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Cactus Heart

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She dreams her father is on the roof of a house. He wants to jump to another roof because, he yells from up there, he has not taken risks in his life. He paces back a few feet, runs to the edge, stops, repeats this, makes it past the edge, but is still holding on. He's caught mid-motion, a barrel-chested bird, mid-flight before descent.

*

They're camped out beneath an afghan on the living room floor. His bear huge body behind hers, the smell of Coca-cola, sweat, beer. We're camping out, kid, kid, do ya see the stars?

*

He plays solitaire at the dark-drained oval table. The one she polishes every Thanksgiving. She wedges between his arms, lap, and the table's edge. She slips the cards, puts the aces in a row, wins the one player game being played by two.

*

They wrestle on the floor. Two-hundred-forty pounds on all fours. Sixty-five of bone and muscle leaping through air swooped down and taken in a thick-fingered tickle.

*

She's on the roof, square and forty stories up. She walks to a corner, sprints diagonal to the other corner, jumps into the wind

she has somewhere to be

Mark Wagstaff

Big Time Julie

Tell you what happened to me. I'm not big on commitment. Not long-term. I take my pleasure in waves. Suits me. So this one night, I'm walking home. I see faces, I lay a few smiles, hoping to catch a sweet look in return. That's me: I erupt in other's lives, and leave before it gets dull.

There's no type I like, but I know what I like, and when I saw her on the sidewalk, tall with her gelled-back hair, I made a move. She crossed the street in no hurry, so polished up she *had* to be hunting. I've done this years, I can tell a girl who's hunting.

So I give her a grin and get a glossy smile in return. She says, "Hi."

Now, I tell you: I'm a sleazebag of continental proportions. Some women, some times in their lives, they're searching, and I *never* let chances slip by. Because when the guys in suits lay you down among the dead men, what'll you do? Sit in your grave and count all the might-have-beens? So I swing around, in the groove for serious fun. Her jackpot lights are going off, she's smiling

straight at me—a pretty wave of lines dance round her eyes. And that hair, slicked and shining like gold. "Okay?"

"Not bad." Her stare searches me out. "Going someplace?"

To the bar on the corner—I felt set for perfection.

By then, I found she was, "Julie. Don't shorten it. I don't like it shortened."

I give a name and say she can do with it what she likes. There's two ways these games play. Some women want you interested in them, they want you to ask everything, to make them the star they can never be in their dishrag lives. Others want mystery, they want to be unknown. That's Julie. I try a few exploratories: where you from? what you do? and she bats it all down with a roll of her eyes. I find she's more happy to dig around in the falsehoods I pass as conversation, but stays quiet about herself. Warm in the bar, but she keeps her jacket zipped, she seems bugged by drafts. So I tell her my place is warmer and take her back—I mean, I ask and she says yes.

We get a cab—we're both in a hurry. I always keep booze and rubbers at home. It all goes as well as expected.

So later, laying side by side, taking turns at the midnight ceiling, I make the joke I always make, how I wish I'd never stopped smoking. That smoke after sex. It's a compliment for a job well

done. Most women laugh or say nothing. But Julie says, "It's what they do to scare you."

I don't get what she means. Usually by then, I'm asking: Shall I call a cab?

"They scare you," she repeats it. "They say stop this, stop that. Do more of this, do less of that. Like if you act good enough, long enough, you'll be okay."

I don't like talking after. I don't like talking at all. But clearly, something's bugging her ass, so I say, "You regret quitting smoking?"

"No, I never smoked. I didn't hardly drink, not even in my teens. Never took drugs—I ate salad. Slept seven hours a night."

Certainly, she's in good condition. But cold feeling, cold to the touch. "It shows," I tell her, "clean living."

"What shows is nothing." She sits up. In distant light whispering in around the curtains, her pale flesh rises above me. "It's what don't show."

Okay, I know she's not talking about personality or charm, or that spirituality crap you admire to get yourself laid. Her frost gets infectious: I shiver and dig down in the blankets. But there's no warmth.

"A year ago, I went to the doctor. I was having stomach pains. I thought: time of life, y'know. Get it checked out. He sent me to

hospital. They done x-rays, put dye in my blood. Sat me down and said I got tumors. Advanced inoperable tumors. Twelve months you got, they said. Twelve to eighteen. They were *so* sorry.

"And my husband, and our two girls, they were totally broken. Big man, my husband. Hard man. Never seen him cry. And my mom, she's old now, she needs someone to take her to the store, y'know. Everyone, so sorry for me."

My flesh shrinks from her. This is why I don't love. It's *dirty*, getting told this.

"All I could see was a future of wires across my chest. Every day worse, and everyone saying how *brave. Brave.*" Her toneless, empty laugh cuts the night. "I figured, twelve to eighteen. I figured they'd have to get used to being without me. They knew that soon I'd be gone. So I went."

"Went?"

"I wanted it big time. Didn't want to be some precious invalid and everyone so fucking sad. I left them. Took my savings and was gone. Moved here—always wanted to live in the city. Y'see, it was better, closing the door on them while I'm alive. They'll remember me in my favorite boots, not carried out in a box.

"Now I'm big time. Got my own place and go out every night." She swings up out of bed. "I got fancy bras and this gorgeous jacket. I do what I like." She starts to dress.

"Don't they worry for you?" I wouldn't, but not everyone's smart like me.

"Maybe. I dunno. They shouldn't, because now I been places I never went before. All the years I felt okay, wasted on the school run. All the nights sat home, when I didn't know I was dying." She pulls on her boots. "I was dying for *years*, y'know. No one told me. No one says there's a rat in your gut." She strokes her stomach. "Got nothing here at all, y'know. Just tumors. Eating themselves to a stop."

Released, her chill fills the room. I feel small—weak, even—trapped under the scrappy covers. Like she's all around me, her voice everywhere. "How long you got?"

"I don't count days. I don't see doctors. They've had their joke on me. I expect to go quick. I don't expect to notice." She unzips her jacket pocket. "Now," she reaches out. "You see how it is? I burned through my savings long back. Big time costs."

The knife makes the best of dismal light: doesn't flash or sparkle, just glows its steady threat. Fumbling, naked, I couldn't take her down. She plays her advantage and watches with clear night vision. So I give her my cash, my cards, my phone. I don't blame her. Big time costs. I say I want to see her again—that's when she smiles.

"I just cleaned you out. You're no use to me."

"All that," all my cash, as it disappears into her pockets, "won't buy you one more day."

"No," she says, stepping out the door. "Won't buy you one neither."

Jessica Keaton

Kissing Boys and Making Them Cry

"What do you want me to do?" The smell of asphalt, gasoline, and oil hangs around us in the parking garage above the bar as I hear David's voice slightly echo.

"Well, for starters, I want you to open my door."

He moves swiftly, letting go of my hand, then unlocks the passenger's side of a gray Toyota. Looking down with a slight grin on his face, he pulls the lever and holds the door open. "Yes, ma'am."

Ugh. Close, but not quite. I slide inside, placing my bag onto the floorboard. He jogs around the vehicle and, within a few seconds, he is inside too. "And don't call me ma'am."

"I—I'm sorry. What should I call you? Mistress?"

That's it! "Perfect." I look at him, his blue eyes bright in the dim car. Before I know it, he moves in for a kiss and I push him back into his seat. "Did I say you could kiss me?" I feel myself scowl and see his head angle toward the floorboard.

"I'm sorry ma—I mean Mistress."

My scowl softens. "Good. Now drive."

David turns the key in record time and I watch the walls curl until we reach the bottom level of the garage.

This is going to be fun.

*

If it's my fault, then I'm in control.

According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN), one out of every six women in America is assaulted during her lifetime and four out of five assaults are perpetrated by someone the victim knows.

Traumatic flashbacks are triggered by sensory details because, in the moment, I am unable to process the act itself. Instead, I log each smell, sound, taste, touch, and sight. I associate each detail with an emotion and it becomes a trigger—a spark ready to fire a bullet at some unexpected point. Sometimes these triggers are on machine guns, a potential barrage that will leave me frozen and crippled in time. Other instances, they explode in quick shots that form flesh wounds on fire at the surface.

I experience the memory in real time, beginning with a close-up of the bedroom blinds. The flood light sprinkles rays into the

darkness, creating shadows. My bookshelf, reaching the ceiling, is black. My stuffed animals line the window, huddled together in a black, odd-shaped mess. To my left, the discount curtains hide the other bedroom window. In the daylight, they are dark blue and are covered with kid-like drawings of different common objects—butterflies, the sun, the moon. The metal frame of the bunk bed is cold and smooth, sending a chill from my fingers to my chest.

The bed squeaks as a pair of feet fall onto my bed. My stepsister, Tiffy, is in shadow, with the exception of the whites of her eyes. Her body is bony and her hands are rough as she crawls on top of me. I feel her moist parts dragging against my thighs.

Her bones jab my legs as I focus on the curtains. I can smell her coconut shampoo and sweat as the bed squeaks at a consistent pace.

There's no use in saying no anymore.

At first I defended myself. One afternoon, I latched onto one of her knees so hard with my teeth that I drew blood and left bruises. When Daddy came home, I got in trouble—too ashamed to tell him why I'd done it. I ran from him so he wouldn't hit me and hid in my closet until he calmed down.

Another night, as the bed creaked, Daddy told us to "be quiet in there."

Eventually I became indifferent and just let it happen.

It ended when Tiffy started middle school and began pulling C's in her classes. The stress of school must have shifted her focus. A few months later, she, her mother, and her baby sister moved their things out to the car in the middle of the night, dropped me off at school the next morning, and left.

Daddy was devastated. I was overjoyed.

Kids will be kids, some say. Well, kids experiment.

"Good touch" and "bad touch" apparently only applies to boys, not your stepsister.

The Darkness Into Light Foundation cites that forty percent of children are abused by either older or more powerful children—most of whom are just acting out their own abuse. Tiffy had spent most of her life around her mother's boyfriends.

*

David is carrying my Betsey Johnson bag, the black one with the big polka-dot bow, up the stairs behind me. I feel the warmth of his hands getting closer to my ass until they graze it. Instantly, I turn around, glaring at him.

"Did I *fucking* say you could touch me?"

His eyes, looking at me from a lower step, say he can't contain himself; he can't wait. But his mouth, his beautiful mouth, says, "No, Mistress."

I smack his hands, keys jangling, and turn around.

By the time we are at my door, he is pressing against me, his breath on my neck. I feel myself shiver. I am beginning to lose control—my authority—in the weakening of my limbs.

No.

I bump him with my hips toward the right of the door, biding my time with the keys. Slowly, ever so slowly, I fiddle with them and hold the correct one in between my fingers.

I wait. Then look back at him. Then wait some more.

Finally, I insert the key into the knob. With a click, the door opens and I turn to him.

"After you." I hold out my arm.

"Yes, Mistress."

*

"Tell him to remember the blue airplane!"

It happens in cycles.

I didn't know, for sure, what the "blue airplane" was until I visited my mother during one of my college breaks. The night was

filled with billowing smoke and the light of the square television in the corner. Mother was living in the same room she had since she was a child, complete with old stuffed animals, pink curtains, and an owl mobile hanging from the ceiling. The only clues to her adulthood were her wheelchair, parked next to the daybed, and the ashtray filled with cigarette butts.

My parents had been trash talking each other since I was a child. Daddy was usually the worst culprit, calling Mother crazy, lazy, and slutty (and variations of each term). Mother, on the other hand, tended to tell stories of Daddy's debauchery.

"But it doesn't surprise me," she said, taking a long drag from her cigarette. "You know your Daddy was abused by his brothers, right?"

I flashed back to one night in high school when Daddy was on the phone in the other room with his mother, my Nana, and his brother, my Uncle Lee:

"I just want an apology from him!"

Daddy is sobbing and I am scared. The last time he cried like this, we were in court with Mother fighting over who would get me on which holidays.

"Put him on the goddamn phone, Mother!"

Sniffles. And silence.

"Tell him to apologize for what he did to me! Tell him to remember the blue airplane!"

I wept with him and I didn't know why.

"Yeah," Mother continued, breaking my reverie, "they made him do stuff to them for his toys."

For years I'd been angry with him. I thought he knew what Tiffy did to me and didn't do anything about it. Maybe he didn't know. Or if he did, he didn't want to know. He didn't want to blame himself.

If it's my fault, then I'm in control.

"I think that's one reason we got each other." Mother wasn't slowing down. "It happened to me too." Mother's cousin, Michael, raped her when she was twelve and then again when she was an adult.

When I had previously met him, I remember thinking it was funny how he hugged her, his arms snaking around her waist as if he owned her.

Two broken souls swirling in a windstorm of abuse.

I couldn't be angry with them anymore.

*

I turn on the light and look David up and down. He's confused, yet excited—his jeans bunching up around his crotch.

"Take your clothes off. Start with your shoes."

I watch him look at me, as if begging me to help him. But I want to watch him squirm—embarrassed—as each layer falls to the floor. I hear the soles of his Chuck Taylor's fling onto the carpet. Then his socks. His blue polo comes off and I watch his fingers fiddle with the belt latch, hearing one single clink. Finally, once he pushes his pants down, boxers curling inside his jeans, he's naked in front of me.

Approaching him, I loudly breathe hot air through my nose. He's tall; I stand on my tiptoes to blow into his ear.

His hands reach out to touch me. I watch his mouth open and his eyes close. I'm having none of it.

I take his wrists in one of my hands and push him into the wooden frame of my bed. "Now, you're going to have to be punished."

David breathes, mouthy and hard. I don't smile. I don't indicate that my nipples are tingling; I'm throbbing from the inside out. I play unfazed and slightly pissed off. "Lie down and keep your wrists together."

I'm feeling generous: I hold them for him while he sits, then push them slightly backward as he kicks his feet up to lie down.

Finally, I smile. "Well, it seems that you're in a very compromising position."

He says nothing as I place my knees on his thighs, taking his wrists in my hands again. "Mistress, can I kiss you?"

He sounds pitiful; I almost give in.

I lean down, my nose touching his. He begs for my mouth, trying to dart forward. His tongue keeps flapping. I part my lips, as if to appease him.

I don't.

I wait until he begs for release in an octave so high that it's barely audible.

*

The National Sexual Violence Resource Center notes that more than one-third of the women that are assaulted before age eighteen will experience another assault as an adult.

My roommate, Caroline, was going through a wild phase after her breakup with her ex-boyfriend. At night, she would either come home so fucked up that the next morning she didn't know how she got home, or she would come home the following day from some rando's house. After the night she had ridiculously loud, ass-slapping sex with our housemate and didn't remember it,

I came to the conclusion that I needed to be the responsible wing-woman.

The night began without incident with a few drinks at Flames, our favorite hangout in downtown San Jose. However, after a couple of cocktails, I began to introduce myself to strangers. At the end of the bar were two cute guys: a chubby, dark-haired one with glasses and his friend, the quieter, more put-together one.

Caroline was not one for friendly conversation at bars with unknown men, but what was the harm? We were just going to talk to them.

If it's my fault, then I'm in control.

A few drinks later, we were walking down Fourth Street in search of burritos. We didn't even know their names. It was beginning to sound like the chorus of a bad country song. Caroline was talking to the one with glasses about video games and I was walking beside his friend, neither one of us saying anything. Caroline and Glasses ended up ordering, standing in what seemed like an hour-long line. By the time they were done, our Uber had arrived and we were on the way back to our apartment, guys in tow.

Once we arrived, we turned on Netflix and decided to watch *Pokemon*. We sat there for a few seconds and before Well-Dressed

Guy and I knew it, Caroline and Glasses were in the bathroom together.

*

David tenses as my tongue circles his lips and runs down his chin. My hands release his wrists. "That doesn't mean you can touch me. Understand?"

He nods as I continue downward, my tongue crossing the left nipple followed by the right. I feel him shake underneath me.

"Almost too much?"

He nods as I look at him, blue eyes almost teary. I smile, making my way to his belly button. After making one circle around it, I stop.

I sit at the foot of the bed and stare at him. "You're naked and I'm still clothed," I say, laughing.

"Can I help, Mistress?"

"No! And why all of these questions? Don't speak unless you're spoken to."

He nods, wanting to mouth the words "Yes, Mistress."

I shake my head, "Nah-ah. Flip over."

He rolls, ass-end facing up. I take my shirt off, then my bra—tossing them onto the floor.

Now is when the fun begins.

The palm of my hand hits his ass and he squirms. Then, I run my hands down his back, first gently, then with my nails dragging. Finally, I straddle his hips and lay atop his back. I want him to feel my curves pressed into him. I want him to turn over, blue eyes on me, seeing my splayed nakedness.

*

I didn't mind the kissing. It kind of felt like the first time I hooked up with a guy in college—we watched *Snow Day*, made out, and dry humped over clothing.

It's when he lays me down and slips his fingers underneath my clothes that I have a problem. I feel him begin to hold me down by my wrists. I feel paralyzed. Time is passing in swift jumps. By the time my clothes are off, I don't even realize it's happened until I feel his electric skin on mine.

"I choose you, Pikachu!" the television chimes.

Between Pikachu's cries and the sounds coming from the bathroom, I know I can't get Caroline's attention.

Like with Tiffy, it seems like there is no way out. There is no fight or flight in me at this moment—just survival. I try to stay as

still as possible as I see him remove a condom from his wallet. Anticipating the insertion, I tense—

The pain is immediate and I look at the ceiling instead of his face. But this pain is nothing compared to what it will be a few minutes later, when he turns me over.

Nothing can prepare me for a penis in my rectum. I gag and cry at the same time into the pillow, trying to keep still. I utter a quiet "ow," but by that time, he is out of me and putting on his clothes. After he is dressed, he knocks on the bathroom door.

And they are gone.

"Our secrets," Caroline still calls them.

Not anymore.

*

I pull my leg across his hips and sit next to him. "You can turn over now."

David has always been hard to read—his emotions buried somewhere behind walls I haven't even seen yet. His glares alternating between my eyes and my body have me so intrigued that I let my tough facade fall.

"You can speak now."

He sits up and we face each other. I've never really been able to look that deeply into another person's eyes. It's too much of an energy exchange for me. But it feels like his energy is feeding off of mine and vise versa—as if in a continuous loop.

"You're a goddess and you deserve to be worshiped."

Now the roles have reversed and I'm left open.

*

A few weeks later, my stepmom, Tammy, calls me on a Friday afternoon to talk about how her visit with Daddy at the jail went last Sunday. We are talking about the logistics of visitation when it comes to men and women having alternating days.

"They don't let them come out together."

"Why not? Like some dude is going to jump some chick's bones right there?"

"Well your dad *has* been in there for eight months."

I pause. *Gross.*

"And he's writing those letters to all of those guys' girlfriends because most of them can't read or write."

Even more gross. Daddy is Gilmer County Jail's E.L. James.

I begin to picture Daddy sitting at his jail-issued desk surrounded by cans of Coke and Honey Bun wrappers—payment for his works of fiction.

In an effort to deflect from the thought of Daddy being anything but as pure as the virgin snow, I respond, "That's nice that he's writing romantic letters."

"I'm not sure how much *romance* is in them."

I try to be Tammy's friend because I'm the only person who can truly empathize with her when it comes to my father. Therefore it wasn't strange when, at some point in the past, she had disclosed to me that they'd never been sexually intimate at all and the closest they ever got was when he was intoxicated. Science would say this was because of his Oxycontin addiction, but psychology would say he was self-medicating due to his past trauma. It was probably a combination of both.

For a brief moment, I mentally remove myself as the child from the situation and ponder the resilience of it all. So far, Daddy has been clean for eight months—the longest amount of time in his life. True, it is by force, but for whatever reason, he is returning to a normal human state. And for that, I am proud and excited for him. For once, perhaps I can take a few moves from his playbook.

After the conversation ends, I remember something I said to a friend one night over drinks the previous week: "If you're not in so deep that you can get hurt, then you're not completely committed. You can't love someone unless you're open to the possibility of getting hurt."

Until this moment, I had been only partially taking my own advice—being only open enough to give the illusion of vulnerability but closed enough to protect myself from pain.

So on the way home from the bar that same night, I decide to change this. But there is no way I am letting David know until the moment presents itself. I put on my normal, domineering facade for the time being.

"No touching until I say so."

He is groaning and drooling for the entire fifteen-block ride home. He opens my door and carries my bag upstairs.

Good.

We sit on the bed next to each other and I queue up the newest episode of *South Park*.

"We're going to watch this and you're not going to touch me until it's over."

By the second commercial break, his hands are on my back and I'm not putting up a fight. By the third, his hands have found their way to the front of my shirt. I inhale loudly as he squeezes.

After what seems like the longest third act in television history, I turn to him and kiss him on the mouth, tongue pressed hard to his teeth. I lie down next to him, our mouths still intertwined.

Finally, we break—gasping.

This time, he's straddling me, his thighs touching my hips. He looks at me and smiles. "What do you want me to do?"

I cup his face in my hands, rubbing my palms against his stubble. Then I move to tousle his hair. "Whatever you want to do."

He smiles, confused. I take his shoulders and pull him downward, close to me. As he kisses my neck, I whisper in his ear.

"I trust you. I surrender."

James Prenatt

Tonight, Please

It's hard to hurt someone and let yourself like it.
You didn't want to hurt him,
just paint pink zebra stripes on his skin with a pen knife
like words on a blank page, imperfect
and one day a final draft of your favorite book,
the one you carry in your backpack.

You were just a heartbeat.
Imagine it splitting open without him,
from between your legs,
you can only growl and hold tight.

There isn't any safer place than this.
She's like a walking mirror
and you're the prettiest boy in pain I've ever seen.

Man Attitude | Indian ink | Richard Vyse

Man Edge | Indian ink | Richard Vyse

Man Mood | Indian ink and watercolor | Richard Vyse

Man Thoughts | Indian ink | Richard Vyse

Chelsey Weber-Smith

Slasher Film

When I'm not brave
someone walks the hallways
around my heart
carrying a silver blade
and singing my name.
He walks slowly
and drags the end of the blade
across the walls
so it makes a sound
that is like waiting
for someone you love
to spit out the bad news.

The suffering
go on suffering
sounding like ice cubes
falling into a glass, sounding
like a glass falling onto the floor,
sounding like the floor itself falling through.
I don't believe in hell but I believe
that some people believe in hell
and for me that is hell
and in the morning I say God,
yours is the only voice
I want in there,

the sound an open field makes
when the sun is straight above it.

But their voices are your voice
even the one that stomps the rooms
kicking in closet doors and laughing.
God, if you have so many voices
which do I listen to?
I wear this guilt
on every inch of me
like a second skin
of someone I dug up,
someone that had plastic lilies
at their grave.
I wear this guilt
and it doesn't fit.
I've been wearing it
all of my life.
I haven't felt the sun
all of my life.
And the suffering
go on suffering
and people say they should
go on suffering.
They should go on suffering
because we go on suffering,
because *my hunger is God's hunger*
and God is hungry forever.
That's not God.
Yes it is.
I didn't hear anything.
It's just the wind.

Caroline Smadja

The Village Elder

I come from the heart of Africa. From a small country squeezed between the Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Northeast is arid, made of steppes; the Southeast, lush and moist, dense with equatorial forest. I grew up in between, in the savanna that's since become the turf of safaris. I've lived in France for over twenty years, first in Strasbourg, where I studied sociology, now in the suburbs of Paris.

My country fell under French rule in the nineteenth century. I had no trouble obtaining French citizenship once there was no one my age to return home to. The friends I was raised with have all died. A generation of men, decimated for feeling invincible. They laughed at western customs when I told them about safe sex. There's no match to feeling a woman's insides, flesh to flesh, they said.

I was born in 1960, the year of my country's independence. My father left months after my birth. My mother's eldest brother took special care of me. He already had three young children, but I was

the only boy of the family. One day when I was six, Uncle Jacques woke me earlier than usual.

"Come with me, Francis, we're going to see the village elder," he said.

My head hummed with sleep. All I could remember was that we'd visited the old man before and that his face looked like parched earth.

The brown plain stretched ahead, bare, aside from the grass as rough as rattan under my feet, and occasional bushes that reared their deformed limbs above ground. It is common to spot the zigzags that a herd of zebras make in the landscape, or the giant curves of a couple of elephants—though most of the wildlife comes out at dusk or late at night, like hyenas do.

That morning bore the stillness of noontime. The sun banged over my head like drums. None of us would ever have considered wearing a hat. This wasn't how people thought then, even in the West. I spent summers with nothing on but shorts. My armpits gave off a sour whiff with a trace of sweet in it.

Uncle Jacques often took me around the wilderness. While we crossed the savanna together, skins almost touching, he told me stories in a voice that verged on song. Stories of hiding in the bush to wait for lions; of men spear-hunting by moonlight.

"Why don't you ever do the hunting yourself?" I asked him once.

"I don't like to kill," he answered.

Did elephants stay in the same family all their lives? Could they survive with one tusk only? I wanted to know. How did cheetahs grow spots? My questions invariably drew chuckles and jokes. Uncle Jacques could tease me all he wanted. I trusted he wouldn't say or do anything to hurt me.

That day, he walked ahead of me, his head erect, his back very straight. I figured he'd run out of words. His shoulders rolled at each step like two swells of muscles about to split off his spine. I had trouble keeping up the pace. I was relieved to hear him say, "We're just about there," though it wouldn't have occurred to me to complain.

We found the village elder crouched on the red dirt not far from his hut, sharpening a machete. He laid it on a nearby rock covered with a white cloth. Then, he and my uncle exchanged greetings in Sango. The village elder didn't call for one of his wives to serve us drinks, as was customary. He did it himself, with slow, deliberate motions. I feared his body might crack when he first stood. His ribcage protruded through his leathered skin. His legs bowed under the weight of time.

He brought mango juice for me and ginger beer for my uncle. When Uncle Jacques asked why he wasn't drinking any, the village elder replied with a rotted grin, "I'm going to need all my head." For what, a six-year-old boy like me hadn't a clue. My uncle gave out a roar. It sounded as if it were coming from another man's throat. Something else drew my attention: no one came out of the village elder's hut that I'd seen swarming with women and children, as if word had been given to leave the three of us alone.

My ears droned with heat. I could tell time had passed by the clench of the sun down my neck. Still, the two men went on chatting. Once I'd drunk all my mango juice, I chewed on the flesh that lay at the bottom of the cup.

"Now's the time," the village elder said at last. He turned to me. "Take off your shorts."

His order startled me, but I let them drop to the ground.

"Good." He shook his parched head at me. "Now move closer."

I grew alarmed and looked up at Uncle Jacques.

"Francis, do as the village elder tells you," he said in a quiet, even tone.

As soon as I stepped forward, the village elder grabbed my penis with one hand. For an instant, I saw the white blade of the machete in his other hand. I had no time to be scared. Only when

the blood gushed out of me did I begin to cry. My uncle and the village elder laughed.

"You're a man now!"

They looked happy and proud.

I had no idea how the sudden throb in my groin could have changed me into a man. I felt like crying some more, but the sun crushed my tears before they could roll down my cheeks. In a few deft moves, the village elder wrapped the thick white cloth he'd kept within reach between my legs, then around my buttocks. He threw my foreskin into the bush. I guess some animal made a snack of it.

"We must put food into you now," they told me.

Mottled butterflies flapped before my eyes. My mouth tasted of dried soil. Yet, I shook my head "no" to the fresh pineapple I was brought. My uncle gulped it down. He let the juice run between his naked thighs. They offered me a bowl of *bouiller*, a porridge-like mixture of rice, peanut butter and sugar traditional to my country. I shook my head again.

"We didn't cut out your tongue," my uncle joked.

For the first time in my life, I disliked him.

I was led into a big hut where my mother, aunt, the rest of the family and the other villagers were all gathered in merriment. It took me a while to grasp that the commotion had to do with what

had just happened to me. I got it only after crowds of celebrants clamped me to their chest and repeated what I'd heard earlier: *You're a man now*. Which again struck me as odd, since I was wearing what looked like a diaper.

The festivities lasted hours. Once the bout of congratulations was over, I sat in a corner, the pounding of drums in my head, and still refused to eat or say anything. My uncle came over several times to coax me.

"Why are you being so stubborn, Francis?" he asked with his typical good-naturedness.

I looked down at my feet crusted with red dirt.

"I see," he said at last, "You don't trust Uncle Jacques anymore. Is that it?"

I didn't touch food till after the stroke of the sun had turned into a waft. For days, I wore the white cloth the village elder had diapered around me. I walked sideways. It was painful to pee. It took a full week for the wound to heal. Once it did, my penis returned to normal. I've never had any trouble with intercourse. In fact, I can sustain a hard-on for an hour if I wish.

It turned out Uncle Jacques had spared me as best he could, though I didn't think of thanking him until he was dead. My schoolmates lost their foreskin between the age of twelve and sixteen in an endurance ritual attended by the whole village.

Things have changed since I was a child. Today, most of the boys in my country are cut at birth, in the hospital. Girls aren't as lucky. They're still excised by the village elder. A woman, according to tradition. In a public ceremony. Without anesthetics. I sometimes wonder whether the flesh slashed out of them ends up in the belly of wild beasts.

Geula Geurts

Linen

It was the time of the harvest,
bundles of ripe flax
drying on Rahav's roof,
waiting for the harlots to be done,
to come up & strip the stalks into fibers.

Flax from the Old Aryan *flah—to flay, strip*
flax from the Latin *plectere—to plait, twist*
flax from all over entered
inside & outside the city walls.

O flax! Wet nails
on dry sheaves, fingers
bleeding to spin you into linen.

& without linen
no bed sheets,
no garments.

Was it Rahav, the mistress of the inn
who said a *zonah* should always
dress herself? Or did she say
a harlot works for her clothes?

I can't remember her exact words,
but I recall the scarlet thread
hanging from the roof.

When the men came, the brothel was spared.
The red meant—*we have suffered enough.*

Benjamin D. Carson

The Road to Phnom Tamao

for ARW

The elderly woman stoops in the shadow of the palm leaf. She's stuck it into the ground and its leaves plume up like broom or a naga sheltering the Buddha. She's nestled behind it to keep the dust out of her eyes. Her gray hair is shaved down to the skull. Her thin arm out. Palm up.

To take the road to Phnom Tamao, a derelict animal sanctuary about thirty-five kilometers south of Phnom Penh in Takeo province, Cambodia, is to run a gauntlet of human suffering—a series of aged men and women, but mostly women, staggered along the dusty, washboard road—only to arrive at a place of caged and cage-less monkeys, mangy deer with open sores, penned birds and lonely lions, and sad-eyed, panting bears—and the coup de grâce, a three-legged elephant loosely fitted with a prosthetic limb. Visitors stomp stupidly around well-trod paths where deer move freely and monkeys stalk, always eager for a

snack. Alligators sun on dusty rocks or sleep in thick ponds of algae. Owls sit motionless, their eyes rolled back into their heads.

I stopped at a monkey cage, wondering why *these* two were inside, while so many others were out, free. *Who's in?* I wondered. *Who's out, and who decides?* The monkeys on the outside seem to eat whatever anyone throws at them; they're curious and brave and often aggressive. They moon for cameras and show off their babies, as if tourists were paparazzi and each of them a kind of star. If you have something they want, they'll try to take it, even if it means mounting a backpack for a rear assault. Bottles are a kind of invitation.

All of the animals at Phnom Tamao have a rather haunted look about them. *Sanctuary*, their eyes, melting in the heat, say with deep, black irony. *Right.* They've been saved, to be sure, but only in a sense. I think of the ancient mariner who gets sentenced for killing the albatross to life-in-death rather than a more merciful, final death. The former penance sails deep in that look.

At this particular pen, one of the monkeys swings wildly from the bamboo rafters to the cage and back to the rafters, hoot-hooting and caw-cawing. He swings the way the bear down the

road moves his head—from side to side, as if to shake off some nascent idea about fate or justice. A group of monks gathers to watch, pointing and laughing. The other monkey comes down to eye level and looks at me, at me and past me at the same time. She has small black eyes, black blueberries, filled with sweet sadness. She looks blue, as if she is just having one of those days, and then she reaches out her hand. Three little fingers and a thumb. I reach into my bag for a banana and slowly hand it to her. I rest it in her palm but she makes no move to take it. She doesn't wrap her long black fingers around it. She doesn't even look at it, making it clear that food isn't exactly what she wants. I let go and it falls, but her hand hangs there, open. I reach out to her, slowly, and put my finger in her palm, and her hand gently closes. The monks drift away, and I stand there, holding hands with this sad-eyed monkey, the little brown banana at my feet. Is this a kind of food? Touch?

Back along the road, the tourists—undoubtedly, and by comparison truly, rich in the minds of those lining the ditches—roll by, coating in dust the undead, a pall that settles heavily on skin and bones. It's a kind of magnet, pulling in the poorest from the countryside who mistake it for a silk road, a route to improbable possibility. But it's more like a vortex, a black hole, its banks an event horizon. Nothing good is here.

I've often wondered who, if anyone, stops to slip a riel into one of the dozens of outstretched hands, or if maybe someone from time to time just tosses a bill from a tuk-tuk, a guilt-bird flittering to the ground to be snatched up and nestled in the brim of a hat. A bad Samaritan, a naga indifferent to the rain, I've never tossed anything. And yet these are the first people, and the last—this road, the road to Phnom Tamao, for me, the path to perdition.

Silence Unguarded – Declinations | Jean-Pierre Parra

JP Allen

Translation

Even though I changed my mind about God
I still sing to the Savior
in Spanish, in Spanish Mass
once monthly,
not because I'm begging or giving any favors
but because both I and the sun-creased man
in the next pew, with no papers,
know we need those songs sung.
So we knead our lungs
until they rise
into shaky unison,
unrehearsed valleys and highs of our grand mother tongue.
My grandmother's tongue
has been a violet petal for twelve
years now, peeking from a granite shadow
at a slightly older sun
than the one
that rose on her quiet
hemorrhage in the closed next room
while I stared at the screen memorizing
cartoons, the day my mother and I
stopped speaking Spanish around the house.

Dani Lamorte

But She's Still Got Those Teeth

I've been re-watching *Frasier*—an exercise in embarrassment for white people—and he keeps singing that song that doesn't make any sense at the end of the show, and it wouldn't make sense elsewhere, but it's at the end of the show so that's where you notice it doesn't make sense there or elsewhere and it says something about "Scrambled eggs all over my face. What is a boy to do?" and I don't know what a boy is to do—and I've never known what a boy is to do—and I don't know what scrambled eggs on one's face has to do with a show about rich white people's gaffes unless they're scrambled Beluga caviar, but I just want to quickly extract one thing: egg on my face.

I knew he liked Japanese, so we went to a Korean restaurant masquerading as a Japanese restaurant which was the closest thing at hand. The prelude to this meeting is unclear in my mind. I remember a trip to the florist, but that might have been another day. And I remember a trip to buy chocolate, but that (subject or object) could have been another boy (subject or object). He

looked simultaneously astonished and angry. I looked hopeful and, just based on my memory of my facial muscles, overrun by adrenaline. The possibility of rejection is a pleasure. The reality of multiple possibilities is a pleasure. Sitting on that edge, holding your breath, waiting for the words "and the winner is…" is a pleasure.

I was in high school—I think—when I visited a dentist in Brackenridge—I think. Brackenridge is nothing special. It is every gray, arthritic steel town along the tributaries of the Allegheny. Daily life causes the town to strain, to suffer, to mourn for the days before this pain. If I described the people of Brackenridge, I would describe their pallor. I always think the word "pallor" implies a paleness, an unwellness, a sense that colors have faded into muted peach tones. The dictionary agrees with me this time. That's not always the case, but never let a bad book get you down.

My mom drove me down a paved road with crumbled edges abutting green lawns, ownerless lots. On the left side there was a one-story house with white siding. There were a lot of one-story houses with white siding but this one had a sign in the front with my initials—DDS—on it, though that was a coincidence. That I share my initials with thousands of dentists is an unkind, unfeeling, careless coincidence. It's the kind of coincidence that

makes you wonder if God, or the Universal Mind, or the Sentient Finger of Adam Smith can only—as Diamanda Galás says—"get it up…in the TV public operating room of another man's misfortune." And then she cackles. But this day I didn't cackle. I needed a cap on my tooth, I think. Or I needed a filling. Maybe. I needed a dentist—like I needed the hole in my head that drove me to the dentist, not my mom, not that kind of driving, the kind of driving that gets you in the car so your mom drives you. That kind of drive. It was that kind of drive.

The receptionist told us he was about to retire and damn if he wasn't overdue. He was that avocado that never ripened, but turned straight into an inedible dirt-brown paste. He was that dirt that never sprouted a seed but turned white with mold. He was all the disappointing products made by the hands of man, or at least that's how I imagine the entirety of his career. I could be wrong and this could be unfair, but at this juncture IDGAF. That's the perview <–(sp?) of the living: to speak. The perview <–(sp?) of the dead is to talk back.

A wirey <–(sp?) white man in a lab coat. Clean shaven. His cheekbones had fallen into his cheeks and fallen into his jawbone. They'd fallen back, too. His sad lips had been pulled backward in the tide of swooping skin, giving his frown a deep and immense presence. His frown was his face. The mark of long-furrowed,

unkempt brows declared itself the echo of the frown below. Angry eyes hung on either side of the tiny frown, weathered and exhausted and frustrated. They felt small. His pasty skin had a pallor—a pallor—of disdain. His retirement was overdue.

At the end of the scheduled procedure—whatever it was—he looked down at my drool-drenched face in furious disappointment. I knew that look. Like, I'd seen it from kids. It was the "Why are you like this?" look, which was usually about being queer but sometimes about being poor and this time it was about being poor, definitely poor, and ugly. And usually the kids also gave me the "Why are you this ugly?" look, but this "Why are you this ugly?" look was the expert "Why are you this ugly?" look, along with the "Why are you this poor?" look, and I've never had answers for those and I don't have answers for those now, except the answer I have for this dentist's career and when you're dead you can drop me a note, Dorothy.

The dental drill still in his hand, he growled, "Your teeth are so fucking crooked." Then he raked the drill across my bottom incisors.

He raked the drill across my bottom incisors.

Without localized painkillers, or even a simple warning, my body stiffened in the sticky vinyl chair. In moments like these, poor people become overwhelmingly aware that their bodies

are—according to the middle classes and above—disposable. In moments like these, queer people become overwhelmingly aware that their bodies are—according to non-queer people and people pretending to not be queer—in need of forceable <–(sp?) correction. A few minutes later, I turned out of the artificial comfort and footed myself on linoleum tiles. The burnt, chalky taste of ground tooth fresh in my mouth, I felt like I could barf.

I knew I was poor and I knew I was ugly, but I didn't know my teeth were bad. I don't remember knowing my teeth were bad. Though I remember teeth growing in crooked, growing in late, I never thought they were bad. But now I knew, and now I knew that the "Why are you like this?" look also applied to my teeth.

Pegasus was once a club in Pittsburgh's Downtown. I frequented Pegasus around the same time I frequented that Japanese/Korean restaurant. It was more than a club, really, but there are other times to tell its story. Terry was the bouncer and he looked like someone who should be gruff, but he wasn't gruff, at least not to me. And Pegasus was really about who you were or weren't and I was—let's not make this controversial—a gay man at the time and so I was someone who *was*, so Terry wasn't gruff to me, but if you were someone who *wasn't* then Terry was because he *was*. Past Terry, in the post-Terry cavern that held Pegasus, everyone *was*. And everyone *was* more than me, so

everyone was gruff to me. And the gruffness went beyond the mildewy <–(sp?) black walls into the bouncerless <–(sp?) outside.

So John, you know John, John and I were walking from Eastern Wigs, which was really close to Pegasus. They were not gruff because gruffness doesn't sell a wig. And so we were walking, I think in the summer, away from Eastern Wigs toward the bus stop. Eastern Wigs was downtown, too, and fags have things to do downtown I guess. I don't know what they do downtown now that cruising isn't a thing anyone admits to and it seems to me that if you aren't going to admit to cruising then you aren't going to admit to being downtown, but there you have it. And I thought I'd about had it with this tooth thing when two fags drove by and I heard one say—from the passenger side of his best friend's ride, so I don't know if I should have even been hearing him in the first place—

"Hey, I saw that kid last night at Pegasus. He has a nice body but his teeth are messed up."

So John, you know John, he had had braces. So I knew it wasn't him. I knew it was me. And I knew I had been drive-by-"Why are you like this?"ed. A drill in a crusty hand leaving a crusty dust on my tongue had already inscribed the language of my teeth in my head and it had such a limited lexicon:

fucked-up

messed-up

why.

And he had spoken my language and my teeth shook like a basilar membrane.

The basilar membrane, you know the basilar membrane, it's that snail in your head that shakes when sound comes in through your ear. And different parts of the snail dance when different sound songs come in. So when the dog barks, the dog dance starts up. And when you are crying, the snail knows it and dances some kind of Martha Graham mourning dance because sound isn't just about other people—the snail dances for you, too. And my teeth were dancing for me and for that boy with sorrow and scorn, and for that boy that I talked about before.

He was sitting across from me because I had engaged in some bad magic, by which I mean the backwards alchemy of the self, by which I mean I tried to make myself into something I thought he wanted, and tried to want that at the same time, and to want him, but I really probably didn't, I guess.

I guess a lot about that time in my life. I don't know it very well anymore.

It was Valentine's Day and I had decided, weeks prior, to be a secret Valentine admirer of this boy. I thought I liked him, I suppose. When I told his roommate, who I convinced to

collaborate on secret surprise gift missions, his roommate asked, "Do you really admire him?" And I was like, "Yeah, I like him," and he was like, "But do you admire him?" And that question resulted in a snail dance I didn't enjoy and I knew I didn't admire this kid but it was too late and too much egg was on my face. I just liked his curves.

So, I went through with all of whatever it was I went through with and there we sat in this restaurant on the first floor, my eyes periodically glancing over his right shoulder into the street strewn with restaurant garbage. I don't remember how he found out it was me who did the Valentine's dance or how we ended up sitting at the table or how the conversation got where it was but he was describing what he looked for in a date and he said:

"And good teeth. Crooked teeth really disgust me."

I don't remember how he had found out it was me or how I got there or what I gave him or what I said before or after and, perhaps, if it hadn't been for those words spelled out above, between little licorice dots rotting away my teeth, I wouldn't remember him at all.

But he looked at me and said, "Why are you like this?" in the language of teeth, which is something like "fucked-up, messed-up, why," and I sat there wondering when I could leave. When I could

be done with him and when the snail could be done with the dance he'd started.

The snail still dances.

I turn to my left for photos because my rightmost incisor on the right side isn't right and I want it left out of my image. I look at it in the mirror and ask, "Why are you like this?" but it's rhetorical. My tooth knows why it's like that and it's the physical representation of the this that I am like.

The snail still dances.

Calvin Rey Moen

Cruel April

April, you're fucking terrifying.
Last week it was snowing.
How can I trust my bare skin to this air?
Do you even remember February?
How this landscape was a frozen cemetery?
How these trees were tombstones?
Now crocuses erupt from open graves
Past clumps of rotting leaves.
Too soon, April, and yet too late!

My mom bought a house when I was grown.
After years of apartments, trailers, basements,
Moving, always moving, she has settled down.
April, I walk through you like that house.
Nature has no memory,
Or these buds wouldn't be so bold, so tender.
When God sent a flood to cover the Earth
And destroy every living thing,
When the waters finally rolled back
And the land appeared, God sent a rainbow
As a promise.
No one thought to hold Him to this.

Once I went away all summer
And when I came home, my baby sister

Took one look at me and burst into tears.
I dropped onto one knee and held her
As she sobbed wordlessly in my arms,
Like, April, you hold me now.

Alyssha Nelson

What I Like about *Supermarket Sweep*

is that a blonde woman named Jennifer
with teeth white as Wonder Bread can wear
an all-denim outfit to match her husband's
and it's not a joke. Late 90's,

perfect time for blondes named Jennifer
to exist without a stitch of irony.
Jennifer can overlook the Coast soap—
The Eye Opener!—and no one will say:

maybe you should have opened your fucking eyes.
Gee whiz, Jen, we all know you're trying.
You had me wrapped around your little finger
from the moment you said *night school.*

Your husband is much better at this show
and I suspect you're only here for him
since he's the one who runs the final Sweep.
I have never pushed a shopping cart for love,

but I have eaten pickled herring,
lost ten pounds, decided against haircuts
and switched cigarette brands. Of course these things

weren't televised. You and your husband look sweet

as you scheme, heads together, the best route
around the store, curls caught in stage light.
You'll look sweeter still as you cheer him on,
Come on, honey! Get your hands on that beef!

and there isn't any irony there, either,
nor in the fact that you and your husband
end up $500 behind first place.
Mark didn't risk the grind-it-yourself coffee

and you didn't push him to. Jen, I know
it's hard to be bold sometimes, especially
in the late 90's, wearing that much denim.
But trust me, Jen, I also know this:

there's nothing riskier than settling.
Grab as much ham as you can before the timer runs out.

Brenna Womer

Sixty Minutes at 375˚

After two weeks had passed and it seemed her husband really wasn't coming back, she decided to make herself a pie. Preferring to bake drunk—preferring, at that time, to do everything drunk or not at all—she made an Old Fashioned and cut butter into cubes for the crust. By the time she'd mixed together the peach filling, her glass was empty for the second time. As she measured a double-shot of Four Roses over the bowl of filling, she tipped the bottle too quickly and the glass overflowed. The excess flooded the thick, syrupy mixture below; she cursed and stared at the puddles of liquor pooled between slimy peach slices. She could rinse the fruit but had used the last of her five-pound bag of sugar, and though she knew every turn of their small-town roads as well as she knew the curvature of his shoulder blades, she also knew she was too drunk to drive.

She picked the wooden spoon up from its rest and folded in the accidental bourbon, sprinkling in some extra cornstarch so the filling wouldn't run. She set the timer for an hour and didn't check

it as it baked, just waited to see the pie in all its golden, bubbling glory at the end. She didn't clean the kitchen and left the pie uncovered on the stovetop to cool overnight. In the morning it was still golden but lifeless, and the filling had congealed in the slits she'd cut on top to let it breathe. She ate pie for breakfast, straight out of the plate, with a fork and a hot cup of coffee. The bourbon added a nice spice, a welcomed bitterness that cut through all the sweet. It was better for it.

On her first day attending the area's divorced women's group, the self-elected leader approached her after the meeting to ask if next time she brought a dessert she wouldn't mind substituting extract for bourbon because some of the women fought daily against their alcoholic tendencies and wouldn't it be a shame if one of them backslid because of a deviant peach pie. She felt the heat in her cheeks and told the woman how she had come up with the recipe by accident two weeks after she asked her husband if he wanted to play Yahtzee and he responded saying he wanted a divorce. She told the woman it was a better pie for the bourbon, and she'd just as soon not make her peach pie at all than to make it without something that deepened and complicated the flavor. The woman said that would be fine; they'd make do with the prepackaged lemon cookies, thank you.

Lyric Dunagan

Dreaming You Have Children When You Are in Your Twenties

Her fuzzy head smells amazing, better
than
your dog's, but her nails are
  scratchy and you can't remember

where she came from.

she's got this satisfying weight like
bread,
and you like how people
  are looking at you like

good-job-citizen, well-done-ma'am. She is warm and

never crying,

everyone is turning, she is an
extension
of your elbow, everybody's
  eyes are gone. You are tired, but

where to put the baby?

Inside the hollow of a tree? In
stories woodland creatures are known
for guarding children. Or perhaps up in the tree.
In a cage in the tree?
She will like the moonlight it will make her
skin like milk.

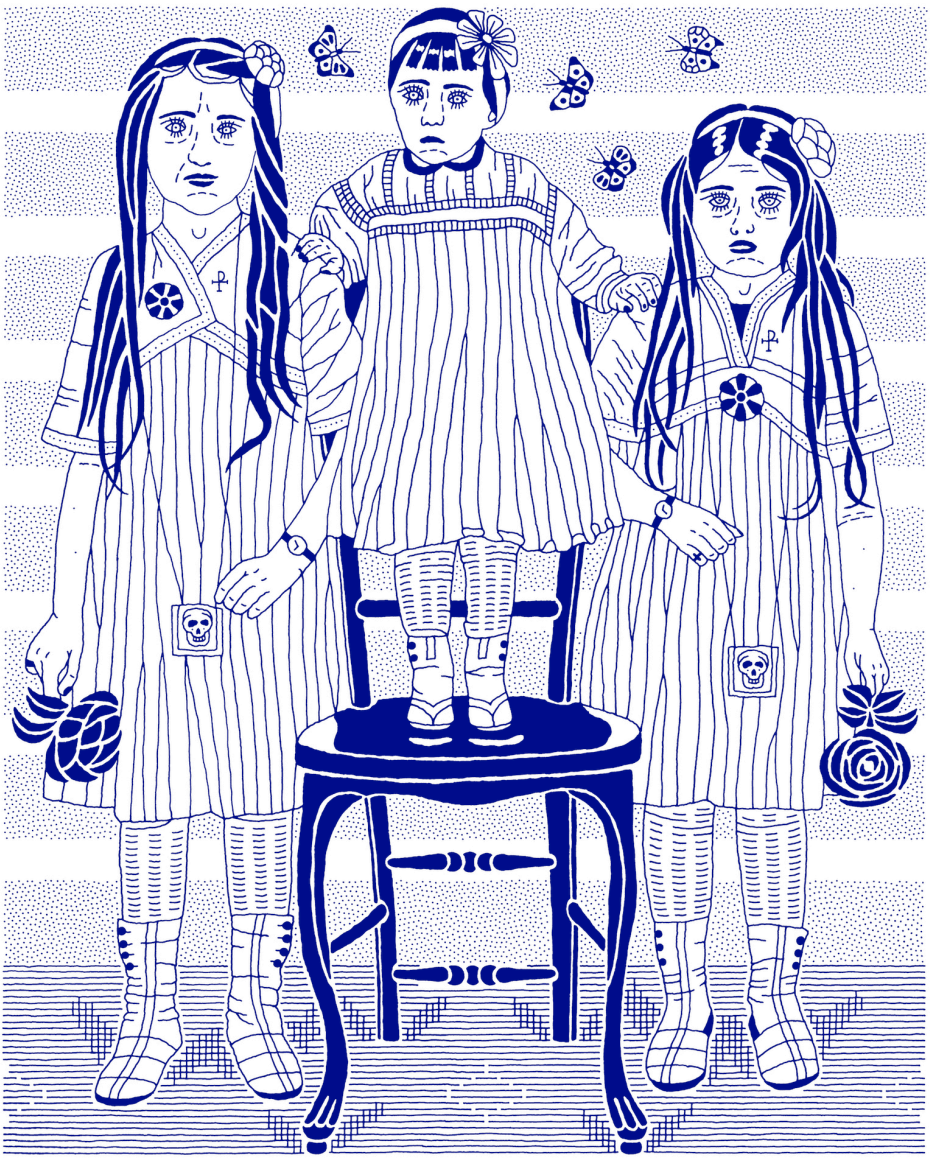
You have an old terrarium, fill it
with tiny cardboard banks and cars. A girl
should
grow up knowing what it's like

to be large.

Fit her with waterwings. Set her
adrift in the seas of your clawfoot – Mr. Bubbles islands

for her to conquer and bright ducks as far as her

marble eyes can see.



Daughters of the Dust | Dmitry Borshch

Betrothal of the Virgins | Dmitry Borshch

Krista Varela

Glory Days

For a month, my mother believed she was going to die. For thirty days, she was convinced that one by one, her neurons would break their ties and commit suicide, leaving her in a body she would no longer recognize. At some point, the friendly faces she knew would morph into strangers and the words she treasured would be rendered meaningless. She was sure that eventually she'd wake up in an unfamiliar world, one she had once fought so hard to survive. And then one day, she would just fade away.

*

A week before I turn twenty-five, I call my mother to say hi. I don't yet know that the cells in her brain have begun to self-destruct. We haven't spoken for a few weeks, so I expect to catch her up on a few things while she tells me about her classes.

My mother is seven months sober and finishing up an inpatient rehab program in Tucson. I'm a year out of graduate

school and trying to launch a teaching career in the Bay Area. My mother is starting her life over at fifty-three years old while I'm trying to get mine into a comfortable rhythm. We are both feeling our way through the world, making mistakes and trying to have compassion for ourselves. I fail at this last part most of the time, but through my mother, I'm learning.

My mother asks me about the weather, which in mid-August is hot and relentless—unusual for Northern California. I ask her about her program. Nothing in her voice indicates that this is a woman who thinks she's dying. She finally breaks the news.

"Well I guess I should tell you," she says, "that I've been diagnosed with a form of Alzheimer's Disease."

I hold my breath.

It's no secret that my mother's memory has been less than optimal for the last few years. Sometimes she talks as though her tongue is tripping over itself, getting hung up on simple words like *probably*. She has a tendency to confuse gender pronouns. Occasionally she will talk about my dog and ask me how he is doing. My dachshund, Quincy, who my mother has met and adores, is female. Most times throughout the course of our half-hour phone calls, she will ask me at least twice about my job.

For as long as her memory has been declining, my mother has thought she has Parkinson's disease, convinced that her body was poisoned by aspartame. When I was a child, our refrigerator was always filled with Diet Mountain Dew. She craved the caffeine and used to drink three or four to get through the day. I remember the excitement in her eyes as she would pop open the tab on the soda can, the way her fingers would grip the aluminum, the satisfied *ahh* after she would take her first gulp. Sometimes she started as early as eight in the morning, taking sips at stoplights as she drove me to school.

As she got older, she came to believe that toxins had built up in her body, causing her memory loss and occasional muscle spasms. Through a series of Internet searches, she swore by the theory that the artificial sweetener in her favorite diet soda had slowly been wreaking havoc on her body for years, despite the fact that no medical evidence supports this idea.

I tried to get her to see a doctor about it, begged her to get tested if she was so certain. She never did. She insisted on treating herself homeopathically, cutting out all sugar and caffeine, taking herbs and supplements. Dr. Oz became her patron saint.

But now, this is the real deal. Her rehab program gave her the support she needed to pursue a diagnosis and get treatment. She

went to a neurologist. He checked her reflexes, watched her eyes dart back and forth, had her memorize three words and asked if she could recall them fifteen minutes later. Then he sent her back to her doctor at the free clinic, where she receives her anti-depressants, for her results.

At the clinic, a nurse took my mother by the hand and sat her down.

"This is bad," the nurse said.

Posterior Cortical Atrophy. A variant of Alzheimer's that affects the posterior cortex, the area that processes visual information. But though it attacks a different part of the brain first, the end result—a mind struggling to hold on to reality—is the same.

"The prognosis isn't very good," my mother says, "most people have about eight to ten years after they are diagnosed."

I sit on the other end of the phone, eight hundred miles away, unable to speak. All I can think is, *She's so young. How many people are diagnosed with Alzheimer's in their fifties?* In ten years, I'll only be thirty-five. What am I going to do without my mother before I'm forty?

"I just want to make the most out of the time I have left," she tells me. She sounds so calm. She tells me she has known for about a week—she's had time to be angry and make her peace with it.

Anger is one thing I could feel right now, but all I feel is fear. I haven't made up my mind about having kids yet, but it scares me thinking my mother may never know her grandchildren. I suddenly have a deep and primal urge for a baby, a longing so profound that my abdomen aches.

"Say hello to...to your beloved for me," she says before we hang up, and I can hear her pause trying to remember my boyfriend's name, the boyfriend I have been with for nine years.

After we say goodbye, I sit on my bed. I exhale.

Early the next morning, I am shaken violently awake by an earthquake, a 4.0 that jolts through the entire bay. My eyes shoot open. The initial tremor is over before I'm even sure it's happening. I don't think I will ever get used to this feeling. Once I realize that my apartment is not falling down, I lie in bed and try to catch my breath as the earth continues to gently roll beneath me.

*

In the month I believe my mother is dying, I deal with it by not dealing with it.

My mother and I usually talk on the phone once or twice a month. She is in class five days a week and so am I. She's learning coping strategies, how to say no to her cravings, what to do once she gets back out in the real world, and I'm teaching college freshmen the difference between colons and semicolons. We really only talk to catch each other up on the big stuff. This is the way it has been since I moved away from home seven years ago. She has never asked me for anything more.

But now, I know I should call her more often. How many more phone calls will we have left that she will remember? How many more chances will I have to talk to her before she begins to lose traces of herself?

I think about her in the morning on my drive to work. She is in class, so I can't call her then. I think about her on my way home, but don't want to divide my attention between her and the road. I don't have the energy for it. I cherish my time in the car by myself on the way home, a time to decompress and listen to NPR. I think about her after dinner, but I have papers to grade and classes to prep for. I think about her while I brush my teeth, but don't want to wake her up if she's already in bed.

Some mornings, I wake up and see that my mother was on Facebook at one in the morning. I wonder if she was feeling lonely as she scrolled through her news feed, reposting and

sharing pictures of babies, puppies, and inspirational quotes: *There is nothing in the world that can trouble you as much as your own thoughts.*

I picture her lying in bed with the blue light from her phone screen her only company in the dark desert night.

*

I finally call my mother after two weeks. She seems in good spirits.

This time, when she asks me for the second time in twenty minutes what I am teaching this semester, I don't get frustrated. When this happened before my mother's diagnosis, I used to feel my throat tighten and fingers clench as I tried to ignore that small part of me that blamed her, thinking she must not be listening to me or concentrating hard enough.

But now, knowing there's a biological reason for her forgetfulness makes me more patient. I take a deep breath and feel my body relax. For the first time in my life, I feel true compassion for my mother.

This is the easiest it's going to be from here on out, I think. *Might as well start practicing.*

When she asks me these questions over again, I try to come up with something new to say. It helps distract me, makes it feel almost like a different conversation.

"I'm having trouble remembering all my students' names," I tell her. I immediately regret it. I usually try to avoid all topics related to memory in our conversations. I don't like to bring attention to it.

My mother doesn't miss a beat. Her sense of humor slays me.

"Welcome to my life," she says, laughing.

*

I'm getting ready for work and can't find my keys.

I've been feeling inert the last few weeks. I can't write, can't sleep, can't bring myself to do anything. I'm paralyzed now that I feel like I'm running out of time. Not just with my mother, but with myself.

I usually put my keys in the front pocket of my purse, but they're not there. I check my laptop bag, my nightstand, the kitchen table. Nowhere to be found. These small moments of forgetfulness send me into a spiral.

I haven't really found anything on the heritability of posterior cortical atrophy, but I haven't been looking all that hard either.

Mostly because I don't want to know, but also because I feel like I already do. I'm convinced that I have inherited whatever mutated gene is tearing through my mother's brain, sure that it is lying dormant in mine. Maybe it's a beast that is slowly awakening, disguising itself as lost keys.

I look for them under piles of mail, in the pants I wore yesterday. I'm in a full-blown panic now. My heart is racing and I start to sweat. I don't know how I could have misplaced them. Where could they be? I'm going to be late for work.

But there they are, in my fucking jacket pocket. I lock my front door in a rage, storm down the stairs to the parking lot.

The car is the only place I allow myself to get upset. I have approximately twenty-five minutes before I get to work, a finite amount of time, to let myself feel it and be scared. Bruce Springsteen, my mother's favorite, comes on the radio. He sings to me about time slipping away and leaving you with nothing but *boring stories of glory days*.

This song always used to make me think of the final episode of *Spin City* with Michael J. Fox, that moment when this song played as he came out onto the stage and took his final bows. I watched this episode with my mother in the living room of my childhood home. I was only nine at the time, but a part of me knew something momentous was ending.

I asked my mother why he was leaving the show, and she explained to me that he had Parkinson's disease.

"He's going to spend more time with his family," she told me.

Now hearing this song, I think of my mother, the way she used to throw her head back when Bruce came on the radio in the car, belting out the lyrics even when I'd roll my eyes.

I start to cry.

*

My mother goes to have an MRI to see how far the disease has progressed. It takes her two days after she receives the results to call me. I can't decide if this lack of urgency means good news or that she's trying to delay a truth that neither of us is ready to face. I keep my phone close every waking moment so I can feel it vibrate when she does call. But I can't bring myself to call her, because this phone call may tell me exactly how much time I have left with her.

My mother's voice is cheerful on the other end when she finally calls, and I still can't decide if this is a good or bad thing.

"Well, it turns out I don't have Alzheimer's after all," she tells me.

"What?" I ask. I don't know what this means.

"They told me I don't have posterior cortical atrophy. The nurse who gave me the news in the first place read my chart wrong. It didn't say posterior cortical atrophy at all."

"The nurse read the chart wrong?" I ask. I need to hear it a second time, because I'm not sure the explanation of a clerical error clears this all up. How did the doctor not catch this?

"She was old and so grouchy with me. Probably past the point of when she should have retired," she says. "I never got a chance to talk to my doctor about it, so he didn't even know. This is what you get with state health care, I guess."

That nurse should be fired, I want to say.

I have finally worked my way to anger. I am angry—angry not just at the nurse who can't read a fucking chart, but angry at myself because it hits me that for a month I thought my mother was dying and I went about my life as if nothing was different. I should have flown down to be with her, should have held her hand at her doctor's appointment, should have gone to her rehab graduation to cheer her on. And now I'm off the hook. A ball of guilt settles in my stomach.

My mother pulls out a piece of paper to read the notes she took at her appointment. She explains that the MRI does show some atrophy in her brain.

"There is one hyper-intense lesion, with several tiny lesions in portions of the right frontal lobe, which could indicate a possible micro-stroke," she reads.

"Micro-stroke?" I ask. How could my mother have had a stroke and not known?

"Yes, I don't fully understand all of it," she says, "but there's no mass or midline shift, which means no cancer, and there's no hemorrhaging. It's nothing conclusive, but the neurologist thinks that as long as I stay sober, my memory shouldn't get any worse."

In a former life, my mother was a nurse, before alcohol and pain pills lured her in a different direction. She used to be my medical expert, the one I'd turn to to help me study for my anatomy tests in middle school. She used to have all the answers. It is strange to hear her as confused as I am.

"But no Alzheimer's?" I ask a third time, just to be sure I understand.

"No Alzheimer's," she says.

That sounds pretty conclusive to me. So why don't I feel better?

*

I am still so angry that it takes me two days to realize that because my mother doesn't have Alzheimer's, I don't have it either.

The realization hits me on my drive to work and I feel myself deflate, as if I've been holding my breath for the entire last month. The weather has finally started to cool down in these last weeks of September and there is the smallest bit of frost on my windows. The autumn morning air catches in my throat, getting tangled on the knot that's been in my chest since I last spoke to my mother. I think about the battles she still has to face: finding somewhere to live, getting a job, trying to resist a bottle when things get hard. I know this is just the beginning of her recovery, that there are still plenty of hurdles to overcome. As my car inches along in the heavy traffic, I think about her memory and wonder if it really won't get any worse. I wonder if I will still be able to manage the same level of patience with her in the next twenty to thirty years that I seem to have learned over the past month.

But I remind myself that she's not dying, that this is something to be grateful for, and the knot loosens. Her brain, my brain, is not withering away. Its neurons are still clinging on to their millions of connections, choosing life over death. I will not be forty years old without a mother. As I exit the freeway and head into the valley, the redwood trees shimmer with morning dew.

The road sweeps around the hills and I find myself taking the turns a little too quickly. The marine layer is beginning to roll back, and the sun casts a soft buttery light through the car windows, warming my face.

I turn up the radio and continue to breathe. I am alive.

Nico Wilkinson

facts about manatees

one day, hundreds of years ago, a man
saw a mermaid: soft and round.
glowing in the sunlight.

he was disappointed.

perhaps this is why we
call them seacows. so men
can still have something
to believe in.

manatees don't seem to give a shit
what you call them.

that's probably why
they're the happiest animals
on earth.

this is a fact.

the manatee can eat
10% of its body weight
in kelp each day.

i'm too afraid to tell you
what 10% of my body weight
even is.

i don't know how good you are
at math.

today i've decided
i'm going to be the happiest
animal on earth.

look for me off the coast,
floating and weightless
in the sunlight.

Elizabeth Bridges

Moultrie, Georgia

Any farther south,
You're in Florida.
Daddy Tom had
200 acres.
A lot of land for
A colored man.
Church here.
School here.
Klan here.
Each time they burned,
Daddy Tom rebuild.
Again and again.
Until,
Klan came after
Daddy Tom's son.
Detroit, Michigan
Any farther north
You're in Canada.
Daddy Tom had
A tiny house,
On a busy street.
Typical for
A colored man.

Alicia L. Gleason

The April Journals

April 1:

Let me be transparent: this is not a real journal. You will not read my most secluded thoughts or dreams here, but some orderly reflections. Dr. Woo, the teacher of Transitions, assigned this therapy journal from today until the week after we get our expiry dates.

The assignment—which is to write a journal that would help you, future Transitions student, as you work through these challenging weeks—is, frankly, busy work for a natural writer. However, as Dr. Woo has probably already mentioned, Transitions class is a rite of passage for New Yorkers and for that—for having a spot in The City when so many artists and dreamers can never cross our borders—we should be thankful. For you, transitioner, I will take this task seriously.

I'm Ofelia but people call me Ofie. I doubt you know me: black hair, brown eyes, a long dimple on my left cheek? Between Clea and I, I'm the less attractive twin.

Anyway, I'll be relieved to know my expiry date, and Clea's. We've been waiting since I can remember.

April 2:

Future transitioner, are you nervous? Something I find helpful is thinking of other things. For example: any day now, the cicadas surface in New York—one million bugs per square mile. I can't imagine more things in this city, but I suppose nobody can, which is the point, which is the reason we expire. The air already seems thicker since the weather turned, and now the cicadas will come too, perched between buildings, collecting at the mouths of the subway. According to my research, cicadas live six weeks, maybe ten: then they expire, like us. Dad told me he remembers them screeching. He said the last time they swarmed the city Clea and I were babies, and we did not sleep through their whining.

That was before our mom expired. It seems silly that I used to wonder how she went. You'll learn all about that in class.

April 3:

Still no cicadas. I read that the ground temperature must reach 64 degrees: it's hardly that in the air today, and misting. Shoe-shaped puddles on the 4 train. Shop fronts droop, grey and damp.

While we wait for my expiry, I'll fill you in on the rest of things. I was accepted to NYU and Sarah Lawrence this afternoon. Still waiting on Columbia—my top choice. It's frustrating getting into schools but not knowing if I can go. What if my date is next year? Do I still go to college for one year? What if it is sooner? I'm hoping for an expiry date that is at least 6 years out, which gives me enough time to complete four years of college and to live as an adult in The City. I also imagine four years in college and two after is enough time to get a couple of poems published and a good start on a collection. I'd like to leave a paper trail. Have you thought about what you want to leave behind?

Clea only applied to two schools, for fashion design: The New School and FIT. She doesn't seem to wonder about them—Daniel is her distraction, I know—but I wonder. I wonder how far away will she be from me? How many minutes on the train?

You'd recognize her if you saw her because she and Daniel can't be missed, hanging on each other like scarves. He is handsome in an unconventional way. A thickly curled mop of blonde hair that sweeps over one eye. His skin is so fair it seems you can see through it at the wrist. He was my friend first but Clea loved him from the first time I had him over to the house. He's a year younger and doesn't have the same feeling we do, this feeling

of what's next? But of our 18 years together, this year with Daniel seems to have been her happiest.

Maybe I'm hiding from my feelings, telling you all this. It may not even matter, I suppose. I guess I am just part nervous, part delighted. To stop guessing, you know?

April 4:

10:00pm—Long day… we went to school as usual, and one by one they called us into the nurse's office to find out our dates. It felt like an eye and hearing test.

I figured they'd call Clea and I in at the same time, since we're from the same zygote and everyone is obsessed with that now that nobody can have twins, but they called me in first. The nurse gave me a glass of water and asked me how I felt. She fingered her way through the file folder, pulled out my file, handed me my card.

First, I did the math: 10/13/2065. Another 12 years, until I turn thirty or about as long as my mother. I asked the nurse what she thought, and she said she also gets until 30—three more years and she's lived a full life. She said it's not so bad.

I left the nurse's and went straight to the bathroom to call Clea. She didn't pick up, so I put down the toilet seat and waited.

A chipped green tile.

A single drop of urine on the floor.

Then, Clea's shoes beneath the stall.

"Did you get it?" she whispered.

I opened the door and she slipped in.

I handed her the card.

She rubbed the raised plastic of my expiry card with her thumb. She took a breath and let her cheeks fill with her exhale. "I guess twelve years isn't bad," she said, dipping her fingers into the pocket of her jeans, "enough time for a few poems." She smiled at me, her two front teeth yellow in the bathroom's sour light. She lifted her card from her pocket and pressed it into my hand, date side up.

"It's not all bad," she reasoned, "enough time to figure out a plan."

The date on her card said 6/10/2054. One year from June.

There was a shuffling of girls into the bathroom, a hug from Clea, a few choked tears about Daniel, the warmth of her hands on my back; I remember thinking that even though she's the one who expires early, that I am the unlucky one.

April 5:

Today is quiet and dim—no cicadas, no school. (Future transitioner, this is worth planning for: they give you a long

weekend after the expiry dates are handed out). Clea and I slept in and woke to a grey mid-morning.

"What do you feel like?" I asked her.

Clea sighed and looked up towards our ceiling, her eyebrows unruly and reaching across the bridge of her nose.

"It's not any more difficult than the waiting part. I'm worried about Daniel, though."

A thin beam of light stretched across her face, illuminated the room, then dimmed. Her hair turned grey in the light's shadow. She turned her face away from mine, wiped her nose with the back of her hand.

"How did he take it?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said, pulling the duvet up to her neck, "he didn't say anything."

I nodded.

"I guess I was expecting a lot worse," she continued, "like a couple of months or something." She paused, and turned towards me, her hands folded between her cheek and the pillow. To me, she looked so lovely. "What's it like for you?"

"Knowing my date?" I clarified. "Comforting in some way, to know. And to expire the same age as Mom."

"I wish we'd known her," Clea said, nuzzling her cheek into my hair. "I don't remember a thing."

April 6:

Transitioner! The cicadas have arrived! At least one, that is. I found him perched on the railing of our building—bigger than I had imagined, with netted wings and an iridescence that somehow surprised me, despite all my research.

Perhaps it was the arrival of the cicada that triggered the visions about our mother. Last night marks the third time in my 18 years I've dreamt of her. In the dream she piloted an old-timey plane. She wore goggles and had a thin scarf tied around her shoulders. The fringe flapped out the window.

When I told Clea and Dad over toast and coffee, they both got interested.

"She had one of those," Clea said, "the see-through blue scarf? I saw it in pictures."

"It was silk," Dad interjected. "You're right, except it wasn't just blue, it had pink and other colors in it." Dad spread a slice of butter across his toast, then lifted a finger to us, "the old-timey plane thing I don't remember her having, though."

We laughed.

"Do you still have it?" I asked. "The scarf?"

"You know," Dad said, pushing his plate back from the edge of the table, "I don't think I've got it anymore."

"What did you do with it?" Clea pressed. "Didn't you keep her things?"

He lifted his arms above his head, "we don't have the room," he reasoned. "It's a space thing."

"There's room outside of New York," Clea said.

I shifted in my chair and the wood creaked beneath me. Clea re-crossed her legs. Dad cleared his throat and set his napkin on his plate. The cicada—or maybe a new one—chirped somewhere near the kitchen window.

"Listen, Clea—both of you actually—this is not easy to understand--"

"It's really not complicated, Dad," Clea countered. A thin coil of hair fell across her shoulder.

Dad looked into his lap: "We stayed because we had to."

"People wish they could be in New York, C." I added.

Clea looked down at me, stabbed.

"Girls," Dad said. His glasses, round and thick, slipped down his nose. "Your mother and I stayed in New York, even after the expiry dates began, because we felt as if there was no other choice. With the stories we heard about the border—which was so much less secure then—people were drowning in the Hudson." He swallowed and looked down at his plate, "Nada, your aunt, left during those years, and for a while we thought we might follow—"

"And?" Clea demanded.

Our father lifted a hand to his mouth, rubbed his lips with the pads of his fingers. "When they called us in to claim the body, she had this pink slice down the bridge of her nose. I almost couldn't identify her. We thought it couldn't be an accident." He pushed his plate away. "Then they put up The Wall, and in a way we were relieved." Clea shifted her weight, crossed her arms. Dad continued: " At least, in New York we knew life would be short, but rich with quality. No crime. Beautiful art. An education. The most delicious food."

(At that moment, transitioner, I thought it really must be hard for him to have such an unusually far-off expiry date. They say those with far-off dates are lucky, but maybe not? To watch so many of us come and go?)

Clea turned and left the kitchen, the door to our bedroom slamming behind her. Her napkin curled over the edge of the table, a button of apricot jam bleeding into the linen. Dad and I spent the afternoon watching cicadas multiply from the kitchen window.

April 7:

Dreamt about Daniel. Probably because of talking with Clea yesterday, he was on my mind. He put his lips into a soft place on

my neck. I woke feeling warm. I'm only saying this, transitioner, to follow through on my promise to tell you as I live it. I'm wondering, perhaps, in the shadow of the expiry, if we all become a bit sick?

Clea got up early. I heard her shuffling through our desk drawers. She shook me awake, though I was already halfway conscious, figuring out that dream.

"Where's the envelope with our college stuff?" she asked.

I swatted her away. "Middle drawer," I said, then cleared my throat. "Why? Did you hear something? Did they email you?" I sat up.

"No," she said, digging, "I just need some information off one of the applications." I watched her pick up the envelope, tweeze open the mouth with her fingers.

"Are you going to tell them about your expiry? Try to get an expedited answer?" I asked.

"Maybe," she said.

"It'd be nice to have some certainty."

She looked into her envelope.

I turned away from her. Maybe I'd like to get an expedited answer. She could think about that.

April 8:

If you're like me, you've been looking forward to this field trip for all of Transitions. When I got Tina's journal last year, the first thing I did was flip through, searching for an entry about the field trip—but her recordings were sorry and I hardly learned anything at all. She barely mentioned The Wall.

First, they took us out to Battery Park. The tour began in a museum room. We buzzed, wondering how it would look, how close can we get? We met our tour guide (Melinda) who took our phones and cameras in a basket, and led us into a conference room.

It filled with light. One river-facing wall was made of glass, and the class gathered there, our hands smudging its fine finish. From there, we could see The Wall at a distance: worn, majestic, parting the Hudson. Of course, I'd seen The Wall before. From a distance. In movies. But I'd never been so close. I hadn't expected the foam of the water against The Wall's façade. Or its height, how when I looked up, I couldn't see the end of it. Or the greyness of it, the greyness of the water against it. That's what struck me most, I guess, was how ugly it looked. I turned to Clea, but she'd moved, standing back from the glass, taking it in from her distance.

While we stood there gawking, Melinda made some comments about the technology of it, which is fascinating, the fact that the water—charged with electricity—is a part of the defense. Have you heard that? In all of these years of rumors, of loitering around the Transitions kids, I never heard that. Clea asked whether there's an under-part, that secures beneath the surface of the water, or else couldn't someone just dive under there with a protective suit of some kind? To which Melinda said: "It's secured beneath the river bed, and any attempt to get over or under the wall is a virtual suicide."

Dr. Woo interrupted her then, and said, "They're Transitions students, you can be specific."

The tour guide looked annoyed. She projected some footage of a close up of The Wall. It shone, electrified. And when Clea countered, "Couldn't someone just cut the power?" the tour guide smiled politely at my sister and said it was a wireless technology, upgraded each year. Dr. Woo walked behind Clea and put her hands on her shoulders, massaged her neck. To break the silence I asked, "Do we get any closer?"

"This is it," the guide said. "You're lucky to be in the most beautiful and safest city in the world."

Then she showed footage from before The Wall was raised. I recognized a river undecided: bursting with bodies colliding,

thrashing towards and away from our city. I saw the coast on the other side, another set of buildings, reaching upwards, and for the first time I wondered if this wall was built to keep them out, or if it was intended to keep us in.

April 9:

I couldn't concentrate at school. After the field trip, Transitions has been all chatter—conspiracy theories and rumors about smugglers—and I can't even finish a short poem. I suggest you get all of your work for the semester finished before the day they hand out your expiry date. It will, undoubtedly, distract you.

Clea and I stopped for tea on the way home. She ordered a slice of vanilla cake with a thin slip of raspberry jam between the layers. We both had jasmine tea, the buds blooming at the base of our glass mugs. I watched the flower unfold completely.

"I've been thinking. And a year isn't bad, C. You could live in my dorm with me. I don't know where yet, but NYU, or maybe Columbia. We could really live." A pause. "I could just leave when Daniel comes over."

"Ofie."

"What?"

She took a large bite of cake.

"What are you guys going to do when your expiry comes?"

"I don't know. But we're not going to follow each other around like a couple of lost dogs," she said.

"Did you break up?" I felt my face flush.

She took a deep, intentional breath. After the exhale she said: "I'm in love with him, Ofie."

I changed the subject to the cicadas, which have descended now on Manhattan. I told her everything I know, and she sipped on her tea and said, leaning back in her chair, Interesting, isn't it?

April 10:

Future transitioner: I went through our desk today, looking for the return dates on my college applications (still haven't heard from Columbia) and found a stack of Clea's identity papers in our college envelope. She had it all, passport, ID card, the name of a smuggler written on a yellow scrap of paper.

I took the papers out to Dad, and as he sifted through them in silence, Clea walked in from a walk with Daniel and set her purse down on the floor next to the door. Her hair was stringy, wind-combed. She wore a soft pink sweater—mohair. She smelled of rain.

She sneezed, peeling her sweater from her arms. "We didn't have an umbrella."

"Clea," Dad said, and I heard her sigh as she tossed her sweater over the back of the sofa.

She brushed the rain from the front of her jeans.

"I found your papers," He said, jaw clenched.

She looked up at me.

"Doesn't mean anything," she said, sitting on the sofa. The coils whined under her delicate weight.

"C," I said. "Don't be stupid."

Dad let out a breath. He rubbed the bridge of his nose with his fingers. "Honey, this isn't a realistic plan." He was clearly acting, sizzling beneath his skin.

She snapped at us: "You're not being realistic. Both of you! You guys just take this, like this is how life has to be? And in twelve years you'll be gone," she looked at me, "and Dad will be alone?" She said, pointing to Dad. She wet her lips.

"Did you not see The Wall?" Dad yelled, slamming his hand down on the kitchen table. Clea and I both flinched. He tossed her papers on the floor and they floated apart. He walked to Clea, leaned in near her face. "Do you not understand the basic principle of The Wall?" I watched a vein swell in his neck. "Is there something I can clear up for you?"

"I have a guide," she said, sniffing.

"And what do you imagine this guide can do to help?" From my post, I saw the spit spray from his lips. "Is he magic?"

"I knew you'd think that," she said, wiping her nose on the hem of her undershirt.

"Come on!" he yelled, and her sobs intensified, "You're smarter than this!"

She looked up at our father, gasping for air, snot cascading over her top lip, and managed to say: "Daniel will protect me."

Dad seemed to calm down then, but I felt myself sinking. He sat down next to Clea, a palm on her back, the fat tips of his fingers gliding down her spine and across each of her ribs. He pushed Clea's hair off her back and over her shoulder.

"Daniel's going with you?" I asked.

She looked at me, sniffled, shrugged. "I don't know."

Later in the night, she packed some of our accessories into a shoebox. She untangled our necklaces, the delicate gold chains impossibly knotted. When she was done she laid each necklace separately on the desk, one loop next to the other.

April 11:

After third period, I called Daniel. "Meet me in the alcove," I said. "Without Clea."

I half-expected her to show up anyway, but he came alone, late. I pulled him behind a pair of lockers. "Are you behind this?" I hissed. "Clea leaving New York?"

A lock of golden hair slipped over his left eye. "I couldn't stop her if I wanted." I wanted to brush it from his face. "She's going."

I paused, recalculated. "You're not going with her?"

He shifted his weight, slipped his fingers into his pocket. "She thinks I'm deciding," he said, looking down, "she wants me to go. But I've got another year before I even know…"

"Shit, Daniel," I said.

"I know." He hung his head.

I lifted a hand, to shake him, I think, I can't remember, but next thing I knew he had my hand enveloped in his, and the warmth of his transparent skin was bleeding into mine and I felt myself flush. He said: "I don't want to risk it." He raised my hand to his chest. "Do you think that means I don't love her?"

What was there to say? No, Daniel, you love her, you should go? Then, the two of them washing up in the river, electrocuted? Or worse, with a line, down the bridge of their nose, from some savage across the river? I guess what I should have said is, "I don't know, Daniel, that's for you to figure out," but I was drunk with his touch and instead I dropped his hand and said: "Yes," I said.

"It might." And when I turned to leave him, there was Clea, her jaw dropped, watching us.

April 12:

Transitioner, it's raining again. Morning and night feel joined. I did not sleep last night, listening to the rain. Feeling Daniel's hand. Listening to Clea breathe. I feel like I have to watch her. And I wonder, next year when you transition, if you'll feel this way about anyone?

Letter from Columbia arrived. I ripped apart the envelope so fast that a corner of the letter itself ripped. I will accept the offer. I'll go. When I told Dad and Clea they both put on some fake smiles for me. We hugged, I felt Clea's bones.

"Let's do dinner," Dad said, "to celebrate."

We went to a farm to table restaurant on 93rd and Madison. They had a roof-top farm that looked 20x bigger than the one on our building and a list of seasonal appetizers involving cicadas, which I refused to try, but later regretted. During dessert, Dad said, "So C, how are things with Daniel?"

And she threw a look to me, and said, her jaw tight, "Ask Ofie."

Dad looked at me, pained. I blushed and said: "I have no idea."

April 13:

I don't know if this is real, transitioner, or imagined. But I woke this morning to Clea hovering above me, palm on my shoulder. Her breath felt hot on my face. A string of hair fell from behind her ear, swung towards me. She looked beautiful, the whites of her eyes luminous in the dark. I heard the cicadas crescendo. "Ofie?" I think she said, "Take care of Daniel." I think I closed my eyes then, because it had to be a dream, how silly and dramatic she sounded, but I heard the bedroom door click behind her, and when I woke up, Clea was gone.

I rushed out to the living room, calling for Dad. He sat on the floor, scraps of paper scattered around, the phone in his palm. He said, tears marking trails on his cheeks, "I've called everyone we know." A cup of cold tea sat on the coffee table. He lifted it to his lips, swallowed, and then ran his fingers through his hair. He looked like a lunatic.

I slumped into the armchair and wondered if what I thought I remembered was real. Perhaps, I reasoned, I'd already invented the memory to make myself feel her. "She was there when I fell asleep. Maybe she went out for a walk."

He shook his head and then buried his face in his hands. He rocked himself, his body shook. I've never known this father.

Of course, we both know where she is, or at least where she's going. But we don't know whether she hears the cicadas when they screech, and if she doesn't, we don't know exactly why. Is she too far from them to hear? Can she hear at all?

And me? I don't know, transitioner, because no matter where Clea is the result is the same, and I have 12 years to wait before I know for sure.

April 17:

Sorry for the silence. It's been three days of agony. With Clea gone Dad sleeps all day, a purple hand dangling off the edge of his bed.

I asked Daniel over to help me go through her things.

We went through her books, her clothes, her figurines. We put everything into boxes. I guess, transitioner, I see why Dad threw Mom's stuff away. As we sifted through her belongings I found myself thinking she must have left something for me, a goodbye clue?

And here's the shame and the delight of it: when I lifted a strand of her hair from the side of her pillowcase, and couldn't believe that just a few days ago we were here, in bed with our new knowledge, I unraveled. Transitioner, I'm embarrassed to say I cried such deep, heaving sobs that the shame of it burned in my

cheeks, that the sound of my own crying, for a moment, drowned out the incessant hum of the bugs. And Daniel pulled me onto his lap and rocked me with those transparent arms.

And when I'd finally stopped crying, when I was quiet enough for him to talk, he brushed the hair from my face, the heat of his hand on my forehead, and said, "Are you ok?"

And I, like a fool, I kissed him. Sitting in his lap, then down on the floor, then with my hand against his bare skin, and it felt exhilarating, the weight of him over me. And afterwards he said, "Wow," and smiled.

"What?" I asked.

And he said, "You're just so different from each other."

April 18:

I am tired of the bugs, their chanting. The way they crash into our kitchen window and collect inside the vestibule of the building. Can you believe how recklessly they spend their short, loud lives? Dive-bombing cab cars and flying into windows? Do they think they can get through the glass? Does the reflection trick them into thinking they're flying into something just as good as what's behind?

April 19:

I keep thinking of her eyes, gray in the morning light. Of the strands of blonde hair woven into her sweaters. Of the look on her face when, that first time, I read her expiry card. I keep thinking of her soft white cheeks, of her smell. Of that ball of jasmine blooming in our cups. I keep thinking of the soft rhythm of her breath, the pulse I slept to each and every night for 18 years, of how it must have been for us, together inside our mother, touching, and pulling and reaching for each other. I keep thinking of Daniel, of the warmth of his arms around me, of his skin, clear at the wrist, and "you're so different from her" like we were the same, or should be the same, or like he wants her instead. I keep thinking of her hanging on him, around him. Of her lips on his, of her hair between his fingers, curled around his knuckles. I keep thinking of her, and him, and me, and him, and her, and her. And her.

And you, of course, and what's next.

I don't know how to say goodbye to you, transitioner. Writing to you has meant something to me. I know, I said it wouldn't be helpful. I know I said that it wouldn't be real. And maybe you'll think I'm just gunning for an A+ from Woo, or that I'm only acting like this assignment added value to me, but it's true, transitioner. And now I don't know how to say goodbye.

Mostly, nowadays I wonder: what it would be like not knowing exactly when you'll move on? To be delivered into this world buzzing, screeching, and expecting the best?

Wishing you the best of luck, transitioner.

Boardwalk | Francine Witte

Bios

JP Allen is an MFA candidate in poetry at Johns Hopkins University, where he is an Editorial Assistant at The Hopkins Review and an intern at The Waywiser Press. His work has appeared in After the Pause, Burning Water, Nanoism and at the 8th International Congress on Micro-Fiction.

Elizabeth Bridges is from Columbus, OH. She has a PhD in education, with a focus on multicultural literature and children's literature. Elizabeth is a passionate reader. She reads fiction, young adult literature, children's books and all kinds of memoirs. When she writes, she focuses on emotional impact. Most of Elizabeth's work, both poetry and fiction, has been inspired by family and personal experiences.

Dmitry Borshch was born in Dnepropetrovsk, studied in Moscow, today lives in New York. His drawings and sculptures have been exhibited at the National Arts Club (New York), Brecht Forum (New York), ISE Cultural Foundation (New York), the State Russian Museum (Saint Petersburg).

Benjamin D. Carson lives just south of Boston with his beautiful dog Dora. Despite being a professed homebody, he travels regularly, often with students, to East and Southeast Asia. His heart, it seems, keeps calling him back to Cambodia. His previous pieces on Cambodia have appeared in The Ampersand Review and Red Fez.

Lyric Dunagan holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Tennessee. Her work has previously appeared in The Volta, and New Madrid.

Janelle Fine is a queer artist, poet and performance artist living in Boulder, Colorado with their leopard gecko named Max. They graduated with their MFA from Naropa University and currently work as a book designer. They are a 2016 Lambda Literary Fellow. Their visual art and poetry can be found in various online and in print journals. Janelle is the founder and editor of Le

Petit Press and is always turning fellow poets' and writers' work into small books and art objects. They have an obsession with matchboxes and miniatures and want to spend the rest of their life handcrafting beautiful things.

Geula Geurts is a Dutch born poet based in Jerusalem. She is enrolled in the Shaindy Rudoff Graduate Program in Creative Writing at Bar Ilan University. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Rogue Agent, Hermeneutic Chaos, Minerva Rising, The Fem, Jellyfish Review and the anthology *HYSTERIA* (Lucky Bastard Press). She works as a Foreign Rights Agent at The Deborah Harris Literary Agency.

Alicia L. Gleason is a graduate of George Mason University's MFA program, where she studied fiction. Her flash fiction has appeared in Oblong and Cleaver Magazine. When she's not working on her stories, Alicia teaches writing at New York University's Washington, D.C. campus. She lives in DC with her husband and their two cats.

Jessica Keaton, originally from Georgia, is a recent graduate of San José State University's Creative Writing MFA Program, where she received her degree in Nonfiction and Poetry. During her time in the program, she taught Freshman English, was the Managing Editor of the 2016 Issue of Reed Magazine—The West's Oldest Literary Journal, and earned a fellowship at the San Francisco Writer's Grotto. Her work has appeared in TWO along with The Corn Creek Review.

Dani Lamorte is a Tucson-based artist and linguist.

Jean-Pierre Parra lives under the sun of southern France, and close to a shore of history and stories from Greek myths and Arabian tales; he want to be part of the poetic and mythological reality of Mediterranean Sea. Jean-Pierre Parra through many books of poetry said the words that fit his worldview; he is haunted by two extreme themes: beauty and evil which are the two great mysteries of human adventure.

Calvin Rey Moen attended graduate school at a private, Midwestern, Catholic football university, escaping with his queer little life and an MFA in poetry. Originally from Minnesota, Calvin now works with psychiatric survivors in southern Vermont and writes songs for his band, badweatherfriend. One of his short stories recently appeared in Jonathan.

Alyssha Nelson was born in Arizona, land of sunshine and cactus, and recently completed her MFA in poetry at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. When she isn't writing, she's watching reality TV or perusing Instagram for tattoo ideas. This is her first publication.

James Prenatt lives in Baltimore where he spends his time rescuing damsels in distress and occasionally eating. He is a graduate of Towson University, who have yet to issue him a diploma due to overdue fines.

Caroline (pronounced Ca-ro-le-ne) **Smadja** is a French-born author of North African heritage. Her poems, fiction and essays have appeared in literary magazines in South Africa, Canada, France and the United States, notably in CA Quarterly and in two anthologies published by Seal Press and SUNY Press, respectively. In 2014, her poem Crépuscule ("Dusk") was awarded second prize, and Désirs d'Afrique ("Lusting for Africa") won third prize, in two national French Poetry contests. The same year, she graduated from Pacific University with an MFA in fiction. She teaches languages and literature and lives in San Francisco.

Krista Varela lives in the Bay Area and received her MFA from Saint Mary's College of California. When not teaching or spoiling her dachshund, she is the managing editor for The East Bay Review. Her essays have appeared in Vagabond City, Toasted Cheese, Blotterature and elsewhere. Krista is currently working on a memoir about broken bodies across generations and species. Her favorite writers include Abigail Thomas and Jo Ann Beard. She also shares her mother's love of The Boss and ranks his 2012 show in San Jose as one of the best concerts she's ever been to.

Internationally collected artist **Richard Vyse** has shown at galleries in Manhattan and Hawaii. He has studied at the School of Visual Arts in New York City and taught at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. His art has been featured in Art of Man #19, Noisy Rain magazine (Winter 2016), and Mascular magazine 15UK. His art is in the Leslie+Lohman Museum.

Since the 1990s **Mark Wagstaff** has had stories published in journals and anthologies in the US and UK. In 2012 Mark's story Burn Lines won the Machigonne Fiction Contest in The New Guard. His story Some Secret Space won the 2013 William Van Wert Fiction Award. Mark's second short story collection, also called Burn Lines, was published in 2014. Gina Ochsner

described the stories in Burn Lines as "lyrically intrepid" while Rick Bass found them "sweetly ominous."

Chelsey Weber-Smith was born on the same day as the Texas Chainsaw Massacre. She is a graduate of the University of Virginia's MFA program in poetry and has written and self-published two chapbooks, a travel memoir, and recorded three albums of songs. She was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Her work has been published in BOAAT, Transom, Matter, Wu-Wei Fashion Mag, the James Franco Review, Miracle Monocle, and Ghost Town. She currently lives in Seattle.

Nico Wilkinson is a performance poet delighting in Colorado Springs. They like to write poems and encourage others to do the same. They've competed at the 2015 National Poetry Slam in Oakland and host "Keep Colorado Springs Queer," a monthly open mic. Most of their time is spent exploring the mountains with their shih tzu, busking on their typewriter, and doing their best. They can be found at nicothepoet.tumblr.com and can be contacted at nicole.wilkinson24@gmail.com.

Francine Witte is the author of the poetry chapbooks *Only, Not Only* (Finishing Line Press, 2012) and *First Rain* (Pecan Grove Press, 2009), winner of the Pecan Grove Press competition, and the flash fiction chapbooks *Cold June* (Ropewalk Press), selected by Robert Olen Butler as the winner of the 2010 Thomas A. Wilhelmus Award, and *The Wind Twirls Everything* (MuscleHead Press). Her latest poetry chapbook, *Not All Fires Burn the* Same has just won the Slipstream chapbook contest and will be published in summer, 2016. Her poem ""My Dead Florida Mother Meets Gandhi" is the first prize winner of the 2015 Slippery Elm poetry award. She has been nominated seven times for a pushcart prize in poetry and once for fiction. A former English teacher, Francine lives in New York City.

Brenna Womer was raised on military bases and is too lazy to count her tattoos for you. She will be an MFA candidate at Northern Michigan University this fall, where she will teach and serve as an associate editor of Passages North. At Missouri State University, she taught composition and served as an assistant editor of Moon City Review while earning an MA in English. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in New Delta Review, Midwestern Gothic, Booth, Bayou Magazine, Prick of the Spindle, Grist's Online Companion, the Sierra Nevada Review, Perversion Magazine, and elsewhere.

Tricia Yost lives and works in Seattle, Washington. Her poems and stories have appeared in such journals as Hayden's Ferry Review, Prairie Schooner, Smartish Pace, and Clackamas Literary Review. March Street Press published her chapbook of poems, *First Things*.

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