

The Lindenwood Review

a journal of literary prose

I found that photo today, the one with a blurred edge of thumb hiding your mouth. I'm sure you were smiling—it's there in your eyes. Like water, those eyes. I drank them over and over and over.

Where are you now? Do you watch the morning bruise of sky with her hand light on your chest?

Cover my eyes again. See that day of lilacs, wine staining our lips. Find me in your drawer of lost things. I wait there, my veins shining blue through the clear skin of my wrist. I wait like this.

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Fiction

Killer Whales

I found a dead bird on the welcome mat this morning. I stared at its upturned cream belly, its crooked legs pointing in different directions like snapped twigs, and I couldn't look away.

There in my periphery were my black loafers, stitched together by a faceless laborer across the ocean, and there were the tiny pale petals that had drifted off the bush overnight and landed on the concrete stoop, prepared to be crushed by the day's beginning.

I was aware of these things, but I was looking at the bird, its squinted eyes now, its tucked wings. It was like a bullet screaming to death with the legs of a helpless baby. All birds, I realized, seem infantile, seem in need of care. At least the palm sized ones, like this one below me. I didn't want to pick it up, maybe because of butterflies—we girls in elementary school all warned each other not to touch a still butterfly because you'd paralyze it. Then you're no longer a bystander to its death, but an agent.

But the bird was already dead, motionless, departed. I overassumed my responsibility in its narrative—I made myself larger than its life. I intuited myself a god.

"It's better than dancing alone," Paul said from behind me, his voice approaching.

"What?"

"It doesn't matter if you're bad at dancing, or whatever you've convinced yourself is wrong with you. I just want you to be there."

I turned around to face his thick body dressed in corporate. We matched black hair, black blazers. Every time I saw us reflected in the side of a car I thought we looked slick. Smooth. Like killer whales.

"So will you?" he asked me and held on to my waist.

I stared at his neck. "There's a dead bird on the stoop."

"What?" He shifted around me to see it. "Oh, that's s-ad." I wondered what s-word he had started to say before thinking better. Strange? Or maybe just So, but then it wasn't really *so* sad.

“I’ll go to your work thing,” I said. I placed my hands on his shoulders, where you typically massage, but I didn’t press. I felt his soul fluttering under the machine of his body. “I just don’t like to move in front of other people and make them think I’m confident about it, like I know what I’m doing.”

“You’re perfect,” he said, trying to catch my eye.

I turned on my heel and saw the bird again. Slowly, so my knees clicked, I brought myself down and took it into my hands. I couldn’t speak. Its beak was closed, head angled one way, twisted, thrashed.

“Okay, I’ll see you tonight,” Paul said, and edged past me, down the stairs. “I love you,” he called from the sidewalk.

“I love you,” I said, still looking at the bird. “I’m going to put it somewhere.”

“What?” he called, but he was walking away, to his car.

I stepped out of the house and closed the door behind me. The air was cold and still. My hands were warm.

A Dead Camel in the Road, or How I Lost My Girlfriend

As we were driving a little too fast because we were late, yet again, for a gathering in Wafra, we saw a large dusty brown lump on the road ahead. “Slow down.” It was twilight, with a tired orange lingering along the desert’s fringe. As we got closer, she leaned forward to get a better look, her hand on my wrist, “Slow down.” It—whatever it was—did not exactly fill up the entire road, but it was lumped more on our side, in our lane, and of course by now we had little choice but to slow down.

“What’s that?” she said, lowering her sunglasses, a tighter grip on my wrist.

“Don’t know, but it doesn’t look good.” As I slowed, I looked behind me—not another car in sight. I slowed more, the orange twilight in my eyes as we carefully rolled up alongside the dusty lump. We stopped. It was a camel. “Camel,” I said. “It’s a camel.”

“You’re kidding?” she said, and she leaned my way, her soft hair in my face, her chest sliding across my arm as she stretched to get a better looksee.

“A camel and a big one at that.”

Now, her face was next to my face, her slender arm around my neck; she strained to see what such a camel might look like. “Dead?”

“Not sure.” We waited a little longer. Its long, leathery tongue aahing on the asphalt; its eyes, a large glossy-brown wide. I waited, giving it time to blink. But it didn’t. Its legs angled this way and that, looking painfully wrong. I watched closely for its dusty scarred belly to move, twitch, anything at all that might look like a tweak of life. Even that late in the day, the sun was

terribly hot. Meanwhile, her leaning never stopped, and I could smell her candied-breath, feel her cool fingertips.

“Dead you think?”

I said, “Yes.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, pretty sure.”

When she finally did sit back in her seat, the scent of her hair lingered. We waited a little longer before I rolled up the window and gently aimed the car to the right, into the soft roadside shoulder sand, and once back on the road drove on.

“Dead?”

“It looks dead but if not, the longer it stays like that, in the middle of the road with night coming on, someone will surely come along to make it truly dead,” I said, hoping to sound somewhat matter-of-fact.

We had some water for ourselves—two tiny plastic containers, one for her, one for me—and, granted, we could have truly stopped, gotten out of the car and tried pushing some water across its tongue, down its throat, if it were alive. I looked again, front and back, to see if there were others coming from any direction, and still nothing, just a long stretch of orange-twilight road that bent ever so softly to the left before disappearing into the desert towards the lights of Wafrah.

We had taken that gentle turn to the left, deeper into the desert, and she was now staring straight ahead when she said, “Should have stopped, you know. Would have taken only a

second. Should have stopped, gotten out of the car to see what we could do. Should have stopped.”

I glanced to see how serious she was about this, and her looking straight ahead, lips whistle-tight, hands in her laps told me she was.

“Yes, you’re probably right. But it looked dead, with its tongue hanging out like that, flat against the asphalt, and its eyes wide, looking up into the sun, the sky. No breathing that I could see. Not a hint of life. It looked dead to me.”

“Doesn’t matter, you should have gotten out of the car to check. It’s the least you could have done.” She turned to look out her window, into the now-shadowy desert, her hands knotted knuckle-white in her lap. She angrily tossed her hair back out of her face.

“Okay, but we are in this together, you know. I would have stopped, pulled over and made sure if you had said something back there. But it’s too late now, don’t you think? Too late.” This is when she became quiet again. And we continued on like that for the longest time. It was terrible: the orange twilight finally giving up, sinking into the desert, the way she stared straight ahead then turning to look out

her window, looking anywhere but at me, and no cars or trucks or anything and all the while that camel was still in the road now many miles behind us. I should have stopped to make sure it was dead, and if it weren't, if there were a speck of life, I would do what? What could I do? I had nothing like camel food. Nothing like camel medicine. Our little containers of water were nothing. What did she want from me?

Still, the more I think about it, remembering after all these weeks, the more dreadful I feel, never mind that it was just some dusty, lumpy camel because later that night she decided I wasn't the man for her. In that restaurant in Wafra, as we were getting ready to leave, having eaten very little—the way she pushed aside her strawberry cheesecake and refused to drink her tea—that's what she said, "You're not the man for me."

Things We Hold On To

1. The Bookstore

In the biography section of a bookstore in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Alee Chen is pretending not to notice a man two feet to her left. The sort of man who wears a corduroy blazer in Summer.

He's flicking through a book and smiling in that annoying, self-satisfied way that only men who once wrote clever op-eds in college can produce.

Alee recognizes him. Not personally. Spiritually.

"Capote would have hated that cover," she says before she can stop herself.

The man turns. "But he would have loved that you said it."

She shrugs. "It was the first thing that came to mind."

"It was good," he says. "I wish I'd said that."

He smiles. Not self-satisfied this time. Surprised.

They continue talking. About Capote, Sontag, the ethics of autofiction, and whether semi-colons are pretentious. She says yes. He says no, which she silently counts as a point in her favor. When she checks her phone, her parking meter has expired by fifteen minutes and still she chooses to stay in the conversation.

"Alee," she says, offering her name like a business card she just found in her coat pocket.

"Paul," he replies.

She smiles.

It's nothing, this conversation. A happenstance. A scene.

But it leaves a corner fold on the rest of her day.

2. The Email

Three days later he emails.

They'd exchanged information during a hastily polite goodbye in the checkout line, Alee writing hers on the back of his receipt, the register

woman watching them with amusement, like she'd just witnessed the opening of a novel.

Paul's email is concise, respectful, funny. A line stands out: I can't stop thinking about how you said Capote would have hated the cover.

Subject line: Another conversation?

3. Paul

Paul Johnston, age 37, editor of a philosophy journal, ex-boyfriend of a woman who now lives in Vancouver and sends him photos of her newborn child and vegan banana bread. A man who has mastered the art of appearing insightful while not being decisive. His apartment has stacks of books he hasn't read and apologies he hasn't delivered.

Paul finds Alee difficult to read. Not because she's elusive, but because she's precise. She speaks in finished thoughts. She doesn't litter her sentences with "you know?" or "like." She laughs only when something is genuinely funny.

He appreciates that. It terrifies him.

4. Alee

Alee Chen, age 35, ghostwriter of celebrity memoirs. Her most recent client was an Olympic gymnast who referred to herself in the third person and thought 'solipsistic' was a type of salad. Alee finds comfort in shaping other people's stories. It's easier than telling her own.

Her mother is a retired anesthesiologist who still asks when she'll get a "real job."

Her father sends her long emails filled with articles on late marriage statistics.

Alee ignores them both with equal precision.

But Paul, like the writer character she relates to in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, who misuses em dashes? She does not ignore Paul.

5. The Dinner

By their sixth date, they've stopped pretending to be casual.

They eat at a Szechuan place with soft lighting and two-dollar dumplings.

Mid-meal, Alee says, “You know what I hate? When people remember things you said better than you do.”

Paul pauses with his chopsticks. “Why?”

“Because it makes you realize you were interesting for only a moment, and then it’s gone. And they’re still holding it, like they caught a firefly in a jar.”

Paul sets down his chopsticks.

“I think it means you were remarkable.”

Alee stares at him. Then: “I wish I’d said that.”

She doesn’t mean it.

6. The Miscommunication (or, The Predictable Act Three)

There’s a thing Paul says that ruins it. Not in the way that bombs ruin cities, but in the way termites ruin floorboards, slowly, invisibly, then all at once.

It happens during a dinner party.

One of Alee’s friends says something pompous about memoirs being “lazy novels.”

Alee begins to respond. Paul cuts in.

“She’s written some actually,” he says. “Not under her own name, but still.”

Actually. Actually. The word hits Alee like a door slamming on her face. Afterwards, in her kitchen, she says, “Do you realize what you did?”

He does not.

“You corrected me,” she says, “as if I needed translating.”

He opens his mouth.

She stops him.

“You handed my sentence to someone else. And now I can’t get it back.”

7. The Silence

Six weeks of silence.

She visits the bookstore, but avoids the biography section.

She starts a new ghostwriting job, for a pop singer who can’t read cursive.

He writes an email. Deletes it. Writes another. Doesn’t send it.

He reads Capote. He doesn’t enjoy it.

8. The Return

It's late September when Alee runs into Paul. They're both reaching for The Year of Magical Thinking. The irony is not lost on either of them.

"You first," he says.

"I already have it," she lies.

"Alee, can I...?"

She nods. They sit in the store's cafe, surrounded by strangers.

Paul says nothing clever. No witty banter. Just this: "I replay it, sometimes. That night. I didn't mean to take your words. I was trying to make you look good."

"I don't need help looking good," she says, not unkindly.

"I know," he says.

Then she says, softly: "That was a good apology."

He smiles, not self-satisfied. Humble.

"I wish I'd said that," she adds.

This time, she means it.

9. The Rest of The Story

They don't become perfect. They become something else.

Something like a shared sentence.

They learn, together, how to speak in ways that leave space for silence. They trade words like books, underline each other's moments.

Sometimes Alee says a thing Paul will repeat a week later to his friends.

Sometimes Paul says a thing Alee will tuck into a paragraph she ghostwrites for someone else.

But the best things they say?

They say them to each other.

And none of it is clever.

But all of it is true.

Lighthouse

Your grandmother stole the Kinkade print from the Kroger bathroom. You didn't find out until the two of you were in the car rattling home. Like always, you drove slowly so she could admire the dogwood blooms. You assumed she'd snuck it in the cart while your back was turned. The road stretched before you like the pink fingers of a baby animal, full of its mother's milk and sleep-ready. Your grandmother ran her fingertips over the frame and grew sheepish. She leaned in.

"I just needed something pretty," she told you.

You were sixteen. You lived with your mother and your grandmother. When your mother asked about the Kinkade, you said you'd had money left over after paying your cell phone bill, so you got your grandmother a gift. Your mother raised her eyebrows and nodded but didn't protest when the two of you nailed it up that night.

Your grandmother died a month ago. You were somewhat prepared. The disease had taken many things, including its time. In the four years after the Kinkade, she became a gallery of strange behaviors.

After the funeral, you and your mother tossed most of her belongings. Although your mother wasn't a sentimental person, she saved a few items: the best china, a pair of reading glasses, a housecoat.

Now, you scrub the dishes, fold your laundry, monitor your mother's habits more and more carefully as she inches up in age, while the Kinkade lies color-up in a landfill. The lighthouse that serves as the focal point washes to a yellow whisper. Stains dot the glass. Raised patches wrinkle the laminate, revealing the wood to be plastic.

Cracks burrow through the glass of the frame, but the pieces remain together. The structure rests against the wall of an overturned kiddie pool, and in the hollow lives a family of rats. A mother and eight babies. They have nested among the bits of furniture and to-go cups. They are warm, and there is plenty of Styrofoam for teething. The mother rat stands sentry against cats and wolves, although she's never seen either.

When you miss the Kinkade, you think of scouring the landfill for it, but landfill excursions are for kindergarten field trips or environmentalists trying to prove a point to their families. You tell yourself you have inherited your mother's practicality.

When your grandmother died, that was that. You remind yourself of this every morning when you wake hours before your alarm. You remind yourself of this on nights when the lighthouse flashes across your eyelids.

On these nights when you slug out from under your blankets toward the kitchen, the rats huddle close. Sometimes it's storming, and you almost believe it's the thunder that woke you. You curl your toes between the couch cushions and click through the channels. You are waiting for something.

On these nights, the mother nurses her kits. Their earnest suckling drowns out the downpour until they sleep. The Kinkade shelters the family, and their ribs are warmed by each other's fur. Their mother listens, wearily, for nearby life.

The Tellers

There's smoke filling the room.

Harold hadn't noticed before now. He'd been lost in the flicker of the fire, watching it burn the broken fragments of his kitchen chair.

He'd been wondering how long it took for something strong—a wooden dowel rod, a marriage, a man—to fall apart.

When had he become this way? Had he always been?

And had she known?

And why, again, was he burning his kitchen chair?

Harold coughs, waves his hand in front of his face, and opens the sliding door. The smoke billows out the door and into the starry sky, rising higher and higher as Harold stands in the freshly fallen snow that covers his back porch. Beyond the banister, their lake is frozen and majestic.

No, not *their* lake. Not anymore.

Harold leaves the door open, crosses the green carpeting of the cottage, and lowers himself into his recliner. The larger flames have subsided. A pool of glowing red embers rests at the bottom of the hearth.

The last time he'd sat in this chair, his wife had been right next to him reading an Ann Garvin novel in her own chair, an exact replica of his, laughing and tugging on his sleeve so hard that he spilled bourbon all over his armrest. And he'd laughed too, but he can't remember why. It had been expensive bourbon and a shameful waste.

As he drags his hand over the upholstery, his mind manifests a dampness lingering in its fibers. Of course it couldn't still be wet—he'd spilled that bourbon months ago—but he wonders if he might still be able to smell his drink in the fabric if he stuck his nose down in it and sniffed.

Hell, he could probably smell her, too.

But for how much longer? How long would her scent linger?

Her hair doesn't smell like that anymore, he thinks. No lavender shampoo. No volumizing hairspray. Just blood and pavement and the cold, cold snow.

You killed her, he thinks to himself. You killed your wife.

The winter breeze blowing through the open doorway thins the smoky haze. A chill lands sharply on the surface of Harold's skin. It's that nipping-at-your-nose kind of cold.

Christmas cold.

He imagines a Christmas without her shopping trips and her obsession with stocking stuffers and her incessant baking of cherry pies—*cherry*, for god's sake!—all December long because that's what her grandmother used to do. He thinks about their grandchildren scampering around and making a mess of his living room and leaving paper and ribbons and cardboard all over his floor.

He thinks of the way she used to smile watching the mess unfurl like ribbon off a spool.

And it didn't have to be this way. She should have known he was capable of something like this. She should have run from him when she had the chance.

Shouldn't she have known this was in him?

Shouldn't *he* have known?

He rocks his chair forward, picks up another broken dowel rod from the floor, and tosses it in the flames. The lacquer catches, bubbles, and melts into the embers below.

What had happened to this chair?

She used to hate when he left the firebox open like this. "You'll scorch the carpet," she'd say. "You'll burn this whole place down. Is that what you want? To burn this all down?"

And maybe he did. All along, maybe that is all he really wanted.

Harold's blood boils as he thinks about her correcting him. He could never get away with talking to her like she talked to him. The lotion, for instance. She had this lotion she wore that gave him migraines every time he had to smell it for more than a few minutes. He'd asked her, *begged* her, to try something different, to please see if there was any other smell that she liked, but she never did. She was a creature of habit. She never changed. Maybe she couldn't change.

He looks at the pictures covering the wall: Black and white photos of her grandmother and grandfather; baby photos of their children, all of whom are well into their adult years now. He looks at the dust-covered cribbage board displayed on the mantle. He'd won it at a raffle, but no

matter how many times he asked, reassured her it was an easy game and she'd enjoy it, she never let him teach her how to play.

And she always insisted on being helpful. Not actually helpful, but emotionally helpful. She would stand next to him as he fiddled with a breaker box or worked on the boat's motor just so she could ask, "Whadduya think?" or tell him she's sorry that he was so frustrated. Maybe if she knew how to find him a wrench or work a power drill, he would have found it *helpful*. But she couldn't. He always wondered why she couldn't just stay back and let him do it.

She always insisted. Even when he told her, "Get back. It's not safe."

She never changed.

Her hair. Her make-up. Her recipes. The way she drank her coffee. The way she cried when it snowed.

"Oh my God, I did it," Harold says. "I really did it. I killed my wife."

Harold sits up and swivels his head around to take in his surroundings. He slowly shakes his head, scratches his beard. None of this is right. This can't be the same place, the same cottage. The same lake. It feels wrong. It's all wrong.

But there are the recliners. There is the cribbage board. The shelving he installed. The hole he'd put in the wall with his foot trying to kill a mouse. The tree outside that has never fallen, even though it always seemed like it was only a matter of time before it would.

There's her sweater. Her slippers. Her favorite throw blanket saturated with the scent of that goddamn body lotion.

It's not different, he thinks. None of it is.

It's you that's not right.

Because there is her blood on your hands, your arms, your chest.

And there are the burning remnants of your kitchen chair. There is the back rest. There is a leg.

You've burned it all down.

Harold had heard once that, in the moment before someone drowns, their whole body relaxes. He finally understands what that means. He feels it now: a deep, suffocating, hopeless calm.

Tires crunch up the driveway. Soon, a red, white, and blue light fills the room.

Harold takes a deep breath. These are Harold's last moments: the Christmas cold, the fire, the blackened fragments of the chair in the hearth, the million little memories lingering like smoke in the pores of this rotten place. He sees them all, smells the foul odor of happy memories made with the woman he'd hit with his car and left on the shoulder of the highway.

He hadn't checked her body, but he hadn't needed to. He'd known in his gut she was dead. He saw it in her eyes. Maybe that's what it means to have a killer instinct: the ability to recognize what's dead instantaneously. Maybe he's had the instinct all along.

Still no footsteps. No flashlights through the windows. No voices plotting to bust down the door and take out the monster who'd killed his wife.

Sooner or later, they'll come. It's just a matter of time.

Harold stands and walks to meet the officers who will soon be standing at his front door. He makes it halfway across the room, then pauses. Something about greeting them, welcoming them, doesn't feel...right. He processes this feeling for a moment, nods his head, and momentarily dips into his bedroom instead.

Because a monster wouldn't go so easily.

So neither will he.

When Harold returns to the living room, he picks up a broken piece of the chair's backrest and tosses it into the hearth. He continues feeding the flame until he hears a knock on the door.

Harold closes his eyes and it hits him again.

He'd killed his wife.

The wood crackles. The smoke climbs the chimney. Flames and police lights illumine the interior of the cottage.

Another knock on the door.

"Mr. Teller, this is the police."

The idea of prison hasn't crossed his mind until now. He thinks of the jeers he'd face, the shame, the endless hoping that one of his children might bring a grandchild and let them sit on his knee.

But of course they won't come. No one will. Why would they?

Harold Teller has killed his wife, and for that, he will be put in a cage, locked up like all the other monsters, and wither away.

Unless he refuses. Unless the monster says no.

“Mr. Teller, my name is Officer Stanley. May we come in and speak with you, please?”

But Mr. Teller is not home. Mr. Teller is a dead man. Mr. Teller’s life ended the moment he punched the gas and plastered his wife onto the pavement.

Mr. Teller is something else now. Something that’s just...not right.

“Mr. Teller, we know you’re there. Please, open the door.”

Harold’s fingers reach the doorknob as the officer on the other side knocks again. The sound echoes off the memory saturated walls, and Harold knows that this is the cleanest, most perfect sound he has ever heard. Harold grips the doorknob, but waits for one more knock before turning it.

It never comes.

“Mr. Teller,” the officer calls out.

Harold opens the door.

“Yes?”

“Mr. Teller, I’m Officer Stanley, this is Officer Carlisle. Do you know where you are?”

Harold opens his mouth, but doesn’t speak.

“Mr. Teller, do you know why we’re here?”

“31460 North Leonard Road. I killed my wife,” is all Harold manages to say.

“Can we come in?” Officer Stanley raises his hands to his waist like someone approaching a stray dog.

Careful, Harold thinks, *I may do it again*.

“I killed her,” he says. “My wife. I killed my wife.”

“We’re going to come inside. Can you sit, Mr. Teller?” Officer Stanley tries to guide Harold back to his chair, but Harold refuses to move.

“Don’t,” Harold says. “Don’t call me that.”

“Okay. Harold then,” Stanley says. “Listen to my voice. Do you remember what happened to you?”

“She never changed. She always insisted. I killed her. Her lotion. Maybe it was her lotion.” He shakes his head. “I killed my wife. I killed my wife.”

“Sir, you’re not in trouble. Everything is going to be alright.”

“No,” Harold says, bristling at the sound of the officer’s soothing voice, the gentleness of his every move. Harold doesn’t deserve this. This isn’t the

way you treat someone like Harold. This isn't how you treat a monster. Is this how they'd handle a drug bust? A prostitution raid?

"I killed my wife," he says again.

Harold feels a tickle on his back and pictures himself reaching for the gun in his belt. Holding its weight out in front of him. Firing one shot, then two. Then a third. A fourth.

"Sir—"

Harold's right-hand twitches, like it *wants* to reach, *wants* to grab it, *wants* to pull the trigger. "She never listened. I told her to let me do it."

"Sir, please breath."

"I did it because of the lotion, maybe. Because she wouldn't change. She always insisted. She always tried to *help*."

"Sir, you're in shock, I need you to—"

"But I didn't need her help," Harold says. His hand drifts towards the small of his back until his fingertips are mere inches from the grip. "I killed my wife, because she wouldn't listen. She insisted. She wouldn't let me—"

"Sir, there was a witness at the scene," Officer Stanley says. "She saw what happened."

Harold blinks. His hand freezes at his hip.

He hadn't noticed anyone else. His wife was on the ground with dead eyes and blood-stained hair. He has no memory of anyone else.

Just his wife. Just his sweet lady.

"A woman at the gas station across the street said she watched you throw quite a bit of mud trying to get your truck out of the snow. She was on her way over to help push when she heard the car rev, the wheels catch, and then a thud."

The word *thud* makes Harold shudder. He imagines Leslie's head splitting as it hit the pavement. He imagines

remembers

her eyes staring back at him through the windshield.

Oh God, they'd said. What have you done?

You monster, what have you done?

"The woman called us. Said you held your wife for a long time before you got up and took off in your car. We got there right after you left."

"I killed my wife," Harold says.

“Do you remember seeing Mrs. Dellamy? Veronica Dellamy? She told you she called the ambulance. She said you were in hysterics.”

“I killed her, Officer. Oh, God I...I...”

“She said you were crying. She said it was clearly an accident.”

There’s a stuffiness in the room, a staleness, as if the memories of her have already faded into sun-washed versions of themselves, the corners of the impressions she’d left on him upturned and brittle.

And suddenly he remembers it all.

He remembers pulling over so she could look at a deer in the forest.

He remembers the way she’d covered her face when the tires started to spin.

He remembers telling her it’s fine, sweetheart.

He remembers her laughing when he’d told her to ask the deer if it could push.

And he remembers grabbing the first thing he could get his hands on when he’d gotten home and smashing that chair into pieces against the floor.

He remembers crying. He remembers screaming what have I done?

My sweet lady, he’d said. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.

“Mr. Teller, you haven’t done anything wrong,” says Officer Carlisle.

“Don’t say that,” Harold says. “Don’t you dare. Don’t you dare say that.” Sweat beads on Harold’s cheeks. He doesn’t know if he’s hot or cold. He just...hell, he doesn’t know what he feels. It’s nothing. It’s everything. It’s anger. It’s fear. It’s heartbreak.

It’s hopelessness. It’s death.

It’s rebirth.

Because, one way or the other, he is a monster now.

Careful, he thinks. *Don’t get too close. Who knows what I might do.*

“Mr. Teller—”

“Stop. Calling me that. I killed my wife. Because of the lotion. Because she always—”

“Sir, please calm down.”

“—insisted that she would just be with me.”

“You clearly loved each other. I’m sure she knew—”

“No. No. I killed my wife,” Harold growls. “I killed...my...”

Harold draws the gun. His first shot hits Officer Carlisle square in the forehead. As Carlisle falls to his back, Harold Teller turns to find Officer Stanley fighting with the snap of his holster. Harold fires again. No longer concerned with the holster or the gun contained within it, Officer Stanley presses both of his hands to the blood pouring out of a gaping hole in his neck. He coughs as he drops to his knees.

When Harold fires at Officer Stanley a second time, it's as if he's staring into Leslie's terror-stricken eyes once more.

My God, they say. What have you done?

You monster. What have you done?

And Harold knows they're both dead.

He doesn't even have to check.

Adhesive

My foot falls heavy against the scuffed wood floor. A somber echo. I press my hand against the fireplace. The stone is cold as my fingers navigate the grooves and abrasions. Inside the barren hearth there's a shriveled pinecone. I'll leave it there. In the living room I glance out at the empty field and the gray sky stretched taught and smooth like a bedsheet. The rusted wheelbarrow still leans against the garden shed. I'll leave it there, too. A parting gift.

As I glance about the room, I see a small piece of scotch tape on the wall that I missed. I pull it off and rub my finger against the adhesive and wonder which of your drawings it once held up. The car waits in the driveway, all packed up. Please don't think I'm leaving to forget you. I climb in and put my hands on the wheel. Then I hear a whoosh of wings. I look up and see a cloud of blackbirds go by, heading north. As the car roars to life, I pull out of the driveway and follow.

Brushstrokes

When I miss Noah a little too much, I stand in the shower with my clothes on. The water turns the shoulders of my shirt dark, creeping downwards to my navel and down over my pants until I feel heavy. Droplets fall from the ends of my glasses and I close my eyes, imagining I am in the rain with him.

I cross my arms over myself and touch along my sides, tracing a hand up to cup my opposite cheek as if he were back. I am not lucky enough for it to always work—my clothes stick to my skin and remind me how much a body changes when someone isn't there to love you. Noah wouldn't recognize me anymore. I crank the knob as hot as I can stand it, cover my ears, and pretend to scream. *I cannot wake the baby*, I remind myself. *You fought for this shower*. Don't ruin it. I glance out from the curtain at the baby monitor and see he is still sleeping soundly.

I turn off the shower, eventually, and try not to feel sorry for myself. I peel out of my wet clothes and hang them in the shower. I grab a towel. If Noah were here he might sit on the sink, chat with me through the curtain while he glances at the monitor. He'd make some joke and sneak a look when I step out and I would pretend not to notice.

Once dressed I open the bathroom cabinet to take my medicine and pause, my hand hovering over the bottom shelf. There's a box of pregnancy tests tucked back, behind my medicine and my toothbrush that haven't been moved in a year and a half. I slowly reach my hand back, into the box, and feel one of them between my fingers without looking. I disturb the thin layer of dust and run my fingers over one before retracting my hand quickly. The baby shifts on the monitor.

Back in my bedroom, our bedroom, I feel foreign. My hair is soaked, the shoulders of my new shirt are damp because of it. I look around, holding the baby monitor and my bundle of clothes under one arm. My eyes settle on the space of blank white wall above my bed, then continue

down to the top of the bed, where the canvas had fallen to. My eyebrows furrow and I cross the room, setting down my things and quickly flipping over the painting to ensure it wasn't broken.

A week before we left for college Noah sat across from me, cross legged on my childhood bedroom floor and painted my birth flower and his, all twisted around an impressionist painting of us. Our faces were made of swirling paint of various colors, colliding in the middle where our foreheads touched.

Even after he died, that painting hung above my desk. For two years, I'd stop and look at it, really look at it, from time to time. Follow the brushstrokes with my finger and close my eyes. Remember the pulse of flexing tendons in his wrist when he painted. Remember the beating warmth radiating through his temple as I pressed my lips against the side of his head. I press my fingerpad into the coarse grit of the wisteria and recoil when it feels warm.

I sigh and climb onto the bed to hang it back up but find no nail to hang it from, only a hole where the nail used to be. I pause, looking down to the painting and back to the empty space. There might be something in the house to hang it with, but my eyes well up with tears anyway. I can find something in the morning. Or call Keith.

I go to set down the canvas on the bedside table and I feel a tug in my gut and on my palm, like his hand is reaching up and begging me not to go. Wordlessly I pull the canvas flat against my chest. My hand pulls my phone from my pocket and presses my father-in-law's face, putting the phone to my ear and letting it ring.

"Hello?"

"Keith—" I whisper on the edge of tears, turning the canvas over and staring down at our faces that cannot be hung in our home. "The painting fell. I need you to hang it."

A long pause. Keith considers arguing with me, I can tell. It has been a long two years and my other decorations don't match it at all anymore. He doesn't argue.

"Do you want me to do it tonight?"

"Tonight," I repeat, my voice breaking.

“Okay. Okay.” He grunts into the phone and I hear the recliner footrest slam down. “I’m on my way. Don’t— don’t go anywhere, okay? Just stay there. Is he sleeping?”

I think what an absurd and cruel question that is, to ask if Noah is sleeping, before I realize he is asking about my son.

“Yes.”

“I’ll be quiet. Don’t go anywhere. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Okay. Can I hang up or do you want me to stay on the phone?”

“I’m okay. I’ll see you in a minute.”

I ended the call and carried the painting with me to the bathroom. I washed my hands, traced his name into the still-foggy mirror in my best calligraphy and wiped it away. There was a time when I really believed I wasn’t in love with Noah anymore. New spot on the mirror where the condensation is untouched. Noah Noah Noah Noah. Wipe. New spot. Look at the painting. Carefully try to replicate our faces. Wipe. Try again. Wipe. Repeat until the bathroom isn’t steamy anymore. Like a year after it happened, fresh out of the newborn trenches, the euphoria of motherhood hitting me, I decided I would move on. He wasn’t going to stop being dead, he had been dead long before he stopped breathing. I almost cleaned out his art studio to give the baby the room with the bigger window. Put all his pieces in the attic or throw them away. There was something satisfying, and maybe frightening, about that thought. His brushstrokes rotting away.

I pad towards the living room, a quiet pleasure in my chest that the baby was still sleeping, and pass the studio door. There was once I remember where Noah closed himself up in there for days working on something but wouldn’t tell me what. It was long enough that I stopped assuming it was a gift and started assuming it was a suicide note. Their insurance didn’t cover his medication and it wouldn’t have been out of the question for him. When I finally convinced him to let me see it, he stood over a large sheet of paper that covered most of the floor, his chest heaving. I open the door to see it still lying there.

Paper scrolled out around his feet and was covered with ink in swirling patterns.

The lines connect like a red string conspiracy board, only with black runny ink instead of red yarn. In one corner, a crude and fast sketch of

me. In another, Noah's self-portrait with him scratching at his face. In the middle, a bleeding heart with "WHY CAN'T YOU SEE" scrawled over top of it.

I stepped closer, when I saw it that first time, and saw that Noah's feet were also dipped in ink and he stood in the bottom middle of the poster, stamping thick black footprints.

I step into the room now, with him long gone but the footprints left behind, and look down at the other, smaller drawings on the poster. More miniature photos of me, happy, him, not. Tiny scribbles of our first home's address and the plastic ring I got him in the eleventh grade and our wedding anniversary and our future child's would-be-name. An ultrasound sketch of that baby that didn't yet exist. Thin spindly lines of ink crack out from his footprints, jutting into the middle of all of the other symbols and words on the piece. He had broken them apart and he knew it. Stress wasn't good for conception. It wasn't good for a marriage. Noah was very good at being stressed.

When he showed it to me the first time his shoulders shook from behind and I knew that this was his way of apologizing for ten years of addiction and mania and depression. I closed the distance and wrapped my arms around him from behind. My hand autonomously goes to my chest now, as if anticipating his grasp. I press my lips together and try not to cry. Noah's father will be here soon. I step out of the studio and close the door shut.

He was always going to die young. It was only a matter of when and how. He insisted that these bumps in the road he kept having were temporary. This time, this impossible scheme will work. He will become the man, the husband, the father he needs to be.

I step into the living room and force myself to sit down with the canvas next to me. That night he did not have a plan, my man of solutions. He turned into my chest and sobbed. There wasn't anything to say. It was the same thing two months before, and seven months before that, and a year and a half before that, and every other time in the six years of marriage that Noah broke. I had gotten very good at silent comfort and renewing my vows. I hold the canvas close to my chest and comfort my husband and myself.

“I can fix it tonight,” I say out loud to him in case he can hear me. “You took care of me and didn’t take care of yourself for six years. I got you tonight, baby. I called for someone to help you.” My voice trails off into a whisper.

Baby starts to cry on the monitor. I take the canvas with me, as if I’m worried it will disappear, and go to him. There’s a question that coasts through my head every time I hold my son’s head to my shoulder or every time I remember the ugly glint of misery in his father’s eye. When Noah would say those awful things in an episode; the things that don’t even make me feel bad for myself, but bad for my mother. One pesky question: what do I get from him to make it worth it?

I stroke Baby’s back and whisper nothing in particular into his ear. Noah liked the sound of life, the reminder that something living is here and he was not alone. Sometimes I would whisper a story or a memory to calm him down, once I whispered “I’m pregnant.”

Tonight to my son I whisper, “Grandpa is on the way to save Daddy. I need to let him go but I don’t want to. I want to hold onto him for you. That is selfish, I think. Mommy is selfish.”

That’s the answer to the question, I think. Leaving Noah means letting someone go, drifting into the cold empty nothingness of space. I don’t know if I’ll ever be strong enough for that kind of cruelty and selfishness. That act of total self-preservation.

Noah was the type of man that was hard not to feel bad for him. I loved him a lot and would do just about anything for him. Noah loved me too. It was just complicated. That’s what he said. It was complicated. One thing about Noah that was blindingly simple was that he was not going to go anywhere. Which meant that I was doing the right thing. Even when I thought I was over him, I eventually came to my senses. Noah was never going to go anywhere, so I might as well try to fall in love with him again. After all, here I am rocking him to sleep in my arms.

I stroke the short hair on my son’s head. He will die young too, if he’s anything like his father, so I might as well love him now.

Just as the baby goes back down, the door quietly cracks open and Keith arrives. He’s a large man who takes no nonsense: he hated everything Noah was because they were exactly the same. I step into the hallway, closing the door behind me, and carry the baby monitor under my arm. Keith takes

off his baseball cap and pulls his pants up firmly under his beer belly like a sack of flour hanging over.

“Hi, honey—” he says, and I hold my arms out for him to hug me. A brief look of surprise crosses his face, like he expected all familial politeness to fade because his son is dead. He does hug me, wrapping one large arm around my neck and the other around my back. When he pulls away his sleeve is damp from my wet hair. I walk Keith back to the bedroom and watch him drill a new hole.

One time, Noah locked himself in the shower when we were at his childhood home for spring break. He was acting strange anyways, and I was worried he would hurt himself. I banged on the door and asked him to let me in or come out to me. He relented and eventually the water turned off and I heard a shuddering breath as the door opens. He has his towel wrapped around his waist and water droplets sat on his shoulders.

“I don’t know what to do. I want to die.”

I stopped in my tracks. I put my hand out and traced the triangle of moles on his left pect. He looked down at my hand then back to me with a thick loneliness and resignation in his eyes. I snaked my hand around the back of his neck and pulled him to me. The moisture in his hair and arms and chest soaked into my shirt in the outline of him holding me. I couldn’t fix this. I could love him until he died.

I dodged his parents as I left; they made jokes about fogged up mirrors and wet clothes and not being able to wait. I drove home. Left the sunroof open and the windows down to let my damp clothes air dry.

With a final *shunk* the painting is back on the wall. Keith steps off the bed and turns to me.

“How you uh, holding up?”

“I’m okay.”

He shifts on one foot to the other. “I found that one pair of sunglasses the other day. The ones that had you running to the airport. In some of his bedroom stuff. If you want it.”

“No, that’s okay—” I say quickly. When Noah moved across the country I chased him to the airport to give him back the sunglasses he left in my car. He wasn’t sober from the moment his plane touched down in Austin until I gave him an ultimatum four years later as he proposed.

“Thanks. For calling me. I like to help you out when you need it.”

I just nod with tears in my eyes. I glance back over his shoulder to the painting and back to him.

“Can I see the baby for a minute?”

I think about it. I’ve been hesitant to let Keith be near our son. I guess I am worried all of that bad that coats him and all of that bad that coated Noah would rub off on the baby, and maybe if I kept him without a man in his life he would remain clean. But I nod. Human connection is so strange and wonderful and exhausted that I know it is possible that for all the bad, there could be some really amazing good that I might miss out on. I nod.

My father-in-law looks wistfully over the crib. I watch him. I don’t regret what Noah and I had. This family taught me a lot about loving for nothing in return just because it’s the right thing to do. As my father-in-law kisses his fingers and smooths my son’s hair down a pang of melancholy washes over my heart. I don’t think that grief is quite the same as sadness, but I mourn for my son who breathes in front of me. I mourn for his grandfather and his father, too. If I let myself sit in it for long enough I will mourn for myself as well—for the relationship that my husband and I didn’t even get to have.

Keith leaves. I shut the nursery door and carry the baby monitor with me. I step into my bedroom and close the door. I lie down in my bed upside down, my hair dampening the quilt. My head is at the footboard, and I stare up at that painting. Swirling wisteria and baby’s breath. Two faces intertwined. Brushstrokes worth breathing for.

Paper Ship Dreams

I kicked my shoes off and left them on the riverbank then peeled off my socks and stuffed them in my pants pocket like a wad of cash. Made of plain notebook paper instead of construction, the sails of my ship were flimsier than the ones I had seen in pictures and read about in magazines. The hull was made of popsicle sticks and a button from one of Mama's old dresses served as the captain's wheel. On the side, in blue marker, I had written my name. *Oliver Shane. Eight years old.*

I rolled up my pant legs and stepped into the water. It was cold. Like sharp icicles. I had never been to this part of the river without my dad. Where the water came up to my shin bones, I set my ship afloat and watched my name sail down the river. I was going places. From the Pigeon River to the French Broad then the Mississippi and the Gulf. After that, the Atlantic Ocean, and places I'd only seen on a map.

The ship wobbled and turned in the current, floating fast over rounded river rocks, the smooth kind that my brother can make skip across the top of the water. I walked farther out to where the rocks were slick and covered with algae, gripping them with my toes as the water ran deeper, never taking my eyes off my ship. I imagined myself as an adult, the captain of my very own real ship with grown men doing what I told them to do and women of foreign lands falling in love with me. I followed my paper ship dreams down the river, splashing and kicking the water, droplets of it wetting my hair and face and the blue November sky shining down on me.

Then I saw it.

Around the turn in the river a slender maple tree had fallen across the water. Its roots stood upright on the river bank, like a makeshift fort, its branches submerged in deep green water. I jumped to the bank and ran downstream to reach it before my ship lodged in the tangle of twigs and debris where bark met water.

I fetched a stick from the bank, the longest one I could find. It was forked at several places on the end. I climbed on top of the fallen tree and

walked the length of it until it dipped into the water. The ship twisted and spun around in the varying currents, heading straight toward the tangle of maple branches. Yellow and orange autumn leaves swirled around them, like pieces of sunlight in a kaleidoscope.

I reached as far as I could with the stick, trying to save my ship from disaster, coming up just inches short of my goal. I stepped farther out onto the tree, my feet hardly under water, and reached out again, this time scratching the sails of the ship, but still outside of reach for any real effect. I leaned forward and tried again.

Like the silver blade of a stranger's knife, the cold water sliced through me. My left foot slid between the branches; my right foot not able to reach the bottom. In over my head, I couldn't breathe.

The blue-green of water and sky turned black and darkness enveloped me. I thrashed about, my arms acting on their own, in failed attempts to come to the surface. I screamed for help, but no sound came forth. My vision closed in and as the water stung my eyes a new feeling came about. I felt no fear. Only sadness of things undone. Of life unlived. And in the blackness, I imagined myself as a great mast, wind in my sails, soaring fearlessly into the black, wet sky before me.

I woke to lamp light and the familiar surroundings of my bedroom. My brother on one side of the bed, head bowed in prayer. My mother on the other, dabbing my forehead with a warm rag.

Outside my bedroom door my father and the doctor talked in low whispers. At the foot of my bed stood a stranger, a man, his denim shirt and trousers soaked through. His dark hair was matted and clung to his pale forehead like seaweed in an ocean wave.

She is Tomorrow

There's no graffitiing over a fragment. If a part of you was once somewhere, that part is still there, no matter how hard you try and erase it. We all exist within these walls, hundreds of incarnations of the people we once were, our childhoods sprinkled in the dust and the rust and the pigeon shit.

I know where I'll find us first, and it won't be next to our spray art. It'll be by the blue door, because that's where we were our most wretched.

I turn on my headtorch. I've prepared for this. I leave our wall, this room, duck through an archway, tiptoe myself down a corridor lined with rotting wood. It's an internal corridor, deathly quiet. The outside world is gone from this place.

The door is at the end, paint peeling. I can already see us standing by it. We are seventeen. My hair is short, manic and I'm wearing a pink dress with an orange bomber jacket. Jackson is to my right; tall, blonde, with sunshine optimism exuding from his fingertips, long since lost. Digger is to my left; hair cropped short, bigger back then. The weight suited him. Scott is in front of us, teetering over whether to open the door. Scott is not seventeen, rather fifteen, and past due for his initiation.

Jackson's goading him in that light-hearted, easy going way that makes you feel like life is a party so long as he is around. Digger's joining in. His goads are less forceful, but still just as effective. He got off lightly for this. His low IQ and generally likeable personality helped blame never fall on his shoulders.

I am silent. I got off lightly too. Silence does not equal blamelessness. If anything, silence is worse than goading. Silence is "I know this is bad, but I'll let it carry on anyway." Silence is passive enough that it lets you get away with things you shouldn't get away with. But you do. With silence, you do.

Scott takes one last look at my fragment before opening the door. His face is just as I remember it: desperate, wanting to trust, not quite being able to.

At first, there's nothing but light. The room beyond is a beacon compared to the corridor, with so many cracks in the boarded-up windows that they are more crack than board. Then Scott sees him: a Matt in disguise, lying rigid, dressed in black, mask on his face.

I still wonder if a small part of Scott recognised the body on the floor as his brother. Matt was our age, seventeen, but had a distinctive silhouette; lanky, almost skeletal, and I find it strange that nothing inside Scott twigged. I guess that's what fear does to you. Clouds your eyes.

Scott gasps, but he doesn't run yet. He's a brave kid, too brave.

"Oh my god." Jackson's acting is horrible. "A body!"

Scott creeps towards Matt. Jackson and Digger go in after him. The two of them have the cheek to grin at each other, and Jackson even lets out a faux gasp which disintegrates into a muffled laugh. Scott is too absorbed in the body to notice. He's repeating, "no, oh no, no, oh no." He stands close to Matt. "We need to call the police!"

That's when Matt sits up.

Scott screams. I jolt back: both versions of me. Even Jackson and Digger jump, though they're well aware it's coming. Then Scott is gone. He comes hurtling down the corridor past me, through the crumbling arch, back into our graffiti room. I run after him, along with our fragments. We all see it happen.

Scott reaches an exit gap in one of the boards and hurtles himself out of it. We're on the second story.

By the time we reach the gap, Scott is lying in pieces, swallowed in the long grass. He's on his back, staring up with huge, bulbous eyes. His left leg is crooked and his chest heaves in rapid, shallow breaths.

We clamber down, but he's not saved yet. Matt screams that we need to call an ambulance. Jackson screams that we need to move him first. Jackson isn't wrong: if we called for help here, the authorities would know about this entrance, doubly board it up, and there's a very good chance we wouldn't find another way in.

I see myself staring at Scott, staring at his leg because I cannot bear to look into his eyes, knowing that his body might heal but our trust never will. Digger is just as hopeless, but ultimately lands on Jackson's side. Had Kerrie been with us, maybe Matt would have stood a chance. But Kerrie is not with us. She would never have taken part in such an act.

And so I watch as we drag a hyperventilating Scott upwards, carry his mangled body through the long grass, through the tear in the barbed wire fence. We head down a derelict path by the side of the verge. We're looking out over an abyss of green, Sleaford behind us. Our precious Maltings was the drop-off to the only life we'd ever known.

We do call an ambulance once we're in the streets. We say Scott fell while trying to do parkour, which was such an unlike Scott thing to do it was laughable. Scott never left his inhaler in his backpack again. He keeps it in his pockets now. My fragment was right, too: he's never trusted us since. Not even Matt. Brothers severed by our wickedness. Hypervigilance born of a cruel joke.

I leave the gap and step back into our graffiti room. I'd needed to face those fragments. I'd needed the cathartic punishment of watching my own wickedness take place, but now I need the opposite.

It's not long before two of us emerge.

It's me and Kerrie and we are painting. We are very young. Fourteen.

I am working on one of my chicken murals, adding hearts in the dust while I wait for the coats to dry, and Kerrie is drawing an intricate, fillagree-esque lion head. I've forgotten how beautiful Kerrie's art is, how creative her fragment could be. This Kerrie wears neon-coloured jeans and ties her hair in haphazard space buns. It was ginger: she dyes it brown now.

We're talking about the future. I'm telling Kerrie I'm going to travel the world in a campervan instead of going to college. Kerrie is telling me she's going to take a gap year in London to pursue art full-time. Then after my year of travel is over, I'll move in with Kerrie and we'll adopt a grey cat which will traipse watercolour pawprints all over our little Soho flat.

These future fragments bring me comfort, even though they don't exist.

Sometimes dreams that have come and gone still feel like distant possibilities, like another version of yourself might be living them out somewhere in a parallel universe. I want to believe that a fragment living in an alternate reality, one who didn't stay silent, one who is good through and through, is getting to live out her dreams with Kerrie.

I leave us. We are too perfect, too innocent, too pristine to taint with observation.

I go up to the rooftop. This ascent is always difficult. There's no stairwell, only a peeling copper-coloured ladder which doesn't quite reach

the opening. I have to stand on the top rung and fling my body up and over. I shouldn't be taking this big of a risk. Every instinct tells me that the life I'm carrying matters more than whatever waits above. But I climb anyway, because I'm this version of me. This is the parallel universe I'm living right now.

The roof is breathtaking and horrendously dangerous in equal measure. There's a flat section in the middle that the odd clover is sprouting from, two metal railings on either side separating the flat from the shingles, which slope down until they drop off to nothing.

In one direction, the same fields, the same greens and yellows; in the other, the same sad rooves of Sleaford, so squat and low and grey compared to the majesty of The Maltings; drab council blocks, brick terraces, the odd church. Someone is having a barbecue or burning something somewhere. I don't dare lean on the bars like I once did and stare out at the open fields pretending Sleaford isn't behind me.

I hear footsteps on the ladder and our fragments emerge. These ones are comparatively recent. Jackson pokes up first. He's twenty-one. Then comes me, skirt torn, tights fraying, wearing the same orange bomber I had at seventeen.

For them it's monstrously windy, but for me it's eerily still. My hair isn't flapping about my face as my fragment's is, and my skirt stays over my knees, whereas hers floats everywhere, thrashing against the metal bars, against Jackson's legs, against my own.

He's pulling out a cigarette and leaning over the railings as if the drop wouldn't be fatal. His face is detached. He's contemplating inward.

After a few moments of silence he says, "I'm a bad person, Marla."

"You're not," I say. I truly believed it then. "I see the middle of your onion. It's good, Jackson. It's good."

"The middle might be good." The end of his cigarette glows as he inhales. "But what does it matter if the rest is rotten? If the outside is all you show the world, what does it matter if your inside is good?"

For them, the metal bars rattle. For me, they are still. I can see both as if I'm analysing slides on a projector being placed over each other.

My fragment buffers. She's longing to fold in on herself, to fall back into comforting silence. Words, in situations like these, can be dangerous.

There's so much safety in saying nothing. I see her wrestling. I see her wanting to flatline, to mute.

But she doesn't. She tries one more time. Yells over the wind. "What matters is what you do from this moment on! We can change ourselves. Every moment we can begin again. This moment. The next. Any moment, we can be different!"

"Can we?" Jackson asks. His eyes are defiant. Provocative. He wants the fight. "Can you be different, Marla? Can you change?"

Again, I feel her wanting to sink. I feel her voice lose itself, her throat clog, the gift of silence embracing her in its talons of safety. But again, I feel her clawing her way up and out. She says, "I can change." Then, "I already am. Every day. I'm already a new incarnation. A new fragment compared to yesterday. And so are you."

Jackson laughs darkly. "You know, I don't know what the fuck you mean half the time. Sometimes I don't think you do, either. You just say things. You just say things to fill the silence."

I like to think that if Jackson had known how much this would hurt me, he wouldn't have said it. I like to think that, but I'm not sure it's the truth.

The curious thing is, I was right: I'm creating a fragment right now. A strange one, but a good one too. One who is at least willing to listen, if not forgive.

If I am the slides, then time is the projector. Maybe there is some future version of me, standing behind me, watching me watch myself. Maybe she is fifty-two. Forty-six. Thirty-three. Maybe she is tomorrow.

Does she paint chicken murals? Does she spray her friends' names on abandoned walls or draw love hearts in the dust? I don't know her, but she knows me. She knows I'm trying. Changing. Just as orange bomber girl did for me.

Too Deep

I didn't know why he'd called me over instead of my sister, but I didn't question it. I flew through the open bulkhead doors and into my father's hands. They circled my ten-year-old waist, and I floated into the cellar, my imagination conjuring images of Dad and me in the years to come: matching dungarees and plaid flannel shirts, rolled at the sleeves, each of us with pencils shoved over an ear and a pack of Marlboros in our front breast pockets.

My father's father had been a carpenter, as had his father's father's father, and the father before him as far back as any of us knew into the dark streets of Copenhagen. So whether by birthright or brute labor, the years of helping his dad stacked behind my father like piles of lumber, and he was never without a woodworking project.

One of my brothers was his usual apprentice, handing him tools, selecting pieces of wood from the scrap pile, bearing the brunt of his frustration when things didn't turn out as he'd planned. But the boys must have been at soccer practice that day, so he'd called me in from the backyard where I'd been playing with my sister. "Come on, Sport," he'd yelled, pointing to me but using the nickname he'd given my brothers. "I need another set of hands."

The hours in the workshop that day are mostly a blur, a blend of "Hand me the three-quarter-inch chisel. No, the three-quarter! The three-quarter goddammit!" and "Hold this here. Tighter. Don't move! Hold it still, goddammit. Still!"

I can't remember what he was piecing together that day—a habitat for my brothers' gerbil? A new dining table for the kitchen?

Nor do I remember how the topic came up. Had I asked a question? Why doesn't anyone call me Maureen? My name weighed heavily on my mind back then, especially after being called "Sport" all day.

What happened next comes to me like moving photographs. Snapshots. Something already of the past, even as it unfolded. I knew somehow, even

then, with just a single decade behind me, that I'd remember this scene, framed somehow in my mind:

One—

“You were named after your grandmother,” my father says, his voice muffled around his cigarette. His back is to me, bent over pieces of wood. I look at him, the sharp black tip of the yellow number two pencil jutting up from behind his ear.

Two—

“We only had you because she died, you know.” Silence punctuates the whirl of a drill. “Your mother, she was devastated. Wouldn't get out of bed. Couldn't make dinner. Lunch for the boys.” The tap-tap-tap of a finish nail being hammered gently into place.

Three—

“I had to do something, and a baby was something she couldn't ignore.” The brush of sawdust to the linoleum floor.

Four—

“She insisted we name you after her mother, but she couldn't bear to call you by that name.” A heavy exhale. “That's why we never call you Maureen. Now hand me the wood glue, Sport. Not that one, goddammit, the one with the brown cap!”

It was the gerbil habitat. I remember now.

How happy I'd felt handing it to my brothers, my smile so big it hurt. And the way, months later, the gerbil would hide in the dark tunnels of wood, eating carrots and apples, out of reach of my brothers' hands. The way my brothers screamed and screamed when they'd managed to pull it free from the tunnel. The blood on the sawdust floor of its cage from where it had caught on a nail that had been hammered too deep into the wood.

Bruises

I still dream of the sound of your leather boots. I hear them fall in the hallway like the buckle of deer in the night.

Tonight, you came in through the garden, slid them off, placed them side by side against the door.

I didn't look up from my screen when you passed. Eyes closed I can trace your presence, the particular weight with which you move.

You stood at the sink, watching the kettle fill. Turning to hand me the steaming mug, you startled, "You walk like a ghost."

Old habits. I'm sorry.

Dad, the bottles are gone now; the stains, too. On that polyester couch we had to burn, its sour odour of vomit colliding with smoke in the wet fall afternoon. On the carpet, the shadows of her knuckles, spray cleaner scented, lemon and vodka. One day I might say that the bruises are gone.

I was five, and then I was twelve.

I don't know if you remember.

I don't know if you remember the sound of your palm, the pale crack of it. The nights you watched me, eyes flashing, as I stood in the December rain. The termination letters, ketchup-stained, face down and red-streaked in the garbage. The beat of your voice would rattle the slats in the walls, send the ice trembling in the glass in your hand. That was when you still used glasses.

Dad, you know how old I am now. You know your own name. You can know hers without the hiss of the can, the clap of the door, the midnight stumble. How did the spirits wash it clean?

Later, over pasta, you talked of yoga and growing basil. I watched you clear our bowls and rinse them until they shone. You were wordless now—cotton blue polo, graying hair. You whistled.

I hovered back in my seat, not yet ready to move. On the surface of my mug, an inverted sun spilled into the husks of trees.

The water shuddered as I drew away from the handle. My fingers were numb from the cold.

Schoolboys

Tonight my son wants to make angels. A winter storm has swept across England, shrouding our town in snow. Cirencester hasn't seen snow in a decade. My wife insists that he should stay inside the house. If he wakes up with a fever and misses school tomorrow, I'll be at fault.

"Only for a few minutes," I say. "The cold will toughen him up."

I dress him in a fleece and jacket and a pair of trackpants he won't mind getting wet, then snowboots and mittens and a hat that just about covers his ears. I stand by the door and watch him run into the snow as he laughs and stretches his tongue to catch the drifting snowflakes. Supine, he waxes his limbs across the powdered lawn until rows of angels guard our house. I feel grateful to see my boyish joy reborn in my son.

"Don't you remember the first time you saw snow?" I call into the house.

"It wasn't coming down this hard," she says. "Is he keeping warm out there?"

"He's fine," I say. "He's making angels."

When my hands get too cold I tell him that it's time to come inside. He can make more angels tomorrow. The snow will still be here.

He shucks off his snow-cruled boots and tosses his hat and gloves into a laundry hamper. When he removes his jacket, I see that the snow has seeped through his fleece and shirt. I pull them off as quickly as I can, afraid that my wife will notice my failure to dress him in thicker clothes.

"Let's take your trousers off, too," I say, soaking up the water from the floor with my socks, then hurrying my son towards the bath before the cold makes him ill.

He prances around in his underwear, then slides across the puddled floor into the bathroom. I place my hands on his shoulders and joke that he can make more angels in the bathtub where it's warmer, but he shudders at my touch as if electrocuted.

"Why are your hands so cold?" he asks.

“I forgot to wear gloves,” I say.

As the flush afterimage of my palms burst across his back, my shoulderblades frost over. I feel the cold press of a hand from my schoolboy days and remember my old housemaster, Partridge.

“You’re going to get frostbite,” my son says.

“It’s not cold enough for that,” I say.

But on that afternoon playing rugby at school, the afternoon that Partridge and I first spoke, I thought that it had been.

I’d amounted a considerable number of tries during the rugby session and midway through my scoring streak I noticed Partridge conferring with my coach, pointing me out with the long wag of his finger. I worried that he’d identified me as the culprit of some offense, but when he told me that I would now play for the A team, a worse dread punched my stomach. I hated rugby and feared the tackles of larger boys.

“You’re a far superior soldier than these ranks, Stephens,” he said. The rain spitting on his anorak sounded like a string of bullets, and he scoured the waterlogged fields like a marshall poised with dire orders. “My squad could use a winger, or perhaps you’d be better as a center. Can you play as a center?”

I’d never played this position, but felt honored to have been promoted and thought it rude to turn down the offer. “Yes, sir,” I said.

“Excellent. We shall face the B team shortly.”

My housemate Fairclough played as our scrumhalf and his brilliance at carrying the ball meant he had no need to pass, for which I was thankful. But inevitably the risk of a tackle fell upon me. Partridge called a knock-on against the B team and both packs squared up for a scrum. Should our pack win, Fairclough would draw in the opposing players before offloading the ball. Had I the speed, I could exploit the gap in the defense and score a try.

My heart pounded in my throat as Partridge gave the orders. Crouch, bind, engage, and the two packs came together in a collision of bovine groans, their mud-lathered shanks digging into the gouged earth. The ball issued out between the legs of our pack like a strange birthing, and Fairclough collected it with prized care, faking a run, luring in the opposition, then whipping the ball into my hands. I fled downfield like the waifish thief of

an enormous egg. Then I felt a tense cord of muscle cincture my ankles and I plunged towards the earth. Above me rucked a violent mass of bodies, their faces contorted in grotesque expressions telling of agony and pleasure. I curled up and braced my head, waiting for the contest to determine a victor, but the ruck caved at the center, collapsing in exhaustion, and I was smothered at the base of the pile.

“Have you got nothing more in you?” asked Partridge.

I couldn’t breathe beneath the heavy bodies that gasped in sweaty relief, until Partridge blew his whistle and roused the limp remains of his soldiers to stand up from the pile. Then I could breathe again.

After the game we hobbled back to the changing rooms, cold and sopping wet, so draped in mud that we seemed candidates from a swampland baptism. Partridge oversaw the proceedings, ordering us to strip and shower and change into uniform. We peeled off our rugby tops and tossed them into a sodden heap like discarded cuts of meat. Our blushed and naked bodies steamed as we scurried from the showers in silence, believing it indecent to converse unclothed as we were. The only one to speak was Partridge, who paced around the room to ensure that we had washed.

“It befits a man to keep clean,” he’d say.

I was eight, I think.

As I climbed into my trousers, a cold hand pressed gently against my back and the knuckles in my spine prickled at the shock. I turned to see Partridge smiling with theatrical surprise.

“Very cold out there wasn’t it, Stephens?” he said.

I forced a smile, understanding the intended joke, though I’d not expected Partridge to be a man of light-hearted humor.

“Yes, sir,” I said. “Very cold out there.”

“I can’t even feel my hands,” said Partridge. “Look.” Again he rested his hand on my shoulderblade with a touch that reassured me of his presence, or reassured himself that I’d understood the joke, I wasn’t sure, and he playacted a painful wince as if this was the reaction he wanted from me. I felt guilty that I hadn’t laughed. Worrying that I might lose his favor, I reciprocated his good-spirits with a quick witticism.

“Yes, sir. Cold enough for frostbite.”

Hadn’t my father joked with me in that way? I didn’t think it too strange, just Partridge having a laugh after a rainy afternoon. As for the

showers, that was teaching proper manners. He stood by the door and inspected our attire. "Tuck your shirt. Shoelaces."

I couldn't breathe if I did up my top button, so I concealed the crime with the doubled knot of my tie. But Partridge could tell. His lip twitched and he pointed at his jugular notch. "Top button," he said.

And I questioned, in how he'd exposed a chink in my skeleton, as if to remind me how easily he could wound me, whether a darker threat lurked behind his grace.

But I felt a parental care with my teachers too. The sportsmaster, MacAngus, coached us for the swimming sessions that year. His Glaswegian accent aroused our laughter, but banter aside, his concern for us was evident. I once forgot to wash my swim shorts and developed a rash along my groin. As MacAngus inspected the name tag sewn to the inside of our waistbands, checking that we hadn't stolen another boy's pair, I felt embarrassed that he would see the infection. He would know that I'd neglected my duty to cleanliness, which made me less of a gentleman.

"What happened here, laddie?" he asked. He'd lowered his voice so as not to humiliate me.

"Just a rash, sir." I said.

"It looks rather painful."

"It itches, sir."

"Have you seen the nurse?"

"No, sir."

"I believe that would be in order then, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

What occurred after the swimming session dissuaded me from his advice. While we dressed into uniform, MacAngus entertained us with his outlandish stories.

"You ever hear about the American lady and the Scotsman?" he asked.

"No, sir," we said, masking the anticipation of a bawdy tale with juvenile ignorance.

"One summer's day, an American lady was walking through Inverness when she ran into a Scotsman dressed in full tartan. Garters and all. Mind you, she'd never seen such an outfit before, so she asked, 'Excuse me, is

there anything worn under the kilt?’ to which the Scotsman responded, ‘Why don’t you feel for yourself, lass?’”

We humored him with feigned laughter. We’d seen the punchline coming, a tame one by MacAngus’ standards.

“Is that a true story?” asked Fairclough.

MacAngus guffawed. “That I can’t answer,” he said. “Here’s another. Three nuns arrive at the gates of heaven. An angel tells them that they must each answer one question before they can enter. The angel asks the first nun to name the first man. ‘Adam,’ she responds, so he lets her pass. He asks the second nun to name the first woman. ‘Eve,’ she says. Into heaven she goes. Finally, the angel asks the third nun to recite the first words Eve said to Adam. ‘Oh, that’s a hard one,’ she says. The gates open and the angel lets her pass.”

We stood half-naked in bafflement. What did the punchline mean? MacAngus clenched his hand into a fist and levered his forearm upwards, clucking his tongue once his forearm had reached full rise. My insides plunged with dumb realization. I looked around to see if anybody else had caught on, but my housemates were gaping in confusion, and I felt uneasy that I’d understood before them. Then Fairclough snorted loudly, stuffing his laughter behind his fist, and soon the room trembled with suffused murmurings as more boys understood, their voices swelling and erupting into a choir of falsetto hysterics.

When was it that MacAngus left the school? The same year I did perhaps, though I saw him less as I grew older, so it could have been earlier. The circumstances behind his departure remain nebulous, but the rumor was that he’d picked up a boy and tickled him inside an alcove. I never thought these reasonable grounds for dismissal. That was just MacAngus’ character. As we used to say, MacAngus is good banter.

I found out about the choirmaster a few years later from a tabloid paper Fairclough had procured from his father. The cover promised scandals on the royals and celebrity affairs, but an article in the backpages told of a choirmaster named Cullop who’d taught Fairclough’s father in the sixties. The article used testimonies from past students to tell how Cullop had auditioned boys for the choir. During each music lesson, he’d sing a hymn for the class. Then he’d call one boy at a time to sit on his lap, those he

thought wouldn't tell, and instruct them to sing back the tune while he accompanied them on the piano. After the boy sang, Cullop would pay them a half crown, the going rate for his sessions, and a further two shillings if they made the choir.

"Did he ever make your father sing?" I asked Fairclough.

"My father was never Culloped," said Fairclough. "But he knew something was off about the man."

We turned onto a page that showed Cullop's photograph. A porcine face, thick muttonchops that bristled down to his chin. Below, the article revealed his fate. Some boys had told. He'd misjudged the extent of their silence. The magistrates took him to trial, but he escaped the verdict. Michael John Cullop laid his body across the tracks at Bracknell Station, and with the patience of a holy man who knows he will reach heaven, he waited for the evening express train to London. The whole affair seemed fitting of the tabloid backpages, a choirmaster fondling his students. I read it with a disturbed fascination, as one might watch pigs mate. After a week, I forgot about it all.

When the investigation concluded and the names of the teachers surfaced, I'd been away from the school for a decade but still remembered their faces, those whose desires our bodies had tempted. I felt relieved to not find Partridge's name. I suspected he deserved the same verdict, but through his avoidance of guilt I myself had avoided admitting that I'd sensed base urges in him. I feared that admitting this would sully the memory of my youth. Had my housemaster been corrupted by vile passions and my silence been the nourishment upon which his passions fed?

"Your hands are freezing," my son says, shivering.

I feel the cold touch of Partridge's hand, the bruising collisions of rugby, the spit of the rain that fell so quick it was as if looking through warped glass. I hear the agonized groans of boys straining in the ruck, then the soft, wet smack of feet running across the shower floors, and I remember, for a fleeting instant, the shame of a naked boy aware of his own nakedness, before my wife asks if I've washed my son yet.

"I'm getting these wet clothes off first," I say, wringing his underwear over the bathtub.

"How did he get wet?" she asks. "Did you not dress him properly?"

“It’s my fault,” my son says. “I went too deep into the snow.”

“I told you he’s going to get sick,” she says.

“I’ll give him a warm bath,” I say.

I cup my hands under the scorching water until it numbs my fingers. When the water rises full, my son slips into the tub, exhaling as his body begins to thaw. He glows a faint, golden hue, like a skinned peach. After he finishes washing, he steps onto the bathmat and swaddles himself in a towel. I lift the towel over his head and scrub hard, then wrap it around his body and embrace him so I absorb his warmth, and as I do so I feel as if I am saving my schoolboy self, saving him from the scrum, the cold, the dripping bodies scrambling to cover up, and the hands of those who swooned at the touch of our flesh.

“Alaskan Salmon”

How strange this menu ending with question marks, this open-ended slither of precipice and food and laundry list, every end enjambed, and so I reason, then, with this hypothetical on paper fare, whether *é* in café is taboo in the heartland, whether the “Alaskan Salmon” with capers and lemon wedges and surreptitiously thawed disjunctive on its journey through corn fields and presented now with the capers—actually—covering its eyes like it can hide that fact, like some ritualized send-off of antiquity, like keepsakes of dinners past stirring up some sort of Brutus conspiracy, if this death mask of salty buds not native to continental climates is simply too unnatural, too far from the city, eating then sacrilege, fish without any water, no graves in sight; I wonder if I would feel differently if I was on the coast, mainstreet not littered with parking tickets, whether the “Alaskan Salmon” even has eyes—dare I anthropomorphize—as I might imagine, as I project out a hideous friend—like-me understanding!—whether I would, instead, feel differently about looking such a massacre in the eyes, whether there’s something to be said about fish with human faces, how it might’ve—should I even ask—puckered when smoked ochre, a living thing turned fiery now gone cold over my death questioning, as I spin dad’s rubik’s cube of this-that prepositions, handed to me pink, ovid in a fleece of rice; maybe that’s why this whole thing is so uncomfortable, why I’m so meticulous about eating piece-meal, asking to and drawing attention, the questions—now posing—in the hand trap, fork to hand, as a child, as I finally take a bite—have I always eaten like this?— taking each thing apart and setting it down, sizing chunks, spectacularly aware of shape, weight, color, so it’s—I think it’s OCD—was told so by mom always remarking like a rush of pockmarks: go, go, go dinner is over and you’re still playing with your food—but maybe I just felt uneasy, about all of this—my place—the salmon’s—about the day they both moved out, how I went first to the foundation of the house, reshuffling each stone, peking grout, assembling an immovable force, whether this means something can

actually be unstoppable, or, the plate smelling more fishy than meaty, just another way to describe questions I can never have answered, like what this “Alaskan Salmon” might think, where its eyes are, had been—if they’re stolen—if I can bear to look at another duck pond disturbed in silence, a child tipping over a canoe, entropy brought back to zero, a spoiling figure, a parent, I assume, taking their son’s hand from the oar, holding him as still as an answer, and returning the lake to the most peaceful thing I could hope to pick apart, put together.

Right-Handed

There were so many noises in the beginning, sharp and loud. The background sounds overwhelmed her: the ceiling fan, footsteps, her own chewing, and especially the rustling of paper. Even the slow start of a fire engine startled her. But her brain had quickly adapted to the new hearing aid, which she wore in one ear. She had chosen a blue one, not those skin tone models, because she thought she might as well treat it as an accessory.

It was raining the day she lost hearing in that ear. She felt a pang of disappointment that she couldn't hear the full sound of rain. She had always found the rhythm of fat little raindrops hitting pavement so soothing. The doctor referred her to a specialist, an audiologist, after she complained of muffled hearing and ringing in her ear. She remembers the look on his face, one of concern and pity. She knew then that she was partially deaf. Her first thought was that now she would have a good reason to learn sign language. She always wanted to anyway. Besides, she still had one good ear to work with.

She received many compliments on her blue hearing aid and those compliments would often come with questions: *Were you born deaf? Did you have an infection? An accident?* She didn't mind the questions at first. She discovered that she enjoyed making up stories about it. She told one person she'd been in a scuba diving accident. Another that she was born that way. One person got the swimmer's ear version. She told her coworkers that she had one too many ear infections as a child. She told a stranger that she'd been stung by wasps and had an allergic reaction resulting in permanent ear damage. She told a postal worker it was a jellyfish sting to the face. She told a customer that she'd flown to Connecticut with a cold.

But over time, she began running out of stories to tell and grew frustrated by people's prying questions. They were so shameless. She thought of telling the truth but wondered if that would only invite more

questions. Questions that she definitely did not want to answer. Questions that people should not be asking in this day and age.

It was a sunny day when she blurted out the truth. She simply could not think of another story for how one could suddenly lose hearing in only one ear. She was surprised at the exhilaration she felt watching their stunned faces. She enjoyed the discomfort it caused, maybe next time they wouldn't pry so much when curiosity coiled around them.

She smiled and answered: *He was right-handed.*

Prose Poems

Keeping Time by Crickets

The first sound always comes before I notice—a faint trill in the grass, a pulse too small to name. By the time I remember to listen, it's everywhere: a current stitched through the quiet, the field alive with its own cadence, damp and humming with late heat, the grass rippling like long fur in the breeze—one surface pretending to be another. Maybe it starts before the heat even fades. You once said summer doesn't end until the crickets start, and winter when they stop. My father, keeping time by insect pitch. I didn't believe then. Seasons seemed like weather, light, not sound. Now I know better. Each evening I open the window just enough to let the noise in, and each night I wait for its falter—the way someone keeps a finger on a pulse, hoping it holds. Their rhythm isn't comfort; it's friction making music of survival. When the night grows heavy and humid, the sound builds—dense, invisible. It moves through the room, through me, vibrating the soles of my feet, my sternum, my throat—as if the air were relearning how to live. Sometimes I press my palm to the screen, feel their bodies tremble through the mesh. By the window, one dead cricket—wings open, still tuned to something I can't hear. The dark presses back, an equal resistance. What the body misplaces, the field hums back—proof that what fades doesn't vanish, only changes register. When the chill finally reaches through the screen from the field, the pitch drifts low and slow, the pauses widening. The last threads of sound sink into the noise of the highway, the train. Nothing ends, not really—the field keeps time, the dark keeps score, the air remembers what we forget. I leave the night ajar, just enough to catch the time, the key.

Portrait of My Brother as a City

I see two kids playing chopsticks on the train and suddenly I'm eight years old and on the way to the Boston Massacre where I'll lay on the ground and pretend I'm dead because Presley is still alive and it doesn't hurt yet. We couldn't bring her because even northern summers flirt with triple digits but you and I still climb the trellis outside the aquarium and swing like the only child I saw today and shed a tear and a jacket for beside the footbridge on the Charles that we had walked across on an MIT college tour before mens and manus were one. Now you build circuits and code Fenway's walls and I can translate the universities' mottos but you still tell me "sit down, shut up, and read me your poem." That one November I slept on your couch and the muse and I watched the T stop running for the night after you fell asleep during *Good Will Hunting*. I talked like Matt Damon for a week but now that you've affected an accent it's not so funny. Our shoes are hanging on a telephone wire somewhere and I know your town better than my own because home isn't a place for me. What I'm trying to say is, I don't know if cities have ghosts but I see you everywhere in Boston.

This one ends in a black hole

Dead skin in the dusty light. A deep breath through the nose. On my mark, set each clock to the same time. On the countertop, the apple's mottled flesh. You collect what used to be your cheek in microfiber—wipe the banister like a timecapsule. A new layer of cobwebs in the corner. I spill the vacuum filter and clean the same mess again—procedures that seem to pull time apart. The stove. The microwave. Each clock reads a different time. I think we deserve to sprawl between these minutes. Let the universe check off its chores, stub its toe on the stairs, and open its wrath, while we embrace and fall through the deep void, lovingly, eternal.

Dream Journalese

Remember dreaming like it's a movie, or maybe a dream within a movie, or a movie inside a dream. Remember soft-edged fictions exploding randomly into ludicrous moments treated without concern or consequence, beautiful set-pieces centred around assorted shames from childhood: hospital thrills, high school chills, cinema kills, cemetery, hell. Late for your exam, late for the movie to get the best seat, late to say goodbye forever, teeth tumbling between your fingers into the bathroom sink as you rush to prepare for everything. Everything matters so much. It matters so much. The hospital needs youth. The high school needs youth. The cinema needs dreams. The cemetery needs nothing at all. Hell is another story altogether. Remember leaving a trail of teeth wherever you go, and still each morning you wake with hands clasped to an overflowing mouth.

At Mile 144, I Tried to Fight a Seagull Over a Half-Eaten Stromboli

The gas station parking lot was fluorescent and humming like the inside of a dying star. The light was a kind of hum. A slow-flickering apology. A moth made soft collisions with the shopwindow—again and again and again. My hands forgot the shape of holding. The air inside was cold and sweet, like freezer breath. There were snacks arranged in rows like thoughts I didn't finish. The receipt printer stuttered, then went back to sleep. A man in front of me scratched his neck and left with an oversized Gatorade. The cashier's bracelet clinked softly against the register drawer. Her nails were chipped, red at the tips like bitten cherries. I lingered by the cooler longer than I needed to, pretending to weigh the difference between lemon-lime and lime-lemon. I imagined we were all ghosts, doing our midnight hauntings in gas station limbo. Outside, the sky had the texture of television static. The parking lot pulsed faintly—lights, engines, the ghost of a song from somewhere. A semi idled at the edge of the lot like a sleeping animal. The sandwich I picked was warm in its plastic, too warm. The steering wheel was smooth and indifferent. In the rearview mirror, I looked like someone halfway through becoming someone else. The building behind the glass kept humming its long electric sentence. Somewhere, beyond the pumps, something shifted—a plastic bag lifting once, then settling again like it had never moved.

Vapors

The dead do not need to breathe, I want to say to my sister, though I doubt she will stop trying, any more than she will quit her pack-a-night habit six years after her death. From under my bed, tar and ammonia waft upward. I read somewhere that cigarettes can produce more than four hundred scents, and I contemplate asking her what my nose is missing. The bed frame shifts, I imagine, as she shrugs, like she often did, a spirit now beneath me, coiled in a yellowed shroud, holes from ash burns top to bottom, threadbare from so much time spent lurking in coffin-tight spaces. I hear her rasp, spectral ribs cracking as flesh-covered ones did during those last years, a popcorn maker just getting started—before being violently unplugged. When she first returned, I begged her to drop the Newportts that put her underground. Back then she came out from under the bed, sat at my feet, even pretended to listen, the top of the shroud—still white—bobbing as she nodded politely, like we had been taught, and I shared my latest research on addiction, emphysema, and mourning. The best response I received was an offer to sleep on my words, to get back to me. Yet she insisted I had to understand the countless stresses of the afterlife; how she needed a little pick-me-up after waking at sundown to float between our family members; how Dad blamed her for not being there to care for him; how Mom talked to her about only me; how dawn felt like a blow to the back of her ectoplasmic skull sending her into a fitful slumber without providing any rest. She wondered why I even cared if she smoked; it was not like she could die a second time. And though my insides burned and my eyes leaked, it was my turn to nod politely. After a few years of such futile talk, we settled into a routine of silent communion, each of us hollowed out, together more in reverie than in moments shared, awaiting the pale warmth of daybreak.

Car and Pear Tree

We expect there to be two of them but when we look, the 2018 Subaru Forester and the Anjou pear tree have become one. Such joinings used to be common and gave us many good things like northwest and bittersweet, turquoise and bronze and electrum. Something wanted to come forward and noticed the car parked under the pear tree, saw this as an opportunity. They say in the Book of the Dead that we choose our parents, the two people who, joining, will produce the exact person we need to be. This that needed to be, and now is, reaches down into the dark soil, throws handfuls of wealth into the sky for sparrows to perch on, waits on its air-filled tires to roll in any direction. A prodigy, possessed of rearview mirrors and green twigs, made of machine by machines and the long slow corridor of seed, tree, seed, tree. What is the direction midway between rushing on asphalt and rooted in the ground, between fossil fuels and fruit? If a pear tree drove a car, where would it go? As it goes it remains rooted. Made of metal and haste, its own branches provide it with shade. A construct of the ego's factories, it turns towards the noon and makes sugar out of sunlight. Didn't you know? You are more than you recognize, you exceed your captivity, sleek aerodynamic being lifting the hidden world up into ripening fruit, melting glaciers with your breath, exhaling what everything that lives needs in order to live and be everything.

Antidote for Ordinary

Forest cries split through a humid summer night like a scroll saw on two by fours. Neighbors huddled together on the tired dirt road listen intently, rushing to rule out the known. The quarry worker from across the street with a Budweiser-stained beard murmurs that catamounts survived extinction in our woods. The same murmur I heard as a teenager in the back of the school bus as my buddy scrunched up his report card and blazed. His gooseflesh face recounted how he cut through the village cemetery one November night and was confronted by a faceless apparition, breezing out from behind a chipped stone monolith. An odd conviction in his words left me to wonder if his dilated pupils were a product of unthawed terror and his sprint for miles, never looking back. My grandmother had the same conviction after cooking supper, when she told of how the woods behind her house in Jericho would hum with static, its source never identified. How at 4am on a subzero winter morning she saw small avocado-eyed grey men in a trance walking down the deserted road. Someday I will tell my son that at sunset on Lake Champlain, I saw the water undulate in the distance and then Champ's stallion head rise from the depths.

Crafting at the End of the World

The story of me gluing macaroni to paper as a child and calling it art is just that: a story my mother tells to laugh. How she let me waste the whole box, the good pasta, the kind meant for guests. How she watched my fingers assemble nonsense and let it dry on the windowsill anyway. I trace it back, this compulsion to make, to fix the world by rearranging its debris. I return to the glue, thick as spit, a pale semen in the light, and the strange throb of wanting it to become something. There are machines that draw better than I do, that write with a speed my body can't mimic. But they don't know the fever of finding a word, the shape of trying to paint your mother's absence, the prayer in your fingertips while tracing the same line again and again, hoping one time it will feel like truth. What is art in a world that no longer asks for the artist? Who can find the human among its infinite replicas? I am the eyelash stuck under varnish in an oil painting that no one noticed until the gallery lights hit. I am the paper cut on the lip of a word that came out too sharp. I am the comma that split a marriage, the silence between stanzas where no one came home. Eraser dust, backspace, snapped pencil tip, blinking cursor, blank page. I am the glitch in the algorithm's eye. I am the mistake someone falls in love with. I am pressing dry noodles into paper and calling it a gift. I am the mother watching from the doorframe, letting it matter.

Little Bear

I am drowning. Claws slipping on the steep slope, again and again I slide under, freezing a little more each time. Following my headstrong sister onto the new ice was an adventure; she loved larking. Together we rolled in the fresh, crisp crystals, our cream baby coats sparkling. When the wind turned without warning, sweeping all ice out of the bay, I swam in circles, crying as I lagged behind, tiring against the current. We have not been taught passages in the old ice cliffs. Now the sea that swallowed my sister sweeps me through on a sudden surge. I am curled on soft snow, not moving despite new smells and sounds approaching; there is nowhere to run or hide in this empty, frozen wilderness. The animals arrive first, roped together, howling with excitement, larger than the graceful Arctic fox who used to trail us, always staying out of reach. A single biped, pointing. I recognise this gesture; waiting for our famished mother prowling the settlement, we saw her stumble, fall. My own hunger is growling as I stand in small defiance. Bright light but I do not fall. No shouting, no rushing, even the animals are quiet. The silence of this low grey dawn broken only by crunching snow, the biped crouching, menace melting. I do not understand this watching. All I know is that after the last flash, after the last cries of “Mush, mush,” I am alone again.

Episode in Which I Outrun the News

I have a premonition that it will be very, very bad. I pack quickly and lightly, taking only two changes of warm-weather clothing and (after a tense exchange with my partner) my child. We board a westbound supersonic jet, gleaming silver, and don't look down until the wings glide over cream-capped cyan ripples. Upon landing, I push past the attendant and race down the airstair, child on hip, carry-on over shoulder. We run gasping to the beach, the only white space on the island. I lie face down, head in the blinding sand, my child a weighted blanket on my back. I settle.

Our Daughter Holds My Hand

And we walk to school and each day I am trying not to say thank you for holding my hand, because that sounds like a weird mom thing to say. And so I point out the strange clouds, the dogwoods planted too close together in the revised park—where they took out the dinosaurs, where we used to set the girls when they were too small even to sit on dinosaurs on their own. And now no one knows where the dinosaurs went, two green T-Rexes, though with very raptor-shaped bodies, and handles on their backs. I imagine the bees felt very alone on Earth when the dinosaurs didn't come back from the polar dust, the sky clearing eventually and no long necks, no teeth glinting in the new sun.

At Dusk

There is no softer air than October twilight. My steps ruffle red leaves, gold leaves, as each house settles for the night, some with closed eyelids, pulled shades. In a yellow window a woman dries dishes, putting each in its place. But the world has grown too small. In your bedroom a Gazan boy with sticks for arms struggles to breathe, and in your basement a rubber boat of refugees tips, then sinks. No one can swim. You don't notice the AK-47 hidden in your closet, but a sad boy from down the block is coming to use it to kill other children for reasons no one can pull from his throat. I turn toward home. Night does not fall. It just hardens the air.

When I was a mermaid...

I approached everything with curiosity. I ate dandelions. I cried silently into my cotton pillow case. I wore sequined skirts over my jeans that were embroidered with hot pink flowers. I used the stage name “Olivian Maxine.” I talked to myself and my stuffed animals; I swore they were sentient, if I apologized to them I meant it. I told stories, aloud and on paper, to my family and to myself. I walked back and forth along a puddle and made up a story about a town that surrounded this puddle and was washed away by a great flood. I took a nap in the lap of my classmate on the bus returning from a field trip. I was eight going on nine. His name was Edgar, he was quiet and sweet. We’d been talking about random things then I asked Edgar if I could lay down. He let me and the nap was peaceful; I remember the sun warming my face through the window. When I told my mom about the nap she said it was weird that I did that. I couldn’t understand why. I let Sisi nap on me all the time. I believed in mermaids as well as faeries and angels. I wanted to be all three of those beings. Lemonade was my favorite drink. I wanted to take away Sisi’s pain. I ate strawberries until my hands and lips were stained red.

Creative Nonfiction

Indiana Dunes

We pulled in late, with the sun's blush on the far horizon, having fought through Chicago traffic for hours. Too late to see much of the waves restless on the Lake Michigan shore, so we lowered the truck windows to just listen. In the near distance, over the dunes, waves pacing, lapping, pawing. I will sleep well, I thought. I have always slept well within earshot of water. My dreams rising and falling with the tide.

Oh, sweet summer child. It was full July in the Indiana Dunes and the night air panted hot and humid, like a Great Dane in my lap. There was to be no sleeping well.

We dove into the wet work at our sandwashed campsite, setting up a sunny yellow tent by lantern light, the tent's nylon walls emblazoned with Eureka! Grains of sand ground under my nails and stuck wherever I was sweating—which was everywhere.

Night fell fully and the insects descended. Bugs were everywhere, wherever I was. When I opened my mouth to speak—which I must if I was to assemble a tent and preserve my marriage of less than a year—mosquitoes, midges, moths, mayflies, crane flies, deer flies, houseflies, all species of fly, flew pell-mell to my tonsils. My husband cracked a joke about the bonus calories but he wasn't laughing when the bonus calories sacrificed themselves to his tongue.

The pale insect wings were the exact color of the dinner I packed in the cooler long ago that morning in Minnesota. Tahini-sauced pasta with chicken, something that should be cold and refreshing but instead each twirling noodle teemed with the sticky, sauce-slicked bodies of bugs.

"Indiana Dunes? More like Indiana *Jones*," my husband said, recalling the creep and crawl of the passageways of the Temple of Doom.

We abandoned dinner, wriggled into our tent to escape the bites of bugs both on our palates and upon every inch of exposed skin. Instead of refuge, we found the Tent of Dune. Abrasive floor, sandy sleeping bags, water vapor cloaking every surface. Then, after midnight, the Great Lake

unleashed a storm shaggy with rain and lightning. I laid still atop my sleeping bag and prayed to be a snow angel. No one answered me but the mosquitoes, their ugly whispers audible even over thunder.

Dawn came late and dirty with tea-stained skies. Fallen wings carpeted the campsite. Our boots crushed them to a fine paste as we extracted the tent poles and folded the nylon loosely, not bothering to stuff it in its storage bag. Shouldn't drive on so little sleep, but there was no need to say it aloud, no need to speak our agreement to leave this lakeshore behind and soon. All across Indiana, through Ohio and on and on, how many particles of sand and insect wings did we leave in our wake?

Years later—three kids later—we again camped at Indiana Dunes on our way from Midwest to East Coast. Bugs not nearly as bad, though the sand just as incessant, the damp pervasive. Yet I don't think the kids had as much fun in their young lives as they did on that day upon the dunes. They swam and splashed in the shallows, jumped the breakers hand in hand with my husband, mounded damp castles on the shore.

From the dry-ish perch of a beach towel, I watched and waved. I barely registered the sand grains between my toes or the pink kisses of the night's mosquitoes. Instead, I felt only joy at their joy. A joy possible because we didn't give up—never quit camping, couldn't let the bugs best us, nor the many anxieties, the tempers that rose and fell.

Sand is an irritant, yes, but isn't it also the most forgiving of terrain? Cushions us when we fall clumsy and laughing upon its dunes. Softens whatever wears upon us. With time, every rock turns to sand, every mountain too. It's a terrain that remembers, that sticks with us. Indiana sand is still surely in the seams of our yellow tent, and every grain rests close as children.

Everything Else You Left Behind

Why I Wish I Was A Painter

One day on the train, I asked you what makes art good. You told me, *good art searches for truth.*

What is truth? I asked you, and we debated for hours whether truth was a form of God, of ourselves, or of something else entirely.

The other day, your mother asked me about this conversation. I told her what you said and she started to cry. She feels your presence in your paintings, and in everything else you left behind.

On a Field Trip in Third Grade

We learned the lifespan of a butterfly. I still wonder how it would look to see the delicate creatures spread their wings.

Your Sister

I first met her when she was five and I was nineteen. I wanted to ask her questions. Questions I thought a kid would like, such as *what is your favorite color? when is your birthday? what is your middle name?*

She acted shy at first, recoiled. But slowly, as the questions kept coming in, she began to unravel.

She told me about the gray white horse named Angel at the barn across the street. Every week, she would ride Angel, and together, they would learn tricks and jumps. Being that high up scared her, she admitted with a nod.

She told me that every day when she gets home from school, she opens her box of watercolors. She was working on a self-portrait then, and I asked if I could see it. She told me maybe, maybe if I come to her home.

She told me about the creek in her backyard. How in the summertime when the water isn't frozen over she races sticks through whirlpools, between glossy stones, through the steady stream trickling down the mountain.

When her voice grew tired from talking, she started to whisper. In a hushed tone, she told me she didn't want to come this weekend. She didn't want to drive down to North Carolina. She didn't want to meet me. Because then she had to think about you.

On a Field Trip in Third Grade

The ranger told us butterflies die because people cut down their homes. They lose the trees, they lose the flowers, they have nowhere else to go.

Humans are the reasons butterflies die. And it's up to humans to keep them alive. It was his job to remind people of that.

You Are Not Your Body or Your Brain

Each room in your house had different color walls. The living room was painted a dull beige. The dining room was painted a muted teal. The kitchen was painted a bright yellow.

Each room had a different life form, a different energy.

As I wandered from room to room, I looked for relics.

I saw your painting in the living room, two wolves roaming snow capped mountains.

I saw you in the family picture hanging in the dining room, smiling your impeccable grin.

I saw you in the kitchen, in the spiral staircase, in the creek flowing in your backyard, in the driveway leading up to your house, and down the street, across your neighborhood, in the winding road you used to bike down and gaze at the stars.

And yet, as I wandered from corridor to corridor, paced up and down the stairs, glanced out the back door, it all felt empty.

When I was younger, I was scared of spirits. Scared of otherworldly beings haunting those of us who are still living. Now, I'm scared spirits don't exist, that they're not real, that it's just us, and nothing else.

That the house, your house, is really nothing more than four different colored walls, and that maybe, there won't be another life where I see you again. Maybe this is it.

So I walk around your house, and I search for relics of you.

On a Field Trip in Third Grade

My mother would not let me go on the butterfly walk. I thought it was because she didn't want me to see the dead butterflies, thought my heart too delicate to handle the sight of decay.

My Father's War Story

You learn a lot in a lifetime managing an appliance store, it seems, even more than a bartender. My father was a storyteller. The time the shop was robbed by a gang of louts when he was there alone locking up for the night and how he (a man fifty-five years old at the time) fought them, “hold him, hit him”; a hairdresser in her declining years who won a fortune on the football pools, only a few of the x’s went slightly outside the boxes and they refused to pay up and ten years on still cried herself to sleep; a mother whose twelve year old made it onto Opportunity Knocks and the judge hailing the kid as the next Sammy Davis Jr.; the time Cilla Black came in and bought a refrigerator, friendly and charming, just as she appears on TV, a Personal Assistant in tow who signed her checks. A blind rescue dog, a psychic who worked with the cops, an orthodox rabbi who moonlighted as a stand-up comic... the catalogue seemed endless.

Then there was the war story. He would tell some of these stories to us children from time to time, but never the one about the war. But we would hear it when he told it to his friends, and he did this often. Once, when my mother started to tell a neighbor what he had done in the war, my father forced her from the room. It was weird because he never did anything like that to her. At the time I put it down to modesty, but then he would tell the story himself, as so I wondered, how could that be?

In any event, even though we came to know the war story backwards and forwards, we didn’t ever hear it from him directly. He never spoke to us, his children, about the war, this man who told us so much. The closest he ever came, expressing disgust on hearing the first verse of Donovan’s *Universal Soldier*. Muttering during an unusually graphic feature on *News at Ten*, “I suppose you might as well see what people do to each other.”

Except for once. In a restaurant, with my own wife and son in attendance, shortly before he died, sick with grief from the loss of my mother, his wife of fifty years. Sotto voce and without context, *That time on the hill in Italy*... The rest I can’t tell you because the story was his.

Arrivals

I am seven years old, the brakes of our minivan squealing to a halt before a wide terra cotta porch. Cries break through the heavy, humid air of Alabama in August. Curious children crowd around the moving truck, new friends acquired with an exchange of names, admiration of the bows and arrows bought on the journey south. Together we tear up the stairs, white columns soaring to the heavens as we explore this new land.

I am thirteen, a small palm clutched in each of mine as we emerge, blinking against the gold and vermilion line of the horizon. Two sets of wide blue eyes look to me, and I squeeze these precious hands as we descend the boarding stairs. The moisture is sucked from my face, the tarmac beneath sizzling, even at sunset. “Don’t worry,” I tell my sisters, as we step into the Arizona desert.

I am eighteen. The wide brick paths wind, stately and subdued in the bright morning light, the grass dew-laden and glistening on an April morning. I study the campus map as I approach the crowd of students, here to decide whether this is where they will spend the next four years. Ahead stands a girl in profile, her troubled gaze as uncertain as mine. I don’t know it yet, but she will hate me.

I am twenty-three, the train shaking as it trundles past Mary Poppins chimney pots. Roses climb the fenceposts beneath a heavy-laden sky, raindrops splattering the window as we wind our way north to London. Ahead is a world I have envisioned a thousand times, brought alive by Jane Austen and Richard Curtis but still unknown. By tomorrow, an English boy will be healing my broken heart.

I am twenty-eight. Anticipation rises in my throat as I climb into the cab, my head pounding with each sudden brake. This is the price of twelve

hours of jetlag and a night on the escalators of Hong Kong. The teeming streets of Bangkok pass in a blur of stalls and highrises, the spires of golden temples gleaming behind whitewashed walls. It's been three months since I've seen him, our whirlwind relationship reduced to stolen weeks, our lives on opposite sides of the world and no end in sight.

I am thirty-five, a baby strapped to my chest, a sticky toddler's hand in mine, just like my sisters' all those years ago. It's the smell that hits me: the scents of sweat and diesel, of dust that rises from oche hills and marigold petals scattered outside the Islamabad airport. I stumble back at the wall of roaring humanity, the shalwar kameez of the women glowing like jewels. An alien world I can only hope to make my own.

I am forty-one. By now, they say, my roots should be deep and steady, twining underground and anchoring me in place. But I carry my roots like an orchid, nourished not in soil but air, in the taste of the wind on my lips. The shores of the Rio de la Plata are calling, the palm-lined streets of Buenos Aires beckon. Another arrival awaits.

Trembling Leaf, Heart in a Cage

Your bike perches from the hook in the laundry room. Removing it is the last task after a litany of morning chores. You place your hip against the seat and grab the handlebars, cradling its body as you gently detach it from the wall. You stand it on the back wheel and roll it out the door, carefully dodging the washing machine, bags of clothes to give away to the Salvation Army, your husband's tools and the stack of plywood resting behind the door. Since your alarm went off an hour ago, you've been on your feet and flying to put the coffee on, clear the sink, pack lunches, make breakfast, get the kids ready, pick your own outfit and get dressed. Answer questions, scold, clean. Eventually handing everything off to your husband so you can leave to get to school on time. You maneuver past the creaky door, down the steps, and lay the bike against the plastic play structure at the back of the driveway you share with your neighbors. After walking back to lock the door, you unclasp your helmet from the top tube and pump your legs against the crisp October air.

You refuse to feel fear when you ride. You suffered a brain injury from a hit and run when you were twenty-two, a car striking you in what the witnesses say was an act of aggression. The driver flashed his headlights, revved the engine, lurched. Waking up from a coma on your twenty-third birthday, you are proud of the physical strength and ability you have recovered. It is precious, this body-magic, and since the age of twenty-five you have been a bicyclist, blood coursing your veins as you trek through city streets. Mindful of people in parked cars who may open their doors, dancing with bus drivers as they make space for you, edge to the curb, start up and stop again. You see lights, you hear engines, and you are not afraid. Reclaiming the road and establishing a place for yourself within it, carving safety from a world of peril.

Cross the footbridge at the end of your street, pass the encampment at the playground, noting how many more coverings have emerged since before the weekend, greet the municipal workers clearing trash, ducking

under the branches that hang low from the tree on the sidewalk that spits you onto the street. Eyes open, alert. A student of yours is waiting at the bus stop, “Hi, Amy!” you yell as the light turns green.

You didn’t learn how to ride a bike until you were nineteen. You remember that you had a bike as a child, lavender purple with a unicorn on the frame. Your parents, too afraid to let you bike in the street, never took the training wheels off. You pedaled vigorously the lengths of your back deck, laps that shrunk by the week. You grew bigger and more restless, giving it up entirely. Clipped wings, the smallness of not knowing what exists beyond the cage.

Fear and free are two sides of the coin. The brain injury unleashed a bright invincibility as you blazed through the world. Not certain why or how you had survived, you denied any intrusion of doubt: you would continue to survive, there was too much God on your side. You didn’t have time to waste on extra caution, and your mother’s abundant anxiety only pushed you into a new, precarious yet brilliant confidence.

You inherit a 1990s-era olive green Bianchi from a friend and vow to build your own model by the time you’re thirty. You volunteer at the neighborhood bike kitchen, sorting greasy parts and studying from a mechanics manual. You memorize the routes of your commute, first consulting maps and online cycling forums then penning the directions on the back of your hand to consult on the ride. You learn to wait at the top of one hill for the green light so the gravity propels you up the second slope, and predict when you will need to change gears or to pause for a water break or keep pushing.

Your mom says that you get two things when a baby is born. “The baby,” as she rocks her arm with an imaginary infant, and picking up a heavy burden with her other arm, “worry.” Her body is tense but she is laughing, explaining that the worry stays with you for life. That you hold onto it for as long as the child is living in the world. To manage this worry, she sheltered you. You nudged and nagged to keep from bursting, jealous of the freedoms your peers enjoyed in listening to pop music on the radio, watching tv, dating and even inviting their boyfriends over—but the answer was always “no.” From her nervousness you understood that the world is a scary place. That she needed to protect you from outside influences at all costs.

When you consider the choices your parents made, you sense they were driven by fear. Two fearful bodies orbiting in the immense and fragile galaxy of inherited trauma. You understood from their thunderous silence that the world is dangerous, so loud and unspecified to blanket the world in fear. You pulled from the faint scratches of stories to create a landscape of deafening and universal fear – your paternal uncle was kidnapped as a boy and went missing for a year, your mother was molested by a stranger after answering the door at home alone, all of your grandparents died young. Alcoholism, scarcity. Without a community of fellow parents to name and process psychological hurdles, you imagine they must have felt isolated. Alone in the young family they had made.

Your colleague calls out “Be careful!” as you exit the front gate of the high school where you work. You respond with a wink, irreverent, “I know, it’s dangerous out there...” and he comes back with sincerity, “No, it’s dangerous right here!” You roll your eyes and sail off, weaving through cars picking up their kids from school, a van taking the volleyball team to their away game. There are potholes and broken glass. You know where to dismount and wait for the walk signal. Violence lurks in the shadows: you look ahead and past it. Conscious, breathing, alive.

When you landed in the Intensive Care Unit, your maternal uncle was the first one there. He has not forgiven himself. You were living with him at the time you were attacked, nervously waiting for me to return if I went out with friends. He blames himself that you were hurt, his baby sister’s little girl, his heart, a constant presence in your childhood. Your mother blames herself. Your father blames himself. When you advanced in your recovery and began to make plans to travel, your uncle said, plain-faced and without blinking: “I wish you could stay in a bubble.” Your parents nodded in agreement as they looked on, creases of anguish at their temples. You felt the walls closing in.

What you know about fear is that it freezes you. You were so afraid of the pain during your labor that you froze against the movement and flow you needed to open with the contractions. It was terrifying. You didn’t want to be afraid, you were ready for the baby, you were mentally prepared for the birth and nonetheless your body tightened and clenched and stiffened. You gave your best and bravest effort to counteract the crippling fear, trying to tense in your upper body and release in your lower. Over your head you

squeezed a stress ball and visualized containing the pressure above your abdomen, that grueling warzone of growth and renewal. But the paralyzing effects were too great and only with the epidural could you focus your breathing and energy on the softness, the opening, the love meeting love.

“I wish you could stay in a bubble” sounds a lot like “It’s your fault for not staying in this bubble we created for you.” You didn’t speak to your uncle for two years after this encounter. You could not carry the guilt from an unprovoked aggression that brought grief to your family. You wanted to scream “Sheltered doesn’t mean safe!” and “I can’t live like this!” Instead molding your own form from the messy scraps that surround you, a chaos that sticks to your bones as you shake it off and off.

Fear is a quivering feather inside your chest. Fear is the wind toppling a pebble, leaf, or plastic toy off the porch. Fear is walking into a hall of mirrors or across a razor ridge of mountain.

Safe is the hug and sparkles from your toddler meeting you at the end of your day: “Hi Ma! I missed you! Come with me?” tugging your finger to the stack of blocks on the carpet. Safe is the warm droplets of your shower, blessings and salves.

Sheltered is the melding of fear and safe, a patchwork of defense and denial. Artificial fusion of the hardest rocks, cross-fire orchestras of misunderstanding.

Free is the burn in your thighs at the penultimate twist of the trail home. Panting free the breaths wash over this square patch of earth, pavement above soil, layers of clay capped and spilling from between the blisters. A telephone wire frames the horizon, sneakers dangling from their shoelaces and your heart in your throat. The air washes your face, unfurls your hair tendrils, keeps the flame burning inside of you with its soft gusty oxygen.

For the East Bay Bike Party the mass of cyclists descend at Fruitvale Plaza the BART station, buzzing and warm before pushing off into the dark, cutting through the night alone /and together. Slicing the road over potholes, past industrial warehouses, across the bridge into Alameda where you backbone the bay’s belly /at the shoreline /lights flaring indigo lifting your heart lime /fluorescence filling tangerine joy your tank. The sweat on wing’s heartbeat /your protection.

The front of the caravan waits at the red light and pedals forward when it’s green, but three hundred deep means the light turns yellow and red

again but we roll through, the reflective bright vested protectors standing to block the intersection, past highway on-ramps it is terrifying and thrilling and the tears pool in your eyes, welling your chest heaves knowing you are doing this, claiming space, coexisting with cars and subverting the power relationship with them.

The holidays come and with them two high profile vehicular assaults, in New Orleans and through a Christmas market in Berlin. You can't take for it granted, not being hit /hurt but you go to the next bike party anyway, first one of the year. It's Friday and the parking lot at El Cerrito BART station is filling with cyclists of all types, all of you brimming with excitement. You roll through neighborhoods and the people come out of their homes to wave, cheer, record your journey on their phones the glitter of friendship and fame, celebration. Through the tunnel at Point Richmond, dancing against the deep blue curtains of the earth, you feel the light of the moon on your face. Looking up you see the stars you are biking under the stars across the curved planet with ducks in the marsh to your left and seagulls at the shore to your right, a chorus of frogs in your ear until nature fades into the freeway's soft roar. Smoke from the Richmond oil refinery billows and fogs lift off the hills studded with lights mirroring the night sky.

In 1968 at Dinner Time, Why Didn't I Help My Little Sister or Even Notice How Much She Needed Me?

In 1962, on a cramped, sweaty drive home from a week at our grandparents' beach house, I was jammed between Dana, my older sister, on one side, and two younger siblings, Gordon and Jan, on the other. My polyester t-shirt stuck to the seat of our Chevy Impala. I panted for breath. Up front, my mom held new baby Charlotte, while my dad drove us along slow, pre-I-95 roads with occasional strip malls.

My heart leapt when Mom asked Dad to pull into Howard Johnson's, famous back then for its 28 flavors of ice cream. This was a rare event; sugar in our household was tightly restricted, a shameful treat we were seldom permitted. I reveled in my choice of peppermint as it dripped on the pavement at my feet, but I also complained about the too-large chunks of hard candy I had to crunch through at the end of each bite.

When we got home, I took my sharpest pencil and used my newly-acquired cursive to write a letter to Howard Johnson's. "Can you please make the candy pieces smaller?" I asked, signing it, "Sincerely yours, Karla Jynn (with a mouth full of peppermint)."

Clearly, my observant, eight-year-old self had the wherewithal to see a problem and speak up about it to a major corporation. But later, those skills didn't develop into advocacy for my little sister.

By ninth grade—the void between kid and legitimate teen—I mostly felt vacant at home. In the gap between after-school choir practice and dinner, I wandered to the kitchen, wanting to fill my empty stomach. With Mom gone at work now all day, and Dana preparing for college, my younger siblings—Jan, 11, Gordon, 10, and Baby Char, now seven—lounged away the afternoons watching TV, arguing, and eating too much of the foods they'd be in trouble for by dinnertime.

From the rectangular opening above the kitchen counter, I saw Char lying on the family-room floor next to Jan, her white-blond hair covering her face. I knew my younger siblings had been flopped in that green-carpeted room since school ended, next to a Wheat Thins or Club Crackers box, supposedly doing homework, but mainly fighting.

I could tell Char was crying.

I heard her say, "That hurts! Cut it out!"

Gordon sneered, "You deserve it! You're so dumb."

Hungry, and depressed by the blaring TV and quarreling, I looked away.

But one time, I'd done differently; I'd been helpful to Charlotte.

Earlier that year, when my parents left on another of Dad's business trips, Char was sad. That night I tucked her in, sat on her Raggedy Ann bedspread with my hand on her arm, and told made-up stories. Sadness forgotten, she giggled at the escapades of "Atlanta" and "Montpelier," goats who took off together on worldwide adventures. The attention made her eyes sparkle.

But hearing her distress on the carpet, I zoned out. I said nothing.

When Mom and Dad arrived home from work, they sat on our tropical-cushioned bamboo couch in the family room, with cocktails, in front of the TV. The whine of our high-end exhaust fan muffled the drone of Walter Cronkite on the news.

"Mom! He punched me!" Char hollered. "It's gonna be like those bruises I showed you."

"Kids!" shot Dad from across the room. "Calm down! Drop it. This is cocktail time."

"Stop it, Gordon," grumbled Mom.

Char sniffled and groaned, but no one made a move to comfort her.

Mom's eyes narrowed as she sipped her nightly Manhattan. "What do you think of this one, Dear?" she asked, handing back the Christmas card Dad had given her from their nightly stack. Dad always opened them first.

His cocktail rested on the glass-topped table in front of them as he ripped into another envelope. Glancing over he said, "Not bad. At least they wrote more than just their names."

"I like its abstractness. Kind of unusual," Mom said. She was an art teacher who painted a Christmas watercolor every year. She and Dad

would have 350 copies made at Ollard's Print Shop, and sit for days around the table hand-addressing them. I often helped, as a way of getting some appreciation.

In the dining room, Mom had already set the Danish teak table with our woven placemats and sleek Correlle dinner plates. I wondered whose turn it was to position the knives and forks, and fold the paper napkins that inevitably one of us would forget to open and place in our lap. Then Dad would point and say, "Please hand that to me," his signal of disapproval for not using it. He'd even said it once to Jan's friend, who'd cringed and seemed bewildered.

Gordon's picking at Char continued, a bit more quietly.

I stumbled back to my bedroom oasis, closed the door, opened *To Kill a Mockingbird* for the dozenth time, and waited for Dad to ring the dinner bell.

In 2023, at a sister get-together, I asked Char about how it was for her growing up. Though I had a vague sense, I wanted details, to connect with her better.

She said, "Gordon was on me all the time. He made me feel like I did everything wrong. I don't know. Maybe he felt bad about himself, cause Dad was always on *him*."

The dad part fit with what Gordon had told me, the few times he and I talked honestly, long distance, about our father's dismissive criticalness.

Char continued, "Gordon would grab my arm so hard I couldn't run away. But I learned to scratch him with my nails. That was my *only* defense."

"And he'd say, 'No one's ever going to be your friend! Who would want to be your friend?' A lot."

"He just knew how to get to me every fucking time."

Then she described the kind of punching I'd seen when I was in ninth grade, but never consciously taken in, or done anything about.

"I felt fat, dumb, and out of it in elementary school. Mom harped on what I wore and how much I ate."

I knew exactly what Char meant. I too had been minutely criticized for who I was, what I wanted and said, and how I behaved.

I thought about the time when I was five, in our sugar-scarce home, and crept up to Dana's birthday cake, waiting under a glass dome on the

sideboard. Sneaking the lid off, I swirled two fingers along the backside and licked them, thinking no one would notice.

Later, with a grim face, Mom came into Dana's and my room demanding, "Who stole the icing off the cake?"

Dana laughed and said it wasn't her. I dropped my head and mumbled, "Not me." Mom stared at us both and walked out. I got hot and sweaty, fearing more trouble would come.

As the day progressed, Mom nailed me to the wall with her cocked head and beady eyes, pressing me with questions. "Did you eat that icing? Did you? I think you're lying. The Lord says being honest is *very* important. Go back to your room until I call you again, and then tell me the truth." Numb and dark inside, I obeyed.

The icing inquisition went further rounds until Mom finally got me by saying there would be no punishment if I confessed. Shaking, I whispered, "I did it."

She sighed and said, "OK, I won't punish you. But you can't have any cake tonight."

I burned with shame, on this and many other occasions.

Gathering momentum, Char said, "In high school, I was the best shooter on the team. Mr. David asked me to teach my technique to the other girls. But Mom and Dad never came to any games. They were too busy."

"And geez, my senior prom! They were away at a conference. I went downtown on the train, alone, to pick out my gown. On prom night, Gordon stayed in his room, and no one was around while I got ready. When my date came, I knocked on Gordon's door and begged him to take a pic of us before we left."

I had not known the intensity of our parents' judgments had morphed, for Char, into that level of neglect as she got older. By that time, I had two kids of my own, and no intimate contact with my youngest sister. For *my* prom, Dana had custom-made and hand-embroidered my dress. Mom had ordered the crown of pink rosebuds I asked for. Dad had taken photos.

Looking back on the shame of the icing incident, and the many other "trespasses" that loom in my memory, it's clear my parents trained me to obsess over whether I was good enough. I was programmed to think and rethink everything I did—a focus on myself that left little space for a sister's needs.

I'm saddened by how absent I was when Charlotte so deeply deserved someone on her team, though it's no wonder I didn't know, till decades later, how to be supportive.

I wish I had told Char more stories. Or invited her to my cozy little yellow-and-orange room, to read or play with the Madame Alexander dolls lined up on the shelf above my bed. I don't blame myself, but I ache for ninth-grade Karla to reach out a hand to her.

When the Streetlights Come On

When I was a kid growing up in the '70s and '80s, there was a simple rule that governed the end of every summer night: be home when the streetlights came on. It wasn't an official decree, but it was law; passed down from the front porch, muttered by dads flipping burgers, and yelled from screen doors by moms with curlers in their hair. When the streetlights came on, you'd better get back home. End of story.

Back then, evenings were sacred. They smelled like fresh-cut grass and sounded like baseballs smacking leather gloves. We tore through the streets on BMX bikes, yelling over the hum of cicadas, chasing something we couldn't define. We lived like time was a rumor, until that quiet click overhead broke the spell. That sudden flicker of amber light that brought us back to reality. One by one, the streetlights woke up, and we knew what it meant. Game over. Time to head back home.

Lately, I've been thinking about those feelings, and wondered where I was on the clock of life. That celestial clock where a lifetime is compressed into a 24 hour day. That curiosity led me to do the math. I'm 59 now, and if the average man lives to be about 76, that puts me at 6:38 p.m. The sun's still up, but the shadows are getting longer. The air is cooling, and the sky has that golden glow that you only notice when you stop and really look around. I can almost hear that familiar hum of the old sodium lamps buzzing back to life.

There were years when I didn't notice time at all; maybe decades. You get busy building careers, chasing money, juggling expectations, trying to become the man you promised yourself you'd be. You measure success in square footage, titles earned, and bank accounts. Somewhere along the way, you forget to look up. You stop hearing the birds sing. You stop feeling the breeze—unless it turns into a storm. And all the while, the clock keeps ticking.

But something happens when you reach this part of the day: Now, I pay attention to everything. The way the flowers turn toward the sun at

sunrise. The stillness just before evening settles in, and the sound of my own breath when everything else is quiet. The day isn't endless anymore—and maybe that's the point. Maybe it never was.

I don't dread the streetlights—not anymore. They don't mark the end of fun. They're just a reminder: it's time to slow down. Time to pay attention. Time to put the phone down and let the moment wrap around you like a warm blanket. It's time to tell people what they really mean to you—and mean it.

There's still time for one more ride around the block, or one more game of tag. But I can feel it in my bones—that low hum in the wires, warming up overhead. The streetlights are about to come on. And it's almost time to head back home.

Look at Yourself

When I was eight, I envied my friends whose sandals bore the impression of their feet: flipflops discarded by summer pools, shoe-beds shiny with the dip of big-toe, pinky, and the rest. A little miracle I thought it was—these belongings giving away and giving *way* to the bodies they belonged to. I remember my friend Izzy stamping her narrow soles onto the black foam of her Volcom thongs. My friends' bodies were reading their names onto the earth—*here I am*—and the earth was reading it back to them, *there you are*. I lingered at doorsteps to look, to listen; to catch the body's involuntary—inevitable, it seemed—signature, like a beachwalker turns to see the prints of an animal on the sand.

Most alluring was that none of my friends seemed to notice nor care. All this being, weighing, and shaping without the slightest surveillance or self-consciousness. It was like watching somebody being loved without asking for it; watching someone be beautiful, without her knowing it.

My sandals refused to do the same. No matter how I pressed my toes in the summer heat, my blue Reefs stayed buoyant as the day my mother bought them. *Here I am*, my strides sung.

No response. My sandals, I felt, were ignoring me. The problem could've been explained by a difference in footbed material, nothing more. But I thought *I* was the thing different, the problem—that maybe I didn't run right, or floated where others trod. I felt like Rhoda in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* when she says, "I have no face. Other people have faces...They laugh really; they get angry really; while I have to look first and do what other people do when they have done it." I began to wonder, with a little dread, if what other bodies did effortlessly, I might need to study and copy, through sheer force of desire.

I worried, most of all, that it was my desire for this aesthetic signature that forbade it from me. Like a love-struck teen whose glances at her crush make them shrink, walk the other way. A wantless girl with shoes in her shape—I wanted to be her.

When I was eleven, I started pulling out my hair. I don't remember the day I began. I only remember doing it all the time, the endless loop of it: the search, tug, the sting of release, and the examination. In the back seat of the family Volvo, or in the dim of the movie theater, I pulled one, then another. Some hairs were ended by a hard white ball, a pinhead of skin. These pinged bright when pulled. Others were encased by a thick, soft cocoon of translucent skin.

These looked like upside down cattails in the shore of my scalp; or like little feathers, fading from white to gray to black. These let go with an ache, and were my favorite, the ones I was after. When I'd find one, I'd twirl the end between the pads of my fingers, then use my finger nails, always too long, to shimmy the skin down, then off, before searching for another.

In a week, I'd made a touch-map of which parts of my scalp housed the most of these hair-types. Most promising were the upper left and right quadrant, not so much in the front and back. In my fifth grade school photo, you can see two little puffs of coarse hair on each side of my skull. The regrowth.

I was not addicted to the hair pulling itself, but to this little proof of attachment at each end. The skin validated something for me, said, *Look! You, your body, is right. Right*, as in, normal; but also right, as in, *Right here*. My hair did for me what my sandals never did.

Of course, by doing this, I was becoming someone strange. But I couldn't help it.

Catching my body in the act of attachment, witnessing its involuntary mechanics of holding onto itself, choreographed for the young me a fantasy—a fantasy of reliable connection, of being held onto without needing to hold on back.

At the stables where I rode as a child every week, some horses—usually the biggest ones—would come to the window and clamp their teeth on the bars of their stalls, bare down, arch their necks, and heave. The rush of oxygen gives them a short high, and so the cycle repeats—cribbing, it's called. Sometimes, when I walked to the tack room to rinse a school pony's bit, I would pass through a symphony of warmbloods and thoroughbreds heaving in unison. The addicts don't traipse off to hide their habit. No,

they do it in the open, in your face. They don't see you seeing them. They are alone with their pain.

A cribbing horse is suffering; she needs a bigger pasture, a different paddock, another companion. The heave says *I am not okay, do something!* But sometimes there is nothing to do. Sometimes, even after you relocate your horse in a sprawling field, with another herd, it will find the nearest fence, clamp, and inhale.

I let my hair fall in plain sight. Little tumbleweeds of dirty-blond gathered on the floor of my mother's car, in my bed. I didn't think of my actions, or my body, as something I needed to hide. I didn't think people could see me. At school I kept my hair out of my face, out of my line of sight, with an elastic headband—always some shade of blue or gray. When I was outside playing, I wondered what it would be like to be just an eye, giant and blue—a metonym of a girl who could see without being seen.

“She's pulling out her hair.” The doctor had barely touched my head when he announced it. The proof was there, in the little stubs that were sprouting back, stronger this time, darker this time.

It has a name, this condition. Other kids do it, but I didn't know them.

In the car-ride home, my mother explained it to me as a grounding compulsion—“To remind oneself that one is there..here,” she said, as I stared out the window, hands under my thighs. “It's called *rooting*,” she rephrased. “Like smelling one's fingers, or picking at one's skin.” The silence between us was solid, the air like amber, preserving this small, weird thing a daughter did, then didn't.

After the doctor's visit, I didn't pull my hair ever again. In a year, I would pluck my body from the earth instead—starve the soft parts, until there was almost nothing left—just to see, check, was anyone holding on? The answer was, unhesitatingly, *yes!* A symphony of care and concern, my mother's embrace. But I couldn't trust those answers. I felt the need to check, then check again. Always, I would use my own hands—gripping one thigh, then the other, measuring. A mirror's reflection meant nothing; my mother's affirmations, water on hot pavement. I wanted to be seen, but a part of me must have known—the point was to feel it, here, in my own hands; to know it, to answer it for myself.

In sixth grade, my crush stops me at the door before lunch. He's wearing rainbow flip-flops. "Wait, Martha, you don't know you're beautiful?"

I don't remember what prompted his question. In my memory, it feels unprompted.

He looks at my basketball shorted thighs, my loose t-shirt trying to conceal the breasts I'd wished for then wished gone.

"Look at yourself!" He says it again, a little angry this time, as if we're siblings not peers, and he's fed up. A brother trying to save his sister from what's coming.

He is the most popular boy in our class. The fastest on the track. There is no way he likes me. What is he doing?

I grab for the shoulders of the plastic chair behind me, inhale, heave. Through the open window, I hear our classmates outside, clamoring for pizza and monkey bars. The room is empty except for us. Quiet except for his words.

"You are so beautiful," he repeats.

It's the kind of thing a girl dreams about—a lie her unconscious sends her when she needs it; a fiction that she can feel, inside, as truth.

When he repeats himself, I don't feel like I can take it literally. I am silent. "Martha, look at yourself!" His words press into me one more time.

He is asking me to do something. *Look at yourself.* He is begging me to feel it. *You are. Right. Here.*

But all I feel is what he's doing to me. I cannot stop looking at him looking at me. All I want is to disappear, watch this miracle happen to me, over and over again, from some other place—some place not here.

When I leave, I cup my crush's words inside me and walk slowly down the stairs to the green. They will run out, spill, but not yet. Right now I feel anointed. As I approach the lunchline, I think, *Maybe they'll see it.* When my sister spots me from the picnic table, I imagine her sighing with relief. All day I pretend I'm someone who knows, someone who doesn't need to ask.

Conversation with My Dead Mother

Mothers stay with us. I talk to mine all the time, and she died before Covid. I refuse to believe the woman is nowhere. Her will alone is more furious than lava. Most times, I think it's best I remain silent. I don't say, I think I can run the dishwasher now. The door is closed. The mat is clean. I know the coffee grounds fell on the carpet. I will vacuum. Please stop bugging me about the vacuuming. But I hear her insisting. I vacuum. There is a brown mark where the grounds were. There is a smudge of toothpaste on the bathroom sink. I grimace, run the cold to wash it away.

Wherever I go, she clings like plastic wrap, and I am getting old. She may never relent. Couldn't we talk of other things besides cleaning? But that was always her way.

Swimming is my escape. The ocean's white caps flutter in the breeze. The light glints off the swells, which ignites me, and I am singing softly, barely forming the words, barely audible, but still, heard. I think she is far away. I think I will drown.

She taught me to swim, afraid of the water herself. We were in the shallow end of the community pool, and she held my back with her arms outstretched, hands flat, while I floated, not drowning. I left her to tread water in the deep end. Then, happily, I could go to the pool by myself. Now I can go anywhere myself, but it's not the same as breaking away, her still there.

I didn't clean the stove yet. Silly me. Gotta go. But yeah, I don't mind the nagging thoughts. Truth is they're disappearing, and even though I can do what I want, I can't hold on to her.

Here Then Gone

When everyone we loved was still alive we would drive my mother-in-law Betty to Lou Gibson's house for a visit. Lou would feed us what she called a "small lunch," casseroles with enough side dishes to rival the King's Table buffet. Dessert was slices of peach pie with generous scoops of vanilla ice cream. Afterwards, I would not eat again for twenty-four hours.

During those visits, my wife and I would take a walk around the block to give Lou and Betty space to reminisce. At the age of 90-something, Betty and Lou had been friends for 70 years, living the bulk of those years on farms in central Illinois, cooking countless meals for their families, faithfully attending church on Sundays, and surviving various cancers. Betty's husband Howard had died twenty years earlier from melanoma.

In those first years without Howard my wife and I would take Betty on trips around the region. We watched barges ply the slack waters of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, picnicked on egg salad sandwiches and chips in small town parks, stopped to read historical markers, rented cabins in the forests of southern Illinois so Betty could listen to the bullfrogs' night songs, and marvel at the blue-tailed skinks. The distractions helped, but when the trips ended we could sense her sadness at returning to an empty house.

Betty's friend Lou was on her second marriage to another farmer, Jack. Jack was retired by the time I met him. He wore black cowboy boots, watched a lot of college sports on TV from his Lazy Boy recliner, collected miniature antique John Deere tractors, and couldn't hear worth a darn. Conversation with Jack was impossible. The volume on the television was turned up so high that I could hear it before I entered the house. Still, I liked sitting with Jack, listening to his comments on the games, not having to say anything or answer any questions about my life. Not that he ever asked, and not that I had anything important to say anyway.

Jack died first, then Lou broke her hip, finally languishing in assisted living before she passed away. Betty lived longer. We had a big celebration

on her 100th birthday. Her remaining friends came by for sheet cake and punch. She was thrilled with all the attention, totally engaged in the festivities, her mind as sharp as ever. Four months later Betty's systems failed, and her long life was over.

When everyone we loved was still alive my mother, deep in the waking slumber of dementia, would answer her phone with the TV remote. She poured coffee grounds in the section of the coffee maker designated for water and wondered why it wouldn't work. I finally took away the coffee maker. Mom always thought she would get colon cancer like Grandma so she would store her feces in the freezer as fecal evidence for her gerontologist as proof that she, too, had Grandma's disease.

In retrospect it was kind of funny, like being stoned and watching a Saturday Night Live skit, but on those arduous days when I would visit her, those signs of a deteriorating mind threw me off balance. I could not believe this was my mom, the same strong, single mother who worked so hard in low-paying clerical jobs to keep me fed and housed. I missed that mom.

Like Jack, Mom had the volume on the TV jacked up to the highest decibel-piercing level. The first thing I would do when I entered her small room at Friendship Village ("*A Gateway to Exceptional Senior Living!*") was to turn the sound down. Mom didn't notice because she wasn't watching whatever show was on anyway. Often I would pick up the wrong remote. Mom had about six of them for reasons I never could determine. Before I left, I would also flush the frozen poops down the toilet.

The last time I saw Mom was on Mother's Day. I think she knew who I was but I wasn't sure. She smiled when I took her hand. We ate a sad turkey dinner in the dining hall. Much of the meal ended up in Mom's lap. I walked her back to her room, where she promptly soiled herself. An aide cleaned her up and put her to bed, where she fell asleep. I kissed her goodbye and left. She died two days later.

When everyone we loved was still alive my father and I would drink red wine in the evenings. Only when I visited would Dad imbibe. The transformation was remarkable. He would sparkle. Conversation between us was easier. He actually smiled, even laughed.

I have many emotions regarding my father. There were times in my early life when I so badly needed him, needed him to give me a kick in

the ass, or to play catch with me, and, yes, to protect me. Traditional Dad Stuff. But he was not around, having remarried and moved far away.

Dad and I eventually reconnected, or maybe simply connected for the first time. By then I was an adult, a father, and a husband twice over. We became comfortable in each other's company. We could find common ground in current events and in his favorite subject: bees. Dad had kept bees since he was a boy in Iowa, and was fascinated by their efficiency and their dismissal of a work-life balance. Dad was all about work first, life (and parenting) later, if at all. When I quit my comfortable university job to write full-time he was aghast. Of course he never told me that as some fathers would. I had to learn his reproach second-hand, the same way I discovered just about everything about him. Sometimes when I visited we would go and attend to his hives in upstate New York in the Catskills. That is when I saw Dad at his happiest, working those industrious bees. He would send us honey every fall. The bottles had a picture of his wife on the label with the words "David's Honey."

I remember a muggy afternoon a lifetime ago when we worked the bees, a time when Dad did not need a walker. Afterwards, as I checked my arms for stings, Dad settled in a chair on the deck. I offered him water but he did not answer. I thought he had fallen asleep, but instead he was staring across his five acres of clover with a look on his face that radiated serenity. All his life he had worked high-level, stressful jobs to obtain this blissful day tending his industrious bees. At that moment, did he even know I was present?

We never had heart-to-heart conversations. No confessionals or the kind of dramatic dialogues you see in movies. I never asked *where were you when I needed you? Did you miss me?* I never really knew what he thought about the past. He never mentioned my mother. I suspect he had forgotten her altogether. Truthfully, I often wondered what was going on in his brilliant mind.

Together we leaned into the present. Most importantly, I had my dad back, and the normal structure of a father-son relationship evolved. I knew he loved me, and I hoped he knew I loved him and respected him in the way that a son should always respect his father. Order was restored.

Last fall, when his wife was in the hospital, Dad and I had our last days together. In the mornings I would bring the newspapers in from the front

porch and place them on the table in front of his preferred chair, set out the bowls and utensils for cereal, milk, V8 juice, and await the sound of his walker thumping across the floor. Then our day would begin. These might seem like simple, inconsequential tasks, but it felt important. I was being of use to Dad when he needed help. It was an act of pure love. I was a son helping his father and, as fate would have it, it was the most wonderful way to say goodbye to my one and only Dad.

By then Dad, at 93, could walk only a few steps before stopping to rest. Congestive heart failure was crippling him. He had always been such an able and devoted walker. During those last days together I would try to have a stroll with him around the neighborhood, but we could only go so far and then have to turn back. His breath was labored and raspy. He would then retreat to bed and sleep until supper.

When Dad passed away four months later I was riding a water buffalo in northern Vietnam. This sounds more exciting than it was. The buffalo calmly grazed while I sat on his back, the Vietnamese attendant counting the 20,000 dong (eighty cents) I had paid him for the five-minute “ride.” I had trouble with the dismount, but I did not embarrass myself too badly. I could not attend the memorial service that was held a few days after Dad’s passing. By then I was in steamy Saigon drinking a coconut coffee after touring a former Viet Cong cave. Dad’s wife told me he passed away peacefully. I wonder if in those last few hours if he thought of me.

When everyone we loved was still alive, the oral history of my life was only a conversation away. With both my parents and my dear mother-in-law gone I have to reset who I am. What is my new position within my family, and in the broader world that I will inhabit for the handful of years left to me? Most of all I realize that with the previous generation gone I’m the next batter up.

For me, now an official member of the *adult orphan tribe*, if you will, there is a contradictory sense of freedom and loss. No one is watching me anymore, yet no one is watching out for me either. I can take up smoking, gambling, cursing, or any number of wicked vices that I did not dare indulge while they were alive. But like Faustus’ good angel, my parents and my mother-in-law rest upon my shoulder cautioning me against heeding the advice of the Devil on my opposite shoulder, who would like nothing more than for me to cash in my soul to him.

Betty's ashes are in a biodegradable urn. On a cloudy fall day we set the cremains in the ground next to her husband's grave in a country cemetery surrounded by the rich, black soil of Illinois farmland. My wife spoke eloquently about her mother, as did other members of the family. We had lost our matriarch. I offered this anecdote: One day I was driving Betty to an appointment and out of the blue she turned to me and said: *"thank you for taking care of my daughter."* She only said it once in the thirty years I knew her, and that made it all the more meaningful. When it comes to words of gratitude sometimes less is more.

My mom's ashes rest in a box upon the black Sears' trunk she bought me when I left for college at 17. I play guitar and sing to her almost every day. She loved to croon the old standards like "Sunnyside of the Street" and "Georgia on my Mind." She was my biggest fan, often exaggerating my modest literary accomplishments and, toward the end of her life, boasting of my many imaginary achievements that simply never happened. I never tried to correct her.

Soon my dad's ashes will sit next to hers. Divorce is never as final as death although at first it feels like it. In their respective urns they will put the past behind them. Mom will forgive Dad for his transgressions. In turn, perhaps Dad will finally remember her. One can hope.

As for me, I will try to carry forward the best in all the people I have ever loved, and I hope that when my passing comes that I will be remembered similarly. In that way, we remain loved, and we remain alive forever.

Times At the Drive-in

The drive-in on the main route through town, that connects Rockland County to the Hudson River, used to play Disney movies every weekend. Old standby animated ones like *Snow White*, *Fantasia*, *The Jungle Book*, and live-action ones like *Herbie the Love Bug*, *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*, *Mary Poppins*. I don't remember a single moment of the actual movies. Just the marquee, with the titles spelled out in hand-placed, black and red letters. Wearing hand-me-down pajamas, eating tin-foil wrapped hamburgers bought at the magical structure from which the beacon-like projection beamed its flickering images onto the largest screen I'd ever seen. Walking through the gravel-laden bumps, searching for our green Jeep, the one my father would outfit with a plow in the winter to make some extra cash, hearing the echoes of the hundreds of speakers blaring entreaties to visit the concession stand in a unified chorus. The back of the Jeep open, blankets and pillows laid out for me and my brother, popcorn strewn and just comfortable enough to fall asleep before the second feature started. Waking up in the morning in my bed, realizing I couldn't quite make it once again, but somehow without disappointment.

My wife is away visiting her father, who has been slowing down. The boys and I take the ancient Pontiac he gifted us to the drive-in in Greenville, the more prosperous neighbor of the town we live in. We moved up here for a new start, but my health caught up with me and now we are subsisting on disability. The old metal speakers that clipped to the window are gone, now you tune in to the station on your car radio. I let the boys watch from the front seat, while I watch them from the back. They get along better than me and my brother did, comrades in arms, making videos together on a cheap, hand-held flip camera we got them for Christmas. The older is the ringleader, the younger his willing soldier. They make raps about *Star Wars*, mini-scenes, staged fights to the death, and anything else that strikes them as funny. The movie is *Wall-E*, and it is surprisingly sweet, sad, and touching. I retake my place in the driver's seat,

as brake lights begin to dot the field. I turn the key and the starter clicks futilely. I'm upset and say something about our luck, and the boys console me. "It's OK, Dad. It happens." I make the embarrassed trek back to the magic structure, where they are shutting down the snack bar for the night. A guy walks back with me and a portable battery charger. "Gotta have one of these around," he says. "This happens nearly every night." He's not doing anything to engender it, but I still feel my failure. The car sparks and I thank him profusely. As we pull away the boys are impassive and stoic. They are already accepting their poverty.

The boys are fifteen and eighteen. It's been a year and a half since my wife passed, tragically and suddenly. We have been existing since then, not really alive or dead. We live in the basement of my wife's sister. My oldest stopped getting up and going to High School the last half of his senior year, so the district sent a tutor to help get him through. The night before his graduation, I had a health issue and ended up in the hospital. The next morning was spent frantically making phone calls to family members to try to get somebody, anybody to be there for the ceremony. But there was an all-day rainstorm that kept all of them, one by one, from coming. Days later my son jokes about walking the length of the football field, his cap and gown soaked through, looking for a familiar face that wasn't there. He ended up catching a ride home. He laughs at the memory, using the one useful tool the three of us share against the vagaries of life. I laugh along, because to face the guilt I feel would immobilize me like an ancient insect frozen in amber.

I've tried to get the boys out, buying tickets I couldn't afford to concerts, sporting events, county fairs, that end up unused. I tell them I'm taking them to dinner with a surprise after. It's corny, and they recognize it as such. My eldest is suspicious, the younger willing to play along. I don't want to give them the option to bail. It's foolproof, I think. Seeing *Deadpool* was one of the few positive experiences we all shared in the last year and a half. The drive-in is playing the original and the sequel as a double-feature. We pull up and my oldest says, "Is this the surprise?" He is noncommittal, not impressed, but not willing to hurt my feelings. My youngest is pretending to be excited for my benefit. We find the channel on the radio, and this time I keep the car running. It's a humid night and the windshield keeps fogging up, so I have to turn on the wipers. My oldest can't stand the intrusion,

and I say, “What do you want me to do?” The theater decides to run the original movie first instead of the sequel. “Probably to sell a few more tubs of popcorn,” my eldest says. We stay through the first movie, rewatching it through the condensation and the wipers. My eldest is annoyed but trying. After the first movie ends, he asks if we can go home. I ask my youngest what he wants to do, and he says he’s fine either way. Trying to keep the peace, and mitigate any bad feelings on either side, as he’s always done. A bridge between the islands of his father and his brother. “I did this for you guys,” I say. “Whatever you want to do is fine.” “I don’t want to hurt your feelings,” my oldest says. “It’s OK, you won’t.” “It was a good idea, just with the wipers and how late it’s starting...” “It’s fine.” We pull out, and my youngest says, “Thanks for trying, Dad.” “Yeah,” my oldest says, “thank you.” I have gotten so used to hiding devastation that it’s reflexively easy. There’s a sense of relief on the car ride home. “Can we stop for ice cream,” my oldest asks. “Sure,” I say.

I’m driving from the wake of a friend in Albany, on my way to visit my father in the same town I used to live. He hasn’t been doing well. Maps is taking me a back way that is strange to me. Before my synapses can make the connections, I realize I am coming upon the drive-in in Greenville, the one where we saw *Wall-E* and drained our car battery. I can see the big white screen, like a gigantic, empty canvas, waiting in the summer heat to be painted upon. I don’t believe I’ll ever be able to go to a drive-in, now, without crying. I can see the face of the teenage girl in the ticket booth, confused and a bit frightened by the sight of a 56-year-old man with tears inexplicably running down his cheeks. I drive on, and safely pack that image away for another time and place.

Lunchtime

I am six years old. My boyfriend, soon to be fiancé, calls my father to ask for my hand in marriage. He says we're going to have a motorcycle wedding. My father wants to know how we'll transport children on motorcycles. Dickie tells him we'll get sidecars.

I am eight years old. My parents hire a watercolorist to paint my portrait. I wear a white silk blouse and black velvet pants. I sit very still, legs in crisscross applesauce on a dining room chair. The painter talks incessantly. She tells me about her sister who was crazy and had a frontal lobotomy and now has no memory and lives in an institution and is pretty much an empty shell. I vow to never have a frontal lobotomy.

I am nine. I wear a navy-and-white-checked one-piece bathing suit, pink bathing cap with rainbow tassels that I flip about pretending they're a ponytail. My normally long brown hair is cut short because of the head lice I caught from my red-haired freckled-faced best friend. A teacher at school, not my teacher but some other lady with a creepy voice, straight out of a horror movie, growls, "I know why your hair is short." I stare back at her, don't utter a word.

I'm ten and a horrible thing happens to me. I feel dirty. And violated, except it will be years before I learn that word and understand what it means. As instructed, I tell no one.

I am 14. Alone in the bus station in Atlantic City, I sit on a stool at the lunch counter, get an iced tea and grilled ham and cheese sandwich on rye.

I am 21. My mother takes me out to a bar to celebrate my birthday. She orders us Brandy Alexanders and grasshoppers. I get drunk and lay my forehead on the bar. She tells me that's not appropriate behavior.

I am 24. I move to Florida with my boyfriend. I play a lot of tennis and eat a lot of eggplant parmesan. My new best friend is an eighty-four-year-old man from West Virginia who smokes unfiltered cigarettes, reads paperback westerns and eats Vienna sausages out of the can with his penknife.

I am 38. The lady who sells me the brand-new fancy crib says, *it will change your life*. She doesn't mean the crib. She means the baby. She's right. It does.

I am 41. My second daughter is born. In the delivery room, my doctor says next time let's go for a boy. It seems like a solid idea at the time.

I am 42. I am standing in the hallway of the community center talking with the art studio manager about a class I will be teaching. The conversation takes a supremely unexpected turn. It is not my intention to reveal my over thirty-year-old secret to a woman who is barely more than a professional acquaintance. I imagine myself a cartoon character, whirling around, looking behind me to see who has spoken. It's me. The sky does not fall on Chicken Little. I'm not swallowed by an enormous sinkhole. So that's it. I can say it out loud now. I can. I do.

I think, huh, is this one of those profoundly pivotal moments? Do I need to get a therapist to unearth a lifetime of trauma, setting me free to live an exalted life of freedom and wisdom that I elegantly impart to my children? Nah. I'm okay. And I'm hungry. I'll walk home. The warm sun on my face and breeze on my arms will feel the same as usual. I'll make lunch.

Red Snow Day

*St. Valentine's Day, 2024, it's clear and sunny in Kansas City, Missouri.
It's even passably warm if one stands in the sun. The atmosphere on the street is electric.
The Kansas City Chiefs have won Super Bowl LVIII. A "Red Snow Day" has been declared.
Red Confetti will fill the air and drift through the streets today!*

I can't think of one specific experience that prompted me to pick up, leave New York, and move back to Kansas City. It was the spring of '13, and I had been living in the city for decades. I was always in "the city," meaning Manhattan; I was snobby that way.

As with most New Yorkers, New York is a love/hate thing. The stories are well-known. You can hear them in detail pretty much every night on some late-night talk show.

"Today, I was trying to catch a cab, and this guy..."

"Today, on the subway, the worst thing..."

"Today, in midtown, the most beautiful thing..."

"The Upper East Side...Tribeca...the East Village is sad, all the artists are gone...nothing but investment banker bros..."

As for the East Village, I spent most of my New York life there, and I loved it. I went through ten addresses, all within blocks of each other. I loved the Dominican and Puerto Rican neighborhoods I lived in. I loved the street life: I laughed at the cheeky kids, the rowdy teens, the domino games, and the endless chatter of the men and women that got louder with each beer. The street picked up after sunset, rain or shine, no matter the season.

There were the ubiquitous homeless guys who had taken up residence on a stoop or the sill of some bricked-up window. They'd wave and chat with the block's residents, hurrying by on their way home. They were part of the neighborhood.

Our guy was Pete, who sat on the sill of a bricked-up window in the wall of a drugstore on the corner of 7th Street and Second Avenue, smiling and shouting “hello” to everyone on the block. I was part of the theatre in the basement of the church, two doors down. Pete was part of the ongoing street theatre that was the East Village. We’d often grab him a sandwich or a coffee. He wouldn’t ask for anything, but we’d do it anyway. He never seemed to lack a bite to eat, and he always had his ever-present half-pint of vodka. Sometimes, the food didn’t agree with him, and that could be a little messy. Solid food had taken on the aspect of a foreign substance at this point in his life.

Pete was a remnant of the dwindling Polish population of that part of the East Village. He looked to be 100 years old, and he might have been. When he was drunk, he would open his mouth in a toothless grin and let loose with a harsh, ear-splitting, nasal howl of a laugh that could be heard blocks away. It would taper off into a cackle at some hilarity only he could see. Most everyone east of 2nd Ave knew Pete.

There is a small-town vibe on pretty much every block in New York City. Not small as in quaint, small in the sense that everyone seems to know everyone at least by sight. Not intimate friends, mind you, but there’s a recognition, a kind of security in knowing that when push comes to shove, there are familiar people around. I’ve always felt New York is a great place for old people and kids, believe it or not.

Still, life takes twists and turns, and living in New York can amplify these changes. I went from penniless theatrical artistic director at Cooper Square Theater to working as a server and weekend manager at Cafe Tabac, one of New York’s all-time trendiest restaurants, to successful hot-shot partner in two trendy gay bars, Starlight and Wonder Bar, and finally to broke manager of the SoHo Playhouse, a derelict Off-Broadway theatre.

By the way, managing an Off-Broadway theatre might be one of the least “hot-shot” things one can do. Theatre managers are literally the low man on the theatrical totem pole, maybe any totem pole.

All these angst-producing changes worked their spells, but they weren’t what pushed me to contemplate leaving the city. I had a hard-core New Yorker’s ego, after all.

If I left, was I a failure? I had been one of Details magazine’s “Downtown 100” during the bar days. Our places had been in the top three highest

Zagat-rated nightlife venues for several years straight. The Cooper Square Theatre had produced dozens of new plays and showcased hundreds of young actors, singers, and dancers over its lifespan. Would I be able to slink away and live somewhere else with my pride intact? It was a question I constantly wrestled with during the last couple of years I was there.

And what of my theatrical career? I had moved to New York to be an actor. Now, I was juggling the demands of entitled actors (“I’ve been on Broadway, you know.”) and producers (“This play is a gonna be a hit! Yeah!”) and techies (“What’s with this shitty sound system, man? I can’t work like this! They can’t make me work like this! I’ll walk out!”) They never did. Nor did they ever stop bitching.

No, the last straw was none of the above; in the end, I’m sure it came down to the scaffolding—the scaffolding and all that it meant. So many scaffolded sidewalks herding humanity into tight columns with fierce, cold, grey piping. Open-sided tunnels topped off by chipped, splintered forest green plywood ceilings. Sidewalk scaffolding turns colorful people into grim, grey pedestrians funneled through tight, narrow sheds.

New York is at its best in a late afternoon light rain—the shining streets, the buildings starting to light up. The city becomes a kaleidoscope that never stops turning. The sound is muted by the swishing of wet pavement under tires and the patter on umbrellas.

A wet afternoon is MacDougal Street’s Caffe Reggio, sitting-in-the-window time. Watching the people as the soft, blue-grey light fades to black and the lights brighten with the darkness. New York is lovely when it’s wet: saturated color and white noise.

But during the last bits of my New York life, more and more of the glistening sidewalks were being covered by scaffolding. The gleaming facades of the buildings shooting up toward the sky were hidden by the rows and rows of two-by-ten planks overhead, obscuring the day. Bare bulbs encased in yellow plastic cages hung along the sides, swinging in the breeze. Scaffolding is ugly. Light bulbs encased in yellow plastic cages are ugly. So, yes, I think the scaffolding is what pushed me over the edge.

The scaffolding is a shadow, a shadowing, of the city. The scaffolding blocks the sun. Trash accumulates beneath them. Plastic bags get snagged on the square wooden shims that level the frames. Bad smells intensify under scaffolding. Homeless people take up residence beneath them. These

constructions, with their obviously temporary status, create a prison-like, fenced-in atmosphere that closes in on an already claustrophobic city.

It dawned on me one day that I had been walking through the same scaffolding on East 9th Street for at least ten years. The idea that these were “temporary” structures was disproven in practically every neighborhood.

A story by James Barron in the New York Times (“Making Scaffolding Artful,” July 15, 2024) details the planned beautification of scaffolding for this very reason. They’re attempting to make scaffolding aesthetically pleasing, less of an eyesore, given that they are, more often than not, going to be semi-permanent fixtures. Some of the designs look, for all the world, like cheap, molded plastic dollhouses from a cut-rate toy store, or reminiscent of those playgrounds for pet mice or rats made up of tunnels that carry on endlessly, up and down, around and around. No sun. No view. No air.

It was under scaffolding that I began noticing I was getting shorter. I would see my unhappy reflection in the random window as I walked the streets. I wasn’t looking like myself anymore. Were the buildings getting taller, or was the pavement grinding away at my 5’10”?

The scaffolding was triggering me, and I wasn’t even sure what “triggering” meant. It was a recent, trendy term for a person’s particular phobias.

“I’m being triggered!” One of our box office interns would gasp every day, several times a day. “Triggered!” she would moan as she ran to the restroom to gather herself.

If New York is a concrete jungle, the scaffolding is the impenetrable undergrowth. Tiresome. Ugly. The last straw. Triggering.

So, on a spring day in 2013, SoHo’s pretty, if fishy-smelling pear trees were blooming. They were obscured, though, by my darkened, cloudy mood. I was threading my way through a succession of scaffolding sheds across Van Dam to Hudson Street and my favorite Halal food truck.

The comedy I was corraling through the theatre was a piece about a hot, gay, up-and-coming, closeted TV star denying the existence of his disappointed, more enlightened, equally hot boyfriend. There were other characters like the lusting older woman and the ogling older man, and so on. It was a predictable, well-meaning mess, and it wasn’t selling any tickets.

Meanwhile, the monthly Homeowner Association dues at my partner's tiny studio condominium had become so overwhelming that, between the two of us, it simply wasn't worth the time and effort required to pay them. It was time to cut our losses, sell, and get out.

There were no second thoughts about moving, although the arduous process of trying to sell the condo knocked us flat. The inflated value of property in New York was a definite boon, but the gauntlet one had to run to get to the closing was ridiculous.

Over the previous couple of years, the occasional jaunts to my childhood hometown were revealing. Kansas City's downtown had been experiencing a renaissance. There was a movement back to downtown living, particularly among millennials. Condo buildings were popping up everywhere. Kansas City's elegant turn-of-the-last-century buildings were being rehabbed, and glossy new towers were replacing empty, stone-strewn lots.

Those empty, stone-strewn lots had once been full of glorious old buildings during Kansas City's jazzy heyday, when it was known as the "Paris of the Plains." Along with many other American cities, Kansas City demolished much of its stunning architecture and elegant design during the urban renewal of the 1960s...including Annie Chambers' house of ill repute.

Dad would holler up the stairs. "Get ready; I need you to play at the mission tonight."

My automatic reaction to this sort of summons was to grind my teeth and silently scream, "No!" I'd throw a couple of shirts at the wall and kick at the jeans strewn across the floor. I was twelve or so and chafing at the bit.

Being the son of an Evangelical minister who treated his children as extensions of his ministry was a pain in the butt. We were preordained to be preachers, missionaries, or teachers of the "gospel" in "Christian" schools as adults. As kids, we would be drafted into performing at church services, retreats, prayer meetings, you name it. We had God-given talent and would use it properly...or else. We had to learn our vocation, see.

I was the rebellious one in the family. I hated playing the violin. The impatient Polish violin teacher terrorized me every Saturday morning with a lightning-fast slap and a tirade of strange, ominous-sounding words at the slightest flat note or messed-up scale.

“Vaht! You Want to be fiddle playing, like uncivil cowpoke?” Slap!

The more he shouted, the worse my squawking violin. It was nerve-shattering for both of us, no doubt. Poor Mr. Shopmaker, he meant well.

I never made friends with that battered violin tucked under my sore chin. But, for a miserable couple of years in my preteens, I toted around the worn case at my dad’s behest to play for his services, including at the mission for a bunch of starving, grumpy-looking guys who had to sit through his messages. Now and then, my younger sister would bring her flute, or my older brother would bring his trombone. If it was Tuesday, it was the mission.

I would never admit it, but I secretly looked forward to the mission as one of the more intriguing places we went. A homeless shelter in downtown Kansas City might sound a little underwhelming, but this was a place with a history. A history zealously kept from me and my younger sister. I was always filled with a certain sense of heightened awareness when I went into the mission. First of all, it was an enormous old mansion that had been converted into a soup kitchen. But its current, haphazard state was no disguise for its opulent, storied past.

It sat a comfortable distance back from the curb in one of the older sections of the city. It was a large, multistoried building with a brick facade darkened by decades of soot. It had stained glass and rounded towers topped by widow’s walks and pointy rooftops. At the top of a broad set of steps were elegant, carved double doors, all dark wood, brass, and cut glass.

Through the window on the left side of the doorway, one could see bars. The right door was used to enter, and just inside, to the left, the bars were revealed to be part of a small cage. Inside the cage was a shrunken man of indeterminate age who pushed the button that allowed the door to open.

He was a fascinating guy. His hair was painted on his bald head. It could have been a tattoo, I guess, but it seemed too dark and detailed to be a tattoo. I never heard him speak, but everyone seemed to know that he was the one in charge.

The little bald man with the painted hair would see us into a massive room that looked as if it had once been a parlor, maybe, or even a ballroom. The floors were hex-tiled and patterned to look like Persian rugs. Looking straight ahead was a wide stairway with opulent, carved banisters that rose

to a landing. Rising from the landing on opposite sides were two stairways going up to a balcony area where the upstairs hallways must have crossed.

Set in the wall on the landing was a very large, backlit, stained glass window depicting a nude woman lying on a fainting couch surrounded by clouds, cupids, birds, and flowers, her hand discreetly tucked between her thighs. Her breasts were full and tipped with the daintiest of pink nipples. She stared out at us unashamed, her beauty softly glowing through the glass.

If you could tear your eyes away from the woman in the window and survey the rest of the room, you would discover a haphazardly built, portable partition to the left that hid the folding tables, coffee urns, and serving trays of the mission's dining area. To the right was what remained of an astonishing room straight out of the Gilded Age. It was very large, with ceilings probably fourteen feet high. On the far wall was a massive, white marble mantelpiece. The lower half of the fireplace was hidden by a stage that had been awkwardly dropped into this lovely, perfectly proportioned room. There was dark paneled wainscoting and lovely ornamental plastered ceilings. There was a plaster wreath of flowers in the center of the ceiling, sprouting a few dusty wires, the remnants of a chandelier. Yes, this fabulous room had seen some history; it was clear.

I was intrigued. I would study the room and run my hands up and down the marble of the fireplace behind where our chairs were placed. My dad scolded, cajoled, warned, and pressed the ragtag men, many falling asleep, to come get Jesus. When it came my turn to play, I would grind away at my violin, pretending I was part of the orchestra playing for the ball, silken ladies and pin-striped gentlemen swirling around the floor.

During the service, I would watch the sad, shadowy men being subjected to threats of hellfire and damnation. I'm pretty sure that most of them thought they were in hell already. All they wanted was food and a place to rest their heads. I'd stare out at them with unconscious rudeness, wondering what, where, how, why. There's something peculiarly cruel about making tired, hungry, desperate souls sit through a preacher's barking harangue just to get at a stale sandwich and some lukewarm soup. Even at the age I was then, it made me feel bad, complicit in meanness.

Now and then, I would notice the bald man with the painted hair watching me. The "hair" was fascinating. It was a roaring 20s, golden-

age-of-Hollywood slicked-back style that someone like Errol Flynn might sport. He was a fascinating guy. Sadly, I never got to talk to him. I suppose I was too young.

I wouldn't find out until years later about that naked woman in the stained glass window, Annie Chambers, aka Annie Santa Fe. She was arguably Kansas City's first independent businesswoman. She amassed wealth and property, running the most opulent, sophisticated, genteel "bawdy house" west of the Mississippi. Her girls were renowned for their beauty and excellent manners, were well-cared for, and frequently made good marriages. Annie saw that they stayed healthy. She took personal responsibility for the occasional child that would inevitably come along. She had herself, in a former life, lost two children.

I like to believe the bald man with the painted hair and one or two other ancients hanging about were all that was left of those accidental children. As little boys, acting as butlers and running errands, they were now living out their years in the house. Annie had become a "Christian" in her old age. She donated all her property to the mission.

Caring for these men, the remnants of an era long gone, was a stipulation Annie had given to the mission. The house would remain as long as these last men were alive. After that, they could do whatever they wanted with the place.

So there I stood on that rickety homemade stage in front of that massive, ornately carved fireplace, hacking away at my violin. There was something titillating about being in the center of that room, even if I was clueless at the time. I felt a delicious buzziness in the air. The men were still coming through the doors even though Madame Annie Chambers had gone from selling pleasure to demanding repentance and conversion.

The glorious old mansion had been bullied, battered, and beaten into a mission. Its opulent grandeur was hollowed out and refilled with wooden folding chairs and a stage mounted on rough-cut two-by-fours. The crystal chandelier had been replaced by buzzing, blinking fluorescent tubes drilled into the once elegant ceiling. The welcoming double doors had become a barred gate, opening for an hour a day to let the men in for a meal, but not without sitting through the penance of a stern sermon.

Somehow, the crusading Christians had opted to leave the magnificent stained glass nude, nipples and all. Maybe it was Annie's spirit, refusing to let it go until she had seen to it that all her charges had been cared for to the end.

Like many of Kansas City's physical remnants of historical importance, the mansion has been replaced by an ugly '70s office building. Annie and the girls are all gone, and at this writing, the bald man with the painted hair has surely gone on as well.

Moving day arrived five months after the sale, during which we lived in the studio, sitting on, and surrounded by boxes. At last, the movers came, took our stuff, and after two days spent in a B&B (a sort of final farewell to New York), we boarded our flight to Kansas City. Dan and Sharon, my oldest friend and his wife, would be meeting us at the airport. We would be at their house while we arranged for new furniture and waited for our stuff to arrive from NYC.

My life partner, Michael, is an energetic, high-strung, very vocal performance artist. His effervescent chatter about the golden age of Hollywood, "Famous Monsters of Filmland" (his favorite magazine growing up in Oregon), and encyclopedic knowledge of arcane film trivia were what made him fascinating to many and somewhat intimidating to others who didn't give a hoot about black and white movies from the 30s. His impersonations of classic horror stars and mashups of golden-era films had created a highly successful career in cabarets and clubs around New York City, particularly downtown.

Michael and Dan, a high school French teacher, live on two very different planets. The conversation, the jokes, and the banter were all at cross purposes and needed translation. It was a difficult start, to say the least.

Whoops.

Dan and I went to high school together, were in the same fraternity in college, and then went our separate ways. His approval of my pursuit of theatre as a career was doubtful. (He certainly wasn't the only one.) I had not chosen a safe, by-the-numbers career that would play out on schedule with benefits, insurance, and comfy retirement. That said, he loved to visit wherever I was, be it Europe, where I spent a decade, or New York.

Dan's wife, Sharon, was on a bit of a learning curve when it came to the outsize personalities of downtown New York theater types. I don't

think she knew quite what to do with these strange creatures from the East Village art and bar scene, though she did her best. Sharon was a government efficiency expert whose career and expertise were centered on predictability, stability, and affordability. These concepts are anathema to actors, theatre, or anything artistic, actually.

Double whoops.

I felt for Sharon, she did not always quite understand what Michael or I were on about. We were odd characters that she, to her everlasting credit, gamely did her best to accommodate. And to give credit where credit is due, Sharon was up to the task.

We landed on a Saturday afternoon. That evening, we were scheduled to stay in a downtown hotel with Dan and Sharon and a few of their friends and attend a fundraiser for the Heartland Men's Chorus, Kansas City's LGBTQ+ choral group. We had set aside proper clothes for the event. It was an ostentatiously swanky introduction back to the informal city I had grown up in. Michael was a nervous wreck, but was doing his best to ride the transition. Staying in a hotel and going to a black-tie event was the last thing we thought we'd do on our first night, but here we were.

After a brief visit to the very bare apartment we had purchased from a distance, we sped off to the hotel, and a glittering, if awkward, evening ensued. Salmon, filet mignon, or baked chicken were the choices and were served up along with the aggressively cheerful drag queens. We wandered through a silent auction of cruises, cases of wine, all-expense-paid trips to New York City (I almost bid just for the lark), along with the occasional oil painting or framed photo of the rainbow flag. But most of all, there were watercolors, oils, and even sculptures of the National Football League's Kansas City Chiefs.

The Kansas City Chiefs are a very big deal in Kansas City. During football season, there is red, lots of red. The Chiefs' red is a very specific, warmer, orangish shade of red, very bright—a little hard on the eyes. There was a lot of red at this auction.

The next day, Dan and Sharon, always meticulously efficient, whisked us away to Nebraska Furniture Mart. We needed beds at the very least. They were expecting company, and we needed to be in our own place—the sooner the better.

Well, we were definitely not prepared for the Nebraska Furniture Mart. Neither one of us had ever heard of this overwhelming, gigantic maze of a place. We were escorted around to the living room, the dining room, and the bedroom sections in dizzying succession.

It was during this whirlwind shopping expedition that I began to feel like a charity project. There was a long-suffering overtone to what was happening. Were we, the poor prodigal New Yorkers, being “rescued?” Was my ridiculous, “artsy-fartsy” move to New York being dismissed as a pipe dream?

Was the cardboard box full of his grandma’s thrown-away kitchen utensils, gifted to us by our real estate agent, the last straw? (We threw the box with its rusty, tarnished contents into the nearest dumpster.) It felt so insulting.

No doubt, our new Kansas City neighbors had the best of intentions, but my worries about the “look” of moving back to Kansas City were materializing. I hated the feeling. I vehemently disagreed that my life and what I had accomplished—my theaters, productions, and nightlife successes—were somehow sad and had become a charity project.

Those first few days in Kansas City were a bewildering dive into severe culture clash. We were confused and very tired. It had been an interminable five months since we had sold the New York property. Getting the various boards, lawyers, and other hangers-on to finalize the transaction had been nothing short of a miracle. It was a typical New York story.

In a dizzying rush, furniture was bought, and two days later, deliveries were made. The unbelievably nice Nebraska Furniture Mart guys put our furniture where we wanted it, and we were finally settled into a new home, a new place. The arduous, nerve-racking, culture clash aspect of the move suddenly took on the sheen of an opportunity well taken. Things were definitely—finally—looking up.

And to be fair, Dan and Sharon had been thoughtful to a fault. They were used to Kansas City’s suburban mindset and were doing their best to ease us into a different life.

That first night in our new home, we went for a walk. There were no cars, no people, no lights, but the air was a revelation. The breeze, blowing up off the Missouri River, had the scent of trees and distant showers. I was practically floating up the sidewalk with happiness.

“Smell the breeze,” I whispered; I think to myself more than anything.

I was in awe. I hadn't inhaled air so sweet in years, not even during the occasional jaunts to the beaches of Fire Island. There was something mystical in the breeze. It was fresh, wild, and untamed as it swirled up from the river, pushing over the bluffs into the deserted downtown streets.

The Missouri River, traveled by French trappers and explored by French priests who came upon it in the late 1600s, has been largely tamed. Historically, it had been a wild, dangerous waterway, always filled with hazards hidden just beneath the surface, much like Kansas City itself, as we would discover soon enough.

Today, wrecks are found buried in the mud for miles along the floodplain. The paddlewheel steamboat *Arabia* was lost in 1856. It was fully loaded, and its contents now overflow one of Kansas City's most popular museums. The *Arabia* was discovered buried, and astonishingly well-preserved, in a muddy Missouri field miles away from where the Missouri flows today.

Kansas City and its surrounding counties have been flooded numerous times over the years. Now, the river churns against its leveed restraints, trying its best to escape.

Walking up Wyandotte Street that first evening, though, it seemed like the gentle breeze was remembering the erratic, untamed river as it coursed through the ages. It blew a sense of possibility and rebirth into our faces. The self-doubt, the fear of questionable motivations, were swept away by this lovely autumn breeze, disappearing into the night. It was whispering a soft welcome home.

Our move was a little bit of magic mixed with much trepidation. We suddenly had four times the space with one-third the cost. Nice. The building was slowly filling up, but was only half occupied at the time. Many of the larger downtown buildings slated for apartments were in the process of being renovated. We were early on in the downtown migration and were in a quiet, darker world, especially at night. There was no traffic noise to speak of, which made it hard to sleep.

One evening, while getting ready to jump into bed, I heard the whistle of a train echo through the night. I had so missed this sound, a sound I had grown up with. The sound of a train off in the distance, blowing its horns, is the sound of dreams. I loved that sound as a child when I longed to get somewhere, anywhere, out of Kansas City.

Starting with our attendance at the fundraiser that first evening, it didn't take long to get acclimated to how Kansas City perceives itself. Sports. The Royals, the Chiefs, and Major League Soccer's Sporting KC (and now the new women's team, KC Current) are the very reason to live for many Kansas Citians. Yes, sports.

Our first month in Kansas City saw the Royals go to the World Series for the first time since '85. They lost it in seven games. But the following year, 2014, they won, beating the NY Mets in New York.

Well, who wouldn't attach profound symbolism to that? Moving back to Kansas City after decades in New York, we go and beat New York in the World Series. What?

So, why are a million people massing along Grand Avenue on Valentine's Day, 2024? Kansas City is waiting for the Chiefs to pass by in triumph. The storied team holds a glittery, scarlet-dusted sway over the million souls crowded behind the police barricades. It feels like the entire Midwest has gathered for the occasion. Red confetti will be shot from cannons, creating a ticker tape effect without the tall buildings.

Since our arrival, the Chiefs have won three Super Bowl Championships: 2020, 2023, and 2024. This is the second Super Bowl victory in two years, and there is already talk about the mythical "three-peat." Almost all the schools located within the 8,000 square miles of the KC Metroplex have been given the day off. This is their Red Snow Day.

Today's parade is magically happening on St. Valentine's Day, and it's a beautiful day. The weather is mild and unseasonably warm. There's a light breeze.

For the countless youngsters short on patience, the hours seem like days. They peer down Grand Avenue, rocking from one foot to the other, practicing with the cameras on their phones. Is that huge guy with the cowboy hat going to be standing in front the whole time?

The crowd, jammed together, is standing ten deep, shoulder to shoulder. Old, young, tall, short, light, heavy, or just plain average, they have one thing in common: the color red—lots and lots of red. There are red scullies, jackets, shoes, scarves, glasses, pants, knit hats with goofy pom poms, faces painted red, mittens, earmuffs—anything that can be a color is red.

Some of the crowd have been waiting since the previous night when they arrived to stake out their places with the sunset. By all rights, they should be sore, stiff, and tired, but they aren't. The anticipation will keep them happy and warm for a little while longer—actually, for as long as it takes. So they wait patiently, if a little anxiously. It won't be long now.

Michael and I worked our way down Main Street against the current of celebrating Chiefs fans, toward the hotel where Dan and Sharon were waiting, tapping their toes and drumming their fingers. To avoid traffic and parking, they had stayed in a downtown hotel the night before, two blocks from the parade route. It was around 9:30 a.m., and they had been at the mercy of their impatient friend, David, who had gone on ahead. He wanted to get to the parade early—a good view and all. He didn't want to miss Mahomes.

Not to be outdone, I was equally cranky that we had to get there so bloody early. The parade wouldn't pass by where we were until noon at the earliest. Arriving early has no bearing on parade sight lines. This has always been my parade-going experience, anyway. Once the parade comes into view, you commence to wriggle your way around until you get to where you can see. It's the only way.

As for Mahomes, we were in no danger of missing Mahomes. He's going to be one of the last people to pass by. Why would we miss him? This was our third Super Bowl Parade in four years, and we'd never missed him before. This, by the way, is a vivid testament to Patrick's hold on Kansas City's imagination. How many people have pinned their hopes and dreams, their very happiness, on his Number 15 jersey?

The 2016 arrival of Patrick Mahomes in Kansas City supercharged the city's sports scene. The Kansas City Chiefs had been slumping for decades, but things took a turn with Mahomes. The fact that he looked like a living, breathing Greek statue turbo-charged his adoption by Chiefs fans and by Kansas Citians in general. He was a patient, eager, precocious, young quarterback who embraced the professional aspects of the game like he'd been born to it.

And for all practical purposes, he had been. His father, Pat, was an MLB pitcher, and Patrick literally grew up in stadiums and pro locker

rooms. He knew the territory, as it were. The crowds, the roar, the hype, none of it fazed young Patrick. He was Kansas City's first star to hit the national spotlight since the Royals' George Brett back in the 80s.

Mahomes managed, in two short years, to morph into something nothing short of legendary. His abilities, both athletic and intellectual, were unmatched. His play was genius, uncanny, even perplexing. The Kansas City Chiefs started to win and win big.

Mahomes landed in what Kansas Citians call the metroplex. It includes two states, fifteen counties, and dozens of suburban enclaves that extend from the downtown area in all directions.

To the South are some of the wealthiest counties and townships in the United States. Out to the North and East are some less affluent neighborhoods of working-class folk. There is a noticeable amount of poverty and homelessness in the East section of the city. To the West is Kansas City, Kansas, home to Major League Soccer's Sporting Kansas City, the NASCAR track, Strawberry Hill, a Serbian/Croatian enclave, and a large Mexican-American population

Kansas Citians are a diverse people. Still, the neighborhoods are primarily separated by race, financial clout, and social status. There is an undeniable apartheid quality to the city. Interestingly, the city's generosity is well known. Kansas City will always show up near the top of any list when it comes to charitable giving.

While sports have ruled Kansas City for most of the last century, it is not the only thing. Kansas City is home to numerous museums and galleries, including the world-class Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art and the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art. The world-renowned National WW I Museum and Memorial holds its place in downtown Kansas City.

The Kansas City theatre scene is alive and well, with numerous equity houses jockeying for an audience. The City Stage in Kansas City's famed Union Station hosts the Kansas City Actors Theatre and the Theatre for Young America. The Black Box in the West Bottoms is home to the Living Room and Fishtank theatre companies, while up on Main Street, the Unicorn stages world premieres. There are numerous others.

Kansas City also has a vibrant music scene. Kansas City jazz grew out of the city's checkered history. This dates back to prohibition when Kansas City refused to "prohibit," and the booze, brothels like Annie's, and jazz

clubs created a raucous, world-renowned nightlife that centered along 12th Street and across town to the 18th and Vine neighborhood that the song *Goin' to Kansas City* made famous.

Kansas City is where Count Basie developed his signature Kansas City Swing, where Charlie Parker developed his chops, Marilyn Maye created her signature vocal style, and, in an odd twist, where Burt Bacharach was born into this world, on Warwick Boulevard, no less.

Walt Disney played with a mouse in his studio at 31st and Troost. He drew the little fellow and named him Mortimer. Mortimer Mouse was Mortimer until Disney's wife suggested that Mickey Mouse might have more bounce, so Mickey he became. Ernest Hemingway pounded the pavement for the Kansas City Star, while Ginger Rogers took dance lessons in Independence, a Kansas City suburb. Independence was also Harry Truman's hometown, by the way. He and Bess lie in the courtyard of the Truman Library in Independence.

Kansas City BBQ is considered the best in the country by the locals and anyone with discerning taste buds (as Kansas Citians will emphatically insist). Then there is the Taco Trail, which meanders through the Mexican communities, the West Bottoms, and across the river to the Kansas side. There are dozens of different styles of tacos, representing all of Mexico's regions, each more delicious than the last.

The Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts, designed by Moshe Safdie, is envied internationally for its flawless acoustics and houses the Kansas City Symphony, the Kansas City Ballet, and the Lyric Opera. All that glass, cable, and white marble sparkles at the apex of one of Kansas City's loftiest hills, overlooking the Crossroads Arts District.

Kansas City is known as the City of Fountains, rightly so. There are over two hundred fountains spread out across the metroplex. It is actually a law that any new construction must set aside a certain percentage for an art installation. That installation almost always turns out to be a fountain.

In short, Kansas City seems to have the best of everything, sitting as it does atop towering bluffs overlooking the conjunction of two major rivers, where the Kansas churns into the wide Missouri. (Note: Kansas City is not flat.) Since those first French settlers arrived in the late 17th century, this city, hidden in plain sight, has personified the proverbial "shining city on

a hill.” Yet, it has always been one of those flyover places no one, anywhere else, knew anything about...until Mahomes.

Mahomes wasn't just talented; he was handsome, and his banter sparkled. He was the perfect superhero: smart, generous, and humble. Wigs designed to match his signature hairstyle sold out. Hats, cakes, shirts—anything that could be sold—suddenly featured Mahomes' hair made of yarn, string, icing; you name it. He was almost too good to be true. Much was made of the phenomenal money the Chiefs spent on him (\$450 million over ten years), but he has proven to be worth every penny. Patrick's NFL merchandise would become the top seller nationally by 2024.

As we jostled, tripped, and stumbled over the occasional crumbling sidewalk through the crowds, I had great fun watching the kids, in particular. We were standing near a family I had seen when walking over from the hotel: A boy, a girl, and two parents. Isn't this just the ideal American family?

He's ten years old, and his name is probably Noah. He has his Number 15 Mahomes shirt on and his new phone, a Christmas present from Mom and Dad, stuffed in the pocket of his new Chiefs jacket. The way cool jacket was a 10th birthday present from his uncle. He's two digits!

He hops in the family's BMW SUV and stares out the window as it floats down the ramp onto I-35 at 135th Street in Leawood, Kansas.

Leawood, an affluent suburb of Kansas City nicknamed “the bubble,” is in South Johnson County. Noah, his parents, and his little sister are headed to the brand-new Loews Hotel downtown. The Loews has a swimming pool and a splendid view of the city from the room they've reserved on the sixteenth floor. It is also only three blocks from the Super Bowl Parade.

Noah's parents and his eight-year-old sister, Ava, chatter excitedly. Ava's learned a new word today—“staycation!” They're off on a staycation downtown, where all the lights are bright.

“Yay! A staycation, a staycation!” Ava chants as Noah covers his ears in feigned indignation.

I made a semi-successful effort to turn off my mental grumbling about the necessity of being at the parade so early. Why on earth should we spend three hours standing on a crowded curb waiting for a parade when we could sit all cozy and comfy at Mildred's Cafe, sipping Americanos and

munching on a croissant? To paraphrase: “Hey, Toto, we’re not in New York anymore.”

No matter, we compromised and stood for two hours instead of three. I actually love watching people, so in the end, it was all good. It was time to turn off my New York whininess.

Meanwhile, everyone has their phones in the air, taking selfies, pictures of the crowd, of the kids hanging from light poles, anything. I spot a boy across the street, maybe twelve or so. He’s with a very protective woman. I imagine she’s his mother. He has his phone held up, taking pictures of everything he sees. He’s in parade heaven.

He’s 12, and his parents named him Amir. Amir’s a good kid. Amir’s dad is driving him and his mom from the East side over to Truman Road and Walnut Street, as close as they can get to the Super Bowl parade. Amir’s got his red and white Pacheco jersey on under his red Chiefs hoodie (from his grandma, who spoils him). He’s wearing the red knit cap with the pom-pom that his mom picked up at the hospital gift shop where she works as the night nurse. Amir’s dad, KCPD, is on duty, so they’re really early.

A sleepy Amir hates getting up early, but he has his pillow. He’ll doze. They set up their lawn chairs behind the police barricades and settle in under the light blanket they have with them, just in case. It’s chilly; the sun’s not quite up yet. There’s already a crowd, but they have a great spot.

There are two kids balancing on a big guy’s shoulders, one on each side, at the front of the crowd. An uncle? He looks a little young to be their father, a little old to be an older brother. It makes me smile.

There are so many stories here; all these people, usually separated by Kansas City’s invisible borders, gathered together in celebration. Were they forgetting their skin color for a change? Their possessions? Their neighborhoods?

Valentina and Sebastian dig into their scrambled eggs at lightning speed.

Their uncle steers his car through the winding, hilly streets of Kansas City, Kansas. He’ll arrive at 10:00 a.m. to take them to the parade. They’ll need to be clever about parking since they’re coming from the Kansas side, west of downtown. Parking on the west side of the parade will be a hassle. He pulls up in front of his sister’s house and honks the horn.

At the downtown airport, Mahomes and company have been loaded onto sleek, silver buses with blacked-out windows for the ride up to Grand Avenue. They're on their way to meet the open-air, double-decker buses that will traverse the parade route. The airport, used mainly by the two-percenters' private jets, is a mere five minutes from the parade's starting line, where the restless throngs are in place.

If there are one million people gathered downtown for the parade, five hundred thousand of them are surely between newborn and eighteen. And they're deliriously happy. The joyful roar of the crowd can be heard for blocks.

It's nearly 11:00 a.m., but before the parade begins, can we add one more emotional layer to the winning of the Super Bowl 2024? Yes, we can. The entire world has been watching the "once upon a time" fairytale that has cast its gossamer spell over the globe.

First comes the fairy princess in the form of pop star Taylor Swift, arguably one of the most famous women in the world. Taylor's *Eras Tour* landed in Kansas City just weeks before football began in '23.

Chiefs record-setting Number 87 tight end Travis Kelce, princely type casting if there ever was, attended the concert and was smitten. Now, it is rumored he had been smitten earlier, but the better story has the prince pleading to meet the princess after the show, only to be spurned.

The prince pouts and feigns a devil-may-care attitude, but secretly sends the princess precious gifts like a Swiftie "friendship bracelet" with his phone number on it by clandestine messenger. He woos her unrelentingly. The princess caves.

In short, Travis and Taylor meet. The world melts down. Two more perfect romance novel protagonists cannot have ever been invented. Step aside, Duke and Duchess of Sussex. A new royal romance, American style, is in full swing.

Travis is tall, ruggedly handsome, and has enough charm to stop the world spinning. The future NFL Hall of Famer's sense of style is borderline insane, but always manages to work.

Taylor Swift is the Time magazine Person of the Year. Her tour has had a significant effect on the economies of every city she's visited. She's a savvy businesswoman who outsmarted her record company, holds the record

for most Best Album Grammys, is tall, blonde, glamorous, and famed for her kindness. One example is the fifty million dollars in bonuses that she showered on her touring crew at the end of '23.

A romance of international proportions had descended on Kansas City. Despite the whiny old “Brads and Chads,” the vast majority of the football crowd and the Swiftie crowd joined hands and celebrated the romance and, by extension, the Chiefs. During the season, the world watched with bated breath to see if her plane would make it from Tokyo to Las Vegas in time for a big game! The Homecoming Queen, her King, and a big game!

It was all too good to be true, and then it happened. The Chiefs' Super Bowl win was the Hollywood ending that Hollywood would never have bought into.

Twists and turns abounded. The game went into overtime. The 49ers didn't know the new OT rules. They won the toss, then chose wrong. Patrick stared at his counterpart in awe, the disbelief on his face barely concealed. Fifteen minutes later, it was over. The red and gold confetti was blasted into the air. Back-to-back wins, back-to-back confetti, back-to-back joy.

Noah had gotten up with the sun and watched the city come alive. He had never been so high. The 16th whole floor! It was way cool. Across the room, his mother emerged from under the covers, saw Noah, and smiled.

“Good morning, dear; what about some breakfast? Do you want to call room service?”

Noah was in heaven. He was going to get to call room service! Yikes!

After they wolfed down their breakfast, Noah, Ava, Mom, and Dad gathered all their gear and headed out. Noah was feeling generous that morning and let Ava push the button to call the elevator. They were on their way.

Down on Grand Avenue, Amir was awake and standing in his chair, checking the picture on his phone's camera. He tried horizontal, vertical, and horizontal again. He checked the different filters and decided Natural was best. He and his mom had to stand firm in the crush that had gathered around them. The mood was good, though. Everyone respected space, and Amir was excited.

Amir and his mom decided to fold up their chairs and tuck them against the barricade in front of where they were standing. The crowd was intense.

There was a constant roar, along with the footballs flying back and forth across the street. The shouts of laughter could be seen, if not heard, when someone managed to catch the ball instead of getting popped in the head with it.

Amir's mom was not a fan of the football tossing. Someone could get hurt. She crossed her fingers inside the pockets of her jacket and hoped for the best. She searched around every once in a while to see if she could spot Amir's dad somewhere out there on the avenue.

The Chiefs have mustered in the River Market at the foot of Grand Avenue. They have transferred to the London-style double-decker buses with open tops. The team-themed Bud Lights are packed into coolers, and the coolers are loaded on along with the players. The mood is jolly, and the wives, kids, and parents are accounted for. It's time.

Along with the players, there are the cheerleaders, trainers, coaches, and dozens and dozens more people (laundry? catering? medical? maintenance?). They have all boarded their respective buses. They have all done their part to keep the well-oiled championship machine working. This is their day, too.

Then, of course, there are politicians; some are welcome, some are not. Missouri Governor Mike Parson will be taking up space in the parade. Is there a better look than riding on a red convertible in a Super Bowl parade? He'll wave even if the crowd boos, and they will.

He couldn't care. He doesn't need Kansas City; the country folk down in the Ozarks are all about Parson. Governor Parson's gun policies have made him a big, big man down in the hinterlands, where the squirrel hunters hang out, where the meth labs and evangelical Christian churches share almost every small-town corner.

His popularity is minuscule in Kansas City and St. Louis, Missouri's largest cities, where he banned the mayors from enforcing federal gun legislation. His Second Amendment Preservation Act was ruled unconstitutional in federal court. Yet he fights to make it easier for Missouri's kids to pack their pistols, and there he is, sitting on the butt end of a red convertible.

After Valentina and Sebastian were whisked away by her brother, their mama turned on the TV news and saw a piece about Parkland, Florida. There is an

interview with someone named David Hogg. She sort of remembers him. It's been, what, six years since all those kids were killed? She's glad the young man survived. He looks like a nice boy.

Enough sadness, she turns off the TV and turns on the radio to see if she can find Taste of Tejano. She loves DJ Lisa Lopez, who plays the best music ever! Siempre! Siempre! She loves making her tamales with Taste of Tejano playing in the background.

Along with Parson, there is Kansas City's dashing Mayor Quinton Lucas and numerous other council members and representatives.

Last, but not least, there are the Hunts, the family that owns the Chiefs.

The cast of the film *Barbie* has nothing on the Hunts: Skinny, blonde, posh, and perfectly plastic in all the perkier of ways, the Hunts live in their own extra-large, privileged, puffy, powdery, hairspray world. All pink, botoxed, flossy, and glossy, their fixed, plastered smiles are permanently and firmly in place. Someone has to own entities like the Chiefs. In Kansas City, it's the Hunts.

Lyndell Mays, 24, and Dominic Miller, 19, on a collision path, as yet unknown to them, have arrived at the parade downtown. That's where everything would be happening on this day. Was it a deliberate or more of an absent-minded move to bring their guns along? Hard to say.

How did these men, one of them a teenager, come to own guns? Statistics say that the guns were likely part of the household from the start. Did the guns make them feel safer? Why wouldn't they feel safe? Is it because, in Kansas City, guns are the number one cause of death for black kids between 15 and 19? In any case, they had both managed to live through high school when many of their classmates had not.

Whatever the reason, they had their guns...just in case. They weren't the only ones by any means. Another young man, Terry J. Young, 21, also had his gun. The truth is, there were surely countless guns floating around in downtown Kansas City on Valentine's Day, 2024.

Finally, at the stroke of 11:00 a.m., the red double-deckers cough, growl, and rumble to life. They start crawling up the avenue. For the next hour and a half, the players will float inside the intense roar of a million voices.

Soon enough, they'll get bored standing on the upper decks. They'll hop off the buses to get closer to the fans. There is no fear, no question of safety, no worries. The world is a glorious place. Nothing was going to get in the way of the love. It's Valentine's Day, after all!

At 11:15 a.m., Valentina, Sebastian, and their uncle worm their way into the crowd. The parade hasn't arrived yet.

The kids are worried they won't be able to see. Their uncle promises they'll sit on his shoulders. One on each side. He's a big guy. He designs, builds, and paints muscle cars. He's strong. He'll make sure they get to see Valentina's favorite, Kelce. Mateo's looking for Pacheco. That guy!

Across the avenue, Amir perks up. The first cars come into view. It won't be long now.

We could hear the double-decker's diesel engines rumbling like a pack of dinosaurs long before they appeared at the lower end of Grand Avenue. It's going to be a long, slow parade. When the players reach us, they're running around in the street. So much for the view! The joke's on us. We were too close; we would have been better off further back with a little elevation.

Everyone moves aside to let the kids up front where they can see. The big Latino guy up front still has his kids on his shoulders. It's fun. The kids have great seats! Good for them. The consensus in KC is that parades are for the kids. I thought of parades I'd been to in New York. This would not have gone down well. Kansas Citians are feeling generous today.

Noah and Ava could hear the roar moving toward them like a tsunami. It obliterated all other sound as the big red buses floated into view, shimmering in the hazy sunlight. Ava thought she would faint dead away! Noah was so excited he couldn't speak. A first.

Grown men scream like Swifties when Patrick's bus floats by sans Patrick, who is walking, a Chiefs souvenir Bud Light in hand. It turns out the only people with a good view of most of the players were hanging from streetlights, perched on windowsills, or watching from the upper stories of parking lots.

Number 10 running back Isiah Pacheco and Number 95 defensive tackle Chris Jones bounce back and forth across Grand, high-fiving kids, leaving them speechless, shiny faces glowing with wonder. Awestruck, they freeze up when Jones, Pacheco, or Number 56 defensive end George Karlaftis glances their way.

The men in the red jerseys do not disappoint. They shout, “Hi! How ya doin’?” They pose for selfies! They high-five!

I see a brief, split-second flash of Patrick’s signature hair between a couple of heads in the front. The others, already hard to recognize out of uniform, are hidden anyway. Travis Kelce and Number 7 placekicker Harrison Butker stay on the bus. Travis is with his mother, Donna. He doesn’t want to leave her alone. Butker? He’s not a drinker. That might be it.

Governor Mike looks glum through his frozen smile. He must have been thinking, “Whoa! That’s a lotta boos! Fine, screw you, Kansas City.”

I realized, soon enough, that the parade, aside from the occasional cannon trucks sending blizzards of confetti into the air, was about as much fun as watching a traffic jam at rush hour. If I wore a watch, I’d be checking it.

The low, chug, chug of buses, the booming swirl of confetti, the roaring of the crowd—and then suddenly, poof, the parade disappears into a haze of diesel exhaust mixing uneasily with the delicious-smelling smoke of the BBQ trucks parked on the side streets. Just like that...it’s over.

The double-deckers will eventually arrive at the top of Grand, turn right onto Pershing Road, an elegant, gracious boulevard lined by mature ginkgo trees, bare save for all the kids perched in their limbs, looking like squirmy, oversized apples. The buses will cross over to Main Street and Union Station. The intersection of Pershing and Main is where Kansas City’s crown jewels are located.

Across from Washington Square, tucked into the triangle of Grand, Main, and Pershing, is Crown Center, the sleek mid-century campus of Hallmark Cards Headquarters. Behind Crown Center is the famed Children’s Mercy Hospital. Across Main to the West is the elegant Beaux-Arts Union Station, Kansas City’s historic railroad station, celebrating its centenary, now the bustling heart of downtown Kansas City. It is the home to Pierpont’s fine dining, the historic Harvey’s casual dining, Science City

and Planetarium, the aforementioned City Stage, and a gallery for touring exhibitions.

Overlooking Crown Center and Union Station is the magnificent World War I Museum and Memorial, featuring its eternal flame atop the two-hundred-seventeen-foot tower. A sloping lawn floats gently down from the memorial to Pershing Road, separating the memorial grounds from Union Station. In the center of Pershing is the dancing water of the Henry Wollman Bloch fountain.

After the buses stop on the East side of Union Station, the players will unload and enter the building for a catered lunch inside the glistening, turn-of-the-century great hall.

The parade is over in a flash. Amir and his mom start their walk up to Children's Mercy Hospital, where they'll turn right and cross over to the station for the rally.

They pick up their chairs and shuffle along with the crowd. It's a great day! Amir got some great shots! His mom takes the phone and puts it in her pocket so he won't lose it. They hold hands as they walk. They don't get to do that very often. Amir likes it. So does his mom.

Valentina and Sebastian have seen everything perfectly. Pacheco had even stopped for a selfie!

Once they're out of the thickest of the crowd, their uncle lowers them to the street, and they'll walk West over to the Broadway overpass with multiple thousands of other red-clad fans, turn left, and try to get close enough to the rally to see. Fingers crossed.

They all hold hands. Valentina and Sebastian loved it when he wrote their names and phone numbers on their arms. "I'm gonna give ya tattoos," he had said.

Noah, Ava, and their parents follow the Latino man and his two kids across the overpass. Noah's mom is not impressed. "Where's their mother? I wonder if they speak English." She pulls Noah close and urges Ava to hold her daddy's hand. Hand in hand, they trundle across the Broadway overpass. One can't be too careful.

We followed the crowd across town and down Broadway. David had had enough and said his goodbyes. We finally rounded the corner and approached Union Station. We managed to get close enough to have a pretty good view of the stage. We were at the West end of the rally. Off to our right was the majestic tower of the World War I Memorial, its flame barely visible in the daylight. A massive red carpet of humanity covered the hillside all the way down to Pershing.

It was nearly noon, and the multitude, having converged on the grounds in front of Union Station, was getting a tad impatient. Meanwhile, the players and their entourages swarmed the buffet lunch. The afternoon sun blazed through the enormous windows, drawing their arches onto the mirror surface of the terrazzo floors, casting the room in a golden light. The wrought iron light fixtures were aglow. The buffets were arrayed across red and gold tablecloths.

An elegant noontime buffet on rally day might seem over the top, but it was as it should be. The players were spent. They were both exhausted and thrilled. Some of them were experiencing this ritual for the first time. Others were more relaxed. They were celebrating the moment, but without a doubt, all were aching to go home. It had been a long season and a longer day. One might wonder what they were thinking while they waited. Kelce was undoubtedly planning something “Kelceish.” Patrick probably wasn’t really thinking about it; he just opens his mouth, and great stuff comes out.

Lyndell and Dominic are hanging out in their individual groups as the parade shifts into the rally. Inside the madness, crushed as they are in a gathering sea of people, somehow they start noticing each other. The side-eyed glances turn to stares, hostile and dark.

The two groups stalk, tail, and skitter around each other as they make their way to the Western edge of the crowd in front of Union Station. They menace, glare, swagger back and forth, but they keep their distance.

And then, tentatively at first, they start inching closer and closer, invasively into one another’s space. Are they looking for a fight? The noise, the crowd, the thumping hip-hop, and the beating drums seem to urge them forward. They’re hot. They’re angry. Why? Chances are, they don’t even know.

We waited with waning patience and tiring legs. Delicious aromas from the BBQ trucks and a smoky haze from the grills and portable smokers filled the air. We were getting hungry. We had planned to retire to the lovely Crossroads Hotel for lunch. Sharon had made reservations.

It's yet another demand for patience, and the crowd is getting antsy. The ice cream and coffee truck sound systems compete with the DJ playing from the stage. A live band alternates with the DJ, and the KC Chiefs drum line, the Rumble, is banging away up by the stage. It's hard to say whether they're really playing or rehearsing. The cacophony is deafening and doesn't really make any sense. It heightens the excitement and the anxiety of the wait.

Finally comes the inevitable "Testing! Testing!" and the ear-splitting squeal. Why is there always an ear-splitting squeal? You'd think they'd have that figured out by now. An announcer bounces out of the wings, screaming, "Make some noise, Kansas City."

"Woo, woo!" We all respond.

He's an upbeat game host kind of guy. I miss his name. He brings out the cheerleaders, who scream, "Make some noise, Kansas City!"

"Woo, woo!" We all respond again.

They do a cutesy-poo bump and grind routine to a jazzy number played by the band. It looks like the Rumble is playing along. The result is very loud.

In a bit of strange serendipity, I see the same little kid who had been standing across from us at the parade. Now he's standing on his lawn chair directly in front of me, snapping pictures like a pro. His mother has his belt in a tight grip to keep him from losing his balance. When the cheerleaders flounce off the stage, he checks to make sure he has the shots. He's happy.

Out saunter the politicians. It's entertaining to know how much Gov. Parson and Mayor Lucas dislike one another. One would love to hear their thoughts. The kid takes a shot or two but isn't that interested. Where are the players?

No players yet. First, we have to suffer through the VIPs. "How 'bout them Chiefs?" they shout.

Then come the staffers, the President, the General Manager, and the Coaches, ending with Andy Reid. "How 'bout them Chiefs?"

Finally, the owners file on, trying their best to give off a working-class vibe, waving the trophy. The Hunts thank Jesus, quote the Bible, and shout, “How ‘bout them Chiefs?”

At this point, the “woo, woos” are barely audible.

At last, Clark Hunt shouts, in a thin, oily voice, “Come on out, Patrick. Ladies and Gentlemen, Patrick Mahomes and your Kansas City Chiefs!”

Patrick and the rest of the team come staggering out like so many bumper cars.

“Hey,” he shouts, “Let’s hear it, Kansas City.”

“Woo, woo!” The “woo, woos” have regained their oomph.

Patrick, three sheets to the wind but still a gentleman, thanks Jesus, his parents, his wife, Brittany, and everyone on the stage and in the crowd. He chugs his Bud Light and yells for Travis Kelce.

Travis is a mess. He pulls out his phone and tries to sing Garth Brooks’ *Friends in Low Places*. “Sing along!” he shouts. Kansas City obliges, proving that they know the song better than he does. All in fun, he’s a good sport. Cut the boys some slack. It’s the rule of the day.

Dan, Sharon, Michael, and I have a brief chit-chat about whether the Chiefs might consider a drinking limit on rally day (“Those players are blasted!”). We decided this was unlikely—oh, well.

At last, there’s nothing left to say, and a little sadly, the Chiefs wave goodbye. With a mixture of regret and relief, the crowd begins to disperse.

Unnoticed on the Western edge of the crowd are the two groups strutting, posing, and glowering at some perceived slight as the human wave surges around them toward the exits.

“What the fuck? What are you staring at?”

The Chiefs are gone, and what sounds like a package of those little firecrackers called Lady Fingers starts exploding all around us. Instead of taking them apart and shooting them one by one, it’s as if someone lit them at one end and threw them out to go off all at once, in a staccato pattern, like a machine gun, or in this case, like an automatic handgun.

It isn’t Lady Fingers. Bullets are flying. They could have been a couple of feet away from where we were standing, or a block away. It’s impossible to tell.

“Gunshots!” someone shouts, “It’s guns!”

Lyndell and Dominic don’t aim exactly; they just point their guns in each other’s general direction and squeeze the triggers. Poppity Pop Pop Pop! Automatic fire. Pop Pop Pop Pop!

It looks like a pebble has been dropped into a body of water, several pebbles, maybe. Crowds scatter in every direction, away from the sound of gunfire. Except it’s impossible to tell where it’s coming from. We were stumbling around blindly, trying to escape, but we didn’t know where to escape from or to.

“Calm down,” a hysterical man shouts, “it’s just fireworks! The kids are being trampled! Don’t trample the kids! Stop! The kids!”

“I’ve lost my daughter!” screams a panicked father, his dreads whipping wildly around his head as he holds his hands up in warning, or maybe it’s in prayer?

Amir had been standing on his chair so he could shoot pictures over all the people’s heads in front of him. When the shooting starts, Amir’s mom sweeps him off the chair and starts running toward a nearby truck for shelter. The phone goes flying. The pictures are gone forever.

Noah and Ava are knocked to the ground. Their parents crouch over them. Their father pulls them up, and crushed against their mother, they struggle to the edge of the surging masses.

Valentina and Sebastian have been munching on some Girl Scout cookies. They were starving! Their uncle has them tucked, one under each arm, in less than a second and plows his way through the crowd toward Broadway, away from the Pop Pop Pop Pop.

I have had very little contact with guns. One night around midnight, I was walking my dog, Lucy, along Avenue C toward East 3rd Street in New York, when a drug raid at the bodega across the street turned into a firefight. I heard a couple of bullets whizz by my head and hit the brick wall behind us.

It was over as soon as it started, and I realized at that moment how silly we must have looked. I was stooped over at the waist behind a fire

hydrant, holding Lucy. The thing is, we were protected by nothing, unless you believe in guardian angels.

It was the same at the rally. Hundreds of people bent over at the waist, waddling around like a flock of geese, protected by nothing but good fortune. I didn't really believe it was happening at first.

"It's guns!" Michael shouts.

"No," I shout back. I'm sure it's just firecrackers. Someone has firecrackers. It's just firecrackers."

I look up, and Michael's gone. Dan and Sharon are running around behind a tech truck.

The crowd is swirling around in a panicked, shrieking murmur—nonsensical. The popping goes on and on. I reach the truck, and we crouch together until it finally stops.

Inside Union Station, the Chiefs suddenly sober up. What the hell? There were kids and panicked parents pouring through the doors. They heard the police screaming, "Active shooter! Active shooter!"

Gathering up children in their arms, the players calm them, hold them, and do their best to find their parents in the panicked crowd.

Governor Mike is whisked away in his black SUV with blue flashing lights. Mayor Lucas searches for his Chief of Police.

Outside is a roiling red sea of humanity that doesn't part; rather, it caves in on itself, drowning those in its path. And then it is over.

We would find out after the fact that the shots were being fired right in front of us, mere feet away. I remember seeing a kid being tackled by a large man. There was what resembled an AK-47 lying on the ground next to them. How the hell did he get that weapon into this crowd unnoticed? People were screaming for the police. Police were running in every direction in ones, twos, and groups.

Dan, Sharon, and I stood up and, oddly wordless, started walking, as if on automatic, away from the rally. A block or two later, an eerie silence had set in. No one in the vast crowd is talking except in terms of direction. ("This way...that way...straight ahead..."). The volume of the chatter was low and had a muffled, shattered quality to it. Any noise came from sirens, which were everywhere, coming from every direction.

We passed a long line of black SUVs with flashing blue lights perched on their dashboards. It reminded me of 9/11. All the Poo Bahs escaping the riffraff.

We found Michael, who had somehow managed to run into the underground parking at Union Station. We decided against trying to get to the Crossroads Hotel. We walked into the first restaurant we found.

If anything could make the situation worse, it was this restaurant. Plates were piled with deep-fried dreck. Buffalo Wings? Fries? Tots? Skins? Healthier options like Green Beans? Broccoli? Everything was battered and soaked in a cool sheen of grease and impossible to identify. We didn't bother to complain.

Weirdly, we avoided talking about the shooting. We had been so close, and still, we couldn't think of anything to say about it. Were we in shock? I think maybe we were.

At loose ends, we decided to go to a movie. Ensnared in our heated recliners, thankful for the dark, we sank back and watched a film that none of us would remember later.

Lisa Lopez-Galvan was dead. Movie star beautiful, the glamorous DJ Lisa-G, 44, was one of the premier faces of Hispanic Kansas City. She left law enforcement to concentrate on her "head-hunting" career and her music, and continually gave of her talents to multiple charities. Her voice on the popular radio show, *Taste of Tejano*, was now silenced.

Twenty-one more were wounded.

Noah? Ava? Amir? Valentina and Sebastian? Was it their blood splattered all over the pavement? Was it Valentina's mouth that had bullet holes through it? Are Amir's legs riddled with bullets? Will Noah and Ava ever see a huge crowd again without freezing up in fear? Will they grow up clinging to guns for protection, as some would urge, or shun them as evil?

Children's Mercy Hospital, mere yards away, took in the wounded children.

Does it make it even worse that there was no logical reason for these shootings? Simply looking at someone causes a mass shooting? Is this some form of uniquely American insanity? Who knows what they would have argued about if they'd gotten past the staring? A girl? Turf? Family? Some juvenile insult? "Your mama." "No, your mama!"

That morning, Lyndell, Dominic, and Terry, ultimately identified as the shooters as reported in the Kansas City Star, along with at least two juveniles and countless unknown others, had stuffed their guns into the backpacks, inside the red Chiefs jackets, under the Mahomes jerseys, wherever they could.

“Fuck him!” thought Lyndell. “Fuck him!” thought Dominic. “Fuck the World!”

The Hunts? What did they think? Owner Clark Hunt’s daughter, Gracie, had this to say on X, “This world is broken, and thank God it is not our home. I’m grateful for a Savior whose sacrifice on the cross gives us the assurance of a perfect eternity in Heaven, with no death, no fear, no grief, and no pain. If you don’t have that—I promise you, you want it when you’re facing that moment.”

One hopes there weren’t any Muslims or Jews, Buddhists or Hindus, or...whatever...on the receiving end of those sentiments. They’d be out of luck.

The film ended, and we emerged into the soft light of “Golden Hour,” a particularly beautiful time of day in Kansas City, when the metro lights up for the evening. The LED lighting, shining in the twilight, had gone from celebratory red to mourning purple. All the joy had evaporated into the fog of thoughts and prayers.

Kansas City, mortified by the spilled blood, recoiled in horror at the thought of angry, disenfranchised young men trying to kill each other. They missed each other, but they did manage to kill one of the city’s cultural icons and maim nine innocent children, while traumatizing countless others.

The cleaning crews appeared like magic and started with the balloons: Poppity, Pop, Pop, Pop. The drifts of red snow were swept up, and the rest of the detritus was washed away in crimson torrents flowing through the drains and emptying into the Kansas and Missouri Rivers.

I can’t think of one specific experience that is prompting me to pick up, leave Kansas City, and move on. Is it the gun violence? It is pervasive. According to an article in the Kansas City Star, January 01, 2024, Missouri, Kansas,

and the Kansas City metroplex are listed among the deadliest places in the U. S. as a result of gun violence.

But New York had gun violence, too. Not as much, to be sure.

There is a New Yorkish vibe that has taken hold since we arrived in 2013. The original “settlers” in Kansas City’s downtown Crossroads were artists. This marked the beginning of the downtown renaissance. Condos have been built, and old buildings have been rehabbed; they’re all at capacity. And just like the East Village in New York, the banker bros have edged out the artists.

The Chiefs reached the championship again the following year, but tanked in their promising three-peat Super Bowl appearance with a shocking, ignominious loss. Kansas City quickly erased that dreadful game from its collective memory. (“If we don’t think about it, it didn’t happen!”) Kind of like doing something about guns.

Travis and Taylor have endured, which is brilliant.

No, none of the above has pushed me to move on. It is the sandy, gravelly, constantly crumbling concrete. Again, it’s the little things: Scaffolding, bad concrete. Every sidewalk in Kansas City crumbles at the drop of a hat.

There is an iconic parking lot across the street from the main library in downtown Kansas City. The library is one of the old buildings that was beautifully designed and built in the early 1900s, when Kansas City was making sturdy buildings with elegance and panache. A parking lot was added a few years back, built to look like a bookshelf with gigantic books lining the street. It’s undeniably cool.

There’s a little stair that goes down to the lot’s elevator. The top step crumbles, gets repaired, and then crumbles again, over and over. In short, the whole city is paved, “staired,” and curbed with this crumbly concrete. Wouldn’t it be great to live in a place where proper concrete is used for infrastructure, or where there is no permanent temporary scaffolding?

Let’s see...Mexico? The Caribbean? Probably not. Copenhagen? I’ve never been there, but Denmark is tempting. Denmark’s royal family is genuinely attractive, and they wave from their balcony in a friendly, unassuming way that the British might want to try, just for fun.

Paris? Now we’re talking. I visited Paris once, traveling solo. I did not see one crumbling sidewalk or curb, or any scaffolding scarring the

boulevards. Maybe I just missed it. Maybe Paris is so blindingly beautiful that it's difficult to see the flaws.

One evening, after finishing off a glass of red wine, I glanced up to see the haughty, intimidating server, in his twenties or so, looking at me from under his eyelids. It was a wet, shiny October evening. I was the only one left. I was sitting outside, alone, almost too warm, under the heaters. It was near closing. I could almost hear him thinking, "What's with this guy?"

I signaled for the bill. I glanced at it and realized I needed to come up with the word "fourteen." I struggled to remember fourteen. My online French had deserted me. After making a couple of lame attempts, he looked at me, one eyebrow raised.

"Quatorze," he said quietly. "Ah, quatorze," I said.

It was the faint smile and the gentle way he picked up the tray that completed a perfect evening. He nodded, friendly, without judgment, and quietly disappeared into the cafe. I'll never forget this weirdly generous moment, something he undoubtedly forgot the minute he took off his apron. Fearing the worst, I had gotten the best instead. I love how this small kindness defied preconceived notions. It's the tiny unexpected things that keep the heart beating.

Maybe the whistle of that distant train is sounding the dream of a flat in Paris, the West Bank, or even somewhere further, new and unknown. Yes, it might be time for another move.

Contributors

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Denis Bell is a mathematics professor and a writer, born in the UK and now living in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Georgia. His writing appears (among other places) in Prague Revue (Czech Republic), Lotus Eaters (Italy), Flash-The International Journal of Short-short Fiction (UK), Literary Orphans, and The Maine Review. A collection of his short fiction, titled *A Box of Dreams*, is published by Luchador Press (Texas).

Sam Campbell grew up in the suburbs of Chicago and has since fled to The Last Frontier for whatever reason. A Best of the Net nominee, his work appears or is forthcoming in Harpur Palate, El Portal, DIAGRAM, The Bombay Gin, and Hoxie Gorge Review among others. He holds an MFA from Boise State University and is Assistant Professor of English at Prince William Sound College in Valdez, Alaska.

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Chris Clemens lives and teaches in Toronto, surrounded by raccoons. Nominated for Best Microfiction and Best Small Fictions, his writing appears in *The Dribble Drabble Review*, *The Woolf*, *JAKE*, *Acta Victoriana*, *Apex Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, and elsewhere.

Leslie Cooles is an American writer currently living in Argentina. Her novel “The Wickedest City” long listed for the Cheshire Novel Prize, and she has published pieces in a variety of literary journals including Bookends Review, Querencia Press, and Sawpalm. When not writing, she can be found traveling, talking all things historical, and wrangling two small children.

Adam Coulter works in agriculture and is an avid reader of Southern literature. He lives in North Carolina where he enjoys traveling the mountains, photographing the disappearing Americana of back country roads. His writing has appeared in *The Rhapsodist*, *Bright Flash Literary Review*, *New Plains Review* and *County Lines Literary Journal*.

K Courtland makes her home in Northern California, where she earns a living as a substitute teacher and spends the rest of her time lost in stories—sometimes the ones she reads, sometimes the ones she writes. Away from the page, she can be found painting with more enthusiasm than skill, stretching into yoga poses of questionable grace, or curled up with her two cats and loving spouse.

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Anna Kate Daunt is pursuing an MA in English at the University of Notre Dame, where she focuses on contemporary poetry, and is also earning a law degree. Her work has appeared in *The Allegheny Review*, *Vita Brevis Press*, *Outrageous Fortune*, *Laurel Moon*, and others. She graduated with Honors in English from Davidson College in 2023, where she received the Vereen Bell Poetry Prize for her work.

Hyla Etame is a poet and writer from Southern California. She earned her Bachelor’s in English Literature and Creative Writing from the University of Kent, Canterbury, England in 2025. Her poetry has been published in *Inlandia Journal*, *Blue Marble Review*, and *Lines & Breaks*. In the summer of 2025, Star Nhà Ease Film Festival commissioned her to write a poem

in response to a film in their program. She was the winner of the Navy Pen Lit Mag “Poetry In Response to Tragedy” contest. Her poetic voice is often described as honest, intimate, and reflective. Dreaming, walking, and journaling are vital aspects of her creative routine.

Anne Tyrles has poetry and fiction published in various journals, including Amsterdam Quarterly, Consilience, Dream Catcher, Dust, Feral, Humana Obscura, and London Grip. She lives in France.

Kathryn Ganfield is a nature writer and teaching artist in the river town of St. Paul, Minnesota. Her work focuses on family, environment, and the climate in crisis. She is a past Loft Literary Center Mentor Series Fellow, Paul Gruchow Essay Contest winner, and two-time Pushcart nominee. Her prose appears in Hippocampus, Water-Stone Review, Creative Nonfiction, and River Teeth, among other literary journals. Find her online at kathrynganfield.com.

Carol L. Gloor has been writing poetry since she was sixteen. Her work has appeared in many online and hard copy journals, most recently in “Earth’s Daughters” and “The Vassar Review.” She has two books: a chapbook, “Assisted Living” (Finishing Line Press, 2014) and a full length poetry collection, “Falling Back” (Word Poetry, 2018). She lives happily with her husband and three cats near the banks of the Mississippi.

Ashley Greenhouse is a California native living in Idaho. She is a wife, dog and cat mom, and a creative writing student at Boise State University.

Uj Hyndman is a writer and veil poi artist from the UK. After a decade confined by chronic illness, she’s now in recovery, exploring the world and writing fiction shaped by resilience and invisibility. She loves circus arts, movement and storytelling in all its forms. Her work can be found in FLARE magazine.

Jon Michael Johnson is a writer/director and is currently the Artistic Director of Cooper Square Productions, Kansas City, Missouri. Jon also serves as Artistic Director of SITU Inc., a performance-art collective. Jon's screenplay credits include the French IMAX feature, *Whales and Dolphins: Tribes of the Ocean*, narrated by Darryl Hannah, presented by Jean Michel Cousteau. Jon wrote, produced, and directed the short film, *Pure Love 500*. He also produced *Happy Birthday*, directed by Roberta Munroe, picked up by Here television. At the Cooper Square Theatre in New York, Jon directed RuPaul and Mona Foote in the late-night, underground production of *My Pet Homo* by James Dean Jay Byrd, produced by Jack Hazan. Jon relocated to Kansas City in 2013 and has since participated in two projects for Kansas City's Art in the Loop/Arts KC, the Kansas International Film Festival, and Kansas City Veterans Write.

Karla Jynn is a 72-year-old emerging writer who left an insular religious community to discover an expansive world outside its confines. Formerly a self-taught mixed-media artist, she currently provides therapeutic support to clients and friends, and volunteers for Movement Voter Project. Her work is published in *Bright Flash Literary Review*, *Discretionary Love*, *Emerge Journal*, *Behemoth*, *LOL Comedy*, *Sonora Review*, and *Argyle Literary Magazine*.

Benjamin Karren is an emerging poet native to Vermont and currently residing in Arizona. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Northern New England Review*, *Wild Greens Magazine*, *WestWard Quarterly*, and *PentaCat Press*. Benjamin's work explores rural life, the divine, and human psychology.

Bob Kelsø is a novelist, short story writer, and travel photographer. When he's not making maps as a professional cartographer, he's out chasing stories—from the backroads of the American West to the side streets of Rome. His work has been featured in numerous print and online publications, including *Reminisce Magazine* and *Roam Family Travel*. Several of his stories have been selected for best-of-the-year anthologies. His debut novel, *The Moto Guzzi Diaries*, is forthcoming.

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Dara Laine (she/her) is a poet and member of the LGBTQ+ and disabled communities, based in Baltimore and originally from a hay farm in New Jersey. She returned to poetry after the sudden death of her father. Her work explores grief, memory, and the sacred ordinary through restrained lyricism and symbolic detail, drawing from rituals, hummingbirds, and fridge notes. Influenced by Jane Kenyon, Marie Howe, and Jane Hirshfield, she writes into quiet emotional space and spiritual undercurrents. A July 2025 30/30 Project poet with Tupelo Press, Dara is completing two collections: *Unpicked* and *Numerology*. This is her first publication.

Craig Loomis taught English (literature and writing) for twenty years (2004-2024) at the American University of Kuwait in Kuwait City. Over the years, he has had his short fiction published in such literary journals as *The Iowa Review*, *The Colorado Review*, *The Prague Revue*, *The Los Angeles Review of Los Angeles*, *The Prairie Schooner*, *Yalobusha Review*, *Fiction International*, *Critical Pass Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *The Owen Wister Review*, *Juxtapose Literary Magazine*, *Cumberland River Review*, *REVUE*, *Consequence Magazine*, *SAND*, and others.

Kevin Loughrin lives in Milwaukee, WI with his wife, his three children, and a puffy chow-chow named Sadie. His fiction revolves around the good and evil of boys and men. His short stories have been published in *The Hunger Journal* and *The Woven Tale Press*. He also once received a tiered rejection from *The New Yorker*, which he knows doesn't technically mean anything, but he thinks it really kind of should. Kevin is a member of the Wisconsin Writers Association, The Chicago Writers Association, and is the chair of the Wisconsin chapter of the Horror Writers Association.

Thomas Lowery is a writer from Dallas, TX. He studied literature at The University of Dallas, and his work has appeared in publications such as Bright Wall/Dark Room, Meniscus Literary Journal, and Open: Journal of Arts and Letters.

Stephen J. Lyons is the author of six books: *Landscape of the Heart* (Washington State University Press); *A View from the Inland Northwest* (Globe Pequot); *The 1000-Year Flood* (Globe Pequot); *West of East* (Finishing Line), *Going Driftless* (Globe Pequot) and *Searching for Home* (Finishing Line). Stephen is a two-time recipient of a prose writing fellowship from the Illinois Arts Council. He has published articles, reviews, essays, and poems in numerous publications, including *Wall Street Journal*, *the Independent*; *Washington Post*, *Salon*, *Manoa*, *Newsweek*, *The Sun*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Funny Times*, *South China Morning Press*, *Witness*, and *High Country News*.

Amelia Martens is the author of *The Spoons in the Grass are There To Dig a Moat* (Sarabande Books, 2016), and four poetry chapbooks. In 2021 she was awarded an Artist Enrichment Grant from the Kentucky Foundation for Women, and in 2019 she received an Al Smith Individual Artist Fellowship from the Kentucky Arts Council.

Jane McCarthy recently wrapped five years as a co-founder of a deep-tech company, wrangling ideas, words, and the occasional engineer, in her role leading communications and marketing. Now she's pursuing ghostwriting gigs, while writing her debut novel. Jane recently received a Silver Honorable Mention from the L. Ron Hubbard Writers of the Future Contest. Her short stories and poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Quarter Press*, twice in *Last Stanza Poetry Journal*, twice in *Spillwords*, *The Underland Review's* inaugural issue, *The Fairy Tale Magazine*, *Eye To The Telescope*, *Farmer-ish Journal*, *Jerry Jazz Musician*, and three times in *Havok*.

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Noel Sloboda is the author of two poetry collections as well as seven chapbooks. His work has appeared in Another Chicago Magazine, Confrontation, Fourteen Hills, Midwest Quarterly, Rattle, Sou'wester, and elsewhere. Sloboda has also published a book about Edith Wharton and Gertrude Stein. He teaches at Penn State York, where he coordinates the English program.

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