

HIVE AVENUE



**HIVE
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JOURNAL**

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Hive Avenue Literary Journal

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CONTENTS (by genre)

POETRY

- 03 Grief is a Strange Bird - *Natalie Illum*
- 15 Mary Shelley Learns Her Husband, Percy Shelley, Has
Drowned at Sea - *Gennarose Nethercott*
- 16 Digital Remains - *Jacqueline Jules*
- 17 Ode to Sleeping in My Mascara - *Candice Kelsey*
- 18 Option – *Hari Bhajan Khalsa*
- 19 Bullet Points - *Hari Bhajan Khalsa*
- 25 Coriander - *Jennifer Eden Rogers*
- 26 Odysseas - *Karine Leno Ancellin*
- 32 Tuesday Morning Sunlight – *April Clark*
- 33 Packing List (for Blessed Stomachs) - *April Clark*
- 35 Discipline - *Sativa Vela*
- 42 Broken Sonnet - *Shana Watkins*
- 55 Personal Algorithm - *Drew Pizarra*
- 56 Theatre – *W. Vandoren Wheeler*
- 57 Earth Works - *W. Vandoren Wheeler*
- 58 Grief is Pink - *Jessica Niles*
- 67 Bedeviled – *Carolyn Martin*
- 68 To: John Q. Poet From: IRS Re: Taxes and 81 Penalties Date:
mm/dd/yyyy - *Carolyn Martin*

FICTION

- 04 Camel Girl - *Anastasia Jill*
- 07 North, East and Elsewhere - *Natasha Levinski*
- 27 Furies of Death - *George Ridge*
- 36 *Waltzing Montana*: an excerpt from a novel - *Mary Clearman
Blew*

NONFICTION

- 20 Verse - *Lee Martin*
- 43 Erasing Memory of Skin - *Ashley Anderson*
- 59 Recollections of Childhood - *April Vazquez*

FEATURED VISUAL ARTIST on pg. 34

MISSION STATEMENT

Hive Avenue is rooted in the belief that art is vital for the sustenance of life and has the strength to unite a community. Our mission is to foster the professional development of writers, poets, and visual artists, to promote communication, connection, and the feeling of kinship. Here at Hive Avenue, we aim to showcase the tastes and talents of both established and emerging writers in the global community – dare we say, hive? Hive Avenue strives to cultivate an environment of appreciation; a sanctified space for all to be able to breathe and to read.

NATALIE ILLUM

GRIEF IS A STRANGE BIRD NESTING

Grief is a strange bird nesting
in my throat
A ribcage
full of featherings
An absurd song
stuck in the blood
A furious beating of
things unsaid

ANASTASIA JILL

CAMEL GIRL

The Camel Girl walks on all fours like a camel, but the proper name for her condition is congenital genu recurvatum. She isn't well versed in science, but she does know about religion. Her whole life has been a study; even Jesus Christ can make mistakes.

The Camel Girl used to be called 'Ella' or 'Ellie' or maybe just 'Elle' before she was sold to the circus. There was nothing else to do with inverted knees, the back of her thighs laying against gravity like planks, her feet ground into the dirt like cloven hooves. That's the real reason her mother wanted her out of the house - not for the money. She thought her daughter was the devil.

The Camel Girl has to buy special pants at the same store The Bearded Lady buys a headscarf. The two catch eyes like nickels and dimes, and sometimes, they catch literal nickels, and dimes husked into insults like "you fucking freak!" They are like dancing monkeys to the world by the simple act of existing. They still need their pants and headscarf though, so they go to the store regardless. On the way home, The Bearded Lady buys her a soda pop. She carries the glass bottle between her teeth.

The Camel girl shares a trailer with four people, including The Bearded Lady, The Unauthorized General Tom Thumb Impersonator, and A Human Torso. They call themselves *The Sideshow* because the elephants are the main attraction, but they draw their crowd, if for no other reason than schadenfreude. Living with them is alright. The Bearded Lady talks a lot, and The Unauthorized General Tom Thumb Impersonator laments his status because he keeps growing despite being little. A Human Torso is an enigma that rolls cigarettes with his lips. He never talks; least of all, to The Camel Girl.

The Camel Girl makes a whopping twenty dollars a week, which means nothing once adjusted for inflation. The Bearded Lady 'humphs' at her meager earnings and says, 'We need to form a union.' The Camel Girl is only ten and doesn't know what a union is, but figures anything to act as a savior would suffice. After paying rent on the trailer, there's hardly enough for things like food, special pants, head scarfs or pop. The Bearded Lady and A Human Torso don't eat some nights, just for The Camel Girl. She

is the youngest, a baby shoat in a flock of screaming pigs. The pigs scream for good reason; they're starving and underpaid, but they're freaks. And nobody cares about a freak's well-being.

The Camel Girl knows there's got to be more than the circus, more than spotlights, more than heckling children throwing peanuts at her head. She sorts the offending child out of the crowd when he doesn't stop. She sees him, fat and stocky and blonde, for some reason, he looked like a Tim. His parents make no measure to stop him, so The Camel Girl sinks under an oppressing layer of nutshells. All she does is stand there. The audience leers whether she walks or not, barraging her in exclamation points. What! A! freak!

The Camel Girl doesn't sleep that night, listening to The Bearded Lady reading from a red book, nodding her head to the rhythm of the lines. The Camel Girl is upset. She wishes she knew how to read. Her mother may have taught her at some point, but it had been years since she'd seen a book herself, besides the Bible. The Man Who Owned the Circus was a Christian and held his service in the back of the tent. The Camel Girl went, but only for the donuts and coffee. The Man Who Owned the Circus would notice when she nodded off, but not say anything until after the service when he reminded her, "God gave you those backward-facing knees for prayer." The Camel Girl knew about prayer. She knew it didn't work. Things never changed. Not for her, or The Bearded Lady, not even for The Unauthorized General Tom Thumb Impersonator, who made a conscious effort to shrink his body.

The Camel Girl lumbers out of her cot and out into the moonlight, baying at it like a starving animal. She screams in frustration like a stranger stuck in a cage until A Human Torso approaches her. He offers her a smoke, and she reminds him, "I'm only ten." He tells her, "I was but five years when I had my first smoke." He works his magic in front of her but needs The Camel Girl to light his match. He inhales deep, blows the smoke in her face. The Camel Girl sighs and says, "I hate it here."

A Human Torso surprises her by asking a question: 'do you know why I'm called A Human Torso?' The Camel Girl has no answer, so A Human Torso answers, 'because there are other men in the world like me, waiting to take my place like a strawberry

sweet in the Pez dispenser. The Man Who Owns the Circus is stupid - he may have more limbs, but I have more heart. It's easy to walk away. There will be someone to take your place.' The Camel Girl reminds him, 'I am very young.' A Human Torso tells her, "That was going to be my point.'

The Camel Girl sits there while A Human Torso smokes, wading through his words like a snout does the mud. At some point, A Human Torso disappears into the tent, leaving The Camel Girl on her own. She likes the sound of that - being on her own. She had money and prayer; there would be another Camel Girl, but never another Ella.

Later that night, The Camel Girl packs her bags and leaves a note for her friends at the circus. The money she saved amassed at a total of two hundred dollars, enough to get her to the next town, and then....and then what, exactly? She has no family to call her own, but there are orphanages and churches and the hostels of welcoming strangers. She thought of the Pez candy A Human Torso told her about and she realizes there will be another circus. It might just be a street, it might be an unloving warden, but that would be her choice or mistake to make; she could become the oppressor as easily as she'd been the oppressed. Once everyone was asleep, The Camel Girl fled into the dark, running on the bent-in knee, a lone cigarette she'd stolen lighting the way.

NATASHA LEVINSKI

NORTH, EAST, AND ELSEWHERE

The Toronto sky was in desperate need of a coffee that September morning when the streetcar's pantograph had fallen off the wire, abandoning us in the middle of the busy Spadina and Queen intersection. Reaching for the support pole, I fell against the backpack of a stranger, mumbling an apology into tightly woven canvas fibers.

That stranger was you.

You turned around, apologizing as though you had pushed me. We had been tamed by society to be polite even at another's fault. Your eyes did a slight double-take while the streetcar was still at rest. Then I remembered we went to the same high school. You gave a short smile and returned to your very important duties of staring outside the window intently, eyes glazing over, not fixating on anything but the paint stroke motion of the moving cars.

Arguably, it wasn't the most memorable 'meet cute.' My English teacher would have suggested raising the stakes. Maybe change the setting to another era. A café in Paris. What if I was studying fashion design? What if you were a trade merchant? What if you were a woman?

The driver hooked the streetcar back to the wire, and we stopped by the school where we both got off. No more exchanges were made. I had no idea where we would go. I didn't pay much attention to you in the weeks to come. That was fall. I walked one way. You walked the other. It was the first intersection of our paths, soon to be a tangled web. *A web of life plot is good; my English teacher would have said, consider adding a non-linear narrative.*

*

The plan was written on the back of a failed math test. They say math is a universal language, but it had taken me years to get the hang of elementary English, and I was equally ill-equipped for trig.

Fog hid the school in the distance. Layers of tissue paper covering a pearly sun. You kicked your knees out from under yourself, the thick uniform dress pants creased and restricted movement. Your dark hands rested on the wet mud. I didn't realize how dark your skin was until that moment when you looked as though you had been birthed from the soil as Aphrodite was born from the flotsam and jetsam.

You nuzzled your face into the collar of your winter jacket. It was a cold spring, the kind that refused to bring hope of blossoms and even makes you forget the color of the sky.

“I’ll miss them,” you croaked out in your thick accent, one that sounded British to me on some occasions. You said I hadn’t developed an ear for dialects yet. But I could understand you just fine. To be quite honest, what you said broke my heart a little. You always had more reason to stay than I did.

“They’ll miss you,” I said, “but you have to think about what you want.”

I had everything figured out. Money. Food. Shelter. Maslow’s Hierarchy. My decision had been made. I reached over and took your hand in mine. Bringing it up to my mouth slowly, I pressed every wrinkle of my chapped lips into your bony knuckles. Placing my head on your shoulder, I wanted to leave it there. To stay like that for eternity.

Then I stood up, my feet sinking in the mud, “Tomorrow I am going to be here before the first bell. I want you to be here, too.” Then I left you, in the tall grass, 400 meters from our high school.

*

Frozen blueberry pancakes. Every morning. Breakfast and lunch. And on Friday nights my father would give me some extra money to buy six more boxes of frozen blueberry pancakes and a jug of milk. I’d walk through Little Italy in the dark winter evenings. Sometimes I’d stand outside the grocers and put my knitted tuque – that’s what you had called *Kapa* – on the ground. The spare change would leap from the pockets previously sewn shut, and purses, leavening the small burden of carrying around too much heavy change. Thank God they killed the pennies here and ended their worthless miserable lives. With the spare change, I’d save up for *pivo* that I could buy off the seniors at school.

When I returned home, often my father would be hunched over his glowing computer screen. But sometimes when I creaked open the door of our duplex, he would be sleeping in his bed, his glasses neatly folded on the bedside table, and an English dictionary in place of the bible. In both scenarios, I would put the pancakes in the freezer, then pop two in the toaster and eat them for dinner.

My father and I kept our distance. So as not to invade the other’s personal space in such close proximities. We were afraid that if we ever spoke we might say something that we would regret. Something about Ma. He worked hard and would take weekend shifts on occasion. For my birthday, he opened a Canadian savings bank account that would go to a college fund for

me in the future. There were good days, like going to the midway in the suffocating summer heat. And bad days, like when the power went out in the middle of winter.

I knew I would miss him. And that would have made Ma sad too. But at least he wouldn't have to look after me anymore. I stocked the freezer with pancakes and made a pot of coffee for him the morning I left.

The last conversation I had with my father follows, translated from Slovenian:

“How is school? Understand your teachers?” He asked while typing away at his computer.

“Fine,” I said. “And yes.”

“Any boys at school?”

“Well...” I wondered for a moment if I should have told him about you. I wondered if he would have approved.

“Don't want to know.”

I would miss the roughness of his poorly shaved cheeks as he kissed me goodnight. I would miss the wrinkles that formed around his eyes as he listened to records of polka music. I tried to convince myself this was the only way.

It was the only way.

*

We left on the hottest day of spring. My uniform's white blouse clung to my sweaty back. You carried the heavy knapsack with the tent. I lugged the small rolling suitcase that had traveled across the Atlantic Ocean when I had emigrated.

The first car that picked us up was a grey SUV. I sat in the front and you in the back. You were worried that people would think you were kidnapping me. I thought that was a hilarious considering I convinced you to come. We were let off in a suburb not too far from the city.

The second car was a red pick up truck. The driver was Polish, and we tried to have a conversation in our respective languages. He drove us for an hour, far enough to be out of the GTA.

The third was a semi, as you called it. The driver was a trucker. You sat in the front and talked about politics until we reached the Georgian Bay.

*

“Where are you from?” You removed my purse from the seat next to me, gently handing it over, and then sat down.

I hadn't even noticed you get on the streetcar, let alone standing at the school bus stop. I straightened myself and clutched my bag into my chest, “By St. Clair West.”

You gave a short chuckle, “No, no, like your heritage. Where do you hail from? You weren’t born here, right?”

“I’m from Eastern Europe. Slovenia.” I felt myself answering the questions too fast, failing to inquire about your own intentions. Why had you sat next to me? Why so intrigued? “My dad and I moved here about a year ago.”

“Your English is very good.”

“Yours too.” I smiled.

You smiled too. The bus was beginning to fill up with more people. Rush hour. The busy hour. The bus-is-too-small hour.

“Where are you from?” I asked.

“Nigeria. But I was raised here.”

I nodded my head, unsure where the conversation was heading.

“Do you like Canada?” you asked.

I pursed my lips, “I’m not quite sure yet.” The streetcar came to a sharp halt, and my body crashed into yours. An old lady in front of us had lost her balance and was on the ground. You tried to help her up, but she batted you away.

“I’m fine. I’m fine,” she called out, but she couldn’t get her footing. You grabbed her cane which had slid under the seat. She took it from you without even a grateful smile. She huffed her way off the bus.

“What a kind old woman,” I said quietly as you took your seat again.

“I’ve seen a lot worse than that.”

I bit my lip, feeling a wave of uneasiness at the woman’s mistreatment of you and your nonchalance towards her disrespect. I got off a stop early. Not announcing it to you either. I just ran off.

I went to the supermarket to grab another box of frozen blueberry pancakes and found your number scrawled on a piece of paper inside of my purse.

*

The landscape of the North is much different than it is back home. I hailed from mountainous valleys and the Adriatic Sea. Green hills that rolled into Austria. Lake Bled, a church stranded in the middle of a turquoise body of water. Here there were plains and trees and rocks as well, but it wasn’t the same.

I had gone out by myself to find the nearest village of Elmvaile. It was small and quaint, and everyone spoke with a funny accent that I hadn’t heard before. I got firewood and canned food. I also bought a *Milka* bar at a candy shop. I shouldn’t have, but I wanted to taste home. I wanted to taste hazelnuts and thick cream. It reminded me of Ma on the bee farm, picking white

chamomile in the green outback, getting water from the stream that ran outside our house.

The chocolate bar was disappointing, tasting stale as though it had been in the shop for years. I ate it all before I even made it back to the beach.

*

We lay in our bayside tent eating discount day-old bagels.

“I think that I would have been considered very pretty if I had lived in Ancient Greece.”

You rolled over onto your side and raised an eyebrow, “How so?”

“I have the figure of a Grecian statue. They have cute little stomach rolls, wide hips, thin arms. I think I look like one.”

“I’m not sure if you’re boasting or if you’re self-deprecating.”

I hit your arm. I took a bite into the bagel. The dry dough was tough to chew. “I mean, I would have fit in with their beauty...ideals.”

“I think you’re more beautiful than a statue an old dead guy made.” You leaned over and gave me a quick kiss.

“Is that a compliment or are you making fun of me?”

*

I found you in the village on the first day of summer. You had told me that you were going to the nearby farm to do some work for cash. I was shopping at the flea market, looking for beads to make jewelry to sell.

You were at the payphone. Your body hunched over, twirling the long, coiled cord in your left hand. I stood in plain sight for a moment, frozen in my spot. It was a betrayal. I knew. And I should have known that you missed your family. Even if they weren’t your real family.

You told me stories of your foster parents. How every year you celebrated a shared birthday party since some of your siblings didn’t know when their birthdates were. You’d gather around a long wooden table. The oldest at one end, the youngest at the other. You were somewhere in the middle. Your parents would then distribute the presents, unwrapped as wrapping paper was destructive to the environment, you had said.

I watched as you cried into the phone, too far away to hear your exact words but I felt everything.

I slid into the nearby building. I took a few deep breaths and pretended I had seen nothing.

*

The dewy leaves made pink impressions on the side of your face. They were wet with blue morning and smelled of dirt. Your

gaze flickered to me. A corpse-like stare. Eyes glossy and damp like the dew. I inhaled deeply, feeling the grass leaves press upon the goosebumps that tickled my arms. They looked like pink moguls on an epidermal ski slope. I placed my hand in the gap between our heads.

You wriggled your body on the ground and removed your hand from under your side. It brushed upon the grass with the rhythm of a wave, bobbing upon an ocean with unpredictable yet cadenced movement. For a moment, I believed that your hand would encapsulate mine, that you would press your palm over my knuckles and your fat fingertips would sprawl far beyond my nails. Yet only your pinkie, ever so slightly, brushed my ring finger. Then your hand tucked under your cheek where the grass leaves had left their kisses.

I could feel an ant crawling across my wrist. Yet the sensation was nothing in comparison to the way your eye would rack focus, like the lens of a camera, from me to the ant, from the ant to the leaves, and then to nothing, no object at all.

*

Ma would have liked you. She would have seen why I cared so much for you. I imagine telling her about you while she harvests honey from the bees. I would have told her about the deepness of your laugh, your love for the feeling of sand between your toes, and how you'd hum as you'd shower in the cold bay. I know you would have liked her too. I wish you two could have met. You would have loved her bees.

*

I woke before the sun had. It was still dark, but I couldn't remain horizontal for any longer. I felt a strange void inside of me as though my insides had been dug out by bony fingers, nails caked in blood. The remains of a nightmare hovered in the must of the tent, horror still looming in my mind. I needed to bathe so I carefully tiptoed over the sleeping bags. I unzipped the tent, notch by notch.

The morning was warmer than usual with a red tinge to the stratus clouds. I peeled my shirt over my head and ran into the water. Letting the lake work its way from the tips of my long hair to my roots. I couldn't wash away the feeling of being the only person on Earth. No matter how hard I scrubbed my arms with the granulated sand, my heart felt removed from my body.

The bright orange tarp on the tent seemed to remind me that I would never truly belong in the wilderness. Then I remembered you. The gentle waves pushed me closer to the shore. I dug my feet into the sand and stood watching the shelter. The

grains dug deeper into my soles as I walked onto the beach. I called your name.

I felt an uneasy sense of something simultaneously familiar and foreign.

*

Mornings in Slovenia were cold but bright as the sun eclipsed over the mountains. I was getting ready for school when I noticed that Ma wasn't around. She usually had her espresso at the kitchen table while reading the *časopis*.

I asked my father if he had seen her leave, but he never really paid attention to anything.

I ran to the beehives and found that they had been opened and most of the bees had left the honeycombs. They buzzed in the air, unsure where to go now that they had been freed. A large, sturdy one landed on my finger. I brought it up slowly to eye level.

"Do you know where Ma is?"

Then the bee flew off. Buzzing with the others. They scrambled in a disordered swarm with no destination and no answers for me.

*

I called your name, drawing closer to the tent. You had been in our sleeping bag when I had awoken. Hadn't you? Did you leave to get some food from the farm?

When I reached the tent, my hands shook as I tried to get the zipper to move. I fell back as it suddenly glided upwards. Pressing my pale palm on your empty cold pillow, I realized you hadn't slept on it at all. I ran out of the tent, calling your name. A group of birds flew north overhead. They knew where you went. They told me you hadn't gone to the farm. Nor had you gone to collect kindling for the fire.

The dry leaves whipped against my bare skin. My feet bruised and bled as they banged against rocks and logs. I could only call your name. I could see for miles in every direction on the flat plain. The red skies and dead yellow grass. The world looked like a snow globe. The perfect dome atmosphere couldn't help me find you.

Some birds came back and flew in erratic patterns in the sky. Before we moved to Canada, my father told me about birds being confused in the ever-changing winters. They would go south to migrate, but then it would warm up, and they would come back. I remember him drawing out a figure 8 to illustrate this. My breathing slowed, and my heart felt heavy.

I felt like a nomad again. As though I didn't belong anywhere in the world without you. But I still felt you. I felt your

love imploding inside me, removing me from this earth, into a space unknown to others.

Maybe we were the birds in the sky. Constantly crossing borders and searching for warmth. Our love was too large to stay in one place, so I kept walking, searching for a new home to put it.

GENNAROSE NETHERSCOTT

PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED IN: *A Ghost of Water*

MARY SHELLEY LEARNS HER HUSBAND, PERCY SHELLEY, HAS DROWNED AT SEA

She imagines white mountains of foam,
sees the lamp of his body shattering
against jagged waves in the storm near Viareggio.

Water is a different kind of monster.
Nothing like the one she birthed that famous summer in Geneva:
Her monster was spooked by flame; the sea has no fear.

Hers was dead made alive again; the sea cannot be resurrected
for it never lived. Her monster was solid, familiar, bodied like a
man (like her husband, even). The sea is formless.

This new beast makes up seventy-eight percent of her body.
To survive, she must drink cool glassfuls of her husband's death
drawn up from the well. To wash, she must submerge

herself the way her husband was submerged, must heavy
her hair with the creature that made her husband's lungs heavy.
Some things must be done, though they cannot be accepted.

JACQUELINE JULES

DIGITAL REMAINS

We sat in the hospital room
watching reruns.

Sometimes *Seinfeld*,
sometimes *The Office*.

We talked about the finale
of *How I Met Your Mother*.
Why I thought it made sense
and you thought it sucked.

But we never discussed
how I would see
your photos
on this silver laptop
I'm hugging today
instead of you.

What's the password?
That sequence of letters
and numbers I need
to see you again,
zip-lining through the jungle
in Guatemala, surfing
on the beach in Spain.

Your frat brothers tell me
there are videos on your phone
they can't open either.

Did you mean to deny me
your digital remains?

Or was death simply too sensitive
a subject? Like sex. Something
a young man would never mention
to his mother.

CANDICE KELSEY

ODE TO SLEEPING IN MY MASCARA

Sometimes it's just
ascend from the
each contact lens
then right, when
reading about
who was male
didn't worry
I blame you,
Crusher in double
Sephora's *Volume*
extreme ebony
I won't carry
to the altar of the
to atone for my
sloth &
I am fine with
waking on a pillow
And as I sleep I
men and women
crocodile feces
not for vanity but
& protect the soul.
exhausted
of producing male
know the sweet
going to bed
eye of Horus

too much effort to
sofa & pluck
first left
I'd much rather be
Aaron Copeland,
and wore glasses &
about such things.
Cover Girl's Clump
plush onyx! Or you,
Glamour Max, with
extra-large rounded brush.
my bed-ready self
medicine cabinet; I fail
modernity
soot-black smear.
melting wax & oil,
of illiterate ink whispers.
dream ancient Egyptians –
who mixed charcoal with
& honey
to stave off evil spirits
I'd sit by the Nile
after a long desert day
heirs who will not ever
quiet rebellion of
with the ink-smudged
or new feminist flag.

HARI BHAJAN KHALSA

BULLET POINTS

- Named for their
- Likeness to bullet
- Holes
- I imagine
- Concise list-making
- In white space
- Eyes you might say
- Unblinking exactitude
- You and
- I had it all
- In order
- Not long ago
- Equidistance
- Pointillist
- Perfection
- At the left margin
- Our legs rarely touch
- Nowadays
- We sleep
- Clad
- In uniform roundness
- Curled up
- In the dark

HARI BHAJAN KHALSA

OPTION

In the kitchen
and groan

I hear you

whirring something up
dreaming

before you go to work

turning the pages

of the day's paper
sweat

your glasses

smudged and tilted

riding your nose
louvers.

I turn over

at five a.m.

I was

blue horses

hurtling a cliff

waking in a

slipping sun

between slats

of pale, white

LEE MARTIN

VERSE

Before I could read, my Grandma Martin taught me rhymes. She said them over and over until I could say them, too. Because of her cataracts, she couldn't see to read, and I didn't know how. Memory and recitation, though, required no clear eyesight, no reading skills.

I'd lie in bed with her and listen to her say,

Ding, dong, bell,
 Pussy's in the well.
 Who put her in?
 Little Johnny Flynn.
 Who pulled her out?
 Little Tommy Stout.

Or:

Georgie Porgie pudding and pie,
 Kissed the girls and made them cry.

One of my favorites, just for the sound it made, and for its pure silliness, was the one in which my grandma said, "What's your name?" And I answered, "Puddin Tane. Ask me again, and I'll tell you the same." I knew what pudding was, and the fact that a little boy could be named that delighted me. What Tane was, I had no idea, but the rhyme was one I loved to say, and I said it with gusto—so much so that my grandma and my parents stopped asking me for my name. I suppose I was getting on their nerves. No problem. I just asked myself, so I could have the joy of answering.

Sometimes my grandma sang to me. She sang, "Yankee Doodle," and "She'll be Comin' Round the Mountain," and "Old Dan Tucker." I loved to sing, and I had a beautiful voice I kept until puberty when a bullfrog seemed to take up residence in my throat, and everything I tried to sing ended up being sharp or flat, or both.

Neither of my parents had any talent for singing—couldn't carry a tune if they had it in a bucket. But I had a talent for it, and I had a knack, I started to learn, for all things verbal.

When I started first grade, I went to a two-room school in Lukin Township just a few miles east of our farm. I rode a yellow bus and learned the stops at the neighboring farms along the way. Groups of children—brothers and sisters—waited at the ends of

their lanes. They got on the bus, often squabbling over something, pushing at one another and calling one another names until the driver, Mr. Kirts, told them to pipe down and behave. He was a patient man, but he brooked no mischief. When he told you to settle down, it was like he was a kindly uncle calling you to task for being a nuisance. “Aw, Henry,” someone might say. At his urging, we called him Henry. “Aw, Henry.” A sheepish hang of the head, an embarrassed tone, maybe a stubbing of a rubber-capped sneaker toe against the metal leg of a bus seat. “We were just messing around.”

I didn’t understand the give and take between brothers and sisters because I didn’t have any. When I was with others who did, I often felt like a person who was “it” in a game of tag, watching the activity around me, running hard to try to touch someone, listening to the laughter and the squeals of those I had to chase. It was like they all knew something that I didn’t just by virtue of the fact that there were more of them. Not only were there more, but they shared the same house. They knew things about being with people that were hard for me to learn. I didn’t have to share my toys with anyone. I didn’t have anyone to play with most of the time, nor did I have anyone with whom to bicker, nor did I feel the attachment of siblings—that bond that could spin them out of being annoyed with one another into a fierce love in a heartbeat.

Thinking back on it now, I suppose I also had a talent for observation. I watched closely, trying to figure out what it meant to have a family. I spent a good part of my childhood in the midst of the middle-aged, the elderly, the childless, the infirm. By the time I was five, my mother was fifty, and my father was forty-eight. When we visited their friends and relatives, there was only rarely any other children around. All the children had grown and left those homes. On occasion, grandchildren might be present—sometimes distant cousins—and I always felt like a needy child when an adult would give me a gentle nudge and say, “Go on. Go out and play.”

Joining those groups of kids was excruciating for a shy only child like me. Although I secretly wanted to, I often shook my head and said, “No, thank you,” preferring to stay close to my mother and father. I spent countless afternoons and evenings, sitting in kitchens and living rooms, or on front porches or out in backyards, listening to people tell stories.

I fell in love with the structure of a good story. That once-upon-a-time. That element of something unknown, something to discover. That march of people through time and space. That feeling of satisfaction that came from finally knowing the answer to that universal question: “What’s going to happen?” In a good

story, the answer always came as a surprise; the unexpected rose to the surface, and when it did, I saw the world and its people in a way I never had.

But a good story had music, too. Its sounds could delight the ear. It had verse.

Consider the turns of phrase I heard: “He ate that fish like a starving fat kid.” “I told him I didn’t chew my cabbage twice.” “I cabbaged onto that fish and wouldn’t let it go to save my life.” “‘Mr.,’ I said, ‘you’re breeding a scab on your ass.’”

The music of simile and metaphor and the unexpected verb.

I heard the same on television. Cartoons like Foghorn Leghorn, and his good ol’ boy southern accent, gave me colorful ways of playing with language. “That’s a joke, ah say, that’s a joke, son.” As did Huckleberry Hound, the laconic blue dog who said things like, “and stuff like that thar,” and sang an off-key and inaccurate version of “Oh My Darling, Clementine.” Or Fred Flintstone with his “yabba dabba doo!”

The music of language was all around me, even in the sounds of the countryside: the three-note call of the whippoorwill from the woods at night; the two sharp notes of the bobwhite, evenly spaced and rising in pitch; the bass lowing of the cows; the chirping of the spring peepers at our pond; the echo that came back to me at dusk when I stood in our farmyard and shouted my name.

Who was I, this child my father at first didn’t want, this only-child, this shy child, this boy blessed with words?

I was the boy the teacher regularly chose to read the captions for the film strips we watched at school.

“Good,” she always said. “Very, very good.”

I wanted to be good. So much of the time, my father made me feel like I was a disappointment. Although he could be proud of me—“Show Ervie how you can dribble that basketball,” he said one night, wanting to show me off to his cousin.—there was more often the sharp word, the lash of a belt, the look of disapproval when I couldn’t do a chore to his satisfaction. “You want me to make you a sugar tit?” he asked me whenever I started to whine. “Can’t never did nothing. Try it again.”

It pleased me, then, to hear those words of praise from my teacher. I loved the gold stars she put on my spelling lessons. I loved the way she gave me featured roles in the little plays we did at the holidays. I loved the way she said, “Does anyone other than Lee know the answer?” when I kept raising my hand to respond to her questions.

I was eager for approval, so much so that when I started school and got my first *Fun with Dick and Jane* reader, I asked my teacher for permission to take it home so I could show my mother.

“It’s mine,” I said, and my mother opened the book on her lap.

“Do you know this word?” she asked me.

“Run,” I told her.

“That’s right.”

It was late afternoon, and the sun was streaming into our kitchen. The cat clock on the wall wagged its long black tail. The refrigerator hummed. Moisture beaded up on the enamel water bucket we kept on the counter. I’d helped my mother fill it at the pump behind the house that morning before I left for school. Now we were sitting at the kitchen table, and my mother was pointing to another word.

“I don’t know that one,” I said.

“You will,” she told me. She closed the book very carefully and ran her hand over the cover. We were alone. My grandmother was napping in her bedroom. My father was out at the machine shed. My mother’s voice was very soft, even more so than usual. She said to me, “You’ll learn to read all the words in this book, and then you’ll learn to read even more.” She handed the book to me. “You’ll see,” she said.

And like that, I saw the letters of the word I hadn’t known. “See!” I said.

“Yes,” my mother said. She put her arms around me and hugged me to her chest. “Yes.”

I have no children of my own, so I can only imagine what she must have been feeling at that moment: pride in this boy whose world, though he didn’t know it, was already starting to change, and a bit of sadness, maybe, because she surely knew that reading and books might one day take me away from her. The world was larger than our eighty acres. Those gravel roads led to blacktops and state highways and interstates. And books led to all sorts of places—places that filled my imagination and gave me permission to dream of a life that wouldn’t involve our farm, our small town, our history of disappointment, the one that started the day my father found out my mother was pregnant and said to Doc Stoll, “Can you get rid of it?”

Though it would be easy to imagine that the word, “verse,” was far removed from my father, its roots actually bind us together. The Latin word, *vertere*, means “to turn,” and the Latin word, *versus*, refers to a turning of the plow, a furrow. My father spent years turning over those eighty acres in furrows, straight and true. I’ve written line after line, turning at the right margin to start

another one. I've loved the labor of words just as my father loved the labor of the land. Farmer, writer: both of us doing our work.

JENNIFER ROGERS

CORIANDER

Not really a brown,
more like a tan, thin
pale paper husk

surrounding potential life,
a germ in an oblong pod
striations around its surface

like stretch marks, earned
and necessary: allowing breakage
without destruction –

strange that it carries no scent.
Gently bitten, the seed itself
bears flavor as old as the earth,

and as complex: bergamot
and toast, curries and dunes,
myrrh and fires licking at the spit,

the woody warmth of coriander
mysterious and prized. Alluring
and elusive ancient spice –

with just a little soil in which to hide
a drizzle and warm sun
it sprouts bold green leaves,

vibrant and lobed,
distinct sharp clean crisp
citrus green cilantro –

powerful flavor that meets with love or hate –
No mystery remains. As the plant
grows, the husk hangs from the first

or second leaf, as if a keepsake
of its past and its journey sometimes
still clinging to mature plants –

whether from fear of what's ahead
or nostalgia for what's behind,
we cannot know.

KARINE LENO ANCELLIN

ODYSSEAS

I know of him,

and of his sorrows,

his pains at sea, leaving captivity seven years thence,
like mine at love, expecting the end of tortures and violence

Under the aegis of Athena he survived and suffered
with my guardian angels I resist, hung on to the undecided

land ahoy, he drifted to the bottom of the rocky cliffs
as I drowned in the spasms of passionate riffs

he did not see the breach to reach land or beach
angry waters lick me, I screech

he divests Calypso's toga on the boulders emerged
estranged, I look to retrace the glory that Love erected

the divine tows him, mortal with no life, to shore and beauty
like the sky allows sun rays, when metamorphosis hiccups I am
here

left as an algae uprooted from its bush, dried up on the shore,
I lack sap, in this parched loveless land,

He lay bare under the gaze of naked Nausicaa in gold.
will Serendip make the gravity of my love hold?

GEORGE RIDGE

FURIES OF DEATH

Screams. Death, pain, rage, frustration, and grief. The once distant roars of death raged closer to the tents that have been squatting at the edge of the sea for a decade now. Oh, the gods were having fun again. The scent of smoke and metal-tinged the air, and the pain infused into it was a tangible element. The sand beneath my feet shifted and slid as I paced yet another lap over the beach. The enemy was further into our encampment than they had breached in the past nine years of our siege. And yet, yet Achilles tent flaps remained closed, undisturbed as the howl of the wolves of war rattled the very sand grains under my sandals. Another chariot returned with another pile of dead men. Men that had been, just this morning, living, breathing strong and ready to tear down the walls of Troy. There was no place left for all those whose life strings had been cut by the furies and been taken over the Styx by Charon. The friend I had made within anger reared his head, sprinkling passion into my blood and bonds. Enough. This had gone far enough. Hot tears of anger salted my face.

Sand gave way to pebbles, pebbles gave way to lumpy rocks, and soon even they were embedded in the solid slab of earth on which our tents had been pitched. When we had first arrived on this cursed shore to retrieve the harlot that Helen was, it has been a pleasant stretch of turf. Now, it was packed down with thousands of war sandals and chariot imprints and sealed with blood, piss, bile, waste, and ash from the pyres that had burned for months in lieu of the plague of death Apollo had fired upon us.

“Achilles!” The name bellowed from me louder than I had anticipated, my ankle nearly rolled on a stray stone on the path up to his tent. “Brother!”

The tent flaps rustled.

“Open your eyes, my friend! My dear commander, they are badly hurt. All who were the best fighters are now lying among the ships with spear or arrow wounds. Your fellow leaders have been struck! Scores of men lay dead with no place for them to be laid to

rest. Our ramparts have been breached; Hector is at the very edge of our camp!”

“Patroklos, I cannot. I have sworn the oath upon the scepter. I am bound to it and cannot fight for Agamemnon against Troy any longer. My heart aches at the losses. These men, I too, once knew. But it is impossible. Hector might sweep into this very tent, and I am helpless.”

Bile filled my mouth. “But brother, if the troops were just to see you they would rally and fight with new vigor! We might yet still regain our ground; if nothing else we would again have our sliver of a sanctum.”

Nothing but somber, resolute eyes met my stare. My heart burst with anger and sank with sadness. We were forfeit. The past decade of agonizing battle, persistence in the siege, was all for naught.

I shook my head. “Brother, I cannot allow this. While I might be loyal to you, we also gave our word to Agamemnon to restore Helen to her rightful place in Greece. My heart is torn! I must aid those who came with us. If nothing else, permit me to don your armor and fight in your stead. You shall not be betraying your oaths, and I might rally the men. There is a chance that seeing you will sway the tide. Please brother, allow this. I cannot stand idly by as they are slaughtered in droves.”

Still, sharp rocks bit at my knees as they met on the ground before Achilles. He looked down at me, who was smaller in frame, slighter in muscle, and weaker in build.

“I shall permit it. But I warn you, my brother, be cautious. You know the cost of war. Do not charge past our borders.”

Together, we rushed to stuff his armor with spare rags so that they might not fall from me in the fray. Once the Achilles esteemed helm rested on my brow, I was fit to join the fight. With one last bemoaning look from my adopted brother, I charged.

The tastes and smell of two clashing metallic tones coated my mouth, and I panted. Blood and bronze, far more familiar than they ought to be, my friends these past years. The thrum of battle had altered, shifted as the Gods turned their heads to watch the armor of the great Achilles whisk the beast of battle and command them on a tight leash. The air hummed with power and anger as the Greeks saw his helm charging. Achilles spear slashing, ripping, mauling, destroying men and their bodies.

They did not know it was me. The bronze brow of his helm stirred the troops, their cries altering from fear to rage. The beast of the Greeks had been awoken. Fire kindled in the soul of the army, manifesting in the flash of bronze armor and taking flight on the tips of arrows. Trojans fell at our feet. Corpse after corpse passed underfoot. My feet splashed through pools of crimson, cascading the air with its blotchy mist. Limbs of men, intestines of men, heads of men ripped before me as I opened myself to the raging beast within. I was Ares incarnate. Power and wrath wrapped around me like a cloak of immortal armor as my vision glowed red. Whether it was from my enemy's sprayed blood or the gods blessing, I will never know. Carrion was my footstool and death was my ally. Sinews tore from my blows, the wet tear reverberating through the shaft of my spear and resonating in my bones. The wolf was out, panting and gasping for more. Its maw dripped with blood and foamed with hunger. I was going to end them. I was going to rip their wall to the dust of the earth, shatter it, cascade it into the pools that were left of their army. I passed our ramparts, and the troops followed.

The soft flesh of a soldier's throat tore as I shredded it with the edge of my barbed spear and slew him. The Trojans hands had nearly reached his wound as he fell and he died. A cry of triumph breached my lips. But suddenly, it was gone; my breath, my helmet, my breastplate. The straps snapped, and the helmet was thrown from the crown of my head as a hot wind whirled through me. The bronze clashed against the damp soil, spitting red-stained earth into the air.

Whispers of awe sounded around me amongst the din of deadly conflict. Not one other had been touched. I alone had had my armor blown from me, leaving me exposed. Apollo had meddled again in the affairs of men. Yet, the rage still simmered in my blood, boiling the marrow of my bones. I had done this much with armor, but I had hardly needed it. I am already at the gates of Troy. I tore my spear from the neck of the boy soldier at my feet and braced myself for the next opponent. The furies, the fates held my life in their hands, as they always had. This changed nothing. Apollo's tricks change nothing.

Hector stepped before my path of death, and I smiled. The eldest prince of Troy gripped his bronze and ashen spear steadily as if he could taste his victory. The wolf within me lifted its head and bellowed. Its howl left my lips. Blood dripped from its teeth, or perhaps it was from mine, and the melee commenced. Bronze flashed as if the sun's rays dwelled within our weapons. Snarls etched themselves on our faces. This was the man leading the Trojans. He was the one who would not force his younger brother, Paris, to give up Helen. He was the one who forced us to stay here and fight, kept us away from our homes, our loved ones. I reared back my arm to thrust it at him, but something jarred my stance and kept me in place. I looked down. Hector's spear protruded from my belly, gleaming with the light of the sun and the gleam of crimson blood; my blood. As if on its own accord, my body pulled back, sliding off the blade. I stumbled back a step, and then another, the grip on my own spear slackening as my lifeblood leaked from me.

Hector leaped. In a charge, his blade found its home again, this time not inside, but through me. A hot rush filled my mouth; the blood dripping certainly was from my own teeth now. The blood-drenched ground caught my fall as Hector jerked back on the handle of his weapon. Its barbed end catching now, returning to its owner with some of me still attached.

“Patroklos, you fool! You are no warrior as Achilles. Your body will be carrion, food for the dogs, and a feast for the blood

gorging vultures!” Hector's voice eased over my ringing ears. He might have been shouting. I couldn't tell you.

“No, Hector. This is your hour, but only by the hand of Apollo. Your doom is soon upon you at my brother's hand.” I might have said more. I might have cursed him, cursed the war, but I was found, meet by death's sweet hands, and this world faded away.

APRIL CLARK

TUESDAY MORNING SUNLIGHT

The other night I called it *an ambivalent relationship*. The one between my skin and me. And Christ, how euphemistic. If I'm honest, I'm an undeserving woman who is violent to herself without a cause. I'm not alone in this.

And so I guess

I'm learning how to learn that
there are moments where it burns

to

be a body. There are moments where it stings. But there are moments where it really feels okay. They're unexpected. There's an art to being caught off

guard.

And lately, this is

all that I can think about: our fingers
laced together in the space above the
bed sheets, and the Tuesday morning sunlight
shifting sweetly through the shades. I see the
dust all in the air, and I am present.

APRIL CLARK

PACKING LIST (FOR BLESSED STOMACHS)

Forks. My father, at the head of the dinner table, praying, forks spilling out of his mouth. They glitter clink clink clink(!) across the table. I put three in my pocket when my father isn't looking. If Jesus comes anywhere near me, I'll stab him with a fork. I'll eat him. I'm so hungry, lately. Also in my pocket: a wire, in the shape of a smile. Braces that I peeled off of my teeth during a fight with myself. My mother said, *Don't you care about your teeth? About your smile? Not caring is such a masculine response.* Is what she said. Whenever she says something worth holding on to, I grip it firm and I push, push, push it through my navel and into my stomach. Had I planned ahead with more care, I would have ten whole jars of blood and belly button lint by now. (What would I do with that, though?) The words I hoard live among the serial bowls of neon sugar cereal that I also keep in my stomach. I'm so full. I forgot to leave six (square) inches for Jesus in my stomach, like I was taught. (Glutton.) I'm so thirsty, too. Lucky for me, I carry five diet oceans in my hair. I never dry my hair off when I shower. It used to be a single sea, but I divided it up with five sharp words (because—?). I divide myself into so many pieces because, because, (forks spilling out of mouths), because I feel like I have to. Words are sharper than razors. Or, no they aren't. Has a word ever swiped so deep into your leg that your leg won't move for two days? I'm not actually sure. Let's find out. We'll win the science fair next year. We'll twist our medals through our navels and we'll leave six inches for Jesus in our stomachs because, because— or maybe we won't (because, who cares?). Everyone will love us so much that they'll want to dissolve us underneath their tongues, like the 8 milligrams of estradiol I take on the daily. Clink clink clink. Stay back, Jesus.



JERRY KIRK

BIG MOON HUG

SATIVA VELA

DISCIPLINE

we practice control
in order to have strong will
the power to grow

A shoe in motion
It hopes that it can be tamed
The rhythm can't stop

MARY CLEARMAN BLEW
AN EXCERPT

WALTZING MONTANA

Murray County, Montana
June 1925

Temple decided his best bet was to send two of his deputies out to arrest Ferrell Adams on charges of assault with intent to do bodily harm and attempted murder. That way, one deputy could back up the other. He picked Dwight Johnson and Milton Bill, ex-doughboys who had seen action in France, and told them he didn't think Ferrell would be stupid enough to resist arrest, but maybe they better sign out a shotgun and take it with them.

"Tomorrow morning's soon enough. But bright and early."

Dwight and Milton looked at each other and did what they were told. Along with the shotgun they signed out a Model T with *Murray County Sheriff's Department* stenciled on its doors, and they headed for the Adams ranch with Dwight driving and Milton staring out at the countryside. Neither Dwight nor Milton were ranch boys. Dwight was born and raised in Fort Maginnis, and Milton had moved down from Havre when the drought hit the Highline at the end of the war, and the banks started closing, including the bank where Milton had a job, and he'd thought prospects might be better farther south. For a while, they were, and then they weren't. Milton, whose first and last names people tried to switch around on him, always said the damned drought had followed him down from Hill County to Murray County. Neither he nor Dwight could see why anybody was drawn to live out here in the endless rolling prairie and endless sagebrush when they had a town to live in.

After an hour and a half of dust and heat, they rolled into the Adams ranch yard. All peaceful. A stocking-legged sorrel horse stood in a corral, switching flies in his sleep. They saw that Ferrell must be home because his truck was parked by an overgrowth of chokecherry brush near the house, where a dog had crawled out from under the front steps to look his visitors over.

"Well—"

Dwight and Milton climbed out of the Model T, Dwight carrying the arrest warrant, and walked up to the house. No point in causing Adams's alarm by taking the shotgun with them, they had decided. A curious flagstone path led to the front steps and the door. The dog sniffed their legs and wagged politely. Dwight knocked on the door.

They waited. Dwight knocked again, and they waited again.

“Ferrell Adams?” called Dwight. “You in there?”

Silence.

“Ferrell Adams? We got a warrant for your arrest.”

“It’s an attempted murder charge, Ferrell, and you’ll be a damn sight better off to come outta there and come with us.”

That was when the door opened a crack and somebody, Ferrell Adams they supposed, whistled the dog inside and slammed the door again and Milton, trying the knob a second later, found it locked.

Ker-rack! The unmistakable sound of a rifle fired inside the house, and the deputies, trained in combat, flattened themselves on either side of the door.

Silence.

Make a run for the Model T and try to retrieve the shotgun when there’s a man with a rifle behind them?

They both had unholstered their revolvers—maybe circle the house from two directions and try to get the drop on him?

The sound of breaking glass above them made up their minds for them. To stay put.

Ker-rack! And the Model T jumped as if startled.

“Jesus Christ, the bastard’s hit the gas tank!”

Ker-rack! Ker-rack!

And Dwight and Milton could only watch as that dirty cocksucking bastard Ferrell Adams shot out the tires of the Model T from a window above their heads.

Silence. Dwight and Milton looked at each other. Was he reloading? Then, still flattened on their sides of the door, Milton looked to the left and Dwight looked to the right, and it was Dwight who noticed some disturbance of underbrush next to the house and saw the burly figure running with his rifle and jumping into his truck and starting his engine.

The truck leaped into gear and roared off. Milton spun around and fired his revolver after it, and Dwight ran to the Model T and grabbed the shotgun and fired both barrels at the truck, but it never slowed, and soon all the deputies saw was the dust it raised.

“How the hell are we getting back to town?”

Dwight put his thumb on the hole in the Model T’s gas tank, and the spurt of gasoline slowed and stopped. “Think we could find a way to plug this hole and make it back on the rims?”

“Think Sheriff Temple will send somebody looking for us, we don’t come back with Adams?”

“Maybe. You rather wait for him here, or part-way down the road?”

Ranch boys might have thought to catch the stocking-legged sorrel horse and see if he was gentle enough to saddle and ride double back to town, but Dwight and Milton decided to stay put, where at least they would have water and shade while they waited, and maybe even find some grub.

Back at Josie’s cabin, the deployment of the Three Musketeers was a little thin on the ground. Albert had left for work at the stockyards and Evangeline was down the street where a cousin was helping her lay out a dress pattern and cut out a dress for herself. Father Hugh, the morning-shift Three Musketeer, saw a parishioner hurrying toward him and thought oh, no, and called to Sammy St. Pierre to walk across the street with his yoyo and cover for him.

When a truck pulled up in front of Josie’s house with a load of firewood, Sammy looked up from practicing Around the World with his yoyo and recognized the driver as his uncle, Renny. He watched Miss Harrington get out of the truck and walk up to his auntie Josie’s house while Renny turned his truck to drive down the bumpy stretch along Josie’s fence. Sammy guessed that Renny planned to toss his firewood from his truck into Josie’s back yard to stack in her woodpile, and he would have gone to help Renny if he hadn’t been covering for Father Hugh. Instead, he switched to Time Warp with his yoyo and practiced that while he looked up and down the street.

Several minutes passed, although asked later, Sammy had no idea how long he practiced Time Warp before another truck pulled up in front of his auntie Josie’s house. Sammy didn’t know the big burly man who climbed out of that truck, but he didn’t like the look of him. Sammy switched to Walking the Dog until he got on the other side of the man’s truck, and then he ran like hell. First for Evangeline, who was the nearest Three Musketeer. Then he ran like hell up the street for Father Hugh. At last! Some excitement to make all his yoyo practice worthwhile.

“I gotta load of firewood for Josie,” Renny had said at breakfast. “You want to ride to town with me and visit with Josie while I unload it?”

Mildred did. Maybe she also could drop by the convent and talk to Sister St. Paul, who had written that the new doctor had cut the cast off Pat’s leg and fitted him with a walking brace and discharged him. Sister St. Paul also wrote that she had visited Pat and examined his leg and had seen that the brace was doing its

work. Pat's muscle tone was returning, and his leg had filled out until he could loosen the buckles on the brace a notch, and he was walking easily by himself.

But Sister St. Paul hadn't written *where* Pat was walking by himself.

Renny drove up to their teetering road and turned toward Fort Maginnis on the county road and drove some more, thinking his thoughts while Mildred thought hers. Bright sunlight falling the windshield, windows rolled down, a rush of wind the truck stirred up, and the scent of sage and the dust rolling up behind them. Before they knew it, it would be time to bring the cattle in from summer pasture and separate cows and calves and sort out the replacement heifers from the calves they'd truck to the auction ring in Fort Maginnis.

Pat had come to her again last night. She had wakened, she hadn't known why, and listened to night sounds. A cottonwood limb was creaking over the cabin roof. One of Renny's dogs growling under his breath, maybe at coyotes again. She sat up in bed and made out the outlines of dresser and lamp table in the dark. The foot of her bed, where Pat materialized. Pat in his white shirt and Levi's. Pat's eyes met hers. His lips moved, and she thought he spoke to her, though she could not hear his words. Her arms reached for him without her asking them to, and Pat dissolved.

She knew some women became strange when their bloods and moons stopped, but she was years away from that time. More likely it was her weeks without talking to anyone except Renny or Smokey. She knew Sister St. Paul didn't like it.

She remembered a time in high school, when Sister Boniface, then Mary Fitzgerald, had been reading a book about the lives of saints and was telling Sister St. Paul about an anchoress in the Middle Ages who had wonderful visions, and Sister St. Paul had wondered aloud if the poor anchoress hadn't been alone too long. Mary had been shocked, but Sister St. Paul, sometimes uncomfortably for others, kept her feet firmly grounded under her.

The hour passed, and they reached Fort Maginnis, and Renny was driving through the old part of town to stop his truck by Josie's cabin and let Mildred out before he pulled around and drove down by the creek where he could throw the firewood out of the truck and into Josie's back yard where he could stack it.

Dusty cottonwood leaves overhead. A dusty apple tree in Josie's front yard, twin to the apple tree in her back yard. A boy, maybe eight years old, played with a yoyo in front of Josie's fence. Mildred opened the familiar gate and closed it behind her and walked up Josie's graveled path. She knocked on Josie's door and,

without waiting for Josie to answer her knock, opened the door and let herself in and found herself face to face with Pat.

Later she guessed he'd come to answer the door, Josie being out back supervising Renny. At the moment, he seemed to have materialized, by daylight this time, in Josie's front room. He looked down at Mildred, his mouth slightly open in his surprise, and she looked up at him and supposed her mouth also had fallen open. In slow motion, Pat's hand reached for hers, and her hand reached to meet his warmth of touch.

"Mil."

He led her a few steps into the room, and she knew he was going to kiss her—and what then, if the door hadn't burst open behind them.

Pat pulling her back by her wrist. Standing in front of her.

Ferrell Adams had come so close that Mildred could see the sweat pouring down his face, and she could smell his stink of sweat, and his years of wearing the same grimy shirts and overalls, and the grime embedded in his face and hands, and, overlying the sweat and grime, the odor of something sharper, an odor like Renny's hooch. She was smelling his rage, she thought. This was how rage smelled.

Ferrell Adams smiled eerily like Pat's except for his broken teeth.

"I'm going to kick that goddamn brace out from under you," he told Pat, "and then I'm going to break you in half. And then you can watch while I give your moccasin squaw what she's asking for."

She felt Pat gathering himself for what was coming, and she looked wildly for a weapon, any weapon, she knew Josie kept a hatchet in the kitchen, and where was Josie, out in her back yard stacking wood with Renny—and then she heard another voice.

"Maybe you'd like to try breaking me in half?"

Ferrell spun to face his new adversary. It was Father Hugh in the open doorway, bouncing on the balls of his feet. The slim young priest confronting the old bull, Ferrell. Ferrell bellowed and charged Father Hugh, and the springs in Father Hugh's feet lifted him and set him down to Ferrell's left. Ferrell turned, trying to keep Father Hugh in his sights, and Father Hugh feinted with his right fist, confusing Ferrell, and then Father Hugh's left-fist jab connected with Ferrell's chin, and Ferrell dropped off his own unbalance so heavily to the floor that chairs jumped and came back down and Josie's rocker started rocking by itself.

Ferrell tried to sit up, failed, and fell back again.

"Mildred," said Father Hugh, "do you know how to drive? Will you take my car and drive over to Water Street and bring back

a policeman or two? I'll stay here, just in case Ferrell gets any more ideas."

"Mildred does not have a do that, Father," said Josie from the kitchen door. She was brandishing a cast-iron skillet. "He try anything, Evvie will sit on him, and I will bash him."

Evangeline, glowing with excitement and dancing on the balls of her feet, herself, had followed Father Hugh into Josie's house.

"Don't worry, Father," said Renny over Josie's shoulder. "Josie, she'll bash him a good one if she needs to, and I'll fetch the cops."

Father Hugh rubbed the knuckles of his left hand, smiling and clearly pleased with himself.

"Kinda glad I got to do that," he said, "although I'll have to hunt up Father Pritchard to hear my confession. Mildred, you be sure to tell Sister what happened. I don't know that she believes me."

Mildred was past telling anything to anyone. She felt herself sway. Pat caught her and picked her up and carried her in his arms to Josie's room and laid her on Josie's bed, and he held her hand until Josie and Evangeline came with cloths and water in a basin and some of Josie's concoctions and chased him away. And then she must have slept.

SHANA WATKINS

A BROKEN SONNET

This day was a parade for my demons,
Clawing viciously at my poor mind's walls.
My darling dark thoughts eager to return
Spectators to agony, sorrow, and falls.
Anxiety, to you, I lavish my heart and soul
To ravage my sanity as you will
And embrace the thoughts you stole;
You brown eyed demon destroy me still,
A mirror reflecting the ghosts in me.
Worry comes calling darkly late at night
And courts my sweet shattered psyche
Until I surrender and concede the fight.
Sisters Anxiety and Worry lust for the same:
To cripple my hopes and dreams, leaving me lame.

ASHLEY ANDERSON

ERASING MEMORY OF SKIN

On the last weekend of a lower Midwest September, the only place I feel comfortable is in my shower, surrounded by purple walls and barely lukewarm water streaming from the showerhead. I feel grimy, sweaty as if there is no way to escape the stuff that is accumulating on my skin. It's not just the sweat, though, which I later find is of my own doing because, despite being set at 68 degrees, my air conditioning unit has frozen up. Pictures show the unit's exhaust pipe covered in ice, a solid tunnel of cold leading in the wrong direction.

As I stand under the showerhead, purple net sponge in hand to scrub what's left away, I also try to scrub the memory of him off my skin. In washing him away, I wonder, maybe I will be able to find some peace.

I run my purple sponge over the echoes of stretch marks left from times when my body rapidly changed shapes, over the essence of a scar from when I spilled boiling pasta water on myself when trying to make Mother's Day dinner the same weekend I graduated with my first master's degree less than twenty-four hours before my younger sister received her college degree from the same university.

I inch closer to the water flowing from the showerhead and look down at the rest of my body. I try to think about a piece of skin he hasn't touched, hands caressing and holding and pulling toward him across space between us while we slept. His echoes still linger, too, and I wonder how long they will continue to reinforce themselves in the structure of my outermost layers. I don't even consider how long they will entrench themselves in my mind.

I wonder just how one does erase the memory of skin; echoes reinforced in layers, the taint embedded in cells.

~

After you closed off our relationship, I took what little I had of you in my apartment and hid those things away in my closet. The picture on my wall of us at the Cincinnati Zoo when we went to see the Christmas lights. The picture of you and your nephew that sat on my desk. The palm-sized rubber duck with the green and white striped hat that you picked for me out of a bucket the last time we went out for brunch at the café in the bright pink house. Half of the keychain set I got you for your birthday so we could carry each other with us no matter where we went. I turned each of these objects over and over in my hands, feeling the

smooth plastic frames and the duck's squishy rubber body and the cool metal of little Ohio that has your initials over the spot where Cincinnati's map dot would be. I don't know where the artifacts of you are buried among soft-sided storage cubes of air freshener bulbs, laundry supplies, and bed linens that I don't have the time or patience to fold in my closet.

I try to hide you, bury you, push you out of sight and mind, but I begin to wonder if I've assigned myself an impossible task. How do I push someone like you out of sight or mind when it's easier to remember so much?

~

It's been over twenty years since Dr. Gary Chapman published his book *Five Love Languages*, which looks at the five general ways in which people express their love for other people in a variety of relationship contexts. There must be a reason that Chapman's work has endured the test of time, academia, and popular culture. Maybe it's that we see something of value in the ways in which we express our feelings, even if those expressions lead to the destruction of the relationships we try so hard to build.

As I read through descriptions of Chapman's five love languages, I already know how it is that I convey my feelings to others. I'm not fluent in gift-giving, which often makes me anxious and develop multiple plans to find *exactly* the perfect gift, for which often there is no tangible match for the ideal I have concocted in my head. Nor do my feelings translate into the language of service by doing things for the person I love. I try, like the time I made him an obnoxiously large batch of homemade chicken noodle soup when he was sick, but I'm always worried that my acts of service might be misinterpreted as wanting attention.

~

As of late, I've found myself drawn to Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*. This is not the first, nor the only time this book has intrigued me, but there's something in Nelson's words that is feeding a part of me attempting to push away an all-encompassing sadness.

Each time I sit or flop or collapse onto my couch and reach for *Bluets*, its slim volume resting among the other artifacts of academic work on the back of my couch, I return to the same sections. Fragments 195-208. The first in this series that draws my attention is Nelson writing about displacement. "Does an album of written thoughts perform a similar displacement or replacement," she writes, "of the 'original' thoughts themselves?"

When I feel adrift, displaced from the places where I used to be – a healthy body, a partner, a lover – I wonder what my

album of written thoughts would look like. *Is this a displacement, I think to myself, or is it simply a replacement.*

~

I wake up Monday morning and I see the red scaly patches that sometimes snuggle in the corners of my chin. I have yet to figure out why they appear when they do, but their plaques pull at the edges where healthy skin meets inflamed, and I begin to scratch. The picking away of the dried plaque of cells makes the skin underneath ooze, and the redness and plaque begin to spread. Not far, but enough that I feel its alienness on my face. I fear that others can see it, too. But I can't stop myself from picking at it. The only remedy is to let the redness disappear so that I no longer can see the difference between normal and not, and once those boundaries fall apart, then I find myself starting to heal.

This time, though, was different.

~

I still remember the roughness of your hands against mine the first time you held my hand. It was our first date, a Thursday evening in November, at the public house in Cincinnati's Incline District that overlooks the rest of the city. At night, you can see Cincinnati sprawling for miles, stretching itself along the Ohio River.

You reached for my hands across the table as we talked, and I remember the callouses on your hands as your skin rubbing against my smooth hands. You held your hands in mine whenever you had the chance as we talked and laughed and marveled at the city lights below us.

Afterward, you walked me back to my car with your arm around my shoulder, which made us laugh again because I am over a foot shorter than you are, and figuring out the configuration of limbs and strides was slightly awkward at first.

But then, when we found my car in the parking deck, you leaned in to kiss me, and the feeling of your lips brushing against mine, whispering an unspoken confession that there was something more there than just flirtatious laughter and a mutual love of books, was enough to make the air touching my skin begin to sizzle, so close to erupting into flames that the potential weighed heavy around us.

~

Quality time, another one of the five love languages Chapman describes, is something I find needs in varying degrees. There are times when I need to sit down and talk with my significant other, to look them in the eye and have a face to face conversation. It's not so much the need for time or communication, but the need for proximity. But being an

introvert by nature, sometimes I need to be alone, disconnected, and spend time with myself to recharge.

Words of affirmation are something I need every so often when I'm feeling insecure or have worked myself up into a state where I begin to think that I am somehow inadequate or making my partner unhappy. Sometimes I need to hear that "it's okay, we're fine," for the insecurity or panic to release me from its grip. Other times, I need to sit down and evaluate our relationship, to pick apart the nuts and bolts that hold me to another person and make sure that all of them are in good shape, the fasteners fastened, the bolts bolted. And yet on other occasions, I need to say or hear "I love you" to banish the cobwebs or the dust that has settled or to even remind me that yes, I am deserving of the love that the world sends my way.

Maybe that was part of the problem. I was so willing to love him, but I never knew if that love was returned in the way I gave it.

~

The next day, I scratch my forehead while getting ready for the day. As I pulled my hand away, I inspect my fingernails. Underneath, a stark white powder almost the same color as my nails are lodged in the space between fingertip and nail.

It's not day-old makeup or another leftover substance. That powder is my skin, so dry that my forehead is turning to dust.

My skin is screaming for something, going through its tremors of withdrawing, but for some reason, my body and I are no longer speaking the same language. My skin is crying out to me, and I'm standing in the wind wearing earmuffs.

~

It wasn't long before the sizzling turned into all-consuming flames, leaving me smoldering and vulnerable beside you, your arms wrapped around me. We laid in silence, reveling in the sound of our breathing and the sensation of flames burning low, glowing brightly against the night.

~

Fragment 199. "For to wish to forget how much you loved someone –" writes Nelson, "- and then, to forget – can feel, at times, like the slaughter of a beautiful bird who chose, by nothing short of grace, to make a habitat of your heart. I have heard that this pain can be converted, as it were, by accepting 'the fundamental impermanence of all things.'"

Nelson makes me wonder about this "fundamental impermanence of all things." Especially when I am in a space where everything that seems at least temporarily permanent is disintegrating, falling apart, peeling away the layers of what has

previously been thought of as at least semi-permanent, here until my shell has become the beautiful bird that is slaughtered by the nature of mortality. But yet, as I pick at my face and see the pieces of skin in my hands and under my nails, as I think about the way I am trying to scour away the language of love and lust, I wonder what kind of slaughter I must lead myself to in order to understand how none of this was meant to be permanent, to begin with.

~

After class on Tuesday afternoon, I decided to spend my feelings. I go to the local sporting goods store and buy the most expensive travel mug I've ever purchased, followed with a trip to Target to buy my favorite kinds of tea that I only buy as a treat.

When I get home, I pour scalding water into the travel mug, one batch to rinse the inside of the gray contraption out and a second to make tea. I drop two tea bags in, an herbal blend that smells citrusy and a little spicy as it steeps. About a half-hour later, I come back and take a deep drink from my new mug, forgetting its promise to keep hot drinks hot for up to twelve hours.

I open my mouth as I sit my tea back on my kitchen counter to let the heat escape. My tongue feels slightly boiled, its surface bearing the brunt of the damage.

When I am under a considerable amount of stress, more so than the already considerable amount of stress I consider normal, I crave acid and heat. Instead of chocolate or wine or ice cream, I want lemonade, pink or regular. Hot sauce, acidic fruit juices, iced tea with obscene amounts of lemon.

By the time I wake up Wednesday morning, I have consumed so much acid that the tip of my tongue and the insides of my cheeks are speckled with the hard, white ulcers that indicate a diet that is out of balance. The tip of my tongue has three or four of these spots, conveniently located in places that make it difficult to speak without pain. I begin to wonder if, since I can't seem to scrub his memory out of my skin, if I am instead trying to burn it away from the inside out.

~

Chapman's fifth love language is the one in which I am most fluent, touch. I am a hands-on, interactive person who needs to feel the concreteness of the world around me. I learn best by touching and doing. I teach in ways that ask students to get their hands dirty. I express love by holding hands, by snuggling on the couch, by curling up next to someone while I sleep.

I know this is where the excitement and the problem laid with him. He was fluent in the language of touch, too, and when

our skins touched the air sang as if it knew that this was a match that was somehow supposed to happen, even if for just a little while. We were almost always touching somehow, someway. We held hands across the table at restaurants, a hand on someone's knee or an arm around the other's shoulders while driving, or closing any space between us while sitting on the couch deciding what to watch.

But it's hard to speak your native tongue when you spend most of your time apart. I tried to find ways to speak in code. The keychains were one such way. I priced a set of rings online that allows us to feel one another's heartbeat on command, haptic devices that recorded our pulses and could share them with our phones so we could always literally be connected at heart. With the steep price tag, though, there was no way I could afford to bridge the physical space between us no matter how badly I wanted to do so.

That's why I am haunted. I still feel haunted, with the language of his touch still written on my skin, still etched in my mind, the words of our speech still in my mouth. When a language becomes such a part of one's identity, sometimes it becomes impossible to erase, no matter how hard I scrub every inch of me.

I, too, ask the same question Maggie Nelson poses in those fragments I return to when I'm sad. "In which case," she writes in fragment 203, "how does one know when, or how, to refuse? How to recover?"

It is the process of recovery that baffles me.

~

Eleven days after he and I split up, I wake up with the clues that I am about to have one of the worst migraines of my life, which is a pretty significant migraine. My classmates that afternoon comment that I don't look like I feel well, that I just look worn out. A half-hour into class, the pressure my swelling brain has placed on the structures surrounding it is so great that I can't feel the touch of my hand that I use to hold up my head. I suffer through the rest of my two and a half hour seminar, get myself home, and I am in bed by four in the afternoon. My migraine medicine begins to blossom in my veins, carrying me off to restful sleep. I don't wake up until seven the next morning, oversleeping my alarm by an hour.

When I sit up the next morning, my skin screams. I don't know what is wrong with me, but I can't move without pain. I feel my stomach revolt as I try to sit at my desk long enough to send an email canceling the class I teach. I choke down some breakfast and barely force some orange juice down my throat. I go back to

bed and sleep most of the weekend away, but no matter what I do, the physical pain will not quit.

I call the doctor's office on Monday morning and ask for an appointment with a female doctor. The receptionist tells me that I can have a pick of any appointment time after eleven A.M. in twenty-minute increments. By the time I get to the health center that afternoon, a piece of my skin has ruptured and is oozing thick, vile-smelling gunk that could only be described as having the smell of disease and cabbage. This doctor says they're not equipped to help me here and that they've already called the emergency room at the local women and children's hospital. They're expecting you, she says.

I hobble to my car with directions written on a notepad with some pharmaceutical name printed on the top.

The physician's assistant in the emergency room drains the abscess that is causing my pain. As she pokes and prods around the lump, I react to the various degrees of pain. A firm grip on one part of my skin caused me to dig my nails into the cushion-covered examining table. She sighs and shakes her head, telling the nurse that there's no wonder why I'm in pain. She's in deep; she tells me as she packs the empty wound. "If you had even waited until tomorrow to come in," the physician's assistant said as she pushed more bandaging into the open wound, "this probably would've been an overnight stay. You would've most likely been septic."

Afterward, I get cleaned up and dressed in the same clothes I wore while struggling to teach that morning. The nurse comes back with my discharge papers, a prescription for pain killers, two more prescriptions for antibiotics meant specifically for skin infections, and two creams, one to repair my skin and another to form a barrier to prevent further damage. I am free to go and slowly make my way back to my car, hoping I can get myself home before the first round of painkillers really kick in and numb everything, skin, and bones, and mind.

~

Twice, I try to erase your words from my skin, attempting to rewrite the transcript you've left behind on the surface of my body. If I speak my language with someone else, I wonder, then maybe I'll be able to start a new story.

Before this, I had never considered hooking up with someone, but after I naively set up an online dating profile, it seems that the men messaging me are only interested in satisfying their needs. Twice, I agree. Twice, I back out of the situation before we even touch. I can't do it.

~

I wonder if Chapman's love languages have room for dialects. I wonder if how I touch-communicate are a variation of the language that everyone around me who is versed in the love of touch speaks. It feels like the equivalent of everyone speaking in words while I am speaking in colors.

~

Fragment 203. Nelson has somehow moved from rivers to memory, from the Disney movie *Fantasia* to, in this fragment, the emergence of crack cocaine in the 1980s. But these moves are so graceful, so artfully balanced, that I don't mind that I am whisked through the process of going from something so natural to simulation to stimulant. She remembers, writing that she heard "all kinds of horror stories about how if you smoked it even once, the memory of its unbelievable high would live on in your system forever, and you would thus never be able to be content without it."

I've never smoked crack because, as a late eighties baby who spent most of her childhood in the nineties, I was told that "hey man, crack is whack!" But I wonder if there are other ways that drugs that aren't drugs live on in our systems forever, whether they be the highs of love or the stings of trauma, the curses of history or burnings of lust or the ever stretching reaches of desire, that seep into our bones, settle in our marrow, and begin to bump against our cells as they are thought to be born anew, but instead released banged and scarred and bruised.

~

While I am sick, I take an obscene number of showers. There is more at stake now. I am not only trying to wash him from my skin but also the infection that makes me feel so untouchable as well even though everyone has reassured me that I am not contagious.

I finish my antibiotics on a Thursday morning twenty-five days after he and I had split up. I shed my pajamas and get ready for my morning shower, and as I look down at my stomach, there are small red spots in no particular pattern on my skin. I begin to wonder what it's from. Maybe I'm having a reaction to the new bottle of shower gel, but I still hop in the shower and wash with what could be the offending blue-tinted liquid soap.

Throughout the day, the bumps start to spread. The skin on the palms of my hands begins to bubble up beneath the surface. Red spots that don't itch or burn or ooze or hurt begin showing up on my hands. A plaque-like rash appears on my abdomen under my belly button. I come home and cry because I want my skin to be back to normal. I look up my symptoms online and call the pharmacy. They both tell me that it's a side effect of not one, but

both of the antibiotics I just finished. I spend the rest of the weekend popping antihistamines and using hydrocortisone cream like it is hand lotion.

~

I only tell you about my first attempt, when the attempt was still a legitimate date. I don't tell you about the second attempt, or the infection, or the emergency room and the warnings of "this could have been septic if you'd have waited another day," or the pain my skin caused me for days on end or the rash that the antibiotics forced up through my layers and out into the open air.

I don't want your pain to hold you back from enjoying the good things in life, you tell me. If only you had known the pain my own body would inflict upon itself without my mind even having to interfere.

~

As I take another dose of allergy medicine and rub my body with cortisone cream, two more medicines that replaced the two antibiotics, skin repair cream, and barrier cream assigned to my infection, I wonder what it will take to erase your memory from my skin. Will I have to shed like a snake, rubbing myself against the ground until my entire outer layer is left behind, a delicate and crisp netting that used to contain me, but is no longer adequate? The thought scares me because I am terrified of snakes, taking every opportunity I can to hide from them.

I begin to wonder if the only possible solution is to shed every piece of skin from my skeleton, epidermis down to the tissues lying beneath the skin. A complete reset, a new skin, seems to be the only way to completely erase what it felt like to have your skin touch mine.

A complete reset, however, is not possible without probable death. I, too, ask the same question Maggie Nelson poses in those fragments I return to when I'm trying to figure out how I'm supposed to navigate this new reality. "In which case," she writes in fragment 203, "how does one know when, or how, to refuse? How to recover?"

It is the process of recovery that baffles me.

~

On top of the scrubbing and infections and rashes and pain, my weight refuses to stabilize. By the time the rashes show up, I have lost a hair under twenty-five pounds in just ten weeks. My skin no longer feels like it fits me.

~

The last remnant of trying to shed my skin are two bands of a thick, rough plaque, one on the inside of each thigh. I lightly

scratch the plaques to try to loosen them enough so they'll peel, and my old skin comes off in chunks.

I wonder if my body is shedding the last bit of him. Or the infection. Or the reaction to the antibiotics. Or all three.

I hold the pieces of my skin that I have just separated from myself in the palm of my hand before throwing them in the bathroom trashcan. They are darker than my skin has ever been, and I wonder if it's the medicines or remnants of the infection or the words of his love language eking out of my skin. Maybe it's a combination. Maybe it's none of these things.

I inspect the topography of these pieces of plaque, some of which are tiny and some of which are almost the size of a dime. They're lumpy and bumpy and rough on both sides. Nothing about them is smooth or indicates ease with which they may have formed. To me, their surfaces indicate trauma, internal and external, and though this trauma is a pittance in the face of other traumas that skin that is not mine has faced, something about my surface has noticeably changed. The ridges on the cap of the orange juice bottle in my fridge dig in and hurt more than they did in the past. Hot dishwater is almost unbearable, but still very necessary to get my dishes clean. I find myself unconsciously scratching something more than I did before I had to grow a new shield between my innards and the outside world.

By the time I visit my family in Ohio for the Thanksgiving holiday, my skin is still shedding. Particularly, the skin on my hands refuses to stop peeling, but the pieces that lift themselves from the layers underneath become smaller and smaller each time a new layer of skin is exposed to air.

Just as I think I am getting over whatever it is that is ailing me mind, body, and soul, I catch a sinus infection that turns my nose bright red from the constant assault of tissues. My dad suggests that I should see a doctor, and I look at him as if he's just said one of the dumbest things of his life.

~

Fragment 205 in *Bluets* is the fragment that makes me both terrified and intrigued. After all of the talk of water and blue and collecting and impermanence, Nelson suddenly brings in snakes for almost two pages.

I am terrified of snakes. My fear of that family of serpents makes me very aware of how the things that insight terror in me are, most likely, not going to be the cause of my mortality.

In this fragment, Nelson recounts intimate moments with her lover that has a tattoo of a blue snake on the back of his hand, "which I liked to watch dance against the white of his wrist when the rest of his hand had disappeared inside me." Everything in

this fragment seems to experience a disappearance of stability – the snakes that overheated after the power went out and came back on, the wobbly lofted bed that sheltered the unsteady plant stands for orchids, and Nelson herself as a lover after the nameless “he” gets a tattoo of a distorted blue circle at the base of his neck. Nelson ends this fragment of choice with the line, “I didn’t live with it long enough to know about what it did.”

But I have lived with my skin long enough to know what it does and what it has done. In light of the layers of cells and plaques, love and lust, languages and runes and the faintest scents of touches that made the world shiver, I wonder how much longer I can experience my disappearance of stability before the whole structure comes crashing down.

~

The process of recovery baffles me.

I’m not sure if this album of new skin, young and tender, is a displacement or a replacement.

Fragment 199. “For to wish to forget how much you loved someone –” writes Nelson, “- and then, to forget – can feel, at times, like the slaughter of a beautiful bird who chose, by nothing short of grace, to make a habitat of your heart. I have heard that this pain can be converted, as it were, by accepting ‘the fundamental impermanence of all things.’”

Recovery came slowly, like the creeping of the sunrise.

I’m still not sure if I have washed him out of my skin. Maybe my skin has shed him, sloughed off the script he had written in my pores. Maybe it was all of the showers. Maybe it was just simply the “fundamental impermanence of all things” that meant I never had a chance to hold on to whatever it was that was no longer mine.

It was sometime between Christmas and New Year’s that I started to get a familiar itch. This itch reappears every so often, usually corresponding with a major life event. This isn’t an itch that I can ignore, and it goes away, but instead, the instinctual craving to somehow commemorate a change or moment in my life by making changes to my body. Find new ways to adorn it.

On a chilly and windy January evening the Wednesday before my thirty-second birthday, I parked my alien green Kia Soul in front of the city courthouse in downtown Columbia, Missouri, and walked the block and a half to the tattoo and piercing parlor that I had been checking out on the internet for a couple of weeks.

As I signed the forms and stared at the zombie figure climbing its way out of the lobby fireplace, I realized just how out of place I feel in tattoo parlors. I don’t have any tattoos myself.

The feeling of pricking the surface of my skin and sending ink deep into my layers is not what attracts me to these places. I answer the final question on the form – “Once you leave here today, will you commit an act of kindness for a stranger?” – with a yes and hand the clipboard and my ID back to the dark-haired man in charge of the desk.

The rest of the procedure didn’t take long at all. When it was my turn, I hopped up onto the table, laid back, and exhaled long and deep as the hollow needle sang through the folded flesh of my ears to create a new space.

A displacement to commemorate a replacement.

A replacement to claim what always was and will always be mine.

The piercing artist finishes installing the captive bead hoop in what is called a daith piercing, or the piercing of the ridge of cartilage above the tunnel to your inner ear. For me, the slight changes to my body that I make each time a needle makes room for metal is a way of saying that what was once yours can never *exactly* be yours again, like the ways in which you can never step in the same river twice.

I, too, am learning about the fundamental impermanence of things. Things that cannot and will not be, at their core, the same again.

I put on my coat, shake the piercer’s hand, walk past the zombie in the fireplace, and make my way back into the winter cold.

DREW PISARRA

PERSONAL ALGORITHM

Every single solitary mental potential
gets digitized as we hive-mind
what to eat, what to read, what to watch,
who to hate, when to sleep, why to speak,
where to go, what to buy, when to tweet,
but not how to spend our time and change.

We take our conversations with us,
our aggregated companions too,
we hold our heads in our hands
or at least the symbol of the head
in the phone held by one hand
while the hand stickers, disrupts,
half-hides half-reveals half-meanings
or thoughts we might have thought
about before thinking before that
what ever else yes/no system
suggests we say/click do or don't.

You haven't lived until you've been decoded,
recoded, encoded, transcoded, transmitted,
refitted then filtered, forwarded and flagged,
tagged and tweaked, snapped and sorted
into a folder of sorts, an archive of saved
missives diarizing some daily play
while a profound sound like a reverb
undercurrent nervously tries to signal
our internal system back into being.

W. VANDOREN WHEELER

THEATER

I staged a play, a
soliloquy.
On a white wall
in red pen I drew
with a trembling hand a
line.

The play was boring.

The ushers, my team
of sharply dressed
Navy Seals, strangled—
professionally, of course—
each audience
member, and
in a neutral
tone asked that
as they died they
consider the play.

After the ushers
resuscitated us, our
applause was deafening.
Our cheers swelled
into a collective
weeping washing
our faces so clean
we became babies
loving everything.

W. VANDOREN WHEELER

EARTH WORKS

I constructed a spaceship large enough to hold earth's population in orbit while the landscape healed. I sent a cute robot down to check on things. When I realized I was retreading a popular animated film, I grew depressed. I rallied, constructed a second earth, a planet which had never seen a movie or a book or a rock smudged with a burnt stick. Then the true work began: to impregnate these voluptuous clouds.

JESSICA NILES

GRIEF IS PINK

They told me grief is slow.
It eats an elephant one bite at a time.
Empties the ocean with a bucket.
Walks towards the horizon with shrinking steps.

How far is grief?
How much?
It chokes my mouth, swells cheeks into pillows.
I breathe in feathers.
Blood and elephant fat spatter the dirt floor.

Grief shows its belly,
Snaps its coated teeth, snarls at a hovering touch.

Grief remembers everything
Like a bully remembers everything.

Grief glows.
It burns all night, flaring at each rasp of the machine.
Death glows.

APRIL VASQUEZ

RECOLLECTIONS OF CHILDHOOD

My kindergarten at Lattimore Elementary School was in a separate building, a long brick structure with a kitchen at one end where we ate cake when it was somebody's birthday. The carpet was flat and threadbare, worn down by generations of kindergartners, and the building was permeated with the competing smells of old wood and new plastic. Outside, the curved stems of painted daisies and tulips stretched upward toward a fat, smiling sun near the roof.

My teacher was a sleek, ebony woman named Miss Walker. She was the first black person I'd ever known personally. Tall and thin to begin with, Miss Walker added to her height with impossibly high heels that clicked on the hard floor of the kindergarten's kitchen. Her prominent cheekbones were rouged, her eyes shadowed a metallic silver. She had a mouth full of perfectly white, straight teeth, and her hair stood out from her head in individual lacquered tresses. She never got angry.

Miss Walker's assistant, on the other hand, looked just like all the ladies at my grandmother's church. Miss Washburn was a heavy white woman, middle-aged, and impatient. Her silver hair was set in tight, round curls all over her head, and her teeth had a little tinge of brown as if they were decaying from the inside. I could see the beige part at the top of her pantyhose when she stepped over my body at nap time.

When Jake Jenkins fell off of one of the half-buried painted tractor tires that we played on at recess and broke his wrist, Miss Washburn didn't give him a tissue to blow his nose or tell him to go to the front office to call his mama. She just rubbed his arm up and down like she was giving him an Indian burn and told him to go back to class, he'd be fine. The next day Jake came to school with a stiff white cast on his arm that we all put our first names on with markers after the letter lesson and song. Our letter that day was "J."

Another day we learned a song that had no music, a little chant that concluded, "Gray squirrel, gray squirrel, shake your bushy tail." Miss Walker showed us how to wiggle our backsides in rhythm to the refrain, and we practiced it several times, each time erupting in giggles at the end. I enjoyed the song so much that when I got off the bus that afternoon I ran up the driveway and breathlessly showed the dance to my mother, chanting it just like Miss Walker had: "Gray squirrel, gray squirrel, shake yo' bushy tail."

My mother looked at me, unsmiling. I was confused, uncertain of what I'd done wrong. She pointed her finger at me and made a jabbing motion to punctuate her words, "Don't you ever let me catch you doing that again."

"How come?"

"Because," my mother said, "you sound just like a nigger."

*

I felt swallowed up by the school. I couldn't see in front of me past the high bus seat, and my lunch tray came almost to my chin. Also, nothing worked right. When I went into the bathroom after lunch, the spigots were all leaking little streams of water. My mother always told me to put a tissue on the toilet seats in public bathrooms because *nasty people have bugs*. I remember seeing a black bug crawling along the bathroom floor and wondering if it had crawled out of some nasty person as she sat peeing.

Once there was a solar eclipse on our way to lunch, and Miss Short told us not to look at the sky because even though the sun looks dark, it's burning a hole through your eyes the whole time. At lunch, Kenneth Greene told us that this happened to his cousin. He looked at the sun during an eclipse and his eyes melted and ran down his face, and then he had two gaping sockets where the eyeballs used to be and couldn't go to school anymore. He couldn't even look at his baseball cards, which had been his favorite thing in the world.

Another day a big boy on the bus gave me a butterscotch candy. When I told Miss Washburn, she snatched it out of my hand and threw it in the trash.

"You never take candy from strangers!" she scolded. "He could have poisoned it!"

After that, I imagined the big boy with a witches' cauldron, stirring up a pot of poison to kill me with. I wondered why he would be so interested in killing me, and why, afterward, he was still so nice, though I clearly hadn't died.

*

Since I've never been back inside it in waking hours, the Lattimore Elementary School I roam in dreams is the place I knew as a child. The hallways are interminable, the industrial ceiling lamps high above me. The school of my dreams is full of dark corners and closed doors.

In these dreams, I never know where I'm supposed to be. Everyone else moves with a purpose, but I languish. Sometimes I'm bumped and pushed along by anonymous masses of kids whose faces I never see. Other times I'm completely alone. I'll

come out of an empty bathroom only to find that it's dark outside, the doors are locked, and everyone has gone home.

*

After lunch one day I went into the bathroom and saw a crowd of seven or eight girls pressed together outside the last stall. They looked nervous, conspiratorial; their voices were hushed. I was surprised to see that some of the girls were in my grade, fourth, along with older girls from fifth and sixth. Normally those girls didn't associate with us.

It turned out that everyone had been subjugated by the mystery at hand. We were, all of us, the uninitiated.

"What's going on?" I asked Goldie Morgan, who rode my bus.

"Susan has her period," she said in a low voice.

That mystery of mysteries, which our mothers had tried embarrassingly to warn us about as we squirmed and looked away, and the Health First series filmstrip demonstrated with diagrams and scientific terms. At the beginning of the year, the teachers of the older grades separated the girls from the boys and made us watch a video on the subject. The boys didn't watch our video, though; I knew because they got on the bus that afternoon repeating words like *masturbation* and *ejaculation*, words we hadn't learned.

I knew who Susan was. Like Goldie, she rode my bus, a tall, lanky girl with blond hair and incongruous dark brown eyes. She had the look about her of another time: round, soulful eyes in a pale, thin face. I would remember her years later as I looked at the cover of a biography of Virginia Woolf.

Suddenly the stall door slowly opened outward, and we all moved backward in a mass, like cattle. Susan stepped out, looked around, then held out her hand to reveal the marvel to us. It was a piece of neatly folded white toilet tissue with a perfect circle of bright red blood in the middle. I thought it looked like a doctor's office finger prick: a circle of blood, a literal period.

As if to reinforce my thoughts, Susan herself said scornfully, "It's just a period." Then, with a disappointed shake of her head, she closed herself back up in the stall.

*

Twice a week we had music lessons. Mrs. Lattimore walked us from our regular classroom to the auditorium, which was like a cavernous mouth with rows of wooden seat teeth. We sat in the first couple of rows, near the piano, and sang with gusto, mostly patriotic pieces like "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" and "Nothing Could Be Finer."

Nothing could be finer than to be in Carolina

*In the mo-o-orning,
Nothing could be sweeter than my sweetie when I meet
her
In the mo-o-orning...*

But the older boys had their own version, which they sang on the bus ride home:

*Nothing could be finer than to be in her vagina
In the mo-o-orning,
Nothing could be sweeter than my sweetie when I eat her
In the mo-o-orning...*

The music history instruction was accomplished by means of a series of dingy-looking posters, each of which had a sketch of a different composer on it. The men, with their crusty faces, mouths drawn into hard lines, and unfailingly wild hair, were more or less indistinguishable.

The poster series was like Mrs. Lattimore herself, old, faded, and dull. She stood before us in her lime-green polyester pants suit, glasses perched at the tip of her nose, the most ancient of all the teachers and seemingly a living embodiment of the school itself, even in name. She called out the chief events in the lives of the composers, prompted by the posters, which she strained to read. Sometimes one of the boys tore little pieces of lint from his sweater and set them adrift in the air by blowing on them. The boys around him clawed the air and tittered.

We sat facing the stage, behind which lay a maze of secret passageways. Twice a year we put on performances for our parents. Not only did these spectacles take place on the stage itself, but they were performed at night, which lent them special charm. No one could be absent. Also, no one was to wiggle or scratch. The emphatic manner in which this was repeated by Mrs. Lattimore in the weeks preceding each show made me decide that I would practice it even outside of school. Nightly, I rehearsed standing completely still while watching myself in my bedroom mirror, bearing with fortitude the various itches that assaulted me. My eyes would unfocus; my mind goes blank. Although I didn't time myself, I knew I was getting better, lasting longer and longer without moving.

I'd read a story in my textbook that year about Native Americans who lived as part of nature, whose presence in the woods was indiscernible to outsiders. Because they could stand motionless for hours at a time, they were expert hunters. The animals grew accustomed to their presence, not expecting them,

suddenly, to strike. I thought how much I would like to live like that: silent, still, part of nature. Invisible.

*

In the fall, I changed schools and went to West Cleveland. All the boys at the new school were savages. They sneered and pushed each other and snapped the girls' bra straps. Any conversation was taken to insinuate sex. If you said, "Give it to me," about a pencil or a plastic fork or a P.E. jersey, they leered at you and mocked, "She wants you to give it to her." Then they'd laugh raucously and slap each other high fives in the air.

What do you call a man with no arms or legs on a doorstep?

Matt.

What do you call a man with no arms or legs in the ocean?

Bob.

What do you call a man with no arms or legs in the mailbox?

Bill.

The boys' bodies were out of proportion, their arms too long, their feet too big. But the girls didn't seem to mind any of this. They giggled and simpered and talked in low voices about the cute boys they wanted to *go with*. They wore shiny lip-gloss and eye shadow with sparkles in it and got their hair permed curly, and hung *Teen Beat* centerfolds on their bedroom walls.

It was during these years that I first became aware of the divide between my classmates and I. I seemed to be lacking something fundamental that they all had. I spent more and more time alone in my room, reading books, emptying myself of my own life. I was still inside the general group, but precariously so. The other girls split off into pairs and shared charm necklaces, each a half heart with a lightning strike schism and half the words *Best Friends Forever* in italic print. They closed their notes to each other *BFF*. But I was no one's BFF; I was an extra.

Little by little, I turned myself over to my strangeness and established my place outside their circles, at the edge of their acquaintance. One year I was the only girl not invited to a birthday sleepover. Another time I discovered that four or five of them had a secret club against me. But by that time, I didn't care too much what they did. They were much, much less interesting to me than the characters in books. The primary advantage of reading was that with a book, I could replace my own unsatisfactory life with a better one. I could escape, disappear.

*

In high school, I exhibited my alienation by being “alternative.” I traced a thin line of eyeliner out to the corner of my eyelid like Cleopatra, Queen of the Nile. I wore combat boots, the kind I would later learn that the slang name for in Spanish is *mataratas*, rat stompers. I read Kurt Vonnegut and Beat poetry. I listened to the Misfits, the Queers, the Circle Jerks, the Cramps. I wore black, or ragtag outfits I bought myself at thrift stores.

Despite my outlandish tastes, I was recognized as smart. I ate my lunch, which I packed for myself each morning in a paper bag, in my English teacher Mrs. Cameron’s classroom, and we had a kind of private continuation of the class each day, talking about books and authors. She was a pale, fragile woman who’d lost her husband several years before when a tractor turned over on him. Mrs. Cameron was the embodiment of tragedy, and I loved her for it.

Not only she but all my teachers predicted greatness for me. On Awards Day I was instructed to sit near the front of the auditorium since it was known that I’d be called up several times to accept awards; except for math, I was at the top of all my classes. I tramped down the aisle in my rat stompers, feeling like a brilliant, sardonic alter ego of myself.

Despite my good grades, my parents refused even to consider helping me pay for college.

I stopped eating all animal products, milk, eggs, even honey. I plastered the walls of my bedroom with literature and photographs illustrating the mistreatment of animals: millions of days-old male chicks are killed in high-speed grinders every year because they’re worthless to the egg industry. Cows are hoisted upside down by their hind legs and dismembered as they hang, fully conscious, in the air. Pigs, as smart and good-natured as dogs, die en route to slaughterhouses at a rate of 100,000 per year. More than 400,000 are crippled as they’re transported. The killing rate in a typical slaughterhouse is four hundred animals an hour.

My father cracked, “If only they didn’t taste so good.”

One day when I came home from school, my mother was watching a cooking show on t.v. The cook, a middle-aged woman with platinum hair and a half-pound of make-up, took a raw slab of meat from a bloody-looking marinade and laid it out in a pan, cheerfully drawing instructions all the while. My mother sat making notes on a piece of notebook paper.

“That’s disgusting,” I said, scowling at the t.v.

My mother turned on me, eyes narrowed.

“Don’t you just think you’re so high and mighty, looking down on all the rest of us. You better be careful who you’re judging. It might turn out that you’re even worse than they are.”

But nothing she said could touch me anymore. The week before, I'd found out that I had gotten a full scholarship to college. It was over at last.

CAROLYN MARTIN

BEDEVILED

“Giant ‘Frog From Hell’ Fossil Found in Madagascar,”
Brian Handwerk, *National Geographic News*, February 18, 2008

Scientists have puzzle-pieced fossils
from Africa’s southeast and dubbed
their hellish find *Beelzebifo*.

A crusher of hatchling dinosaurs,
a shredder of lizard skins,
this native South American refined
his Pac Man jaws, buffed up
his steroidal size at every stop
across his continental hop.

I understand his drift.
When human error delays a flight,
I crush coffee cups
and chew out reservation desks.
When flight attendants cite
the FAA to tie me to my seat –
it’s bathroom or embarrassment –
I feel my rage puff up
into threats of nastiness.

Of all the totems on my pole,
this amphibian is my newest guide.
If any vertebrate gets in my way
or continental drift nudges
me off course, I’ll shape-shift.
I won’t kill any kid or shred
aging skin, but watch out.
Aggressiveness will ooze
through my green eyes.

CAROLYN MARTIN

To: John Q. Poet
From: The IRS
Re: Taxes and Penalties
Date: mm/dd/yy

Dear Mr. Poet,

Thank you for your delinquent funds
and the elegiac couplets explaining
their tardiness. I enjoyed *forget/regret*,
taxes/asses set in pentameter, nearly iambic.

As for the penalties, while I understand
you supplement the pennies poets make
with teaching undergrads the rhythmic effects
of dactyls and anapests, my hands are tied.
The rules for fines are as sacred as those
for sonnets, sestinas, and triolets.

With that said, I'd like to share something
you would understand: decades ago
I wrote a poem my high school teacher
penned *Extremely maudlin* in red ink.
I didn't know what *maudlin* meant,
but figured it was not a compliment.
Thanks to her honesty, I spend my days
composing dispassionate retorts
to mawkish letters that grovel and blame.

On a whim, I cc'd your letter upstairs.
Our website editor wants to publish it.
If you approve, send me a third- person bio,
fifty words max. Believe me, not many
are honored with this opportunity.