountains, it is seen from miles away. It looks larger than it is—looming and strong. But it is subjected to high winds, not just probing eyes, and every year brings more shaking. The grounds below us are partially hollow grutas. My father refuses to go into these

caverns: he's always been afraid of the dark. Even now, I see he still sleeps with a nightlight on in the bathroom, and I have to shut my bedroom door across the hall not to be bothered by it at night.

The cracks on the walls upstairs are cobwebbing across switch plates, door frames, baseboards. They know no barriers, urge themselves beyond borders, sending abstractions into the robin's-egg blue of my bedroom, the eggshell white (why are we obsessed with eggs when it comes to paint colors?) of the main hallway.

Some people may think the cracks make the house ugly, like spider veins marring the once-sculpted legs of an aging runner. I remember how disappointed my mother was every time we came here for the summer to find the previous year's new coat of paint had not acted like a glue or bandage or tourniquet, keeping the cracks at bay. She would hate the look of our old house. She would say, "This dump is falling apart" and "I miss our house in America." I am glad for the transformation.

These cracks add a haunted, delicious beauty to the walls, the way spider webs add a gemlike quality to a forest. Even when no one lives there, something will keep moving, shifting, shaping. Things open up without human intervention. We must accept there are things we can't control and learn to tether them to the possibilities that we think make our lives. Then we must learn to let them go again.

Even now, as I think this, at this very moment far from the Old Country, there are hairline fractures spreading. I can't prove it, but it must be true. Like God. Like Pai's ineffable grief when my mother died, and his incommunicable connection when J arrived. You can't prove to me the opposite.

MY FATHER'S APPETITE HASN'T changed—voracious, desperate eating in large spoonfuls and hunks of buttered

bread to help push it all down. He often eats fruit and cheese directly after a fish stew he's left simmering on the stove all day, having reheated it as he patiently waits for me to re-acclimate myself with the shower knobs upstairs, the arrangement of the furniture, the trick to getting the sticky lock in the back door to turn.

The first day I arrive, I come downstairs feeling clean and strange and not as hungry as I thought after a six-and-a-half-hour flight delayed four and a half hours at JFK and two and a half hours of customs and a ride home (because despite being away for half a lifetime, I still call Alcaravia that). I haven't eaten on the plane because dinner had been served at 3 a.m. New York time and breakfast at 1:30 p.m. Portugal time and I was too anxious to eat, too tired, too uninterested in food. I could only think of getting here, and wondered why, before I left Connecticut, another relative told me, "I'm nervous for you."

When he came to pick me up at the airport, my cousin, who lives in town here half the year and in America the other half, had charged me with fattening my father up. It was a strange thing to prioritize telling someone who had not seen her father in the better part of two decades, but I suppose it was the only tangible thing he could offer—the only physical gift I may be able to give my father. I could not reverse or regain time. I could not spill an adult life of memories into his ear all at once so that he could understand the me of now. I could not fill him with the sense of proper fatherhood when he had not been a father to me for some time.

Yet, I loved him. Despite J nearly ruining everything, changing and taking so much from us, I loved my father. And I would do my best by him. I had promised my cousin that my father would eat every meal, every bite, every crumb I put before him. That had been the end of the discussion.

At 10:30 each night, I pray the rosary as I look out my

bedroom window. I sit on the edge of my bed and rest my chin on the ledge of the sill, feeling young again. I don't care that my back will hurt in the morning. One evening, I hear sheep bleating, down in the valley, for a minute or so—a throaty, desperate, mournful sound. Then, they stop—or their piteous voices became lost upon the wind. Wind slays all noise here, paving the way only for its own voice, like a farmer clearing a field, razing it to fine rocks once all the vegetation is cleared. I keep saying the rosary and tell myself, I like that we pray mysteries. It is the last thought I have before falling asleep.

IT TAKES A COUPLE OF DAYS, and a few meals, a few walks around the rutted roads filled with goat droppings and pitted stone, but we finally talk about J. Papa tells me he'd already been ill before the sickness claimed him.

“Like with fever and flu?” I asked.

“No—not that kind of illness.” Pai hesitates but keeps walking. “It’s nothing the doctors could really see.”

“What do you mean?”

“He had thirteen demons around him. Every time I looked at J, all I could see were those demons eating at his body and I didn't even want to look at the end. When he was dying and wasting away, those demons were fat and bloated.”

I nod.

“And his clothes,” Papa adds, “were like ash. All burned. Of course, only I could see.”

I nod.

“I think J could see, too, but he couldn't really talk in the end. And it wasn't him in the end, anyway.”

I am still nodding but there is nothing to say that will change anything.

I never knew what to believe from my father, because I did believe every word he said and also did see how unstable he

sounded. Had I not been witness to those happenings years ago in Connecticut, the miracles J had catalyzed, and that Papa and I had experienced, I would have laughed. I would have walked out the door. I would never have come here. But here was Tiago Bettencourt, in his mid-60s, sounding rational and calm and talking about demons and burnt clothes only he could see. I understood that everything is strange and impossible until it actually happens. No one sees wars coming as swiftly as they do. No one predicts the precise moment of shifting from “safe” to “accident.” Even a pandemic seems impossible until it hits everyone nearly all at once and ceases to be a laughing matter.

They say, “God works in mysterious ways.” No one says anything about the Devil’s mysterious work. The Devil works in ways so obvious that people can’t see them. I didn’t want to think it, but I wanted to know who was behind everything here. What exactly was living in this town? What had each of us brought to this house?

On another day that first week, Papa takes me to visit the old farmland, now overrun with thickets, but with a beautiful copse of lemon trees on one side. I find an 1883 coin there and hold it in my palm and press the coolness out of it. It turns both of my hands sooty and I don’t care. I pretend it was once my great-grandfather’s. I pretend it smells of lemons. I think briefly of putting it back in the ground but then pocket it instead.

For some reason, Papa is loose and loquacious when we come back from the lemon tree property. We are talking about my schooling, my job, and my friends. I ask him about relatives who used to live in town but have since died or moved to Canada or Switzerland or England. He tells me that, about a dozen times since he’s returned to Alcaravia, he has been mistaken for another man in a bordering town.

“So close to this other town,” Papa marvels, “but only recently people start to call me Mário and ask about children I

don't have. Well, one day, I was leaving a mass there at Igreja da Virgem Santa and I saw someone studying me and it was like looking into a mirror. Is that what they say? 'Like looking into a mirror?'

"Yes, that's right."

I learn that no one talked—the two doppelgängers didn't approach one another. "I didn't even like to look," Papa says, shrinking up his nose, wrinkling his face with a look I have never seen him not do when he is worried. "I don't like to see something like me looking at myself."

I don't tell him that this story scares and amuses me. It is also *déjà vu*. That was J.—a reflection of my father without being my father. A safe reflection. Someone Pai could look at without recoiling or being ashamed. So close, he couldn't see it.

This other man, though—I'll bet this was some long-lost cousin. The man has the same coloring, nose, and haircut, I learn. "It's why I keep cutting my hair so short. I'm trying to not look like this other man, but I keep getting called 'Mário.'" When Pai saw him last, the stranger had been wearing blue jeans. I couldn't even imagine my father in anything but khaki or black trousers. I wish someone had spoken to the other, but I imagine how terrifying it may be to realize that you may not be alone in your body—someone may be sharing it, and not even a twin. Cases of mistaken identity do happen all the time, according to Forensic Files.

Maybe it's better the men didn't say a word, only nodded. Mysteries often sustain us better than truths, some of which may be so underwhelming or overwhelming that they are able to destroy a life in an instant.

"I understand, Papa. I don't think I'd want to see someone who looked like me, either. It would be like someone had lived a whole other life that was meant to be mine and I would think I was missing something. Or I'd probably think, 'How ugly

I am. I look so much better in the mirror.’ What a hit to my vanity,” I joke.

“Aurora, you’re always beautiful to me,” he says with the seriousness of a prayer. “And your life is good as is.”

It is nice to be outside where the wind is an excuse for silence, or the red setting sun stunning enough to be a reason to just watch. Our togetherness is fused by the emptiness of a space someone else could fill. Maybe my mother. Maybe J. Maybe someone we have not met yet.

We are bonded by absence. It is strange to be reunited with someone after so many years and to still know what is going on in his head. When you share a suffering, a loss with someone the way he lost his wife and I my mother, you can’t not recall what it was like to be united in the mental space of grief. And not just any grief, but the particular one of losing a person whom you both knew intimately, albeit in different ways. In ways that no one other than you two would know. It felt like a dark secret that would devour us and yet we had let it, for years, chew slowly.

Me being an only child, with no other children to spread the grief around and help carry that burden, it was just him and me. Here we both were now, across the Atlantic and far from the grasp of loss, or the direct site of it, and yet that grip was strong enough to rattle us both. Here we were, following another loss. We moved like twigs in the breeze, the very tips of branches with their crown shyness that meant they would never touch—only get close. And when Papa takes me to the driest patch of land at the corner of our old property—right where it drops to the new highway below—opening his arms broadly and turning to show me how much we still own, I keep thinking of that moment when I was a child in our backyard in Connecticut, planting that snatched lock of my dead mother’s hair as if she would regrow from it. I had prayed over that small hole in the ground and refilled it with red dust and rock. I had

laid that hair in there like a sacrifice to a great God. But I had made a mistake. For I was young and had prayed only to my mother, not to the Holy Father or Holy Spirit or the Saints in Heaven. I had forgotten how. I had been a bad Catholic. I had failed in everything Papa had told me. How stupid I had been, but how hopeful.

That was more a funeral to me than my mother's actual one at the cemetery. I had spent many years after that burial digging things up. Mostly, it was my emotions that I kept planting, uprooting, replanting in some place no one could see. I spent years wondering why J. drifted into our lives afterward and not my mother, sprung from the ground like bursts of spoonwood blossoms. I should have known better than to think of my mother in terms of a beautiful yet poisonous plant. We do reap what we sow. Some of us have mislabeled our seeds.

It is hard to see how similar things are at root. Sometimes, we don't see it until death is before us, the same way it seems odd to think that dinosaurs and birds are related. But then you go to a museum and you see the skeletons of Dromaeosauridae and how, when they died, they curved their necks and, suddenly, you're looking at a swan tucking its face under its wing in the throes of dying. And you see that, inside, all things are the same, especially in the end. That is sort of like the silence. Everything, and nothing, is in that. It is the hole in the ground. It is the hole in the throat.

Next, Papa shows me the brook where he had been forced to drown kittens as a child, and it makes me sorry for him, and it makes me ashamed to be there, as if I am intruding upon some private mourning. Because his family had been too poor to have kept those kittens, and he had done it without knowing that it was wrong. He had even done it with glee—you could tell without him saying it—because he had wanted to make his father proud. I knew exactly what that was like. He didn't have to explain it to me beyond the mechanical way of describing

the drownings, and he didn't make any attempt to do so. But in all that talk of death, surrounded by that weed-choked land, I knew that J. was everywhere, and I almost wanted to ask my father what they had done when they had first gotten there over 15 years ago.

What had they first eaten when they stepped off the plane in Lisboa? Where had they walked that first autumn while I was moving into my college dormitory for freshman year, alone and at the mercy of a strange roommate to help me haul a steamer trunk, 3,300 miles away? I knew that people who had otherwise loved my father would have shunned him for leaving his only daughter—the last remnant of his life in America—and bringing this stranger instead. This strange man, his full name unknown. Maybe J. would have been loved—a fellow Portuguese man que conhece a língua, speaking without hesitation or embarrassment better than I ever could. For a moment, the people of Alcaravia may have even forgotten that my mother was dead, and that J. had come in her place. And mine.

But he wasn't one of them, not from Alcaravia and this small town. A Portuguese, yet a wanderer. The people here may not be here anymore, not in the numbers they had been years ago, but I knew the type. They scrutinized from windowpanes unabashedly, making no movement to hide behind curtains. They came out halfway into the street to study you as you passed, blowing their noses in detailed hankies or scratching one heel with the toes of the other foot. They nodded and said “boa tarde” in the afternoon with the low growl of a mongrel, resting against their potted plants or front pillars. Ultimately, J. was still an outsider taking up space in the old house where Tiago Bettencourt's wife and child had once been. My father probably explained that I was now in college. He may have mentioned how stubborn I was, refusing to come before finishing school. Years would go by, I would not come, and he'd explain graduate

school, a new job, a full-fledged career. The Old Country would not have cared. The people loved one another without time for excuse, or patience for it. J. would have eventually been studied warily not out of any fault of his own but because, in time, the townspeople would have seen him as a poor replacement for the Bettencourt women.

He would have been left to fall into the cracks and disappear. And it was the way J. had always liked it—I realize that much, even if I never did know him as well as my father did. Yet, if you know someone when you are a child, you will know that person his or her whole life because children are always perceptive, and they are always looking for what comes out of the seams. I had pulled on every loose thread of a word or gesticulation I had witnessed come from J. and had filed it away somewhere, a place where I never wanted to look but knew that being back here in Portugal was forcing me to study, even if askance.

I think I could study him better now that he was gone and all that was left was the ghostly smudge of his presence in our old house, the decaying town, the half-empty streets where stray cats outnumbered people. Children are rule-breakers mostly because they don't know what rules are and they will do everything they can within their power to test their strength and prove themselves mighty. When children grow up, if they know what's good for them, they will not change in this way.

They may even, against their better judgment, drown kittens. They will talk about it fifty years later in a pedantic drone, but only because they still feel they have penance to do for their ignorant crimes.

Later, when we are back at home, I can see that my father has been wound down like an overworked mechanism, his raspy breath like the clicking of a stuck clock hand. I am relieved but keep it to myself. He goes to bed early, and I stay up to tidy

things that do not need tidying. And I go back and look at all the pictures downstairs, and I say a rosary, and then, at last, I myself go to sleep.

AT SOME POINT, I REALIZE THAT I don't have that much time left here. I could stay, but I don't want to. My life isn't here anymore. It could have been with my father, but not here, not where the shadows of a past that is not mine seem to have taken up the space I could have used to remake myself into someone newer and firmer of belief. I could have been a daughter stepping into her role fully. Instead, I am a guest in dry country that has not turned me away but has not known what to do with me, either.

I've been away too long, and I've come too late.

Is it J.'s ghost here, keeping me awake? Is it my mother's? Both? I don't know why my mother would haunt this place when she died in another country. But then I remember that places aren't haunted: people are. It is possible she has come with me.

One day, Pai and I are watching the world news while eating a simple dinner. It is too hot to cook and we are feasting on fresh goat cheese, leftover fish, salad from the garden, olives and—afterward—ice cream sandwiches. I remember my promise to my cousin and insist Papa eat two. The lead story is that Italian researchers have found evidence of liquid water on Mars. There is a lake beneath the surface of a southern ice cap. Pai and I watch while licking melted vanilla ice cream from between our fingers. We listen to explanations of radar and reflected radio waves. We look at grainy footage and haphazardly drawn diagrams.

"People are so desperate to not be alone," Papa finally says, "that they leave Earth looking for signs of life, ignoring all the signs right here."

MY PORTUGUESE IMPROVES GREATLY by watching the local television stations. They have their version of *The Price is Right*, and a station where I spend thirty minutes watching a master craftsman transform a hunk of wood into a spindle-back chair. There are no nails or screws—just half-blind dovetails, biscuit joints, and wood glue. And a lot of patience. It is like surgery. Just when I think this handsome man with thick hair the same color as the wood is done with his handiwork, he takes out paint and stencils and I watch for another thirty minutes. It seems he can never do enough. By the end of the program, I am disappointed. He has painted the chair a putrid color, concealing the gorgeous natural grain beneath. He has stenciled every inch and spindle and made a monstrosity of his ambition. Some people just don't know when to stop. I know I should have changed the channel when he took the paint can out but, for some reason, I wanted to see just how ugly he could make this chair and call it beautiful.

The news is particularly illuminating, and I recall how Papa and I used to eat dinner in our house in Connecticut while watching the evening's stories. There is a dangerous heat wave hitting Portugal and we are told by all the newscasters on three different stations to stay inside. Elsewhere, the world newscasters inform, California is burning. Greece is burning. I watch a woman in a smart pink suit describe footage of a dog in Attica who survived by hiding in an outdoor oven.

It weighs us heavily. I find my insomnia worse than before. I say three rosaries, then five, a night. I keep falling asleep with the beads in my hand, losing my place, and starting over.

"Thirty-eight degrees Celsius!" Papa mutters as he washes a plate, shaves, and hangs laundry on the line in the back garden. "Thirty-eight. Não acredito. I can't believe it." He plucks a cucumber from its vine and studies it like a thermometer.

We stay inside the house, or sit in the shade of the garden, for eight days—maybe nine. I lose count because there is nothing

particular to look forward to here. There is just possibility and waiting. It's like that dog in Greece. It is a nice change.

On another night, closer to the end of my stay, Papa says something beautiful and frightening. Every once in a while, he is pure poetry, the kind of artist that comes out of only five or so years of formal education and, thus, assembles fragments of ideas in unexpected metaphors because no teacher has ever told him he can't. He says people in Hell are sheaves of ash or sacks of ash—something startling, smart, and scary. The fullness of it will come to me later, after I've left this place. It is hard to think of Alcaravia and its happenings when I'm there, within it. It is hard to study all of my father's words when I'm busy just storing them up before they slip away. I want to remember the sound, too—like how he pronounces “Devil” as “Debil” and how he does not blink when he says it. How he describes a bouncing motion as “like leaping on mattresses” when I think he means “trampolines,” but I don't correct him. I don't want to interrupt the stories or waste any more time waiting for amendments to automatic thoughts. Time stretches thin, and it doesn't just come apart—it snaps like gum and covers you with what's been destroyed in the process. Too often, it's the words that are destroyed because human beings are very good at remembering. But—they are very bad at remembering correctly.

Papa and I fall into ritual. We get up, brush our teeth, and I leave him for two hours to meditate and pray in a back room that I avoid, for it is his space. I say yet another rosary in my bedroom. Then he comes upstairs, and we snoop. We raise the blinds and linger at the edges of window frames, and we survey our town. We talk about what we see as if I am a child again, my mother still alive, and we are driving from Connecticut to New York on a day trip, playing “I Spy.” We talk about snakes, rats, and lizards—a welcome and surprising change in typical

conversation. We say everything we can about every scrap we can so that I may avoid discussing my mother and he can avoid discussing J. But each of us knows the other is never fooled.

Everything, and nothing, has changed. The years have altered everything and nothing. This summer, the heat wave is appropriate; it gives everything a fuzzy look, a mirage to the dry-throated traveler who sees water everywhere. The truth is that our imagination is the only real thing with the power of transformation. We make time do things. We take time to do something to ourselves, and others.

It is getting closer to the day I must leave. I remember my promise again, so I tell my father we need to stock up on groceries.

“Why?”

“Because I want to make sure you have enough to eat after I’m gone. You’re looking too skinny.”

He laughs in the sarcastic way I’ve always hated and examines me with a gleam that makes him unlikeable.

“Do you think I can’t look after myself? I eat fine.”

I must look unconvinced because he takes my arm—which surprises me—and takes me to the top of the house. He opens the closet in the spare room and there are rows of tuna fish cans. He pushes aside some clothes and I find bags of rice lining the drawers of a bureau. Everywhere, in corners and boxes and crawlspaces and bins, there are storehouses like something out of a bunker in *The Road*.

“What? You think I’m not prepared for what’s coming? J. knew. All those years ago, we knew. That’s what we came here—to prepare for the End of Days.”

I nod.

All I keep thinking about now is that supply of canned goods and boxed goods and tinned goods. Especially all those rows of peas in their dusty labels stored in the attic crawlspace.

My father had shown them to me proudly. So many peas. Not enough people in the world to eat those peas. I want to cry over those peas. I somehow, in my mind, get it all mixed up. When I dream one night, the last night I'm sleeping in the firm-mattressed twin bed in my old room, I imagine my father as a child with his brown canvas sacks of kittens. In the dream, I grab the sacks from him, screaming "no" in Portuguese and English. I tear one of the bags open, but there are no kittens. And I look up to see that my father is just a child, barely able to carry the sacks. Young Tiago, in my dream, trips, and out spill cans of peas from another sack, tripping down the hills, skidding over broken pieces of terracotta tiles, trampling bugs, scattering lizards. Chasing me away from this place for good.

After my father shows me all the food, he leans close and whispers, "This is only for us."

WE'RE SITTING IN THE GARDEN one afternoon, after hanging laundry that will dry in mere hours in this humidity-less heat. As Papa lets the hose run lazily into the strawberry beds, I remember:

We were in Proctor, Connecticut, when my mother was alive. In the memory I am too small to lift the full watering can, the large silver one with the chipped handle. But I want to help. I remember how Papa showed me how to hold my thumb over the hose so that it makes a shower to water the garden. I remember the force of water under my hands, the thumping and pulsing of the green hose snaking through the yard and getting wrapped around the trunk of the apple tree.

Now I ask him about the oranges, bursting from the trees by the garden wall. We could never have these in Connecticut. "Shouldn't you pick all these oranges? Make some juice?"

"They're out of season." He laughs, pointing to some green spheres tucked amidst the bulbous bright ones; they could be

limes. “Those big ones are oranges that never fell last year. I leave those for the birds.”

How audacious—how hopeful, this incessant, fruitful clinging. But the thought of taking one to my lips and examining it closer to find shriveled flesh and absent juice leaves me sad and wounded. How much else out there anchors itself firm but loses what gives it its name and figure in the process, a blanching of bones—ribs of orange wedges. It feels familiar, but then the image slips away.

“We should go inside now.” He turns off the faucet, shakes, and then begins coiling the hose. “The news is on—maybe there’s something more about the fires.”

WHEN YOU HAVEN’T BEEN TO A house in about twenty years, every drawer is a time capsule of some secret self you long forgot existed. In my bedroom in Alcaravia, in the month I am there, I find an old, stiff pair of Levi’s I thought I’d thrown out ages ago. In the bureau drawer, I find old cassette tapes of 1990s pop music recorded off the radio, Lisa Frank stickers, and dried palms from Easter Sunday. I leave these smaller things where they are and put a bag of old clothes in the church donation bin our small town has recently acquired. Part of me is surprised that my father hasn’t filled my closet or bookshelf with nonperishables.

Before I leave, Papa tells me that he had never wanted to leave me, but he had to. “Don’t blame J. Blame me. I was following my calling and preparing for the future. And now, here you are, and you know me again. It’s like no time has passed.”

I’m too shy to tell my father that I had cried, fasted, wept, prayed for him to return. I had begged for normalcy. I had asked to be together. Who is the greatest fool: him for leaving or me for staying behind?

The last night I stay in Alcaravia, I do not sleep. I try to remember everything. I write it all down. I like how the clocks ticking in each room give the house multiple heartbeats. The clock in the living room answers the kitchen's tick-ticking with a chock chock chock. The cracks on the wall behind my headboard stretch a soupçon further.

Papa has never been a quiet sleeper. "That man could sleep on a log," my mother used to say. He is hard to wake up, and loud. A snorer more often than not. But I listen. How reassuring is his gentle-but-loud, steady-and-slightly-windy breathing. It comes in two-tone notes through the nose. I remember his sleeping sound so well and here it is again, like I was never without it, never without it for the past several years of my life.

I imagine a baby could be soothed to sleep by that sound. Papa's house and body as equally rhythmic with the ticking of many clocks in many rooms, up and down.

My grandmother—my father's mother—used to say that, in Hell, mouths are always dry and parched. But when you pray for those who are suffering, "it's like a spray of water in their mouths." I wonder how people—like Avó, like her son—know these things. Is this what they call "inheritance?"

When I go downstairs for water, I am careful not to wake him. The house is mostly solid—brick, concrete—so it doesn't creak as much as homes in the United States. But the wind and echo of too much tile can gust up with noise, and the curved staircase is wood. After a month, I still don't quite know how to walk precisely where each step won't creak. It's like the spots change every day, depending on the weather. You have time to learn, I tell myself. The banister squeaks beneath my hand as I climb back up, feeling my way through the dark with one hand against the wall and an eye on the bathroom nightlight ahead.

I get back into bed. I see my alarm will go off in three

hours. I close my eyes to hear better. The conversations are everywhere. So is the potential for miracles. The walls are alive with them. Listen.

## Streetlight People

*Emily Polk*

THE OLD ROLLER-SKATING LADIES appeared as firecrackers spiraling up from the ground, colorful moving sticks of middle-aged light, hot pink nostalgia and stardust on wheels. Nearly a dozen women always skated at dusk in the empty church parking lot that separated northern San Antonio Ave. from its southern end. Esme watched them every evening during her daily walk after work. She didn't know where they came from or why they had chosen this spot to do their thing, but she took their presence as confirmation that it was the right choice for her and her husband to move from Brooklyn to this small island east of San Francisco.

Now she stopped and put her face up to the iron gates that bordered the edge of the parking lot. She put her hand on her swollen belly and steadied herself against a wave of nausea. A boom box on a bench in front of a life-size papier-mâché Jesus played "Eye of the Tiger." *It's the thrill of the fight ...* The women wore neon leotards and fluorescent knee pads; jean shorts and elbow pads with tiger faces; orange leg warmers and polka-dotted tights, flowering skirts that gave way to fuchsia leg warmers. They nodded as they roller-skated past each other. Some skated backwards, others beat the air with arms raised triumphantly, others closed their eyes, lost in a reverie that made Esme smile. She saw a flash of movement in the window next to the double wooden doors of the church. An older man, mostly bald with a face obscured by the pre-twilight glare, looked down on the parking lot, surveying the scene. He caught Esme's eye and she thought he smiled. She smiled back.

"ARE YOU THE MAN WHO watches the roller skaters?" Esme asked the priest on the other side of the beige curtain a few

weeks later. It was her first time in the confessional box. She was not a member of the church, but her next-door neighbor was the janitor there and told her that if she wanted to go to confession, all she had to do was sign up for a half hour slot on the confessional sheet in the foyer of the church. “No need for a name, a check mark is fine, better to keep it all anonymous just like the old days,” her neighbor told her. The confessional box was in a separate part of the church, just off the kitchen, easy to mistake for a storage cabinet, “Be careful you don’t miss it.”

“I am,” the priest said. “I find them ceaselessly impressive. You’re not one of them, are you?”

“Oh, no. I love to watch them, but I haven’t roller skated in years and I’m also pregnant. And we just moved here.” She sounded nervous.

“I see,” the priest said.

“At first I wondered if they were nuns,” Esme said.

The priest chuckled. “They have no affiliation with the church, though I do think they create a nice mood for the parking lot.”

Esme pulled out an orange from her bag. She liked to peel it in one single strip to make a snake. Her grandmother taught her how to peel it that way. Every Sunday morning when she was a child, they practiced peeling oranges and playing with the peel-snake, which Esme always named Cecilia. Now, the smell of citrus against the musty wood and stiff beige curtains was a comfort. It was easier to talk when her hands were moving along the soft ball of orange, when they were sticky with the juice.

“Do you want an orange?” she asked. “I’ve got more.”

“No, thank you.”

She knew she had to go for it. She only had half an hour. “I want to confess—” She paused. “I want to confess that I never wanted to have a baby. I never, ever wanted to be a mother.”

“I see...” the priest said. “And now? Now you are pregnant, and it was a mistake?”

Esme thought about her husband. How he cradled her and put his hands on her belly every night in his sleep, even before they got pregnant.

“Yes. No. I mean yes, I’m pregnant, but it wasn’t a mistake. I promised if we moved here...and you know, I’m not so young anymore and—” She stopped. Rubbed her sticky hands on her skirt. “I never had a mother. And I don’t think I will be a good one.”

She didn’t tell the priest that their baby was her husband’s idea, the trade he had bargained for when they made the move cross country for her new job. He had always wanted a big family. She had always wanted a big job. Now she had one and she had worked hard for it. She was the creative director of a multinational greeting card company—in charge of all of the content of all of the greeting cards, including every holiday and major life event. Birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, retirements, weddings, births, losses. She loved to picture the cards flying all over the world with her thoughts and ideas and good wishes and warm jokes held gently inside an envelope. Sometimes she imagined she was the words in the cards, flying from one person’s hand to another, an arrow straight into the heart of somebody who needed it. It was a thrill to know she was saying the things that others couldn’t say or the things they needed to say but didn’t know how. Her words could be the buoys and the life rafts, the glass raised to honor and celebrate, or the shoulder for a long cry. She had always known, even when she was a young girl, that when people thought they wanted money or fame or success, what they really wanted was words. For this reason, Esme’s work made her life bigger than what she thought it would be. And she had always wanted a big life.

“I’m sorry you didn’t have a mother,” the priest said. “But I don’t think that disqualifies you from being a good one yourself.”

“Have you ever gotten a FestivoPaper card before?” she asked. Esme didn’t like to talk about her mother. Her parents never married, and she wasn’t sure if her father ever knew much about her mother, even before she left them. Esme had never tried to find her—though sometimes she wondered if she had ever read any of her cards.

“Perhaps?” the priest said. “My sister sends cards for every holiday.”

“I write the content for them. My team and I. Thousands and thousands of cards.” She paused. “We have plenty of religious ones. You’d love those, the Genesis ones are awesome. I mean I don’t re-write the bible quotes; I just make them relevant to the holiday.”

“So you’re kind of famous then?”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far,” she said. “But my words... I hope my words have meant something.”

Esme took a deep breath. “What if I can’t love this baby?”

“And if you don’t? What will happen?” he said.

“I don’t know. I haven’t had it yet.”

“Exactly. Why are you worrying about something that hasn’t happened yet? Why not deal with the things that you can control right now and trust that you will cross the other worry bridges when you need to?”

“Are you saying these things because you think that’s what Jesus would say?”

The priest chuckled again.

“No. I’m saying it because you’re a good person. A really good person.”

ESME’S JEWISH GRANDMOTHER, the same one who taught her how to peel oranges in a single stroke, gave her the idea to

go to confession. She had raised six children, including Esme's father, in the apartment two floors above her best friend Doris Jackson. Doris was also the mother of six children, and a devout Catholic. The two women never missed a weekend confession date at Divine Mercy Parish on Skillman Avenue in Brooklyn during more than 40 years of friendship.

*Best 20 minutes of my entire week.*

*Finally, a man who will listen to me.*

*When he tells me I'm forgiven, it sounds like he really means it.*

The forgiveness part had always interested Esme the most. Would she believe the priest when he told her she was forgiven? Did priests always tell the confessor that they were forgiven? What if he just said it but didn't really mean it. How could she trust him? How could you forgive anybody who couldn't love their own child? She did like the sound of the priest's voice. She wanted to come back to it. It had the feeling of wind and sand in it, and something of a horizon. She thought she could feel a little bit of her grandmother in the confessional too.

THE CHURCH WAS ON THE CORNER of the street in her new neighborhood, three blocks to the north. In the summer the jacaranda trees dropped purple galaxies along the street and the poppies exploded in bursts of orange across her neighbors' yards. In the evenings, jasmine climbing up fences released their sweet scent. Esme always inhaled deeply at the church parking lot. She came early this evening so she could watch the elder women roller skate for a few minutes. A woman in two long silver braids whipped by Esme and skated the length of the parking lot with her left leg up in the air. Esme had just read an article about these women in the local newspaper. A small female faction of the Church of Eight Wheels, the group of fanatical roller skaters began skating together during the

Summer of Love in an abandoned church in San Francisco, practicing what they called their “roll-igion.” There were Black women, Latinx women, Asian women, white women, lesbian and trans women. They had been something of a legend back then but now they were older and wanted a quiet place where they could skate together, away from the younger kids.

Esme looked up at the belfry in the middle of the steeple, where the carillon bells marked the hour. A decorative metal sculpture of a woman blowing a flute was squeezed in next to the bells. She had tiny white lights weaved throughout her body and she leaned forward haphazardly, almost falling out of the steeple—perhaps a festive remnant, Esme thought, of the previous Christmas, when somebody must have wanted it to look like the metal woman was playing the music from the bells.

As she walked down the narrow hallway toward the confessional, music from the boom box on the bench next to the papier-mâché Jesus filtered into the corridor. *A singer in a smoky room*, ... She sat in the seat. It was hard and a little more uncomfortable than she had remembered it.

“*Don’t stop believin’*,” she sang quietly. She heard somebody entering the confessional. “*Hold on to that feelin’*,” the priest whispered. “*Streetlight people, Don’t stop believin’, hold on to that feeeeeeeelin’*.”

They both sang together. “*Streetlight people, woahooaaaaa.*”

“*Oh, I’ve always loved that song*,” the priest said.

“I wouldn’t have thought of it before today, but I can really see why,” Esme said.

She began to peel her orange. She had a few things she wanted to confess, but the woman with the two silver braids reminded her of the years she spent with her own hair in two braids trying to look like Laura Ingalls. “I was obsessed with the TV show *Little House on the Prairie*. I never read the books, but

I watched every episode religiously,” she said. “I’ve always felt I should have been born on a prairie.”

“It was a wonderful show, wasn’t it?” the priest said. “I can see your connection to it. Laura Ingalls was a writer too.”

“Wait—you used to watch *Little House on the Prairie*?”

“On occasion,” the priest said.

“Laura was very close with Reverend Alden. Remember him? He was so good. But not pious, you know what I mean?”

“Yes, I think I do.”

“Sometimes I imagine that I am talking to Reverend Alden,” Esme said.

“You mean like right now? You are imagining that I am Reverend Alden?”

Esme felt the blood rushing to her face. “Any chance you look like him?”

The priest paused. “No, no I definitely don’t look like Reverend Alden from *Little House on the Prairie*,” he said. “I think I might more closely resemble Laurence Fishburne.

“What! Laurence Fishburne? You mean Morpheus? You look like Morpheus from *The Matrix*?”

“I think I might. Perhaps with gentler eyes.”

“Wow. That is not what I was picturing,” she said. “So... wait—does that mean... You’re telling me Black people watched *Little House on the Prairie*?”

“Well, I can’t speak for all Black people.”

“Oh. It’s just... it’s just not how imagined you,” she said. “I hope you’ll forgive me.”

When the priest spoke it sounded like he was smiling. “I suspect there will be very few things in your life that will happen as you imagine,” he said. “And you’ll always be forgiven for that.”

Esme had so many questions for the priest, all of them personal and none of them appropriate. She thought of her grandmother and felt suddenly heavy with a familiar sadness

as she wondered about the priests who were behind the curtain in her grandmother's confessional box. Did they ever share any of their own secrets with her? What did they think of the secret stories her grandmother shared? Did she ever confess that she wasn't Catholic? Did she ever talk about surviving the Holocaust as a child? About being taken at five-years-old from a displacement camp in Poland with other orphaned children? Could the priest hear the faint accent on her grandmother's tongue? Her grandmother always said she had no memory before she moved to Brooklyn to live with her aunt and uncle. But Esme knew there were stories that were never spoken aloud. Perhaps there was still a priest in Brooklyn who knew them all.

Esme's doctor wanted her to come in for tests that week. There were some reasons for concern. It was on her mind, but Esme never mentioned this to the priest. She just wanted to hear his wind and sand voice, and to know she was forgiven.

ESME RETURNED TO THE CONFESSION box two months later. She trembled in the small seat in the tiny box just off the church's kitchen. Her bloodshot eyes had purple quarries under them, and her belly was the size of a snowman's torso. She had a few big confessions to make and she was anxious about seeing the priest. What if he wasn't there? What if somebody else was on the other side of the curtain? She heard somebody entering the box, and before he sat down she blurted, "Forgive me Father for I have sinned. Big time."

"What happened?"

She was relieved to hear the familiar voice. "I don't know how to say it. I've been so angry. I did something I regret terribly. I don't know how to make it right again. Would you like an orange?"

She pulled the small round orb out of her bag. She began to peel it.

“No thank you. When you’re ready... Perhaps you can let me know what you did?”

“I... I’m so angry.” She finished peeling the orange. The peel made a long spiral, but she was too rough and broke it. “Dammit,” she said, tossing the long snake and the smaller piece of peel into her bag. She ripped off a small piece and orange juice squirted into her eye.

“I...I changed the content of the greeting cards. I rewrote them. Not all of them, but a lot. I... I made them obscene. And then I approved them and now they are going to be in grocery stores and markets and stationery stores and—” She started to cry.

“Obscene?”

“Yes. Terribly obscene.”

“Can you clarify?”

“Well, for our premier golden anniversary card, I changed, ‘Your handsome eyes are the blue of my sky’ to ‘Your cheeks look like candy cane testicles.’”

Silence.

“I don’t suppose that is too harmful.” The priest coughed.

“Well, it gets worse.”

“How much worse?”

“Yesterday I changed our classic bestseller, ‘Happy Birthday to my North Star,’ to, ‘Your face thrusts me into a pit of existential despair and I am terrified of the approaching apocalypse and that we are losing our humanity and everything is going so fast and feels so fragile and last night I awoke to a flood of moonlight milking the room and you were snoring and it sounded like a pig being tortured in a barn being bulldozed but I can’t tell you any of this so instead I’m saying happy birthday.’”

“You fit all that on a card?”

“Yeah. I made the text really small. Except for the happy birthday part. That was a little bigger.”

The priest took a deep breath. “Well, some people might relate...”

Esme wiped her eyes. “Do you always look at the bright side of things? Is that part of your religious training or just your personality?”

“Both, probably.”

Esme felt the air coming back to itself. She put her hand on her large belly.

She was 7 months along now.

“My baby’s going to die,” she said. “Not now, not yet, but soon.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Esme.”

She told the priest everything. How they found out the baby was a girl. How they would name her Gila after her grandmother. How the doctor told her that the tests did not come back normal. How there were so many more tests. All of the blood drawn, the pee in cups. The tests that confirmed the chromosomal disorder. Trisomy 13. Nothing they could do. They had a pile of pamphlets now. Pamphlets for support groups, genetic disorders, resources for what to expect and when to expect it. None of them answered the question that burned Esme’s nerves through her skin so that she felt they were outside of her body. Was this her fault? Her punishment? She wanted the baby. She did. She wanted her daughter. She had one more month until she would give birth, and maybe a week with her before they would lose her. That’s when Esme would get a chance to really tell her. She was telling her now. She wanted the priest to know she was telling her now.

“I’m so terribly sorry,” the priest said, in a soft and grave voice. “You must know this is not your fault.”

Esme took the tissue from her pocket and wiped her nose.

“Just don’t tell me she’s going to go up to Jesus or God any of that, okay. I don’t want to give her up to God. I’m fucking angry at God.”

Esme felt her daughter moving against her ribs. She marveled at the strength of her movement, at its tender, powerful aliveness.

THE TREES AND PLANTS IN THEIR neighborhood lost their leaves over the month of December. The arrival of winter made the northern California wind blush and shiver all at once. In the lavender light of Esme's evening walk, the leaves and petals looked like shimmering moths when they fell, like paper confetti. Esme thought the clouds looked like the chewed bones of old dogs, like the thick thighs of Victorian ladies. She didn't stop to watch the roller skaters during the last confession she would make before her daughter was born.

"I am so huge," she huffed. "I can't believe I fit in this confessional seat here."

"How are you, Esme?"

What was she supposed to say? That she felt like the chewed cloud bone of an old dog? That she was dying inside? "I'm tired," she said. "I'm really tired." Esme searched her bag for an orange but couldn't find one. Her hands were swollen now, unrecognizable. Most of her body was unrecognizable to her. "My daughter is going to die, and there are old ladies roller-skating outside to Bon Jovi. What am I supposed to make of any of it?"

"I don't suppose you've written that on one of your cards?"

"I think I might have. Don't tell anybody."

"Did you ever..." the priest hesitated. "Did anybody ever realize what you'd done?"

"It's hard to know. Nobody has reported anything. And the candy cane testicle card sold out the first day it hit the shelves."

Their talking was suddenly interrupted by frantic cries coming from outside. "HELP!!!! PLEASE HELP!" A woman was shouting from the parking lot.

“Forgive me,” the priest said. Esme could hear him stand up. She stood and followed him down the corridor and out a side door, straight into the parking lot, toward the screaming. From the back, Esme saw that his cassock hid long, thick arms. He was almost a full head taller than she was.

The early evening December light cast a butterscotch hue across the parking lot. On the far side, near the building that housed the church preschool, a woman was laying on the blacktop, one leg in front of her, the other one at an odd angle underneath the bench with the boom box on it.

“An ambulance is coming,” the woman with the two silver braids who was now wearing a sequin sweatband, told the priest. She kneeled next to the woman on the ground and seemed to be talking directly to her. “Her leg looks broken. I told her she shouldn’t be skating out here, but she insisted. God dammit, Pearl, what were you thinking? You could have killed yourself.”

The priest approached the woman on the ground carefully, as though nearing a flock of pigeons he didn’t want to startle. Esme had never seen such a strange and colorful crowd. She looked at the papier-mâché Jesus hanging on the cross. She looked at the metal woman playing the flute hanging out of the steeple. She put her hands on her belly. She thought about her grandmother and how death was so close to life for everybody, even when you weren’t thinking about it.

In a few minutes the flashing lights of an ambulance lit the sides of the church. It was almost dark now, the purple sky giving way to navy blue, to chillier air, to an almost-full moon rising swiftly over large oaks just on the other side of the parking lot. The ambulance parked near the oak trees between two streetlights illuminating the cracked sidewalk. Two young male paramedics pushed a folded-up stretcher as they made their way to the group.

“She’s too old to be skating out here,” a woman with pink hair, who looked to be in her early 70s, said to the paramedics. “We tried to tell her, but she wouldn’t—”

“Oh go shove it, Esther,” a voice came from under the bench, and Esme could see the woman on the ground was sitting up now, her pale face looking angry. The paramedics carefully hoisted her onto the now-opened stretcher. The woman was dressed fairly simply—a blue blouse over a denim skirt, but Esme could see a sliver of hot pink underwear, like the lip of a whale, sticking out of her skirt.

“I’m as old as shit, but goddamn you all to hell if I don’t enjoy myself before this body craps out entirely.” She turned to the priest. “I didn’t mean you, Mr. Priest. Or you handsome fellas. Ouch, ouch, watch the leg, watch the leg, I think it’s broken. Can one of you please call my son?” She was still talking as the paramedics lifted her into the back of the ambulance, shut the door, and drove away.

After everybody left, Esme and the priest sat on the wooden bench inches from each other in the darkness.

“She’ll be okay, right?” Esme said.

“Something tells me she’ll be okay,” the priest said. “In fact, something tells me she’ll be back out here in a few months, once she can walk again.”

They sat next to each other like that for a long time, the priest and the pregnant woman, with the night thrumming around them like a familiar bruise. They were sitting together in that liminal space that seems like it might last forever so long as you don’t move: that space between the past and the future, between the sublime and the sorrow, sitting still to keep it forever before it moved on and changed you, before it left you for good. But even this, Esme knew was a lie. Even in the stillness, the baby in her belly kicked against the darkness, kicked against the calm and the quiet, kicked against organ, blood, and bone, every kick an answer to a question, an exaltation, a

tender hallelujah that seemed to only want to remind Esme of one thing—that maybe it was a miracle she was alive at all.

“It’s strange sitting next to you like this,” she said. “Is it bad luck for me to see you? I’m Jewish, you know.”

“I don’t think so,” the priest said in that familiar voice that sounded to Esme like something between a cough and a laugh. “Just make sure you turn around and walk away when you see me buying toothpaste in the market.”

“Really?”

“No, I’m just kidding you.”

She looked at the priest for a long time. He was staring straight ahead. “You do kind of look like Laurence Fishburne,” she said.

“I know, right?” the priest said.

Esme took an orange out of her bag and started to peel it. She stared up at the steeple. “Do you think we should climb up there and rescue that flute player?” she asked. “She’s falling out.”

The priest followed Esme’s gaze. “I don’t think she needs to be rescued,” he said. “But let’s get her next summer if she’s still up there.”

Esme put a piece of orange in her mouth. “Sounds like a plan,” she said. She wiped the sticky juice of the orange on her pant leg and stood up. Her belly extended out of her jacket and into the night like a planet. Esme nodded to the priest and turned toward the streetlights that lit her way home.



## CONTRIBUTORS' BIOS

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Featured Artist: Monica Ong







