



Chestnut Review

VOLUME 2 NUMBER 3 WINTER 2021

FOR STUBBORN ARTISTS

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COVER ART

Cynthia Yatchman, “Eta”

Print, April 2020

“Eta” is a little unconventional in that latex house paint is used. The paint is very “wet.” There are long “strings” of paint that are created easily with the flick of the brush. The paint drips off the brush in a satisfying way and gives a very gestural component to the work. The first stage in this painting was watering down the latex, applying it much like watercolour for the background, then a series of prints were laid on top. The image itself is an olive branch, which we know to signify peace, however in some cultures it represents hardiness, and hardiness can certainly be of value during these Covid times. In addition, many of us gain strength and resilience through nature.

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FROM THE EDITORS

Introduction

Welcome to our Winter 2021 issue.

Whether winter is a snowy season or a rainy one where you live, perhaps you, like us, find a sense of contemplation in it, the itch of anticipation as we wait for the dormant world to renew itself. Perhaps we, ourselves, are like winter, quietly growing, hibernating even, changing in ways others cannot see immediately. In this, perhaps literature sustains us in our dormancy, always assuring that change is possible, that discovery is available to those with patient eyes. May you find words in this issue that meet you where you are, that fuel you, that challenge your path, and inspire your journey toward renewal.

Perhaps the first thing you noticed about this issue was its length. Alongside our regular contents, we are so pleased to share the winning pieces of our first annual Stubborn Writers contest with three prizes each in short fiction, flash, and poetry. A huge thank you to our guest judges **Siamak Vossoughi** (short fiction and flash) and **Mary Buchinger** (poetry) and to all the contestants for making our first contest a success. We enjoyed reading your work immensely. Siamak and Mary had a tough job, to be sure.

We hope you enjoy this issue. As always, keep creating. Keep being stubborn.

MAURYA KERR

FIRST PRIZE IN POETRY
2020 STUBBORN WRITERS CONTEST

The “C” of Tommy’s Abecedary, Had He Lived, Not Shot Dead At Fourteen

cusps on the verge of, as when laying a gleam in off-white ruffled sheets / frayed borders / in dawn light / no one word laying claim to the world / acrest, ready to unfurl / overflow like the rollercoaster / where time stilled / at the top fell quiet / at the top / the forever of seconds, two maybe three / heart-stopped high / so hushed / how are you so beautiful / before rush of blood and noise / before tissue plummeting back into the fullness of here / I am / here is my body next to yours / you sing / a gleam and laughing / oh beautiful femurs / all the goodness of this / dusk this life / take it furl it in to / our lungs our hearts our open mouths / the claret force of your tongue insisting / me insisting life / let it be long remember / us / as you straddle the *cusps* / look down at me, watching / you like the moon, lit / whisper in to me / *wait tommy wait / I’m coming.*

JEN ASHBURN

SECOND PRIZE IN POETRY
2020 STUBBORN WRITERS CONTEST

To Understand the Taste of Dirt

-After Yona Harvey

I must go back to my father’s long stride through the beehives, my grandfather’s descent into coal. It seems right to stop along the road and study the morning glories in the ditch. The day is humid with lust and my skin aches for it. The field ants sense this with their patterned searching, the morning glories with their ever-wanton reach. The dirt furrows out to the skyline, the corn pushing through like a goddamn birthright. To understand, I must go back to a simple fermenting hunger—the craving of nitrogen and sugar—and step into the chigger-rush of ancient weeds.

DAN REILLY

THIRD PRIZE IN POETRY
2020 STUBBORN WRITERS CONTEST

Dream an Emptiness

The faint trace though undergrowth was once a road to somewhere, to their place. It was a small village then. The people left and never returned along that passage by the homestead at Covey Hill, past the old schoolhouse, its loose clapboard walls still standing, a sapling grown from the crumpled chimney. A schoolhouse yet, in form and storied memory, though a century since books, students or teacher. Marion and Gerald ran with dogs down that lane, laughing and rolling about. Later, at dinner, the story of a previous dinner. George was there with a bottle of father's Chateau Laffitte. Torchlight flickered over the murmurs of Indo European, a toast to Egeria on the eve of her departure. She of the peregrinatio, a story known only from the torn scrap of a letter. A pilgrim himself, George put down that evening in words unfinished, having already begun, we know now, his own departure, the absence without leaving, his delirium of the I gone but he still there. Walk that path. At the river, sit in meaningless sunlight, stare at the water. Calm, doe-like, watch and wait for the day to go your way. Oh, Golden Fish! Speak to me, quotidian world.

SARA PIRKLE

FIRST PRIZE IN SHORT FICTION
2020 STUBBORN WRITERS CONTEST

Word Problems

Two trains depart different cities heading toward the same city at different speeds. Train A, carrying a woman, leaves Atlanta traveling 120 miles an hour. The next morning, Train B, carrying a man, leaves New York traveling 100 miles an hour. How long until these passengers crash into each other?

I knew he didn't love me, but maybe by the end he did. I thought I heard him say it once, but maybe I just imagined it. He did say his body liked my body. That I am sure he said. He put his cheek against my breast and breathed, *This is my favorite spot*. My fingers grazed his bare back and his skin flushed with goosebumps. A scatter of dark freckles dotted his neck. They were something else, those freckles, something sweet, like fireflies over a hushed grassy field, each so tiny that I'd see one and when my eyes traveled to the next, I'd lose sight of the first.

Of course we didn't want anyone to know what we were doing, and neither of us could pinpoint who started it, because when you started backtracking through the chain of events it easily could have been either of us. He made sure to sit by me at the welcome dinner, told me he'd read my book. The earnestness in his voice upended me. I kept

bumping into him the second day. Hiking the residency trails, taking coffee breaks at the same time. The next night, his suggestion we talk on his bed, my eagerness to do so. Then his hands were baby foxes chasing each other around my body, and I gave in to what I'd promised myself I'd never succumb to again. When it was over, and he was in his *favorite spot*, I said, *Who would be the worst person to find us like this?* He said, *I don't want to think about that.* Then he pushed me gently out of his bed, as if my leaving could erase the problem we'd just created.

I could have stopped then. I could have let that one night be the only time. But two nights later as I was passing his room, he pulled me in, and his hands were doing their work on me before the door was even closed. Later, we were lying on the sweaty sheets listening to his iPod and I said, *Play a song that reminds you of your mother*, and he scrolled until he found "To Love Somebody" by The Bee Gees. I rolled over to my side and he folded himself around me and said he could fall asleep like that. Then he nudged me out of his bed again.

Maybe he was trying to protect me. Maybe he was trying to protect himself. He definitely didn't love me. But his body liked my body. That I knew.

He set a thirty-minute limit our third time, as if restraint could breed fidelity. When we hit the thirty minutes, I said, *Are you kicking me out of your bed again?* He said, *I wasn't even thinking about it*, and I said, *Fifteen more minutes?* He said yes and I stayed two more hours.

Our first five nights together were like that, him pulling back the quilt on his bed, me lowering the window shade since he was on the first floor of the main house and we couldn't risk being seen from the yard. We'd scratch and

tickle and cradle and sigh so many times I couldn't tell which sounds were content, which were distraught, which were just tired cries of being torn between each other and the ones back home. I said, *I don't want to ruin your life.* I said, *I know I'm being selfish.* He said, *Look at me, I'm doing the same thing.* He said, *As long as this stays here, we're not doing anything wrong.*

We were entangled, legs entwined, arms around each other, my cheek against his heartbeat, his head resting on mine. *I'm going to fall asleep*, he said, so I squeezed him tighter and he nudged me out for a fifth time, not in a mean way, but in a way that said if I didn't leave that second, he wouldn't be able to stop himself from rearranging his life for me. I couldn't let him do that, but each time, it was harder for me to leave.

I said, *I wish it wasn't wrong, being this close to you.*

He said, *This is all I want – to be this close to you.*

That's when I lost my footing with him.

What is it about a man's trigger finger tracing your naked collarbone from your shoulder to your throat then down between your breasts that makes you fall into yourself? When you try to think of the word for this, you can't come up with one. It's something you feel happening before it even happens, some mysterious tingle in the air, a foreshadowing that something bigger than you will throw your body into deep water and there's nothing you can do to stop it. You've felt it before with other people, but each time it feels unnameable, beyond language. It's like balancing on the front of an inflatable raft and knowing before you hit the rapids that you're going to tumble out, and sure enough when the raft hits the first rock, you lose your grip and bounce right into the icy river. You try to

remember your training, try to recall your preparation for this moment, but you're being pulled under and in your panic of trying to come up for air, your head keeps hitting the raft's bottom. The only way to survive is to submit to the current, let it hold you under, and there's a peace that soaks into your skin once you allow the river to do what it's going to do. That's how you feel when you meet this young man you weren't expecting to meet. You lie on your back and let this river carry you through foamy white rapids full of jagged boulders because you have no other choice, but the whole time you're hoping someone will catch you and pull you out of yourself, easy as a fisherman lifts trout from a stream.

A standard pressure cooker can boil liquids at 120 degrees Celsius. When the regulator knob on the lid is pushed, steam escapes through a tiny vent. A woman believes it is necessary to press this knob from time to time so that the pot does not erupt. A man believes the pot is fine if it is less than 2/3 full. How long until a poet uses this metaphor to justify an affair?

We both had our book projects and halfway through our time together, I started worrying that he was tolerating me when he needed to be writing. I didn't know how to ask if I was bothering him without sounding needy, so I refrained from seeking him out in his studio, and when I passed him in a hall and felt the urge to touch him, I'd hold back, feeling desire pulse through me like my own heart-beat. Other times, I'd see him leave a room, then I'd find the chair he'd just abandoned and sit in it, and inhale his cologne lingering in the cushion. The peril of him walking back in and finding me there shamed me.

One afternoon we were hiking, and he reached out his hand to hold mine. We walked a measure, our fingers interlaced like a couple of teenagers. Then he wrestled his hand back and swiveled to glance over his shoulder, surprised at his own slip into reckless behavior, a public display that would reveal more to the world than if we'd stripped naked and streaked through the main house. I was just as guilty. At lunch, my pretend-to-pick-lint-off-his-shirt-just-to-touch-him touch said everything about me. If nothing else, our coming together confirmed the law of physics that two people who want to touch will always find a way, even when nothing can happen. Even when everything can happen.

And at night he was all kinds of everything. I wanted to memorize every detail, so as I inhabited each moment, I stood outside it as well, noting how his hands felt knotted in my hair, pulling fistfuls until my chin pointed to the ceiling, his mouth gasping against my neck. When he pushed me against the wall, I tried describing it to myself to preserve it, but I kept losing track, that part of my brain responsible for language surrendering to the tender scratch of his fingernail on my thigh as he glided his hand between my legs.

After each encounter, an English professor records the details of lovemaking in a spiral-bound notebook. The acts become no more than the sum of the letters in the words she uses. Given what you know about this woman's compulsion to compartmentalize, calculate how many consonants and vowels she will employ to describe the PhD student sleeping beneath her.

Once, we were lying there in the dark and he told me his middle name and I said his whole name out loud just to feel it in my mouth. His full name sounded upper class to me, pretentious even, but in a way that thrilled me because I grew up on a dirt road in a small town in South Carolina, so holding this well-bred guy in my arms made me shiver. And when I told him my middle name, he echoed it over and over to the top of my head, his breath warm in my hair. *It's very Southern*, I said. *My Southern Belle*, he said.

The next night he said, *Tell me about your childhood*, and it all spilled out in a breathless rush: crying on my first day of kindergarten, and the green bath towel I slept with, and the matchbox car I carried in my pocket until I lost it. I couldn't stop talking, and he just lay there listening, and the less he said, the more I confessed: teasing a girl in 4th grade who couldn't read, playing doctor with the boy down the road, giving a jock I hated a handjob at an 8th grade pool party. *You're good at telling stories*, he whispered, drifting to sleep.

After revealing so much, I began looking for things to despise in him so when it came time to say goodbye it would be easier. If he'd been a disgusting eater like the loud-chewing men I'd grown up around, I could hate him. At dinner I watched for him to slurp his carrot soup or laugh with hunks of meat wedged in his teeth, but he took small bites, held the fork in his left hand and used his knife to push potatoes on to the back of the fork. He lifted each bite calmly to his mouth in a custom that revealed his breeding and made my own table manners look crude.

Here's what I found to despise: his hipster pocketwatch. That he said *horny* instead of *turned on*, *fingering* instead of *touching*. How childish he could be, jumping to slap the

doorframe whenever he passed through a tall doorway.

X and Y are lying in bed. How many minutes until Y says something X finds embarrassing? How long until X decides this could never work? Will Y ever realize what he thinks are the right words are actually the wrong words?

Always there was this wall between us, this age difference. Maybe I felt it more than he did. Sometimes, I could pretend it wasn't there at all, then I'd feel it with my hands, rigid as his stomach muscles, and I was already too soft in places I didn't want to be soft in. But he liked my soft edges. At least, I think he did. He was so careful with them, the way you're careful with a chipmunk you catch in your mudroom, cupping it in your hands and setting it gently in the garden. He took his time with me, knew how to slow himself down even though he wanted to go fast, like when you're running downhill, how tempting it is to really surrender and allow gravity to torpedo you to the bottom, but you hold back, force your muscles to feel every footstep, the heel rolling to the ball then rising up, the other heel rolling to the ball, the tension in your hips and thighs like thick ropes twisted around a wooden fence.

Halfway through the residency we went to an art gallery in the city and I was feeling agitated, aware in my bones that my time with him was so finite. We were looking at a bench made from kitchen utensils and he asked if I would ever consider starting over. I said I was too old to start over, and he said 39 wasn't too old, if I went for an older man. *You're attractive, you're smart, you're stable. You have a lot to offer*. I wanted him to mean I had a lot to offer him, but I knew he meant I had a lot to offer some-

one else, not someone still in his twenties, someone who wanted kids, which I couldn't give him. But why should I have even thought about children with him? We'd only been sleeping together a week. No one talks about having babies after just a week.

When my husband hadn't heard from me in days, he called and yelled for an hour. He was suspicious, of course, who wouldn't be? I stood in the dark kitchen of the main house, trying to reassure him that everything was fine, but he was too drunk on his own insecurity to listen. After we hung up, I pulled a juice glass from the cabinet and it slipped and dropped to the floor. My young man heard the crash down the hall and found me standing barefoot among the shattered glass. I said, *I broke a glass. I don't know what to do.* And what I meant was, I don't know why I keep breaking things and expecting other people to clean my messes. He said, *Don't move.* He put on shoes and found a broom and swept up all the pieces. Later in his bed, he said, *Tell me all the good things about your husband.* Maybe he wanted to remind me that this thing between us wasn't permanent. Maybe since I'd only told him the bad stuff, he hated the man I lived with, and he didn't want to feel that way.

That night while I was holding him, I said, *Do you think of me as someone so much older than you?* And he said *No*, but he hesitated for just a second and it seemed he was only saying no because he didn't want the age difference to matter. *I haven't really thought about it*, he said, *but yeah, I think of us being the same age.* I knew he didn't mean it. And with his head on my chest and my fingers stroking his hair, I felt for the first time since we'd started this thing that I was holding a boy in my arms, not a man, and

I didn't like the way that felt.

The next day we jogged at East Rock Park, and I kept pace with him at first. I told him about running laps in high school P.E. and how I beat the boys in the weightlifting class, and he high-fived me in his charming, little kid way. When we reached the bridge, he pulled ahead and turned to look at me, and I said, *Please, run at your own pace*, and I meant it. I didn't want to hold him back. Jogging behind him, I watched his shoulders under his white athletic shirt, his small tight muscles flexing, his hard, round calves and perfect posture. He glided the way I used to glide when I was in my twenties, when I could run for miles without stopping. He got so far ahead I couldn't see him anymore and I hated how slow I was, hated he still had his entire thirties just waiting for him to make as many mistakes as I'd made in mine. I hated him for reminding me that I was a different person than I was ten years earlier, and I loved him for it too, loved his athleticism and sweat, how he had the energy to climb up a boulder on the side of the trail and perch there like a coyote, waiting for me to catch up. And I hated that he was perched on that boulder, hated his impulsivity, hated how easily he could elongate the distance between us.

If a woman leaves a man's room two hours after midnight each night, and he sleeps at least eight hours before they see each other the next morning, how many hours is he available to her over the course of fourteen days? Take into account: on average she wakes three hours before he does, and she wakes thinking of him and she also dreams about him in the final hour of the five hours she sleeps each night.

Even before it was over, I was already trying to add up the price. Sometimes, it felt like he cost too much. Other times, when I tried adding things up, he wasn't enough. I was holding him, tallying the hours we had left—four more days, three more nights besides the one we were in. Then again, it wasn't really four whole days because his train was early Monday afternoon, so make it three and a half days left. But I had to subtract my poetry reading on the college campus Friday night, so that was another hour, plus the cocktail hour before it and dinner with the other professors afterward that he wasn't invited to, so that was at least four or five hours gone right there. And he had volunteered to run a workshop with local high schoolers on Saturday morning, and he might grab lunch at the Thai restaurant with them, he said, but he'd be back by 2 p.m. So another half day would be lost, and we were down to two days and change. But there was also the Saturday night low country boil and we'd have to sit apart so nobody would think we were sharing this thing we were sharing, and though we'd both be under that park pavilion, we'd be at opposite ends of the picnic table, listening to the other writers drone on about Derrida while their fingers tore apart overcooked shrimp. Each shrimp tail thrown on the ground was another minute we could be together wasted.

Lying in his bed, running the numbers while he slept, I counted the disappointments, desperate for them to negate my lust. The group dinner at an oyster bar after the art gallery, when he sat as far from me as he could, deeply involved in a conversation about parietal art in France where he'd spent the previous summer. I wore a silky green dress. He didn't seem to notice. I ate oysters for the first time that night and they tasted like the sea, salty

and oniony, and I swallowed frosty gulps of chardonnay between each bite and felt light-headed and aroused and wanted him next to me. I'd been in his bed just the night before, and now I couldn't catch his eye when I walked past his chair to the ladies' room.

Or the time I said, *I'm not a bad person*, and he didn't reply. He was putting on pajamas while I sat on his bed. I'd just had that terrible fight with my husband. I wanted him to say, Of course you're not. Maybe he thought he didn't have to say it, that cleaning up my shattered juice glass implied it. Maybe he thought I was a bad person. Or maybe he realized he hadn't known me long enough to know what kind of person I was. *I'm not going to be a punching bag for anyone's insecurities*, I said. *I'm tired of being told what to do, tired of being treated like someone's child*. When I finished speaking, he drew my face to his and pressed his forehead to mine, like our foreheads were kissing. But he never agreed that I was not a bad person, so I said it again: *I'm not a bad person*.

A woman jogs a three-mile loop through the park. She runs the first mile at 6 mph, the second mile at 5.7 mph, and the third mile at 5.5 mph. What is the average speed it will take for her to clear her mind of the man she may never stop loving? How far into her daily run will she get before her grief turns into a physical barrier? At what point will the ground turn to quicksand, until she slogs to a bench and begins sobbing uncontrollably? How many strangers pushing toddlers in strollers will ask if she needs help?

I told him early on, our third night I think, that I'd never run out of things to say to him. A week later, I was tired

of hearing myself speak, tired of waiting for his reply. That happens even when you only have two weeks with another person. And you go home thinking if you ran out of things to say to him, then there's no one in the world you could talk to forever. But you keep remembering the night after you got off the phone with your husband, how horrible you were feeling about the hurt husband, the broken glass, and this younger man walking into the room and crossing the moonlit kitchen and wrapping you in his arms, as if he could absorb some of your despair into his muscles, sponge it off you just a little, and it worked, you could feel the pain and anger draining, not *into* him exactly, but *out* of you. It wasn't romance you felt in that moment, it was compassion. Maybe compassion was all you ever wanted from him.

On our last night, he was changing a lightbulb in a ceiling fan and I pulled out my camera. *Do you ever try to remember something without taking a picture?* he asked. How could I say without sounding desperate that I had catalogued every facet of him: the way his fingers looked typing an email, the way his hair curled behind his ear like a question mark, how his beard felt tickling my navel. *Sure*, I said. I wanted to say, I think about you before I go to sleep, I lie there replaying every laugh, every eyebrow raise, every insignificant moment that alone would mean nothing but piled together mean everything, or at least something. But I didn't say that because the next day we'd be saying goodbye for good, so why say anything?

Two trains depart the same city at the same time. Train A carries a woman. Train B, a man. If all matter in the universe is recycled, and every passenger is made of tree dust or pow-

dered rock, is there anything in a man that isn't in a woman? When a younger man pulls a woman on top of him, presses into her, says there is no position he'd rather be in, could this have happened any time? Could it never happen again?

When I got home, I compulsively made word banks out of each conversation, a column for nouns, a column for verbs, and so on. I compiled these lists in a pale green steno pad, the kind I used in 10th grade English class to write down the daily grammar rule from the board. The spectacular words he used were worth more—his middle name, for example, and what he called his grandfather's boat, and what he murmured into my neck the last night I shared his bed. Other words could be discarded easily: articles, prepositions, his girlfriend's name. I thought if I could distill the entire relationship into one page, just the words I wanted to remember, I could pull the page out on quiet mornings and read it over and over. If I could perfect this list, I could contain him on one sheet of paper.

But you can't just delegate a man to a sheet of paper and only think of him when it's convenient. A week after it ends, you're reading a magazine in an empty coffee shop in Atlanta and notice a design someone scratched into the wooden table with a key—an 8-pointed star like a compass. The etching reminds you of his pocket watch. That afternoon, long fingers of sunlight stretch between the cars in the parking lot, and you imagine him sitting in his apartment in Brooklyn, a book on his lap, the dog nuzzling his hand with her large black nose. The way he smiled when he talked about his dog was a miracle.

Or weeks later, you hear college students laughing in the hall outside your office and you remember the time

you made a joke and he turned to you with that grin of his, that grin you were always gunning for, and no one else was around and he threw his weight against you for a hug and he knocked you off balance so you took a step back but he kept hugging, which made you both start giggling, and you kept taking steps backwards until you'd hug-walked across the entire room, and by then you were both gasping with laughter, barely able to stand, god, he made you feel like a kid. It was the only time you let go before he did.

Even a month after your separation, you wake feeling him still inside you, as if he has pushed you out of your own body the way he pushed you out of his bed those times. He takes over, stretches his arms all the way down your arms, spreads his fingers into yours, pushes his legs through to your toes, fills you the way a hard-sleeping man can fill a bed with his whole body, vinelike and spread-eagled and greedy, incapable of giving up what he wants. You want to get back into your life, but you begin to believe this ache will never leave.

You stare at that photo you took of him changing the lightbulb. He's standing on a chair, and his gray t-shirt is lifted just enough to reveal a strip of flat stomach and the gray waistband of his boxer briefs. You can't bring yourself to add up the number of times you felt the heat that radiated from his torso with your bare hands, because you know how the human heart works, how difficult it is to ever calculate a sum you can afford.

TEAL FITZPATRICK

SECOND PRIZE IN SHORT FICTION
2020 STUBBORN WRITERS CONTEST

Underneath the Ficus Tree

\ Shed; shedding \ transitive verb 1. : to rid oneself of, temporarily or permanently, as superfluous or unwanted 2. : to give off, discharge, or expel from the body of a plant or animal: such as a. : to eject, slough off, or lose as part of the normal process of life b. : to discharge usually gradually especially as a part of a pathological process¹

Disgust turns to curiosity more quickly than I might have expected; the blister spills out over her lip-line and onto the chin, changes shape ever so slightly as she speaks. I lean in toward the shiny bubble, feigning interest in her speech, watching the surface glisten as the light refracts off her face. I can stare, as she has turned her gaze away from mine, and stare I do, fully entranced by the glorious unpleasantness of it all. Four years I've worked with Karen P., and in the hundreds of Tuesdays from nine to nine fifty-five am that we sit across from one another I've never seen her with a fever blister, and I can find fever blisters on faces before a face even knows one's about to erupt. It's true we see in others the things we find most

¹ "Shed." Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary

repulsive about ourselves.

I begin to chew, just a little bit at first, on the lower-right part of my own lip. I imagine an itch, a tiny piece of dry skin just needing to come off, to make the lip perfect: no mars, no blisters, no flakes. My bite does not go deep, and a thin layer pulls off easily and I roll the tiny bit around in my mouth, still nodding and listening, still providing a perfectly professional façade of care. The skin gathers into a tiny ball as I tongue it, a little piece of me disappears down my throat when I swallow. No big deal. Just a little skin.

*

This shedding happened so subtly that it took some time to realize the import of it all. The shedding of a snake seems so quick and complete and meaningful, leaving behind a skin, and so putting down that part of a life. Leaving ghosts of self behind for others to find. I wonder if snakes find that funny or scary. And for us humans, our reptile brain covered over with layers of dura mater and a legacy of replacing mystery with scientific fact, the first shedding happens almost invisibly. I itch that spot on my left forearm during Ashley T.'s session and feel a few small peels of skin coming away under my fingernails. I exfoliate in the shower, keep exfoliating, more and more exfoliating. I wonder how I became so dehydrated and drink more water. Yet no matter the water intake, no matter the applications of lotion, the peeling continues. I schedule the next available appointment at my dermatologist, six weeks out, and continue to scrub and moisturize, showing up at my own office in long-sleeve shirts and feeling a little shinier

than usual. No one seems to notice.

*

Every weekday, my patients come and sit on a white leather couch, next to and underneath the ficus tree. Most come once a week, some twice a week when things are really heavy, some every-other week when they are ready to go but not ready to say goodbye. We have our rhythms, our schedules, our ebbs and flows. The ficus tree sits to one side of the couch that patients typically use, and so for most of my day I see each person not as a solitary being, but a beautiful creature shaded by the outstretched arms of the tree. I only realize that the tree is a central figure for me, a peripheral one for them, after several expressed surprise upon noticing it was there after several months or even years in therapy.

Under the ficus tree today, Mike S. speaks about climbing out of his car on a bridge, looking over the edge at the dark and churning water, and seeing an embrace in the depths. *I know it could feel terrifying going down* he said, *but it was so clear to me, in that moment, that once I broke the surface, it would be only love underneath. The water promised to hold me.*

Under the ficus tree today, Ashley R., who prefers to go by Ash, shares an ordinary story about an ordinary conversation in an ordinary coffee shop as tears run down both of her cheeks. *Affective incongruency*, I tell myself to remember for my session note. With her in the room, though, I feel her tears as two streams of connection, as invitation toward something that does not yet have words, might not ever have words, but allows me to feel these

layers beneath. We are quiet together. One last piece of subcutaneous tissue, one that connects my lower back and abdomen, melts off me and settles into the space around my hips in the chair, loosened by the depth of her half-owned experience.

*

Although it took months, I think of my slow loss of dermis, the thinning of skin until I was translucent, as all one shedding. The next few sheds were more like dissolvings, and certain parts began to melt away, take up less space, disappear. Losing entire anatomical systems seems a biological and physiological impossibility, but here I am. Once the dermis was gone everything seemed to move more quickly, more aggressively, more fatally and yet I did not die.

The bones dissolved. The entire skeletal system dissolved in less than a day, and this was the only time that I felt true fear. I maintained my therapeutic neutrality as my tibia, patella, humerus, ulna, clavicle, all began to soften, then felt tiny particles melt away as if each piece was an Alka-Seltzer tab finding a new form in the atmosphere of the room. I have been puzzled by the lack of concern from my patients about my deteriorating appearance, but Rachel R. comes in today and she always has something to say about my looks. Rachel will comment on my newest transformation, surely will notice when I do not cross or uncross my legs, or rise to adjust the ancient, failing heater.

But Rachel has other things on her mind: she hasn't been able to stop thinking about last week and the fact

that I hadn't laughed, hadn't seemed to think it was funny at all when she told that story about her girlfriend's antics at the bar. And that had really gotten her thinking about just how often she tells her life as a story, looking for the punchline, looking for the joke to take the edge off it all. She had been pissed, she said, that I hadn't reacted at all. (It's hard to react without a face, I thought). But this was a real shift, Rachel went on. She had started tracking her speech that week, noticing when she was about to go in for the joke, about to put a spin on the sad stories, about to make light of the things that hurt. *It had been a hard week, she said, sad really. But felt like getting toward something real. So, thanks.* As she leaves the room, I instinctively try to rise to fully close the door. A surge of energy moves through my now-exposed belly, and I can almost feel a crackling run through the nerves that still seem to connect electric impulses even though my spine has disappeared. My brain hurts. There is nothing to do but rest for a while.

*

Karen P. is on the couch, nylon-cased legs drawn in at the knees, commuting sneakers splayed out hip-distance on the floor so her lower legs look like a triangle as she leans in toward me. It must be Tuesday morning. *I'll never forget that morning, she begins, when the letter came and....* Karen stopped living, really, three years ago. I can tell you her story just as she tells it here, over and over. I make a note to add "repetition compulsion" to Karen's chart. The story always begins with *I'll never forget* because truth be told, she never stopped living it. No one seems to under-

stand Karen's suffering. Three years ago, a letter from the IRS arrived, informing Karen that she had underpaid her federal taxes, that a discrepancy from a 1099 form meant that she still owed \$11,327.00, which she could pay in full, or in installments. Karen broke down, reading that letter. It wasn't that she could not make the payment. Industrious Karen had started saving little by little years ago and could and did promptly pay the balance in full. No, the financial burden was hard but manageable, Karen said. The real injury was the letter itself, the tone that Karen could hear emanating through the stock language on the page. *You tried to trick us* she understood it to say. *You tried to trick us, and you didn't get away with it. And now you know that we know that you are bad. A bad and sick woman. A disgusting little pig.*

*

Mary cleans the offices, and she does a bang-up job. Before I became stuck to my chair, I only saw the after-effects of her work: the empty trashcans, the lines on the carpet left by her vacuum which she clearly operates with a steady hand and a preference for neat, tight strokes. I guessed that Mary was about 5'2", given where the dust starts to collect on the cheap, plastic venetian blinds, and imagined her standing on tiptoes with a Swiffer duster, small particles of dust falling toward her serious face. Now that I am bound to this chair, I have no choice but to be here when Mary comes, usually between 10 pm and midnight. I braced myself that first time for her inevitable terror: what terror comes forth seeing this pulsating mess of muscles and organs plastered to this formidable armchair.

Like Karen and the others, though, Mary seemed unperturbed and ignored me altogether.

I love watching Mary move. I follow every choice and action with awe. She is shorter than I thought, barely five feet if I wager a guess, and I was right about her serious face. She does the same tasks in the same order night to night: first emptying the trash baskets, a clever move, as any debris that falls to the floor will be vacuumed off before leaving. She dusts after taking out the trash, not only relying on tiptoes but pulling a small stool off her cleaning cart and reaching as high as she can up the blinds that must be more than thirty years old, bending but never breaking. If I was cleaning an office like mine, I imagine I may have stopped to look at the odd book titles: Psychopathy, Hard to Love, Psychological Evaluations for the Courts, The Divine Feminine and Jungian Archetypes. But no, Mary moves a duster over the bound books without pausing to lean in. And I began calling her Saint Mary when, on one occasion a patient file, one that did not belong to me and must have lived behind the file cabinet that came with the office from a previous occupant, fell out and open while she was vacuuming that corner. Mary, without a pause, gathered rogue papers that fell out, neatly closed the folder, and placed it face-down on my desk. The vacuuming is the best part to watch. Mary plugs the vacuum in near the door to the hallway, then unravels the cord fully as she moves the machine to the far corner, under the ficus tree. The dry, yellow leaves that fell to the floor during the day are sucked up first, making little thwacks on the inside of the tube as they rise up and into the main chamber. Sometimes, Mary will click off the vacuum and get down on hands and knees, reaching behind the massive tree to pull

dead leaves off the floor where the vacuum couldn't reach. She puts these in the pocket of her sweatshirt, pulling them out when she makes it back to the cleaning cart. And what a dance it is on the way back. Mary pulls and pushes the vacuum in straight lines moving about four feet each section, lunging and pulling with strength and grace. She gets every square inch that the head of the vacuum can fit into and also carries a small hand-held vacuum, the tiniest I have ever seen, on a loop on her belt, getting it into all the nooks and crannies. It is amazing to see. And when she makes it to the door, moving backwards so she never steps on the newly cleaned floor, she takes a good look at her work, nods, and moves on.

*

Have you ever been hummed? There is humming from the mouth of course, as you hum along to a tune you like, hum when the melody is there but not the words. Humming to become a temporary instrument to meet the band. I'm talking about that other kind of humming, one that I only learned as it happened to me. I can find no other way to describe it other than being hummed and while not unpleasant, it is not under my control. The more that I shed, the more that I hum. It's beautiful, but not entirely so. It's vibrational and phantasmal and mystical and also just so very ordinary that I'm surprised I never noticed it all along. It's a space between being present and being hyper-present. When it kicks in, oh boy. Karen P. is here, so it must be Tuesday? How fast time flies these days. *I'll never forget that morning* she begins, and I begin to hum.

*

Last week, my circulatory system shed quickly and surely halfway through the day. All at once I saw the blue threads, the most gorgeous interconnections of tiny and tinier tubular filaments, fall to the chair and the floor around me like a silk skirt falling off around the hips and ankles. It gathered on the seat cushion around me, some falling all the way to the carpet forming a brilliant nest of azure and cobalt and navy gossamers. It was so stunning that I gasped, pulled sharp breath into my still-operational lungs. I admired it for the rest of the day, through Sarah K. and Michael M. and Rachel R. and a no-show by Ash and a tearful session with Brenda R., who is making significant breakthroughs around boundary setting and relational enmeshment. When Mary showed up that night around 11 pm, vacuum in hand, I wept as she gathered up my beautiful mess along with the small pieces of the world outside that patients had brought in on their shoes. My beautiful mess. Sucked up the nozzle of a vacuum in less than five seconds, what an undignified way to go.

*

Karen P. is sobbing into a tissue as she says over and over *I am a disgusting little pig, a disgusting pig, filthy, disgusting pig* and there is nothing that I can do but pulse and hum but that seems to be enough today. There is energy to her sobbing, and her sobs seem to move all through the room: rising high, dipping low, swirling in counterclockwise eddies around the ficus tree planter, caressing the book jackets and squeezing underneath the carpet corners. The sobs climb up each venetian-blind slat, pulling

up and up one at a time like the smallest mountaineers. The sobs move into and out of the gelatinous fat masses where my thighs and buttocks used to be, undulating the glistening piles that quiver and settle again as the sobs approach and retreat. Karen pulls more tissues, and sobs harder, which makes it more difficult to speak but each word lands with power. *Disgusting. Fucking. Pig.* As if a silent alarm goes off, at nine fifty-five Karen wipes her face, dabs at her red-rimmed eyes, pulls herself together, and with some light comments about *looking a mess* and *I'll see you next week*, she leaves the office. When she pulls the door into the slightly ill-fitted jamb with a tug, I jiggle again, just a little bit.

*

I watch Mary clean and clean. I watch Karen P. smile more and weep less. I remember some things more clearly these days, try so hard to catch those things that fade. I sometimes summon all my efforts to remember just how bitter a lemon tastes, submitting to the ecstatic swell of joy when I can feel it, puckering, taking me higher, everything in that moment the glorious bitterness, knowing it will fade.

*

Energy to energy, we are all just bundles of spirited mass, pulsing and humming and changing shape all the time even though we barely notice, if we notice at all. And something is shifting today, I can feel it energetically, more so than I have ever felt anything; there is irony of

course, to feeling more than ever while barely existing as a thing at all. But these tiny waves of excitation are becoming more intense, like surfs rolling over me, like being in the warmest ocean, an atmospheric Dead Sea, and more than washing over me now, I feel myself lifting up, rising, ready to break through something, some unseen surface. Is this it? Am I finally, after all this time, really dying? And if I could scream, I would scream something like *I am not ready!* and if I had a face, paradoxically, I think I would be grinning, a big stupid grin because these pulses feel so good. And what is dying anyway? Another form of shedding? And thinking has become useless because there is a sense of being pushed and of needing to push because whatever is happening here requires every ounce of me-ness that still exists, every bit of me to brace and then push and then rise above something. I have the feeling of both giving birth and being born, although I've never done the first and don't recall the last, and yet feel the contraction of invisible muscles, the clenching of invisible thighs, and the undeniable knowing that I have to move, have to travel, whether I resist it or not. I won't resist. I'm ready. Here we go.

Overleaf: E. E. King, "Bill's Drive-in."

Acrylic on canvas, 36"x 50", 2005.



JASPER OLIVER

THIRD PRIZE IN SHORT FICTION
2020 STUBBORN WRITERS CONTEST

What We Talk About When We Talk About Gigantic Disembodied Oceanic Wolf- Heads

*There is a wolf in sheep's clothing.
There is a wolf, a man by day.
There's this wolf, you might know him,
he likes little girls and he devours your aged ones.
He spits their bones into the soil and
their bones seed
and grow towers that puncture the sky.
There's a decapitated wolf who lives in the sea.
- Hibogulous the Younger*

Karla asked if we'd heard about the new species of wolf that they'd found off the coast of Virginia.

"Massive," she said, "the size of a BUNGalow." She said bungalow in a kind of singsong and drummed her fingers on the table.

We were all out for Korean BBQ; all meaning Bobby, Destiny, Rodrigo, Ava, Francesca, Farooq, Jeff, Su, Esfir, Ray, D, Ji Jie, Kimmy, Jimmy, Timmy, Song, DeMarcus, Kayla, Daphne, Koharu, Stevie, Babak, Soap Stain, Ellory, Jaylin, Other Jeff, Big Slice, Sofia, Karla, and myself. Yes, the whole gang was there!

We were huddled impossibly around the hibachi.

Bobby was giving me a hard time about grilling the kimchi.

"You don't typically do that," he was saying, "you're making a mess."

Fuck you Bobby, I thought, and then I felt guilty for thinking it. I removed my kimchi piece.

"Oh," I said, "uh, sorry," and Bobby smiled in this condescending manner. He looked around at the crew as if he was their personal savior.

"Also," Karla said, "they're just heads, no bodies, or no typical bodies anyhow."

She pulled a clip up and passed it to us. In the window of her Galaxy S8 we saw the murk of the sea. Suddenly a large, dark shape began to appear beneath the surface, hurtling like a torpedo. It crested and rolled, salt foam spuming from lupine snout, beads of ocean rolling off its thick, gray fur. Its eyes cloudy. Its rough, raspberry, tongue lolling past tearing canines. No blood but this ravaged neckline with long, pastel-purple and ochre neck tendrils snaking out like phallic, barnacle viscera, whipping up the frenzied waves as though they—the vagus nerves, the laryngeal nerves, the carotid artery—were their own living beings. Seagulls appearing in the frame's bottom-left were made antlike in relation to the behemoth. It flopped spectacularly back into the ash-grey sea and torpedo'd away

into the depths.

Su said, “Holy Shit.”

Jeff said, “Wait.”

DeMarcus asked, “Is it a prank?”

Daphne said, “Wait.”

Big Slice was like, “Fuck.”

D asked, “What is it?” She couldn’t really see from her angle.

Esfir trembled in fear.

Koharu said, “Wait, what is it?”

Jaylin asked, “Is it real?”

Babak asked, “Is it a threat?”

Kayla asked, “Is it a God?”

I asked, “Is it a dream?”

Bobby asked, “Was it alive? Was it even alive? That thing? Was it dead or alive?”

“Wait,” Kimmy said, “Is this from the new season of *Popular TV Show*? Please, no spoilers.”

And Karla was like, “No, this is real.”

We sat agog passing the phone around, watching and re-watching the clip of the disembodied Leviathan. We couldn’t really believe the similarities between this and the latest season of *Popular TV Show*. Didn’t the gang of precocious youth battle a nearly identical, lab-grown beastie in the penultimate episode?

“Hold on, hold on,” Kimmy beseeched, “No spoilers!”

She made a big show of covering her ears.

“Oh,” Soap Stain said, “that show sucks anyway,” and they were about to launch into their whole elitist spiel when the waiter came over with a fresh heap of bulgogi.

“Have you seen this?” I asked the waiter, and Bobby said, “Yes, have you?”

The waiter smiled and cocked their head.

“What is it?” They asked.

Jeff wanted to know the source of the video.

“These days,” he said, “you have to be careful with your news. Who do you trust?”

Other Jeff was perplexed by the wolf-head’s fur.

“Aquatic life doesn’t really have fur like that,” they said. “It has more like blubber instead, that kind of fur, that’s for tundra, that’s for keeping warm and dry in falling snow, not water.”

Other Jeff’s sister was a marine biologist so they knew of what they spoke.

“Was it even alive?” Sofia asked. “Its head looked really cut off to me. Didn’t you see those neck guts?”

It so happened Destiny had read an editorial about the creature earlier that day in *Big City Paper*.

“They’re thinking it’s not alive, no, that’s the latest,” Destiny said. “They think the whole thing is animated interiorly by translucent crustaceans.”

“But where did it come from?” Timmy asked, and Jimmy wanted to know, “Was it even an animal, perhaps it was a weapon?”

We went through the list of potential culprits. Russia, Syria, our own government.

Ray said, “Mexico question mark?” and we all shot him sidelong looks of withering incredulity.

“It’s the end times,” Ji Jie said.

Big Slice said, “It’s a false flag.”

Rodrigo said if any of us were scared he would hold us, and Song said how she could hold herself just fine, thank you, and stormed out on the check.

“In Los Angeles, there’s a wolf sanctuary,” Esfir told us.

“I used to go a lot when I lived out there. I think all the wolves are retired wolf actors from back when they used to do that kind of thing, before CGI.”

“That’s fucked,” Ellory said. “They probably treated those wolves like shit.”

“They lead a pretty good life now,” Esfir told us. “For five bucks you can feed them raw hamburger patties.”

“No,” Ellory said. “That’s still fucked.”

Then Soap Stain started going on about how he’d take a real animal over a computer one any day.

I got to imagining one of the wolf-head creatures swimming down from the heavens. It would say, “feed me Seymour,” and we would all enjoy the reference. We would thrill with the reward of knowing a thing. I wondered if the wolf-head would lose some of its appeal being that close. Would I begin to see the strings?

Outside the Korean BBQ, the swollen, dusk-gloomed sky. Sleeping men and women. Wayward men parading, asking for money, smelling richly of shit and neglect. And in the oceans, and now in the sky, and maybe now in our lakes even, these miraculous creatures.

“The old cultures, they took better care of their giant aquatic wolf-heads,” Francesca said sagely. We were beginning to forget a time that this was ever not our reality.

Last week it was the whale they found, beached thirty-eight miles inland, and the week before that it was the chimpanzee, whose autopsy revealed multiple sets of inner organs, and who was found in the sedan-with-no-papers, in the center of a corn field, in the middle of a shadow, whose cast had no source. Today it was the wolf-head sea-monsters.

Koharu asked for the check and asked if we could split

it thirty ways.

“I know that’s obnoxious,” she said, but the waiter merely nodded.

“Does everyone have cash?” I asked. “Like we agreed?” But, of course, Bobby only had a card.

We began to pay and leave, one by one.

Ava realized she had never been with us at all and quietly atomized into the air. We looked over at where we’d thought she’d been, and we spied her drifting particles winking back into the space between all things. How quickly we forgot even this.

Bobby said, “Jasper, be sure and leave 20%,” and I thought, eat a dick sandwich, Bobby.

All the friends moved into separate quadrants. Soon it was just Karla and I. The table had grown cold.

“Once,” Karla said, “my shoes were stolen in the night by this elf.”

I looked into her eyes and thought I saw two wolf pups swimming there. I thought, I’m going to cut off the heads of those pups and release them into the sea. I couldn’t help but think it, I thought, though maybe I could.

We looked around for the waiter. Karla had also brought a card and needed to sign. But no one came, and we saw a thick layer of dust carpeted over everything. Now Karla, too, was gone, and I was alone in the dust, and the streets spread for miles before me, empty and desolate, save for dust. And the streets spread, and the streets spread, and multi-organged chimpanzees lurked those streets, and shadows grew out of nowhere and scurried just as quickly, and corpse-heads swam through air, full of shrimp as I was full of beef. I was alone in Hell. It was alright, I guess. It wasn’t really, you know, so bad.

CYN NOONEY

FIRST PRIZE IN FLASH FICTION
2020 STUBBORN WRITERS CONTEST

Here Is How

My wife and I are expecting a daughter. At night in bed my wife cries about this. Not every night but almost. I hold Cara close, urge her to think positive thoughts. How will we keep her safe? she asks. I tell her she's making a mountain out of a molehill. A reckless teen out of a bell-pepper fetus. That's the size our daughter is now.

We usually get home from work around the same time. Cara puts on sweatpants and headphones, sings along to the same country song over and over while we make dinner. I know it by heart because she used to play it full blast from speakers until I said, Please—no. The ballad is beautiful but rips me up. It goes like this: “Girl, watch your mouth and watch your weight.” The refrain pines for a God for the daughters, seeing as there's God the Son and God the Father. When Cara belts out the last line for the seventh or eighth time, I remove her headphones, lead her to a chair, bring over the food. We bow our heads. I've never been one for prayer but lately I find myself mouthing one every night.

On Friday Cara's curled up on the couch. She's heard about a murder in Morningside. Barnard student. Eighteen years old. She refuses to get dressed for work. She declines

my hug, my kisses. When I come home she's still on the couch, eyes closed, head lolling near the edge. I spread a blanket across her slightly swollen belly.

Around midnight she comes to bed. Finally a good night's sleep, I think, as we're both worn out. But soon the keening begins. Who watches over them?—she cries—Who?

I will, I tell her, and you will. We both will. I speak urgently and reach for her in the dark but she slips from my grasp. We'll protect our daughter, I say. It'll be our number one job.

Come Saturday she pores over details about the murdered student. Clips a photo from the newspaper—the girl with her mother, father, brother at Thanksgiving—and examines it closely.

That poor mother, Cara sobs.

Poor family, I say.

How will the mother go on? she asks.

I have no answer.

She refuses breakfast. Then lunch. Her hair is limp, her nightgown crumpled and damp at the collar. Online, she reads about Natalee Holloway and Laci Peterson then selects *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* on Netflix.

Stop, I plead. We're supposed to be happy. Especially right now.

She turns up the volume.

You're focusing on the wrong things.

Am I? Her face is pinched, her eyes slender as apostrophes.

Sunday, she makes coffee. I am surprised. Relieved. She slides a tray of sweet rolls into the oven and joins me at the

table. The kitchen smells like hope.

Here, she says, and hands over a story about a home invasion. The father survived, she tells me, like it's my fault.

The wife and daughters were raped and killed, Cara says. Tied to bedposts and burned alive.

Her eyes are bigger today, lit with fire.

The father survived, she says again. She sips her coffee. He hid in the basement.

I tell her I've heard enough. I get up, go into my office.

I print a story about a Texas mom who drowned her five children in the bathtub. I print a story about a mother who pushed her newborn and toddler from a rooftop parking lot. I print another about a woman who drove off a cliff into the Pacific with her wife and six children. There are more. Many more.

Our printer needs ink. I change the cartridge and think of Debbie Hibbard, my schoolmate. About the night her mother went into her room and shot her in the head. She shot Debbie's brother too. And their father. She called the police then killed herself. The story was on the front page the day I started ninth grade. I'd gone into the kitchen for Cheerios. My parents were at the table.

Don't look, my mother said. But I'd already seen the headline. Family wiped out while sleeping. I'd cut the Hibbards' grass, shoveled their sidewalk. For weeks afterward I dragged my bureau across my bedroom door before I went to sleep. Should my mother try to enter, I'd be alerted by the noise. I'd fight or run or hide. My mother would come up empty.

When the printing stops, I staple the pages and put them in a folder, labeling the tab: Here Is How (Not to Mother). Cara will know I'm kidding—we'll laugh about it

someday—maybe at Bell Pepper's wedding. We'll combat fear with love. We will do right by our daughter. We have each other and that is enough. This is what I rehearse as I walk to the living room.

She's curled on the couch again. The nightgown now bunched between her knees, its bloody hem in her hands. I call the doctor. Wrap her in a coat. Carry her to the car. Everything will be okay, I say, even though it's not true. I keep my hand on her thigh while I drive.

She groans and clutches her stomach then whispers, I'm scared.

Me too, I admit.

So what do we do?

It's still morning. Icy and bright.

I'm the one crying now. Cara turns toward me and I point out the window, indicating the sun, the sky. We keep praying for a God for the daughters, I tell her. For this daughter. Or the next. Whatever comes our way.

L A Z A R T R U B M A N

SECOND PRIZE IN FLASH FICTION
2020 STUBBORN WRITERS CONTEST

Unexpected Sunday Meeting

Gorgeous morning in the awakened city: fresh new green, the angled rays of the sun glittering in spiders' webs, birds twittering, the fragrance of buds, grass drenched in dew, the air cool, bees hovering around blossoming branches, Sunday, the tolling of a distant bell - spring in Chisinau!

It had been months since Florin was liberated from the Colony of Strict Regime in Northern Russia. Behind him were dozens of blood transfusions, restorative dental tortures, and scary talks with a cardiologist. He had obtained his so-so bill of health and was waiting patiently for the Soviet Immigration Office to approve his visa.

One day, as he was sipping coffee at a small table outside of a restaurant in downtown Chisinau, a light hand touched his shoulder:

"What are you up to these days, Florin, what are you up to?"

The voice sounded unfamiliar, as well as the short laugh. Florin turned around to see the man.

At first, he didn't recognize Professor Luca Oliescu as he stood there in front of him. It wasn't just his voice, but his face, pale and utterly different. And yet Florin still felt that he knew him. Something in his aspect could never be changed.

"Don't you remember me?" asked Luca, noticing Florin's confusion. "Yes, yes, they can do this to you – they and their newly invented mill-stones! But your Colony wasn't a vacation either, I've been told."

Florin kept looking at Luca's face in silence. In reality, it was no longer a face, but two cheek-bones with thin skin over them, sticking out like miniature mountain peaks, and the muscles that formed an expression--an expression that reminded him of Professor Oliescu--were so weak that they couldn't hold his laugh for a long time. That's why his laugh was short and much too large; it distorted his face; it seemed huge in relation to his eyes, which were set far back in his skull.

"Professor!" exclaimed Florin, stopping himself from adding: I was told that you were dead! Instead: "Well, well, how the hell are you?"

"I'm great, Florin, I'm great!" Luca put up another short laugh. "It's spring in Chisinau, nature's booming awakening!"

Florin tried to understand why he kept laughing. He knew Luca as a serious man, as Professor of Electromagnetics at the Chisinau State University, but every time he opened his mouth, his face formed that uncanny expression of mirth. To ask seemed impossible.

"Those mill-stones roughed me up quite a bit," said Luca. "But I got lucky."

He paused, and Florin had a chance to take another look

at him. Actually, he wasn't laughing at all, any more than two cheek-bones with skin over them could laugh. Florin apologized for not recognizing him at first.

"You're not alone, my friend," assured Luca, "but I've gotten used to it."

"I'm sorry," Florin said again, "I feel embarrassed." He felt an impulse to leave now, but before he could speak, Luca began coughing and couldn't stop, and when he finally did, Florin saw two bloody spots percolating through his handkerchief.

"Scary, isn't it?" said Luca. "But not as scary as some other things I'm hiding under my clothes."

"We all have our scars to show, I guess," said Florin. "Some deeper than others."

"Don't we, colleague? Scars of the century, aren't they?"

His skin looked as if it could crack at any moment, like old leather or clay, and he had a belly that looked like a small party balloon suspended under his thin ribs. His eyes were the only thing unchanged since Florin last saw him--lovely, but sunken. He glanced at his wristwatch.

"Why are you suddenly in such a hurry?" asked Luca. "How about a drink for the occasion?"

He had been Florin's colleague back in the old days at the university; Florin looked up to him and respected him more than any other professor in the country. But he really had no time for a drink. "My dear professor," he said, because Luca was holding him by the arm, "I do have to go: my conference starts in less than an hour."

"Then some other time, right?" said Luca, and Florin knew in that moment that this man was really already dead.

"Yes, I should like that," he said, paying for his coffee.

"Whenever I'm in Chisinau again."

Maybe it was a laugh, he thought, while checking the street for a taxi, maybe Luca kept laughing all the time because he was still alive, standing in front of him in downtown Chisinau, despite the rumors that he had been tortured badly and died in the camp.

As luck would have it, a taxi stopped next to them, and a young couple paid and got out. Florin slipped into the back seat, lowered the window, and said: "It was nice to see you alive and laughing..."

"We should meet again, Florin!" interrupted Luca. "I have a lot to tell you, and I hope you're still a good listener."

"I'm always up for a good story, professor," said Florin, "always up for a good story."

He tried to distinguish the color of Luca's eyes and couldn't.

"In the meantime, call me," said Luca stepping back from the taxi. "It is allowed now."

"I will," promised Florin and gave the driver a sign to go.

"You may take a nap," said the driver moving into the traffic. "It's quite a ride."

"Can you make it in thirty minutes?"

"I'll certainly try."

"You'll be rewarded," promised Florin.

We're damaged goods, he thought, cranking up the window and closing his eyes, but it's rubbish that we are dying; we're just getting awfully tired and more often than not need bypasses, transplants, dentures and blood transfusions. And when none of that helps, when we run out of the last ounce of strength, we move aside. In silence.

TEDDY ENGS

THIRD PRIZE IN FLASH FICTION
2020 STUBBORN WRITERS CONTEST

Miscarriage

The phone rang and the mommy answered it. She walked into the bathroom and leaned into the vanity, twisting the phone's cord around her wrist until her hand went pale. Her unclasped bra hung from her bony shoulders like a pair of sneakers from a telephone wire. She listened into the phone, she twisted the cord, she opened her mouth but said nothing.

The home was a modern home, designed by the daddy, who was out of town, and the master bedroom led directly into the bathroom with no door or wall separating the spaces. Just inside the bedroom door stood the boy, recently five years old, who had come into the room to ask if he could use the computer to play Backyard Baseball, a computer game he had been given at his birthday party. The party was Aladdin themed, his favorite movie, and the mommy had handbuilt the Cave of Wonders and the tunnel leading up to it out of cardboard boxes and a camping tent, which the boy and his friends crawled through to find the genie's magic lamp.

"Should I schedule that now?" the mommy said, rubbing at her stomach. The boy stood there watching her,

sensing in his developing mind that something was wrong but not knowing what or why exactly, and mostly wondering how long mommy would be on the phone because he needed the telephone line to access the internet. The mommy leaned into the vanity, bent over and bracing herself against it like she was trying to push it away. She leaned in deeper and her shoulder blades popped up, losing one of the bra's straps, which slid down her arm.

Her body heaved.

She breathed in quick little spurts.

"Mommy," the boy said, and she shot upright, startled, and fixed the bra with one hand while holding the phone against her chest with the other. Her face was wet and heavy and the boy had never seen his mommy like this before. His mommy was the tallest mommy he knew, and she was strong, stronger than daddy even, and when she shook Father Brad's hand after mass on Sunday mornings she would look him directly in the eye and say thank you father and he (the boy) would do the same without having to be told. She had that kind of effect on him. She had that kind of effect on a lot of people. But this trembling woman standing in front of him now? Who was this?

What the boy was looking at was raw, unfiltered adult pain for the first time. It was a look he would later see on his daddy's face the morning the towers leaked that horrible black smoke and collapsed in on themselves like sand castles, and again on Mr. Beckman's face when the rifle shots snapped and echoed across the campus courtyard, but this moment with mommy holding the phone and her face all wet and him standing by the door, this is the one he would later cite as his first real memory, a moment of terror and confusion and almost cruel serendip-

ity between an unsuspecting mother and her little boy, a moment capable of launching somebody from one world into the next. The mommy wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and sort of shooed the boy away by flicking at him like *git, git*.

“Mommy,” the boy said again, but this time like a question.

The mommy put the phone down. She went over to the boy and put her hands on his shoulders and led him out of the room. Then she shut the door and twisted the lock.

When the boy turned eighteen he would take a train across the country to Eugene, Oregon, a small hippie town that the mommy only knew from the Joni Mitchell song, and he would notify her that he had landed a job on a farm and would be staying there. He would finally come home for Christmas when he was twenty-two and the mommy would find out that he worked on a marijuana farm, causing a two-day fight, and then she wouldn't hear his voice for three years, until one night she was woken up by a call from the Lane County Jail. By the third call from the Lane County Jail something in her would shift. She would post the bail but after that she would stop being a mommy. She had had enough. She would tell this to the boy over the crackly phone and she would keep her word, despite herself. And every once in a while when she was loading the dishwasher or clipping her toenails or kneeling at mass she would be reminded of that time in the bathroom and her little boy by the door. She would remember how in her greatest moment of loss, the moment she learned of her unborn, lifeless daughter floating around in the sick fluids of her womb, the moment she needed her little boy the most, and he needed her, she would remember how she

shooed him away, flicking her hand at him like a bee buzzing at the back of a sweaty neck, and would wonder if his entire life was contained in that one mindless act.

my little brother tells me he's a drug addict

at Christmas time, our parent's house ablaze
with light, glimmery trinkets, the thick
smell of cut firs. the low wail of a holiday chorus

slips under the door. it could be a funeral
song, but instead *all is calm, all is bright*.
we talk in his childhood bedroom, knee to knee

on the red metal bunk we used to share.
hesitant in our affection, as though meeting
after years of another life, I try to see

what's stayed the same: his huge mess of hair
like hydrangea blooms, pupils wide and dark
as wild blueberries. I want to touch his cheek,

to know this stranger who moves
my brother's body in and out of reality.
he won't name names, leaves me

to imagine what all he has welcomed
into himself. maybe a better sister
would have known, trusted the urges

to check the crooks of his elbows
for little graves, called five times
instead of four when he missed

our weekly coffee date. instead, I let
missed meetings pile up between us, left
terse voicemails and felt sorry to have a brother

who could not love me how I wanted. now,
it's the season of giving and I am willing to give
anything. I just want a brother

who lives. tinsel rustles on the door frame.
it's dinner time. we sit side by side
at the big table like children, our white plates

staring back at us.

Hard Healing

Legs suddenly like jars of lit fire
in a dark mountain pass, the ear hears
the shouts of soldiers as the mountains
become men with guns in the stains
of shadows between rocks, shouts of
“RPG” just colorless vibrations my ear
still hears, but the light a red flash
of surprise my mind still sees as I wake
to the smell of sweat on a pillow,
look down again at my legs like jars
of lit gasoline I can’t shake off, or walk
out of, and coming awake, I remember
the smell of razor-burning pain.

After the surgeries from that blast
that cleft my right foot and scarred
my legs, gave me the cripple walk
I want to keep to myself, I stay
in the rooms of my house, sit, alone.
When my wife talks it’s lonely too,
a voice like the foreign song of geese
in the sky, the sound of passing by,
leaving. But then she puts the paper
on the table where I sit, turned back

to the Veterans Day bicycle race
promo, leaves it there for days like
it’s nailed to the tabletop, and suddenly
I get up, get the bike from the garage.

On a crisp November morning I move
into a rush of breeze, my legs ache like
pushing into barbed wire, but each
barb glistens in the sun as I say
with every crank of a pedal, “*This*
is what I am, that is what I was,”
my wife smiling and waving the small
wooden stick of an American flag
so close on the sideline, me laughing,
muscling through the flow of cyclists.

Empire of Hunger

I hate the Indians. They are a beastly people with a beastly religion. The famine was their own fault for breeding like rabbits.

— Winston Churchill

They stole our harvest in steamers, love —
smiled tight at the ribs jutting out from our skin
like the wind rose on a pirate treasure map.
For twelve months we watched our city shrink
under stumbling feet as we tried to coax
kindness from men who lined their pockets with
our suffering. Babus in borrowed shoes and speech
siphoned every morsel to our name
to pay the piper of white greed.
I often wonder what secret Gods must
whisper to their wives as they
strain the foam from rice down our throats
in a belated peace offering. This high they stacked
our fallen friends down river banks we
raced around in better years on makeshift wheels.
You have to pinch your nose just right
or the stench can make you heave before
the fire in your hollow belly will. Most days

are a test to stay upright, but when the final plea
for a quiver of rain dwindles to dust at our blistered feet,
perhaps our spines will bow to greet
the stream of cherry blood kissing the street —
it is our only shot at making history.

Overleaf: Martins Deep,
“self-portrait in the body of a boy
with the tongue of silence.”

Digitally altered photo. Kaduna, Kaduna State, Nigeria, 2020



Names | 姓名

Ask my American parents to write my Chinese name. I often want to, and I don't know if my desire is driven by spite or desperation. Because I know, no matter what they say to excuse it, if I sat them down at the textured red metal kitchen table and slid a piece of paper and my favorite pen for them to take, they couldn't do it.

I was born _____. I don't know if my Chinese parents named me, if they could bring themselves to name a child they were going to leave behind. I don't know if I could bear the humanization of such an action if they had.

I became 高小荣 when the welfare center staff found me. When my finding papers were filed, those three characters filled every blank asking for 姓名.

I do not have memories of being 高小荣 from my infancy in China. I try to imagine the name sliding off native-speaking tongues, in the vocal register reserved for babies and similarly precious creatures who cannot reciprocate speech or understanding. On a weekend trip to 高邮 when I was twenty, a welfare center caretaker told me, with the help of a translator, that I'd been a very unruly child. Ever since, I have imagined my name spoken with fond admon-

ishment in her voice, the sound of which I cling to through hazy memories of that visit. Peeling back the heat and humidity of the day, the way the translator fanned himself and squinted, hand shading his eyes, up towards the sun as if it would reveal to him how long the heat would last, quieting the clicking cameras and toddlers playing, I try to remember her voice. Tired but resonant, and deeper in pitch than I had expected.

After I returned to America, other adoptees cautioned me that the caretaker's memories might be a fiction, that the welfare center staff might have told me this story to make me feel better about my visit, to make me feel like my connection to that place hadn't been completely lost. But even if some connection had been severed, even if this was perhaps the kindest lie I'd ever been told, it wasn't until I heard her voice that I could imagine myself as a person in the time between abandonment and adoption, that I realized that I hadn't been able to before.

I became Gao Shao Rong when my American parents first learned my Chinese name in preparation to adopt me. I do not know exactly when this was. I don't believe there was any intentional malice in mispronouncing "Xiao" as "Shao." The Mandarin "x" sound doesn't map easily onto any common English sounds, and I have seen pronunciation cheat sheets simplify it as a "sh" sound. Chinese teachers have told me to start with a "sh" sound, then widen my lips to flatten the sound into an "x," but I don't know if that's only because they thought I, a Chinese person, should know such things. There was less of an emphasis on my white classmates pronouncing it correctly,

although whether it was because it was assumed to be too difficult or because it was good enough for a white person to merely make an attempt, I cannot say.

I legally became Kimberly Christine Rooney when I was one and a half years old. A white judge with curly blond hair smiles in the photo from that day. Her black robes billow as she leans over her bench, looking at the camera rather than down at us. She looks excited to bring together this new family, to help my American parents give me their name, to help them scrub the last legal mark of 高小荣 from me. The weight of the legality, the weight of the next twenty years of using Kimberly Christine Rooney without question, became a closed door barring another name, another legacy, another history.

The name, and the history it carried, forced its way to the surface, but only rarely. My American father used to make up bedtime stories for me about Gao Shao Rong, the smartest girl in all of China, to encourage me to be like epitheted heroes in storybooks. I can only try to remember those stories fondly. Perhaps one who actually bore that name received my father's good will. For me, though, his stories are marred by an incongruence, an incorrectness, and his ignorance and indifference to them that linger still.

I do not remember when the stories stopped. But by the time I was faced with the choice to learn Chinese, French, or Spanish in middle school, they were long gone. Most of my friends took Spanish. What need did they have for Chinese classes in school, when they returned home to Chinese parents and Chinese food and Chinese conversa-

tions? The only other Chinese students in the class were ones who wanted to learn the formalities of grammar and writing that growing up hearing a language doesn't fully provide. But before I even stepped foot in the portable classroom, the furthest on the left in the line of portables that sat behind the school, I sat at my Chinese teacher's wooden kitchen table. The smooth surface with rounded corners was a patient place, with silky white curtains that let the sunlight shine gently through from the backyard. She knew through her daughter that I was adopted, although I don't know if she had already sensed my discomfort and uncertainty with my Chineseness. Her daughter was a friend of mine, although she wasn't present — in another room of the house, perhaps, or somewhere else entirely. I wasn't there for her, but for a brief lesson with her mother before school could start. Because, as she explained to me, many of the incoming students already knew the basics in Mandarin. Many had even been to China. They would be in sixth grade, whereas I was in seventh, and they would be overwhelmingly white. She didn't want me to fall behind. I wondered if she knew the shame of white people knowing more of what is yours than you do.

She showed me a piece of paper with three characters. This, she explained to me, would be the name she would call me in class. She had asked before this lesson, if I knew my Chinese name, and I'd sent her the Romanized spelling, no tones, that my mother had dug up for me. I didn't know at the time that my parents were mispronouncing it. When the teacher asked for the characters, I told her I didn't know. I had asked my mother, and she had told me I would have to dig through my old paperwork to find it

because she didn't know it.

I found myself with my hand on the door, behind which lay 高小荣 and the history and trauma the name carried. The only thing between me and that name — my name — was finding where my mother had put the binder with my papers. The task paralyzed me. I told myself it was too high a barrier to surmount. I didn't yet have the words to understand that the barrier wasn't too high, but the information was too significant to receive. Years of keeping 高小荣 tucked away behind Gao Shao Rong, behind Kimberly Christine Rooney, had hollowed me out and chipped away any foundation upon which I could hold the vastness of another life, another history. So my Chinese teacher took her best guess.

I became 高小容 when she showed me that paper. Incidentally, I would discover years later that she had guessed the tones correctly, but the third character was incorrect. 高 for my hometown, 高邮, survived the guessing game, as did the first character of my given name. But this 容 meant “to hold,” “to tolerate,” “to contain.” It could also mean “appearance.” Combined with another character, it becomes another word, 容易, “easy,” which was how my class learned 容 several months later. I used to laugh off my discomfort with this guessed name, make jokes that my name was so weird, isn't it funny? For a while, I forgot it was an untruth, and it became easy, or easier, at least, than facing the weight of who I once was.

For four years, when I entered a Chinese classroom, I became 高小容. When I left, I became Kim, or Kimchi if

you were part of certain friend groups, or Kimmi if you were one of my relatives. Because of class sizes and format, Chinese instructors in middle and high school could never devote much time to improving speaking and pronunciation skills of individual students, leaving my ear and tongue untrained to hear and pronounce the difference between “xiao” and “shao.” And so, for those four years and the four that followed, my own incorrectness and my parents’ blended together.

I stopped taking Chinese after tenth grade. It was time to focus on preparing for college applications, and to do so, I had to be judicious with my time and effort, reserving it for things I could leverage as success stories. I was already struggling to maintain my grades in Chinese classes. My parents hired a private tutor to help me, but it felt futile. I could not keep up, and even the gradebook successes felt hollow when confronted with questions spoken to me in Chinese. I felt as though I was wasting the tutor’s time, and so, in the hopes that she would deem me unteachable and therefore remove the burden of trying, I began to stall during tutoring sessions. And in a sense, it worked. When it came time to choose classes for eleventh grade, my parents had no issue with my choice to drop Chinese in favor of more AP classes: Language and Composition, Psychology, and World History. AP classes had a chance of transferring to college credits, and I knew I could excel in the ones I had chosen, safe from the shame of learning Chinese while lacking the courage to find my correct name.

I rediscovered 高小荣 a month before I left for an eight-week study abroad program in Shanghai. It was after my

second year of college, during which time I witnessed a professor switch effortlessly from English to Italian, then back to English. It was the first time in years I had been part of a conversation where language switching occurred, and it planted a need within me. The ability would be mine, I determined. I tried to push away lingering guilt for not achieving the ability already, convincing myself that I would cleanse my prior sins by doing it right this time.

When I visited my American parents’ house before leaving for China, I dug through the relics from China my parents kept tucked away. I touched the clothing I wore in China, running my fingers over the silky cloth. I turned over in my hands the chop and ink set they bought and never used — the ink might spill and get everywhere, my parents told me, and then we’d never be able to get it out — and resisted the temptation to stamp my name into myself at that very moment. Instead, I pulled out the paperwork with my Chinese name and wrote it down, the lines and boxes and hooks disproportional and misaligned from lack of practice. I tried again, and this time I was able to write each character in the same size.

In the few weeks I had left before my departure, I practiced writing my name over and over. I was determined to know it correctly the next time anybody asked. When I did, my Chinese professor in Shanghai said it back to me, emphasizing the different “x,” and I began to understand that, from the start, the obfuscation of my name had not merely come in taking my Chinese name away from me, but in giving me back a falsehood. Later that week, she taught me and my classmates how to shape our lips and

place our tongues to say it correctly, and I practiced silently for the next week.

When I returned from China, I continued taking Chinese classes. With my newfound knowledge of my parents' misunderstanding, I asked them if they wanted me to teach them my name. No, they told me, we'd only mess it up. I deflated with the sudden awareness that, without intention, I had expected them to want to learn their daughter's name.

In the correct version of my name, 荣 can be "honor," or "glory," or even "prosperous." When I started using it again, it felt wrong. I felt dissonant. I felt bursting at my seams. I had opened the door, and my name, my heritage, my trauma came crashing into me, the deluge of another life trying to fit into a body already filled. I wanted to feel like I was doing something right by continuing to learn after so many years. But overwhelmingly, beneath the excitement of going back to China for the first time in my life, I felt shame.

At first, when confessing my shame to others, I had only the words to explain that I felt so behind, so irreparably, irrevocably behind. That even if I tried for the rest of my life, I could never get back the time I lost to squandered opportunities. Each person told me there was no reason to feel ashamed, and I knew that they were right, if only that had been the whole truth. I did not yet know how to explain that it wasn't merely the shame of not knowing what I felt I should have already known, or even the shame of wasting opportunities to return to and claim my Chinese

self and heritage, but the deeper shame of lying to myself. Not just about my name, but about the significance that it held to me. That this was a deep break within me, and I could try to survive without setting it, but it would remain splintered inside. That I needed to wrench the pieces back into place if I could ever expect to heal. That this seemed like too great an ache to bear fully and honestly, and so for years, I didn't. I turned away from its importance and turned away from myself.

The first time I was able to say these words to anyone was to my thesis adviser. I was twenty-one, and I sat in her office, the door mostly slid shut behind me. She had a notepad in front of her and her pen poised loosely over the paper in a way that suggested that she was ready to write at any moment but that her attention was on me. We were discussing the final changes necessary for my thesis on racial adoptee identity formation in Chinese-American adoptees, and I found myself falling into a tangent about names. In a defense of its inclusion in my thesis, I began telling her about my own name, about how I used the wrong name for years. When I finished, I felt light-headed, like drinking too much tea on an empty stomach. The room felt lighter, clearer, than before, as if it sensed a revelation had occurred. We continued to discuss my thesis, but before I left, she asked me if I could help her learn my Chinese name.

At first, I didn't understand. It was my name, she explained, and therefore, it was important to know how to say it correctly. She offered me a large sticky note, and I began writing the characters, then realized that they would

mean nothing to her, so I added the pinyin below. Then I realized that without further explanation, she would make the same mistake my parents had, and I would once again become Gao Shao Rong. I told her how to make the “x” sound, then wrote out instructions for where to place and move the lips to produce it. I added instructions for tones, then explained and demonstrated how they differed. When I was finished writing, I handed her the sticky note, and she studied it for a moment before telling me that it would take some practice, but she was determined to learn it.

When I left her office, I wanted to cry. It had been such an easy thing — for her to ask, for me to explain, for her to promise with full intent that she would learn. If it had always been so easy, how could she have been only the second person to ask? The first, I realized, was my middle school Chinese teacher, although I had not been able to recognize at the time. I wished I could go back to my younger self, sitting at her wooden kitchen table, and thank her for asking, thank her for not showing disappointment when I couldn’t answer what to her was an easy question. But if it had always been so easy, why had my American parents refused to even try?

Over the next year, I became Kim | 高小菜, or sometimes Kim (高小菜). I began telling people that I will respond to either name and offering to teach people who were receptive. Old friends and new friends, even new acquaintances, responded with eagerness to learn and sometimes even offers to switch entirely to 高小菜. Each one brought validation for a name lost for so long. Each one

brought grief for the years it had been lost, for the juxtaposition between their efforts and my parents’ that grew starker with each instance. I met a Chinese tattoo artist who agreed to help me write my Chinese name back into myself after my American parents wrote it out, and they wrote it with inky needles down my sternum, next to my heart.

I still picture myself sitting across from my American parents at that red metal kitchen table, pen and paper between us. I imagine myself in a shirt that covers my sternum, waiting for them to write the Chinese name they never learned. When they fail to fulfill my request, I imagine telling them that the shame I held for so long is not mine to bear alone. Their failure was not only their ignorance. It was also facing their responsibility and the power of choosing what to learn, the power inherent in a name, and choosing to stay stagnant and not learn their own daughter’s. I do not often picture their response, but I imagine they would maintain they could not be blamed for not knowing. I think about my adviser’s words, about my middle school Chinese teacher’s offer, about how an earnest attempt, even if a failure through mistake, is better than a failure through omission.

Today, I am Kimberly Christine Rooney, I am 高小菜. Although I am no longer Gao Shao Rong to myself, I am to my American parents. Even if I weren’t, I would still carry her with me like a twenty-year old ghost. In another twenty years, I will be 高小菜, I will be Kimberly Christine Rooney, I will be _____.



Danielle O'Hanlon, "Chaos"
Acrylic on canvas, 48"x36", 2017

The Icehouse

The ice fishing house had a linoleum floor—the old-fashioned kind with red-and-white squares. In the dead center sat a cast iron woodstove. I could describe the rest of the icehouse in perfect detail, but the details don't really matter. The temperature inside, the weather outside, the time of day, the exact date this happened, none of that matters. What matters is that I punched my dad in the face, and he slammed his head on the door of the woodstove on the way down. He struck the floor, rolled over, and checked his mouth for blood, first with one hand and then the other. Both came back bright red. I braced myself against the wall and waited for him to recover. Eventually he stood, still wobbly, and—staring straight at me—began to clap, applauding me at a meditative pace, really the only compliment he ever gave me. With every clap, splatters of red shot through his fingers, landing on the floor between us, visible only on the white squares. I was fifteen, his only child. That was the last time he ever tried to hit me. He never even bothered to clean up the blood. One morning in late January, mom and I found him there, frozen to death after another night of drinking alone.

Years later, at the onset of winter, mom finally asked me what happened that day. I told her, and she began to cry. Don't worry, I said. It doesn't matter. Not anymore.

Fine, she said. Let's not talk about it again. But would you clean up the icehouse for me? Mop the floor at least? I want to put it up for sale.

I went out there to have a look. A minute later I found myself tearing out that dirty linoleum floor with my bare hands, piece by piece. I couldn't work fast enough. When all the tiles were up, I leaned against the wall to catch my breath. When I looked down at my hands, they were bright red just like his.

Aşure (*Noah's Pudding*)

When he walked off the ark after deluge, slosh, and antsy bird-watching, there wasn't much left in the way of edibles. This, at least, is the story the Turkish people tell, ladle in hand. There's no recipe for *aşure*. You can add rice and rosewater and garnets of pomegranate. You can let coconut drift over the filberts like snow.

I want all the people I've ever friended to come to my house with their stories, their offspring, their pictures of God. One polaroid shows a huge toe poised over a sugar ant. Another is nothing but fog on a road, an endless white sky. A man plays a violin and every note sprouts wings. A child with red eyes watches a small candle blink.

There's no recipe for *aşure* but I like it with cinnamon, chickpeas, scant fig, and lucent apricot. I like the way the raisins get blimpy again

after all that boiling in lemon and white beans. I like the way you open your door and a neighbor you hardly know kisses both your cheeks, cries *Run, get a bowl! I made this for you.*

Scenario

Visibility diminishes at greater depth, so our destination (home) recedes with memory. Meaning, currents blanket landmarks; an ocean, once invoked, distorts echoes. Frost accumulates porch-side. We assemble with our logbooks and photos, attempt to chart safe passage through a future where houses outlive parents. There's another with missiles fired in our name. But we disagree about revenge: the threat—value—theory—of it. Finches sing. Like canaries telling us wind is safe to breathe today, our klaxon just a car alarm we learn to forget. Every dive is a visit. We roll and lurch toward the seafloor. Bubbles rise. I'm trying to decipher ballast versus buoyancy when they flood the entryway with music and neighbors, toasting. I listen for whether this is a drill, for leveling pressure—when hatches must open. A dozen lungs inflate to speak or escape.

Like Large Bodies of Light

They always waited at the hollow in the almond tree. Two men. Half clad in multi-coloured wrappers tied around their waists. Their skins were highly burnished.

On my way to errands, they shadowed me. When they caught up with me, they snatched the to-buy list and scanned through it. Sometimes, they read out the contents with raspy voices: egwusi, uda, okpei. Their ribcages stuck out like rungs on a ladder. When I tried to glimpse their faces, I felt like a whirr of something was coming to cross me out.

At the market stalls, they helped me to bargain.

“No, Oche, say two hundred naira.”

“Will you sell for two hundred naira?” I'd ask a vendor.

“No, Oche, let's go to the next stall.”

“Yes, Oche, let's buy.”

They kept their small tied up bundles in the open chest of the almond tree and swung on the branches. My mother watched me with worried eyes, and often said to my father, “Oche talks to himself often. He talks to the walls and the plates and the water tank. Do you notice?”

My father perched at the corners of our compound and peeked through the cracks in our doors and windows. But he was human, so things slipped past him.

In my dreams, the two men filtered in through the walls

and lay beside me. Then they tugged at my body, seeking to be let in. At dawn, my skin stung. They gradually nudged me aside, did my laundry, followed me everywhere, and wanted to go on my errands alone.

“Oche, we will wash your clothes while you do the dishes,” they proposed, readily dipping their wrinkled hands into pails of water. I felt a sense of things slipping away, and my chest tightened often like a pocket.

One night, my parents screamed; I whizzed back from the many distances of dreams. I woke up to their glare, eyes rolling wide in the sockets. My mother trembled and begged me in a small voice to get up and come to her. My father’s hand clutched a cutlass, arm raised high, ready to strike.

“They are gone,” my mother whispered when I stood up.

“What?” I asked, shrugging off the fuzziness of sleep.

Her hands examined my body, suspicious that something had been altered.

“Nothing. They didn’t bite him.”

She looked at my father, and he turned away, his brow pleated with a soft sheen of sweat.

The men were absent from the tree at cockcrow. Their bundles were missing too. How could I summon them when they never told me their names?

My parents and I marched to the healer, Nwanyieze at noon. My pulse throbbed in my throat all the way.

Nwanyieze was small of stature. Her eyes were fiery, setting the world alight.

“You saw two pythons latched on Oche’s body this morning,” Nwanyieze said as soon as we sat down.

“Yes,” my mother said, folded her arms and leaned to-

wards Nwanyieze with a frown. My father’s face brimmed with dread.

“Who are they?” he asked, “and what do we do?”

“They are incarnates from your lineage. Two of their human hosts met their sudden death. Now they are reluctant to return to the spirit world. They want to share your son’s body.”

“God forbid,” my mother said.

Nwanyieze said, “It is an easy rite,” and coursed around me repeatedly. “What did they look like?” she asked.

I knew their faces now. They could pass for large bodies of light, or darkness. But I replied, “I don’t remember.”

“Lies,” she berated me and resumed her dance. She gave me some leaf juice that burned my chest on its way down. My father handed her the fee and thanked her.

“He will never see them again. I have bound them in the underworld.” she said and swung her hands around her head twice, then snapped her fingers.

On the way back, my parents followed behind me, cursing the pythons and praising the lord for protecting my holy temple. But I had my eyes forward on the orange-striped sky. Bright light briefly filled the horizon and melted into mist. Figures of the two men rose. They queued in front of me and led the way home.

here be dragons

there's always some monster to begin
with some candour · some flower · some great
golden eye that drinks you in

my grandfather ran til his legs were lost
my grandfather flooded marshes, restored
cities to an unseen greatness or perhaps
cemented their legends with his bare hands

my grandfather spoke to the dead with that
certain kindness that sometimes allows them
to resuscitate · for a small hour · to dance
their rattling bones on a dragon's far remains

because there's always some pretty boy saint
with limbs that itch and the mettle of hornets
to guide the way

where it's better to wander
to gore where flounder you must

my grandparents were forged in a war
like great steel battles and were afterwards
never able to spell themselves righteous

they were made of knives and small mistakes
that often prove meaningful in the end

they say a depth always precedes a death
and that to find the lake you first must've
heard the water calling · drink drink in
the amber mouth of its sullen glorified sun

its serpentine will · the twist that will bring
you back to where it started · the bodies ·
the shelter · the unknown menace within

MATTHEW SUMPTER

12:25 AM

An email from a friend. Their newborn son
can't form connective tissue,

can't breathe on his own, will pass away
in the NICU when they can bear to let him.

In the pictures, I see his clean, thick hair.
He wears a wristband like a teenager stepping out

of a concert he'll re-enter after this brief hello.
Our Rosalie is one month old,

a dark starfish in the crib's bottom,
her temporary sleep gathering

toward waking like a held breath.
I let my phone go dark.

Moonlight emerges on the comforter,
sliced by the window screen

into a thousand pale shards I touch
the way I touch my daughter's voice,

the way you touch any fragile thing
that could be there or not.

Winding Walks

Around us the quietude of heritage forest,
maze of trails, crowded he-heather, juniper,
cloudberry, scots pine, gnarled and lasting,

trunks wide as centuries, waymarking
the interior where capercaillie fantail
black sunrises. We walk shapeshifting

in our flimsy shoes, my Scottish
husband telling me tales of painted people,
aboriginal to the wilderness,

stacking their stones, steles left standing.
The resin is resonant of design in the rich, herbaceous
understory, retold by tattoos on his forearms —

mirror and comb, double-disc — spiraling pattern
to his thicker neck, comprehending blue and barbarian.
We arrive at an outlook of carved pavilion —

latticed wood, railing of logs splintering —
and see across the dance, valley to the mouth
of a sea-bound river, his landscape of longing.

Jen Ashburn is the author of the *The Light on the Wall* (Main Street Rag, 2016), and has work published in numerous venues, including *The Writer's Almanac*, *Pedestal* and *New Ohio Review*. She holds an MFA from Chatham University, and lives in Pittsburgh.

Steven Croft, an Army veteran, lives on a barrier island off the coast of Georgia on a property lush with vegetation. His work has appeared in *Willawaw Journal*, *Sky Island Journal*, *So It Goes: The Literary Journal of the Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library*, *Third Wednesday*, *Red Eft Review*, *San Pedro River Review*, *Poets Reading the News*, *Gyroscope Review*, and other places.

Martins Deep is a Nigerian poet and photographer. He is passionate about documenting muffled stories of the African experience in his poetry and visual art. Writing from Kaduna, or whichever place he finds himself, his creative juices tend to paint the spontaneity of his imagination, humanity, justice, truth and emotions, in different ways, bringing as much balm to as many wounds desperate for healing. His works have appeared, or are forthcoming on *Barren Magazine*, *Writers Space Africa*, *Mineral Lit Mag*, *Agbowó Magazine*, *The Ducor Review*, *The Shallow Tales Review*, *Omelette Magazine*, *The Lumiere Review*, and elsewhere. He is also the brain behind Shotstoryz Photography.

Teddy Engs is a writer and musician living in Portland, Oregon. He writes stories and songs from a drum stool in his basement. *Chestnut Review* is home to his first-ever-published story, and he is eternally grateful.

Teal Fitzpatrick is a writer, musician, and clinical psychologist living in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She is working on a book about the history of American psychology as a colonizing practice and writes a bi-monthly column about ethical mental health practices for *No Contact Magazine*. Currently obsessed with worsted wool, dresses with pockets, savory scones, tearing down systems of oppression and writing poems and short stories about all of these things. This is her first prose publication. Find her on Twitter and Instagram at @TealFitzpatrick.

Ceridwen Hall recently completed a PhD at the University of Utah. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *The Cincinnati Review*, *Triquarterly*, *Salamander*, *Spoon River Poetry*, *Pembroke Magazine*, and elsewhere. She is the author of a chapbook, *Automotive*, forthcoming from Finishing Line Press.

Bryana Joy is a writer, poet, and painter who works full-time sending illustrated snail mail letters all over the world. She spent her childhood in Turkey and is currently in the middle of a one-year sojourn in York, England with her husband. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in an assortment of literary journals, including *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *The Christian Century*, and *The Sunlight Press*. She has a thing for thunderstorms, loose-leaf tea, green countrysides, and the music of Johann Sebastian Bach.

Maurya Kerr is a bay area-based writer, educator, and artist. Much of her artistic work, across disciplines, is focused toward Black and brown people reclaiming their birthright to wonderment. A recent Pushcart prize nominee, her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Blue River Review*, *River Heron Review*, *Inverted Syntax*, *Oyster River Pages*, and *The Future of Black: A Black Comics and Afrofuturism Anthology* (2022).

E.E. King is a painter, performer, writer, and biologist - she'll do anything that won't pay the bills, especially if it involves animals. She has won numerous various awards and fellowships for art, writing, and environmental research. She's been published widely, most recently in *Clarkesworld*, *Flame Tree*, *Cosmic Roots*, and *Eldritch Shores* and *On Spec*. Her books include *Dirk Quigby's Guide to the Afterlife*, *Pandora's Card Game*, *The Truth of Fiction*, and *The Adventures of Emily Finfeather*. She's worked with children in Bosnia, crocodiles in Mexico, frogs in Puerto Rico, egrets in Bali, mushrooms in Montana, archaeologists in Spain, butterflies in South Central Los Angeles, lectured on island evolution and marine biology on cruise ships in the South Pacific and the Caribbean, and painted murals in Los Angeles and Spain. Learn more at www.elizabetheveking.com.

Steven Lang's fiction has appeared in the anthology *Fiction on a Stick*, published by Milkweed Editions, in the book, *The Art of Wonder*, published by the Minneapolis Institute of Art, and in the literary journals *CutBank* and *Slush Pile Magazine*.

Cynthia (Cyn) Nooney's stories and essays have appeared in *New Flash Fiction Review*, *Ursa Minor*, *Fractured Literary*, *New York Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and elsewhere. Her story "Tiers of Joy" was named 2020 1st Runner-Up of the Anton Chekhov Prize for Very Short Fiction. She holds an MFA from Pacific University and lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Frances Ogamba's short stories appear on *Jalada Africa*, in the 2019 *New Weather for MEDIA* anthology, and in the first issue of *Rewrite Reads*. Her nonfiction piece, "The Valley of Memories," won the 2019 Koffi Addo Prize for Creative Non Fiction. She is an alumna of the Purple Hibiscus Creative Writing Workshop taught by Chimamanda

Adichie.

Danielle O'Hanlon's goal is to create works with which viewers can connect as they contemplate the visual, ideally arousing a strong emotional reaction. Her paintings are simple in composition and color, yet full of complexities that draw the viewer to stay longer. Inspired by artists Edvard Munch and Jackson Pollock, Danielle has expanded her technique to include a three-dimensional style of painting that she calls 'Acrylic Sculpting'. She explains the impact of this method: "Acrylic sculpting brings my work to life in a whole new way; in a sense, the painting reaches into our world, asking to be seen." She credits her husband and her many supporters who provided the amazing opportunity to pursue a career doing what she loves. She finds it very rewarding to know her paintings - displayed in public or private - are being shared, cared for, and admired. See more at www.DanielleOHanlonArt.com.

Jasper Oliver is a Gemini with Sagittarius-rising, ENFP, elder-millennial born in a wood-rat year. He holds an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He rode the rails, but just the once. Currently he lives in Chicago where he reads, writes, and dérives, saying "hey" to the local dogs. You can find him on the webs at www.jasperoliver.net.

Sara Pirkle is a Southern poet, an identical twin, a breast cancer survivor, and a board game enthusiast. Her first book, *The Disappearing Act*, won the 2016 Adrienne Bond Award for Poetry. Sara has received writing fellowships from The Anderson Center, I-Park Foundation, and The Hambidge Center for Creative Arts and Sciences. She is the Assistant Director of Undergraduate Creative Writing at The University of Alabama, where she also runs the Pure Products Reading & Lecture Series.

Kiyoko Reidy is a MFA Candidate at Vanderbilt University. She lives in Nashville with her partner and their two dogs. She loves baking, coffee, live music, and anything outdoors. Her work has been published in *Red Rock Review*, *Driftwood Press*, *The Berkeley Poetry Review*, and elsewhere.

Dan Reilly lives with his wife Aggie in the Adirondacks where he had his first reading thanks to Maurice Kenny. Dan has worked in films and construction, bartended, driven truck and taxi, written for a newspaper, taught in prisons, owned a business, and lived in NYC and LA. His poetry and stories have recently been published in *Pif Magazine*, *Beyond Words*, and *Closed Eye Open*. Dan was a featured writer on The New Guard's BANG! page. His story, "Sights Seen," is upcoming in *Ocotillo Review*. "The Promise of Dreams Holy" is in the current issue of *Obelus Journal*. He and Aggie are currently completing a pair children's books, and Dan is collaborating with Atlanta artist Gail Foster on a chapbook.

Kimberly Rooney (高小菜) is a Chinese-American adoptee from Jiangsu Province. They now live in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and their writing has appeared in *The Offing*, *Jellyfish Review*, and *The Pitt News*. They have also contributed to *Pittsburgh Magazine* and *The Review Review*. When they aren't writing or working, they enjoy cooking, singing, and crocheting.

Matthew Sumpter is the author of the poetry collection *Public Land* (University of Tampa Press, 2018), which won the Anita Claire Scharf Award. His poems have also been awarded the *Crab Orchard Review* Special Issues Feature Award, as well as the Zocalo Public Square Poetry Prize. Other individual poems have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The New Republic*, *AGNI*, *Best New Poets*, and *Poetry*

Daily. His scholarship on writing pedagogy has appeared in *College English*, and his creative prose has appeared in *Glimmer Train* and *Pithead Chapel*. A graduate of the Ohio State MFA program and the Binghamton University PhD program in creative writing, he is currently Visiting Assistant Professor of English at Tulane University.

Yashodhara Trivedi is from Kolkata and works in Delhi, India, as an international student recruitment manager. She holds an MA in English from Durham University. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Knight's Library Magazine*, *The Sunlight Press*, *The Rising Phoenix Review*, and elsewhere. She goes by @poetrynerd on Twitter.

Lazar Trubman is a college professor from the former USSR who immigrated to the United States in 1990, after surviving four years in a Strict-Regime Colony in Northern Russia. In 2017, after teaching the Theory of Literature and Cyrillic languages for twenty-four years, he retired to devote his time to writing. His work has appeared in print and online publications, among them, *The Threepenny Review*, *New Letters*, *Vestal Review*, *The Fiddlehead*, *Black Mountain Press*, *Forge* and others.

Milla van der Have (The Netherlands, 1975) is a Gemini. Her poetry has been published in *Cherry Tree*, *Otis Nebula* and *Ninth Letter*, among others. In 2016 her chapbook *Ghosts of Old Virginy* was published. Milla lives and works in Utrecht, the Netherlands, with her wife and two rabbits (that sometimes appear in her poetry).

Tori Grant Welhouse is a poet-writer from Green Bay, Wisconsin. Her most recent poetry chapbook *Vaginas Need Air* won Etching Press's 2020 chapbook contest. Her YA paranormal fantasy *The Fergus* won Skyrocket Press's 2019 novel-writing contest. Both are available on Amazon

and at indie bookseller Lion's Mouth Bookstore. Tori is an active volunteer with Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets.

Cynthia Yatchman is a Seattle based artist and art instructor. She works primarily on paintings, prints and collages. Her art is housed in numerous public and private collections in the Northwest and she has been shown nationally in California, Connecticut, New York, Indiana, Michigan, Oregon and Wyoming.

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for stubborn artists

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