The Oval
University of Montana

Volume 1
2008
Dear reader,

What began six months ago as an idea for a small student-run publication has snowballed into a literary magazine with 16 staff members and its inaugural issue containing 20 pieces of work. For all of us who produced this magazine it’s been an honor to receive, read, and publish work from the best writers this university has to offer. I sincerely believe this magazine won’t let its readers down for a single page. From cover to cover you’ll find inspiring short stories, poems, photography, and visual art.

The name “The Oval” is taken from the grassy, oval-shaped field that is the social hub and community centerpiece for the University of Montana. The Oval is a place that connects students to every corner of campus. This magazine adopts the name and spirit of The Oval. It shares the work of talented artists and creates a common experience between its readers, extending and strengthening the campus network.

I’d like to thank the internationally-acclaimed poet and literary critic Eduardo Chirinos for sharing two new translations of his work. In 2001, Chirinos was awarded the first Posia Americana Innovadora prize from the Casa de America in Madrid for his innovations in Latin America poetry. On pages 37 and 39 you’ll find two poems paired with their English translations by G.J. Racz (Associate Professor of Foreign Languages & Literature, Long Island University, Brooklyn). Chirinos is the author of 12 books of poetry and is currently associate professor in the Department of Modern and Classical Languages and Literature here at the University of Montana. In the future we’d like to publish bilingual work as well as interviews and contributions from local, professional writers.

Finally, I’d like to thank those who made this inaugural issue a reality. The contribution of my four fellow editors was tremendous. I’m indebted to Andy who worked tirelessly to process every submission and to Louise who designed and compiled the final manuscript. My gratitude also goes to Tyler and Sam who organized their genre boards and gave a fair reading to every author’s work. They stunned me with inexhaustible energy despite being subjected to my Friday night
meetings and last minute requests. I’d also like to thank our supporters in the English department. Before this magazine had a name it had the unwavering support from the Chair of the English Department Casey Charles, the Director of Creative Writing Prageeta Sharma, and our Faculty Adviser Robbert Stubblefield. A big thanks is extended to Sue Samson and Bonnie Allen at the Mansfield library for ensuring this magazine’s present and future success. Finally, I’d like to thank every reader whose curiosity has put this magazine into their hands: Every word you read strengthens our creative community.

Cheers,

Ryan Fish
General Editor
# Table of Contents

## Photography and Visual Art

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adrienne Ashby</td>
<td>School Boys- Swaziland</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert C. Mahon</td>
<td>Sun River, Montana</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eli Suzukovich III</td>
<td>Wolverine and Rabbitt</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa Nicole Jarrett</td>
<td>Breach</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Joshua</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saara Snow</td>
<td>Temples of Angkor</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Tveter</td>
<td>Scavengers Support Society</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva Champagne</td>
<td>False Bird of Paradise</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To Play</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tulum</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick Kakavas</td>
<td>Untitled</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Poetry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poet</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zach Wheeler</td>
<td>Tabby Cat</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ruby Dreams</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autumn Suzanne Parisi</td>
<td>Untitled</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chelsea Rayfield</td>
<td>Nature of Things</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>And Still</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley C. Jerman</td>
<td>It’s Almost Winter</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eduardo Chirinos</td>
<td>El Color de los Atardeceres/The Color of Nightfall</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>El Gato y la luna/The Cat and the Moon</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura Anne Nicole Foster</td>
<td>Buss, Buss</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Departed</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deadened</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Jesse Hammond
    Suizenji Joujen Garden ...........................................72
Harrison Stevens
    Tongue of the Phoenix Serpent ....................................74
Sara Horvath
    One Way Highway ..................................................78
Holli Harken
    Waking ...............................................................73
Leo Brett
    Afternoon ............................................................79

**FICTION**

Laura Steele
    Something Like That ...............................................10
Crystal Corrigan
    Just Fine ............................................................42
Jesse Delong
    Whatever Comes Next ..............................................59
Ashley Pledge
    Ginger Tea ..........................................................79

**SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION** .......................................80
Something Like That

The Post called it “an ill-fated accident with a ceiling tile.” The university called it “a devastating blow to the philosophy department.” My mother called it “an opportunity for closure.”

I came downstairs Tuesday morning to find my mom sitting at the kitchen table, crying.

“What’s going on?” I asked as I pulled a cereal bowl out of the cabinet.

“Trent, honey, come sit down.”

I poured myself a bowl of Cheerios and sat across from her. She had two pages from The Denver Post Online on the table.

“Brace yourself,” she said.

“Just tell me,” I said, between mouthfuls of cereal. She slid the pages towards me. I glanced at them and looked back at her.

“Your father died yesterday.”

I picked up the first page. The headline read, “Professor Dies in Tragic Accident.” I started reading. Professor of philosophy, Franklin Garret, died yesterday in an ill-fated accident with a ceiling tile. The esteemed professor was teaching his freshman ethics class when the tile came loose and struck him in the head... He was pronounced dead by paramedics on the scene. I picked up the other page. It had a picture of the hole that was left in the ceiling.

My mother came around the table and held me like I should be hysterical.

“The funeral is on Thursday,” she said as she let me go. I just nodded. “You can take the car.”

“What?”

“You’ll drive down tomorrow.”

“Why?”

“He’s your father. You’re going to his funeral.” I stared at her and picked up my spoon. “My cereal is getting soggy.”

“I know it’s a lot to absorb right now. But you need closure.” She walked out of the room.

The Cheerios were soft and bloated with milk. I dumped them down the garbage disposal.

My mom stood in the doorway of my room later that night, car
keys dangling from her right hand.
“What about school?” I asked.
“I already called your teachers.”
“What about your work?”
“I’ll take the bus. It drops me two blocks away from the hospital.”
I didn’t move. I lay on the bed staring out the window. “Can I have money for a hotel?”
“You can stay with Uncle Jody. I’ll give you some money for gas and food.”
“What if I never come back?”
She set the keys on my dresser and left.
I waited until I heard her bedroom door shut. I got up, dug my blue duffel out of the closet and started packing. I only had one suit. It was almost black, and the legs and sleeves were about half an inch too short.
I fell asleep face down that night. I dreamt I was the one who threw the ceiling tile all the way from Helena and hit Franklin Garret in the head. I told everyone at the funeral, but they all said no one could throw anything that far. I picked up a wine glass and threw it. It hit my cousin Zach in the kneecap. He lives in Tallahassee.
My mom woke me up at 5:45, as darkness loosened its grip on the morning. My throat felt dry and my eyes were tired. I brought my hand to my bottom lip and wiped the white film off with my index finger.
“I have to be at work by six-thirty,” my mom said, poking her head through the doorway.
“I thought you were taking the bus.” My voice sounded scratchy; I cleared my throat.
“You can take me today. You have to get an early start.”
Lying in bed for a few minutes, I swallowed to get the sour taste out of my mouth. I sat up and planted my feet on the carpet. I remembered sitting in the same position a few years earlier, before the growth spurt. My feet dangled over the edge, toes brushing the tops of the carpet threads.
“It’s good to be tall,” my mom said. “Tall people get better jobs.” At 5’6” she had to tilt her head back slightly to look into my face. “And handsome people, too.” She reached her hand toward my cheek.
“That’s just something short, ugly people say.” I brushed by her before she could touch my face.

At 6’4” I had a spot as forward on the varsity basketball team. Coach said he thought I would grow more, said he would keep his fingers crossed. On the team roster I was 6’6”, but I stopped growing by the end of sophomore year. With basketball shoes on, I was six foot four and a half.

“Here are the directions to Jody’s place and directions to the Temple.” We stood in the kitchen, my bag on the floor next to me.

“Temple? Was he Muslim or something?”

“His family is Jewish. Real reform though.” I snatched the paper out of her hand.

“I’m half-Jewish?”

“Drive safely. Don’t pick up any hitchhikers. Keep an eye on the gauge; don’t run out of gas. If you feel tired, stop and take a nap. I don’t want you falling asleep at the wheel.”

“We are the chosen people,” I said loudly and pounded my fist against my chest.

“Here’s some money.” She held out three hundred dollars.

“I always knew Jesus was a fake. I guess it was just in my blood.”

She set the money on the counter. “I made you a peanut butter sandwich for lunch and there are some snacks in here.” She set down a paper grocery bag. “There’s some Coke in there to keep you awake.”

“You owe me seventeen years of Chanukah gifts.”

“Call me when you get to Jody’s.”

“Eight gifts a year for seventeen years...that’s a hundred and thirty-six gifts.”

“You can drive back Friday or Saturday. Just call and tell me which.”

“I’ll make a list of what I want,” I said.

She leaned in to hug me and I let her.

I threw my duffel into the trunk of the Taurus and put the paper bag in the back seat.

“Do you have your wallet?” my mom asked, standing in the driveway. It was early October and the morning air was crisp. She
barely shivered.

“Yeah.”

“Do you have your suit?”

“Yeah, I got everything,” I said. “Let’s go.” I slammed the trunk, got into the driver’s seat and started the car.

She climbed in, clutching her purse in her lap.

I shifted the car into drive and pulled away. I watched the townhouse get smaller in my mirror and then disappear around a corner. My mom turned the heat on and rubbed her hands together like she was in front of a fire.

“I feel really lucky to have you as a son.” She was trying to have a profound moment with me, the kind she could tell her friends about, the kind that made her feel like a good mom.

“I think we’re really lucky to have each other,” she continued when I said nothing. “It’s not...”

“Which side of the hospital?” I asked.

She sighed. “The main entrance,” she said looking out the window.

I turned into St. Peter’s driveway and stopped in front of the sliding doors.

“This is going to be good for you.” Without a response she would never get out.

“Yeah.”

She patted my thigh, opened the door and walked into the hospital. The doors closed automatically behind her. I turned onto Cedar Street, toward the highway.

I took Highway 12 toward 287. I thought about Jake Neilson. He was in a head-on crash a year before right along this stretch of highway. They said he was trying to pass a semi. He survived, but he couldn’t tell them what happened; he was too busy relearning how to walk.

There wasn’t a car in front of me, but I swerved across the double yellow, just to see what it was like. The road took a sharp curve; I stayed in the left lane. I came to a stretch of straight highway. A black SUV crested the horizon. I stayed for a moment, and then slowly drifted back over the line.

It’s an eleven-hour drive from Helena to Boulder. Wyoming is just in the way. When I merged onto I-90 I set the cruise control ten miles per hour above the speed limit. I opened the glove
compartment and fished for a tape. The only one I found was yellowed with age. It was a Disney tape I listened to as a kid. It had people like Bruce Springsteen singing their versions of songs like “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” I drove twenty minutes in silence before I decided to play it.

I had been to Colorado once before. The year Uncle Jody decided I needed a father figure right after he lost his job at the DMV, and subsequently his apartment. We drove to Boulder and picked him up. I was thirteen at the time. He lived across the hall from me for six months and left long hairs in the shower. “Never apologize to a woman,” he told me, “then they have your balls right where they want them.”

Most nights it was just my mom and me with Jody wandering home in the middle of the night or late the next morning. Privacy never made sense to him. When I was in the bathroom, he would just walk in. He wouldn’t even knock. “We’re all people,” he would say.

Once, I was unzipping when he walked in. He started shaving, so I buttoned my pants. But he wouldn’t let me leave, not until I peed in front of him. “We can’t be afraid of each other’s cocks.” Those were the kinds of lessons I could never learn from my mom, he said.

“Hele n just doesn’t have the energy Boulder does,” he told me one Sunday morning, while we brushed our teeth side by side, making eye contact in the mirror. A few weeks later a friend of a friend found him a job and he moved back to Boulder.

I drove through Billings at 9:45. I hated Billings. I stayed there for a basketball tournament my freshman year. The motel room smelled like old vase water and the sheets made me itch for two days. I sped up to ninety miles per hour until I couldn’t see it in my rear view mirror.

I saw a picture of my dad once. He was tall, with dark hair and a puffy face. My mom said I couldn’t contact him until I was eighteen; she said it was part of the rules. She sent him a letter a few weeks before my seventeenth birthday. She said the sperm bank never told her she couldn’t contact him before I was eighteen. Plus, he was an adult; if he didn’t want to write her back he didn’t have to.
He was a professor at Metro State, he told her. He married, divorced, and had two kids in college on the East coast. He sent a picture of himself; my mom sent him my basketball picture. He told her he looked forward to hearing from me.

I wondered what his last thought was right before he died. I wondered if he heard the tile come loose, if anyone in the class yelled out. I wondered if he put my picture in a drawer and forgot about it, or if he hung it up on the fridge, or if he framed it and put it on his desk. Or maybe he just looked at it and threw it away.

I drank a can of soda and had to stop in Buffalo, Wyoming to pee and get gas. It was almost noon, so I ate at the Pizza Hut on Hart Street. The only other people in there were a family of five. The little boy and girl were already pale and round like their parents. The baby was well on its way. The dad wore denim overalls and a cut-off t-shirt. His gut made it hard for him to sit close to the table. The mom was at least three hundred pounds. They were the type of people my mom called Bohemians.

I was back on the road by twelve thirty. I thought about what the funeral would be like while I listened to Bob Dylan’s rendition of “This Old Man.” Just outside of Casper, in the distance, someone stood on the side of the road. As I got closer I realized it was a hitchhiker, a woman. She had a faded green duffel and a baggy red canvas coat. I slowed down, pulled off the road and rolled down the passenger side window.

“You’re just a kid,” she said as she leaned down and looked in at me. She couldn’t have been more than twenty-three. “Where’re you headed?”

“Boulder.”

She just stared at me for a moment. Then she picked up her bag, opened the door and threw the duffel into the back seat.

“Are you going to rob me?” I asked when she sat down.

“Are you going to rape me?”

I looked at her face and pulled onto the highway.

She had reddish-brown hair and she reminded me of Alexa Figley, the second girl I ever kissed: the same wide jaw, same rounded nose.

We rode for several minutes in silence, spare the sound of the grey asphalt coming up to meet the tires.

“So why are you going to Boulder?” she asked.
“To visit my uncle.”
She nodded like she already knew.
“What about you?”
“I need a change of scenery.”
“I can see why,” I said. There was nothing for miles. There weren’t any curves in the road as far as I could see. “I bet I could fall asleep at the wheel and we’d both be okay.”
She smiled. Her teeth were perfect, except her canines looked too pointed.
A few minutes of silence went by. The tape still played, but the volume was so low, it blended in with the murmur of the tires.
“I’m Devin,” she said. She had a wildness hidden behind her eyes.
“Trent.”
“Where are you from?” I couldn’t tell if she was just making conversation or if she wanted to know.
“Helena.”
“Hmm.” She stared out her window. “How do you like it there?”
“It’s alright,” I said. “Helena’s quaint in a depressing sort of way. Everyone wants to pretend it has the small town thing going for it.”
“But it doesn’t?” She cocked her head to the side.
“No. It just feels neglected.”
She drummed her fingers on her thigh. They were long and thin, but strong. “I’m from Portland, originally.”
I could feel she was looking at me, but I kept my eyes on the road.
“How do you think your mom would feel about you picking up a hitchhiker from Portland?”
“I don’t care what she thinks,” I said a little too defensively. Devin smiled like she was in on something I would never understand. She rolled down her window. Her hair blew in every direction. I glanced over.
“So, Devin,” I yelled over the wind. “Who do you know in Boulder?”
“I guess now when I get there,” she was yelling too, “I’ll know you.”
Something about the way she said it made me feel warm.
After a half hour or so, she rolled up her window. The quiet
sounded strange after the violent wind.
“So is your uncle your mom’s or dad’s brother?” she asked.
“Mom’s. Never knew my dad.”
“So they were divorced?”
“No. They were never married.” I wanted to touch her.
I moved to the left lane and passed a purple minivan.
“What about your parents?”
“Divorced.” She reached out her hand and turned the volume up. “What is this?” she asked. The voice of Paul McCartney singing “The Ballad of Davy Crockett” filled the car.
“It’s from when I was a kid.” I switched it to radio and hit scan. There was static for a moment, before it stopped on a scratchy country station.
“I hate country,” she said and hit Tape. “Let’s listen to this.”
“I can kick you out of the car.” I hit the FM button.
“But you won’t.” Davy Crockett came back on.
I clenched my jaw and reached towards the radio. She grabbed my hand and gently pulled it back. She set it down and left her hand on top of it. I swallowed hard. “Davy Crockett” ended and we listened to the sound of the space in between songs. Her hand was warm and strong. Little Richard’s voice broke the silence. She picked up her hand and turned the volume up a little. My hand was cold and tingly without hers.
“Itsy Bitsy Spider” blasted through the speakers. “This is great,” she said. I couldn’t help but smile.
We crossed the border into Colorado at four ‘o clock. I stopped to get gas at a Conoco in Fort Collins. Devin bought Twizzlers when she went in to go to the bathroom. I called Jody from the payphone on the west side of the building, to tell him I was close. He sounded high on his answering machine.
The highway was busier than any highways in Montana or Wyoming.
“Where are you staying in Boulder?” I asked.
“I’ll make some calls when I get there.”
“My uncle probably won’t mind if you need to stay at his place.”
She smiled, like there was nothing I could tell her that she didn’t already know.
We took the exit onto 119 and got into town at quarter ‘til six. I pulled out the directions my mom gave me.
“I’ll read them to you,” Devin said and grabbed for them. “No, I got it,” I switched them to my left hand and held them next to the steering wheel.

Jody’s house was between Canyon Boulevard and Pearl Street. “Look for 601,” I said.

“It’s back that way,” she said and gestured behind us. “You sure?” I asked, but I was already pulling into a driveway to turn around.

I drove a couple blocks then I parked in front of 601 Walnut Street.

I knocked on the door, no answer. I knocked again, this time louder and longer, nothing. “I don’t think he’s home,” Devin said.

I knocked one more time. “Jody,” I yelled. “Are you sure this is his place?” she asked.

“If no one’s answering, it’s probably his place.” “Let me see those.” She snatched the directions out of my hand. As she stared at the paper, wisps of hair fell into her face. She tucked them behind her ears without looking up. “What’s Temple Emmanuel?” “A Jewish church.” “A synagogue?” She said slowly and tilted her head. “Yeah.”

“Why do you have directions to a synagogue?” “Maybe I’m Jewish.” She shifted her weight onto her right leg and stared at me, raising her eyebrows enough to show she didn’t believe me. “I have to go to a funeral.” The word was heavy.

She held the directions out to me. “Well, I don’t want you to get lost.”

I folded them and stuffed them in my back pocket. “Let’s get some food.” She smiled and leaned close to me.

I locked the car and we walked to the Pearl Street Mall. It reminded me of the outdoor mall in downtown Helena, except there were people. Groups of hippies sat on the benches with worn backpacks and scruffy dogs. Kids my age skateboarded, weaving between people and jumping off at the last second. College students sat on the restaurant patios, drinking dark beer. In Helena there were never more than eleven people walking the mall at any given time on a weekday; usually nine of them were
I followed Devin into Illegal Pete’s on Pearl Street and Fifteenth. Loud music. Dim lighting. Low ceiling. It was grungy in that hip sort of way.

“You hungry?” she asked. I nodded.

I ordered a steak burrito; she got chicken. I paid with a fifty.

We sat outside, on the edge of a big wooden flowerbed, under a maple tree. The sun shone through the branches. The light moved with the breeze.

“Whose funeral?” A patch of light lingered in her hair.

“My father’s.”

She took a bite and stared at me. The wind blew, leaves fluttered and the sun changed her left eye from brown to gold.

“You said you never met him.”

“I haven’t.”

She rolled her eyes and tucked her hair behind her ear.

When we finished our burritos, we strolled back up the mall.

Jody’s door was open when we got back to his house. I knocked and walked in. Devin followed.

“Jody,” I yelled.

“Hey little man,” he came down the stairs. He hadn’t shaved in a few days. He had skinny limbs, but a round face. “How you doing?” He nudged me with his shoulder and then wrapped me in a loose hug.

“Alright,” I said. I backed up a step. “This is Devin.” I gestured towards her.

“You didn’t tell me you were bringing anyone.” He smiled; his teeth were yellow around the edges. “I’m Jody, Trent’s coolest uncle.” He held out his hand to her.

“Devin.” She shook it.

“He’s my only uncle.”

“You guys are at the top of the stairs on the left. I’m going out to take care of some stuff, but I’ll be ready by eleven tomorrow,” Jody said.

“What?” I asked

“Your mom said I should probably go to the funeral with you. She said you would need someone there.”

“I’ll go with him,” Devin said. I didn’t look at her. I just nodded at Jody.

“Alright.” He looked at me, then at her and back at me. “If
you need anything let me know.” He started towards the door. I followed, leaving Devin in the hallway.

“Thanks, Jody,” I said as he opened the door. He reached in his pocket and held something out to me.

He slipped it into my hand. “Have a good night,” he said and shut the door behind him.

I put the condom in my pocket.

“I need a shower,” Devin said when we got to the top of the stairs. She set her duffel in the room with the fold-out couch and found the bathroom down the hall. “Can I use the towels in here?” she asked through a cracked door.

I found a stack in the hallway closet. “You probably want to use this,” I said and held the towel in front of the bathroom door. The water was running. I knocked. “I got you a towel,” I said loudly. The door opened; I glimpsed a patch of skin. Then her bare arm reached out.

“Thanks.” Her pinky brushed my knuckle as she took the towel from me. I saw her naked stomach as she pulled it into the bathroom, just before she shut the door.

“Need anything else?” I asked.

I heard the shower door close.

I went back to the bedroom. I closed my eyes and listened to the water. I didn’t want to hear it anymore so I slammed the bedroom door and started to disassemble the couch. Stacking the striped pillows in the corner, I thought about the ceiling tiles in the bathroom. Once the couch was bare, I grabbed the metal handle and pulled the mattress out. I unfolded it all the way and lay down. The metal bar across the middle stuck into my back. I rolled onto my side and it was less noticeable. The shower stopped. I went back to the hallway closet and got sheets for the bed. I heard the shower door slide open, heard her bare feet on the tile floor.

I had the bottom sheet on and was unfolding the top when Devin opened the door. Her hair was wet and she was wearing baggy athletic shorts and a plain black t-shirt. I could tell she wasn’t wearing a bra.

“I think I left you some hot water,” she said.

“Thanks.” I slipped past her through the doorway, grabbed a towel from the closet and closed the bathroom door behind me.
Walking into the bathroom felt like putting on a shirt straight from the dryer. The steam held Devin’s scent, soapy and familiar, reminding me of my first kiss, when I realized how someone’s tongue could taste so foreign, yet so similar to my own. I could taste her as I breathed in the moisture. I turned the water on as hot as it would go and stepped in. It burned my skin. I let the water run down my face and over my closed eyes. I thought about Devin and considered masturbating. I tried to picture her naked, but the only image that came into my head was the picture of the hole in the ceiling. I rubbed the water from my eyes and looked up, but the ceiling was only drywall. I thought about the picture of my father, sitting at his desk, staring at something the camera couldn’t see. I washed my hair and got out and wrapped the towel around my waist.

“I need clothes out of my bag,” I said when I walked into the bedroom with just a towel on.

Devin was lying on the bed. She didn’t even look up.

I held the towel up with my left hand and unzipped the bag with my right. I grabbed the first pair shorts I saw and the white Nike t-shirt next to them. I took them into the bathroom with me. This time it was easy; I masturbated into the toilet with little effort. I put on my clothes and returned to the bedroom.

“This is so uncomfortable,” she said and squirmed. The way she moved made me want to grab her hips.

“Sorry.” I dug the suit out of my duffel and hung it on the doorknob. “Do you want me to sleep on the floor?” I knew it was the right thing to say.

“It’d probably be just as comfortable.” She grinned.

“You don’t have to come tomorrow.”

“I know.” She turned her eyes towards me. “I don’t have anything black, except this.”

I looked at her t-shirt. “We’ll figure something out.”

I fell asleep quickly. I woke in the middle of the night with Devin’s arms wrapped around my stomach. I felt her hips against mine. I pulled away gently, but her hands wouldn’t let go.

“What are you doing?” she whispered in the dark.

“What are you doing?” I asked. She moved her hips close to me again.

“I’m sorry about your dad.” She reached her hand around and
rested it on my thigh. I could smell her hair.
I turned over, lay on my back. She nestled herself close to me and laid her head on my chest. Her right hand drifted down to my waist and lingered. I clenched my jaw.
“What’s wrong?” she asked.
“What are you doing?”
“Is something wrong?”
I breathed out forcefully and stared at the ceiling. She ran her fingers along the top of my shorts. I reached across my body and grabbed her breast, then dug my thumb under her collarbone and rolled on top of her.
“It’s okay,” she whispered into my ear. The darkness made her feel far away.
I used the back of the couch for leverage, squeezed so hard my knuckles hurt. She breathed heavily, but didn’t make any other noise. Her forehead brushed against my chest.
The bed felt like it would give way, but it never did. All my muscles tensed, I almost collapsed on top of her. A piece of her hair clung to my lip. I brushed it off and rolled onto my back, my face hot, hands tired.
“Sorry.” I turned onto my side, facing away from her.
She touched my back gently. Soon I heard the deep, steady breaths of sleep.

I woke up at nine-thirty. Devin was downstairs; Jody’s car was still gone.
“Did you eat?” I asked.
“No yet.”
I boiled water in the teapot, and emptied two instant oatmeal packets into each bowl. Steam rolled upward as I poured water over the oats. I put a pinch of brown sugar in hers and more in mine.
“I’ve never been to a Jewish funeral,” she said as we sat at the kitchen table, stirring our oatmeal.
“Me neither.” I looked over at her. “Actually I’ve never been to a Jewish anything.”
She put her hand on my knee.
“He wasn’t really my father.”
She blew on her spoon and waited for me to continue.
“He was a sperm donor.”
“Seriously?”
I stared at her.
“So you’re like a test-tube baby?”
“Something like that.” I tasted my oatmeal; it was too sweet.

I put my suit on; it made me feel like a giant. Even my shoes felt tiny. Devin straightened my tie and brushed off my shoulders. “I think I’ll wait outside,” she said.
“What?” I looked down at my suit. I didn’t recognize my body.
“I’ll go with you. But I’m going to wait for you outside.”

We arrived at Temple Emmanuel about fifteen minutes before the service started. It was a short, but wide brick building with well-trimmed hedges.
The only clouds above us were light, wispy threads. The sun bounced off the pavement making it bright from every angle.
Devin looked me in the face. “Do you want me to come?”
“No. I’ll be fine.”
She leaned towards me and wrapped her right arm around my neck. “Good luck.” Then she leaned back a little and kissed me on the cheek. I stared at her for a moment, then opened the door and got out.
I walked in through the giant wooden doors and followed the stream of people to the left. A short, bony woman stood at the chapel’s entrance. She wore a long black robe and a white shawl around her shoulders. “Cantor Heit,” she said and held out her hand.
I shook it.
“I’m like a singing rabbi,” she said when I didn’t respond.
“Nice to meet you.”
“Yarmulke?” she gestured towards a basket sitting on the table next to the doorway.
I just stared at her.
She leaned close to me. “You don’t have to be Jewish,” she whispered. I watched a man pick one out and place it on the top of his head. I did the same. It was weightless; I worried it would fall off.
“Students are in that section,” she gestured towards the right.
“I’m not a student. I’m a relative.”
She raised her eyebrows the same way Devin did.
“Distant relative,” I said.
She pursed her lips like she wasn’t sure if she should believe me.
I leaned close to her and bent down a little. “I’m the son no one knew about.”

“Relatives are in the middle.” She averted her eyes.
The chapel was bright. Natural light spilled in through the windows near the ceiling. I took a seat three rows back. The coffin was propped open at the front, next to the pulpit.
I had never seen a dead person before. I spent the entire service staring at it, examining his profile. His body was rigid and his face was unnaturally serious. It looked forced, as if he might burst out laughing in the middle of the funeral. I smiled. From across the room an old woman with a stern face and deep wrinkles flashed me a disapproving glare. Everyone was dressed in black, but she was the only one who made it look theatrical. A feathery black hat perched atop her bright orange hair as her lacey dress clung to her torso. Everyone else looked dutifully boring.
My eyes fell back to the corpse. He was wearing a blue suit that was too big. The arms draped over his hands. The bottom half of the casket was closed. Maybe he had mismatched pants, or maybe he didn’t have any pants at all. I closed my eyes and shook the idea out of my head. I wondered where the tile had hit him. I thought about Devin and hated the idea of going back to Helena.

The rabbi switched back and forth from English to Hebrew. He had a strong, soothing voice and a beard that made him look both capable and wise. The Cantor sang in Hebrew; she had a strong voice for her size.
I spotted a college-aged boy in the front row. A brother, I almost said out loud. He had narrow shoulders and straight, matted black hair. A middle-aged woman sat to his right. She had the same slender shoulders and her dark, wiry hair was pulled back into a bun. I wondered if ex-wives grieve for dead ex-husbands. The back of her head didn’t make it obvious either way.
I wondered if children of sperm donors grieve for their dead fathers. I wondered if this particular one did. The inside of my head didn’t make it obvious either way.
A colleague from the university spoke for several minutes about Frank’s accomplishments and what he meant to the philosophy
department. It sounded rehearsed. I looked at the ark as he droned on.

I had never really noticed the void in my life, but my mom poked and prodded until a hole gaped, hollowed out by her constant reassurances that it was okay to be sad or angry. I remembered the first time she told me it was okay to be upset that I didn’t have a father. I was six. Travis Culler’s dad taught him how to shoot a BB gun. I told her I wanted a BB gun, too. She said it was healthy to be mad about not having a dad to teach me.

I looked at the man in the coffin. He probably didn’t know how to shoot a gun anyways. Maybe it was better I never met him.

Frank’s daughter talked for a few minutes too, but she didn’t say much. She teared up near the end. Then the rabbi reminded us that the burial site was just off Colorado Boulevard and everyone stood, heads bowed, while he recited a prayer in Hebrew. Then the service was over.

Everyone made their way to the aisle; I followed the procession of black shoes. But once they got there, people turned toward the front of the chapel rather than the door; they were going for a close-up of the body. The line slowed to a crawl and then stopped. I shifted my weight from foot to foot. I didn’t want to be that close to him, that close to death.

I watched other people stop in front of the casket. Most just bowed their heads for a moment and moved past, some touched him to make sure he was real, others nudged him to see if he would wake up. One child stood wide-eyed for several minutes, until an adult ushered him along.

Then I was staring at him. His skin was grey and his eyes were closed. I wondered what color they were. I searched his face for an answer of some kind, anything. But looking for familiar traits on something so lifeless was impossible. I hung my head. This would be my only experience of my father, dead. A corpse in a blue suit with no pants. I realized I never wanted this to be anyone’s experience of me.

“I want to be cremated.”

Someone cleared their throat behind me. It wasn’t until then that I knew I had said it aloud. I took one last look at my father and headed to the door.

“Sorry,” I said to no one in particular.

Cantor Heit was at the door again. She held out the basket of
sparer yarmulke and I dropped mine in.  
“What’s your name?” she asked before I could walk away. 
“Trent.” She looked smug. 
“I want you to meet Drew, Frank’s son.” The man with the matted black hair stood beside her. He extended his hand. 
“I took his class a couple of semesters ago. Good man,” I said and shook it. He nodded absentely, didn’t look me in the face. 
“I’m sorry about your father,” I said, my voice catching on the last word. He nodded again. 
The Cantor looked me in the eye; I glared at her for a moment and walked away. I made it outside. The wooden doors closed behind me. I felt small, tiny. My suit felt too tight; I loosened my tie. I found a small patch of grass and sat down. 
I lay back and looked up at the clouds; they were thicker, but not menacing. I tried to be completely still. 
“What are you doing?” Devin was standing above me. 
“I’m trying to imagine what being dead feels like.” I closed my eyes. 
“How’s it feel?” 
“Itchy.” 
The sun behind her sent shadows across her face. She sat down next to me. We sat in silence for a while. I steadied my breathing. She lay down. I could feel her looking at me. 
I watched the clouds drift across the sky, change shape so slowly but so suddenly. I felt the blades of grass tickle my palms. 
“What are you thinking about now?” 
“I’m imagining what being alive feels like.” I breathed in deeply. 
“How’s it feel?” Her voice sounded so soft. 
“Itchy.” 
She took my hand in hers. It felt foreign and familiar. 
“That one looks like a heart.” She pointed into the sky. 
It looked like a triangle to me. “Yeah,” I said. “Something like that.”
School Boys -
Swaziland
Tabby Cat

A dangling Technicolor jesus
watches barking
mocha-shag cocker-
Spaniel careening
off walls before settling
for portal
-patiently waiting caramel
tabby-cat eye-
to avoid hearing
Jesus argue taking her virginity,
and find time in perspective
to consider happen chance
revelation – she is
thinking (really too complex
to explain)
at the same time
of two big hair
balls, no
way a perspective
on April
sun
Ruby Dreams

princess

Sapphire has

no last name

and no
Spanish

but yes,
waves, yes

curly-haired

dreams
Nature of Things

1

Who’s this? Small hands on large face.
Another hurricane concludes.
Will the tide ever ebb? A dandelion blooms.

Stifle me beyond these city walls. Is there another option?
Tense, the mountains tower. A catfish sifts in muck.
These leaves tear.

Shrivel me, petals. Desert takes root in this life. Peering,
yellow eyes from trunks. Whisper, reveal yourself.
This cannot be the end of things, this haunting of wolves.

In one moment of suspension, delicate lives are birthed.
The fire-ants march, restless.
Mother, return from your sleep.

Talons skim the surface. Ripples, how you destroy perfection.
The wake subsides. Do not linger, faint sky.
The wind is stale.

2

The puddles persist
deep as a wrist
and drown the tulips
as you say,
My heart’s left ventricle.

I see round feet flattening soil, level soles smashing earth.
They rearrange like shovels or knives or chainsaws.
Bouncing off bruised shins, a ferocious theory.
My fingers trace you. Yesterday I crept beneath
dinner tables and kitchen counters, severing sound waves.
The fireflies abandoned me
as the forest remnants collapsed.
A brown bush intrudes,
corners contained.
Pigeons roost in the gutter.
Sagging on the hillside, sunflowers.
A long arm extends.
The whale’s call fails us.
and oranges fall from trees
and leaves roll rolling
dry across pavement
cracked forced
by unseen forces or
not beyond the boundaries
blurry and blurring

but painted blues and
greys and yellows
offer no substitute

and must we continue so?
and still there is no green //

crisp leaves roll rolling
sky clouds (boundaries fuzzy
sky to white)

and not white  grey
grey leaves

we cannot contain
nor command
the ceasing of catastrophes

and distant blue is
not blue but small

and those small betrayals
trifling inconveniences
still stuffed in your pockets
rise yet distract
and do not fade but reflect
and do not attempt
our white palms flashing
fingers wrapped
in rings, concerned
beyond rolling clouds

cornered across the span
cornered in bends

here the river beds are horizontal
and dizzying steep
the orange of evening
wraps forcefully
In the middle of the glossy path
Periwinkle legs barely hold me
Brushed by fading green cotton

A tiny factory nearing my ear
The source of vibrating teeth
On the floor, miniature explosions
Silently mushrooming
Limbs intertwined
Brown lifeless wisps

Gone toward the collarbone
My head floating away

Immediately hammered on
Harsh words, unkind eyes

I let those fall too
Joining in graves of landing
I crave your absence
It's Almost Winter

sleep or love like it
frames our faces in arms
between our good bodies
and the leaves
spin my hair
into yellow mittens //

winter isn’t hard with you here
and I will split the wood
in your grandfather’s sweater //
in leaves that won’t fall
so we’ll pick them //
give them to the ground //
warm the dirt before the cold
comes in blue fingers
we’ll build a fire to keep the sunlight

beaming at you
across the room
when the window is open
we’re too big to carry it //
the open breeze
that ripened our stale bodies
is still with us now // lifting
my curtains onto my bed

we breathe like trains:

into maps and exhale
stories of how we arrived
with flowers
woven into iron rails
behind us
the rails merge
any desert moving
with one diner
ten cars each
and a phone booth
is where I call from
to give myself away
when you need it
telephones don’t ring //
on the road

is like your head
and blankets like your stories
are true and
lies sometimes
like mine

when our faces are safe
in our arms //
I am at my station //
I do not have walls
to keep us inside
Sun River, Montana
Atardecer naranja
con sus nubes raídas
y su sol que alumbra todas las palabras.
Una gasolinera exhibe un dinosaurio
(aquí hubo dinosaurios)
y una pradera inacabable.

¿Dónde aprendí todo eso?

Descartemos las nubes, son siempre
las mismas. Descartemos el sol,
presa fácil de todas las metáforas.
Nos queda la naranja.

Algunos dicen que vino de la India
donde era alimento de los dioses.
Otros, que vino de Persia o de Arabia
igual que el nombre y su color.

Virgilio la llamó “aurea mala”
y la dejó caer en una égloga.
Colón la tuvo entre sus dedos. Por ella
descubrió que el mundo era redondo
y que viajando hacia el Poniente
llegaría (como el sol) hacia el Levante.

Ahora estamos solos. Yo y la naranja.

Cuesta siglos decir atardecer naranja.
The Color of Nightfall

Orange nightfall
with its fraying clouds
and sun illuminating every word.
A gas station’s logo shows a dinosaur
(there used to be dinosaurs here)
and an endless plain.

Where did I learn all this?

Let’s put aside the clouds for now—they’re always the same. And let’s put aside the sun, which is an easy prey for metaphor. That leaves us with the orange.

Some say the orange came from India
where it was food for the gods. Others, that it came from Persia or Arabia along with its name and its color.

Virgil called it aurea mala
and dropped one into an Eclogue. From holding one in his hands, Columbus discovered that the world was round, that by traveling toward the West he would (like the sun) reach the East.

Now we are alone, the orange and I.

It takes centuries to say “orange nightfall.”
El Gato y la Luna

When two close kindred meet,
What better than call a dance?
—W. B. Yeats

El gato de mi vecina arquea su lomo
como el arco de la luna.

La luna
relame sus bigotes como gato
y llora por un platito de leche.

Mi vecina ve televisión
(pero no llora)
y se desliza furtivamente por la hierba
inventando pasitos de baile.

Micifuz o Minnaloushe
la luna
me tenderá esta noche su mano
y yo le diré (con los ojos cambiantes):

“Oh lo siento, no me gusta bailar.”
The Cat and the Moon

When two close kindred meet,
What better than call a dance?
—W. B. Yeats

The neighbor lady’s cat arches its back
like the arc of the moon.
The moon
licks her whiskers like a cat
and wails for a saucer of milk.

The neighbor lady watches TV
(but doesn’t wail)
and creeps through the grass,
inventing a new dance turn.

Cheshire Puss or Minnaloushe,
the moon
will hold out her hand to me tonight
and I’ll tell her (with changing eyes):

“I’m sorry, but I don’t like to dance.”

Translations by G.J. Racz, Associate Professor of Foreign Languages.
& Literature, Long Island University
Nathan focused on the small packet of Oreos that rested between the two seats and among the empty bullet cartridges, dirty napkins, random screws, dog biscuits, and nails. But the Oreos, with their blue and white plastic label, gleamed like a fleck of gold embedded in ash covered stone.

The thirteen-year-old boy nervously tore another cookie from the package. The vehicle started to slow and he looked at the frost outside his window. It just had to snow this afternoon, he thought.

“Don’t slam that door.” His father’s gruff voice cut through before the car’s hum died.

Nathan slipped out and very gently nudged the door shut. It clinked submissively. The boy pulled a wool hat over his auburn curls and stuffed his fingers into a pair of thin gloves, watching as his father shed an outer vest.

For a moment, Nathan considered taking the gloves off. It would keep his hands free. The air in front of his face became misty from his breath.

He made his way around to his father’s side of the vehicle. The older man stuffed several bullets into the boy’s coat pocket. His father slid the long rifle off the back seat with his wrinkled hands. Fingernails rimmed with dirt, he fiddled with a cartridge and shoved it into the magazine. Two more bullets followed the first.

Numerous scrapes and scars covered his knuckles and fingers. Teal blood vessels bulged, creating hills and valleys under the dark mottled skin, and they reminded his son of a warrior’s hands; hands that had served a lifetime of hard loyal work. Those hands were the single visible sign of his old age.

He offered the .30-06 to Nathan, whose soft gloved fingers wrapped around the smooth barrel and butt, gripping tightly until he checked the safety. Altering the position so it rested in his arms, he whispered to his father, “Do we need anything else?”

Nathan gritted his teeth as a slight, dry wind scraped his face. Like his mother, he had never been able to stand the cold. His father tromped away from the truck.
It begins, Nathan thought as he turned his eyes toward the ground, carefully placing his boots, step by step, inside his father’s imprints. He avoided the faded, gold grass, recognizing the brittle look of crunch-makers. Pride at his own silent footsteps dampened the envy that made him want to stomp confidently behind his father.

Still, despite his best attempts, the sound of both their steps resonated through empty air. Nathan couldn’t imagine any animal missing the noise. But his father knew how to track and, no matter how disbelieving his son had been on other hunting trips, they always returned home with exactly what his father wanted.

They reached a barbed wire fence. His father pulled two wires apart and pushed through before Nathan could help. The son rushed forward to uselessly hold the upper wire as the older man finished pulling his leg through. His father put a hand out for the gun and Nathan passed it over mutely. The boy started to maneuver the wires apart, but already the bottom was being pushed down by the scuffed leather boots of his father and the upper was stretched tightly by the old hands. Nathan hunched down and twisted through the fence.

He could sense the tension on his jacket as he came across. He knew without looking that he’d caught a barb. Pretending nothing was wrong, he received the .30-06 and then waited until he was following behind before checking the jacket. A slight snag, nothing his mother couldn’t fix, he thought, as he turned his head toward his father.

The older man continuously searched the land for deer. Nathan followed his father’s lead and tried to maintain his focus on the surroundings.

They crossed wild fields carpeted with speckled white snow. They traipsed through groves of Cottonwood and striped Quaking Aspen, meandered over hardened creeks that trailed and curled like an aged man’s twisted spine.

Nathan noticed peachy hues highlighting the horizon. For a moment, Nathan considered commenting on the unique sunset, but no. Silence was the key to hunting, and besides, his father wouldn’t appreciate it. He’d just grunt in agreement and go back to searching for deer.

Time melded in such a way that Nathan wasn’t sure how long
they’d been out. Could have been an hour, could have been five. He supposed his father would know exactly what time it was. He couldn’t remember when they headed out. Judging by the vibrant sky it had to be getting late.

Relief settled in at this thought. It was done then. He had survived. Nathan knew they could not hunt in the dark and he welcomed the increasing arctic cold that came as light died. The chill wouldn’t matter. Their truck would be warm.

A small part of him was disappointed because they had not shot anything, another trip was guaranteed. He gazed at his father, who frowned, and Nathan’s discontent swelled. His father would be grouchy.

Trying to orient himself in relation to the vehicle, he looked back at the sunset, which was more coral pink than orange. It seemed they were going east, but Nathan wasn’t able to tell if they were heading back or had circled in a much wider loop than he’d thought. He was so focused on the sunset he almost ran into his father, who abruptly stopped. Nathan backed up, confused at the pause in their progress.

His father motioned with his hand, waving at the higher side of the ditch. Slowly, carefully, the older man made his way over there. Nathan followed his father up the slanted, frozen earth. He could hear his own heartbeat. As his father peeked over the ridge, Nathan closed in the space between them.

His father’s ashy haired head wavered and tilted down toward his son. He reached out a hand. Nathan hesitated, unsure whether he was asking for the gun or if he was offering assistance in climbing up. His father impatiently gestured at the gun.

Feeling foolish, Nathan passed it to him and scrambled up the mound. The new vantage point revealed a herd of robust bucks, scattered across the snow crusted meadow, tentatively nibbling hidden grass. Each one picked its head up occasionally and gazed around, tender ears perked. Not one gave him and his father a suspicious stare.

Nathan’s heartbeat convulsed. He attempted to keep his breaths even. The whole day had spiraled around to this very point. For a moment, he could see himself crouching and watching, experiencing the sum of all moments.

A gentle push on his shoulder reminded him of the reality of
the situation. He turned to see the rifle held out to him. But his arms wouldn’t move. He couldn’t bend them, couldn’t reach out or stretch.

And then, as if someone had been trying to shoot with the safety on, a sudden click in Nathan’s mind changed everything. He couldn’t shoot with his gloves on. His hands moved on their own, pulling the gloves off his pale fingers, stowing them away in a back pocket, and finally reaching for the gun.

Nathan rested the rifle comfortably in position. The ridge provided a perfect spot, just enough brush to cover them, the perfect height to see the whole herd, and a sturdy dead log for a rest. As if the earth had already arranged everything.

Nathan peered through his scope, trying to compare differently sized antlers. Unable to pick the biggest, he glanced back at his father who watched through binoculars.

Nudging the older man, Nathan mouthed, “Which one?”

His father pulled up the binoculars, and then pulled two fingers up on his left hand.

Second from the left, Nathan read the signs, and then put his eye to the scope. He slid the barrel back and forth, scanning the group on the left. Nathan debated for a minute about the second and third bucks which were standing close together. It looked like the third one was bigger. It was possible they had switched places. He focused in on the ribs of the second one and considered double checking with his father.

Nathan clicked the safety off and breathed in smoothly; practicing the techniques his father had taught him. A frosty breeze bit the back of his neck.

The deer looked straight at them, its body frozen and posing like a plastic garden decoration. Nathan softly squeezed the trigger, and at the same time, a deafening shot blasted into his ears.

The herd scattered like leaves spreading across snow on a windy day between autumn and winter. Lagging behind the group was the one he’d shot.

His father still had the binoculars up. “Gut shot,” he grumbled, glaring at his son. “Come on, we’ll have to go after it.” And the older man pushed himself up over the ridge.

Nathan barely remembered the safety as he staggered up the ridge. He chided himself for thinking he’d actually done it right.
His father stumbled down the other side of the ridge and Nathan followed. Midway across the field, his father stopped. “It’s pausing.” Looking back quickly at his son, “It shouldn’t get far.”

They closed in the space and Nathan could see it, a golden beauty, trembling amongst cobalt gray Cottonwood trunks. “It’s the wrong one,” his father accused.

“It was the second one.” It came out as a weak mumble.

His father shook his head slightly. “Give it here,” he said, reaching for the gun.

The words slipped out before Nathan could halt them, “No, I’ll do it.”

His father gave him a hard look. Nathan said what he’d felt. He had put the animal into such misery, and he would put him out of it.

Nathan flicked the safety off and aimed carefully this time, thinking that he would never let himself miss again. He would always be this careful in the future. No other animal would suffer because of his sloppiness. The animal teetered in his scope for a moment and then regained balance.

The shot went off and the noise seemed dead. Nathan heard the thump of the buck falling.

He looked up from the gun. The deer’s rib cage expanded slowly, held for a moment, and then shuddered back down. It didn’t move.

His father started toward it and Nathan caught up behind him. When they reached the deer, he was taken aback by the perfection of the creature. Before he could stop himself he was reaching down, stroking the deer’s neck. Part of him wanted to apologize aloud.

“That was a decent shot,” his father judged, kneeling down to look more closely at the two wounds. “We’re close to the truck,” he said. “We’ll be able to drive over here. I suppose I’ll clean the deer. Gut wounds smell awful.”

The saliva in Nathan’s mouth tasted metallic at the thought of digging through the internal organs of the animal. Yet something in his father’s watchful stare made him offer, “I…I want to help. But you’ll have to tell me what to do.”

Dark red blood splattered Nathan’s fingers. Ignoring the intense stench and the bitter cold, he listened to his father’s
instructions carefully and with accurate precision followed through. When any uncertainty slowed him down, he asked aloud. At one point, his question was not answered.

Nathan glanced up. His father stared off at the horizon. “Did you hear me?” Nathan asked.

Slowly, his father turned his gaze toward his son. “You’ve got it. Just keep cutting it a couple more inches there.”

Nathan looked down at the deer and then back to his father. His father’s eyes wandered back to the fiery violet sunset and almost so quietly that Nathan didn’t hear it, he whispered, “It was a fine day for it, just fine.”
......Turning into a rabbit seemed like a good idea at the time......

Wolverine and Rabbit
Breach
Temples of Angkor
Scavengers Support Society
False Bird of Paradise
Tulum
buss,  buss

  far from the ornament, your voice steeped to sonorous
evening, through ethereal corn blue. suffocating our
lipped howl.
  when the aurora flew, golden-ed sunflowers, all bowed.
lachrymose
lives
shivered from the firmament. surrounded by the tinkling of
bells,
you stretched, with the wraith
  whirling
Departed

broiled deep in a sea of placental black
you trampled,
giant-like with bloated eyes
beyond the waste of liquor
a small helpless tone,
reached. only for the sake.
a manageable feast
and a glorious cape: wrapped
suffocating
i knew when you died, slipped out
into jelly. my body limped.
finally blowing
smacked the stomach sheen
smoked the breath of death.
Deadened

to begin one must be good at conclusions.
when you left I had no time. not enough to shake la folia
that once
curled tight, in unison we blew.
no grammatical skills. just paper in flight. a stilling chill of
that first thought. like when
against all spring and raspberries.
the wind shook all stood.
My girlfriend broke up with me today. Alright. I could take that. That alone is not the end of it. But I got fired, too. My boss comes to me with his clipboard and his thick rimmed spectacles and scratches the black of his shirt below his name tag. I’m sucking skin between my thumb and pointer finger because it’s bleeding from breaking down beer boxes and he tells me that that’s it. I was rude to one customer too many.

The lady was a bitch all night. Throwing back meals because her kid didn’t like them. Or because he thought they looked better on the floor than on his plate. So she’s leaving, right, and her hands still holding the door as I say it, “Two whole dollars, how could I be so lucky?”

She grabs her red haired brat by the collar. He claws and scratches her grip. A sharp gasp from the back of the room. The low rumble of collected voices. Banging pots and the scrape of silverware. An old man grabs his wife by the elbow and shakes her arm.

“Excuse me?” the lady says and sees if anybody else is listening.

“Thank you,” I reply. I shake the money in the air. “A five percent tip on a forty dollar dinner. That’s generous.” Her brat orders four meals and eats one of them and I get stiffed on the tip. I’m working my ass off with the pleasantries every time she tells me, “Look, we need something else, isn’t there anything on this menu?” I just say, “Oh, I’m sorry ma’am, yes right away we’ll get that grilled cheese for you right away.” And then she screws me.

The kid whines and scrapes his shoes at the floor. Her face trembles. I can smell chicken cordon bleu and it makes me think of this ugly vein creeping up her forehead.

“You’re lucky with what you got,” she says. Alice tugs the back of my shirt, whispers in my ear for me to calm down.

“Lucky?” I say. “Lucky? You’re lucky I’m working otherwise I would.” Alice puts her hand over my mouth.

“Is this the lady that sent back the meals?” Danny, the cook, says. The commotion must have made its way to the kitchen.

“Yes,” the lady says, and tucks her chin into her neck. She
releases the kid and he shoots off into the parking lot and disappears.

“You didn’t like your meals?” Danny asks, slowly swinging a spatula at his side.

“They weren’t what my kid wanted,” she says and looks behind her.

“You can’t please them all,” Danny says and walks back into the kitchen.

“Let’s just leave this be,” Alice says, and tugs at my shirt. The room gets dark. Fluorescent lights flicker like an electric bug zapper. A few customers leave, finishing their drinks and placing their green cloth napkins on the tables.

“Leave this be?” I yell.

“Let’s just calm down,” the lady says, and her eyes go small, like she can play everyone against me. “I don’t know how you got this job but you won’t keep it the way you’re acting.”

“That would be too bad,” I say and walk up to the lady. Sweat greases from her face and loud, heavy breaths struggle from her lungs. “If I lost this job, I wouldn’t be able to meet the gems of the earth like you.” She steps back, anger rising, and I yell, “Where would I be then? Where would I be with out all you wonderful customers?” And I spin with my hands in the air, like in a movie where the character and camera sweep the beautiful new cityscape. I can almost hear the music, “and I’m gunna make it after all.”

“What do you have to say to that?” I ask, but she just says some bitch thing about getting the manager. I throw my hands in the air like I can toss her away. I leave to break down boxes and, although I didn’t know it right then, get fired.

Ann walks up me as I’m sitting on my couch eating a packet of ramen noodles dry. Dry, right. I didn’t even cook them and she walks over with her cotton skirt swaying and bracelets sparkling and she tells me she’s had enough. “I’m going to my parents,” she says, standing in front of the television.

“Alright,” I say, and try and nudge her out of my line of vision. CSI is on and David Caruso is getting right into his tough guy act. “See you tomorrow.”

“No,” she says, “you won’t.” And I don’t think I hear her right. I mean, I’m not really paying attention.
“What?” I ask. Ramen noodle crumbs line the floor. She picks them up, puts them in her pocket, and says, “I’m not coming back, Ted.”

What? I thought things were going great. Well, maybe not great but they weren’t going bad. It’s not like she caught me fucking her sister.

She walks the stairs to her room. When I get there she’s packing her stuff into my brown and grey suitcase.

“What do you mean you’re not coming back?” I say, and take her clothes out the suitcase, placing them on the bed.

“Stop it, Ted,” she says, louder than I expected. She puts the clothes back in and frowns at me like she’s the one getting her heart broken. The radio plays some upbeat disco crap and as I pull the cord from the wall a bright blue mass of electricity fades into the air. Rain smacks the window. Loose weather stripping flaps the pane.

I throw the suitcase into the back of our Taurus and slam the door. Rain is falling heavy and I didn’t bother to grab a coat. She clutches her arms tight and looks at the ground.

“Look, baby,” I say, and place my hands on her shoulders. She smacks them off and looks down the street. “Tell me what’s going on. I just want to know what the fuck is going on.”

She glares at me like I already know and am trying to be an ass. She starts to say something, shuts her mouth, and shakes her head. She starts to shiver.

“Come on,” I say. “Out with it.” And I curl my fingers like I can draw the words from her.

“I can’t keep supporting you while you go from job to job, Ted,” she says, like my name tastes bitter in her mouth. “That’s not who I am. That’s not what I’m meant to be. I’m not the supporter.” Her breath smells of wine and mascara runs down her face.

“Damn straight you’re not,” I say, like it’s a fact she wouldn’t want to admit. “You think you’re better than me because you’re a fucking secretary?”

“Yeah, okay, we’re done,” and she gets into the Taurus.

“You work for a realty company,” I yell. Trailing exhaust steams. “You don’t even sell the dreams. You just answer the phones for the people that do.”

Bangs blow into my eyes. The moon is half full and a dog’s
hoarse bark fills the air. Rain runs down my face. Taillights drop below the hill like stars over the horizon.

Ann was a few years older than me in high school. We’d been dating for a couple months before I took her to this hill I knew overlooking the city. Wind flapped her red hair like uncontrollable flames and although it was cold we never put the top up on the convertible. Pink Floyd blasted from the speakers and fell back into the night like northern lights. The road was narrow and dusty and tops of pine trees poked over the bank like they were peeking up for a view. I drove next to the edge. Ann scooted close and grabbed my arm. She looked over the bank, shivered, then stuck her chin against my shoulder and whispered, “Back to the middle,” her lips close to my ear. I smiled and gave her a wink.

We tossed our shoes in the grass and laid down a blanket. The faint scent of autumn leaves burned, like somebody far off was having a bonfire. We opened a bottle of Yellowtail. The city shined from below and stars cast down from above and I felt as if we were in the exact middle. A place where you could lie in the grass and fall asleep.

Ann closed her eyes and wrapped her lips around the wine. She took a long drink. Her throat rippled. Moonlight shone pale on her skin.

“You like that?” I said. She nodded and smiled.

I set the bottle down. We sat in silence. Below, the city looked like a strand of Christmas lights. For a second, the wind was soundless and it was the warmest quiet I have ever known. Ann rubbed my foot with hers and I straightened. She was about to say something.

“Where’s your mom?” she said, and tied her hair back with a turquoise rubberband.

“I don’t know” I said. A couple weeks ago she had up and left me and my father and we hadn’t heard from her since. I asked my father about it and he said he didn’t know, then mumbled something about how everybody in the army was a bastard, that they didn’t care about real life and real problems. They only know how to kill, he said, and it didn’t have to be with a bullet. Tears welled in his eyes and he looked past me as he spoke, like he wasn’t speaking to me but off into the world. He went to the
bars and I didn’t see him for two days.

I didn’t know what he meant, right then, because I had never met anybody in the army. Later, some grunt officers came to my school, tried to recruit the senior boys of my class. I saw, that day, the way they looked at girls. The lust in their eyes. The confidence that they could get any women they wanted. I knew what happened to my mother and it was a sad, sad thing.

“You poor little child,” Ann said and ran her hand along my jaw line. “You must feel like the world’s coming down on you.”

I looked into the night and thought about my mother. About where she was. Whether she was thinking about me. Whether she was sitting on top of some hill and looking down on empty, eerie lights, wondering if she would ever know what it was like to be connected with them all.

“Watch now,” Ann said, lying down. She pointed at the stars. “If you see a shooting star, you get to make a wish, any wish at all, and it will come true.”

I propped myself on my elbow. I felt grass blades beneath the blanket. Ann looked as peaceful as I’ve ever seen her. Her green eyes reflected the night. I looked in her eyes for a long while and she barely blinked. I ran my fingers along her soft red hair. I said, “You’ll never leave me, will you?”

“Never ever,” she said, and I could see the constellations in her eyes. I could see the North Star, pointing the handle of the Big Dipper.

Dirty, yellow light molds over my eyelids. Downstairs, the TV’s still going. Martha Stewart works this black and white spatula around a big red bowl and tells her audience how great life is. I almost call to Ann. I bite the inside of my cheek to keep the tears from coming. Dust covers the floor and dishes pile the sink.

I pick the paper up off my lawn. Snowcapped ridges of the Beartooth Mountains edge the sky over the horizon. A few thin, wispy clouds hang. My neighbor, Phil, is washing his Lincoln and playing jazz music. Piano notes play off beat as he twists a yellow sponge over a red bucket, suds plopping against the water. He works the sponge over his front hubcap. His long sleeves are scrunched above his elbows but still wet.

He turns to me and stands and waves. “It’s a particularly nice
day, huh Ted?” And flicks his hands dry.

“Yeah, it is.” I lie. Sure it’s sunny, nobody is going to argue that. But sun can get into your skin, absorb itself into your veins as you’re sitting on the couch and dust covers your floors and food crusts your dishes. You can’t do anything but try and sweat it out, sit there and wait as your body pumps hot sun out your pores and onto your shirt and underwear. The day’s nice alright. Real fucking nice.

“It’s so hot I might not even have to dry,” he says, teeth shining like white candy. His thin grey hair slicks back behind his ears. He’s retired. Been so since I moved here five years ago. Said he got out of the stock market while it was hot and never looked back. I don’t hold it against him, though. Too nice a fella.

“Watch out for those spots, Phil,” I say. I walk towards my door. I don’t think he understands me, though, and he smiles and waves as if I haven’t really said anything.


I never went to college, right. Never saw any reason to. My mother and father had both gotten degrees and what did they have to show for it? One became a weak alcoholic, scrapping by on welfare, the other a faded memory, so far gone from my life that I didn’t know what job she held or how she got by. Last I heard she was a beautician down in Los Angeles, but that was some time ago.

When I graduated I packed a box full of clothes and case of cassette tapes into the back of my Gremlin and drove to the truck stop where Ann worked. I made her take her break, sat her down, and told her I was moving to Montana where the air is fresh and the land untamed and that I hoped she would come along with me. I told her fuck Dallas, right, fuck all of Texas. She was unsure at first, and it took some convincing, but I told her how magical the place was, how the sky can carry on for days and open to the sun like she’s never seen before. She looked towards the interstate, then, where a deep, sooty smog hovered in the sky like the bottom of an ashtray. Another waitress coughed in front of us, cleared the phlegm from her
throat and leaned her elbow onto the booth of a scrawny, jittery trucker,

“What’ll you have, darling?” she asked, her thin, bleached hair looking like it’s going to fall onto the table.

“Only you, honey,” the trucker said, smiling an old, wrinkly smile. And that was it. That had done it. Ann gave one disgusted look around the room, set her apron on the table and left without telling her boss.

The manager that fired me, Edward, is working today. His shifts line up like that sometimes. So I decide it. What the hell, maybe he’ll give me my job back. I mean, it was hectic last night and maybe he slept off his anger.

The roads are trafficless. Gasoline fumes float in my busted side window. I had to take the Gremlin, since Ann escaped in the Taurus, and I’m grinding gears and mashing the clutch and hoping that the gas needle doesn’t drop below E.

I park on a different street so that Ed won’t see me. I don’t want him to know what I’m doing until I’m right in his face, until I can smell the oil on his pores and look into his small eyes and crowd him enough that he has to act like a man.

The parking lot is empty but of two cars. Ed’s Datsun and Alice’s Jeep. Orange lines draw the pavement like a chalk sketch at a murder scene. Paper cups lay against the bottom of a trashcan. Something doesn’t seem right. There should be more cars. At least one.

A light blue condom wrapper lays in the soil next to bushes. I pick it up, feel the slick plastic between my fingertips. The condom’s been removed. I drop it. A shudder moves down my spine and I wipe my hands against my pant thighs.

Inside, the place is empty. One customer sits along the back corner, his forehead pressed to the surface of a table. A coffee mug sits next to him, and when he hears me, he jerks his head, looks confused, then rests back against the wood. Florescent lights glow something unnatural and I feel like the whole place is covered in plastic wrap.

I walk into the kitchen and it’s as if the backroom fades behind me. Prep counters glow and the metal spatula shines silver metallic. The dish spray nozzle dangles from its holder, swaying back and forth, but no dishes line the sink and the
sanitizer sits quiet. Trashcans are empty and so is the order slip.

I call out, “Hello, hello.” Only echoes.

I walk towards the manager’s room and the door slowly opens. Ed sticks his chin against the wood so that all I see is his face. He pops his head back and closes the door. Commotion. Muffled voices. A girl says, “relax, ease up” and the door opens.

Ed slides ivory colored buttons through the slits of his black shirt. He holds his head high in the air, like he’s waiting for me to make a move, and Alice walks behind him, hair disheveled. She runs her palms down her pant thighs. She smiles an embarrassed smile and looks at the floor.

“What are you doing here, Ted?” Edward asks.

“I’m getting my job back, that’s what I’m doing Eddy, my boy,” and I can’t help but bite my bottom lip. Alice shakes her head. Her jaw line tenses and relaxes as she chews a piece of gum.

“As is that so?” Edward says, “Why would that be again?” As if he doesn’t know.

“Who do you think you’re fooling?” I say and force a few short, winded laughs. “Are you kidding me or something? You don’t think I know what you and Alice were doing back there, with you coming out buttoning up your shirt and her hair all a mess.” I flip my finger at his shirt, then Alice “And, oh, by the way, don’t you have a wife? What do you think she would say about all of this? Let alone the big wigs at Chili’s?” I cross my arms and stare in a pleased manner.

“My god,” Alice says. “How gross.” And pulls both hands up, palms out, like she’s showing a cop she doesn’t have anything illegal. She walks past me, shaking her head.

“Are you serious?” Ed asks. The sanitizer starts, rattling ceramic dishes. Alice slices onions.

“Come on, Eddy boy,” I say, and have to speak up to be heard over the spray of water. “Nobody else is here. Where’s the waitress?”

“Was that two pounds or three?” Alice asks. My eyes sting from onion juice.

“Three,” Ed says but keeps looking at me. He sighs. “Ted,” he says, “get the hell out of here.” I look at him like he’s kidding. I clench my fists and squint my eyes to see if he’s serious. “I mean right now, or I’ll call the cops.” And he points toward the dining
“Fuck you you’re nothing but a two bit fucking restaurant manager anyways,” I say. I step into the darkness of the dining hall. My face is hot and my neck is tense. Fluorescent lights chop the room. “There are plenty of jobs out there,” I enter the dining room and kick a couple chairs over. The lone customer cringes into the corner and grabs his coffee mug with both hands. Ed threatens with the cops again. I knock some napkins and silverware onto the floor and head out the door.

Clouds form over the horizon. The air dampens, becomes musty. A crow flies past my window and I wonder what it would be like to have wings, to be an animal, to be able to fly into the air and above the clouds where problems don’t exist. Instead I’m grounded, stuck on the bitterness of the earth where a woman will leave you and a man will fire you for no good reason and then threaten the cops on you. All this when you’re only trying to piece your life back together.

I close the curtains and a shadow falls over the floor. I pick up the phone and dial Ann’s number. She answers on the third ring.

“Ann here,” she says, and her voice sounds so sweet, so nice. She was probably expecting my call.

“Hey baby,” I say. “It’s me.” Like she’s away on business.

Ann sighs. “Please, don’t do this,” she says. My heart steadily gains rhythm. I breathe in and out of the receiver. I squeeze the phone cord between my fingers and try and think of something to say. Something that will make this turn in the right direction.

“Hey, um…” but my voice fails. Silence follows. Commotion in the background. The voice of man. My heart beats faster and harder. Thumps against my temples. And still this silence between us. And still this man’s voice. I can see him, sitting in her father’s leather chair, drinking scotch without ice and crossing his legs like a jackass. I can see the bleached tips of his hair and delicate dimples of his face. Oh, I bet he’s charming the hell out of Ann. Ann and her whole family.

“I’m glad you left,” I say and hope she’s offended. Hope she cries into the telephone and tells the man to leave and begs me to take her back. I hope she realizes that her life’s not the same without me.
But she doesn’t. She sighs and feels sorry for me. She tells me she hopes that I don’t hate her. That she had to do what she did for her own sake. She wishes me the best of lives. Hopes I find my raft and never have to struggle with the waters again. And she hangs up.

The rest of the night doesn’t matter, right? It’s just crying and despair and everything that goes along with it. It’s just rock bottom, as they say.

Darkness settles. The sun sinks and starts rain drizzling and I walk out on to my lawn to look at the dark underbellies of clouds. The moon’s hidden. Rain ratta-pat-pats against the streets like a drum roll, gaining momentum, I can feel it.

Headlights reach into the air from behind me. Cars pass, happy people with places to go. Friends to see. I look in the window of a car stopped at a red light. A woman laughs and street lights cast her in an eerie yellow haze. The driver turns towards her, waving his hands and talking excitedly. She touches his shoulder and laughs and they drive away.

Commotion builds from Phil’s house. Music and talking and shouts of appraisal. The side window glows orange and shadowy figures of people move. Somebody holds a glass in the air above their head, sets it below their waist, and walks out of view.

Ahead of me, a small break in clouds forms. A few stars shine through. The North Star points the handle of the Big Dipper, the guiding point of the night, and I look up and watch, wait, hope. Maybe, just maybe, a shooting star will streak. Maybe there will be something that will show me that this is just a day like any other day, only one that let the world crash down on me.

A little girl walks up. She leads this brown and white bulldog as it sniffs the ground. The girl’s tan corduroy overalls strap to one shoulder and her shoes flash red lights. She smiles like rain’s not hitting the top of her head.

The dog sniffs a trail to my feet. It touches its muzzle to my shoe and sniffs. It licks the top of my sneaker. The girl giggles.

“What’s this mutt doing?” I say and shake my foot. The dog stops, waits, and when my foot’s planted on the dirt, sniffs again.

“It’s not a mutt,” the girl says. “His name is Bambi.” She can’t
be more than seven or eight and has to be a relative of Phil. Got too many freckles not to be.

The dog paws at my laces, kicking its back feet. “What’s this thing doing?” I ask, and the girl giggles and covers her mouth. Above me the break in clouds begins to fade, the North Star already consumed by a progressing storm. Phil’s house has gotten louder and I can almost make out the music. Stevey Ray Vaughn or B.B. King or some type of blues.

I stick my other foot at the dog. It walks over and sits at the girl’s feet. She pats its head and rubs its ears.

“What,” I say and wait for the girl to look at me, “it didn’t want that one?”

“I think your shoe had poop on it,” she says and covers her mouth.

The music quiets down. Phil walks over with an umbrella and an unhappy look on his face. He puts his arm around the girl and covers her from the rain. “It’s time to come inside now, Sweetie,” he says and then says hello to me.

“I was just talking with the kid here,” I say and put my hands in my pockets. Phil looks at me and squints and looks into the night. Rain’s coming harder than before, splashing as it hits pavement. My clothes are soaked and I feel a chill sink into my skin. I don’t want to go inside.

“This is my granddaughter, Emily,” Phil says and pats her shoulder. He looks down at her and smiles.

“Is that so,” I say, just to say something, and Phil nods his head.

“Her and her parents drove in tonight.” Phil says and motions to a green Ford Explorer in his driveway. It’s backed in and the front grill is all smashed, but that’s none of my business. “My daughter, Beth, and her husband, Mark,” he says, looking at the car.

“Right, your daughter, I think I remember something along those lines.” But I don’t think I can. I don’t think me and Phil ever got that deep into a conversation.

“All the way from Miss-Zourri,” he says and looks at Emily and pats her on the shoulder again. Bambi’s tongue hangs, panting it up.

“Is that so,” I say and squat on my heels in front of Emily. “What brought you all the way over here?”
"I don’t know," she says and buries her face into Phil’s side. “They came to visit their old grandpa-pa,” Phil says. “Right Em?” But she just leaves her face snuggled against his side. “Well,” Phil says and looks at me like the conversation’s about to end. “There’s also a fourth running around. His name’s Jeremy. I thought I would hunt them down and bring them out of this weather. It looks like it’s about to get ugly.”

I look up into a starless sky. Deep purple-blue clouds stretch from the horizon and over me and beyond, to an endless oblivion, to the edge of places I’ll never be or experience. The rain is bigger and thicker than when I first came out, falling like lava bombs on judgment day. Phil is right. It’s about to get nasty. “It’s going to get bad,” I say and smile at the little girl, who’s stopped hiding behind her grandfather. “But I’ve seen worse.” And I wave goodbye.

I fix myself a bacon sandwich. When it’s gone I drink a glass of milk and feel satisfied. I lay on the couch in my living room and the overhead fan whips grey and black petals along the ceiling. Cars drive by. Spinning tires rush along rain soaked roads. Splattering and whooshing water blends with the steady hum of motors, and, ebony tires shoot silver crowns that glisten and shimmer and break into jewel encrusted puddles on darkened streets.
Kabuki
I enter this ancient tea retreat beneath fragrant curtains of hydrangeas, heavy bulbs of purple sunshine.

Along the path pebbled in stones, I pass shrines with peaked roofs built to honor the ancestral lords. Our heads bowed, their spirits awaken to tolling bells and the plink of my copper yen as it lands in a box of prayers.

Later I buy a paper fortune from a woman in a red kimono. I tie it to a string lined with hundreds of fortune slips, soggy in the slow drizzle. The oracles of others dissolve in front of me as the words of their futures drip from the delicate paper.

The pond is filled with yellow and orange carp. They sway in murky water, oblivious to the soft rain rippling the uneven surface. The cherry trees surrounding the pond give away their blossoms. I steal one from the water and press it against my palm, molding the petal into its center, tenderly closing my fingers around it.
Waking

Seeping in under the door, light beams splinter in, pushing and filling the room up to the ceiling: weighing down on everything—the sofa cushions give, flattening slightly; their sponge-like seats absorb the light as water, filling up until they sag with wish of squeezing it out.

It swallows me
engulfs me
drowns me.

Eyelids tightly taut shut: rods of light—like bird beaks, fidgety-finger pokes—peck and prod hoping to pry, hoping, a new source to pour into...
Tongue of the
Phoenix Serpent

Sultry lover snaking round my abdomen,
Panting on my skin like a wet dog that drips tendrils of
rainwater.
Xochipilli’s Ajna chakra organizes the dark matter of the
Missoula night;
The flowery geometries stroke inner space and reach outward to
the stars.
Over our crescent moon clouds seem to hover and detonate the
firmament.

I.

O excellent ode,
Commander of dense fortune in regions of New Jerusalem,
Processor of mixed melodies shaped into my eyes:
Boiling catastrophes of men and their boozy ways,
Koyaanasquatsi prototypical flippant lunatics.
Mites, dirty and unkind, they shrink the nerves,
Enforcing its passions…evermore?
“Evermore! Evermore!” they lisp, tossing genitalia and raping
their yin-consorts.
Robotic, relentless fighting technique;
Cannibal imps whirling at one another amidst the Bardo.
In times past a moksha-man counted.
Once he stood in Father Sun the shaman-king,
And chanted with Father-Mother in the ritual dark.
Antiquated and dead, I rise beyond you dweeb Hollywood;
I smear my buffalo-black-hair in gravelly mud.
And my pupils are splotches on Babylon,
My whispers the fascinations of duppies.
Out my gut runs the Yellowstone,
While chokecherry lungs hurl my breath into ether;
The Shri yantra clasped to my heart throbs in the dark waters
of Granite Lake.
The flautist calls me Not-Afraid, for that is the name I call
myself.

OVAL MAGAZINE
I pass through dreams like lucid honeycomb, a net of jewels, my own Diamond Web.

My animal teeth and apple lips laugh the sprite laugh of the wood elf, my brother,
As we jig the jig that rocks like the vanishing waves of Shakti,
All along my beachcombing brows.

Therein the conch maroon I spy tender heirlooms to marine-people,
And geomantic fantastic, bruised Tao arteries unrolling,
And the slick caricature of Kukulcan complete with labyrinthine tongue.

“Itinerant Nothinglover, where glides the sweet consort flashing jade orbs
Tumbling with the Star of the Sea?
Where are her heart-tears that embrace my machismo jowl?
O tender dove or verdant Mother, may our loins clash to birth fire dancers
Who straighten like arrows over the land.
May the ayahuasqueras banter at the cosmic gem,
Breathing Logos and squawking like wizened flamingos.”

II.

Iron patience sinks down to my gut and pain never lets out.
Xochiquetzal’s image splits me; eats me piecemeal:
The flowers waft dust since Our Lady wore Marlboro tar.
“Cannot the spirit-people quicken my animal thunder?”
Let us writhe and shake together Kachina,
And not long after prancing,
We shall hover along like leaves,
Shocked by brittle hooves and the Four Winds;
Father Sun Centerlight Autumnal makes them crisp.
“O rivulet, in jest does thou babble?”
Cross-eyed psalmist entranced,
He turns Medicine Man Eyes at the starbeams,
Queries these waters—chantlike, fragrant leaf fungus orator:
“Moon Mother, stirring at your oiling pot, does Father Sun threaten to burn us?
To shrivel up our flesh? To torch our corneas?”
What Grief! And Due Process Patriot America!—Renewing Gaia, Eden Father Sun winks over green Pastoral.
Pans, Peyote spirits, and Mannegishi herald Aboriginal.  
There darts the Truth! It flickers in monarch wings.  
There squats the undying Truth! It settles in mountain cairns.  
At last Truth hit me in a fractal Virgin Mary:  
Enrobed in stars, her arms are open and palms turned outward.  
The Brotherhood of Eternal Love swam in it;  
Tarahumara witch-doctors are preaching divine right—  
“Stupefying sight, translucent light,  
My world bobs and turns and zings in cosmic night!”  
Mary, sylvan Motherlover, you came with quarter pupils,  
And preceded the Argus.  
Gleaming Truth! Chrome Truth! Sheen Truth!  
There spasms the Spirit-Truth! Is it the Queen of the Night?  
Mountainside faeries reveal an antidote:  
The optical and tactile reception of Wira-Kocha!  

III.

“Does Bhaishajyaguru dangle rainbows above Turtle Island?”  
The awesome specter prince touts the poor bird heart,  
Muan’s wings flap outward; these pale old appendages unfurl—  
And our juvenile cocoon becomes mince.  
Double owlish beaks that are catchers of flesh,  
Brows wound round by lashings of hair-feathers,  
Or perhaps the burning night oil trapped in our heads  
Has drawn our wings together.  
By Jove! An aura of arura leaf leaks brighter!  
I unreel magic fibers of cottony spirit,  
Emptying doe eyes of tears until liquid tadpoles manifest,  
Slickening the back of Taku Wakan.  
And the Nti-Si-Tho say listen you sons and daughters,  
Open those ears to fragmentary America,  
Peek out from beneath your dollar signs;  
Confront the ideas of arbitrary judiciary,  
And yellow journalism,  
And industrialism,  
And dearest religious -isms.  
And InI say listen you sons and daughters,  
Lest the clock strike too soon on us.  
Compose the heart and let it be True:  
Every child of God shall reveal Her,  
Gracious Gaia.
And likewise He,
Father Sun.
(O Great Spirit, I love thee, I love thee, O Transmitter,
Holy Host, Holy Guest, I see thee mold to me and I to thee;
By tomorrow our two black-eagle feathers rest in the dust
beside the sea,
And the pale tropic moon inks its sunlit image
On mangy old fisher folk sporting tackle and rum
Down the pier across the bay).

IV.

A silent stranger
Wrings a seabird’s neck
And more feathers dance down
From his paw
In scattered lines beside his toes
Shoveling tiny seashells
In the sand.
The loudly rushing sea foam
Cradles his thrown catch
And he stands
On naked feet, gently grinning
As the dead flyer wildly spins
Upward through the air
Then down,
To the giant water waves
Breaking over a bent line
From the bottom of his black heart,
Where angst springs like summer weeds,
And the trespass of sleep saves his soul.
From the bottom of his bustling bowels,
His dirty cables turn like clock arms,
And the trespass of sleep saves me face.
From the bottom of my spine,
Time makes magic poison,
And the trespass of sleep saves my bones.
One Way Highway

Seeing you
is like passing a car
on a one-way highway

The lights speed toward me
Then in the the knick of time
I look away
And pull back into place
Eve sat at the kitchen table, dressed only in a long t-shirt and underwear, sipping black coffee from a purple mug and staring out of the window. It was the only window in the room, and in the mornings she could see right into her neighbor’s kitchen across the street. The little Jarred girl was having a birthday party, and her mother was baking her a cake. Eve and her husband, Dom, were invited to this party, along with the other residents of Highmore Street. Everyone on the street had accepted the invitation. The Jarreds were well liked by all the neighbors except Eve, who hated anyone with children. They had received the invitation in the mail a month ago, and Dom had stuck it to the fridge door with a smiley-face magnet he had painted himself.

Eve watched as her neighbor pulled from the cupboards a mixing bowl, flour, sugar, baking powder. From the fridge: eggs, butter. Eve took a sip of her coffee and set the mug down on the coaster, so as not to leave a ring on the blue tablecloth, a wedding present from Dom’s grandmother. “May you and your family eat many happy meals on this tablecloth,” the card had read. That card, along with the rest of their wedding memorabilia, was stuffed into a box in the garage, next to a bag of old clothes that needed to be taken to Goodwill.

Dom came into the kitchen, yawning and scratching his chest. “Is there any coffee left?” he asked as he searched the top cupboards for the box of Cheerio’s.

“No, I’ve had the whole pot,” said Eve. She hadn’t slept well the night before, it was difficult to judge how long she’d been awake. “I’ll make more.” She didn’t move, only gazed out of the window as she spoke. Beth Jarred, with her flowered apron covering her khakis and measuring cup in hand, made such a perfect housewife picture within the frame of her kitchen window. If she had looked up, she might have seen Eve in her long shirt, an old one of Dom’s and stained with yellow paint, greasy hair pulled back and calves curled around the legs of the chair like a child. But Beth Jarred wouldn’t look up, her only daughter’s birthday cake took all her attention. She cracked four eggs into her mixing bowl. Eve imagined she could her
each yolk plop onto the metal surface. She didn’t own a mixing bowl, wasn’t sure there were eggs in the fridge either.

“What about tea?” Dom said. Eve looked up at her husband, her coffee mug halfway to her lips. He was leaning over the counter, his hands folded on the hideous green top. The gold of his wedding band glinted at her. Her own ring hung from a chain around her neck, tucked under the collar of the white t-shirt. When she wore it on her finger, she had the tendency to take it off and leave it in odd places: the fridge, the medicine cabinet, the gas station.

“We haven’t had tea in years,” she said thoughtfully. Not since their second date, a picnic on top of Mount Sentinel. Dom had brought apple cinnamon tea in a thermos for her to drink if she got cold. She hadn’t needed to. In the kitchen across the street, Beth Jarred was mixing the cake ingredients together with a hand-held mixer, stopping periodically to scrape the sides of the bowl with a rubber spatula.

“I know,” Dom said. “What if I make that some of that ginger tea you like? We could use those fancy cups with the gold rims, the ones your mom gave us last Christmas.”

Two years ago, when they were in their first months of marriage, Eve would have teased him. “And can we talk with English accents, too?” she would have said, wrinkling her nose the way he liked. Instead she said, “I’ll make more coffee.” For the first year, they’d been genuinely happy. Then she’d gotten pregnant and had a miscarriage. Then Dom had disappeared for two days and slept with the owner of an art gallery that regularly showed his work. Now, more than a year later, he sometimes spent days in his studio, swiping at huge canvases with oversized paintbrushes. It was wearing, living in a house with a person who spent most of his time in another world.

Outside, the leaves were starting to fall down from the trees, covering the sidewalk and her own 1987 Ford Escort. There were no other cars on the street, the neighbors had theirs in garages where they belonged. Traditionally, when she’d married Dom, the car should have become theirs, but Eve could only think of it as hers. Eve had bought the car with her own money right before he proposed, and she reasoned that when they had kids to worry about, they would get something with more room, more reliability, maybe a minivan. Across the
street, Beth Jarred was preheating the oven.

Dom started to hum. The tune sounded vaguely like “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds.” The art gallery owner’s name had been Lucy. Eve realized that her silence must be making her husband uncomfortable; he couldn’t even paint without the radio on. She took one hand from her mug and gestured to the window. “Do you think they have curtains? Do you think she even cares that we can see her?”

Dom came to stand behind his wife, his hands now resting on the back of her chair. They watched as Beth Jarred poured the creamy white cake batter into a rectangular pan, smoothing the surface with the rubber spatula. “They have curtains. I’ve seen them.”

Eve twisted in her chair to look up at him. “When were you at the Jarred’s?” In the two years they’d lived on Highmore Street, Dom and Eve had never made an effort to become friendly with the neighbors. She was perfectly fine with their image of the eccentric artist and his antisocial wife.

She felt him stiffen, and though he tried to keep his face expressionless, she thought she saw him wince. “Last summer, they had a barbecue. You were gone.”

Eve took another drink of her now-lukewarm coffee, hands tight around the purple mug. “I know where I was.”

He moved around the table to sit in the other chair. She knew he wanted to hold her, but knew her well enough to know that she might want distance. Dom reached his hands to the middle of the table, palms facing the ceiling. She was meant to reach for him with her own hands, but she kept them safely clenched around her mug. “Where?” he said.

“I told you, I was at my parents’.” That was part of the truth, all he was ever going to get. Eve wanted him to be tortured a little, to speculate about any affairs she might have had with a sheep farmer from Stevensville or a high school teacher. She had gone to her parents’ house for a few days, but they were out of town and she’d been uncomfortable. She spent the rest of the time at her friend Anne’s in Polson. Beth put the cake into the oven, middle rack. After a few moments, Eve commented quietly, “The Jarred’s have a nice kitchen.”

Dom now leaned into the back of his chair and ran his hands through his curly hair. Eve forced herself to keep looking at
him: tall, lanky frame, crooked nose, eyes the color of black coffee. He wasn’t looking at her. “The rest of the house is nice, too. I went over there a couple of times after that barbecue.”

What did he mean by that? How much had he seen of the house? The bathroom, the basement, the bedrooms? The bed? Under the sheets? “Really,” Eve said, just to say something. She thought of Mr. Jarred, who worked at a bank and came home each night after his wife and child had gone to bed.

Dom’s eyes flickered to her face for a second, then back to the window. “I had to talk to someone, you know? You had just left and I was hurt, Evie. She talked about her husband threatening to leave her, we helped each other.”

“When didn’t you talk to Lucy?” That seemed logical, Eve thought. He had already slept with her, she assumed they had kept in touch.

“Laura,” Dom said softly.

“Laura,” Eve repeated. “Why didn’t you talk to Laura?” Eve had only met her once, at one of Dom’s show openings. Laura had informed Eve that she just loved Dom’s work, owned five of his paintings. That was more than they had in their whole house; Dom hated to look at the canvases after he’d finished with them. Eve had hated the woman even then, for being more a part of Dom’s world than his wife was.

“She was in Toronto at the time. She lives there now.” He sighed. “I wouldn’t have even gone to that barbecue if you hadn’t left, Evie. I wouldn’t have needed to.”

Eve gripped her coffee mug, half expecting a suffocating wave of rage to wash over her, but all she felt was a niggle of annoyance. So this new friendship of his—maybe beyond friendship?—was her fault, was it? Well, if he cheated once, that probably made it more likely he would do it again. She wouldn’t be surprised. She couldn’t argue with him, though, it was all circular. He would feel guilty for not being there for her when she was grieving over their lost child, she would feel guilty about running away. She watched as Beth Jarred took a sponge from the sink and wiped down all the counters and the stove top. Beth pulled the cake from the oven, inserted a toothpick into the middle to test if it was done. The toothpick came out clean. She put the cake into the fridge.

Eve could no longer feel her husband watching her from
across the table. Though she didn’t hear him get up, she suspects he has retreated to his downstairs studio. She dipped her finger into her coffee again, let the cold black liquid drip from her fingernail back to the mug. She inhaled the rich scent, watched as Beth frosted the cake with a chocolate frosting she no doubt made herself. Eve hated frosting. She liked her flavors to grab attention: the spicy, bitter sweetness of ginger, not the seductive, sweet smoothness of frosting. After a few more minutes, Eve got up and went to their bedroom to get dressed. Though she wasn’t really looking forward to spending an afternoon in the home of Beth Jarred, she couldn’t pass up the chance to observe Dom and Beth together. She needed to see those curtains.

Three and a half hours later, as early afternoon was wearing into late, Eve walked across the street with her husband. She was dressed in a jean skirt and a long-sleeved blue shirt of Dom’s, which she had carefully inspected for paint splotches before putting on. Dom had come back upstairs as she was going through his closet. He hadn’t said anything, just pulled a shirt at random from a hanger and left the room. When she came out of the bedroom, he was sitting at the kitchen table, waiting for her and holding a carefully wrapped package.

“So what did we get her?” she said, trying to make her voice light.

“Just a little picture I painted,” Dom said, standing up and grabbing the keys from the table next to the front door. “It’s of her and her mom.”

Eve started to open the door, then paused. “Exactly how much time have you been spending over there, anyway?” She was careful not to raise her voice.

He put his hand on top of hers on the doorknob. “It was all last summer, Evie. You were gone.”

“You’ve never painted me.”

“I wanted to, remember?” Eve had forgotten, but she remembered now. He had started a painting of her when her stomach had first started to round. She wondered if he had painted over it, or if it was still in his studio somewhere. “You know, we don’t have to go if you don’t want to. We can just stay here.”
Eve thought about that for a moment. “No. We have to go, we already said we would.”

“Let’s go, then, we’re already late.”

And so they left, Eve hugging herself against the chill. They stood on the Jarred’s doorstep for a few moments before she realized that she was the one standing closest to the doorbell. As she reached her hand forward, she noticed that there was a tiny blob of white paint on the right cuff of the shirt she was wearing. She wished she had bothered to look through her own closet for something to wear, or at least brushed her hair. Beth, like Laura had been, was always stylishly and sleekly dressed.

The little Jarred girl answered the door. Eve couldn’t remember her name, should’ve asked Dom before they left the house. “Welcome to my party!” the little girl said. She was wearing a dress patterned with tulips, a witch’s hat, and oversized lion slippers.

“Thanks, Katie,” Dom said to the girl, and handed her the present. Katie, right, that was her name.

“What is it?” Katie asked, shaking her gift with both hands. “Guess you’ll have to open it and find out,” Dom said.

“Who are you?” Katie looked up at Eve.

Eve tried to shake off all events and words of the day, so that she could sound somewhat cheerful for the child. “I’m Eve. How old are you today, Katie?”

“I’m eight.” She studied Eve for a moment. “I like your hair.”

“Thanks,” Eve said, thinking how much nicer her long hair would have looked if she had taken the time to shower.

“Dom!” Beth Jarred came to the door and stood behind her child. She was still dressed in khakis and a white sweater, not a smear of chocolate frosting to be seen. Her eyes were overbright, though, and her fair skin a little flushed. “Eve! I’m so glad you could come! And so is Katie, aren’t you, honey?” Katie nodded, the point of her hat bobbing. “Well, come in, come in, it’s getting chilly out!” Beth steered her daughter away from the door so that Eve and her husband could enter.

Dom put his hand low on Eve’s back as they stepped into the house. The door opened into the kitchen, like their own. The Jarred’s kitchen was much whiter than theirs, which made the room look much brighter than Dom and Eve’s hideous green one. Dom had said when they first moved in that he would
paint it, but Eve knew that he probably would never get around to it. Katie, already bored with the new party guests, ran to the basement stairs with her gift.

“Katie, darling, take off that ridiculous hat, won’t you?” Beth called after her, but her daughter didn’t hear her. She grimaced. “It’s so silly, but her father gave it to her and she won’t take it off.”

“Kids are like that,” said Dom. Eve wondered how he knew that.

Beth smiled at him and went over to the kitchen table, which held several open wine bottles for the adults and Sprite for the kids. “Would either of you like something to drink?”

“I’d like some white wine,” Dom said, inspecting the bottles. He almost never drank wine, he preferred hard liquor.

“What about you, Eve?”

“I hate white,” Eve said.

“Red for you, then,” Beth said, her white-blond hair swaying into her face as she poured. Eve suspected that, from the way her neighbor stared so intently at the liquid as it reached the glass, that she had already had her fair share of the wine that evening. Beth straightened and put on her smile again. “All the adults have gathered in the living room, so let’s go say hello, shall we?” Dom followed her through the doorway, wine glass in hand. He looked back at Eve to make sure she was coming.

Eve stayed in the kitchen for a moment. There was something so...sterile about this kitchen. There was almost no evidence that a child lived here, save for a crudely-drawn picture of a cat stuck to the fridge with an alphabet magnet. If Eve was Katie’s mother, she would have stuck every doodle on that fridge to cover up the whiteness. She turned to look out of the window, to see if she could see anything in her house, and there were the curtains: white, of course, with miniscule daisies and ruffled edges. She had expected something a little more seductive, provocative, if curtains could be that way. As it was, Eve found them sickening and resolved to go out the next day and buy bright purple ones with orange polka dots.

She heard Dom laugh, that great booming guffaw of his that was so distinctive. He was probably laughing at one of his own puns. His favorite one was about the history professor who only read “hysterical” fiction. Eve went into the living room
to stand between him and Beth on the white carpet, next to the fireplace. She didn’t recognize many of the other guests, though most of them lived on the same street she did. The elderly woman on the couch, balancing a plate of bread and cheese on her lap, was maybe one of Katie’s grandmothers. She didn’t see Mr. Jarred anywhere, even though it was Saturday and the banks were closed.

Eve couldn’t pay attention to the conversation, which mostly consisted of all the neighbors sharing memories of little Katie: the time she ran away, the day she fell from the Wrights’ swing set and broke her arm, her first day of school. At one point, Katie and her friends came upstairs, playing tag. All of them were wearing socks, except Katie, who was still in her lion slippers. Eve willed them to be careful on the slippery linoleum of the kitchen, especially after she saw Katie stop several times to pull one of her slippers back on. She was pulled into the talk when one of the men who lived down the street said, “It’s Eve, isn’t it?”

Eve nodded, self-conscious now that everyone was looking at her.

“So which one of those rugrats over there is yours?”

“Yes,” the woman next to him smiled, “You two are such a good-looking couple, your child must be beautiful.”

Eve opened her mouth to answer, but Dom beat her to it. “We don’t have any children.” His hand went to her lower back again.

There was awkward silence. The man who had asked the question excused himself to go check on the kids. “Eve?” Beth said. “Do you mind helping me in the kitchen for a moment?” Eve handed her wine glass to her husband and followed her neighbor into the kitchen.

“You must excuse Bill,” Beth said, handing Eve a cheese tray as soon as she stepped through the doorway. “He has almost no social skills whatsoever.”

“It’s fine,” Eve said.

Beth opened the fridge and pulled a vegetable tray from the top shelf. “Dom told me about your miscarriage last summer,” she said. “I’m so sorry.” Her face was full of pity as she looked at Eve.

“Yeah, he told me you two talked.” Eve’s tone was more
clipped than she meant it to be.

“Please don’t read anything into what happened,” The look of pity changed to a pleading one. “We were both drunk and hurt...Peter is never home, Katie is such a handful...it was just kissing, I swear. I would never cheat on Peter.”

“Stop,” Eve said. “I understand.” But she didn’t understand, she was too startled at Beth’s outburst to process the information just then. She mostly wanted to leave the kitchen, which was starting to remind her of a hospital room in all its sterile whiteness. She wanted to go back to the living room where at least some of the guests were wearing colored clothing.

“Are you sure you don’t want some tea or something? I hear you like ginger,” Beth pleaded. “We can get Dom and talk this whole thing out, right here.”

Eve started to get angry then; her hands gripped the cheese tray like they had gripped her coffee mug that morning. She knew that Dom had told Beth about Eve leaving, but did he have to share of all his wife’s likes and dislikes with the neighbors too? Would she meet Mr. Jarred one day and find out he knew whether she preferred Herbal Essences over Tresemme? “You don’t want to leave your guests,” Eve said. “After you.” She stepped out of the doorway so that Beth could enter the room first. Beth dropped her eyes and started to walk.

Beth didn’t see her daughter’s slipper lying in the middle of the doorway, but Eve did, right before Beth tripped over it, causing her to crash hard. Carrots, pickles, broccoli, and radishes created a kaleidoscope of color on the white carpet. Beth had fallen on her stomach, her face planted into the ground, legs awkwardly bent. The party guests gasped and rushed to see if she was alright, Dom included, but Eve just laughed as she hadn’t for over a year, as if the slipper had been placed there for her own amusement.

If Dom had stood up to lead her away from the scene, her catharsis would have been ruined. Eve was glad he was helping Beth up and to a recliner in the corner, his hands carefully distant from her chest and hips. The other guests were picking up vegetables from the carpet. It looked like some bizarre scavenger hunt, which only made Eve laugh harder. Her left hand clutched at the middle of her chest, where her wedding
ring rested. She could feel her fury evaporating, like steam from her coffee mug, with every shake of her shoulders.

As the sound of a car door slamming reached them from the garage, Eve looked toward the kitchen, the way out. Her husband understood the signal. He edged himself around the recliner and the kneeling party guests, touched his hand to her lower back, and they walked together home.
Afternoon
(A Warm Breeze in Late October)

Indian summer goldenrod-
Fallen leaves etched yellow on the ground,
Reflect blue sky, unlike a mirror,
But a kindred spirit

While over cracks in the sidewalk
Waltzes the wind, yet
Too soft to stir
Carelessly tossed yesterday’s newspaper

People, playing, run past
Singing girls,
Paintings neatly arrayed against
Sunset mountains-

But you, you are a limbo,
Your prayer for the departed
Unable to save me

From you— more fall colors
Flow, and by the chime of the
Tower, and drone of the high-distant airplane
you are out of reach

of

Indian
Golden
Summer
rod
days.
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