



BLUE MESA REVIEW

NO. 34

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Jason: Shit's rough. Times are tough. 2016 has sucked. And continues to suck.

Aaron: Yes, we could easily insert a president-elect anecdote here—it wouldn't be *unpresidential*— but why give him the space? Like Jason and myself, many who write also teach, and we found ourselves in the position of consoling our students in the wake of the election—some fearing hate crimes, others sick from worrying about being deportation. I had one student tell me of her sister, who is an elementary school teacher here in Albuquerque, how one of the kids in her class asked who would eat breakfast with him in the morning if his parents were deported. I was devastated when I heard this. What's more, I know someone who is attending college on a visa, and she brought her younger siblings with her to escape the political corruption of their hometown. She is now afraid that her siblings will be sent back to a place where over dozen individuals are being murdered in the streets, weekly. As more of these stories surface, I keep asking myself, how did we get here? How is this man going to be the leader of this country?

Jason: And while we were all still reeling from Trump's rise to power, an Oakland DIY space caught fire during a show, killing 36 young, creative people. The DIY music scene was a huge part of my life when I lived in Chicago. I performed at and attended hundreds of these concerts in basements and warehouses and garages and living rooms and long defunct ballrooms. These makeshift venues are safe spaces for the LGBTQ and otherwise marginalized communities. They encourage musical experimentation and unbridled self-expression. These scenes across the country are connected and I knew three people who died in Oakland. Edmond Lapine was an affable, charismatic guy who I met through friends in the Northwest. A few summers ago, we all played loud music in an apartment building in downtown Olympia, Washington. Chelsea Faith Dolan was an electronic musician who I met through my friend Justin the last time I was in New York. She was vibrant and warm, unpretentious, yet effortlessly cool. And one of the best House musicians on the planet. I never formally met Joey Casio, but I saw him perform his no-rave, Futurist, electro-punk at a DIY festival in an old yacht club in Astoria, Oregon when I was 18. So much kindness, so much creativity lost in that fire. Our cities need to support the arts so no one has to play in unsafe spaces.

Aaron: And then there is Aleppo. Those families. The children.

Jason: God, Aleppo. Heartbreaking.

Aaron: Horrible. And Bowie. And Prince.

Jason: And Leonard Cohen--and Alan Thicke. *Show me that smile again..*

Aaron: *Show me that smile..*

Jason and Aaron: *Don't waste another minute on your crying..*

Jason: Alan Thicke. One of the great songwriters of our time. 2016 hasn't been all horrible, though. Aaron? Help me out.

Aaron: Well, I became a father in February 2016—the best thing that has happened to me in my whole life. And what a little adventurer Wolff is. That's his name in case you were wondering. But yes, he's already walking and speaking gibberish—but don't tell him that!

Jason: I watched the video that Aaron posted on Instagram of Wolff walking and giggling, over and over again. Beyond precious. I didn't have a baby this year, per se, but I did finish the first draft of my memoir. Which is kind of like a baby, in that I'm trying to protect it and grow it until it is mature enough to be ushered out into the world. And Aaron finished a draft of his book of poetry. You feel good about it, right Aaron?

Aaron: I do feel good about it. Writing makes us feel good during tough times. You know what else makes us feel good during tough times?

Jason: Drinking?

Aaron: Ok, yes. Drinking. But also...

Jason: ...Singing?

Aaron: Cooking. We love to cook. Both of us.

Jason: And we are good cooks. Aaron and I.

Aaron: So I thought that right now, during these tough times, we could share a couple recipes with you to get you through to the new year.

Jason: You can make this food and eat it while you read through this issue.

Aaron: For me, I always go to comfort food. And what's more comforting than green chile stew? A good green chile stew starts with the broth. And no, I'm not talking about you running out to the grocery store and picking up a carton of Swanson's. You need a chicken carcass. Throw those chicken bones in the crockpot with five cups of water, two onions, a crushed whole garlic, a little apple cider vinegar, and let that thing simmer overnight. Trust me. It's worth it. The next step is cubing out some stew meat and brown it in a large pan on high heat with a tablespoon of olive oil (be heart healthy!). While your meat is browning, chop up some red bell pepper and potatoes to add in. Once meat is browned, combine it with the chopped bells, potatoes, and bone broth in a large pot. Bring this to a boil for five minutes, and then reduce the heat for a simmer. Last but certainly not least, dice up some fresh roasted Hatch chile, about two cups worth. You'll toss that in the pot as well. Now, let the stew simmer on the stove for at least three hours, but in my experience, the longer you can go, the better it will taste! Garnish with chopped cilantro and pinto beans. I also recommend fresh flour tortillas, but that's another recipe for another time.

Jason: I make a damn good salmon. Get a wild caught fillet and scrape the scales off--you are going to want to eat the skin, all those omega-3s. Place the fillet in a Ziplock bag and pour in a marinade of 1-2 tablespoons of soy sauce, 1 tablespoon of fresh grated ginger, 1 tablespoon of freshly minced garlic, and if you have an orange handy, squeeze a tablespoon of its juice in as well. Let the salmon relax in the fridge for an hour. Heat a tablespoon or two of sesame oil in a cast iron pan on medium heat. When the oil is hot, lay the fish skin side down in the pan. You should never over cook salmon, so I don't flip the fish. I put a lid on the pan and let it fry for 5 minutes and call it good. The flesh should easily break away from the skin and range in color from pink to pinkish red--never pale pink. Serve with couscous and grilled vegetables.

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SECOND PLACE POETRY IN THE 2016 SUMMER CONTEST

I love this poem for its willingness, no, its commitment, to not look away. Such is the most trying yet necessary work of seeing as an artist. This poem sees, and sees through itself, us. - Ocean Vuong

Threnody
By: Elisabeth Murawski

It all comes back when her waters break:
Mama yowling like a cat. The pinkish shape
in the bowl. The shout *don't flush*

even as she grips the silver handle, a doll-
like figure whirling round and down
to where the water goes. Yells

in a panic to the labor nurse: don't let me
kill the baby! Resolves to tell
her mother what she did. Here

they are together, days later; Mama's
picking at a hangnail till it bleeds.
Murder? That's absurd. The fetus

died inside me. The doctor said to save it
in the bowl. I told you not to flush...
you disobeyed. The daughter groans.

Years of nightmares, children drowning.
I try to save them, but I can't. Mama
eye rolls her disdain: you don't

explain miscarriage to a three-year-old.
The daughter looks down at her shoes.
In a voice soft as kidskin, asks

will the dreams stop now? Will the children
still drown? The memory stands
between them, dripping and pink.

THIRD PLACE NONFICTION IN THE 2016 SUMMER CONTEST

This essay's ability to depict resentment and also empathy is rare and remarkable.

- Debra Monroe

50 Lire

By: Sara Marinelli

The night my sister and I met our stepfather, I didn't know that shortly afterwards I would wish him dead. I was five years old, Paola nine, on our first summer holiday after a lifetime of mourning our father's death. It was the summer my mother stopped wearing black, the color I had seen on her since I was born, and began to wear colorful blouses that revived the beauty and youth she had buried along with my father. We were staying with one of my mother's older sisters, who had rented a house on the coast, midway between Naples and Rome, and took care of the three of us as her own children.

That night, Paola and I had not been asked to wait for our mother at home. To our surprise and joy, we were invited to go out with her and our cousin Lorena. We loved Lorena, nineteen years old and the embodiment of the uninhibited sexuality of the late 70s, which we could not understand but could sniff in the air around her when she sunbathed topless on the beach and talked to men without covering her bosom, or when at home she left the restroom door wide open for us to peer in and steal another glance at her breasts or—if we got lucky—at her pitch-black bush. We were thrilled to be part of this small tribe of women, and we savored the appetite for life that Lorena was passing on to our mother along with her vibrant Indian tunics that made mother the most beautiful woman we had ever seen.

We walked into the Lido disco bar with trepidation. The familiar beach deck, coated with sand during the day, had turned into a shiny dance floor at night, with a glittering ball spinning on the ceiling, a jukebox blasting Donna Summer and Gloria Gaynor, and a row of pinball machines beckoning us from within a cloud of cigarette smoke. We had entered the world of adults, and it was loud and hazy and electrifying.

At first, we did not understand. A mustached

man, leaning against the bar, looked as if he were expecting us. He instinctively moved in our direction, grinning, then stopped abruptly, seemingly responding to a signal from our mother, and pretended to join a group of dancers. The disco ball cast light and shadow over him, and we could not fully see his face. Rocking to the rhythm of his own music, he then traced his steps back toward the bar and lit a cigarette, waiting for another invisible signal. We sat at a table across the bar, from which we studied the exchange of glances across the dance floor. The mustached man kept watching my mother, and she watched him back. He smiled, she didn't. She lowered her gaze, aware of ours. Then, she sent us to ask him for some change to play a pinball game so we would stop staring at them staring at each other.

"I'll go," Paola said.

"Me too." I grabbed Paola's hand and followed her through the dancing crowd.

"Scusi, signore, do you have 50 lire for the pinball game?" Paola and I said in unison, because speaking together gave us courage, and because we were unable to contain the excitement of approaching a man who—it was not hard to guess—already seemed to know who we were.

"Only 50?" he said, smiling.

Eager to put his hand to the wallet, he gave us more than we had expected: we could play not one, but four games. He leaned toward us, and up close, we noticed that he had slightly bulging eyes. Later, my mother—and we after her—called him "Maurizio occhi a palla" for his soccer ball eyes. We thanked him and returned to our mother's table, around which now hung a cluster of men. Maurizio was not the only man not taking his eyes off our mother; with her coffee-colored skin and eyes enhanced by the turquoise of Lorena's Indian tunic, she looked aware, but not in control, of her stunning beauty. She was thirty years old; she smelled of jasmine and figs and all the good fruits I discovered that summer in my aunt's garden, and she had an edginess

in her manner I had never seen before. Later, I realized it might have been desire. Desire to be loved, to be plucked like a fruit by some male hands, to be plunged back into the carnality of life she had tasted for less than four years during her marriage, and that had been taken away from her too soon. A desire—and the shame of it—I could not understand yet, but that the men in the Lido bar surely did and were eager to satiate.

“Mamma, that man gave us two hundred lire!” Paola and I said, excited.

“I told you Maurizio is a good man,” Lorena said.

“Maybe,” my mother said.

“Now he has met these two.”

My mother blushed.

“It’s time you find a man for your kids.”

Actually, I am lying: I never heard Lorena say that last line. Yet, it was the line all our family members told our mother every time they came to check on us after weeks of her not leaving the house. They brought her food, cigarettes, and cash, alongside an injunction to live, which was tantamount to finding a man: “If not for yourself, do it for the love of your husband’s daughters.”

And so it was for the love of us, that Paola and I were dragged into a disco club that night. We knew we were on a mission, and that we had the consent of the entire family: our grandparents, aunts and uncles, all wanted my mother to find a man. Not any man, but one to replace my father. One who was not afraid of joining a family with no male head and with three pairs of female legs.

Except for the uncountable pinball games and my mother’s turquoise blouse, I do not recall much else from that first encounter. All I know is that not long after that night—the night that determined who I would become, and how much love I could get and give—Maurizio, my mother, my sister and I were walking on the beach like a family: Maurizio holding my mother’s hand, we right behind them next to bare-breasted Lorena. We liked Maurizio because he bought us ice cream and pinball games, and because finally here was one man by our mother’s side, one that would keep away all others who offered to fulfill the needs of a young widow after her daughters were put to bed.

Maurizio kept visiting us after summer was over and we had returned to our apartment in Naples. On Sundays, he took us to the amusement park; we always came back home with toys in our arms and cotton candy stuck to our lips. I would sit on his lap, and we would call each other *Cuoricino mio*—“My Little Heart.”

“Let’s pretend that you are my daddy,” I said a Sunday evening, eager to have a father like all the kids I knew.

“Yes, *Cuoricino mio*.”

Soon after, with the approval of both my sister and me, and to the objection of the entire small town he was from—a town that considered a Neapolitan woman, a widow with two daughters, seven years his senior, a disgrace that would ruin his life—Maurizio came to live with us.

This was before the fights started. Before Maurizio punched furniture and smashed plates. Often, it was because of his jealousy. When my mother returned from grocery shopping, he objected that she looked too well-dressed or too made-up, that she stirred the fantasies of the butcher, the baker and all the shop owners on our street, and forbid her to set foot in any shop run by men—virtually all the shops in our neighborhood. Soon, even knocking at the neighbor next door was not allowed. Signora Lucia had lovers—the whole neighborhood knew, and in Maurizio’s mind a simple chat with the adulterous neighbor made my mother an adulterous too.

“What were you doing there?”

“To borrow some basil, then we smoked a cigarette.”

“I don’t want you smoking a cigarette with her.”

“Why not?”

“Because I say so.”

“She’s cheating on her husband, not me. Stop being jealous.”

Maurizio was not simply jealous; he was infected with jealousy: a jealousy that, like a dormant virus in his blood, could awake at any moment—violently and capriciously—and for which there was no cure. With time, I understood jealousy was a way of claiming for himself what he could not fully possess. Not a real husband, nor a real father, Maurizio reacted to his own predicament by picking a fight with any pretense of threat: the phone ringing, a knock on the door, the cigarette drooping from my mother’s lips, which made her more desirable, yet defiant.

Above all, every day he fought a solitary battle with my father’s ghost. Every day, he saw the prints of my mother’s lips covering the photograph of my father on her bedside table, and felt defeated. The photo bore more kisses than he could ever dream of getting, and the clear outline of my mother’s mouth was the unmis-

takable evidence of her infidelity—of which he could not find her guilty. The man in the photograph, snapped on his wedding day, was this woman's husband. He was not. Five years into their relationship, not only had she not married him yet, she also had not forgotten her husband, who had passed away more than ten years earlier.

As for Paola and me, we were no longer little kids. Maurizio was only twenty-three that summer at the Lido bar; had he really conceived us, he would have had my sister at fourteen and me at eighteen. In order to widen the uncomfortable closeness in our ages, he played the father's role harder. He imposed on us the same prohibitions he had on my mother: we were not allowed to visit the neighbor's kids, because the girls next door had brothers, and in Maurizio's world boys and girls did not play together. He forbade us from taking phone calls, to the point that when the phone rang, it spread terror in the house, and we, nailed to our fear, waited for the ringing to stop—you pick it; no, you do; who is going to pick up the phone?—, and the more we waited, the more the ringing spread terror in the house. If on the other end of the line there was a male voice, no statuettes or knick-knacks that covered my mother's sideboards and dressers would be safe. Once, Maurizio smashed my sister's guitar, which he had bought her a month earlier: a sweet gift that turned sour.

His favorite punishment was to lock us in the bathroom; he would hide the key in his pocket, then lie down on the couch and take a nap. His long naps became our out-of-cell time: my mother snatched the key and set us free. And it was always when he was sound asleep that we would visit the neighbor, make a phone call, sneak out of the house. We got a kick out of fooling him; it was our only way then—sly and yet submissive—of fooling violence. I wonder now if violence on those who are very young hurts more in the moment, or later once its measure is fully grasped. At the time, I didn't call it violence. It was a mischievous game in which I could test disparate tricks in order to win it, and in which I never felt completely defeated every time I lost it, but rather more combative and ready for the next round.

With time, the punishments didn't hurt me anymore; instead, I wanted them. I wanted the kicks in my shins, the slaps across my face. I wanted them and I expected them, so that I could prove how strong I was. I spent my confinement time—half-hour, an hour, sometimes longer— thinking hard about two things: one, how much I wished him dead; and two, how I could make him die. Regularly, I contemplated plans of

poisoning his food or of making him breathe gas in his sleep without burning down our house. Regularly, I did not accomplish any of these plans, nor did I even try, and resorted to wishing and hoping and praying that he would die naturally, that he wouldn't wake up in the morning.

While I got used to Maurizio's aggressive outbursts, I remained terrified when he and my mother fought: if I could resist the punishments he inflicted on me, I could not bear to watch the ones reserved for my mother. My mother's tears were—and will always be—more painful than my own, more hurtful than any blow or slap I could receive. The fights between the two would typically happen at dinner time: it was then, while we were all gathered for our meals, that Maurizio tested his authority the most, and the faintest sign of defiance was enough for him to flip the table over. At first, my mother fought back: she argued, yelled, cried. Then she stopped.

Once, during one of Maurizio's fits, she stood up, stormed out of the kitchen, and locked herself in the bedroom. She emerged five minutes later wearing one of my father's ties around her neck: an elegant silk tie, with red stripes, the knot perfectly tied, the ends falling neatly on her kitchen apron, as if she had starched them and ironed them for a special occasion. She had a whole compartment brimming with my father's clothes: his jackets, his pants and hats, all wrapped in cellophane, smelling of mothballs and of a time before mine. After the tie, it was the turn of a wrist-watch, a cardigan, a shirt; she would roll up the sleeves, sit back down at the table, and continue to eat with vacant eyes. My mother had finally found a way to oppose Maurizio, and it was with the only weapon that could make her invincible: her husband's spirit; her access to an otherworldly force that nobody—not Maurizio, not me, nor my sister—dared to take away from her. The ghost had been summoned, and Maurizio, now tamed and embarrassed, mumbled something under his mustache, and kept on eating with downcast eyes, swallowing his food without chewing.

My mother's frequent conjuring of my father's garments at the table would protect her and us from the fights, but it did not make me feel safe, and had me ponder about the father I did not have. I would stare at my plate and debate with myself what makes a man a father. I had heard my aunts say that a father is the one who raises the children, not the one who conceives them; I had seen them periodically warn my mother that if she left Maurizio she would lose a father for her children.

“He treats them like his daughters,” my mother would end up agreeing as a way to solve the constant battle she fought—not with her sisters, but with herself. She would not mention that the daughters’ treatment included punishments, prohibitions, and violence. After all, it was part of the Neapolitan father’s deal: care, financial support, protection from the outside world went hand in hand with authority, power, and fear. We saw it in other families around us, hence it must have been true that Maurizio treated us like his daughters. Indeed, my sister and I had soon learned to call him father, although for years—until this day—I cannot help adding a line in my head: *mio padre—che non è veramente mio padre*. Our mother, on the other hand, never introduced Maurizio as her husband, and when she felt she had to in order to avoid gossips, the words “*mio marito*” slipped out of her mouth quickly and bashfully, in a voice two tones lower than her normal pitch.

I, for my part, wanted blood to matter. I was not born of Maurizio. I was the spitting image of my deceased father, whom I never knew, about whom I had heard stories that depicted him as the kind of man you meet once in a lifetime: beautiful, patient, and kind. When Maurizio treated us like daughters by locking us in the house and smacking us, I repeated in my head: *Tu non sei mio padre..*

You. Are Not. My Father.

During the fights, I imagined what it would be like to go back to a fatherless life, the way it had been until the summer we asked Maurizio for 50 lire for the pinball game. What would it be like if Maurizio died. I told myself that if I had endured the death of my real father, two weeks before I was born, I could endure the death of his surrogate. And since he was a stepfather, he deserved to die twice: once for having taken my father’s place, and again for not really taking his place. Those moments, as I sat petrified at the table—glass shards on the tablecloth, food splattered on the floor, tears streaming down my cheeks, and the large tie knotted around my mother’s neck—I wanted the stepfather, the only father I’d ever had, to die.

And in the gloomy light of my mother’s eyes, I wondered, and never dared to ask, if that ever was her wish too.

Almost thirty years later, Maurizio still sits with my mother at the same table. I sit with them when I visit from San Francisco. Ever since I left their house, in my early twenties, I’ve come back to it uncountable times. First it was Rome, Milano, then London, Glasgow,

until it was farther away. Until I did not go back. I’ve been living in California for nine years, and every summer—sometimes at Christmas—I sit with them at the same spot, anticipating that something will go wrong, that talking face-to-face, and not over the phone ten thousand kilometers away, will make my mother’s meals taste bitter. I know there will be bickering and quick tempers, but there won’t be real fighting. It’s been a long time since Maurizio smashed plates—now he helps wash them. A month ago, he got laid off, and he spends his days at home. The elderly man he took care of for almost ten years passed away, leaving him unemployed and ten years older. Maurizio himself has turned into an old man: his hair completely white, large rolls of fat on his belly, a stent in his heart, and chronic bronchitis from chain-smoking. A week before I arrived on my last visit, he was taken to the ER. Diabetic shock. He didn’t even know he had diabetes, and the doctors said he was lucky. He spent a week in the hospital and was sent home with daily insulin shots and a list of warnings and precautions. It’s the second time he’s come close to death; the first was four years ago, due to a failure of his heart, now beating regularly via an electric box sewn beneath his skin.

“How did you get to this point?” I ask Maurizio.

“I was just a bit dizzy.”

“Diabetic shock, you could have died!” I cry.

“I thought I just needed new glasses,” he says.

He reaches for his cigarettes.

“And you’re still smoking. Both of you,” I say upset, turning to my mother.

“Don’t start,” my mother says.

“Diabetes has nothing to do with smoking,”

Maurizio says.

I am astounded by his answers, but I should not be. I understood long ago that Maurizio and I never thought alike. I roll my eyes, and say nothing; I realize that I am the one ready for a lunch-time fight, although I know I will lose it. Conversations about my mother and Maurizio neglecting their health and smoking like chimneys have been pointless and hurtful for a lifetime. They have both damaged their lungs to the point my mother sprays asthma aerosol into her mouth after every meal. Her daily dessert.

“I smoked only three since this morning,” he says, triumphantly, coughing his perennial smoker’s cough. “Isn’t it so, Gigi?”

Gigi is their dog, a seven-year-old black mutt, small and fat, its body so misshapen it looks like a seal rather than a dog. I now call him “La foca” La foca

perks up at its name and laps around the table waiting for food. When Maurizio cannot bear to talk about something, he either changes topic or talks to the dog. Now, he does both.

“Gigi, did you tell her I am buying a scooter?” He says, not looking at me and dropping breadcrumbs into Gigi’s mouth.

“You shouldn’t drive a scooter,” I snap.

“I need it to find a job.”

“Mamma, what do you say?”

“Wasted breath. You know how stubborn he is.”

The phone rings. La foca barks angrily when Maurizio picks up the phone.

“Gigi is so jealous that it gets mad when Maurizio or I talk on the phone or to a neighbor,” says my mother, pleased at her dog’s reaction.

I am not as amused as my mother. Gigi protesting at Maurizio answering the phone reminds me of an old pattern, as does its way of showing love through absurd jealousy. The dog has inherited its master’s behavior without inheriting his genes: conditioned by family ties alone, which have nothing to do with blood. The dog-master relationship, a kind of child-parent relationship, makes me think of how much of Maurizio I have in my blood. I inherited the features of my real father, but it is the encounter between this man and my mother, their love and lack of love, their fights and their reconciliations, that went on making me. This is where I come from. My origin. Before which I remember nothing, except for my mother’s mourning clothes.

I hear Maurizio making arrangements with a friend to go check out a scooter deal.

“Maybe you should wait to buy one until you feel better,” I say calmly when he hangs up. The California side of me is speaking, the one that has learned to negotiate and doesn’t yield to my Neapolitan side that would just snap at him.

“I feel great. See, I am strong,” he says, and flexes vigorously his limp biceps.

I look at him, a sixty-year-old man behaving like a teenager, and I see our old roles reversed: me imposing a prohibition, flipping the table over. I want to tell him I will lock him in the bathroom; that I forbid him to go out with his friend. Why?, he would ask. Because I say so, I would reply—his old favorite phrase.

“That’s crazy, you’re not well,” I mumble.

There’s a long silence, except for the TV and Gigi crying for food.

“What’s up, Gigi? Come to your daddy,” Maurizio says, standing up with the excuse to feed the dog.

He hastily gives Gigi a big plate of pasta, then sneaks out on the balcony and lights a cigarette.

“Another cigarette?” I shout from the table.

“It’s my first.”

“You said you had three.”

“The first after lunch,” he laughs.

I pretend to watch some TV program with my mother, but I am thinking about the future. I wonder if on my next visit Maurizio will have burned his lungs out after forty years of smoking. If his diabetes will be under control, if the stent in his heart will hold. If the dog will burst.

“300 Euros is a great deal,” he says excited, stepping back into the kitchen.

I picture him on the scooter, surely without a helmet, maneuvering through Naples’ streets swarming with million scooters honking, harassing, roaring. I see the electric box under his skin run wild, unhinge from inside his chest.

“It’s a bargain,” he repeats.

I say nothing, because what I am really thinking should not be said out loud:

Death. Do you ever think about DEATH?

“It will help me find work,” he continues his own conversation.

I look at him, and I am indeed glad that he and I never thought alike. That we don’t share the same fears. That there is nothing of me in his blood. That the tangible sense of mortality I was fed through my mother’s cord and born into had never crossed his mind. An old man with a stent in his heart, diabetes, and chronic bronchitis, rides around the city looking for a job, where much younger and healthier men can’t find any, and he’s ready to take whatever will come his way, whatever life can still offer him. He always had. Even when he was twenty-three and we, a bereft and needy family, came along. He took us. He took us without second thoughts or doubts about the future; he took us for the longest ride of all.

For years, I wondered why a stunning woman like my mother would be with a soccer-ball-eyed man, not particularly handsome, not particularly intelligent, not particularly kind. I realize now that it was because Maurizio did not know death. For about three decades, living with a woman stricken with the loss of the man she considered her one and only love, Maurizio had been immune and irreverent to death. Perhaps this is what has been keeping them together for so long—much longer than my mother ever got to be with my real father.

CONTRIBUTORS

Yet, in his own way, Maurizio understood it. Despite the first years of jealousy toward a dead man, he never asked my mother to remove my father's photograph from their bedroom, never said out loud that he saw her kisses on the frame; he let her kiss it, year after year, when the man on the photograph had become much younger than my mother, much younger than his own daughters. He never flinched at my mother turning the photo into a fully-fledged altar, now adorned with roses, prayers, rosaries, and small gifts. From the very first day, Maurizio had been living with us as if death did not exist, as if he could defy it because he had taken the place of a dead man, to whom—consciously or not—he owed the duty of keeping himself alive.

How much time I wasted wishing him dead. And how foolish of me to think I knew how to handle a father's death because it had already happened and, therefore, I was ahead of the life game. And because, for good or for bad, I always found an excuse for my feelings in the addendum I invariably put next to Maurizio's name: *mio padre*—*che non è veramente mio padre*; an addendum that one day, I know, will be of no use.

After I left Naples, Maurizio bought an old Vespa for 270 Euros, an even better deal.

"It helps him look for a job," my mother tells me on the phone. "He goes out every day."

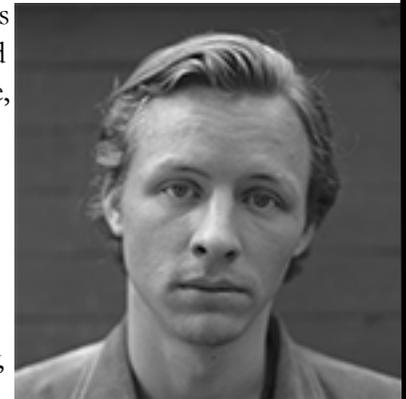
It's the end of summer, I sit in my apartment ten thousand kilometers away, and I picture Maurizio on his Vespa leaving business cards with concierges at hospitals and clinics, who will probably toss them in the trash bin or ditch them in a drawer. I see him, out of breath and sweaty, and I wish that he would rest, take a day off from his job hunt, spend a few hours without maddening the electric box in his chest. I wish that he would enjoy the September weather, merciful and mild, with its tender light over the water, smoothing out the sharp edges of my city, and would drive along the coast, there where he used to take us as kids after work on the long and hot summer afternoons.

I wish that he would go toward the sea, with a wholesome heart and without a worry furrowing his eyebrows, like he went toward my mother—and us—that summer night at the Lido bar, with no fears and no regrets, walking confident and proud toward the women to whom he did not know yet he would be giving a second life.

Alabama Stone is not from Alabama—she is from the swampy wetlands of North Carolina. Raised on the humidity of the South, she relies on her family name for inspiration. Her work has appeared in *Crab Fat Magazine*; along with and forthcoming in, *Voicemail Poems*, *The Found Poetry Review*, *The Corradi*, *The Voice*, and featured in *(parenthetical): words on pages*. She feels grateful. Very grateful. Always grateful. Alabama enjoys bourbon, strangers, words, and lamp-light—she is disenchanted by most other things. She is pursuing an MFA in Poetry at North Carolina State University.



Anders Carlson-Wee is a 2015 NEA Fellow and the author of *Dynamite*, winner of the 2015 Frost Place Chapbook Prize. His work has appeared in *Ploughshares*, *New England Review*, *AGNI*, *Poetry Daily*, *The Iowa Review*, *Best New Poets*, *The Best American Nonrequired Reading*, and *Narrative Magazine*, which featured him on their "30 Below 30" list of young writers to watch. Winner of *Ninth Letter's* Poetry Award and *New Delta Review's* Editors' Choice Prize, he was runner-up for the 2016 *Discovery/Boston Review Poetry Prize*. He's received fellowships from *Bread Loaf*, *Sewanee Writers' Conference*, the *Camargo Foundation*, *Ucross Foundation*, *The Frost Place*, and *Vanderbilt University*. He lives in Minneapolis, where he's a 2016 *McKnight Foundation Creative Writing Fellow*.



SECOND PLACE FICTION IN THE 2016 SUMMER CONTEST

This story is so full of heart. I appreciated the uniqueness of the setting and plot, both of which were rendered marvelously. And the story's humor worked so well with the deep and resonate sadness beneath the surface. - Jensen Beach

QUARTZSITE

By: Debbie Vance

After they were evicted from their apartment in Phoenix, Ren and Larry bought a 1970 Ford E200 pop-top camper van from the salvage yard and towed it two hours west, into the Bureau of Land Management territory outside of Quartzsite, Arizona, where they could camp for two weeks for forty dollars, which was ten dollars more than they had after purchasing the camper.

"Eviction is the quickest path to freedom," Larry said, as he parked the camper between two giant RVs. He pulled an elk skull from behind his seat and fitted it over his face like a mask.

"Freedom is a luxury of the rich," Ren said before climbing down from the camper. Ren suspected Larry of having a secret stash of mommy's money somewhere, a real honest-to-god bank account he was too proud to admit, which put a real strain on their relationship. Sure, Ren might've taken the money had she known where to look, but even she knew that you couldn't keep secrets and people both. Something had to give.

Outside, Ren stretched her limbs, her body sticky and tight from too many waterless days. She wished more than anything for a shower, but the camper, for all its luxurious amenities, didn't have one. It had a single-burner stove and a miniature oven, a tiny metal sink and a toilet in a closet, none operational. Neither Ren nor Larry were interested in mechanical secrets.

The park was the same as all RV Parks, except full to overflowing. "Like Burning Man, but for rocks," Larry said, and it was true. Every January, a million people flooded the small desert town of Quartzsite, Arizona, population 3,000 out of season, to attend the Quartzsite Showcase and Swap-meet, the largest gathering of rock and gem shows in the world. Here, in the middle of the golden desert, a rock enthusiast could buy anything from selenite roses to geodes to fossils, and all available land was filled to accommodate them. The wilderness of the desert subdued.

Larry walked a whole ten yards away to piss on a creosote bush, ignoring the stares of their new neigh-

bors. Men and women lounged on camp chairs drinking beer in cosies and smoking. They threw cigarette butts on the ground and compared treasure hoards with the only other people on the planet who would give a rat's ass about a bunch of goddamn rocks. This was their vacation. For some, the older ones, this was their retirement. Living out of rented RVs, driving through the desert like fools, stopping for two or three days here and there, collecting souvenirs on the windowsills of their moveable homes. Snow globes and hula girls and cartoon cacti tacked down with chewing gum. Pretending the folks they met along the road were family, when they weren't, could never be. Ren knew the type; she was born of the same stock.

As a girl, Ren had spent a few odd years with her daddy in a trailer park, a neighborhood of permanent campers where everyone paid in cash. The rent was cheap and the community was constant, if inconsistent. "An unending stream of babysitters," her daddy said. The trailer park was located in a floodplain, and when Ren was twelve, rains came and washed them out. They shored up in a friend's basement that smelled like cat piss and weed and hot glue, and Ren spent her days at the public school even when school was out. Then, one day, Ren's daddy came home from a drive and said they were moving. He had met a woman, "a real high-class piece of ass," he said, at a Love's truck stop on I-10, and she had offered them a place to live.

"You'll have a real home," he said.

"This is real," Ren said. She was building a trailer home out of pipe cleaners for her paper doll, the kind with brass brackets for joints, the kind you could bend any which way, twist their arms, their legs in circles, and they wouldn't break. Ren had spent whole days imagining her world through the bulging 2D eyes of her paper dolls. How simple it would be: paper-thin belly, never hungry, body so thin you could turn sideways and become invisible, limbs you could un-bracket and remove at will, prune yourself down to the necessities, fit compactly in anyone's pocket. Ren spent all her birth-

day wishes, first star wishes, and 11:11 wishes on such a transformation.

Ren and her daddy packed up the next day and drove west, Ren sitting high in the passenger seat of her daddy's big rig. The world looked small from up there, and for once, Ren thought she understood why her daddy kept leaving. A few weeks later, when her daddy didn't come back from his latest trip, she thought she understood that too. Some people are good at cupping their hands over your eyes without you even feeling their touch.

"I had a daddy once too," Celia said. It was evening, and the two were sitting on the pool deck, watching the sun's watery wake. There was no question that Celia would keep Ren just as long as Ren wanted to stay.

Now, little kids ran barefoot circles in the RV Park, kicking up whorls of dust that threatened to extinguish the whole place. Watching these kids run, watching their magic feet fail to erase what shouldn't ever have been, Ren wanted to pull them into her camper and drive them somewhere else, somewhere real. Of course she couldn't do that. She could hardly save herself. Ren closed her eyes against the desert sun, eye-level now, and ran her fingertips over the pale ridges that lined her wrists. She picked a scab and the quick exposure of blood to air gave her just enough room to breathe. Cutting was a bad habit, like her relationship with Larry, but unlike Larry, she wasn't planning on kicking it any time soon.

Larry strolled the avenue between RVs, offering polite nods and taking orders for coffee on an imaginary notepad. Behind his elk skull, his voice—Evening, ma'am. Would you like a cup of coffee, sir?—was muffled. She should tell them, the old folks, that they didn't have any coffee, they didn't even have any running water, but it didn't matter. Every single one of them waved Larry on. Keep moving, buddy. Not interested. Larry wasn't exactly what you would call trustworthy, neither was Ren.

When Larry reached the end of the aisle, he spun on his heels and bowed. The elk skull fell facedown into the dirt, and Larry continued on into the open desert beyond to commune, presumably, with his ancestral brothers. The old folks, still in their chairs, turned from Larry to Ren, looking for an explanation, but she had none. Larry was who he was, his one redeeming feature, and this was not something Ren could explain.

Instead, to the collective she asked, "Which way's the camp host?" A little girl with raven black hair and bare feet pointed west, toward the sun.

The camp host had spread woven rugs over the desert floor and set out some upholstered reading chairs as though this little patch of desert were her living room. Ren figured most people would feel sorry for this woman, alone and sunburnt in the desert with nothing to lay claim to but a goddam RV, but Ren didn't. People made choices and they lived with them and there were worse choices to make than this one. Ren should know. She paid the woman what she had and wrote an IOU for the rest, and as she was leaving the faux living room she cupped a plastic wine glass, half full in her palm, like the thief she was, like her daddy's girl.

The wine was dry and cheap, like everything else in this place.

Back at the camper van, Larry had returned from his desert wanderings and was sharing a joint with a skinny old man in a patched jean jacket and leather boots that seemed too heavy for his bones. An FM radio played Willy Nelson, and the old man sang along, his voice hoarse and high, not unlike Willy's.

"Welcome to the good life," Larry said, spreading his arms wide to encompass everything.

Behind Larry, behind the old man's RV, a plaster saguaro stood fifty feet tall, its paint-chipped arms raised to the purpling sky. Ren drained the wine and lifted her arms in imitation of the cactus, and the old man laughed so hard he started to choke.

Ren dropped the plastic wine glass, which couldn't break, and walked toward the fairgrounds to survey the job site.

The Desert Gardens Gem & Mineral Show, the largest of the four rock shows in Quartzsite, occupied an RV Park on the edge of town, bordered by Hwy 10 on one side and what the map labelled as "Once a Military Appliance Runway" on the other. In between, 200 professional and amateur lapidaries spread their wares across aisles of pop-up tents and accompanying RVs, selling rocks, gems, and minerals to daily visitors and wholesalers alike. Currently, the map told her, she was standing a few aisles north of "You Are Here." The sun was nearing its bed, and the salesmen and women had packed up for the night, trading their gemstones and cash boxes for camp chairs and cooking fires.

Ren had been here once before, three years ago, with her stepmother Celia. That was the winter after her daddy left for good. They had driven Celia's new-to-you RV from Imperial, California to redeem the money Ren's daddy had borrowed with no intention of ever paying back by selling geodes to horny cowboys. Every morning, Celia strapped on her push-up bra, which show-

cased a sea of sun-dried skin, wrinkled and freckled and free for the taking. Celia was a good stepmother, but a cheap date, at least she pretended to be.

“Nothing worth having comes free,” she’d say to the men snooping around the geode table. At ten dollars a rock, Celia made a lot of money that winter, enough to replenish what Ren’s daddy had stolen the summer before. On bad days, when the beast that was her daddy reared up inside of Ren, she reminded Celia that it had been her who’d made the first move. “You picked him up,” she’d say, as though proving something. Celia only held Ren’s face in her palms and said, “Just because you look like your daddy doesn’t mean you’re the same.”

But Ren would always be her daddy’s girl, a trailer park baby with bad teeth and very few hard-wired morals, and for all her good, Celia knew this too. There’s only so much a stepmother can do.

That next summer, Ren stole the Folger’s coffee can that held all their winter earnings and bought a bus ticket to Phoenix. Living with people you loved gave them too much control, and it wasn’t good for other people to have too much control. If there was any hope for survival, you had to keep hold of the reins.

Now, standing in the aisle of the Desert Gardens Gem & Mineral Show, Ren lifted her arms to the breeze that skimmed off the desert floor and cooled her skin. She reached into the pocket of her hoodie for a smoke. When she agreed to come here with Larry, to work the gem show for petty cash, she had tried not to think of Celia, of what would happen if they ran into her. She had not realized that somewhere, at the base of her spine maybe, or just below the surface of her skin, she had been hoping just the opposite: that Celia would be here, after all these years, like a storybook mother, waiting to welcome Ren home. She picked at a scab on her arm.

“You looking for something pretty?” an old woman asked, holding up a tray labelled fire agate. It was too dark to see their color, but the stones reflected the campfires and flashlights like eyes. The woman plucked a single stone from the tray and held it up. “Pretty,” she said grabbing Ren’s arm, talon-strong, and though Ren resisted, she managed to tuck the stone into Ren’s palm.

“Pretty,” the woman said again. She wore a necklace of garlic and a long black dress.

“I don’t have any money,” Ren said, trying to give the stone back, but the old woman closed her kohl-lined eyes and shook her head. Garlic rattled against her breast, the sound of onion-skin paper and bones.

“If she’s giving it to you for free, you must really

need it,” another woman said. Ren turned around and saw a circle of women sitting around a small charcoal grill. The one who had spoken was younger than the first, and bigger. Her rear barely fit in the one-size-fits-all camp chair.

“Fire agate is the stone of integrity,” the woman in the chair said. She wore a red bandana over her coarse brown hair. Freckles spanned the bridge of her nose. The angle of her chin, the tilt of her voice, reminded Ren of her stepmother, and she felt drawn to the woman like a magnet.

“I already have integrity,” Ren said. She made a show of tossing the stone toward this woman’s feet, hoping this would prove something, but the stone, small and light, barely made a dent in the sand.

The big woman leaned forward, tipping the camp chair onto two precarious legs, and picked up the stone. She blew the dirt from it in one puff. Good lungs, Ren thought. The older woman, the strange one, hurried past Ren and knelt amongst the women. She took the stone in her hands like the Host and rested her cheek against the large woman’s knee, cooed like a child. Her voice was small and indecipherable, and Ren had the impression that pretty was the only English word she knew.

“Come,” the big woman said. “Get warm. Eat.” But something inside Ren had already shifted toward the women. A column of smoke rose from the vent in the grill—beef, from the smell. Ren sat in the dirt cradling her knees in her elbows.

“My name’s Lottie,” the big woman said. “And these are my sisters.”

The strange one, Birdy was her name, watched Ren from the corner of her eyes but did not lift her head from her sister’s knee. Instead, she raised the string of garlic to her nose and inhaled.

“She’s afraid of witches,” Lottie said, and laughed.

The other two women continued their conversation about the healing qualities of amber, whether it mattered what kind of body was entombed inside, if any, and whether the process of sap pooling around the living felt like drowning.

“Are you afraid of witches?” Lottie asked Ren. Tattoos covered Lottie’s arms—all black ink and flowers with sleeping faces, eyes closed and mouths puckered as to receive mother’s milk. Maybe it was a trick of the light, but she thought she saw one move.

“I don’t believe in witches,” Ren said.

Lottie lifted the lid to the grill, and a shower of sparks rained out. Birdy lifted her chin to watch their

rise. The meat inside was bloody still; small pools of pink wet, gathered at the surface. Lottie speared and turned the steak, the sound of fresh meat on the hot grill like a scream. She poured red wine from a box on the table behind her and offered the drink to Ren before filling her own glass.

“To each their own,” she said, lifting her glass.

Birdy mumbled vowel sounds, and the other women held small black stones to their eyes, dropped them in their wine glasses.

Lottie ignored them all. “This your first time at the gem show?” she asked.

Ren flooded her mouth with wine and nodded yes. The chances that this witch woman knew Celia were too slim, and not slim enough.

“Well, we been coming here for years, so if you need yourself a tour guide, you just let Mama Lottie know,” Lottie said, “Right, girls?”

The two sisters disengaged from their conversation and turned to Ren. Their eyes were bluer than Ren thought possible and whirled, like cat’s eye marbles. One pulled back her lips, not quite a smile, to reveal the black stone held between her teeth, and the other lowered her mouth over her glass and spit. Birdy hid behind her shield of garlic and pointed at Ren’s arms. Her sweater sleeves had fallen back to reveal the thin white scars that lined her forearms, and Lottie reached out to touch her.

“Oh, my girl,” she said. “Please, no.” The register of her voice slipped close and warm, like a mother’s, and Ren’s heart broke for wanting Celia.

When Ren was younger, when she had lived with Celia in her lemon-scented house in Imperial, she cut in the yellow light of the upstairs bathroom. She was good at cutting shallow, drawing just enough blood to feel better, to breathe. Her cuts rarely went deep, but when they did, Celia was always there to pull butterfly strips across the wound, bind it together so a new stretch of skin could bridge the handmade rift and hide it. Celia would draw Ren’s arms to her lips for a healing kiss, but she was not Ren’s mother and never told her to stop.

Now, the four sisters leaned towards Ren, reaching out, trying to pull Ren into their coven, but they were not Celia. None of them knew Ren, who she had been and why, and Ren ran.

She ran past the other RVs with their lanterns and string lights, past empty tables, tents chained closed for the night, public restrooms, and into the desert at the edge of everything, hoping the open space would give her room to breathe. She pulled at the neck of her shirt and lifted her chin.

The dry air was punctured by coyote yips and the rapid put-put-put of cactus pygmy owls. Her vision tunnelling, the saguaros looked like giants telling her to stop. Go no further. Go home.

Ren pressed her fingernails into her palms, branding her skin with eight crescent moons.

Not enough.

Back at camp, Larry sprawled across the bed in the camper, already asleep. Ren found Larry’s straight razor, the one he used for cocaine when they had the money, clean now, and slipped it against the skin of her arm until a drop of blood rose and fell. The relief was instantaneous and short-lived. She cut again and again, careful not to rush, careful to let each cut expand like an external lung before making the next incision, until the pain bloomed large and filled her whole body, until she could finally, finally breathe.

The next morning, Ren pulled on the same gray hoodie, careful to cover the Band-Aids that lined her arm with her sleeve, and examined her face in the small mirror that hung over the sink. Her hair was slick with grease, and a spray of zits reddened the skin on either side of her mouth. Her eyes, once round and bright, were dull. Celia had taught her beauty tricks—swipe Vaseline under the eyes for a quick jolt of wide-eyed bloom, dab a pearl of gloss in the middle of your lower lip for a fuller pout—but she doubted any of them would be of use now.

Ren turned from the mirror and woke Larry, who groaned and rolled over, pressing his face into the vinyl cushions.

“Let’s get this over with,” Ren said.

“What’s the rush?” Larry said, wrapping his arms around her legs. He tried to pull her onto the makeshift bed—the kitchen table had been lowered between the two bench seats to make one flat surface—Ren shoved him off.

“Don’t be a tease,” Larry said, rolling onto his back and rubbing his eyes with his palm heels.

“The people here are freaks,” Ren said, feeling a wave of guilt. Despite her best efforts, Ren couldn’t separate Celia from these people, this place, and everything she did felt like another betrayal. She pressed her thumbnail against the bandage on her arm and inhaled.

“I thought we had a deal,” he said. Larry had agreed to quit coke if Ren agreed to quit cutting. A perfect one-for-one sacrifice.

“It was just this once,” Ren said.

Larry opened his mouth like he wanted to ask a question. Maybe, Why now? or more simply, Why? But they had made an agreement never to ask for more information than needed. Instead Larry passed a hand over his face like he was sweeping away cobwebs. He dug through the pile of clothes on the floor until he found a soft pack of Marlboro Reds.

“Freaks still have money, Ren baby,” he said. “Eyes on the prize.”

Ren softened her voice. She and Larry had shared a bed for two years, an apartment, an eviction notice. Surely that was worth something. Surely she had leverage.

“Let’s keep driving,” she said. “There are other tourist sites, ghost towns a few miles on. Come on, Larry, let’s just go.” She knelt on the bed beside him, held his arm tenderly with both hands, kissed his shoulder, the tattooed heart on his collarbone. He shook her off.

“I can’t do the lighter with you hanging on like that,” he said.

Ren snatched the lit cigarette from between Larry’s lips and threw it to the floor.

“The fuck,” Larry said, scrambling to rescue the smoke, his bare bony ass swinging in the air. “You crazy?”

“Just get dressed,” Ren said, and went outside. The desert was pink in the morning light and cool. She closed her eyes and let the wind blush her cheeks to match the sky.

They arrived at the Desert Gardens Gem & Mineral Show a little after nine, and already the crowds were rolling. Larry packed a lip and leaned against a stand of fossils. Giant snail-like crustaceans pressed out of rock slabs like they were trying to escape. Their shells marbled tan and brown, their expanding spiral smooth and carefully drawn. Ren traced her finger from its center outward, until there was nowhere left to go.

“What’s our first target?” Larry asked, scanning the crowd.

After a beat, Ren pointed to a young woman, mid-twenties, who was selecting gemstone bracelets with her daughter, eight, maybe ten years old. The little girl had five different bracelets on her arm. They were comparing the color and quality of stones as if they were precious, which they weren’t.

“They’re distracted,” Ren said, “It’ll be easy.”

Ren waited while Larry walked by, slipping a hand into the young woman’s drawstring purse without even looking. Ren couldn’t deny it: Larry was the best

petty thief she’d known, and she’d known plenty. She watched as he carried the woman’s wallet away, watched as the little girl decided on a bracelet the color of a bruise, watched as the woman reached into her purse for the money that was no longer there.

Larry and Ren reconvened in the shade behind a food tent. The wallet, the long kind with a tri-fold, not yet faded at the creases, had the woman’s ID and debit card and the jackpot: one hundred dollars in crisp twenties.

“Bingo,” Larry said, slapping the bills against his hand. “The path to success is as wide as it is sweet.” Larry grabbed Ren and kissed her on the lips before throwing the wallet in the trashcan. Ren thought about retrieving it—it was a nice wallet—but didn’t.

They spent the rest of the morning this way: Ren scouting targets. Larry doing the deed. Not all of the jobs were as lucrative as the first. By lunchtime they had nearly four hundred dollars, a collection of family photos, a few condoms, and a gift card for a free milkshake from Wendy’s.

“That’s a wrap, sweetheart,” Larry said. “Let’s get us some grub.”

Ren stood in the shadows of the food tent, their home base, watching Birdy, the woman who’d tried to give Ren the stone of integrity the night before, push magical gemstones at passersby.

“Pretty,” Birdy said. “Want something pretty?”

Lottie waited by the RV like a guard dog.

“Let’s do one more,” Ren said, and she pushed Larry toward integrity.

Instead of keeping watch, as was their deal, Ren snuck over to Lottie. She was sitting alone this morning, no sign of the other sisters, and Ren wondered if they had even existed. Ren glanced over and saw Larry casually browsing nearby tables. He hadn’t yet made his move, but she didn’t have much time.

Ren opened her mouth to speak, but Lottie spoke first.

“When Birdy was a girl, she was obsessed with molted snake skins. Disgusting things. Papery and white and scaled all over. Our mama, she didn’t let Birdy keep the snake skins in the house, so she dug a hole beneath the whitethorn acacia tree in our backyard and buried them there. Said the acacia would keep them safe for her, like a charm. One day, Birdy went out to the tree to visit her skins and found them gone. I don’t know what beast eats dried-out snake skins, but something sure liked the taste. After that, Birdy was never quite the same. Didn’t trust the magic of the desert no more.”

Lottie paused and squinted up at Ren. “All of us searching for something in this world,” she said. “But none of us will ever find what we’re looking for if we’ve nothing to trust.”

“How can you trust a broken thing?” Ren asked.

Lottie opened her mouth to speak, but a terrible howling issued from the aisle and both women turned.

Larry had been caught red handed. Birdy had his arm in her talon-strong clutches, and his fingers were still wrapped around her tasselled coin purse, which was knotted to the belt that cinched her loose-fitting dress to her waist.

Birdy shrieked indecipherable sounds, thief, help, and the tray of fire agate stones lay scattered at her feet.

Lottie left Ren and ran to her sister just as Larry pulled his arm free and made a break for it. He ran for the clearing, for the desert on the edge of the fairgrounds, and as far as Ren could see, he made it. Ren wondered if he would return to camp and wait for her—he was always waiting for her—or if he would break for the highway and hitchhike his way somewhere safe. She wouldn’t blame him for leaving—it’s what she would do—even still, the thought of returning to an empty camper made her heart swell against her sternum, choking all the air from her lungs. She had given him too much for too long. She should’ve known better.

While Lottie held her sister in the aisle, Ren snuck away.

In the dusty desert on the edge of the fairgrounds, Ren breathed in the sweet milky smell of the whitethorn acacia, the loamy cavernous earth smell of geodes, the sun, and she remembered her step-mother. She remembered her house in the hills and the kidney bean pool with clean saltwater, so easy to move through. She remembered collecting geodes in a wide-open desert the summer after her daddy left, all golden sand and light and blue. That was the last good time, Ren thought, if only for their mutual awareness that they were on the edge of something big, inescapable. Like that time they went to the abandoned mining towns near Yuma and stood on the edge of a giant hole, their toes tempting whatever was down there to pull them in.

Beneath the setting sun, the desert was red and yellow and long shadows stretched purple across the sand, leading past hidden rattlers, coiled beneath

brush, and anthills as big as cities. The highway, when she reached it, was unending.

“I thought I’d find you here,” Larry said. He was leaning against the Hwy 10 signpost, spinning Birdy’s drawstring purse around his fingers. “You can’t kick me that easily,” he said. “We’re a team.” He tossed her Birdy’s purse. Ren fingered the soft fabric, the small gems inside hard and loose like bones.

BLUE MESA REVIEW NO. 34

CONTRIBUTORS

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is the author of *Zorba's Daughter*, winner of the 2010 May Swenson Poetry Award, *Moon and Mercury*, and two chapbooks: *Troubled by an Angel* and *Out-patients*. Hawthornden fellow, 2008. Publications

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Anne Riesenberg, an acupuncturist and meditation instructor from Portland, Maine, holds a recent MFA from Lesley University. Her work has appeared (or is forthcoming) in *The Maine Review*, *Monkey-bicycle* and *Solstice Literary Magazine*. She is a founding board member of Hewnoaks Artist Colony in Lovell, Maine.



Naomi Washer held a Follet Fellowship in Nonfiction at Columbia College Chicago where she earned her MFA in Creative Writing. Her essays, poems, fictions, and Cambodian translations have appeared in *TYPO*, *wigleaf*, *Maudlin House*, *Ampersand Review*, *Essay Daily*, *Poor Claudia*, and *St. Petersburg Review*, among other places. She is the co-founder, Editor-in-Chief, and publisher of *Ghost Proposal*.



**"Shot in Los Angeles on a Friday Afternoon"
By: Thomas Gillaspay**



An Interview With Author José Orduña

By: David O'Connor

Jose Orduña's *The Weight of Shadows: a Memoir of Immigration and Displacement* was published by Beacon Press earlier this year. Theoretically a memoir, it contains eleven standalone essays in chronological order that cover the process of becoming an American citizen while undocumented. Orduña was born in Cordoba, Veracruz and immigrated with his parents to Chicago at two years old.

Blending the investigative with the personal, Orduña's writing is honest and intense. By cataloguing bureaucratic absurdities, family history, and the intense anxiety of surviving America undocumented, Orduña exposes the continuous non-sequitur policies on immigration and the economic forces that have turned the US-Mexican borderlands into killing fields.

Orduña graduated from the Nonfiction Writing Program at The University of Iowa and is active in Latin American solidarity. If the current president-elect's poisonous rhetoric of "building the wall" ever comes to fruition, Orduña, along with millions will be heart-broken. Orduña is one of the few that have the passionate articulation and disciplined erudition to explain the culmination of these horrific choices by the US government.

Blue Mesa Review caught up with Orduña, pre-election, at the Humboldt Coffee Shop in Albuquerque, near University of New Mexico, where he is the current Joseph M. Russo Chair in Creative Writing.

Blue Mesa Review: Are you up for a little free association?

Jose Orduña: Sure.

BMR: One word or sentence only please. Ready? Ok. NAFTA.

JO: Wow. One word? Only a sentence... wow. (long thoughtful pause) The dissolution of Mexican farmers. The end of Mexican farming. The movement from rural to urban...

BMR: Alien?

JO: Green creature from another planet.

BMR: Promotion?

JO: Getting more money?

BMR: Discipline?

JO: Foucault.

BMR: MFA?

JO: Pointless if you don't do it write.

BMR: The New York Times?

JO: Sometime a rag, sometimes PR.

BMR: Restaurants?

JO: Hierarchies.

BMR: Facebook?

JO: Mostly where I get my news.

BMR: Streamline?

JO: The vanishing point of justice.

BMR: Socialism?

JO: A possible alternative to our dysfunctional-crony-capitalist-faux-democracy

BMR: Socialismo?

JO: Spanish for socialism.

BMR: Cabron?

JO: One of my mom's favourite words.

BMR: Arizona?

JO: Theater of immigration.

BMR: New Mexico?

JO: New home.

BMR: Iowa?

JO: Old home.

BMR: Marriage?

JO: Really exciting and different than I ever thought it would be...

BMR: Citizenship?

JO: More attached than should be.

BMR: Bureaucracy?

JO: Systems of oppression

BMR: Obama?

JO: A disappointment and actively harmful.

BMR: Herbert Hoover?

JO: The Repatriation.

BMR: Naturalization?

JO: Completely unnatural.

BMR: Frontier?

JO: A local restaurant and also a zone of existence.

BMR: Ok, take a breath... enough free association. So, when did you first start writing?

JO: As a kid, I used to draw. I was always drawing comic books. Marvel and Spiderman stuff. I thought I was really good, until I met one of my oldest friends who could really draw well, so I started keeping a journal, before I really knew what journaling was... like a mental sketchbook, lists, doodles, the notebooks became more elaborate.

BMR: Do you still have them? Do you ever go back to them?

JO: Yeah, I do. I've lost some but it's kinda scary because sometimes I feel I used to be a better writer. Like some of my sentences as a teen are so powerful and clear. I wish I could still produce sentences like that sometimes.

BMR: Was there ever that lightening bolt moment when you knew you wanted to be a writer?

JO: Actually there was, it was a class I took—a film and video class at Columbia College in Chicago. The course was really technical. I got into location audio. Also, I took some incredible classes with Marcy Rae Henry at a local college and she was really nurturing. Then I took an essay class with David Lazar, who is now kinda like my essay-father. He is an incredible essayist. I took a few of his workshops and he helped me situate myself in the

essay tradition.

BMR: And from there to Iowa?

JO: I worked in restaurants. I was a permanent resident then but among the undocumented labour. Easily deported. Just think of the terms: “Back-of-the-house, Front-of-the-house.” So racially fraught. Class structures became so clear. I was the host and I occupied this role, a role I had occupied so many times in my life, the figure that could slide between zones and move freely...

BMR: The intermediary?

JO: Yes, but in a precarious way. Then I moved to Dallas, and worked in a community organization, stopped writing for awhile. I was looking for a career, a way to make a living. I thought there was no way to make money as a writer. I shifted gears to try and make money. I applied to jobs I didn't want and then Grad-school and got in to a bunch.

BMR: Were you writing about the same themes then?

JO: Yes. But more squarely personal essays.

BMR: Did your thesis become your book?

JO: Kinda. I was writing really experimental stuff. Video essays. Modular.

BMR: Yeah, Not My Home, I loved that.

JO: Yes, I like that stuff and hope to continue. But I was going through the Naturalization process as I was going through Graduate school. Early drafts became chapters...

BMR: How was Graduate School for you?

JO: I felt very isolated, even though I had good friends, people who cared about me, I think I isolated myself. I felt isolated in Iowa.

BMR: You kinda have to do that to write, don't you?

JO: I used to believe that, but feel it's just a myth. If I were in isolation, I couldn't write what I am writing now.

BMR: Growing up in Chicago, did you feel isolated from the Mexican community?

JO: Not really, we have a historical community there. But there are long-standing communities throughout the Mid-West—hundreds of years—but they are outside of cities, out of sight, and were migrant workers, itinerant labours coming and going with the seasons, until restrictive laws prevented them from coming and going.

BMR: In the 90s?

JO: No, it was The Bracero Program, from World War II to the 60s. They had to formalize and had to stay. Crossing the border was no longer an option.

BMR: Let's talk about the book, how's your relationship with it now? I mean readings and interviews...

JO: I'm glad it's done. I'm proud I wrote the book I wanted to write. Working through it was very satisfying. I'm proud I got that book published, because there was a lot of interest in a different book.

BMR: The title was changed, wasn't it?

JO: The working title was The Naturalization.

BMR: Tell us about the publishing process.

JO: Well, Coffee House Press were super nice, they informally offered to give it a home but said to try the bigger houses. I submitted a one-page pitch to an agent. I was so under-prepared. I had no idea how to pitch it. He took me on and helped me develop a proposal. He sent it to all the major houses and it was rejected by all of them. Some of the rejections were thinly veiled racism and classism. Then I suggested Beacon. I mean I've always loved James Baldwin and he was published there and they expressed interest in the actual book I was writing and it found a home there.

BMR: How long did that process take?

JO: About a year. My agent really guided me. Then I had a year contract to deliver. I went over a few months, but my editor was super helpful both conceptually and with line edits.

BMR: There are some beautiful lines.

JO: Thanks. It comes from living with a poet. My wife, who I met at Iowa, is my first and best reader and editor. Our heads stay together at night. Osmosis.

BMR: The genres are as far apart as you can get...

JO: I don't know, for me, the essay and poetry are close, closer than fiction anyway.

BMR: Your title, The Weight of Shadows, comes from a painting by Remedios Veros called Fenómeno. Why?

JO: That particular painting stands out because it is spare. Most of her work looks like Hieronymus Bosch, full and bold and busy, but this one is different, sparse.

BMR: Let's get into the themes. There is a section in the book where you go to the Philippines, you step out from the US-Mexican umbrella, and somehow step into the colonizer's role. Was that intended?

JO: Immigration in the US is not just a Mexican thing. Not just a Latin-American thing. I wanted to write through my experience, but I wanted gestures in the book that this was not the whole story.

BMR: Much of the book deals with desert crossing and the danger.

JO: I mean the structure of the book was to follow my process of naturalization and going to The Philippines happened in the middle of that, and I thought, how can I not write about that. In The US, until I speak, I'm read as a Mexican or Latino. In Mexico, when I speak, I'm seen as an American. In a third place, it's more ambiguous. I have benefited from being an American and I didn't want to create a character of myself that was morally flat. I didn't want to be "the good immigrant" because I'm not.

BMR: Typical immigrant question. Do you think they can ever go home?

JO: I think the answer is obvious. Yes. I have several homes and I feel comfortable in several places, but I think the question has a lot of political realities attached. It's linked to this century and the nation state, on how you construct national identity. I feel the local is a more intuitive scale, and the global. I feel I am a Chicagoan and also a human being. The local and the global are what we should use to form our identity. The nation state is very strange. I've never understood flag waving. I never wear flags. To answer your question, I find home in specific localities.

BMR: Do you think we get access to global life through education?

JO: Not education. I mean, it's easy to get a passport and travel for us. Most of the world will never have access to a tourist visa to most of the rest of the world. They have to establish their class, by showing money and property to get a visa. There are so many people who will never board a plane.

BMR: And language, how do you feel about Spanish?

JO: I read and write Spanish. It was my first language. When I started school, I pretended to speak English through jibber-jabber. Then through school it became my first language. My parents learned English quickly.

They studied hard, so I never had the full burden of being the family translator like many others.

BMO: Before we go, what are you reading these days?

JO: On my bedside table, *Women and Other Aliens*, by an incredible author called Debbie Nathan. Lately, I'm supper jazzed on Arundhati Roy, especially her non-fiction. I read a lot of academic articles and legal history. And the big ones, James Baldwin, John Berger... of course my wife's work, Caitlin Roach.

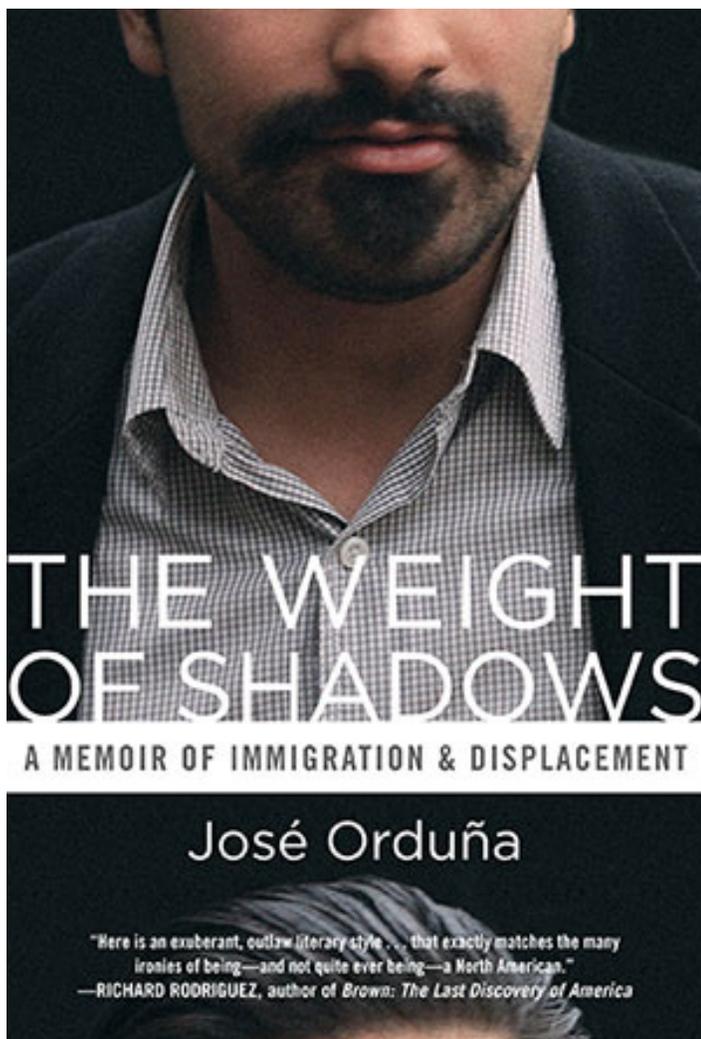
BMO: Do you like Hunter S. Thompson? That essay "Tasers, Drones and Cold Chicken..." in the Huffington Post reminded me of him.

JO: Oh, I love him. That was a very strange experience.

BMR: What are you working on now?

JO: I'm trying to write about historical material perspectives on violence and Ciudad Juarez. But I'm really reading around things and establishing links, which is how I work.

Remedios Varos: 1962 Fenómeno (Phenomenon)



CONTRIBUTORS

Sara Marinelli is a writer from Naples, Italy, and lives in San Francisco. Like her heart, her writing is split between English and Italian. Her work has appeared in many Italian publications and in *New American Writing*. She has a PhD



in English from the University of Rome, and an MFA in Creative Writing from San Francisco State University; she teaches Comparative Literature at the University of San Francisco. She was awarded residencies at the Vermont Studio Center, Byrdcliffe Art Colony, and BANFF. She is working on a novel about family grief, set in a religious and superstitious Naples.

Alec Osthoff grew up in Ely, Minnesota. His work has previously appeared in *The Atticus Review* and *Midwestern Gothic*. He is a current MFA student at the University of Wyoming, where he is working on his first novel.



Cady Vishniac is a Distinguished University Fellow and an MFA in fiction at The Ohio State University. Her stories have won contests at *New Letters*, *Mid-American Review*, and *New Millennium Writings*, placed in *Glimmer Train*, and



appeared in *New Ohio Review*. Her poetry can be found in *Sugar House Review* and has been featured on *Verse Daily*.

FIRST PLACE POETRY IN THE 2016 SUMMER CONTEST

The images in this poem are fraught with a pristine specificity, describing a life as it ghosts itself before us. I found myself standing beside the “you,” right there in the bathroom, asking “what next?” a question good poems demand of us. - Ocean Vuong

**McDonald's
By: Anders Carlson-Wee**

You walk all night and into the next day
to survive the sudden October snow.

You have no money or hope of money.
Your backpack is a cloth sack with duct-

tape straps and safety pins in place
of zippers. Your gloves have no thumbs,

just holes, just unraveling half fingers.
You've come inside for the heat,

for plastic spoons, mayo, salt and sugar
packets, hand-napkins you'll ball later

for insulation beneath your clothes.
You've come for the bathroom—soap

to scrub your face, your neck, your pits,
toilet rolls for kindling flames as you camp

alone tonight in the woods or in a silo.
Mirror for popping your zits, hand-dryer

for drying your hair, your musty coat.
You've come to run warm water

over hands you can no longer feel,
come to sit and rest and do nothing,

and think nothing, and be no one.
You ask the boy at the counter

if you can have some water. He nods,
tapping his foot to a bluegrass tune,

slides a paper cup toward you
with a smooth memorized hand, asks

out of habit if that will be everything.

SECOND PLACE NONFICTION IN THE 2016 SUMMER CONTEST

This essay's voice is so sure-footed, so eloquent, the syntax so full of authority even while depicting fear and vulnerability, that it immediately creates a consciousness of the world that I, as reader, am quick to trust. I admire, too, its "bridging" of various divided senses of identity: half-student/half-teacher; half-apprentice/half-master; half-resident/half-outsider; half loving/half-wary. I love its scope and ambition. - Debra Monroe

“We Will Be Bridges, We Will Be Dead-End Streets” begins on the next page.

We Will Be Bridges, We Will Be Dead-End Streets

By: Naomi Washer

He stepped silent into my classroom, having missed the first day, having signed up late.
And I asked him a question for which there is no proper response:

Are you in the right place?

What I recall were not his words but his voice, an accent I could not immediately place, and mannerisms transcending generations.

After class we spoke, and he listened very close it seemed, though later he would tell me that most of what I said sunk in while some became lost.

Lost to where, I do not know.



In college in the Green Mountains, I lived in a house on a road with no street lights that dipped and curved and dipped again. On nights when the moon was full I would read while walking—scripts and essays and poems. There were rarely any cars. I would look up from the page and find that I had wandered, without feeling it, from the tall grass on the side of the road to the middle of the street, moonlight on the book in my hand.



In writing, I need always a middle tense: not so far removed as the past implies, nor so far as the future. The present satisfies me neither. I need a tense that glances every which way—a tense that implies and infers, that pulls back the curtain a little but does not yet reveal. Perhaps this tense lies in languages not my own. I would not know, as I speak no other language but English fluently—a fact I am aware is one of my shortcomings.

I am drawn to writing in translation because of this. In books that have been translated into the language I speak and write, the language in which I think and perceive, I gain at least the awareness that I am glimpsing, if not fully revealing, another country's *relingos*.



In graduate school, I study with a professor who says people are more interesting when they read books not written in America. I get excited about translation, do a little myself, publish, give a talk at a conference. I meet translators who are generous of spirit. My bookshelves fill with Tsvetaeva and Pasternak, Zagajewsky, Pavese, Isaac Babel, and

Celan. I say goodnight to the English language for a while, because even though I am reading these authors in English, it is not the English that surrounds me every day.

I read Maggie Nelson: “I aimed to be a student not of longing but of light.” These words sidle close to where I would like to begin—back to another day, earlier on:

Here, at my writing desk, on a winter night in Chicago, in my early twenties: an instructor of longing, and a student of light.



Why cities in winter? I will try to explain this.



Let me ground myself:

A graduate student, an instructor of college writing, aware of the falsity of assuming roles. In my classrooms we spread the tables apart so I can walk down the middle between them. I never stay behind the table in front where a teacher traditionally goes.

As a student I am quiet, brooding—as an instructor, wildly gestural.

On walks from the train to the school I glance in all the storefront windows to get a glimpse of myself—my gait, my stance, whether I lean forward or back with the wind.

I facilitate lengthy discussions on persona, assigning texts seemingly dense for first-year writing: Maggie Nelson’s *Bluets*, Fernando Pessoa’s *The Book of Disquiet*. We discuss the etymology of the word persona, its Portuguese connections to the name Pessoa.

My students make masks and short films, spoken word pieces and paintings. I ask them if they think my teacher persona (so loud, so peppy, so jolly) is the only persona I have. They shake their heads no, but that is where that thread of conversation must stop, as they mustn’t know the rest of me. The rest is off limits.

The rest: blue jeans and cutoffs, ripped shirts and skinned knees, hungover ordering breakfast from bed.

The closest I get to sharing more of me is when I tell my students that I have failed.

I am guessing they think I mean *in the past*...that I am put together now, that I have my head on my shoulders and walk in a straight line, that I go to bed early and get up on time, don't gossip and say what I mean.

I am not supposed to tell them I mean right now, today, last night, this morning, this very minute, every second in which I attempt to speak the truth but falter.

→

His favorite book is *Ulysses*.

Her favorite author is Woolf.

He likes discussing good movies.

She takes solitary walks.

He wants to be the best.

She believes in no Plan B.

She likes *The Fault in Our Stars*.

He likes sadness and relief.

He likes to gather history.

She likes the colors yellow and blue but not together.

He likes possibilities that can't happen but do in his head.

She likes learning about religious cults.

He likes rolling the perfect cigarette.

She likes the nineteenth century.

He likes tattoos. She likes tattoos.

She wants to know why women orgasm less often than men (or if they do).

She wants to know what it means to be happy.

He wants to know what happiness means.

She likes writing. He likes writing too...

←

He had come, like so many each year, to the city to study in hopes of finding like-minded people. But in this he said he found himself disappointed. The person who becomes a reader before they leave home often experiences this—non-readers shroud them in invisibility while, to other readers, they become much more capable of being seen.

↑

At nineteen I was silent.

Full of a fear I did not know how to name, I took to writing secretly.

I studied in the mountains where I could be contained.

I admired my young students for living in high-rise buildings downtown, for roaming an unfamiliar city after dark. But I did not envy them.

In moving from the mountains to the city I allowed myself to mourn for a year, even while I did my best to put on a comforting face for my students that first semester I taught writing. I felt a lack of agency, felt I would be stuck forever between the walls of a spacious city which somehow seemed to be closing in.

At nineteen I performed the act of city living, for two months in winter, in a city small and quiet but nevertheless looming to me then. Now, it is a city I hold in my hand on evenings I remember teaching myself how to breathe: standing with my back against the wind beside the reflecting pool outside a church. How boots sound on brick.

I performed this life but did not live it really, did not have an address of my own or a paying job. By night I zipped myself into a sleeping bag on a couch in a friend's apartment; by morning I zipped the sleeping bag into a trunk out of sight and slipped out of my friend's routine, as if I'd never been there at all.

I went back to reread the city. I went back and two of my students were going back too. Throughout that semester we had several of those touchstone conversations: I lived at _____ and my school was _____ and you know the _____ and riding the _____ line to the _____ and yes, nodding, yes I know, yes, as we placed

ourselves in those spaces so many miles away from this classroom without any windows.

I loved that city as I've not loved many things since. I loved its quietness and light, its walkability and curving, cobblestone streets. The city opened itself to me during a year in which I needed to learn how to roam, to get lost in all the ways Walser and Benjamin say is best. No technology to guide me, I learned how to navigate that city's avenues through the intentional practice of getting lost. There simply was no other way.



I wanted my students to learn how to get lost, to learn it is the only way to learn.

This proved challenging.

I instructed them to take night walks with their hands cupped around their eyes, to write about the ways in which we see.

I said it had to be night because darkness accentuates fragments of light.

And though some reached revelation (*How much of the world passes me by each day? How much goes unnoticed?*), others returned to class saying they'd felt unsafe; they'd walked through unsafe neighborhoods or crossed the street without looking both ways.

I felt I'd failed then, failed them, as this taught me I might not be able to teach them how to let exteriors fall away—how to follow their own inner rhythms, how to carve out space within landscapes already named.



Among the mistakes I continue to make:

Bringing strangers to my landscapes, in hopes they will read these spaces and become strangers no longer, read the space the way I read it and, in turn, read me.



Sitting on a pier at the harbor in Chicago, a cold winter evening:

The sky got orange, then violet, and then a deep blue, until the buildings across the lake solidified through the fog. Our feet dangled just above the surface of the water, the water a shade of bluish green. *I feel I might slip into it*, he said.

He asked me, What is this place? and I told him.

I think I want to remember, he said, laying claim over the rocks; the lighthouses; the pier. *I want to remember this place. To come back to it.*

“I come back to the geography of it.” –Charles Olson.



“Rereading is not like remembering,” writes Valeria Luiselli. “It’s more like rewriting ourselves: the subtle alchemy of reinventing our past through the twice-underscored words written by others.”

Luiselli’s book *Sidewalks*, retitled from the Spanish *Papeles Falsos*, is one I re-read and reread. Between its pages lies a postcard depicting *La Calavera Catrina*, by the Mexican artist Jose Guadalupe Posada, purchased at some point in Aguascalientes or Mexico City perhaps, pulled from a jacket pocket on a Chicago street in winter, given to me.

Luiselli’s book came in the mail a week later.

Luiselli writes:

“Rereading begins in the comments written in the margins, the underlined phrases and scribbled footnotes; but especially in the objects left behind between the pages.”

I know that many years from now, I will unpack this book from some box while arranging the shelves in a new apartment, or cabin, or home, in some new city or perhaps another country. And I will run my hand across the postcard’s matte finish. And I will remember that I was a girl who walked quickly through cold city streets, that I burrowed in the sleeves of an old woolen coat, that this gift was given for an idea and not for me.



I place objects inside books intentionally, wanting them to live there—a sheet of stickers inside *Anna Karenina*—to suffuse moments I craft into nostalgic ones before they are even gone. This has always been my way—more a re-living than living.

And yet I can do nothing but trust this instinct, serendipitous as it always proves to be—I found Sidewalks, or rather it found me, only after I read his essays on Mexico; on seeing and walking; on cities and spaces.

Some books are so exactly what a young writer desires to accomplish themselves that they can only crawl into bed, turn out the light, and go to sleep.

Other books, however, one wants to be in conversation with.

→

I think I am re-reading and re-reading Luiselli because I see myself in her sentences, the way I see myself in the student who stays after class just to talk.

The student who stays only stays for the length of a season, sometimes a year, but mostly is gone again once a new semester begins.

And so I begin, not replacing but accumulating these students, the same way I do with lovers and friends: all the Tylers with their skateboards and untapped potential; all the Sarahs who needed more than I knew I should give.

Luiselli: “There are things that produce nostalgia in advance—spaces that we know to be lost as soon as we find them—places in which we know ourselves to be happier than we will ever be afterwards. In such situations, the soul twists itself around, as if in a voluntary simulacrum of seeing its present in retrospect. Like an eye watching itself look from the perspective of a later time, it sees that remote present and yearns for it.”

←

Christmas:

I visit my parents’ house, open a large cardboard box in the closet of my former bedroom, pull out a packet of loose essays written at age seventeen, written before I knew what I

was—what an essay was. On the bottom of each one, my teacher’s comments told me.

These early attempts of mine are earnest: they are brief; their sincerity bursts from the page. And I see my students in them too—their halting uncertainty, their moments of reckless abandon. I want to make hundreds of copies of all of these essays, ship them to every student I’ve ever had, say *See, I never knew either—you’re okay. You’re okay.*



In the café of a bookstore late at night, his English falters.

He tries to speak but cannot find the words he wants to use, words he wants me to understand. *Do you really not know any Spanish?*



He enters my apartment, where he’s come to take my books away. I am leaving the city for a new, unfamiliar place, and I am giving my books away.

I will keep the Luiselli, with the postcard he gave me, but I will give him nearly everything else. His books are all in Mexico, and he needs to read more, I say.

He stands beside my bookshelf and gazes at the room:

Why does this look exactly like the place where you would live? he asks.

Because it is, I say.

Because I do.

And because—I want to say this, but do not—because I am rooted in cliché, as you have written you are rooted in cliché, and I surround myself with all those things I love.

And, while sitting at the kitchen table drinking small cups of green tea:

You speak lower just before you say something eloquent.

As if I am afraid of who will hear.

As if I am afraid of who will listen, my language falters just before I say something real.

→

Luiselli: “Perhaps learning to speak is realizing, little by little, that we can say nothing about anything.”

←

I get off the bus in Chicago after a translation conference in Milwaukee and walk straight to the library downtown.

I set my suitcase down at the head of an aisle in French and begin crawling down it reading titles. I find a poet who has never been translated into English.

My French is rusty, not having spoken it frequently since I was sixteen.

I believe if I practice rigorously enough, meaning will return to me.

I check out the book and get on the train to my apartment on the north side where, for the rest of the evening, I pace between the living room and kitchen reading French aloud.

↑

Among the places I am student:

The water’s edge, when English fails. When English fails, when roles recede, I give myself over. I give myself over to the waiting lecture. I hope to succeed with minimal effort because to exert effort at the water’s edge would require being seen.

↓

There have been other places, too.

In high school International Relations class, I failed the first time I took the Map Test. I forgot to study. Or, I just didn't. I labeled only seven countries. The least amount of effort. But my teacher was kind and let me re-take it. For weeks, I breathed maps and maps. Tested myself endlessly until I knew. One hundred and twenty-nine countries.

→

On the second day of a new semester, I lead a discussion on vulnerability.

I tell my students I am someone who allows herself to be hurt repeatedly, but that I still believe it is the only way to live.

The Education major says, *What about the people who fail because they have no resources?*

I tell her yes, there are many kinds of failure, but that the world does not want us to discuss any of them.

←

I tell his class we are going to read *The Book of Disquiet* by an author named Fernando Pessoa and he says, *Fernando Pessoa or one of his heteronyms?*

After class he tells me of a book called *Blindness* in Portuguese that translates in English to *Essay on Blindness* though it is a novel.

I ask him how he knows about the heteronyms and he describes a bus ride the summer before, from Aguascalientes to his grandmother's house in Mexico City—reading a collection of poems, he discovered Alvaro de Campos.

↑

He wrote of walking blind, of his desire to see, of his first attempt to walk to the Mexican neighborhood in Chicago and the dead-end street.

He asked me what I loved about Chicago and I pointed to the bridges in suspension.



It was in that tiny city I pretended to live in that I discovered *The Book of Disquiet*. One evening while leaving my friend alone in her space, I go to the closest bookstore where I spend nearly every evening reading but never buying.

It is a large bookstore and easy to sit in unnoticed. I have very little money and no intention of purchasing anything. But somehow I pull out *The Book of Disquiet*, and something about it is familiar to me, though I don't know why.

In my blindness, I wander to the register and purchase it, then make my way out of the store and onto a city bench in the dark.



On that street where I lived in the Green Mountains, on the nights when I woke in the middle of that moonlit road, I would stand and look up at the sky.

I couldn't understand how I had done it, how I could have been so wrong.

I thought I'd been diligent, clinging to the side of the street within the weeds.

Instead, I had unconsciously led myself to wander down the middle.



I live in a city now, a city with a grid system and four diagonal streets cutting through which everyone who lives here can name.

It took a long time for me to learn this grid system. The friends I made when I moved here assured me that as long as I knew the grid I would never get lost.

They said this to comfort me, knowing I'd moved here from the mountains. But I resisted this information; I resisted the grid. And I got plenty lost.

I still get lost when I find myself on those diagonal streets. I get lost on diagonals now because I have adjusted my body to the grid and the grid contains me.



He got lost when I said, *Meet me at the theatre*, when I said, *Meet me by the café*.

I said he hadn't explored enough yet.

It was winter and we had both spent Christmas in that tiny curving cobblestoned city, missing one another in bookstores by only an hour.

I went back to that city to re-read but found I could not—my boots too suited to the grid, my eyes no longer blind.



If we wanted anything from each other it was this: permission to see.



If it seems as though some of these fragments are written in a language full of longing, it is because I wish to use a different language—one that is not my own but that I can nestle into, like a city I only perform the act of living in.

I want to crack this language open till a bright light from Lisbon flickers in.

"Future's Old" By: Hossein Abbaszadeh



On “Finding Dory” and Resilience: An Interview with Jennifer Givhan

By: Charissa Inman

On “Finding Dory” and Resilience: An Interview with Jennifer Givhan

Jennifer Givhan is the Pleiades Press Editors Prize winning author of, *Landscape with Headless Mama*, a book reflecting both her strengths and struggles in womanhood. You may recognize her as Blue Mesa Review’s runner-up in the 2014 Poetry contest. Jenn’s work reflects her Mexican-American heritage, while encompassing the messages of the desert, where she calls home.

Charissa Inman: Reviews have described *Landscape with Headless Mama* as “the fierce work of a poet who can’t be denied.” Can we expect a second book anytime soon?

Jennifer Givhan: Yes! *Protection Spell*, is actually coming out in February. Billy Collins chose it as part of the Miller Williams Series, and it’s being published by the University of Arkansas Press. I thought *Landscape* and *Protection Spell* were one book, originally. In the past eight years, they’ve morphed into different themes. *Protection Spell* focuses on the son and the husband and racism becomes a dominant theme, which I’d only hinted at in *Landscape*.

CI: *Landscape with Headless Mama* presents themes of life, death, and femininity. Are these themes we can expect in your next book?

JG: Yes, definitely. Added to that mix are racial tension, power dynamics, and the violence enacted upon women and especially brown bodies. *Landscape* hints at the speaker’s inner trauma, but in *Protection Spell*, I explore outward into society and culture at large. The book was inspired by racialized trauma within my own family. This book took a lot of courage.

CI: You are clearly inspired by the desert’s treasures. From the Imperial Valley, to Albuquerque, what makes the desert so captivating?

JG: It’s home. It’s always been home. You know, when I was growing up I didn’t necessarily love the desert. It was hot! I longed for lushness. I wanted to live by the ocean. The desert raised me, but it was a rebellious relationship – I didn’t want the desert to be my mother. So I moved from the desert in Southern California to LA near the beach. I lived there for five years, and met my husband (“thank God I moved there!”), but I would drive for an hour trying to escape and I couldn’t get out! I would cry. I missed open spaces! When the opportunity to move here came, I worried. But after a year, it was like ‘wow.’ I can breathe again. All that time I had been searching for life and lushness, and it was here. It’s just a harsher environment, so life has to be tougher. And that’s what inspires me.

CI: Last year, you revealed that you reached 100 published poetry submissions. Any advice on submitting?

JG: My kids and I just watched *Finding Dory*, and you know how Dory’s saying is “just keep swimming?” I say “just keep submitting.” I get rejections all the time! It’s all about finding your readers and taking chances along the way. I’ve probably sent my work to over 500 publications. No joke. Keep sending work out; lightning will strike!

CI: With a full-time job as a mother of two beautiful children, how do you take the time to work on projects/free write?

JG: Well, they’re in school now, but I try to spend as much time with them as I can. Even if that means I’m working and they’re next to me playing. I try to make time with them count. I’ve learned if I write something that doesn’t seem that great, save it. I’ll go back later and structurally it’s mess, but there’s often something there. Something that drove me to write it in the first place. And I can dramatically revise it later. I have learned to accept imperfection everywhere, in my mothering as well.

LANDSCAPE WITH HEADLESS MAMA



JENNIFER GIVHAN

Winner of the Pleiades Press Editors Prize for Poetry

CI: You've listed progressive Latin-American women as idols, such as Frida Kahlo, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Lenora Carrington. What message would these strong women, including yourself, give to American women at this time?

JG: It goes back to "the desert is my mother," and these are my literary mothers. They have taught me a toughness, a toughness of spirit. Politically right now it seems that we're going back decades, and it's scary. But we won't let it happen. With Frida Kahlo and Lenora Carrington, they had a lot of really negative things happen in their lives and you can't always control the external. It's about resilience. And I think that's what they would say, and that's what I would tell other women.

CI: What are your greatest hopes for your daughter as she grows into a young woman?

JG: I don't want her to go through some of what I've gone through. But whatever path she chooses, or however she needs to get there, I want her to be a strong woman who believes in herself. It's so important to be concerned with ego and self, especially for women. Frida Kahlo painted herself in order to have an impact, and you have to love yourself in order to love anyone else. I think it's taken me a long time to get there and not feel so broken. I don't want my daughter to break along the way. Again, it goes back to resilience. She wants to be an artist, which means she can paint the world as she sees it, and as she needs it to be. I couldn't think of anything better for my daughter.

Art Contributors

Hossein Abbaszadeh was born in Mashhad, Iran on September 20th, 1979. In addition to photography, they have written three books of fiction in Iran.

Morvarid Ebadi was born in Tehran, Iran on April 18th 1999. They are a student in the field of News Photography. One of their photos won 3rd place in the Photography Festival of Tehran.

Thomas Gillaspy is a northern California photographer. His photography has been featured in numerous magazines including the literary journals: Compose, Portland Review and Brooklyn Review. His work can be viewed at <http://www.thomasgillaspy.com>.

Fabio Sassi makes photos and acrylics using tiny objects and what is considered to have no worth by the mainstream. Fabio is also a sometime poet living in Bologna, Italy. His work can be viewed at www.fabiosassi.foliohd.com

FIRST PLACE FICTION IN THE 2016 SUMMER CONTEST

I loved this story. I loved the voice, and the energy that gathered and grew with each sentence. I loved the story's conceit and the perfect note, that lovely image, that it lands on. This was a really terrific piece of writing. - Jensen Beach

A Midwestern Gothic **By: Alec Osthoff**

You call the drink a Tom Collins, but it's half lemonade and half gin. It makes you more relaxed and more alert to the knitting of your sweater dress and the thin black arm hairs of the man you're talking to. He's a spoken word poet—Shelly introduced you, and you haven't had sex since last spring semester. The drink both warms and cools you. The man has many poems about growing up in a mixed household. His mother was one of the thousands of Somali refugees that came over in the late eighties. He talks a lot about the difficulty of not belonging anywhere, though that isn't what he's talking about now. He's talking about baseball, specifically the Twins. But he often talks about loneliness and discrimination. And here you are: the only girl from the burbs who doesn't have a friend that fucked their life up on heroin. You feel so small.

But he touches your hand when he laughs with his teeth. Once he asks permission, he reaches out to feel your hair. Still you lack the confidence that he throws—the poise of walking into a room like it's a stage, like everyone is staring at you. Whenever you walk into a crowded room it feels like everyone just recently stopped talking about you, like they're relieved you didn't enter a moment earlier. So when he asks about the beautiful marble vase on the bookshelf, you say, "It's an urn," which is true. Then you say, "It's my uncle. He passed last month. He was like a father to me." This is not true. Not any of it.

The soundtrack for the party is a compromise between Shelly, who only listens to electronic dance music, and Jillian, who loves the Dave Matthews Band. Dave croons Don't drink the water. No one is dancing. You rarely move when you lie. You get the feeling that any gesture will seem wooden and reveal the truth. When you are conscious of this you try to compensate for the impulse by making exaggerated movements. But you are too tipsy to stop yourself from getting stuck standing still. Those who know you can always call

your bluff. This man doesn't know you that well. "Oh God," he says, "Katie, I am so sorry."

He doesn't need to apologize. How could he have known?

"I am so, so sorry."

And yes, the sex, when it finally happens, is wonderful. You fuck like forked lightning. It both fills and devours you. It's the kind of sex that Cosmo has, feral and acrobatic and resonant. He's sobering up and you're spinning drunk, but you still know this is exactly what you both hoped for. And the best part is, when he shares his American Spirit with you and you're both cooling off on top of your sheets, you realize that you didn't even have to lie to him. He didn't care. He wanted you from the start. And that feels so, so good.

Of all places, you found the urn at the Goodwill off Lyndale Avenue. You and your two roommates made a trip there to stock the apartment with secondhand furniture and appliances. You're all sophomores, first year out of the dorms. You'd hoped to be living in a sorority this year, but the rent was too high. Between you and your roommates you own two futons but no plates, three mini-fridges but only four cups. You make do.

You spot the urn in the kitchenware aisle. You can't believe what you're seeing. The marble bends so smoothly. It almost looks soft. But it can't be. The stone is cool when you touch it, and you leave hot, wet fingerprints on the gloss. But it can't be. Shelly says "Holy shit. Is that what I think it is?"

You lift the lid and the top layer of ash scatters like dust bunnies.

This Goodwill has a reputation for not being thorough in its inspections. The boy across the hall freshman year bought a coat with an eighth of weed in the pocket. The whole place was shut down for a day after a woman found a few rocks of meth in a toaster

on display. But you can't believe they could miss something like this.

Shelly says it first. "This is a fucking body." It's three dollars.

Neither of you consider alerting the floor manager. The cashier doesn't seem to register what he is ringing up. On the walk home a rough looking kid shouts, "Who died?"

Shelly shouts, "Her uncle! He was like a father to her!" But you don't say anything. You're struggling just to hold it, and besides, you don't know who this is. You have no idea.

You set the urn on the bookshelf in the living room. Plastic bags from IKEA and Target and Cub Foods litter the floor. The etching where the name once was is almost completely worn away from being handled, being loved. You can make out MAS etched in flaking gold paint on the stone, looks like the last three letters of his name. The birth and death dates are long gone, but the bottom of the urn was dated during production—1988. Maybe the man—you're almost certain it was a man—died the same year. Maybe his last name was Thomas; that would fit the remaining letters.

You google the 1988 obituaries with the last name Thomas. There are thousands, tens of thousands maybe. You refine the search to Minnesota. The list narrows, but still in the hundreds, and those are only the ones listed. You resolve to call one surviving relative per week until you find the rightful owner. That's the right thing to do. In the meantime, you will keep it safe. You place it on the bookshelf in the living room. You tell Shelly about your plan and she says, "Fuck that. Someone gave it to Goodwill. They don't care about getting it back."

You glance at the worn lettering. You want to argue, but Shelly is still looking when you turn back to her, and her look draws you to silence. She says, "Nobody wants that thing but us."

You make the calls in secret. Some weeks you get caught up in classes and forget. No one claims the urn. One woman says, "Do I look like someone who would lose that?" And you've never seen her, so you don't really know. But her words remind you of Shelly's point. Someone who was careless enough to donate this must not care much about getting it back.

You consider keeping it. It comforts you to have around, and now the poet thinks it's your uncle, and Shelly shows it to everyone that comes by the apartment, sort of a house mascot. You like how easily you can cradle it in your arms when you're tired of being alone.

More and more it starts to feel like a pet, like someone that won't judge you, that wouldn't even understand how. You don't tell your parents about it. That's probably why you suddenly feel guilty, why you feel compelled to post an ad on Craigslist's lost and found.

You get three emails claiming it after you post. One is from the band Teenage Witch Abortion. They offer to write a song for you in exchange for your urn. You pull down the ad.

You told the poet that the urn is your uncle. But only a few months later it's starting to feel that way, at least a little. The urn has a certain presence in the room—caring, familial. You trace patterns in the marble, leaving smudgy finger trails on the seamless rock. You eye the careworn surface etching, but you can't forget that someone somewhere must really want this back. Reluctantly, you keep making calls.

You get tangled up in coursework. You started freshman year in biomedical engineering, but after stern insistence from numerous professors, you've transferred to the school of nursing. The course load is lighter, which makes it easier to get behind. The fall semester ends in a blitz of worksheets and term papers. The poet invites you to a slam in one of those second story bars where the man pouring drinks doesn't ask to see your fake ID. It's sunk in Mid-City Industrial, far from any convenient bus line. You haven't seen the poet in weeks, so you're willing to put up with shit you normally wouldn't. You end up walking the whole way in your too thin Northface. The stony cold settles into your toes and refuses to leave.

The bar doesn't stock tonic, so you order a gin and soda. The walls are covered in layers of aging memorabilia. The stools are all occupied. You cozy up to the radiator between a poster of George Costanza in his boxers, and a bumper sticker saying "CIA Killed Paul Wellstone." It's that kind of bar—one of those places you wouldn't want your friends to know you've been to, where you dream about snuggling your radiator at home, which you cover with an afghan and regularly dust.

The poets are okay. They mostly work the same topics to the same rhythm. He is no exception, but you enjoy him. Your poet talks about his white father's hands, how they are bleached and tough as picket fencing. The poet's hands, of course, are so unlike a picket fence. The poet's hands, you know from experience, are not like that at all.

The winning slam compares growing up with a fluid gender to Pluto not being a planet anymore. You

don't really see the point, and you don't like looking at them. But you clap politely anyway, even give a soft whoop when it seems rude not to. The bartender gives you a free gin and seltzer because you've already had four. He says it's lady's night, but it isn't. The poet tips him and wraps his arm around you. It keeps you standing. He holds you in place.

The poet introduces you to the winner like they're a celebrity, but you can't even look at them. You can't look at anything. You rushed Lambda Delta Phi last year, but it cost too much to live in house. You want to ask, "What are you?" but instead say, "Nice poem."

Everyone else is embarrassed for you. You roll your head back onto his arm and it holds you up. You didn't mean to get this drunk. The poet finishes his whiskey-7 and walks you down the stairs you had no problem climbing earlier. You're still holding your glass of gin, but the cups here are plastic, so you let it tumble down the steps. You lean on the wall for support, and rip a corner off a vintage Prince poster. He stares back at you, all eyeliner and scraggly moustache. You keep your mouth shut so you won't vomit.

The cold hits like it was waiting for you. It cuts and seeps. Your body screams for warmth and shelter. The cold pushes the drink down inside you where you use it for fuel. You aren't sober, but it's as close as you'll be until morning. You lean on the poet for support. This is about survival. You drag your Uggs through the road salt.

A woman is hustling from the bus shelter on the corner, so wrapped in parkas it's hard to see her at all. The group in front of you doesn't spare a glance. It's too cold to give a shit. This is the weather that kills people. You limp past her and lock eyes a moment. She has the look of someone used to not getting what she wants, one of the transplants to Minnesota that likely weren't told about the weather and Midwestern standoffishness until she got here. She asks your poet, "Y'all got a buck or two put me on the bus? I'm trying to get to the shelter before it closes."

The poet shakes his head, says something back to her in Somali, probably something encouraging and dismissive.

The woman yells, "You cut that shit. I ain't Somali. I'm just some broke-ass nigger."

And it's an easy mistake. It's a mistake you've seen a hundred times before in this city of Somali immigrants. That mistake so frequently dismissed with a shake of the head or a wave of the hand, and the apology—the vehement apology of I am so sorry. I didn't

mean to assume. I am so, so sorry. It's a mistake you could have made. But you didn't. He did, and he doesn't say anything. He just stiffens for a moment and keeps walking. You open your mouth to apologize, but everything comes out—gin and seltzer and Annie's Macaroni shells pirouetting on the ice. The woman says, "Jesus. Y'all can fucking keep each other." And this hurts so much. The mistake was his. She just caught you at a vulnerable moment.

Tears. You heard a story once about a boy that went blind from crying in the cold like this. The tears froze in his eyes. The sockets filled with stone. You don't go blind. You're shutting the car door. The poet had more than one whiskey-7, but he gets you home. You don't say anything, parked by the dumpster behind your building. You step out of the car and he says, "How was I supposed to know?"

You open your mouth and it all comes back up again.

You make it through winter break with your parents. You don't tell them about the urn. You stop making calls so they won't overhear and wonder what mess their daughter has gotten herself into. You're relieved to make the long drive up from Iowa and settle back into the Minneapolis apartment, to get back to making the calls. You've burned through your summer savings, so you get a part-time waitressing gig at the American Girl Doll Bistro in the Mall of America. You spend your tips on handles of gin and the occasional spliff you've recently taken to buying off Shelly. The two of you blow the smoke into paper towel rolls stuffed with drier sheets to mask the smell from Jillian, but she knows. The bistro has dolls the girls can borrow in case they don't have one of their own. Each doll gets its own seat and cup of black Lipton tea that the store buys in bulk. You're required to talk to the dolls like they're people, and it's surprisingly easy for you.

The mall has that chlorinated smell all malls seem to have, but the restaurant smells permanently like chicken tenders, even when the fryer is switched off for the night. You get used to this. The restaurant is above a hair salon where the girls can get their hair teased to look like their dolls. The salon also functions as a doll hospital. Girls will bring in dolls they colored on or maimed and the manager will take the doll back and swap out its head or arms for fresh parts. They save the disfigured heads for six months in case the girls notice and want them back. Your manager, Jason, once had a girl come up to him, shouting, "I need my doll back! My

old doll has all my secrets in her head!”

The heads are kept in a back room. Some are missing lashes, some have been melted by radiators, some have been Sharpie tattooed by cruel siblings. They are the warped ones. You take your evening breaks with the dolls. They have so much emotion, these things that were so loved then thrown away.

The poet doesn't call. You want him to do something dramatic to show you he's sorry—sorry for embarrassing you, and sorry for not calling for so long. You tell the urn about it and that helps, but doesn't make the situation any clearer. Shelly has moved on past the urn—she's shown it to all her friends, and now she mostly ignores it on the shelf. You start calling the urn Thomas. After two weeks back in Minneapolis you stop looking for a home for him. You spent the fall semester making calls to whoever you could get to pick up the phone, to entertain for the briefest of moments that you could be connecting them with their lost loved one—that you could be fixing their lives, restoring the balance in some small but important way. But it's stopped feeling that way. The last call you make is over when the man shouts, “I swear to god, we get one god damn night a week to eat our fucking dinner together like we're a normal god damn family, and you fucking people keep harassing us.” The phone receiver slams the cradle. You give up on restoring the balance. And in the long nights that the poet doesn't bother bridging that gap and coming back to you, you let Thomas in. You move him from the living room to a permanent home on your desk. He begins to feel more present in the room. When you talk, he listens, and never corrects you. He starts restoring your balance.

Sometimes after a particularly strong joint you cradle him and feel like you're pulling him inside of you, like the cold marble is running through your guts and getting tangled up in your muscles. But that only lasts a few seconds, and has only happened a few times.

Mostly the urn sits on your desk. Mostly your roommates ignore it.

You sit in the warped doll room, pushing chicken fingers and french fries in lazy circles round your plate. You feel like a child again at this job. You've been spending too much time as an adult lately—too much gin, and smoke, and term sheets, and counting down the months until your twenty-first. It's easy to shut off and pretend for a while. It's easier when you're the tiniest bit lit up. You pour Lipton out of stout pink teapots, some for the girls and some for the dolls. Sometimes the girls don't want to share what their dolls are thinking, but it's polite to ask. And it's policy to ask the parents if there is

a birthday coming up. It's easier to talk to the parents if you aren't high, particularly the fathers. A little gin helps though, particularly with the fathers.

But in the doll ward you don't need any substances. The ward helps pass the time, and it comforts you in a subdued way. Jason, your manager, has learned to look for you there when you disappear from the floor. He finds you stirring the food around your plate, not even eating.

“Katie, we don't take breaks when we have open tables.”

Luckily it's a gin day. It's impossible to be around Jason when you're lit. You straighten your tie, fasten your pink apron that droops past your knees.

“You've got to stop this crap. Your food's cold in the window.”

That night you spoon Thomas on top of the covers where the marble will keep its cool. Shelly comes in without knocking and asks if you're busy. You tell her you are. She stands over you for a while anyway. “In my time,” she says, “I've seen some weird ass shit.”

Shelly wears glasses but doesn't need them. She wears flannels when she drinks beer, even in the summer. She runs every morning and pretends she doesn't. Shelly goes to punk shows at Club Medusa and hates all the bands, but digs the scene. Shelly also rushed Lambda Delta Phi, but decided she didn't need to pay an annual to have friends. Shelly is rarely nervous. Shelly doesn't get high when Shelly doesn't want to. Shelly fakes putting mickeys in her own drinks. Shelly is smoke and mirrors, but has no secrets. Everything works out for her. And so you can't understand why she would put up these fliers, why someone with so much going for them, so much confidence, would feel the need to take this one thing from you, this thing that matters so much.

You spot a flier fastened to one of the bulletin columns spaced throughout the snowy campus. Found: Urn. Please call with a description, and then your number, your name. Fucking Shelly.

You tear down the flier, move to the next column and tear one down there too. You run home, though you really can't afford to miss your macrobiology lab in half an hour. Shelly is at class, so you sit on her bed and you wait. You want to turn the room inside out, but you aren't that kind of person. So you wait.

Your phone rings. It isn't Shelly. It's an unknown number. You flick the phone on silent. You put it screen down on the bed so you don't have to watch the light flash with each new call. You get a dozen calls in an

hour. They keep pouring in. They all want what you have. You'll have to get your number changed.

Shelly is gone for hours. You scroll through the texts that have been piling up.

Our grandfather needs to come home

hi u have my urn?

I am offering a fifty dollar reward

Is this some kind of joke?

You're glad you have unlimited texting. Still no sign of Shelly. You pull a small, unlikely to be noticed nug from Shelly's stash. You grind it, roll it, and smoke it on your bed with Thomas and your drier sheets. Shelly can't take this away from you.

Jillian shows around three, asks if you want her to pick anything up from Target while she's there. You don't say anything, and she doesn't ask again.

Shelly finally shows long after dark. You've snuck more than one nug by this point. You leave Thomas on the bed. You stand in your doorway facing her. You say, "I know what you did."

She says, "What are you talking about?"

But you don't really hear her. You don't really want to. "I know what you are."

Shelly tells you to go to bed and pulls her door shut. You don't know how long you stand there.

Jason has the balls to fire you on the same night Jillian throws a party. It's one of those disastrous affairs most people stop hosting freshman year where everyone brings a half empty bottle and pours it into a communal bowl. You've started keeping Thomas in your room at all times, only handling him with the door closed. You've gotten your number changed. You've taken a break from smoking, even quit drinking at work, though it's much more boring now. You haven't talked to Shelly. You've gone out of your way to avoid her, to avoid confrontation, to maintain that household balance. You've been doing everything right, and, well, just look at this mess you're in. You ride the blue line home in the dark.

You were given a birthday table, a nine top, big check and coming in with automatic gratuity. You poured the tea for the children, then the dolls, then the adults—just like you were trained. You asked who the birthday girl was, and who you thought was just someone's brother brought along for the ride raised his hand. Nine years old, blonde bangs, hazel eyes with glasses pushed up on his bridge. You asked him if he liked Legos. Then you told him there is a Lego restaurant in the mall that does birthdays too.

Stupid. Stupid. His mother asked why you would

bring that up. You said, "Wouldn't he rather play with Legos? This isn't a good restaurant for boys." The boy's mother went ballistic, said that it wasn't your place to make judgments like that, that you could go fuck yourself and stay away from her son. She said fuck, right in front of the kids like that. Unbelievable. Jason let you go before the appetizers hit the table. He said he'll have to comp half their meal.

A man on the train asks if he can buy you a drink. You pretend you don't speak English. You've already had enough of tonight. He asks if you're deaf or something. He waves a hand in front of your eyes, then throws both hands in the air. "Fine, bitch."

You transfer to the green line and walk home through the spring slush. You see the line of parked cars before you hear the EDM. The poet's car is on your block. You brace for coming in from the cold.

The poet that hasn't called in months and is obviously no longer your poet is chatting up Shelly. They're both smoking American Spirits in your non-smoking apartment. Jillian is debating whether or not the punch would be improved by the mostly full pinot noir in her hand. You walk past the poet towards Jillian without letting him see you looking. You ask Jillian, "What's in it?"

Jillian says, "Damned if I know. Mostly blueberry vodka I think. Cranberry juice?"

She ladles you a cup. It tastes like Kool-Aid and antiseptic. "Is there mouthwash in this?"

"Shouldn't be," Jillian says, giving the bowl a quick sniff. "I think it got left out."

Behind you the poet has stopped talking. You turn to see the two focused on you. Jillian says, "Sober perspective: add the wine or leave it out?"

By this point, Jillian is used to you ignoring her. "Katie," the poet says, "It's been a long time."

"Hi." You flash him a smile, showing off your perfect teeth.

The poet says, "Shelly was just telling me about your uncle."

"Oh? Which one?"

"The one that works at the Goodwill. I was sorry to hear about him."

He thinks he can let you down gently, and normally you would take the most convenient exit from this conversation. You aren't usually a confrontational person, but you've had enough. And he's not as fucking tactful as he thinks he is. "I don't have an uncle that works at Goodwill. You must be thinking of someone else."

"I could have sworn you mentioned him at

Shelly's party a couple months back."

Shelly says, "She knows what you're talking about. We all know what you're talking about."

You say, "My uncle died after a yearlong struggle with Lou Gehrig's. He used his tongue to wheel his chair in front of a train."

The poet picks up his spoken word voice, all syncopated and with that strange inflection. He always projects spit when he uses this voice, and flecks of it land on your cheek and arm "Jesus, Katie, why can't you just act like a fucking adult for once? Just admit it."

"That's the truth. I should know. It happened to me," you say, refusing to raise your voice. "You must have me confused with someone you think speaks Somali."

He shouts, "Fuck off, Katie. That's got nothing to do with this. Just admit you fucked up." But you're already walking away. Jillian decided not to add the wine. It's still sitting by the bowl, uncorked and full. You shove to the front of the line, hold your hair back with your left hand, and upend the wine into the bowl with your right. You shove your face in and suck. When you come back up the whole room is cheering for you, pumping their fists into the air. Shouts of chug and wolf whistles fill the room. Purple blue droplets sprinkle your pink work shirt and drip onto the carpet as you make your way towards your room. You drop the empty bottle on the floor, but it doesn't break. You close the door behind you.

Your eyes sting from the vodka. You bite down on a pillow to keep from screaming, but you can feel your teeth grinding through the cotton. You throw it across the room and bite your microbiology text book. When you pull the book from your mouth you feel the imprinted grooves from your perfect teeth on the cover. You keep the lights off. It's barely after ten; you should just be getting off work. The EDM crashes into the Ska playing next door where the party is full of people you don't know. You say, "Not me. No, you fucked up. You fucked up. Not me." You want the parties to stop. You want it all, everything, to empty out. You heft Thomas into your bed, and you try to make the world silent.

You wake to water falling on your face. For a moment you're lost. Then Shelly flicks on the light and when your eyes adjust you see she's holding an empty mug. You're still wrapped around Thomas. A thin streak of ash spilled onto your sheet while you were sleeping. You scoop as much of it back into the urn as you can. It's still dark out. There's an occasional shout from the

street below as the partygoers shuffle out of your apartment complex looking for the night's last dive.

Shelly says, "You know, I had a long list of people that I could have lived with this year. A long fucking list. And I picked you because I didn't think you'd go all Exorcism of Emily Rose on me."

Your eyebrows are sticky with blueberry vodka. You're slow to sit up, but you feel more awake when you do. You say, "What time is it?"

Shelly points at Thomas and says, "Seriously, man. What is your god damn problem? It was funny at first, but you've been mooning over that thing for months. When's it going back?"

"Back where?" It sounds like the party guests have all left. Shelly's is the only voice you hear in the apartment.

She says, "Anywhere. Back where it belongs, with whoever it belongs to. Or in the fucking trash. I don't care anymore."

The urn by this point belongs to you and you alone, but you don't tell Shelly that. You don't want to fight with her. You really want to keep the household balanced.

"It isn't yours." Shelly rubs her eyes. "And it's fuckin with your head. You used to be chill, well, not chill maybe, but you were cool." Shelly rubs her eyes again, and you can see they're misting up.

You blink, trying to shake off the sleep. You say, "Why'd you tell him?"

"Because I thought then you might get rid of the fucking thing, but that obviously didn't work. So if it isn't about the lie, why the fuck are you so obsessed with it?"

It was awful of her to tell the poet about Thomas, but it's what you'd expect her to do. You can't stay mad at her for that. But you can't give up Thomas either—Thomas who listens, Thomas who is always right where you left him. So you don't say anything. You just sit there. Your face is still damp from the water she threw on you. You use the moisture to rub off some of the sugar sticking in your eyebrows.

Shelly says, "Here, let's get that shit cleaned off."

She pulls you by the hand into the common room. The room is a shipwreck. Brown beer glass is scattered across the counter and kitchen linoleum. The white living room carpet is speckled with blue pools and wine stains. The door to your unit is open. You smell vomit coming from the sink. Shelly leaves you there in the mess, brings a dripping rag from the bathroom and rubs it over your face, waking you up the rest of the way.

The towel comes away blue. The clock on the microwave says it's almost four a.m.

Shelly says, "Your bangs're gonna stay a little blue for a while." Then she throws the rag into the corner for the morning. Says, "Sorry."

"Yeah, well."

Shelly says, "We cool?"

"Yeah, we'll be alright."

"Cool. So what're you going to do with it?"

You say, "I'll call it in to Radio K, maybe put up a classified. I'll give it to the first person that calls." But you won't. You know that's not how this ends.

Shelly waits there for a moment with her hands at her sides and you feel that electric certainty that you both want to reach out and touch the other, to embrace, and let the fights and troubles of the last few months fade out. But then she says goodnight and walks to her room. You wait for her door to latch, then grab Thomas and put on your coat and boots, slip out of the apartment as quietly as you can.

The buses have all shut down for the night, so you take the long walk to Uptown, taking the pedestrian tunnels and suspended bridges, moving over and under the street like a suture. By the time you arrive, the parties are over. The sun has risen. It's almost six a.m. You stop at a public bench along the blusteriest stretch of Hennepin Avenue. You're two blocks from the lake, only a few more from the cemetery. It feels like as good a place as any. You lean against the back of the bench outside the Uptown L.A. Fitness. There is only one woman running laps on the indoor track. You count her laps through the porthole windows, tracking the number of times her face skips by. She catches a glimpse of you and Thomas as she runs past. A question forms on her face. On her next lap around she stops. She is struggling to catch her breath. She puts her hands on either side of the glass. You lock eyes briefly. Then she stares at the urn. You give a small wave. Your hands are freezing. You didn't put on enough warm clothes. You're standing in the spring wind in your T-shirt and flannel coat.

You drop the lid and upend Thomas onto the sidewalk. The wind catches the ash and cyclones it into your face before carrying it into the lake or the cemetery or further into the city. You don't want to look at Thomas, so you keep watching the woman. You know that in a minute you're going to have to walk away, leave Thomas's husk by the bench for someone to scoop up and take home. You don't want to think about it. And the woman keeps watching you. She presses her face close to the glass like she wants to reach out and hold you,

to take you home and feed you, bathe you, bring you up better so you don't end up standing on some corner in the cold with an urn. You smile, like you don't know how you got here, like this isn't even that bad. You want her to know that you're okay, that everything, you're sure, is going to work out just fine for you, but you just stand there, and slowly her breathing fogs everything up.

CONTRIBUTORS

Debbie Vance's fiction has appeared in The Conium Review Online Compendium, Flyway, Alligator Juniper, and elsewhere. She is a 2015 Pushcart Prize nominee and an MFA candidate at Colorado State University, where she teaches composition and research.



Matt Tompkins is the author of two chapbooks: *Souvenirs and Other Stories* (Conium Press) and *Studies in Hybrid Morphology* (tNY Press). Matt's stories have appeared in *New Haven Review*, *Post Road*, and online at the *Carolina Quarterly*. He lives in Virginia with his wife (who kindly reads his first drafts), his daughter (who prefers picture books) and his cat (who is illiterate).



BLUE MESA REVIEW NO. 34

"The Rusted Iron Temple"



By: Fabio Sassi



THIRD PLACE FICTION IN THE 2016 SUMMER CONTEST

I was drawn to the precision of the anger and hurt of this story. The second person point of view worked really well. This is a gritty and compelling piece of fiction. - Jenson Beach

Girls Needed \$200/HR Weekends and Nights

By: Cady Vishniac

The ad in City Paper says you'll model for gentlemen, and you like the sound of that. Modeling for gentlemen would be an excellent way to fuck with your ex-boyfriend. When your roommate Shawn is working at the construction site and your roommate Rachel is hanging her latest show, sit on the living room floor. Call the agency. Assure them you are only nineteen. Make an appointment for tomorrow, Sunday—"the Lord's day," the woman on the other end of the line says, which reminds you of your parents because they're religious freaks. Is she making some sort of joke? This woman is about to be your boss, so tell her yeah, the Lord's day, like you think she's funny.

Call your ex-boyfriend—even though you've already called him today and emailed him and sent him messages—and when you hear the beep let him know where you're going tomorrow. Say it's his fault, and a man whose girlfriend turns into a hooker should take a good long look in the mirror, then shoot himself in the head. This sort of talk might have something to do with why he dumped you, but you know what? Fuck that guy. Fuck him right in his stupid Goth face at stupid Burning Man, where you celebrated your one-year anniversary. Say, "Fuck you so royally," to his voicemail, then hang up.

Walk to what you now know will be your last night of waitressing at the sushi-Mexican fusion restaurant on Mount Royal, but first, leave a note for your roommates: Got a new job. I know you guys have been worried about me. Thanks for being so patient.

It's sunny out. Smell the coffee wafting from the open door of Red Emma's. Everybody's sexy in their second-hand sundresses, because Baltimore people are beautiful and Baltimore is the most beautiful place on Earth. The greatest city in America. Charm City. The city that never sleeps alone. Syphilis is endemic.

Arrive at the restaurant three minutes after five. Your manager says, "This is the last time you'll ever show up late." Once you stayed out past seven and your dad threw everything you owned in garbage bags, and when you finally got home he was standing in the drive-

way surrounded by the bags, making the exact same face your manager is making right now.

Say, "You're right, it's the last time." Then while you wait for the first dinner guests, get wasted with your coworker Jay. The cool thing about working at a sushi-Mexican fusion restaurant is they have hot sake on tap.

Tell Jay if he gives you the lounge on the third floor tonight, you'll give him your shifts over Labor Day Weekend, because you'll be heading out of town with your boyfriend—you haven't told anybody at work he broke up with you. This trade would earn Jay at least four hundred bucks if you had any intention of following through, so he says yes, and you spend the night serving two-and-three-and-four-hundred-dollar meals to Ravens linebackers and city councilors and other rich people, the kind your father still works with. You make three hundred dollars in tips. Don't bother with the side-work—your manager can roll napkins tomorrow when he realizes you've bailed, and then he'll probably give all your shifts to his girlfriend.

Tuck the money into your sock and walk home in the dark, like the real dark. It's two in the morning. Men call from the lips of alleyways, from the shadows of trees. "Do you party?" the men ask, which means will you have sex with them in exchange for crack or heroin. You don't do crack or heroin, or you've only tried them a couple times, so tell these men you hate to party. "Shame," they say. The problem with the path home from your waitressing gig is it's also where the hookers go walking at night, so the men hope against hope that you're a hooker. Your mother used to say you looked like a hooker every other time you left the house, only the word she used was "jezebel." The pastor at Resurrection Baptist of Roland Park, which is your parents' church, gave her permission to smack you with a hairbrush handle, too, if she felt your skirts were too short. Now that you've spotted some real jezebels on your walks home you know she was right. They do wear short skirts. You wear pants to set yourself apart.

Reach the wrought iron gate to your apartment complex without incident. Trudge up the stairs and open the door; your roommates are having one of their drunken screaming fights in their bedroom, so don't say hi—they're busy. Walk to the kitchen, open the fridge, and examine your communal tub of Save-a-Lot cranberry juice. Each time one of you drinks from the cranberry tub you fill it with Popov, until the liquid starts to clear, then you pour more cranberry juice in there. Tonight the vodka-cran mix is a perfect fifty-fifty. Gulp down three tall glasses in under five minutes.

Call your ex-boyfriend and leave another message. Tell him how scared you are about tomorrow, how you wish he'd talk you out of it, but also tell him it's fine, you're aware he doesn't give a shit. Ask him, "Didn't you tell me she was a one-time thing? I can still get into your email account. I saw you bought her a new phone for her birthday." Tell him you were lying about his being the fifth man you ever fucked. He was only the second, and the first was just some guy who bought you a coffee at Red Emma's. You'd only been out of your parents' house for a couple weeks and you were feeling crazy.

Hang up because your roommates are shouting so loud, you aren't certain your ex-boyfriend will be able to make out your words when he checks his voicemail. Lie down on the pillows you bought last month, after you and your roommates got bedbugs and had to trash your mattresses. Let the sound of screaming in the next room lull you, the thud of someone punching the wall. Wrenching sobs. Shut your eyes and imagine what it's like to be dead, which is something you've been doing for a whole year, since you stopped believing in heaven. Sleep. Dream of nothing and nobody. Let the pillows slip out from under you so the hardwood floor fucks up your back.

Wake when your alarm goes off at nine. You're burping up gas that smells like rotten eggs. You set the alarm because you were scheduled to work a clopen, a close-open, only you're never showing up at the sushi-Mexican fusion place again so the clopen is moot. Decide, since you're up anyway, to get ready for the escort agency, where you're expected this afternoon. That's in DC, a roundabout haul on public transit.

Stand and take a deep breath, only realize you can't breathe because you've come down with a cold. Hack up neon green phlegm and swear you'll start eating vegetables and drinking less so you're not always sick. You should have taken some miso soup home from work last night, but you were so excited to leave. Say, "Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck," to the empty room.

"You up?" says Rachel from the hallway. "Want some pancakes?"

Say, "I would fucking love some fucking pancakes." It's true, you would. Come into the living room wearing your sweat-soaked waitress clothes, which you've had on for sixteen hours. There is a single grain of sushi rice stuck to your shirt and taco cheese smeared across your right sleeve. Notice Shawn asleep on the living room floor, his coat covering his bare chest.

Rachel's in the kitchen now, heating up a frying pan. Her gaze lingers on her boyfriend, and she says, "We should think about getting new furniture." There are fingerprint bruises on her neck. Don't stare. There were women with bruised necks at Resurrection, where the pastor often read verses about submitting to husbands. Your ex-boyfriend was the one who told you how men get arrested for it, out here in the real world, and at first you thought he was kidding.

Rachel makes pancakes in cool shapes, not just your basic Mickey Mouse but pancakes like snakes and winged bats and those pin-up girls you see on mudflaps. While she's waiting for the first pancake to cook through, she takes out one of her Ritalin pills and smashes it against the counter with her thumb, disappearing the powder up her nose with a dainty snort. Then, because she is maternal, a nurturing presence in your life, she notices your cold and is determined to get some orange juice into you. "How about I make mimosas?" she says, and, "I saw your note. What's your new job?"

Say yes to the mimosas and tell her you're training to be a concierge at the Ritz in Georgetown. Bite into a pancake and feel smart for coming up with a plausible lie. Let Rachel congratulate you on this massive step up. Let her give you a baggie of cherry cough drops for your first day of work. Say thanks. She hugs you goodbye and walks out the front door, grabbing a scarf on the way to cover her neck bruises. She's going to sit in the student gallery where her paintings hang next to her classmates' and encourage visitors, if there are any, to support the arts.

Go to the bathroom. Rip off your clothes and shower until the hardened snot blocking your nasal passage becomes soft and loose and runs down your chin. Open your mouth to barf, when the nausea passes shave your legs instead. Get out of the shower and do your makeup in front of the mirror; go back to your room and change into the only pair of underwear with no holes, the only bra with all its hooks, and your sexiest second-hand sundress. For jewelry wear the earrings

one of Rachel's art school friends made for you on your nineteenth birthday—the Natty Boh man on the right ear and Utz girl on the left. Shove your feet into dirty flip-flops and make faces at your mirror.

Dig your phone out of the pocket of last night's pants and look at two missed calls from your manager, five texts from Jay. You quit on me didn't you. What about Memorial Day you slut? Jay asks. The next four messages are one word each: I, COULD, MURDER, and YOU.

Turn off your phone and go back to the kitchen. Shawn is there, awake and wearing only his boxers, working his magic on an ancient coffee machine that won't start for anybody else. When he hears you walk into the room he asks, "Where you going, you whore?" Then he turns around and sees your face. "Sorry, thought you were Rachel."

Say, "She already left," then, "I got a new job. I'm a concierge."

"Your bra is showing." Shawn hands you the first cup of coffee. Drink it in your room, in front of the computer, while emailing your ex-boyfriend a photo of your best duckface. Now you can leave. Forget Rachel's cherry cough drops on the floor next to your window.

Take the light rail to the BWI stop to the airport shuttle to the airport, where you switch to the other airport shuttle to the Green Line of the DC Metro, then transfer to the Red Line for three stops. By now, you've been in transit for hours. You're hungry, but also gassy. Burp uncontrollably, that rotten egg smell again. Taste something salty and realize your nose is running, mucus dripping into your mouth. The man sitting next to you says, "Here," and hands you a tissue. Give him a thumbs up because sometimes you still like to imagine that strange men are your brothers in Christ.

Ride up the station escalator and into the sunlight. Smile at everybody you see on the cobblestone sidewalk. Notice tourist families picnicking in a park the same way your family did before you informed them you needed a break from their lifestyle, their Lord. In three blocks, reach the building where the woman from the agency told you to meet. Turn on your phone to call your ex-boyfriend one last time, but freak out instead, because you see another dozen threatening texts from Jay and a voice message that's either from the detective your parents hired or from your manager at the sushi-Mexican fusion place or from God only knows who else. Turn the phone off and knock on the door to apartment 4B.

A woman answers. "Are you Johanna?" she asks. Recognize the throatiness of her voice, the accent. The one you spoke to on the phone yesterday. She's middle-aged, overweight. The bridge of her nose is spidered with the telltale burst blood vessels of a long-term alcoholic. So you've got that in common.

Say, "Yes. I'm Johanna."

"Prove it."

Show her your driver's license.

"Okay, but when you're here you'll call yourself Julia."

Only after you have put your license back in your pocket and agreed to the new name does the woman let you inside. "I'm Mimi," she says.

The living room is airy and white. White curtains open out onto a white balcony. Another woman who looks like she might be related to Mimi sits at a white table, drinking yellow slush from a mug. She looks up at you and whistles. "Gringa, we're about to make each other rich." Find that reassuring, because you'd like to be rich. So rich you could buy your ex-boyfriend's rowhouse and make him pay you rent. So rich you could waltz into your father's office and he'd tell you how to invest your wealth. So rich you could donate a new building to Resurrection's preschool.

"Suck in your gut," says the woman who is not Mimi. "Straighten your shoulders."

Suck in your gut and straighten your shoulders.

"You got a nice face," Mimi says. She wags a finger. "But you're skinny-fat, like I can tell you drink too much beer. That beer's gonna give you a belly." She's not wrong.

"Want a smoothie?" says Not-Mimi.

Say yes, even though you've begun to fart with abandon and you're sure a smoothie won't help. She asks if kale and strawberries is good. Say sure, but actually, kale and strawberries sounds like the worst possible combination. She disappears into another room while Mimi looks you up and down.

"Why are you here, Julia?" Open your mouth, but she interrupts you. "You're already slouching again." She reaches out and grabs your hips, pressing them back, then she goes behind you and applies pressure between your shoulderblades so your chest pops out. Squinch your ass cheeks while she's back there so you don't fart on your boss. "Better," she says. "Now tell me."

Be careful not to shift your spinal column as you sputter out something about how you don't want to work weekend clopens for a couple hundred bucks when you know other women are out there making the

same money in an hour, setting their own schedules. Do not mention your Goth ex-boyfriend, that you plan to call him up and tell him you're a prostitute now, and he's just some idiot who wears black and makes women miserable. Do not mention that summer in middle school when your family went to Montego Bay. Your parents kept trying to take you on these boring tours of the cathedral in Spanish Town, then things came to a head because you flirted with one of the resort lifeguards. You winked at him and ran into the surf, and that may have been the first time your mother called you a jezebel. Your father dragged you by your hair back to the hotel room, where you were grounded for the rest of the trip, only you got even by drinking a whole bottle of rum from the minibar.

Don't breathe a word about this, because Mimi doesn't want to know. She points at your tits and asks, "Would you ever consider implants?" Tell her you'd be into it if you were sure the surgeon was safe.

Not-Mimi comes back and hands you your smoothie. It's brown and grody-looking, but when you hold it to your lips, your whole body tingles, the pit of your stomach and the lonely backs of your knees, the hollow you fill with booze and coffee and whatever Rachel cooks for you, tickles your chest, which you hadn't even noticed until now, subsides.

"Good?" asks Not-Mimi. "We'll take care of you, see?"

A phone vibrates on the table. Mimi picks it up and says, "Hi! Yes, she's free." She meets your eyes. "Okay, see you then." She hangs up.

"Julia, gringa," she asks, "wanna start today? We just had another girl cancel and this guy's on his way over. Help us out?"

Say you understand, because you do. You understand there is no girl who cancelled, just a staged emergency, an opportunity for Mimi and Not-Mimi to make sure you'll really go through with it. Your stomach cartwheels.

"Ten minutes. You can finish the smoothie," says Mimi. She tells you the condoms will be in a drawer in the nightstand. She tells you you've got to use one. She tells you how much she's charging this guy and how much you keep.

Sit at the table while Mimi and Not-Mimi converse in Spanish. Don't pull out your phone because you can't call your ex-boyfriend with people watching. Don't pray because you've decided not to, not ever again. Hold the smoothie to your mouth because there's nothing else to do.

Eventually Mimi gets a text. She walks over to the entrance of the apartment and lets in a man in an old grey suit, bringing him to the table and asking him if he wants a beer or anything. He says no, he's in a rush.

"I understand," Mimi says to him, touching his arm. "let me introduce you to Julia. Julia just turned seventeen two days ago."

Grey Suit eyes your legs. He looks at the straps of your dress like he's trying to figure out if he can eat the material. He takes your hand, and he must be a regular because he knows exactly where to go.

There's another room, behind another door you hadn't noticed. Here the floor is hardwood with an oriental rug, the walls are brick red, and the curtains are gold. There's a bed in the center of the room with a gold comforter on red sheets. There's a nightstand with a gold fringe lamp, the kind of lamp your mother would love. There's a TV mounted to the wall playing hardcore porn, a gangbang scene, on mute. This room is tiny, barely enough for the bed and the nightstand and the TV and the lamp. Yellow light spills from a bathroom to the side.

"You plan to stand there all day?" says Grey Suit.

Tell him no. Try not to think of your ex-boyfriend but think of him anyway. Then give up and pretend Grey Suit is your ex-boyfriend. What would you do if your ex-boyfriend wanted you again, the way Grey Suit wants you now? Move your hands down to the hem of your sexiest dress and lift it over your head while Grey Suit watches. Reach behind your back and unclasp your bra—the hooks pop out—and let it fall to the ground. Wiggle out of your underwear. Step forward, leaving your flip-flops on the floor where you just stood. Grey Suit breathes heavy. In your mind's eye, superimpose your ex-boyfriend's face, your ex-boyfriend smirking with that purple lip ring and the smoky eyes he sometimes wore to clubs, back when you'd just met and he was showing you how to do things like dance with your hips, like change a tire and live as a heathen. Step forward and kiss Grey Suit passionately, the way you haven't kissed anybody in a while. Ignore the fuzziness of his tongue. Tell yourself that's your ex-boyfriend's tongue. Do not puke.

Grey Suit picks you up onto the bed and sits beside you. "Undress me," he says. Take off his grey suit jacket but then just sit there holding the thing, because you don't know where to put it. "The floor is fine," says Grey Suit. Drop the jacket on the floor next to the bed. Unbutton his button-up shirt and drop that too on the floor. Struggle to unhook his belt and pull his grey slacks

down from his ample ass. The floor for that as well. Yank on his boxers until they're free. The floor. Wrap your mouth around his wrinkled penis and bob your head up and down for a minute, two minutes.

"Why are you shaking?" asks Grey Suit.

Lie. Tell him you're not. You're still pretending he's your boyfriend, so call him hon. Say, "Hon, I'm fine."

"Why don't you shave that pussy?" He points at the hairy patch between your legs.

Say, "If you promise to come back to me, hon, I'll shave my pussy." Tell him you've been wanting him so bad, and ask him where the condoms are because you already forgot.

"Nightstand," says Grey Suit. "But I'll give you an extra hundred not to. An extra two hundred."

"I don't know if that's a good idea." Shake harder.

"You want me to come back, right? I'll only see you again if you let me go natural. Our secret."

Don't stop him when he pulls your head up to his head, your groin to his groin. Don't stop him when he lowers you onto his short grey dick. Let him pump his flabby body up and down in a way that makes his thighs jiggle. Admit to yourself that you are no longer picturing your ex-boyfriend. The jiggling has ruined that fantasy. Look to the wall and the TV and the bathroom while he moves underneath you. Turn your head to the side and try to make out the pattern on the rug.

"Say you love me," groans Grey Suit.

Say it. Say, "I love you," to Grey Suit.

His eyes are shut tight with concentration. He pants with his tongue sticking out. "Say it again," he tells you, so you open your mouth and say it again. But you don't love Grey Suit, obviously. Hope you're not giving him the wrong impression.

Feel Grey Suit moving up and up inside you, the rebellion of your organs, the slope of your shoulders because you're slouching again, a waterfall of blood behind your eyeballs. Feel the slow turn of your stomach, full of smoothie and mimosa and pancake. Feel your heartache and your headache and your nose stuffing up one last time and the air passing through your chest wetly, in a full-blown rattle. Focus on your rising internal tide, half-digested junk working its way back toward your throat. Know that you are definitely about to throw up on your first-ever client.

Grey Suit is still jiggling away, moaning "oh God oh God oh God" and huffing so you know he's close. Clamber off of him and make a run for the bathroom

while he bellows, "What? Come back. Jesus." Ignore him. Locate and embrace the toilet bowl. Think about how sorry you are for everything, for calling your mom a dumb bitch the day you moved out, throwing a full Coke can at your dad. For saying you'd become a Satanist just to see the looks on their faces. For bothering your ex-boyfriend every few hours of the day without fail, even now, even a month after he asked you to leave him alone. For showing up late to work all the time and stiffing Jay on those shifts. For being so conspicuously helpless that the people you live with feel compelled to feed you. For drinking too much.

Hover above the bleach-scented toilet water and feel your place in the universe. You're tiny and you'll never matter, so don't take your problems so seriously. Hurl in spasms that wrack from head to toe, empty yourself of all the stuff that was weighing you down. You're dredging up the muck and abandoning it here, in this apartment, in DC, an appropriate city in which to leave your garbage. You're a new void, a daughter of the God who isn't there, a check no man can cash. And you're ripshit and fucked in every possible sense of the word, and this is not your day. You're well and truly lost, you're wandering, but save some perspective—nothing is forever. Not even this.

THIRD PLACE POETRY IN THE 2016 SUMMER CONTEST

A searing yet crystallized retention of a fraught bond between two people. "My lover's teeth--vinegar yellow"--when I read that, I carried that image with me for weeks--it has not left me since.

- Ocean Vuong

Epilogue: Lend Me Your Teeth By: Alabama Stone

My lover's teeth—vinegar yellow.
Wet and shining like bleach.
I prefer the perverse:
the oil from your hands,
a cheap magic trick,
muscadines or mescaline,
I need something to change your mind.

In the end, the earth eats us all.
Death is just a matter of dirt.
Slug stomp and I sobbed & sobbed.
Bring me wet earth
to chew. Granma's
chinaware to bite down on.
A corn cob or steel pipe.
Break your watch on my back
molars; lend me your teeth.

for Diane Seuss

FIRST PLACE NONFICTION IN THE 2016 SUMMER CONTEST

I admire this lyric essay for its seamless ability to move from the past into a latter-day assessment of the past and back again, over and over. Its counterpoint of the traumatic past with the welcome retrospective assures the reader the speaker has survived with intelligence and discernment intact. This is what Phillip Lopate calls the “double-consciousness” that sets the essay apart from fiction. It’s also beautifully written on the language level and tightly focused on the form level. - Debra Monroe

Ghosted Image of a Naked Girl By: Anne Riesenberg

Summer comes I visit my sister she
moved east to live on a commune I fly
alone watch fields flicker green under
the wings she meets my plane we
head north the car smells briny wet
like the sea the road up the coast gets
smaller then smaller twists past
humps of granite stark clapboarded
churches tiny cemeteries furry with
moss white houses perch dark-
shuttered in yards strewn with stones
water sparkles across fields full of
daisies the sky gets bluer the land
more and more bare wind tangles our
hair I can’t believe how happy I feel

We stop at a farmhouse gray with red
trim my sister’s boyfriend G and his
mother R father Z bring in my
suitcase six fifths of gin we bought on
the way the house feels lived in
layered with activities things in the
kitchen a slate sink under a window
that looks to the sea through another a
barn tattered flag peace sign up near
the peak the walls look like a collage
Jimi Hendrix posters newspaper
clippings tide charts local maps

In the living room a fireplace two
mustard couches a bookcase
crammed full *I’m OK You’re OK*
Rodale’s Organic Gardening Das
Kapital The Joy of Sex in the dining
room a mahogany cabinet full of
surprisingly delicate teacups two
large tapestry portraits one of Lenin
the other of Mao I follow my sister
upstairs my room has a view of the
garden a pond shaped like a comma
the field beyond leads to the shore the
tide is out mud glistens like chocolate
mousse

Fog every morning often all day mist
wraps the trees cool tendrils blend
land into soft shades of gray when the
sun burns through every leaf every
blade of grass shimmers I want to live
in the light stay outside as much as I
can mow lawn help on the boat hang
laundry weed vegetables gather the
eggs the hens nip my hands peck my
heels I love their bobbing heads
scurrying tangerine feet I find kittens
sleeping tucked into hay they smell
like warm milk suckle my shirt up a
hill past wind-scoured trees mica
flakes raspberry bushes silver puddles
caught in the rocks the ocean is
everywhere open and blue my body
unfolds like a fan

*

Ideas poke holes in the splendor turn
on tune in drop out back-to-the-land
free love non-monogamy self-
sufficiency anti-establishment of the
people for the people all woven
together into the farm as the younger
sister of a commune member my role
is tangential still I am expected to
follow the rules we meet after
breakfast to plan out the day discuss
the new society under construction
Z's point of view directs the vision he
owns the land his forcefulness draws
people in

Non-monogamy dominates the
rhetoric the word *fuck* wanting
describing demanding saturates the
conversation G's comments echo his
father's potential new members nod
their heads ask for details R stays
mostly silent unfazed I wonder how
she can stand it sometimes my sister
tries to intervene *she's just a kid can
we give it a rest* no one complies

*

July brings a fresh shipment of *Shakin' Jamaican* pot much stronger than what I know G has friends over one night pulls out his guitar pretends to be Jimi I brush my hair out upside-down wear the halter-top I made in HomEc purple ribbon around my neck I am a red-eyed confection the party turns into a mini-Woodstock out on the lawn I smoke too much weed walk back and forth in my triangle of cloth try to find a spot of ground where I don't feel dumb men don't eye me like prey

*

A few nights later I'm too high again Z makes a second pitcher of martinis takes off his clothes puts on what he calls his *orgy robe* ties it too loose I go up to my room lay face down on my bed I want to fall asleep without interruption but there's no lock on my door not one in the house Z equates privacy with bourgeois notions of property rights goes on about shared rather than exclusive access to assets

I can hear people talking in the kitchen Z shuffling around knocking things over yelling *motherfucker* into his off-key rendition of *American Pie* the bed feels lumpy under my bones my lips make a sucking sound when I pull them apart try to swallow my throat feels like a desert eyes pummeled with sand the room spins I see Bedouins camels trudging a caravan of tents I wish I had a glass of water a piece of the bread we made before lunch fresh from the oven with butter and cinnamon sugar I'd ground

the wheat berries by hand punched
down the dough kneaded it until my
arms ached put it into six pans six
loaves of heaven

The nightgown I bought at the church
sale sticks to my chest the pattern is
faded almost not there but I like the
lace at the neck the way it sits like
butterfly wings on my skin – skin –
skin is problematic there's too much
of it too much attention paid to it we
bathe in the pond every day small
hard slivers of soap thin towels frayed
the size of dishcloths water fresh
smooth rusty brown swimming in the
pond is like floating in a cup of tea
leaf sediment from the oak trees
permeates every drop clings to the
fine hairs close to my skin the downy
covering never seen if I rolled on a
piece of paper I'd leave a slight
impression a ghosted image of a
naked girl

Z likes to swim out and stand on a
rock when he bathes he calls it the
Fucking Rock chuckles when he says
it like it's a cute little joke he is a
gross old man graying body rumped
gut I don't want to see his penis
anyone's for that matter but I've been
challenged – *don't be so uptight* –
about the skinny dipping and I think
maybe I'll feel more grown up maybe
participation will save me

He watches me swim wash my face
shampoo my hair calls to me from the
rock *wash my back will you* and it
sounds like a question but feels like a
demand and his eyes linger on my
breasts and I swim farther away and
he keeps looking and I can feel him
pulling me in and I end up on the rock
next to his long hairy legs with the

soap in my hand and my stomach in
my mouth and watch my fingers
move back and forth across his
sagging freckled skin

*

I shift around on the bed stare into the
bones of the roof inhale a century of
rising heat numbing cold asphalt
shingles tarry and baked I open the
window June bugs scrabble the
cobwebby screen the pond trembles a
silver streak under the moon I can't
sleep the door creaks open I knew that
it would most nights it does it's D it
could be worse he looks like a
lumberjack dark beard flannel shirt
doesn't swear I've refused every one
of his advances still he keeps asking
hey are you up – what do you think I
try to sound annoyed how about I lie
down next to you – no we've been
through this before – I won't do
anything we can just cuddle there's no
harm in that is there – I don't want to
– but I'm lonely – I'm sorry you're
lonely compassion is how I survive
I'm only 13 don't you want somebody
older – but you're so pretty do you
know how pretty you are

I can't decode my own sensations
deep habits of accommodation ache
to be cool I am sweaty cold numb all
I can do is talk my way through last
time it took over an hour before he
gave up and left nobody will come if
I yell finally he leaves sulking
dejected it has taken all I have to keep
his hands off my body his mouth from
my neck I feel hollow gray like a husk
corn stalks cicadas I am too tired to
cry still tears leak out

*

In the morning D Z and another man
talk about me while they eat breakfast
I sit on the bench under the window
and stare at my eggs *any luck – nope*
– all hail the Ice Queen then Z starts
in on my breasts *have you seen her tits*
they're pointy like ICBMs lights his
pipe leans back in his chair sends
smoke streaming slowly from either
side of his mouth *some day* he says *I*
guarantee it I go out the door ask
grass sun trees sky to rectify what I
am losing what is already lost

Spinning Jinnies

By: Matt Tompkins

Six months from now in Odsburg, Pennsylvania—after several rounds of arduous lobbying by OdsWellMore (local pharmaceuticals manufacturer, major employer, and claimer of responsibility for Odsburg’s meager economic prosperity)—all pharmaceutical testing and sales regulations will be provisionally lifted. Within the village limits, prescriptions and even patents for all types of medication will be rendered unnecessary. Following a brief period of confusion and distrust, market activity will erupt.

The number and variety of medications flooding the market will be staggering. Of course one will be able to find the old standbys—pain killers, antidepressants, antibiotics—but these will be joined by a slew of additional compounds only the lab rats will have tried. No prescriptions or physicians’ notes will be necessary, with everything over-the-counter and available at the nearest gas station or corner market, while supplies last.

The ethical debates will be fierce. Some will tout the change as a beacon of a new chemical utopia. Others will tell cautionary tales of people going mad on unregulated drugs and killing or maiming friends, relatives and neighbors; or, if not that, then killing themselves with the untested toxic compounds. The municipal government, for its part, will decide to let the whole thing play out as a grand, libertarian experiment. The village councilmembers will fold their hands and utter in perfect unison, *Caveat emptor*. There will be murmurings that the mayor is an Adderall addict, but in truth his pockets (and the pockets of several influential councilmembers) will be thickly lined with cash from OdsWellMore’s coffers.

Two weeks after deregulation, a bearded ‘pharmacist’ (truthfully more like a bartender) will lean casually over the service counter of the Gas-’n’-Go minimart, resting his weight on his elbows, waiting for Agnes Blinn to make a decision.

Agnes, 26, bored and bemused, will stand close in front of the counter, wiggling her fingers, looking up at the overhead menu board.

Frog Whompers.

Clear Blue Skies.

Apple Brown Betties.

The names will be whimsical, evocative, but not terribly informative. She will consider asking for a recommendation. She will consider turning around and leaving empty-handed. But her feet will remain planted, and she will continue to scan the list.

Okay, Agnes will say. I’ll try the ‘Spinning Jinnies.’

The pharmacist will duck into the maze of bins and canisters behind the counter, and after five minutes of rustling, scraping, and tapping, he will return with a small white paper bag.

Twenty bucks, he’ll say.

Most things will be twenty bucks. Most business will be in cash. Despite deregulation, people will feel uneasy about creating paper trails tracking their purchases.

Twenty bucks, Agnes will echo.

She will hand the pharmacist, whose name tag says Bill, a bill.

Receipt? Bill will ask.

Agnes will shake her head and exit carrying the little white bag. She will take it to a neighborhood park a few blocks away, sit down on a bench, open the bag, and lift out a small brown glass bottle. She will reflect on the fact that it would probably be safer to try a new drug in the safety of her home, but she will weigh that against the pull of the outdoors, the comfortable earthy expanse, and will decide to stay on the bench.

Agnes will then click open the white cap on the little brown bottle and shake two capsules into her palm. With no instructions, contraindications or dosages, she will decide that two seems like a reasonable number, and pop them in her mouth. She will swig her water, swallow and wait.

For a few minutes nothing will happen. Then, slowly, the leaves on a nearby sugar maple will start to spin, catching the wind like thousands of little pinwheels, picking up speed until the whole tree becomes one enormous whirling mass. Agnes will shake her head and the blur of green will burn a windsock trail behind it. She will turn her gaze from the tree and find it is not just the sugar maple spinning. The blades of grass by her feet will be tiny flagellate turbines, which spin separately and in tandem, creating a pulsating, undulating carpet of green. Agnes will then blink, and another layer

will weave into the mosaic. She will sense not just the leaves and the grass spinning, but the cells of the plants themselves vibrating, jumping from their places and refusing to stand still. As she watches, the green of the grass will bleed into the deeper green of the leaves; the dirt-brown of the path will seep into the bark-brown of the maple trunk; and her own clothes and skin will throb and swirl, right down to the blue buttons on her yellow felt coat.

Through all of this, Agnes will breathe. She will breathe, and the scene around her will breathe as well. She will draw the scene down into her lungs, and the scenery will absorb her in return. Eventually, there will be only breath and swirling color and Agnes' abiding awareness. And then there will just be awareness itself—no more Agnes. At that moment all the weight of human existence will evaporate. At that moment all self-conscious murmurings will dissolve into the humming of chimes. And at the very next moment after that, the Spinning Jinnies will wear off and Agnes Blinn will be back on the park bench being herself again.

Agnes will continue to breathe—to feel the gentle rise and fall of her abdomen, chest, shoulders—and she will realize that she is not actually, or not fully, herself again. She will have left some piece, some portion of her worldly weight, in the swirl of colors and vibrations. In doing so, she will have absorbed some lingering magic of the enveloping, vibratory whirl. Slowly, quietly, almost imperceptibly, she will rise from the bench and walk home.

Three days after her transformative pharmaceutical experience, Agnes Blinn will go permanently blind. OdsWellMore will deny responsibility for the outcome, as they will with all drug-related incidents. They will insist that when regulations and controls were lifted, all adult citizens of Odsburg implicitly took upon themselves all risk of injury stemming from any substances they might choose to consume—all prior contracts, guarantees, and claims of safety, null and void. Agnes will nevertheless file a suit against OdsWellMore and will settle out of court for an undisclosed sum. She will be seen frequently thereafter walking in the village with a seeing-eye dog named Rufus. Observers will frequently remark that they move as if one. And Agnes, her eyes unreadable behind dark glasses, will respond: But don't we all?

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