



Letter from the Editor

Issue 23 saw some big changes to the masthead. The incomparable Eimear Laffan moved from a reader to an Assistant CNF Editor, and Mána Taylor—a terrific writer—joined as another new Assistant CNF Editor. We were also lucky to welcome new CNF readers Paige Lalain, Hannah Levy, Para Vadhahong, and Katie M Zeigler. You can find some of Paige and Katie’s words in previous issues of A+A! Lastly, Sarah Twombly, who has been killing it lately with her own work, has taken on the role of a multi-genre reader at the magazine.

Our editors and readers have put together a wonderful issue that is sometimes funny, sometimes harrowing, sometimes introspective, and always enthralling. Memory plays a big role in these stories, poems, and essays, and I hope you enjoy reading the collection as much as I’ve enjoyed compiling it for you. May this brief note find you well and looking forward to the end of another year.

XO,
BW

Editorial Board

Founder: Brendan Todt • Editor in Chief: Benjamin Woodard

Poetry Editor: Liz Ann Young

Fiction Editors: Whitney Bryant & Cathy Ulrich

Creative Nonfiction Editor: Lindsey Danis

Assistant CNF Editors: Alton Melvar M. Dapanas, Eimear Laffan, & Mána Taylor

CNF Readers: Paige Lalain, Hannah Levy, Para Vadhahong, & Katie M Zeigler

General Reader: Sarah Twombly

Table of Contents

Suzanne Hicks <i>f</i>	My Sincerest Apologies	6
Anita Goveas <i>f</i>	Pluck, scrub, crush	7
Paige Swan †	Summer, 1983. Kitty's.	9
Erik Tschekunow †	On the Form That Requests the Inmate's Reentry Intentions	10
Sage Ravenwood †	What Happens in a Day	12
Juila Ruth Smith <i>f</i>	A Quiet Turning Back	14
Sarina Bosco <i>f</i>	Somnolence	16
Kaitlen Whitt †	Calling Hours	18
Zeynep Inanoglu †	Hagar's Pilgrimage	20
Debbie Graber <i>f</i>	My Thesis	22
Lily Damron ≈	Great Thing Dying, Living On	34
Sophie Fetokaki ≈	§	38
Annie Marhefka ≈	How to make friends	43
Elliott Gish <i>f</i>	Nestling	46
RT Villa ≈	In My Father's Kitchen	56
Claudia Monpere <i>f</i>	Solar Flare	58
Harli James ≈	Here Is an Update on This Town	60
Contributor Notes		64

Fiction – *f* CNF – ≈ Poetry – †

Issue 23, Summer/Fall 2023
Atlas and Alice Literary Magazine
Sioux City, Iowa
www.atlasandalice.com

© Atlas and Alice, All Rights Reserved

Suzanne Hicks

My Sincerest Apologies

First off, I just want to say that I know you might think it's odd to hear from me since we haven't talked in years, but I was so happy to find you on Facebook. I wanted you to know that I'm sorry I stole your Swatch watch in third grade. I was so jealous of that watch. The way the face popped out and could snap into a different band. How it could change so easily. You took it off that day we were painting self-portraits and left it on your desk when you got up to go to the bathroom. I couldn't help myself. At first I kept it hidden, but then I proudly wore it on my wrist and I didn't care when I saw your eyes fixed on it. Even when you asked me if that was your watch, because you knew it was your watch, and I knew it was your watch, I said no and I licked the face of it while you stared at me. When you told the teacher, she made me give it back to you. Honestly, I just want you to know that I'm a good person. I probably would've given the watch back to you eventually even if you didn't tell on me. I just wanted to pretend it was mine for a bit. After that, I never saw you wear it again. And I've always wondered what happened to that watch. Did you wear it when we weren't in school? Did you ever put it back on your wrist after I took it from you? I don't know why I wonder about this so much. But I just need to know. I need to know if what I did left a mark on you.

Anita Goveas

Pluck, scrub, crush

In the morning, we heat leftover rotis, roll them up like swaddled babies, and chew, chew, chew until we can choke them down. The little one dreams of the velvety feel of fresh coriander, its pungent citrus scent, gathered from the flourishing plant, but nothing green thrives here, nothing raw and unpolished survives.

In the afternoon, we submerge in composition, we burnish our grammar, we refine our spelling, O-B-E-Y, Y-I-E-L-D, C-O-M-P-L-Y, until the cramp, crimp, cramp in our fingers tingles and grows. The middle one dreams of stretching luxuriously, limbs tumbled across a whole bed until the new sun spreads dawn like melting ghee, but we all sleep together with no space to roll.

In the evening, we brush our teeth until they gleam, our hair until it shines, pluck, pick, pluck our eyebrows until they sting. The oldest one dreams of hair so short it needs no primping, and the feel of air dancing across an unburdened neck as tired arms unfold and soar, but the window screens are nailed shut against invading pests and the only currents flow sluggishly from the fluttering fan.

In the morning, we boil the milk for chai, we crush, crish, crush the obstinate cardamon, we scatter in the bitter cloves. The little one dreams of the orange flesh of unprocessed turmeric root harvested straight from the ground, the stain flooding across earth-crusting fingers, of chopping and hewing into uneven pieces to liberate the glorious glowing colour, but the knives are safely locked away and everything has a purpose and nothing goes to waste.

In the afternoon, we practice our maths, we marshal the numbers, we harness the equations, A-B-C, W-X-Y, x-y-z. The middle one dreams of shimmying to bhangra, of vah-vah-vooming and hip shaking to Laila Main Laila until the dusk rolls in but the music that surrounds us plinks like glass breaking and we can't find the beat.

In the evening we cream our faces, we pat, pat, pat our loosening jaw skin, we smooth under our eyes. The oldest one dreams of wobbling in a rickety boat, jowls

shaking, of finding balance on an untameable sea, but the wind outside swoops-swish-swoops so fiercely we dare not peek.

In the morning, we scrub, scrub, scrub the pots, we scour the pans, we buff the tava. The little one dreams of peeling back cinnamon bark, of tight curls of sweet-earth-savoury, of spice dusted fingertips, of taste and fragrance and zest and linger, but the vegetables are waiting and must be stewed, steamed, simmered until they fall apart.

In the afternoon, we pore over Marathi, we review our Hindi, we cram in French A-I-K-A, S-U-N-O, E-C-O-U-T-E-Z. The middle one dreams of palms slapping against thirsting tabla, chalks scraping into hankering paper, paint lashing against craving canvas but there are no abundant colours, only white and black, and paper is for holding all our words that no one will read.

In the evening we rub, scrub, rub gram paste into our darkened elbows, slather neem onto oily faces, smear curd onto dry limp hair. The oldest one dreams of the purr-whirr-purr of aircraft engines, the rattle of windows pushing against opposing molecules, the shiveryness of the escaping ground viewed from up high but our skin, our bones, our marrow is too delicate to expose, and here inside in the safe warm dark is where we should stay.

Paige Swan

Summer, 1983. Kitty's.

I slip between the crevices
of his fingertips. Pieces of
me lodged in the hook of him.
A pearl in his palm. Your father's
sour breath lingers in the curl
of my hair. I find you there on
the back steps, your knees skinned
to the bone, knuckles wrapped by
the end of a butterknife. I try to
find the words to hold you but
I am as empty as they come.

The shards of green scattered
like Mary's beads across the
kitchen tile, the rubber fish in
the pan on the stove, discarded
bits in the carpet under the dining
table. I leave it there to hold you here.

There is only this.

Erik Tschekunow

On the Form That Requests the Inmate's Reentry Intentions

I want to write run
a pub, bottom
of the steepest
street, catch
the tripped-up
like a warm
pool, all fizzier
than a tippler's
wish, the empires
uncorked, the stars
plunged, drop in
an olive, the eye sinks
to unseemly things
give up waiting
for wasted
and repeat
relentlessly we've let
our loved ones
down like crystal
gavels, pass out
dice and boxes
of tissues, kneel
by night's end
at the bar rail
the reflection there
strained, indistinct

the person who'd hoped
so long for freedom.

Sage Ravenwood

What Happens in a Day

You can't have this day.
Even with the angry overcast sky.
 Torrential rain flooding streets,
 slipping down wide asphalt cracks.
Or the cat showing signs of
 fleas straddling high shelves
 room by room as if the floor is lava.
Little mites seeking warmth and blood,
before the cold sets in.
I'll keep the rescued eleven-year-old pup
 who eats as if it's her last meal and vomits.
Not every day, just today;
Like the surprised discovery of a wet hair ball
 beneath bare feet on the way to pee.
Outside, it's early Autumn and the grass still grows;
Refusing to let me bed the mower.
Third times the charm for an electrical outage.
Last upgrade they promised.
Liars. Everything is constantly changing.
You only get one chance at *this* day.
How long does it take anyway,
 before a freezer full of food begins
 to thaw,
 before you can feel?
I'm asking, how does the day find me
writing on the couch, feet up

as if the floor is lava?
Years away from broken windows
and bones or waiting for
the zipper to close on a body bag.
Dreaming of days like this.
Alive.

Julia Ruth Smith

A Quiet Looking Back

Lonely running, your breath trails bitter. A single egret bursts from the riverbank then settles further upstream, seeming to urge you on, saying 'not now, not yet,' but he's white as heavens and you know.

The smell of piss in train station toilets, your fear that it will cling to your skin and she'll smell it. Now she's sobbing into your clinical sheets. You've both come a long way.

The slow crawl of certain sofa afternoons that are both too long, then suddenly too short as she gets up to cook for hungry children and you want to shout, 'Stay with me!' You touch her fading warmth on cushions.

A swan hissing in a copper-coloured day trip haze while you run higgledy-piggledy, the picnic blanket flapping like a cape. You laugh and laugh back at the car, a family. No cares then home.

Lupines like slate purple steeples mourning the passing of your children on school days, voices giggling like church bells. If you stride, you can reach them but your breath catches.

The dog runs ahead to the bridge where frogs sing in spring. Left to the sea, right to farming. He hesitates, looks back with longing then sprints to the left, as you knew he would, as he always does.

The maw of morning as it swallows your fear and casts it into hedgerows that twitter their buttercup love of life, dawn unceasing, before you and certainly after. You understand now.

All the lore you told and were told, huddled against the world; sailors, kraken, bold women of old. Magic slips from starched white sheets, closes its door quietly but surely. You saw a shimmer late last night but it was rain, just rain falling. You go quickly. You make no fuss.

Sarina Bosco

Somnolence

The last of the snow melted over a week ago and when I go outside to give the yard and garden a once-over, I can see Will's knuckles sticking up out of the dirt. Curled under like the translucent Indian Pipe that ruptures out from the blankets of pine needles back in the woods.

When the snow went, it went so quickly that it carried a layer of dirt with it, and now things from seasons ago are exposed. The shovel, in two moldering pieces, laying near a sapling. A t-shirt that I took off on a humid day and forgot to retrieve. The wiry, dull husks of gypsy moth cocoons dappling a maple. And Will's knuckles.

I feel bad leaving him exposed like that but there's not much else I can do. It's still getting down into the twenties at night and the dirt is fractured into little frost heaves. Trying to kick it up now will just bruise my toes.

When Will first died, ten years ago this last February, we all carried him around for months. We were young and he was our first and none of us knew what to do or how to cope. It was both embarrassing and terrifying.

Most of the girls were dragging him around under the armpits those days, struggling but happy to have something to cry over and work at. I mimicked the boys instead and hauled him over my shoulder with his toes tapping the back of my thighs. He was surprisingly short, for being such a Casanova.

I used to bring him to work with me and prop him against tomato boxes. Sometimes the smell of bread proofing would spin me back to the morning he died in the ICU.

Who ever thinks they'll go that way? Bleeding from the stomach in a bowling alley parking lot. Who ever plans that?

It was so fresh that first year that I'd get mad and kick the mop bucket. But I never brought him home with me. Some sane part of me realized that having my dead friend hanging around while I napped or made lunch wasn't healthy.

Then last summer I saw him at a bonfire. They were tossing empties at his feet, laughing and making out. His pant leg caught fire and no one batted an eyelash. It's funny, the things you forget you carry with you, or take for granted.

I marched into the crowd, dragged him out, threw him in the back of the Honda, and drove home. But I couldn't bring him inside, so I buried him out back.

His knuckles are so pale.

It's all I can think about for the rest of the day. In the end I take the new shovel and dig him out.

I wake up at 4AM and his body is in the bed next to me, clad in that worn out t-shirt and the Carhartt jeans. Even the steel toed boots, fashionable back then because no one our age was doing any hard labor.

Will's chest is smaller than I remember it being. There was that summer when the girls in the group gathered on a tattered blanket at the town green and watched the boys play tug-of-war, shirtless. Their taunt muscles stirring something in us that was mortifying and delicious.

Now I glance over at his still body without moving and think of him more like a son. Maybe the son I'll have one day. I've been thinking about it a lot lately. There's an extra bedroom upstairs, and so many kids in the foster system. Of all the things I can do, I'm not sure my body will endure pregnancy and childbirth.

Is this what my son will look like? Maybe when he sleeps. Will's chest doesn't rise with breath. I let my wrist roll over limply and graze his forearm. The skin is cold and stiff and clammy at all once, and for a moment panic surges in me at the realization that I'm in bed with a dead body. It doesn't matter that I've been carrying him around for all of these years, literally slogging his ungiving flesh up against my own.

The first blush of dawn tinges the room gray. I stare at the ceiling until the panic ebbs and my own breathing slows to something close to somnolence.

The truth is, I never had the chance to be afraid of death because there wasn't a clear line where life ended and it began. None of us were given even a second to adjust to the sudden shift between burying hamsters in shoeboxes and burying friends we'd grown up with.

I wonder if I'll wake up with him in my bed again tomorrow.

When it's lighter out, I'll get up and take him back out to the garden, and maybe prop him up in one of those wrought iron chairs that are sitting under the cigar tree. But until then I'll let him stay. He isn't really here, after all, and I'm not sure if that makes me lonely or just alone.

Kaitlen Whitt

Calling Hours

My grandmother grew up
hatchet handed
beheading chickens.

She tells me when she sees
the shooter on the news
that she never plugged her ears.

His lines, ghost blurry
self-made reaper
anointed in our stars

sewn from our fear.
Walker Razors
to drown out the wailing.

But we hear it,
states away
tucked between mountains

pit in the peach
a familiar grief
sweeps the hollows

squats on the stripped knoll.
Coyotes mourn
the pine thickets.

Girls in the backpack village
scream at the moon.
Bitches counted

among our growing heap of dead.
We open the house,
invite in the dark

sleep swimming.
Our ears ring. To witness,
it's the very least we can do.

Zeynep Inanoglu

Hagar's Pilgrimage

Flush with seed,
my coveted belly rose
and emptied like a spring
I mothered with water, with
the sweetest relief watched our son
a marvelous creature
expand beyond
my self

Ibrahim, in your pupils
I was an animal
stunned by the image
of its own face
I was cattle, my milk
feral with blood
my pain, a private
wilderness

where you sent my son
and me to die: hollow
desert in which
no seed can rest
and one must heed
the sun's demands,
to wilt, sullen place
where my breasts

became withered hills
and I ran
on bleeding feet, on
skin as bleached
as bone

But God
has provided, has
looked upon my face,
held my meek voice
to his ear, as we named
our first son: *Ishmael*.

Debbie Graber

My Thesis

Hypothesis: Googling “Online Master’s degree programs in Psychology” can have life-changing consequences.

Preface: I’ve almost completed my Master’s degree in Psychology. This program has definitely been “super challenging.” (citation: Guam Online University YouTube infomercial).

Re: 2nd Hypothesis: I’m not sure what my thesis topic is exactly. But I have to turn in something, because finishing a thesis is mandatory in order to graduate.

“In answer to your question, Ms. Lowenstein—no, a candidate cannot receive a Master’s degree in Psychology without a properly vetted and filed thesis.” (citation: Email, Dr. Daniel Reggebrugge, thesis advisor).

I emailed Dr. Reggebrugge months ago that I was thinking about writing my thesis about love. He wrote back “LOL,” and it was not in a collegial way. He said love was “way too general” a topic and that I should narrow my focus to something I “could actually accomplish.” (citation: Email, Dr. Reggebrugge).

Additional Introduction: Love is the one thing that universally fascinates, regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, gender, gender preference, or whether one’s advisor deems it a worthy subject.

From my extensive clinical research, which includes supervised mock client therapy sessions (and unsupervised real sessions conducted at Starbucks), plus my own personal experiences as a human, I’ve formed a lot of ideas about love: I posit that love originates from the heart, not from the brain. Despite contradictory biological research that describes love as a relationship between emotions and neurotransmitters (or some other science type word?), I remain steadfast in my assessment. Others may disagree (citation: Attached emails from Dr. Reggebrugge).

Thesis Statement: Love is...hard to quantify?

PS: I believe theses are meant to foster honest debate with disagreeers. I'm trying my best to debate honestly, but my thesis advisor/main disagreeer is now resorting to unfriendly texts and certified letters to make his point.

"Your 'thesis' reads like the longwinded rant of an adolescent." (citation: Dr. Reggebrugge text).

Really? That's the best you got?

- I. Disagreeers are quick to shoot down out-of-the-box ideas. They refuse to admit that alternative concepts have merit, and are generally insufferable and mansplaining.
- II. "Your paper needs to be based on fact, not fantasy." (citation: Thesis check-in meeting with Dr. Reggebrugge).
- III. When it comes to love, disagreeers do not add anything new to the global conversation. It's a big globe out there and disagreeers don't get that. Some disagreeers wish to remain in their academic ivory tower with a frayed copy of *Wuthering Heights* and a thermos of bean and bacon soup to serve as their only context of the globe around them. (citation: Attached watercolor I painted of Dr. Reggebrugge as I imagine him in said ivory tower with said soup. Maybe I should have gone to art school instead.)
- IV. This thesis *will not* contain:
 - a. Spreadsheets
 - b. Graphs
 - c. Scientific Methodology
 - d. Tediousness

These things might be important if you want to impress a bunch of disagreeers, but they don't fly in today's marketplace. My "boots on the ground" research reveals that data alone doesn't engage: People are too busy online shopping or "binge watching 'Tiger King.'" (citation: "Alan," client #3, Starbucks session).

I am willing to appear "ill-suited for a degree of any sort," (citation: Email, Dr. Reggebrugge), if my personal experience will shed some light on the elusive nature of love.

- V. Despite the odds, I have faith that Dr. Reggebrugge will ultimately approve this thesis so that I can start my training hours and pay off my student loans.

- VI. This thesis *will* contain:
- a. Personal anecdotes.
 - i. Trigger warning: Some of these anecdotes may gross more sensitive people out. Please use caution when reading.
 - ii. If this thesis turns out as well as I think it will, Brad Pitt's production company might decide to option it and turn it into a high grossing feature that wins an Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay.
 - iii. How many Master's theses in Psychology ever created a media conglomerate bidding war that makes the front page of *Variety*? None. Until this one!
- VII. What do we love? I could start quoting here from Plato's Symposium, but that falls under tediousness, so I'm skipping it.
- VIII. We all love pretty much the same stuff. Example: We all most likely love our parents, even though they are jerks. Many of us are able to get over parental rejection eventually after years of therapy and listening to a bunch of TED talks. We don't let that kind of fissure in our souls get in the way of a sincere, last-ditch attempt at finishing a Master's degree. Hell no!
- a. "If you borrowed money from a bank, they wouldn't forgive your debt because you were busy trying to 'find yourself' doing God knows what." (citation: Argument with my mother).
 - b. My mother scrunched up her face, all irritated-like when I told her to stay out of my gummy stash. Her excuse? "I ran out of Coffee Nips." (citation: Same argument with my mother).
PS: Those gummies really help with my sensory processing disorder, and they aren't cheap.
 - c. Why do old people love hard candy?
 - d. My parents were horrified when I had to move back in with them due to financial hardship. (citation: Current student loan balance of \$78,050.64).
You think I was overjoyed?
- IX. 3rd Hypothesis: Every Beatles song ever written is about love. My sister Anne went through a Beatles phase back in the eighties when we were kids. She listened to the *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album on our turntable about twenty times a day for a year, so we all listened to it about

twenty times a day for a year. Headphones weren't invented yet, at least not in our house.

X. More things this thesis will *not* contain:

1. A history of the Beatles, although that would be fascinating. I would maybe discuss pursuing this new topic with Dr. Reggebrugge, but he's blocking my texts.

2. Firsthand interviews with the Beatles. I tweeted at Paul McCartney to see if he'd let me interview him for this thesis, but that's as far as it got. All the interesting Beatles are dead anyway.

3. My sister Anne is not dead, but she won't speak to me. "I won't engage with an insane person." (citation: text, Anne Lowenstein).

4. Sometimes I pretend Anne is dead so that I don't feel sad.

4A: Don't get me wrong, it is sad to believe that Anne is dead, but it's not the same kind of sadness I feel when I run into her at Costco and she looks right through me, as though I were a stranger.

4B: Yes, it's awkward on the few times a year that I have to see Anne at family functions, but I have been able to convince myself that the woman at Thanksgiving dinner is not actually Anne, but Anne's clone.

Wait; hold up—Anne has a clone?

Here's the story I came up with:

- a. Anne purchased a cloning machine from a mysterious doctor with a monocle that she met while waiting on line for an oil change.
- b. Mysterious Dr. X was leaving the country that very evening, never to return, and sold Anne the cloning machine for twenty-five dollars.
- c. Anne has poor impulse control and immediately cloned herself in the Jiffy Lube bathroom.
- d. Shortly thereafter, in a freak accident, the real Anne was crushed underneath her own car as it rolled off the car elevator at Jiffy Lube. Clone Anne found real Anne's purse on the ground, paid for the service and drove off in Anne's Land Rover while real Anne was stuck under the car. This is why no one, except for Clone Anne, ever knew Real Anne was dead. Although Dr. X might have known, because he can read minds.

- e. I try not to delve too much into the details because it makes my head hurt.
- f. Wouldn't a cloning machine be huge? How did Anne drag it into the ladies room without anyone noticing? And why was Dr. X getting an oil change if he was leaving the country?

5: Back to love: Most people love hearing news about old friends. I recently read an interview in the *New York Times* about my former boyfriend from high school. (citation: "A Latte with Josh McDougal – A Funny Guy Gets Serious," *New York Times*). I have written dozens of essays, epic poems, and a full-length screenplay (citation: "Puppies vs. Tyrannosaurus Rex Babies," WGA registry.) I slaved over these projects for years, but none of them ever found publication anywhere.

5A: I love getting rejection letters, especially this one: "This essay is incoherent. Consider taking a writing class before you submit anything else anywhere." (citation: Rejection email, *McSweeneys*). I love constructive criticism!

5B: Josh McDougal, my former boyfriend, is a Hollywood writer/director/producer. It's not all that surprising because he was a snarky, immature tool in high school. I guess that's all it takes to become a success in Hollywood. I wouldn't even want to be in the same room with him, but what do I know about success? I've never seen a Josh McDougal movie, but I'll bet they are two hours of snarky, jerky, immature fun. I bet they are the kind of movies that encourage the global marketplace to stuff more popcorn into their faces.

6: Everyone loves popcorn, unless you're one of the 2% of people worldwide who is allergic. (citation: WebMD). Popcorn makes me blow up like a tick!

5C: Josh is supposedly happily married to Jennifer Gottlieb, his high school sweetheart. I would hardly call Josh and Jennifer high school sweethearts. I got a good chuckle out of that one. Jennifer played Adelaide in *Guys and Dolls*, among other starring roles in our high school musicals. She also made news our senior year when she and Josh were caught sixty-nining in the natatorium showers during a swim meet.

7: I love it when the *New York Times* cowtows to a jerky Hollywood type by not fact checking the statement that his "high school sweetheart" was really his "fuckbuddy."

5D: Jennifer Gottlieb wasn't the best singer, but she had a generally obnoxious manner that some mistook for vivaciousness. This made her a natural choice for the part of Maria in *The Sound of Music*.

5E. I'm being sarcastic here.

5F. I studied voice at Harand Performing Arts Camp in Wisconsin for twelve summers, and was awarded "Most Improved Tone" my last summer there. I also was chosen to sing the "Lullaby of Birdland" solo that summer for our big concert, but was sidelined due to cramps.

5G. Everyone who saw my high school *Sound of Music* audition said that I should have gotten the lead, instead of the part of non-singing Nun #4. Dr. Lamble, our choir director, told me that he preferred Jennifer's "charisma" to my "stiff competency."

5H. I love getting that kind of feedback! As a confused teen desperate for approval, it made quite an impression.

5I. Sadly, Dr. Lamble is no longer with us, but his untimely demise from a brain aneurism has allowed me some well-deserved closure. (citation: "Passing of Beloved Choir Director," Glenview Announcements).

4g. Maybe Dr. X's cloning machine is small, like a garage door opener. You push the button and bam! You've been cloned!

8: There was so much more to love in that Josh McDougal interview: I loved reading that Jennifer and Josh live in a beautiful Spanish-style home that appraises between 9.1-9.7 million. (citation: Realtor.com). I loved finding out that they have two adorable children who are being raised to be bilingual by two nannies, one from Kyrgyzstan and one from Guatemala. I loved reading that they employ several personal assistants who used to be child soldiers in Sierra Leone. (citation: "Funny Guy Gets Serious," *blah blah blah*). Hearing about the success of others makes me want to try even harder to succeed, even though I'm pretty sure that it is not humanly possible to try any harder than I already have.

8A. When a prestigious online academic institution sends you a certified letter, suggesting that you consider withdrawing from their Psychology program due to their "growing concern about your mental state," (citation: Letter from Guam Online University ombudswoman), success can sure feel out of reach.

9: One afternoon before becoming famous, Josh McDougal found himself sitting next to Martin Scorsese on the 7 train to Flushing, Queens. Josh handed Mr. Scorsese his first screenplay, which he had the foresight to carry around with him at all times. Scorsese read it, loved it and

subsequently produced the movie—the rest is history. (citation: *NYT* puff piece)

9A: I've ridden the subway hundreds of times, and rarely sat next to someone clean, let alone someone famous.

10. I love it when famous film directors inexplicably ride public transportation (to Flushing, no less!) and then offer up billion dollar chances to snarky jerks that don't deserve it. Talk about good luck.

10A: A discussion of luck: Even though I am a graduate student of this academic institution, at least I think I still am, I did not get here due to luck—no, far from it. While still employed in the corporate sector, I was rejected three times from other programs before finally getting accepted. (citation: "Accreditation in USA finally for Guam Online University," *Pacific News*).

11: I love trying really hard to attain a goal and getting knocked down a bunch of times along the way due to, among other things, cramps and a sensory processing disorder.

11A: Gummies help with both of these issues.

12: I love how psychic pain inspires courage. I love being at an extremely low point mentally, physically and spiritually.

12A. I love having to dig deep to find new reasons to get out of bed in the morning. Now that kind of torment inspires real creative thinking.

12B: I'm kidding, who would actually love all that?

4th Hypothesis: I just thought of this—love and hate are inextricably linked—one is the opposite of the other, but often they can often feel in the body like the same thing.

13: Personal anecdote #1: I can love the way I feel after six beers and three cigarettes shared with co-workers at Happy Hour, but then I hate the way I feel four hours later when I am lying in bed, trying to quiet the caravan that has set up camp in my intestines. I also hate remembering that I may have drunkenly insulted my boss by calling her a "micromanaging lush."

13A: Personal anecdote #2: I hate that my now ex-boss informed me that my services were no longer needed. I loved the freedom I experienced as the security guards escorted me from the building, but hated the fact that I would no longer receive a paycheck and health benefits.

13B: Personal anecdote #3: I hate that I had to move in with my parents since I lost my job. I hate that my parents are forcing me to complete my Master's degree or "deal with the consequences." (citation: *Intervention with Mom, Dad and Anne's Clone*.)

13C: Personal anecdote #4: I hate that my mother started attending Al-Anon meetings in order to learn how not to enable me.

13D: Personal anecdote #5: I hate that I now sleep in the same bedroom I slept in as a kid. It's even got the same bedspread from 1985 because my parents refuse to buy a new Bed in a Bag set from Target. Every night as I drift off to sleep in my old twin bed, I am surrounded by my childhood things—the flamenco dancer doll my grandparents brought back from a trip to Puerto Vallarta, the jewelry box with a ballerina inside pirouetting en pointe—and I feel as though I am still ten years old, despite my mightiest efforts to grow up.

13E: Personal anecdote #6: I hate that I no longer have a lifetime of mistakes to make. That I no longer have the world spread out before me, like a buffet to be gorged upon. I hate that I have spent years dithering about what to eat for dinner and what to wear to work when what I should have been doing is asking myself, “What do I love? What is my passion? What am I going to do with my life before it's too late?”

13F: Personal anecdote #7: I hate that my parents are aging and that sometime in the not-so-distant future, they will die and Anne's Clone and I will be orphans.

13G: Personal anecdote #8: I hate that one day, I too will also die, and what will have been the point? What will I be able to count among my accomplishments?

Accomplishments:

1. Almost finishing a Master's degree in Psychology.
2. Blowing Josh McDougal in our high school parking lot.
3. Stealing Anne's *Sgt. Pepper's* album, her Neil Diamond posters and various mixtapes out of her dresser and burying them in the backyard.

13H: What do I know about love? Can I honestly say that Josh McDougal was my high school sweetheart? Does one blowjob in the parking lot count? If not, why not?

14. “All you need is love, buh buh buh buh buh, all you need is love, everybody, all you need is love, love...love is all you need.” (citation: Everyone knows that song.)

1. You are never going to believe this.
2. I'm starting over with the numbering because this thesis is going in a bold new direction.

Exhibit 2A: transcript of a phone call between me and Yasmin Sakharan, Human Resources, Guam Online University:

JL: (that's me) Hello?

YS: Is this Jacqueline Lowenstein?

Me: Yes, this is Jacki. I go by Jacki. Who is this? How did you get this number? (I'll skip to the good part):

YS: I am calling to notify you that Dr. Reggebrugge has been let go from GOU.

JL: Dr. Reggebrugge got fired?

YS: His contract was terminated, effective immediately.

JL: No freaking way! What happened?

YS: I'm afraid I can't go into the details. Suffice it to say that his academic practices and behaviors were not in keeping with GOU standards.

JL: Some other students besides me must have complained! He wasn't vey nice, if you must know. But I guess you do know because I emailed HR about him like ten times. Plus, he's been fired, so the cat's really out of the bag now!

YS: (long pause) I've been tasked with calling Dr. Reggebrugge's advisees to let them know what's going on.

JL: So who's going to advise me?

YS: We're in the process of figuring that out, but it may take a while. GOU has been short Psychology professors for quite some time, and this unexpected development pushes the future of the department into further question. Our existing professors just don't have the bandwidth, and so we're taking the unprecedented step of allowing all matriculating Psychology students to file his/her/their thesis whenever he/she/they feel it's ready.

JL: You mean no one has to approve it first?

YS: Short answer—no.

JL: No as in no one needs to look at it.

YS: Correct.

JL: I can just file it.

YS: Correct.

JL: You aren't shitting me?

YS: No.

JL: And once it's filed, I'll graduate? Provided all the other coursework is done?

YS: As I mentioned, Dr. Reggebrugge's departure has thrown a wrench into the

works.

JL: I would say so.

3. We chatted a bit more, but it was like getting blood from a stone, so I hung up.

3a. Why do HR people play things so close to the vest?

3b. Who cares? I'm gonna graduate!

3c. Dr. Reggebrugge getting fired is the best thing that's ever happened to me!

The delicious irony! It's even better than when Dr. Lamble bit the big one! (citation: Glenview Announcements obit).

3d. Spellcheck this motherfucker and put a fork in it!

Addendum:

- After I told my parents that it looks like I'm going to graduate after all, they were legitimately happy. Mom even hugged me.
- I posted my thesis on FB, and it got 34 likes!
- Anne's clone messaged me from out of the blue to say she read my thesis on FB and got a good laugh at the part about mom's fetish for Coffee Nips. (Wow, talk about selective reading! What about me burying her tapes in the backyard? And that I think she's a clone?)
- Now that I've graduated, I need to figure out how to get my training hours and then put together a lucrative counseling practice. There's got to be some kind of app for that, right?

Conclusion:

After the euphoria of graduating wore off, I started to wonder what had happened to Dr. Reggebrugge. So I did what any normal person would do—I trolled him on LinkedIn. And Instagram. You might wonder why I never looked for Dr. Reggebrugge on social media before. At that time, I had no interest in him as a person. I saw him as another hoop I had to jump through. Well, it turns out that Dr. Reggebrugge lives in Oak Brook, Illinois. He's married with two sons and what appears to be a corgi. And he's looking for work, as an adjunct professor or an educational consultant. He's also a Reiki healer.

It was strange seeing a photo of Dr. Reggebrugge wearing a Santa hat in front of a mantle with his family at Christmas. How was this person who seemed so normal the

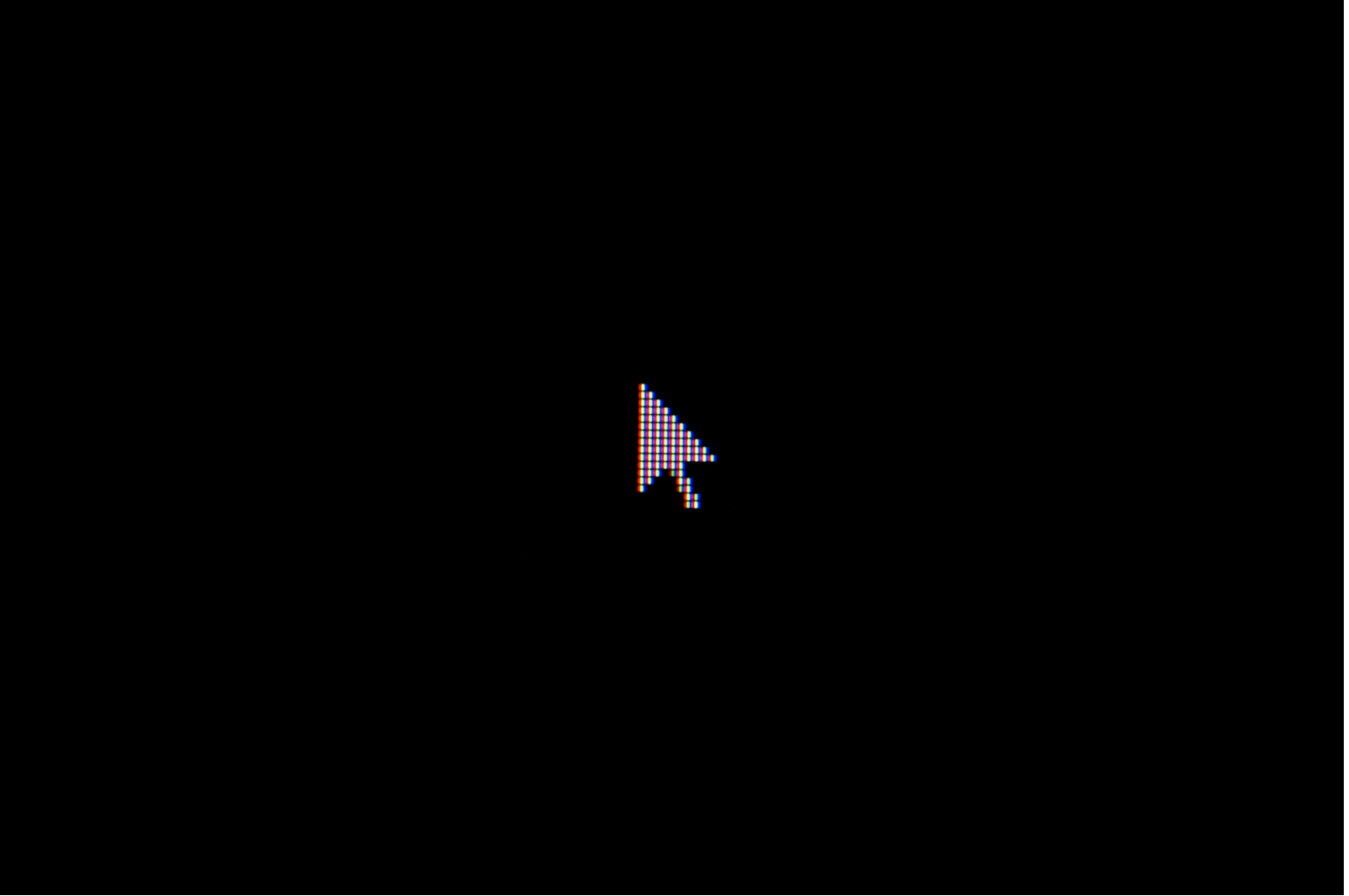
same person who tossed around fancy Psychology terms and mocked my ideas, like he was some kind of expert. Maybe the point is that while I don't exactly love Dr. Reggebrugge, I don't hate him either. He was only trying to do his job. Which he sucked at, but still.

Hypothesis: Reconciling love and hate are vital if one wants to move forward. Holding onto grudges only hurts the grudger, not the grudgee. (citation: Message I left on Clone Anne's cell phone). (Citation: DM to Dr. Reggebrugge on LinkedIn).

Why do I keep citing sources even though my thesis is finished? Everyone needs a new project. You know what they say, when one door closes, another one opens.

Another hypothesis: The Failure of Online Universities to offer Real World Advice to their Students has Real Time Consequences.

Now that's interesting. I could really be on to something with that.



Lily Damron

Great Thing Dying, Living On

Acer saccharinum has several names. Its epithet, *saccharinum*, refers to the tree's sweet sap that can be turned into syrup. It's also *silver maple* or *silverleaf*, since the pale green undersides of its foliage seem to shimmer silver in the sun. Or *river maple*, for its preferred habitat, or *softwood* because its lumber is brittle. Silver maples are prodigious growers, gaining up to three feet per year. They grow tall and broad until their weak branches can't hold the weight anymore, and then they die.

Two hundred and eleven years ago, a samara spiraled through muggy air to marshy ground and took root on the floodplain of a small river. It joined thousands of other winged seeds that whorled with their paper helicopter blades and came to rest in the undergrowth of untouched forest. The miry river had been called 'Blue Water Creek' by a few explorers who came and went, and the ground the new maple took root in was legally a frontier called the Louisiana Territory. The tree grew regardless.

A thousand miles away, the eighteen United States declared war on Britain in their second war for independence. The seedling pushed its way through brush at a tremendous two feet per year, outstripping neighboring trees in their race toward the sun. Its smooth sapling bark grew rough, and it began producing seeds. All while colonial wars for independence were fought and Napoleon was defeated. It reached thirty, forty feet as settlers on the Oregon, Santa Fe, and California trails crossed the newly named Blue River up and downstream from where it was rooted. Beethoven died, aluminum was isolated, and the internal combustion engine was invented.

The tree grew wider, established three main shoots from its squat trunk. There were more revolutions, civil wars, famines, inquisitions, depressions, and literary movements while its bi-colored leaves turned red and brown and fell in the thousands to the ground. Other trees grew and died, adding their mass to the riverbed while the

banks eroded and shifted. Squirrels, ducks, and eagles nested in its branches while deer laid nearby, blips in the shadow of its memory.

By 1912 the cardboard box, the radio, the automobile, and aspirin had been invented. The Eiffel Tower was built, and the last Emperor of China assumed the throne. As the Titanic sank, the maple's great boughs were thick as full-grown trees, clothed with twining bark, and the massive trunk was nine feet around.

Acer saccharinum, as a species, became popular in new towns and on the frontier as the United States spread west. Its popularity continued through the mid twentieth century, as its hardiness and growth rate made it an ideal shade solution. Today, *Acer saccharinum* is one of the most common trees in the eastern United States, yet many advise against its planting. It has gained infamy for growing larger than anticipated and, in its old age, dropping limbs on houses. Its many, abnormally large samaras also clog gutters and its shallow root system can disturb gas lines and sidewalks.

In the following years, another centenarian tree grew just ten feet away, listing at a forty-five-degree angle to get sun from beneath the tree's bulk. The area around the two trees became farmland, then a rural town, and finally was developed as suburbs—as world wars and economic depressions came and went. The population of the world reached two billion, the first commercial flight took off, and the first Superman comic was published. By the middle of the twentieth century, sounds of cars and train whistles could be heard near where the trees stood. It stood while historic floods swept over, putting fields and houses underwater, floating grown trees downriver.

The maple's topmost branches hung over a hundred feet over the water below. The soft river-ground around it began to sink under its weight. It passed its species life expectancy by twenty years.

As the Cold War escalated and the mobile phone was invented, the tree had its first encounters with modern America and came to sit on the property of a house, where the owners cut away the underbrush to find it and its neighbor. The Berlin Wall fell, the USSR dissolved, and Information Age began.

For the first time, someone could properly marvel at the tree's girth and height, and it was crowned 'King Tree.' Children piled logs against its side, tied a climbing rope to a branch, and pulled themselves to the first split in the trunk—seven feet above the ground. Two could sit ensconced in the hollow of the split, another could perch between two boughs. They craned their necks against the rough, wall-like expanse of its heavy boughs to watch the branches of the crown move in the wind. The rope frayed and fell

and the children grew. Their whole lifespan, ten or fifteen years against two centuries. The tree had been old when they found it and was just as old when they left.

The Twin Towers fell, and the tree's neighbor splintered and died and dropped its limbs into the river, leaving nothing but its slanted, limbless trunk. The tree itself lost a fifteen-foot-long limb in the rainy season, which fell so it speared the malleable ground as a bare obelisk, a stillborn sapling of its own. The owners of the property used it for firewood.

Eight more years passed, with heavy floods and frigid winters. The bank eroded so the tree was a mere five feet from the edge. With each winter more branches broke, their brittle wood too weak to hold their icy weight. As Apple was founded, social media was born, and the global financial crisis hit, the tree's trunk attained a striking eighteen feet around. Up to the fork it was wide as it was tall, so surrounded by vastly slimmer walnuts whose own forks disappeared into the canopy, the maple looked like a primeval relic. Within a hole in the largest bough, two vultures raised a clutch.

Acer saccharinum has no defenses against rot once it loses a major limb. Even though it is highly resistant to disease and insect damage, reproduces quickly, and grows fast; once it gets big enough, it cracks under its own weight and rots. Tree-care experts recommend careful pruning to avoid these problems.

The tree was now eighty-three years past its species lifespan.

The branch the vultures roosted in, large as the dead partner's mushroom-laden trunk, broke above the vultures' hole and fell half into the riverbank. It tilted up so a person, or bird, could climb atop it and see the babies inside grow and lose their downy white feathers. They raised their fledgling wings at whoever came within eyesight, hissing like death. Months later, as the world shut down in a pandemic, racial protests broke out, and historic wildfires filled skies around the world with smoke, they climbed atop the jagged edge of the branch vestige to practice flapping their dark wings and flew away.

The bough the vultures made their home had been half as wide as the tree itself and was directly attached to the trunk, so now an obvious stub jutted out under the canopy. The lack of cover revealed half a dozen smaller pieces like it.

One cloudy morning in the tree's two-hundred-and-eighth year, while the air tasted like storms and mildew, a person turned to consider it. She imagined being very large and ancient, so a person might seem like a squirrel, stopping to size her up before darting away to find nuts.

Against the sound of the brown and bloated river, she considered the bared heartwood of the branches and the naked twigs. She felt the tree's hoary bark as she measured a length of twine around its trunk, listened to tailwinds in its winking silver leaves, smelled perfumed rain dripping off it.

She was in the presence of a great thing dying.

The person thought about herself in comparison to the tree, how small ants seemed to human eyes. She thought about how New York was twenty-three times older than her, and how Rome was seven times older than New York, and how billion-year-old stars just exhale off their atmospheres and shrivel.

The tree budded in the spring, as it had for the rest of its two-hundred-year life. Its lopsided bulk shaded wildflowers on the riverbank with the silhouette of a broken crown.

Sophie Fetokaki

§

§ 1.1

For some reason the way of telling has become very important to me. If I want to tell what is happening now, I must find a way. I cannot tell without a way. The trees do not tell me now. I cannot hear their way of telling. My mother could not tell, still cannot tell. The work of telling is hard, and slow.

§ 1.2

There was a timeline that opened up, we stood and faced it. What they tell is correct, it was as if a veil had been lifted. My mother saw that world in sepia. She draws it sometimes. I walk in step with a shadow of myself, one who, after the funeral, looks at everything in this house as a trace of her.

§ 1.3

I want to tell everything I know. I can be of use, I can find ways out of tunnels. This is what I am good at, what all my labours have been dedicated to. Now I cannot tell what I know, I keep it to myself, I save it for later. I recoil, like a flower that feels the heaviness of the air before rain.

§ 1.4

To tell of love without telling of resentment is a sham. And resentment builds in the not telling. To tell a life's worth of resentment is a herculean labour. That great, dark mass was also unveiled. I stood at its opening, nodding. Cared for the lips that parted in rage and helplessness.

§ 1.5

We should not need the lick of death to find the courage to tell and to hear the way of telling. The problem (as always) is time.

§ 1.6

Suddenly, my sense of time changed. All the pieces of my life were gathered, held together, shaken, and cast again. I try to read the story they tell, to divine something useful from the pattern of their falling.

§ 1.7

I take in the washing. We do a lot of washing. Even though it is October it is warm and sunny, and the clothes dry quickly. Washing tells a lot about time, and our extension in it. I take my time in the short walk from the washing line to the house, resting the lip of the laundry basket on my hip.

§ 1.8

I water the scallions I planted as an act of consolation just under two weeks ago. They are sprouting now, among the leafless pillars of last season's lettuce, telling their quiet stories of necessity, causality, time.

§ 1.9

I am in a bind. I mourn the grief I almost felt, but did not feel, and it is impossible to tell of something one has never felt. In order to bear the weight of the not-telling I pick the greenest figs and drink my coffee from the bluest cup.

§ 1.10

The waves rise in my dreams again, this time immeasurably high and telling of total destruction. But they are slow, so that I and a few nameless others have time to discuss what we will do. We decide to go under. We assume that, sooner or later, we will come out the other side.

§ 1.11

We tell through baking now. The flour speaks for us. The cinnamon powder, the groundnut oil, and the fresh cheese speak for us. My shadow is there too, as always, reading the traces in the twenty-year-old recipe book. Stains, notes, dog-ears, post-its. Testaments to what will be gone.

§ 1.12

Remembering how to tell is healing me. The telling comes sporadically in small, fully

formed thoughts: *The wave of grief that rose in me became a wave of hope that in surviving she might be reborn.* I write down these thoughts, to not forget.

§ 1.13

I listen to Nuka Alice tell of the celebrations of Ullukinneq, the winter solstice. She tells how her Greenlandic ancestors placed a bucket of water on the ground so that they would know, by the spilling of the water, that the earth was trembling with the rising of the new sun.

§ 1.14

I think of the love of what is scarce. Even as we now come closest to the light, its warmth is distant. We tilt away, and our days are dark and cool. So we sing, and light fires, and tell stories, and yearn for what is distant to bestow on us once again the warmth of its closeness.

§ 1.15

I drive to the sea. It is fraught from the beginning. I get lost, but I give in to the loss, taking dirt roads along fields of squash and freshly sprouted hay. Finally I arrive at the rolling shore and my solitary walk is interrupted by a prying man. I tell him to leave me alone, but then I am the one who leaves.

§ 1.16

In the car on the way home the stupor lifts for a while and the waves of grief strike with their unpredictable timing. The grief tells of an ever-renewable hope. Of a longing whose fervour belies the perpetual absence of what is longed for. It tells of the knowledge that not even death can wake her.

§ 2.1

I remember that my mother left this world and then returned. I remember that she needed a ventilator to breathe. I remember I bought her handmade pasta and truffle pesto at the airport in Rome, so she would stay alive long enough to receive my gift. I remember trying to bargain with the gods. *I know you must take her, but not now, not before I get there.* I remember the terror of what I so very nearly experienced. My mother's sudden and unforeseen death, in my absence. I remember that, since then, I cannot shake the sense that this life is nothing but a parenthesis. I have been granted a reprieve, which comes with the knowledge that it will not last. Now I wait, for her death, and mine. Wait in a kind of unspent grief.

§ 2.2

I am in between Mother-grief and mother-recognition. Holding my breath in the ocean of the Mother I didn't have, not coming up to the surface to see the mother I do have.

§ 2.3

Remember, when you saw her hands in the folded laundry, and thought *these are the hands of the only mother I will ever know*. And you cried. And she said, *have you been having a hard time?* And you nodded, but she didn't ask anything else. And you imagined what it would be like to talk to your mother without feeling that stone-heavy resistance weighing down your body and soul.

§ 2.4

I bought you a gift of food you like to bind you to life. And you lived. Now the jar of pesto and packet of fileja sit in the glass cabinet in the living room. They carry the trace of a bargain with death. We don't eat them. They just sit there, reminding us.

§ 2.5

For a while after the heart attack, we said *I love you* again. Those words I remember from long ago. The three of us traumatised, wounded siblings, standing in the sudden light of love. A dawn of almost-death, the frailty of what gave us life. *I love you*, meaning, *I am your flesh*.

§ 2.6

How do I make time start up again? How do I unfreeze all that stopped then, those words that cling to the left side of the page, will not move over, refuse to extend themselves?

§ 2.7

If you are 67 forever, what will become of me, in the meantime?

§ 2.8

Is this why I have tried to put a stop to so many things? Is it because I want to contain the death? What died in me, that I must revive?

§ 3.1

Have you ever seen a field of artichokes? It is the most surprising thing. The artichoke flower is a symbol of wisdom hard-won. A field of thistles is what you meet at the end of the land.

The Greek name for artichoke is ακινάρα.

Ankinára.

It is named after the goddess Cynara, turned into an artichoke by Zeus as punishment for leaving Olympus too often to visit her mother.

About 100 metres from my field of artichokes is the church of Saint Leontius the miracle-worker. It is tucked away at the southern edge of a small village. It wears its placeness like a thin veil and its placelessness too. There are old graves in the graveyard of the church of St. Leontius. Women who died in 1978 at the age of 86. Women with names like Mirianthi, meaning *a myriad of flowers*. Their surnames are derived andronymically, ending in the genitive case, the case of ownership. In the small oval portraits mounted on memorial crosses the men all have moustaches and the women wear headscarves.

The grave markers and the bell tower all neatly face east. For a while I sit in on their meeting. All the bottomless somethings become, for a moment, nothing.

Nothing at all.

Twice I try to leave, and can't. On the third try, I turn southwards from that place, past the grass lined with newly bloomed poppies, and on to the artichoke fields, the haybales and the sea.

Annie Marhefka

How to make friends

There are two mothers watching the entrance when the little girls disappear into the hay maze. There are two mothers with sleeping babies strapped to their chests, phones slipped into back pockets, spit-up stains on their blouses. One mother has her hair in a ponytail. The other left her hair down. They have met, once or twice; their daughters became friends at summer camp. The mothers don't even know how it came to be that they are friends, as the girls are only three years old, and they share bits of their summer camp experience in snippets: *Molly wore an Elsa dress today. Jax got in trouble. Someone made me cry.*

The mothers are here, at the hay maze, trying to form a friendship, because of the girls. Otherwise, they would not have met.

The hay maze is a tough place to watch a child, because you only watch them disappear. The hay bales are stacked tall for an adult's height, five or six feet maybe. The sightlines don't allow for the tops of children's heads to be visible. The mothers don't discuss it, but one moves to the left side of the maze, and the other to the right, so both exits are covered. They can't chat from this distance apart, stationed at their hay maze corners, but they toss each other smiles and coo at the babies strapped to their chests, and this is enough.

For a while, it feels relieving to tend to one child when she normally tends to two. One is safe, swaddled against her torso, soft cheek squished against a breast that teems with milk. The mother rocks her hips side to side, keeping the baby asleep with her movements. The other child is safe inside the hay maze.

The muffled giggles and rustling of hay are soothing sounds, almost as quiet as a sunrise before the babies wake. Farther out, there are joyful noises: a boy squealing as he whooshes down a slide, a girl laughing as she admires her glittery butterfly face paint in a hand-held mirror, a vendor hawking kettle corn and cotton candy, pink or blue. The hum of a food truck's generator. It is not quiet, no, but it feels quiet to the mothers.

It has been some time since the daughters disappeared into the maze. The mothers start to fidget. One drums her fingers against the baby's bottom, an anxious ticking of the seconds. The other checks the time on her phone, tries to recall what time the girls entered the maze, checks her phone clock again. The mothers smile at each other, shrug their shoulders as if to say, *It's too soon to panic. Right?*

More minutes slip away, and the mothers start to think the girls are lost inside the hay maze. One mother offers, *I can go walk through and find them?* The other nods, too eagerly, and says, *I'll wait here and watch.* One mother steadies herself against walls of hay with her hands, trying not to wake the baby with a scratch of hay against the infant's leg, trying to cover each turn, each dead end. The other mother waits, eyes darting between maze exits. When one mother emerges without the girls, they switch. The other mother searches, tracing the same path or a different one. You can't tell once you're inside. It all blends to hay.

The mothers don't remember how many times they searched, switched places, searched again, before they start screaming for help.

The farm staff have a viewing platform above the maze, where they can help a maze-goer if they get stuck. A farmworker gets a description of the girls from the mothers, races up to the platform and searches. He shouts down to the mothers, shaking his head: *The maze is empty.* The farm is not quiet now. It is a roar.

The other families visiting the farm hear the descriptions of the girls and try to match them with children they can see: *Pigtails, blonde, purple dress, rainbow leggings.* The other mothers grab their children's hands, whisper: *Don't leave Mommy's side.* The farm staff press buttons on their walkie-talkies, order someone to stand at the gates, instruct them to make sure no children leave alone or against their will. Someone chirps over the radio, *What does against their will look like?* The walkie-talkies squawk with updates.

No one can hear the hay rustling now.

The mothers aren't sure where to stand. Should they run around the farm, race to the road, look for a fleeing car? Should they walk with the farm staff or listen to the play-by-play of the missing girls dialogue on the walkie-talkies? Should they stay by the maze, in case the girls come back to the place where they left their mothers?

The mothers think: *How could I have missed her escaping? Did I look away too long? Did I close my eyes? Did I let myself relax?* They feel responsible. They whisper, *I'm sorry.* One mother grabs the other mother's hand. They squeeze. Each thinks the other's hand feels softer, calmer, than her own. But something feels off, scratchy. They look down and discover a piece of hay between their hands. Neither mother lets go.

Inside the maze, beneath one very sturdy wall of hay, a small, compact hole has been dug by two pairs of toddler hands. The hay has been parted left and right, torn from its

molded block and softened to form a crevice just large enough for two petite three-year-old girls. They are wedged into the hay wall, huddled together, giggling. Their nook is so low to the ground that it can't be seen by a mother peering over a baby strapped to her chest; it is so tucked away under a mess of hay that a farm worker can't spot a purple skirt from the viewing platform above. One girl holds a sweaty palmful of hay with a gleeful grin; the other girl balls her fists in excitement. They lace their fingers together and press against each other, against the hay.

And this is it, this is the moment. It is two girls holding hands while the world swarms around them. It is two mothers, mothering. The world swarms and all they know is the sensation they hold in each other's palms. They know it is the same.

Elliott Gish

Nestling

They called a curfew in Laherty after Rufus Orville got snatched. By 6 PM, all the kids in the neighborhood had to be inside. That damn near killed us, since it was summer. We'd watch the blazing sun from the shadows of our bedrooms, thinking of all the fun we could be having out in it, and stew.

No one had seen it happen, exactly. Janine Pritchard remembered a black car coming slowly down the road, almost idling in its languor. Henry Keener said he heard a whistling noise, low and soft, like someone calling to a wary dog. May Anne Hornaday told us all that she'd seen Rufus that day, walking down the sidewalk with a piece of chalk in his hand, his wide eyes narrowed as though staring into the distance at someone he could not quite place. When we questioned her about the chalk, she said that he had been drawing a hopscotch grid on the ground and jumping it by himself, one forlorn square at a time.

May Anne was a liar by habit, but her story had the ring of truth—Rufus was exactly the kind of boy who would draw a hopscotch grid just to play by himself. And sure enough, when we walked by the Orville house, there were traces of blue chalk still on the sidewalk, not quite washed away from the rain that fell the night Rufus was taken.

The Orvilles were a wreck. Mrs. Orville couldn't stop crying. Mr. Orville couldn't stop drinking. Gregory, the older son, walked around with big empty zeros for eyes, looking past us when we passed on the street.

They thought he was dead. We all did. What else was there to think as the days went by?

Kids being kids, that didn't stop us from resenting Rufus. He'd ruined our summer, taken away the freedom that started at sunrise and only disappeared when the streetlights came on, all because he'd been dumb enough to get himself snatched. That was how we thought of it: that it was something he had done, somehow, to himself, something for which he was to blame. None of us would ever get taken by some stranger

on the street. We were too quick, too canny, too sharp. Rufus disappeared, we all concurred, because he was soft and pliant, easy to fool, easy to scare. Kids like him were mice to the cats that prowled the streets, the ones we learned about in stilted, solemn assemblies about stranger danger. The world was full of horrors, and if you could not dodge them, you were dead. Rufus's disappearance was, by our own sideways logic, his own fault.

Which was all well and good until he came back.

He came back on a Wednesday morning, when most of us were still asleep. Old Mrs. Eaton, a habitual early riser who lived at the far edge of town, was on her porch with her first cigarette of the day and saw him emerge from the woods, his clothes splattered with mud, leaves stuck in his curly hair. It took her a moment to recognize him, and by the time she squared up the face of the wild child emerging from the woods with the one she'd seen on posters, he was well down the road, walking in the direction of his house. She called after him, and then, when he did not stop or turn around, called the police.

"His eyes," Mrs. Eaton said later, shaking her head. Her hands were shaking, too. "That boy's eyes were empty. Like something'd reached inside him and scooped everything out."

She said this to anyone who would listen. It lost its edge for us after the first few repetitions.

The police caught up with him on Lehane Road. Josh Ahern's dad was a cop and heard about what happened from someone at work. They pulled over behind Rufus as he made his straggling way along the shoulder of the road, limping slightly, and ushered him into the squad car. He didn't resist, didn't even react much. One of the officers kept trying to make eye contact with him through the rearview mirror, but Rufus would not meet his gaze. He seemed to be looking at something else, something far away. Shivers wracked his little body so that he trembled constantly. Somehow this had the effect of making him look less vulnerable, more adult, although it should have been the opposite.

At the station, the Orvilles were called, and Rufus was given a blanket and a cup of watery hot chocolate. Only then did an officer sit down with him and start asking questions.

None of us kids were supposed to know about the interrogation, of course, but in a town like Laherty, everybody knows everything. So we knew that for a long while Rufus was silent, sipping his hot chocolate with the grim and weary air of a man in the middle of an overnight shift. We knew that the officer with him grew increasingly frustrated, his voice becoming less and less gentle as time went on. We knew what questions were asked. Who had been driving the black car, Rufus? What did they say to you when they stopped? Where did they take you? Where have you been?

That question Rufus reacted to with a few slow blinks. He looked at the officer as though seeing him for the first time, his eyes hooded and unreadable, his expression showing little besides exhaustion.

He said, "I've been in the woods."

His voice was lower than it had been, lower than a boy's should be, and hoarse, as though he'd spent the last seven days screaming.

That was when the Orvilles showed up, loud and tearful and insistent, and fought their way into the room where Rufus was being kept. Kept, not held. Mrs. Orville clutched him to her chest and wept. Mr. Orville stood a few feet away, one hand stretched out towards his son, his fingers not quite touching his shoulder. Gregory kept well back, crowded into a corner of the room, watching his brother with eyes that did not quite trust what they saw.

LOCAL BOY RETURNS, screamed the front page of the paper the next day. There was a picture of Rufus being carried out of the station by Mrs. Orville, hoisted in her arms like a child half his age and weight. Her face was drawn, the toll of the previous week easy to see. His was blank.

We all read the article, although most of us were not allowed to. It said little that we did not already know. Rufus had disappeared at approximately 7:30 PM on a Tuesday. He reappeared at 5:45 AM the following Wednesday. His whereabouts during his time away were unknown. "The child seemed disoriented and exhausted," the article stated. "No current information about his abductor or abductors is available."

The article went on to say that the curfew had been lifted, but advised parents to keep a close eye on their children and avoid letting us play outside after dark. Some parents listened to this advice for a week or two. After that, most of them forgot. It hadn't happened to their kids, after all.

There were no articles after that first one, not even to talk about the hunt for the black car that had taken Rufus away. We knew, because we looked.

We saw Rufus only in glimpses for the rest of the summer. He and his family showed up sporadically to church, crowding as a single unit into the pew closest to the back door. He would emerge from his house sometimes to sit in his back yard, sitting motionless on the swing set, looking over the roof at something we could not see. Once Carrie Bian was bold enough to go to the Orville house and ring the bell, only to lose her nerve at the last minute and flee before the door opened. When she reached the end of the street, she looked over her shoulder and saw the curtains in the window moving slightly, as though someone were looking back at her.

Some of us understood what usually happened to kids who got snatched. We watched enough television without adult supervision to know. Some of us didn't at first,

but learned quickly enough from the sentences our parents never finished, the things that other children would say in whispers. Bad things happened to people who were taken. Things so bad we could hardly understand them at all.

None of us had ever really been friends with Rufus, but after his return, we stayed further away than we had before. When we caught a glimpse of him trailing uncertainly after his mother in the supermarket or walking behind his brother in the local park, our bodies shied away from him as though repelled by magnets. It seemed utterly natural, this repulsion, like a cat abandoning a sickly kitten. Being snatched had marked Rufus. Bad luck radiated from him like cartoon stink lines. We did not want it to rub off.

There was no kindness in this way of thinking, no empathy in our averted gazes and shuffling feet. Being kind did not occur to us.

When they thought he was asleep in front of the television, Bruce Jackson heard his parents talking. His mother was a hairdresser, had seen Mrs. Orville the day before for a trim. The Orvilles were going to take Rufus to see a psychiatrist, she had said. He hardly ate, hardly talked. And when he did talk, it was in that strange voice that had so startled the officer who'd been interrogating him: deep, painfully hoarse. Like he had never stopped screaming.

"That boy is never going to be right again," Mr. Jackson said, and although his voice was full of regret, there was a tinge, too, of reproach. As though, the facts being what they were, Rufus should have had the decency not to come home at all.

The long, dry summer passed, with only the barest glimpses of Rufus Orville to satiate our curiosity. We looked out for black cars. We played along the edges of the woods where he'd emerged. We invented a version of tag that cast It as the kidnapper, one kid grabbing another and dragging them away. That kid would then become the kidnapper, and the cycle would continue until night fell and it occurred to us that we ought to be in bed.

The only one of us who talked to Rufus that summer was Farrah Whitmore. The backyard of her house was kitty-corner to the backyard of the Orville house, and she would keep an eye to the corner of the fence while she played, waiting to catch a glimpse of Rufus. It was not until August was almost over that she saw him, sitting cross-legged at the base of a spreading birch tree, staring up into the branches.

Farrah was kinder than the rest of us. Perhaps it was because she'd had a stutter when she first came to school, and had become too well acquainted with juvenile cruelty to want to replicate it. Or perhaps she was that way naturally. Whatever the case, she decided to come and say hello to Rufus that day, even though she, like all of us, felt the urge to stay far, far away.

She would have approached with caution no matter what—she was a shy girl, and tended to assume shyness in others. Since it was Rufus, she tiptoed more carefully than usual, approaching the fence without so much as rustling a leaf on the ground. When she got close, Rufus turned to look at her—or at least in her direction. Farrah froze.

“Hello, Rufus,” she called. There was enough distance between them to necessitate a slightly raised voice.

Rufus did not respond, although Farrah knew he had heard her. He stared at a point above her head, then turned back to look up into the tree.

“There are baby birds up there,” he said, and she was taken aback by the sound of his voice. It sounded nothing like the voice of the Rufus Orville she remembered, who had spoken softly and hesitantly. This Rufus had a voice that sounded as though it came from a throat that had been scratched on all sides by a hairbrush.

“Cute,” Farrah said, and let herself come closer. She craned her neck to see into the tree, but could not see a nest. A faint sound reached her ears, a high and pitiful peeping of dismay. “What kind of birds are they?”

Rufus shrugged. His eyes did not move from the thick green of the treetop. “I can’t tell,” he replied. “The mama hasn’t been back to the nest in a while. Maybe they’ll all die.”

Farrah flinched and started backwards, almost without meaning to. “I sure hope not,” she said. “I hate it when little things die.”

Rufus smiled.

This Farrah would swear to, later on, when she recounted the story to other children in the neighborhood: Rufus had smiled.

“Worse things happen,” he said, and his gaze remained on the tree and the birds as Farrah backed away, slowly, then very fast.

By the time school started up again, none of the grownups were talking about Rufus. No other children had disappeared. The black car had not come back into town. Their minds were too full of thoughts of back-to-school shopping, new clothes, and healthy lunches to have any room for him.

But we were talking about Rufus. Milling around outside the school building that morning, we kept an eye out for him, waiting for a glimpse of his curly hair, his wide, empty eyes. All summer we had seen him with other people, walking in the shadow of his mother, his father, his brother. We had not yet seen him alone.

Laherty was a small town, and the school was small, too. There was only one third grade teacher, only one classroom that Rufus could enter. We would all be there.

Somehow we missed him until after the bell rang and we’d all crowded inside, torrents of kids choking the halls like so much trash in a river. Not until we were all filed

into the third-grade classroom did we see him, pressed as close to the back wall as he could go, hunched over as small as he could make himself. He was wearing a shirt none of us had ever seen him wear before, blue with patterned sailboats. Our gazes ping-ponged between the shirt and the boy, the cheerful little sailboats and the blank face that seemed, to us, strangely adult.

May Anne looked at him and giggled, putting a hand over her own mouth to try and collect the sound. Bruce leaned over and whispered something to Haywood Matheson that made him snicker and flinch. Janine turned full around in her seat to stare at him, trying to make him meet her gaze. He didn't. Just as they had been in the cop car, Rufus's eyes were far away.

Farrah was the only one who dared to sit next to him. She took the desk to his right, trying not to look at him. The desk to the left and the one in front remained empty, even as the rest of the room filled up.

Miss Sheppard, the third-grade teacher, smiled at us from beneath a flickering fluorescent light. She was thin, brittle, grey in the face. Pink lipstick marked her front teeth.

"Welcome, everyone," she said. Her voice was chipper and high, as though she had stolen it from a much younger woman. "We're going to do roll call a little differently today. When I call your name, instead of saying 'here,' I would like you to please stand and tell me what you did this summer."

A murmurous wave of chatter swept the room. We all looked at Rufus. He did not look back.

But, of course, the roll was alphabetical, and "Orville" was near the bottom of the list. There were a dozen names to get through before we got to Rufus.

Josh stood and said that he and his brother had gone to the pool every day, and that he could dive off the big diving board now.

Carrie stood and told her about the ferry she and her father had taken to an island campground, where they had roasted marshmallows and looked at the stars.

May Anne stood and told us about the trip her family had taken to the country, the tree she had climbed.

Bruce stood and talked about his visit to his aunt in the city. She had taken him to eat breakfast in a café across the street from her apartment every morning, he said, and let him order a coffee with his meal, even though his mother would never let him drink coffee at home.

Henry stood and claimed that he had gone to Australia. None of us believed him.

Haywood stood and said that his family had gotten a dog from the local pound. A little mutt, with one ear that stood up and one ear that flopped down. His name was Sammy, and he could play dead.

Child after child stood, rattled off their statement in a rote and mechanized way. None of us were thinking much about what we had to say. Our own summers were not mysteries to us. We were all waiting for Rufus to speak.

Finally, it was his turn.

He stood for an extra moment or two in his seat, still looking at nothing in particular.

“Go on, Rufus,” said Miss Sheppard, and nodded encouragingly at him. The pink on her teeth looked suddenly obscene, like shreds of gore. “Tell us about your summer,”

Rufus drew in a long, deep breath, pushed his chair back with an unholy shriek that made us grit our teeth. He stood. He did not do these things the same way the rest of us did, we noticed. He moved like an old man whose bones ached endlessly.

“This summer,” he said, and stopped. His voice was so deep, so hoarse, that it seemed wrong coming out of his childish mouth.

“It’s okay,” the teacher said, and we thought we could hear an eagerness in her voice, a hunger that matched our own. Miss Sheppard, of course, knew who Rufus was. She had seen the posters, read the article in the paper. “You can say, honey. Tell us what happened.”

Rufus met her eyes, then. It was the first time we had seen him do so since he’d come back. Miss Sheppard’s smile slipped slightly, the lipstick on her tooth vanishing from sight.

“This summer,” Rufus said, standing straighter, speaking louder, “I was in the woods.”

For a moment it seemed that he might stop there. His mouth closed firmly. Our hearts beat three times, loud and fast, and then he spoke again.

“There was a black car,” he said, and we all leaned closer in our seats. “I was playing hopscotch by myself, and it drove up real slow beside me. Someone rolled down the window. There was a whistle. Someone said, ‘Hey, kid, want to go for a ride?’”

His gaze left Miss Sheppard then, and she sagged, as though he had been pulling her up straighter with his stare. Rufus’s wide, empty eyes moved from one face in the class to the next, landing briefly on every face before moving on. When Rufus looked at Henry, he felt the sudden prickle of baby-tears in his eyes. When Rufus looked at May Anne, a jolt went through her like a white-hot spike of fire. When Rufus looked at Bruce, he found himself struggling not to wet his pants.

“No one ever plays with me,” he said. “I was bored. I was sad. So I decided to get in the car. It was a nice car. Shiny and clean. It smelled good inside, like pine. Not the fake kind. Real pine, real trees. We drove for a long time.”

“But who was driving?” Carrie asked, and flinched when Rufus turned to look at her. She thought of the day when she had shown up on his doorstep, how she’d run away and looked behind her to see the curtains swinging. She imagined Rufus, standing in his living room, watching her flee.

“We drove for a long time,” Rufus said again, as though he hadn’t heard her question. “We were on a road I’d never seen before. It was dirt. It was dark. There were trees all around. We drove right into the middle of a forest. And then the road ended. Just like that.”

Rufus closed his mouth again. Miss Sheppard looked at him, her brow furrowing in confusion.

“But then what happened, Rufus?” she asked.

For a long moment, Rufus did not answer. When he spoke again, his voice was thicker, harsher, as though he were being choked.

“I got out of the car,” he said. “It was dark there. I looked up, and I couldn’t see the sky. There were too many trees. I looked to the left, and then the right, and I couldn’t see anything but trees. There were birds. They were singing.”

He put a hand up to his throat, winced, coughed.

“And then the driver got out,” he said, and coughed again, longer this time. His voice was so hoarse we could scarcely understand him. “And then the birds... the birds stopped singing.”

Rufus’s mouth opened wide. His tongue stretched out beyond his lips, his eyes wide and wet. He coughed and coughed, bending nearly double. Something fell from his mouth and drifted wetly to the surface of his desk. Farrah was the only one close enough to see it. She leaned in, then gasped.

A tiny black feather, soaked with saliva and bile, lay in the middle of Rufus’s desk.

Rufus’s face turned dark. His cheeks bulged. He sputtered and hacked, his little arms folded around his middle as though trying to keep himself from tearing in two.

“He’s choking!” someone cried.

Miss Sheppard, realizing what was happening, sprang down the aisle to assist him, but he beat at her with his little fists when she tried to grab him around the waist and administer abdominal thrusts. Still leaning over his desk, his shoulders heaved as he gave one last mighty retch.

Something slid from Rufus’s throat and fell onto the desk with a wet splat. It was small and dark, curled in on itself like a fetus. Its limbs splayed away from its body, its feet kicking feebly. Its mouth gaped open, framed with jagged yellow. Its eyes were enormous, but closed and bruised-looking, soft as swelling blisters. It stretched out its skinny neck as far as it would go, searching. From its throat came a single gasping chirp, a protest and a plea.

Rufus looked down at the baby bird, his eyes seeing something that none of us could. Tenderly he laid his hand over the creature, as though to protect it from our staring eyes. Lovingly he brought his full weight down upon it until it crunched.



RT Villa

In My Father's Kitchen

When I was twelve years old, my father summoned me into the kitchen. Dad stood bent over the counter, his large hands dredged in flour and egg. “Wash your hands,” he told me. “We’re making eggplant parmesan.”

It’s snowing just past my crooked window. There’s a hole in the screen and frost collects in the window’s wooden frame. The snow is benevolent, hugging the contours of the trees’ lonely branches.

I am writing this from the tiny kitchen of the one-bedroom cottage I rent. It’s a Sunday, sacred Sunday, safe from obligation and hurried footsteps.

Olive oil sizzles on the stovetop, crackling and popping in anticipatory fizz.

In my father’s kitchen, we wiped our hands on wrinkled dish towels and transferred eggplant between bowl and frying pan. The aubergine disks bobbed, a ring of buoys floating in oil. Bubbles roiled in the free spaces between them, seeking escape. Dad and I formed an assembly line: transfer, cook, flip, cook, transfer. No words, only motions. Our plate grew high with golden brown eggplant stacked on paper towels rendered translucent by excess oil. Just as Dad removed a slice, a wayward pop of oil arced out of the pan, finding purchase on my thigh. It branded my skin, a loud red slash below the hem of my pajama shorts.

Sunday is meal-prep day, my one chance to get my ducks in a row. By Friday, I run out of food and search my cabinets for a forgotten soup can to carry me through the weekend. But on Sundays I steep myself in the kitchen, constructing a family-sized meal for one.

Eggplant parmesan is warm; it is filling; it is a tether to a lineage from which I often feel disconnected.

When I was a child, I’d go back for seconds every time. Grandpop would scoop a heaping serving onto my sauce-stained plate, give me a wink, and get himself some more

as well. He'd grate extra parmesan on top. We'd sit at the table and listen to Grandma's stories and let ourselves be filled up.

First, I dredge and fry the eggplant, keeping distant from the crackling oil. When the frying is done, I stack the eggplant slices in haphazard layers with mozzarella and ricotta and tomato sauce, then bake the dish until the layers fuse together.

My great-grandfather came to the United States in 1910. He got a job and some land and built a house, then went back to Italy to get his wife and grow their family on new soil. I never knew my great-grandparents. But I imagine them during the Great Depression, buying eggplants and garlic to feed their many children. I imagine my grandfather as a child with sauce stains around his mouth. I imagine him hungry for seconds.

I stand alone in the rented kitchen, basking in the oven's warmth and the scent of garlic. I mindlessly touch the top of my thigh, where, below a layer of worn cotton, the ghost of an oil burn haunts my skin. I used to text my dad every time I made this dish.

When Dad was in the hospital, I had a dream about him. He was barefoot and scared and he didn't know who I was. In desperation, I told him about the eggplant parmesan I had made, a reason for him to come home. He listened. He followed.

Even in dreams, food was the only thing we could talk about.

The snow has thickened; it cloaks the window.

Before the timer dings, before the sauce thickens and the cheese crusts, I will go outside. I will lay in the whitened grass. I will let the winter hold me.

Claudia Monpere

Solar Flare

You interrupt your husband doing the crosswords to show him how much the sun weighs: 4,385,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 pounds (1,989,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 kg). You don't know how to say these numbers, so you point to your tablet.

He grunts, then asks you for a five-letter word that's part of a ship's hull under the engine room. "Bilge," you say, then run for the bathroom to vomit. You shouldn't have eaten those pancakes. You're in the minority of women who still have nausea in their third trimester. You're forty years old, sick and exhausted. You sit on the bathroom floor afterward, wiping your mouth with a towel. "Baby," you say. "Oh Baby, Baby, Baby. You're right not to trust me."

When you come out of the bathroom, your husband has a glass of ginger ale for you and a warm towel for your face. He brings you a cozy blanket as you lie on the couch. He's tender, unlike your first husband. When you're feeling better, he opens his laptop and suggests the two of you look at ovens to replace the thirteen-year-old one that heats irregularly and now has rust. He's very organized and has made a list of all the things that need to be done before the baby's birth. "We were thinking about a convection oven, right?" he says.

You ask him if he knows that the convection layer of the sun is 4 million degrees Fahrenheit. "I don't know. And sweetie, I don't care," he says. "What I do care about is your obsession with the sun. It's gone beyond irritating." He suggests a game of Wordle. "And please, don't start with *solar*." You tell him you're going back to bed. You need to sleep.

Some scientists refer to Earth's sun as *our luminary*. How lyrical. How benign. Especially since it's middle aged: a typical G-class star in mid-life cycle. Born 4.6 billion years ago. A lot of living left to do. Baby kicks vigorously. A lot of living? Baby is not a

yellow dwarf star like the sun. You rub your tummy. “Baby,” you say. “I love you, Baby. But we’re all keepers of secrets.”

When you wake up around noon, your husband is painting the nursery. That soft pastel blue you picked out together. You take pictures of him standing on the ladder, waving. This makes him happy. Later, he rubs your feet and sips a Corona. You don’t tell him that last year for the first time ever, a spacecraft entered the sun’s corona where temperatures spike upwards of 2 million degrees Fahrenheit.

Temperatures spike quickly inside a parked car.

The sun is mostly hydrogen and helium. Like a child’s orange balloon.

That night you awaken around 2:00 am and can’t get back to sleep. You take a bath. This makes Baby active. You watch your belly ripple. That moving lump is probably an arm or leg. That firm round area, probably Baby’s head. After a while, you get out of the tub and make some herbal tea, then bring it outside in the warm night and lie on the chaise lounge, looking up at the sky. Soon it will be dawn.

“Once,” you tell Baby, “a mother drove to work. She and her husband were young and stupid and always rushing around. There was confusion that morning about who was driving the 22-month-old to daycare.” You rub your belly gently. You sip your tea and watch the sunrise. In a few hundred million years, the sun will swell to orange. Still later, it will expand to become a red giant, on the cusp of death. It will gently shed its outer layers, expelling glowing gas, a dazzling nebula. Fifteen years, four months, and two days ago you shed your motherhood, your husband. You smoldered shame and learned a new language. You sing this story to Baby.

Harli James

Here Is an Update on This Town

On an early Sunday evening in Asheville, NC, May 2018, a light mist covers the town square. A man in a pale blue racer jacket sits alone on a park bench and smokes a cigarette. His eyes have a palpating look, inspecting the long lawn for something insidious. Before him stands a tall obelisk in the center of the square, mute but obtrusive. Three years from now the obelisk, named after a NC Governor/US Senator who fought against civil rights and was an enslaver, will be removed. Behind it, the former BB&T building is half remodeled. It stands like an open ribcage, the tallest building in town, competing for a view of the mountains. The man leans over and stubs his cigarette out on the sidewalk, but he doesn't get up. He holds the butt between his fingers and stares across the luminous green grass as if he's watching a ghost sitting on the city hall steps holding its head in its hands.

It's strange how, when a person dies, and then everyone who knew them dies, no one is sad about the original death anymore. Bearing witness to demise is the provoking experience, not the fact of the demise itself. After all, we manage to go about our days with a minimal level of despondency despite being cognizant of our mortality. Facing it in real time, such as watching a loved one pass, is another thing entirely. Death in the present is a monsoon. Death in the past is historical.

Thomas Wolfe was born in this town two years after the obelisk was erected. He was buried in the cemetery down the street from my house thirty-eight years later. At his grave site, visitors keep a cup overflowing with pens and pencils—in memoriam, but not in grief—as if he might rise unseen to ink another tome for the heavens to read.

Currently, over ten million people visit Asheville every year. The constant influx of people seeking novel experiences means that for a little town of ninety-four thousand people, it has the entertainment and recreational resources of a multi-million-person city. This has led to palpable change. Over the last twenty years I have watched the old guards shutter their doors and make room for new ventures, which smack more of chic

Atlanta chain stores than our town's signature hippie-turned-bohemian-bourgeois brand that demands something less polished, a little messy.

Watching this textural shift induces low level panic in the old-timers, a turning in the gut of what is coming. But imagine what the town was in Wolfe's day—less curated, more functional. Witnessing change can be painful, but living among something that has already evolved is hard to even detect. We are the product of myriad past changes, and it's this iteration we want to keep. We want to step out of the timeline and freeze our current version as the most authentic. Why? Because this is our present, and our present is our home. Not the future and not the past. As we age, we risk our present getting stuck in our past, and so the old folks contemplate some specific time back in their day, an idealized version of their present.

Why do I tell you about the man in the pale blue racer jacket? Because as he sits there, we are in my favorite version of Asheville. Mist coats the darkening town and buildings sit half-remodeled. Blue-gray clouds are backlit with the sun scurrying down the mountain and out of sight. My children, not yet grown, gobble chocolate nearby. The sidewalks are ambulatory, but not yet teeming. There is pressure in the town, but not spoil. And as I watch the man's face, I see no expression, and do not know him, and I wonder at the mystery of strangers. I feel potential for something great, even as I see the past clinging to the city streets, gossamer characters retracing old footsteps.

Each spring, the Ginkgo trees outside my office sprout lime green fringes on their branches. By May, each leaf will take the shape of a Japanese folding fan. The trees run the length of the Flatiron Building, a homage to the New York City icon for this little town with a big idea about itself. Maidenhair Tree is the Ginkgo's informal name. A woman with lemon hair.

In *You Can't Go Home Again*, Thomas Wolfe depicts a careening train ride up the mountain to Asheville (called Libya Hill) as his main character returns home for his father's funeral. The folks on the train are bursting with chatter about real estate speculation, each sharing a story of how they'd made gobs of money buying and selling quickly, even as they were bewildered by their ability to dispose of property they hadn't taken possession of yet. You can practically hear the train wheels clack and creak, feel the smoke-spattered air coat your lungs, and see the passengers' eyes wild with greed.

Our protagonist is dubious, even though Wolfe's own mother was a real estate tycoon and had rented out the rooms of her house when he was a child, booting him from bed to bed depending on the needs of her boarders. In *Look Homeward Angel*, he lacks that stability of home, and a reader gets the sense that if only poor Tom had known where his head lay each night, he wouldn't have written such a masterpiece. He says, "There was no place sacred unto themselves, no place fixed for their own inhabitation, no place proof against the invasions of the boarders." Here is the place that had raised him, provided sustenance, the place from which he'd expounded upon lists of the food

his mother prepared for him: *stacked batter-cakes, rum-colored molasses, a bowl of wet cherries, fat juicy bacon, jam*. Yet he didn't feel at home. Later, through writing, he set his heart down in a place on the verge of change and shifting property lines. He lit up the town square with a ghost.

Ginkgo trees have a hardiness zone of three to eight, making them viable from Georgia to Maine. Suitable for urban places, they tolerate pollution well. Fossils suggest the species is 270 million years old. Every day from my office window, I study the line of them down the street. Their architectural backdrop is the thin-speckled, granite-wrapped base of the Flatiron Building, buttressing the structure's creamy limestone slab facade, and rows of windows spaced three feet apart at each level, all the way to the eighth floor. That's the right height for a building in this town.

And give it an operator-powered elevator. And give it green awnings that tatter in the wind. And give it marble-tiled floors that were also used in this building and that building because there were extra. Six years after the man in the pale blue racer jacket stubs out his cigarette, the Flatiron building is sold to a real estate investment firm who mechanizes the elevator and turns the building into a luxury hotel.

In *You Can't Go Home Again*, Wolfe's character is unsettled by returning home because of the things he's written about the people who live there. They'll kill him! Stone him. Run him away. Also, he can't go home again because he needs to first prove himself worthy with a second book, and so he spends over four years writing it.

Wolfe left home because it was never a good fit for him, too small for his soaring spirit. When he returns, he hardly recognizes it. He describes a place surging with that same youthful angst he embodied when he left—new hotels, speculation, a slipping away of childhood nights sitting on the front porch, inky summer air languishing around him. But like the energy in his first book, which was written as an “act of utterance” and put down in “white hot heat,” he returns to a place boiling with change.

Before college, I moved ten times, from Macon, Georgia, where I was born, all throughout that pot-belly-stove-shaped state, to the Carolinas, back down to Macon for high school and even up to West Virginia, finally settling in Asheville, where I have lived for over twenty years. Yet I admit I don't quite feel that this is home. Only having left a place, have I looked back and called it such. But when I see that place, it is unchanged in my memory, a particular slice of space and time that I inhabited. That specifically is home. And so, for me, home can only be identified in the past, but paradoxically can only be experienced in the present.

Home is a slippery noodle, a spinal cord of loose string. A name, a briny smell, a sticky air, a collective pain. For me it is embodied in the words of Macon's poet son, Sidney Lanier: *sweet burly-barked, man-bodied tree*. Home is architecture and streets and new stores with historical names printed over their transoms. I know that what makes a place are the people who walk the streets—past and present—etching some fissure into

the town, whether building or removing an obelisk, the crack of a cornerstone, delicate cups of lettuce leaves reaped from the soil and leaving a nutritive legacy, the crush of a tender yellow leaf on the sole of your boot. So why can't I accept that I belong here?

Wolfe can't go home again because when you are expelled from a place, fully formed, there is nothing left to take from it. The pages of his books smell like leather, a library, earth tang, fresh air.

Tom, here's an update on this town: Rain torrents down and everything is gray. The old BB&T building is wrapped in concrete and glass and is an art-deco inspired hotel and wine cellar. The sidewalks are made of concrete, except in the block by your old home, which is maintained with reverence. Trolleys of bridesmaids whoop and holler, screaming Britney Spears lyrics as I eat my sandwich on a park bench at lunch. The grave of your brother is three down from yours. But you know that.

By October, the Ginkgo leaves are a deep-butter yellow, and when I track them into my office on the bottoms of my shoes, I track in the DNA of last year's leaves. And of the leaves from all the prior years that are broken down into the silt stuck between the stones in the street, the decision to build up a road here, where once there was a hill, shaped from the age-old movement of the earth that formed the Appalachians, the toil of the men who constructed the road and the buildings, and the words they spoke to each other as they worked. I turn to my co-worker and say, *Aren't the Ginkgos beautiful this time of year?*

In *Look Homeward Angel*, Wolfe leaves his brother as an apparition on the city hall steps, beating his chest for the loss. We close the book, bereft.

Today, I place a pen in the cup at Wolfe's grave. Tomorrow, I will transport yellow leaves into the office on the soles of my shoes. I will pluck a little fan-shaped leaf from the branch, put it in my mouth, and write my own list of food: little gems, butter leaf, mother tongue, granite slab, home.

Asheville, NC

April 2023

Contributor Notes

Sarina Bosco is a chronic New Englander. She writes fiction, poetry, and nonfiction. She's a supporter of the serial comma.

Lily Damron is a writer from Kansas.

Sophie Fetokaki is an itinerant artist, writer, singer and researcher. She is often drawn to the intersection of the conceptual and the situated/specific. Learn more at sophiefetokaki.com.

Elliott Gish is a writer and librarian from Halifax, Nova Scotia. Her fiction has appeared in *The Baltimore Review*, *The New Quarterly*, *Grain Magazine*, and many others.

Anita Goveas is British-Asian, London-based, and fuelled by strong coffee and paneer jalfrezi. She was first published in the 2016 London Short Story Prize anthology, most recently by the *Cincinnati Review*. She's on the editorial team at *Flashback Fiction*, and tweets erratically @coffeeandpaneer. Her debut flash collection, *Families and Other Natural Disasters*, is available from Reflex Press, and links to her stories are at <https://coffeeandpaneer.wordpress.com>.

Debbie Graber's short fiction has appeared in *The Conium Review*, *Cagibi Lit*, *Zyzyva* and *Hobart*, among other journals. Her story collection, *Kevin Kramer Starts on Monday*, was published in 2016 by The Unnamed Press. Debbie grew up in Chicago and currently lives in Los Angeles.

Suzanne Hicks is a disabled writer living with multiple sclerosis. Her stories have appeared in *New Flash Fiction Review*, *MicroLit Almanac*, *Sledgehammer Lit*, and elsewhere. She lives in Las Vegas, Nevada with her husband and their animals. Find her at suzannehickswrites.com and on Twitter @iamsuzannehicks.

Zeynep Inanoglu is a Turkish-American poet, nurse, and visual artist. Her poetry focuses on bodily experience, spirituality, lineage, and medicine. Her work has been published in *Folio*, Skidmore College's student-run literary magazine. In 2021, she was awarded the Distinguished Writing Award in Poetry by the Skidmore English department. Zeynep graduated from Skidmore College with a B.A. in English literature in 2021. She is a current student at Yale School of Nursing.

Harli James is a writer living in Asheville, NC. Her work has appeared in several literary journals, including *Jabberwock Review*, *descant*, *Permafrost*, and *The Gateway Review*. Her work can also be found on her web site, harlijames.com.

Annie Marhefka is a writer in Baltimore, Maryland whose writing has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. Her recent publications include prose and poetry in *Pithead Chapel*, *Variant Literature*, *Reckon Review*, *Literary Mama*, and others. Annie is the Executive Director at Yellow Arrow Publishing, a Baltimore-based nonprofit supporting and empowering women-identifying writers. She has a degree in creative writing from Washington College and an MBA. Follow Annie on Instagram @anniemarhefka, Twitter @charmcityannie, and at anniemarhefka.com.

Claudia Monpere's flash fiction has appeared in *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Pidgeonholes*, *The Forge*, *Fictive Dream*, *Trampset*, *Ghost Parachute* and elsewhere. Her poems and short stories have appeared in such places as *The Kenyon Review*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *New Ohio Review*, *Prairie Schooner* and *Hunger Mountain*. She is a recipient of a Hedgebrook residency and has been nominated three times for a Pushcart. Her flash was shortlisted for The Smokey 2022 and awarded second place in *Vestal Review's* 2022 food themed flash fiction contest.

Sage Ravenwood is a deaf Cherokee woman residing in upstate NY. She is an outspoken advocate against animal cruelty and domestic violence. Her work can be found in, *Grain*, *The Rumpus*, *Lit Quarterly*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Native Skin Lit*, *Pangyrus*, *UCity Review*, *128 Lit*, *Colorado Review*, *Shó Poetry Journal*, *Nixes Mate*, *Indianapolis Review*, *MORIA*, and more. Her book, *'Everything That Hurt Us Becomes a Ghost'* is forthcoming from Gallaudet University Press October 2023.

Julia Ruth Smith is a mother, teacher and writer. She lives by the sea in Italy. Her work has appeared in *Vestal Review*, *Flash Frog*, *Reflex Fiction* and is upcoming in the Bath Flash Fiction Anthology and *New Flash Fiction Review*. She has been nominated for Best of the Net by Full House Lit and a Pushcart Prize by Seaside Gothic. On Twitter @JuliaRuthSmith1 or at the beach.

Paige Swan is a recent graduate from Western Washington University and currently resides on Whidbey Island, where she spends her time walking along the shoreline, and chasing the sun in her car The Beast. When she is not wandering the world, she can be found in a corner trying to dream up new ones. Her cat Waffles is her best friend.

Poems, along with his parents and son, have helped **Erik Tschekunow** overcome his addiction and related prison sentence. He is so grateful. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Sun*, *MacGuffin*, *The Cortland Review*, and a variety of other journals. He was also recipient of the 2020 Rose Warner Poetry Prize from The Freshwater Review.

RT Villa is a multidisciplinary artist and writing educator from the middle-of-nowhere mid-Atlantic. Their writing has previously appeared in *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *The Believer*, *Grub Street*, and *Memoir Mixtapes*. They're currently an MFA candidate in nonfiction at Oregon State University, where they spend entirely too much time gazing at trees.

Kaitlen Whitt earned her master's in poetry from Virginia Tech. She has composed stories for broadcast on West Virginia Public Radio and has published work with *Matador Network*, *Natural Bridge*, *The Blue Earth Review*, *Still: The Journal*, *New Note Poetry*, *Naugatuck River Review*, *Appalachian Heritage*, and *Bodega Magazine*.

Cover Photo: Jez Timms
Interior Images: Liam Briese & Kostiantyn Vierkieie
All images from Unsplash

