

**THE
VIRGINIA
NORMAL**

ISSUE 6
SPRING 2020

The Virginia Normal is a publication of Virginia State University's Department of Languages & Literature.

All content copyright ©2020 The Virginia Normal
Individual rights revert to authors upon publication.

www.thevirginianormal.com

The Virginia Normal

Department of Languages & Literature, Box 9072
Virginia State University
1 Hayden Drive
Petersburg, VA 23806

Submission Guidelines

The Virginia Normal reads submissions from August through April. All manuscripts received over the summer will be held until the fall. Send up to six poems or ten pages of prose as a .doc or .pdf attachment to thevirginianormal@gmail.com. Complete guidelines are available online.

The Virginia Normal

Editor

Tedria Smith

Associate Editor

Sha-Keiya Culzac

Assistant Editors

Emani Brown

Deja Farquharson-Carter

Faith Cunningham

Branson Neuman

Nia Stevens

Designer

Francisco Umana

Faculty Editors

Ann Rudy Franklin

Michael McClure

Claire Boswell

Acknowledgments

The editors extend special thanks to Dr. Sheikh Kamarah, Dr. John Holmes, and Cheryl Stewart for their support, as well as to Dr. James Capozzi for his efforts in establishing the journal.

Table Of Contents

POETRY ●

Holly Day

- MEMOIR OF ANOTHER WORLD 1
- NOCTURNAL SONG 3
- ECHOES OF THE DOG 4
- "I HAVE EATEN ONE OF EVERY TYPE OF BIRD IN THIS FOREST," SAID THE ORNITHOLOGIST 5

Lee Clark Zumpe

- THROUGH THE WINDOW AT 2 A.M. 6

Rebecca Givens Rolland

- HUNGER AS THE ORDINARY ART 7
- SONG OF THE CITIZEN FROM A PRIOR CENTURY 9

Jacob Appel

- THE LORIKEET 21

Sharon Kennedy-Nolle

- SLIPSHOD 22
- SUSQUEHANNA 23
- "BETTER TAKE WHATEVER YOU WANT NOW, HONEY" 25

Madelyn Camrud

- COUSIN INGRID 26

DS Maolalai

- MY BROTHER VISITS 33
- THE AQUARIUM 35

Darren C. Demaree

- CLAWING AT THE GROUNDED MOON #79 37
- CLAWING AT THE GROUNDED MOON #80 38

Alison Hicks

- SUNFLOWER 39
- MOUNTAIN ASH 40

Carolyn Wilsey

- TURNING 40 IN PORTSMOUTH SQUARE 42

Patrick Kelly Joyner	
• HARVESTING. MIDDAY	43
• USEFUL	46
• VW BUG	48
• DEAL	49
Merridawn Duckler	
• FURTHER DOWN THE BAR	73
• HOLY MOVIES	74
Cathy Allman	
• TOURIST NOTES: WHEN I WATCH MY GRANDDAUGHTER, AT HOME, CONNECTICUT	75
• OUTLINE FOR HER NOVEL	76
Rochelle Jewel Shapiro	
• CITY PIGEONS	82
Catherine Stansfield	
• WHEN COUNTING SHEEP FAILS	83
Julio Monteiro Martins	
• LA BALLATA DI CABO BRANCO	84
• THE BALLAD OF CABO BRANCO (translated from the Italian by Donald Stang and Helen Wickes)	85
Peter Leight	
• WHEN THEY PUT ME IN CHARGE	91
• THIS WAR	92
Robert Beveridge	
• THREE	93
Eva-Maria Sher	
• NOTHING TO CROW ABOUT	95
Monty Jones	
• PROKOFIEV	98

Kelly R. Samuels

- MIRRORS AND ARCHIBALD GEORGE BARNES'S
CONTEMPLATION

117

Brendan Todt

- SHORT PROSE FOR TWO
- WE ARE ALL ALONE
- IF YOU BELIEVE IT

119

120

121

FICTION ■

Mika Seifert

- THE EDGE™ 11
- THE PLOT 78

Michael Pasley

- VANISHING 27

Daniel Kenitz

- THE PARENT LICENSE 52

Andrew Condouris

- KIND EYES 100

MEMOIR OF ANOTHER WORLD ●

Holly Day

“Remember this?” I inquire, holding up the indistinct plaything, a dog, maybe. “You used to take this around with you everywhere, you always had it.” I don’t know why I say it. I think it’s a test. I observe the blank gaze change to recognition as she takes the toy, turns it over and over in her small, pudgy hands before smiling brightly and nodding, “I remember this.”

It’s an awful game, this dishonesty, because I know for a fact she doesn’t remember this toy, this toy probably isn’t even hers, I may have found some other child’s toy in the back yard and just thought it was hers. I know I don’t remember this toy, this fuzzy, dirt-covered dog-thing, can barely remember when she was small enough to appreciate something like this myself.

She is consciously trying to amuse me, patronizing me, embellishing on the pretend memories—“I called this dog ‘Scruffy,’ and we were best friends.

Scruffy thought I was his mother, and he was right.” She looks at me, waiting

for my own ridiculous additions to the story, something about how I’m this dog’s grandmother, and how I’ve missed this dog so much since it went off live in the back

yard, under the deck, and how I’m so glad that Scruffy’s found his way home back to us again.

We take Scruffy inside and wash the dirt from the toy, dry its mangy, matted coat

with a blow-dryer, and in my head, I’m terrified at how quickly she’s adopted the idea that this toy was a defining part of her childhood.

I spend the rest of the day imagining strangers on the street stopping by her where she sits in the front yard, doodling her adventures with Scruffy on the sidewalk

in fluorescent swaths of chalk, saying, “Do you remember me? I
used to be
your mommy, daddy, big brother, remember?” I imagine her
nodding, smiling,
taking the proffered hand of the friendly stranger
put out to lead her away.

NOCTURNAL SONG ●

Holly Day

if I could have accepted that this morning
we would be ended and done not later
than tonight I never would have gotten up
exposed myself to the morning
I would have stayed asleep, alive

under the covers, reserved my arm numb
around your upper body, lips on your back,
eyes stopped up. I would have found a way to contain

the dawn, to keep the bright fingers of light
from creeping across the bedclothes to trace the shadows
of your face, to stroke your eyelids into opening, to keep
this new thought that we must be over from
blossoming into the angry flower

you keep close to your heart
this denial of me.

ECHOES OF THE DOG ●

Holly Day

The first thing we need to do is dig a large hole
one wide enough to fit everything from the past into it
deep enough to be able to cover everything completely once
the deed is done, deep and wide enough that once the hole is
refilled

the ground can be stomped flat without exposing
the errant kitchen utensil, a dusty, furred teddy bear leg.

Afterwards, seeds must be spread over the ground
something that grows quickly so that in just a few days
no one would ever guess the wreckage beneath the new
shoots.

beans, perhaps, some verdant and vigorous writhing vine
looking for a tree or twig to whirl tendrils around
or perhaps just grass, some mixed-seed blend
guaranteed to sprout at the first hint of water.

Years later, when people stumble over this site, they'll find
only jungle, or prairie, or even just hard, packed dirt
nothing to hint that our lives together ended here.

**“I HAVE EATEN ONE OF EVERY TYPE OF BIRD
IN THIS FOREST,” SAID THE ORNITHOLOGIST ●**

Holly Day

He opens the wings of the bird over the nest
poses her protectively around the clutch. At the last minute
he rearranges the eggs so that the ends all point
towards one another, instead of lying haphazardly in the basin of
leaves and twigs
as they did when he first found his subject.

The little bird's head lolls to one side, glassy eye stares back
up at nothing. Sighing, the ornithologist picks up the little body,
sets it back down in the nest, restores the maternal pose
props the head up with a bit of straw
against her neck, where it can't be seen. She could be alive now
a tiny blue-green finch, patiently shading her brood
against her breast, under her outspread wings.

He fills out his sketch with a backdrop of greenery
surrounds his prey in platitudes, a vision of some place untouched
by the fans of his books.

THROUGH THE WINDOW AT 2 A.M. ●

Lee Clark Zumpe

Last night, you went to the window.
Last night, something drew
you from the bed, lured you
into the living room, pressed
your palms against the back of
the sofa and urged your fingers
to separate the blinds. Last night
you watched her come home. You
watched her anonymous lover
park his pick-up three houses
up the street, watched her linger
there long enough to let your
imagination stray into dark
territory, watched the door
swing wide with sudden bravado,
watched high-heels sink
into dew-moist St. Augustine
grass.

Last night, the margaritas
tricked her into feeling stealthy.
Last night, she didn't feel your
eyes upon her as she curb-skirted
her way home to the house across
the street. Last night, you felt sorry
for her husband. Last night, you
remembered feeling sorry for yourself.

HUNGER AS THE ORDINARY ART ●

Rebecca Givens Rolland

While dressing, I shut
the door: ashamed
at what I've come to what has become
of this body he once thought
made for love—

my husband enters: only a tiny
insinuation
freckled glance
at this corpus
the whole
of the tongue-
tied body its convex swerved
to meet convex
space where tiered lines
marking childbirth
appear space where
no human has
for some time made
inroads ramshackle
plot
of fallow field
furrows interspersed

like no one else's tricked-
out path to him
lovemaking is nothing but
a second

SONG OF THE CITIZEN FROM A PRIOR CENTURY ●

Rebecca Givens Rolland

In our castle garden, a vagrant gust over ground
winds our ears like analog clocks. You stand your ground,

alongside a sundial. Our gazebo gleams
where I left you, camellias wracked. Digging ground,

I find bulbs yet to bloom. Children long gone. Empty
yard beckons us to plant. We refuse. Lost, you ground

all our plans for now. Where was our treasure? Our
marked X? This map's useless, shows blank ground,

ghosts of women pinioned by hand-spinning
wheels for eternity. In memory's moat, I ground

heels, tell toes to flex, limbs to flutter. Yet, face
to face with you, I'm paralyzed. No king's ground,

this restrictive charter, more like a closed mouth,
wishing to open. Beg pardon? I demand red ground.

Come back, it begs. You'll freeze, find your feet. I
ask what other women want: guards to keep ground

from burning them whole, and no white fences? No.
How many years till tomorrow? Uncharted ground

from tick to tock, from snore to snore, from towel
to washcloth, souring with age: not the ground

I once said I'd give my life for. Not the countryside
I wanted to see. Will the two of us be ground

down together? Grow mad? Make symphonies?
Don't tell me I've loved you into the ground,

or haven't loved well. The ghost of an old regime
rises in me. I tap a new melody, gain ground.

After Newport, Oregon (2041), Sucre, Bolivia (2044), New York City (2045), and the whole of Liechtenstein (2047), in 2048 it was our turn to live on the *Edge*™. Not exactly cause to jump and jive, you can imagine. When the guy from *Edgeworks*™ left again, faces were long. Skinny dude they had sent, name of Olaf Something-or-other. Face like a weasel. Painfully obvious he couldn't wait to get out of here again - with good reason, of course. Forty-eight hours, he said, of personal grief time. The same deal as everyone else. Forty-eight hours to get our affairs in order.

Forty-eight hours to compose ourselves until the rest of the world would be told. Should we roast him? we asked ourselves, with the dust from Olaf's hasty departure still in the air. Why not? What had we to lose? Just roast the clown and pretend he never showed up. Then, when they sent Olaf #2 to investigate the wherewithal of Olaf #1, we would shrug and say, "Olaf who?" Then we would roast Olaf #2. And we would keep roasting Olafs until *Edgeworks*™ finally acquiesced, directing their goons somewhere else, some rotten luck town where everyone was so brainwashed they had no qualms about dying in the name of some science that no one knew the first thing about. I kid you not, these people exist. They butter their toast with *Edgeworks*™ margarine.

But no, we would refuse to play ball. Leading, hopefully, to an emergency meeting in Iceland, where they would wonder, addle-brained, what is the name of this raggedy-assed town that is roasting our employees faster than we can rehire? Best not anger them further lest we find ourselves with no employees at all, or worse, in a situation where any future employee would automatically ask for a risk of roasting bonus and thus bring down the whole company. Voilà. A last-minute save. Just like that.

In the end, of course, we allowed Olaf #1 to escape scalp, fingernails and all, which – between you and me - was just as

well. While we bawled our eyes out over the crappy hand fate had dealt us, the rest of the world was going banoodles over the fact that the axe had come down on someone else's head again, i.e. ours, and ours didn't count, since a population of less than twenty thousand put us squarely in the camp of hick towns no one gave two hoots about. Everybody still remembered 2045, after all, the announcement alone a world-class shock, and the repercussions reverberating for years, if not still: New York City, *Edged*TM for the first time in living memory, i.e. never the same again, and world along with it. What a load of baloney, if you ask me, but then again, experts are experts for a reason, and concerning this matter they were all in agreement: next time better hillbilly town than another NYC, and what can I say: they got their wish. The markets, in free-fall for months, rallied; more than that – they rose to record highs, never mind how insulting that was for everyone here. I guess, in a weird way you finally know your worth when the *Edge*TM comes round to your neck of the woods.

Apart from us, only the TV stations were unhappy, having crossed their fingers for L.A. or Moscow or Rio, and now sulking big-time as all their well-hatched plans went up in flames and they saw themselves reporting on the weather again, which was never quite as satisfying as the imminent demise of a couple of million souls. But then some genius network official somewhere had a glorious idea. He said hold on a second, if we can't have big, let's make it something else. Why not make it up close and personal? We'll get to know that yokel town in advance of *Edge-Day*TM, get to be on a first name basis with everyone over there, hear their miserable life stories, i.e. how come they ended up where they ended up and not in a more important place, important in the sense of massive things going on all the time. Had they never dreamed of being one of the movers and shakers in the world? And if they had, when did the dream die? And anyhow, what about this *Edge*TM coming up and everything dissolving? Your name, your body, everything you ever did nulled and voided. Was that not just a big fat stinker?

Within hours the place was swarming with journalists. You could hardly fetch the mail without being accosted and asked how was our sleep since we had been told? Had there been a spike in blood pressure? Were people friendlier to one another, generally speaking? Did food taste better now that we knew we only had a month or so left, realistically speaking? What about beer?

The journalists, of course, benefited from the invisible barrier only working one-way. We could no longer get out, but they could certainly get in. Aren't you afraid we're going to hold you here? We asked them. What's to stop us from tying you to that lamppost?

That took care of a number of them, though a brazen few continued to hang around.

There were other folks, too, descending on the town like a plague of locusts. About a third of the country, it seemed - anxious to revel in the pre-*Edge*TM gloom, have a cup of coffee in a coffeehouse they knew would be toast next month, carry off some touristy piece of crap or chunk of asphalt they would then attempt to sell on Ebay, or merely sit around morbidly trying to feel as if they themselves were affected, in danger of blinking out of existence in a matter of days. At times they just sat there, crying their eyes out till someone came and whooped them upside the head, to general cheering.

It was hard to tell in which category the woman belonged who sat down opposite me at Joe's Pizza, two weeks into *Edgewait*TM.

"Hello," she said, beaming.

Hello," I said back, cautiously, since whatever the exact type of her affliction, she clearly could not be trusted.

"Ada," she said, still smiling – inanely, I thought.

“Gilbert,” I said.

“You have a friendly look about you, Gilbert.”

A minute or so of silence. Her smile never wavered, never changed, and I began to feel like the butt of a joke.

“I’m sorry –?” I tried.

“Oh, you,” she said, pointing to a yellow ribbon on her right breast in the shape of a bird.

I nodded in what I hoped was an appreciative manner.

“Very nice,” I said.

She shook her head, laughing.

“No, silly,” again pointing to the bird and giving me a nudge.

“So, do you?” she asked, a trifle uncertain. “Do you want to?”

I was out of my depth, and professed as much.

“Do I want to what?” I asked, feeling like the village idiot.

“So you really don’t know!” she said.

I shook my head no.

“I really, really don’t,” I said.

And then it came pouring out of her. That she was an *Edgegal*TM. That the bird was their sign. Hadn’t I heard of *Edgegals*TM before? Never seen the bird sign before? Didn’t I watch MTV? I said no, what do they do? Well, honey, said Ada, we believe that babies conceived during *Edgewait*TM and then smuggled out by an *Edgegal*TM will one day be the saviors of mankind. Did I not think

that a worthy endeavor?

I said I didn't know if it was, since I had heard about it for the first time just now, and it sounded absolutely ludicrous. Okay, I didn't actually say any of that, but my look must have conveyed the gist of it.

"Well, but wouldn't you like to have a child?" she asked. "You have so little time left."

She looked at me intently.

"A child I'll never see growing up?" I asked.

"A part of you that lives on," she said.

I said nothing.

A week before the apocalypse saw the return of Olaf, of *Edgeworks*TM fame. We told him he had some nerve coming back, and to better run and hide. Someone tackled him, but it ended up more like a playful nudge in the ribs. Poor guy was only doing his job, after all, and no matter what they paid him, it wasn't nearly enough.

"It's my duty to inform you of the possibility of redemption," he read slowly from a laminated card, while we were rolling our eyes. "This time tomorrow morning, you may present the *Edgeworks*TM official with a written argument, detailing why you should be spared."

"Oh, for Chrissake," someone said.

"The argument," Olaf went on, "may run to no more than a thousand words, and must be signed by ten representatives. The *Edgeworks*TM official will then feed the argument to the *Edge*TM who will make a decision within twenty-four hours."

Olaf wished us good luck, and left us to our deliberations.

Historically, most cities, in our position, had taken the road of a sappy appeal, sometimes accompanied by Polaroids, imploring the *Edge*TM to spare their children.

*The Edge*TM, however, was never swayed by tears.

Other cities, most notably NYC, had based all their hopes on their cultural importance for the whole of humanity, only to have them crushed when the *Edge*TM spat out a slip of paper with the word “No” on it in cruel 12 pt. Comic Sans.

We chose, instead, to make threats, just letting the expletives fly and using up every one of the thousand words at our disposal.

The Edge^sTM answer was what we knew it would be, and what it was always going to be.

Town life drew inward in those last few days. I always used to wonder how things would pan out in an *Edge*TM event, never having followed the footage myself, all those countless round-the-clock programs from Lyon, Dortmund, Mariupol, Brindisi, Pondicherry. What were those people jabbering on about? What were they saying? I found the whole thing odious, to say the least, and couldn't muster the patience. Now I could only speculate. Would people choose to lose their heads completely in a drunken swirl that would propel them into the *Edge*TM zonked and swooning?

Speaking only of our town, this did not happen. Instead, social life all but collapsed. There were drunks, yes, but of the reserved variety, the kind looking for quiet extinction rather than a mad hullabaloo.

Of tourists, there were still a few. Journalists, too, lingered. But even they seemed to have been infected by the melancholy airs and the realization, rapidly spreading, that this was no child's play, and that things were finally coming to a head. There would be – and there could be – no midnight pardon.

I lived alone. Others had it worse. Or better, whichever way you looked at it. There was a voice in my head saying, “At least they have family to share these last moments with.” It had to be a whole lot easier that way. And then a different voice piped up, saying what kind of a life was that, knowing your five-year-old kid would be following you into the *Edge*TM? How could anybody live with that knowledge?

From what I witnessed, there were several ways people coped. There were those who were up front about what was happening. They cried and embraced effusively. There were those who ignored the *Edge*TM altogether, refusing to make space for it in their lives. And there were those, too, who decided to choose the moment in time themselves, who could not bear the thought of waiting for the *Edge*TM to tell them when their time was up, and who walked into the abyss believing they were doing the right thing.

An amusing vignette that will have you in stitches, I promise: the other day, my buddy Rollins cornered me by the plaza. This was a week or so before Olaf #1 started spreading the Christmas spirit. Rollins had a brand-new rucksack slung over his shoulder that looked about fit to burst.

“Hey, Gil,” he called. “You wanna come with?”

“With where?” I asked warily.

“The big apple,” he said. “Where else?”

It turned out Rollins had recently subscribed to the idea that the

*Edge*TM never chose the same place twice in a row, and so he and a handful of other lunatics had decided to become temporary citizens of New York, where, so the theory went, you were as safe as kittens.

To be fair, there were more than a handful currently with a membership to that elite globetrotting club. At last count, New York had swelled to thrice its normal size.

“That’s not a rule,” I told him. “You stand exactly the same chance in New York that you do here.”

“Aha! That’s what they want you to believe,” he said triumphantly, having, of course, an ace up his sleeve: the *Edge*TM really had never hit the same spot twice in a row, at least in recorded history. That was a fact not to be trifled with.

“Well, of course,” I lectured him. “With all the thousands and thousands of cities, chances are it’ll hit some other shit-luck place. But it’ll happen, one day, because it has to. Law of statistics.” My heart, but I felt superior.

“Yadda yadda yadda,” said Rollins, but I wasn’t finished. Not yet. I had one more card to play, and I played it suavely.

“You’re a million times more likely to die at the hands of a mugger in New York than out here because of the *Edge*TM,” I said. “I for one wouldn’t be caught dead in New York.”

And now Rollins was in some posh four-star off Times Square, I’m sure, pushing pretzels and Macadamia nuts into his face, muttering sweet I-told-you-so’s at the latest Plasma monstrosity from Samsung, while I was already as good as dead.

Life is droll like that sometimes.

Ada insisted we wait until the last possible moment, ensuring the *Edge's*TM influence on the child would be at its most powerful. Then, when waiting any further would have seriously jeopardized her chances of making it back to safety, she led me to a secluded spot very near the edge – the *Edge's*TM edge, so to speak (“Because proximity matters, too, you know,” Ada’s words) – and we made an EdgebabyTM with the black mass always in sight like a lake of molasses.

“What do you think’ll happen?” asked Ada after, when we sat on the ground for a last powwow, hugging our knees tightly against the cold emanating from the *Edge*TM.

I shrugged.

“You know what happens,” I said. “Sometime in the next hour or so, the *Edge*TM will begin to ripple. Like Jell-O, I suppose. Then it will slowly spread itself over everything, like a blanket. After that, nothing for a month, two months, and when the *Edge*TM disappears again, there will be a new town, right here, with the same name, roughly the same number of people, but all new.”

She knew all this, of course.

“And do you think you’ll be one of these people?” she asked. I mulled it over, as if thinking about it for the first time.

“I don’t know,” I finally said.

“Oh, but I do!” she said brightly. “I have a good feeling about you, Gilbert. I think you’ll bounce right back.”

I said nothing, trying to zone out her chipper voice. Didn’t look at her, either, only out at the void a couple of hundred yards away, and at the dozen or so men and women peering down into it like storks looking for food. I mean, this close to the *Edge*TM it was real hard to stay upbeat about the whole thing.

As we watched, a tall lanky fellow came running out of nowhere and, without pausing, jumped. As if encouraged by this, one of the longtimers, after looking back towards us in a forlorn, pleading sort of way, let himself drop.

“When he grows up,” I said, breaking off as a chilly wave emanated from the *Edge*TM, sending goosebumps down my arms.

“When he grows up,” I went on, heedless, “tell him to expect an opening in his chest. A rip, almost. Tell him his father said to tell him that, and that he had learned it from his father, too, a long time back when he was a young boy himself. Tell him to wish for it with all his heart, to pine after it day after day, and that once he succeeds, to strive to make the gash permanent and to look in the gash for a strand the size of a flea’s hair. It is this strand he has to picture when he stands before the *Edge*TM. Will you tell him that?”

I turned to look at Ada, but she was already gone, and I had no way of knowing what she had heard, if anything. The *Edge*TM had begun to ripple at the margins, and I readied myself.

THE LORIKEET ●

Jacob Appel

That puppy we never adopted
Went un-walked though my childhood
Failing to paw the upholstery
Or scar our Frisbee with canines

He did not chase the other pets
We never owed: hamsters, hedgehogs,
That one-eared Abyssinian tabby who
Didn't trail us home from the park

No backyard cairn marked his grave
Nor grade school eulogy recalled
His un-barked rage at those bunnies
We left behind in the shop

Our mom feared rabies and fevers
Droppings riled our dad
So no lorikeet serenaded at breakfast
And that pup neither frisked nor fetched

But once, tail wagging, he retrieved
That doubtful lorikeet between his doggie teeth
And how I sobbed over that absent bird
Even now, I am still mourning

SLIPSHOD ●

Sharon Kennedy-Nolle

Carter House, Site of 1864 Battle of Franklin, TN

Samuel Carter's shoes, still at the top of the stairs,
where jacks, toy soldiers, a top cuddle together,
size eleven, they point to the railing,
the section that needed repair.

A little scuffed, the shoes touch too tidily,
the way a four-year-old never leaves them.

When this house was a hospital,
blood pooled in the plank floor grooves
as they carried them in, continuously
—the aftermath of Hood's seventeen failed assaults—
off the front lawn, where fighting was fiercest.

The parlor door, unhinged,
became a table for the saw.

Out the window went arms and legs.

He did not see Todd, his older brother
of the 20th Tennessee, brought in bullet-ridden,
die three days later, that smoke-sifted November afternoon
because on an earlier day his father had been too busy,
always with his cotton gin accounts, come autumn.

So he had played alone, lining up the troops
leading them on the double quick to charge
until he fell too, as if reaching for the colors.

They found him near the newel below,
dead of a broken neck.

All his father could do was work;
so distracted, he put the spindles in upside down,
and so they stayed.

SUSQUEHANNA ●

Sharon Kennedy-Nolle

*And down the river's dim expanse
Like some bold seer in a trance.
Seeing all his own mischance—
"The Lady of Shalott," Tennyson*

Plying your muddy waters, I peer down
but the green-gray eddies,
milken moot across kayak cuts,

yield nothing,
not even our miso-clouded reflections.

Pouring from the Glimmerglass
headwaters to the Chesapeake,

you yet seem to stay
in unanswered standstill.

One false step
and I'm suddenly staggering,

ooze up to knees, deep, silted murk
groping again;

my son's MRI
showing shadows, indigo depths undelved

we're over our heads
in glow and buzz that outlast the power lines.

Anytime pop
could go the weasel
—aneurism's sudden sigh—

bubbles break up the lotus surface,
the blue heron dips beak, takes wing,
easily ending the twelve years he's had.

Swim long to drown cool
in your silken surrender...

Susquehanna, Susquehanna,
is there a song for such Shalot sorrows?

**“BETTER TAKE WHATEVER YOU
WANT NOW, HONEY ●**

Sharon Kennedy-Nolle

’cause it’s goin’ in the garbage,”
so the aide said when I told her you were gone,
but I couldn’t lift a thing,
except my eyes when I got outside,
Bronx, midnight, parking lot,
looking up to your bright lit window, awful fluorescence
where the sanitary nurses scurry, readying the room fast
pitching all the party favors of your hospice stay, silly tinsel hats,
pulling down the papier-mâché streamers, the stuffed
bears that celebrated the extra days you made;
wheeling out the IV pole; stripping
the bed, that crocheted comforter from home.
Three months is a long time to drip-die.
After they had you bagged,
taped and zipped, out you went
(frail bone sack, well under a hundred pounds)
the steel back door of the loading dock,
forked over to the bored, gloved guy
(where else could he be on a Friday night?)
who grabs the clipboard, signs, throws
open the hatch; his minivan engine running
exhausting the July air.

COUSIN INGRID ●

Madelyn Camrud

As if even the fact of her dying needs apology,
she smiles, same shameful smile
she smiled in life. Pink roses crocheted,

white afghan drapes her body, skeletal,
face yellow from liver cancer, pillowed.

A prayer request to bless this house hangs over her bed.
I suggest this woman's house, already blessed

for the order of its rooms, Norwegian-clean.
Don't know her sins and if I did, am sure

her nimble fingers somehow made them pretty.
This woman who could mend most anything,

about to slip from a dress worn too long—
soon to fall, and lie in a heap, seams

showing, a mess for everyone to see.

VANISHING ■

Michael Pasley

In a house where people could teleport, we never panicked when folk went missing.

My family was always disappearing. Here one day and gone the next. There was the time when my grandpa left home right after breakfast and called from Mexico an hour later to say hi. Even Mom vanished for a week. Right before she left, she had fallen into one of her “moods.” It was a cloudy-day kind of mood, a sit-in-your-room-with-the-lights-off kind of mood, a bury-me-alive-in-the-graveyard kind of mood. She got that way sometimes. We didn’t talk about it much. So, when my big sister disappeared it was no big deal. But when she didn’t come back by dinnertime. Mom and Dad got worried.

My parents didn’t call the cops. Instead, they faded away too, for months they were gone. Were they searching for her? I never knew. I only knew the weren’t there.

It was a strange thing, my sister’s disappearance, because people in my house didn’t usually vanish all at once. A segmented-form of invisibility came first. My family tended to fade in and out of reality, spectral and ghostly, like the body of the Cheshire Cat. One moment you would see a piece of them here, and a few hours later, you would see a piece of them there. There were always flashes of body parts coming and going until the whole person vanished. But my sister was just gone one day. And that was the start of something new. But Grandma disappeared the old way and was a disembodied head for two days before she left and never returned.

After Grandma was gone, Mom and Dad came home again. Grandpa couldn’t raise my brother and me alone. At first, my parents went out of their way to make us happy. We went out to eat, played games and went to the amusement park. We didn’t talk about my sister or Grandma leaving, and in this

way, my brother and I learned never to talk about anything painful at all. So, there was silence between us when Mom and Dad started arguing. She screamed. He screamed. She went out with other men. He went out with other women. She drank. He drank. Not long after a big blowup Dad went into the bathroom and never came back out. We all took it in stride because we all knew it was coming. Dad like Grandma was old school. His arms disappeared the night before he vanished. It was no big deal, he didn't hug us much anyway.

I knew the day was coming soon that I would be able to teleport and I couldn't wait. My sister was only a year older than I was, so I figured it'd be soon. Mom was screaming at my brother and me a lot these days. She accused us of planning to abandon her like everyone else. We denied this truth with lies and false promises to stay forever.

My little brother left next. He went all at once like my sister. We were at the park, and he called for me to watch him perform a trick. He did a back flip, and even before his feet touched the ground, he had faded from sight and never came back. This time someone did call the cops. I did. When they arrived, they shook their sad cop heads, and with their square-jawed cop faces they informed me with a patronizing and terrifying solemnity that there wasn't much hope of their finding my brother. They said that people who could teleport were, by their very nature difficult to locate. I told them I understood but that I still had to try. They said they were sorry and wished me luck.

When I told Mom we needed to look for my brother, she laughed sourly. "And where on Earth would we start?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said.

"Exactly," she said.

One day I went to wake Grandpa for breakfast, and he was gone. Grandpa was the only one in our family who ever left a note before he went. It said, "Virginia Beach, here I come." He left in the new way, all at once. I smiled. "You go, Grandpa."

Since only Mom and me were left, she chained me to the house so I couldn't wander off. She told me it was a love chain, and that everything would be okay because love is never bad.

"Why didn't you use it on the others?" I asked.

"It never occurred to me to do so until they were gone," she said.

I didn't want a chain. I yelled and broke things. I begged Mom to remove it. She ignored my protestations, so I spent the next year inside with Mom watching television, eating Cheetos, drinking Cokes, and growing larger.

Outside the house, the world moved on, and I envied those kids whose families would always be visible and lingering. And whose mom's didn't chain them. I wanted to go out and play, but it was too significant a risk for Mom to take.

Over the years, Dad was the only one to reappear from time to time. I never saw him use a door. I'd come clanking, dragging my chain downstairs, and there he'd be, in the kitchen, making a sandwich or sitting on the sofa with a beer, like he'd never left, like everything was normal, like he'd just run to the grocery store for milk.

The last time Dad showed up, I asked him if I could go with him when he left again or at least could he take this chain off me. He shook his head. "Couldn't even if I wanted to," he said. "Our power doesn't work that way. Besides, someone needs to stay with your mom. Your grandparents are gone as well as

your siblings. She's lost too much as it is."

It was a bright sunny morning when I saw Dad go. He was staring out the bay window at the rundown row of shotgun houses across the street. Oblique strokes of light, with large dust motes drifting through them like dead angels, beamed past him, slicing through gaps in the curtains. Dad's fade away was gradual, daylight transforming into dusk. At least this time he turned and waved goodbye. He closed his eyes and leaked into transparency. My father faded into nothingness and I never saw him again. Mom was in the bathroom. When she came out, she didn't notice me or that Dad was gone. She started watching television and never mentioned the man again.

After Dad left, I spent long hours staring at myself in the mirror trying to pop out of existence. I would squeeze my eyes so tight in concentration that my head would start to ache. I would run at the wall hoping to disappear, only to smash into it. I jumped from the top of the staircase, hoping the adrenaline would kick-start something inside me. Nothing happened except for a few fractures and a bloody nose.

When the age at which I should've acquired my power had passed and then another year followed that one, Mom hugged me. "I'm so glad you can't teleport," she said smiling like she'd won the lotto. "I guess the chain worked. Now you can stay with me forever."

"Yay," I mumbled.

So weeks turned into months and months into years. I lost track of the date and my age. Time just kept passing unnoticed. It collected in stealth like the heavy pouches of flesh now riding my bones. One day I came lumbering down the steps to the living room. The walk downstairs was difficult for me, hauling my hundreds of pounds plus this stupid chain. I waddled to my favorite spot in front of the television, collapsed into a

large bean bag chair, and gasped. I took a sip of Coke from a half-empty two-liter bottle that I had left on the end table the night before. Why bother with a glass? I began to channel surf and then cursed when I realized I had forgotten to make myself a bowl of chocolate ice cream.

I looked at my hands; two big meaty lumps of flesh. My digits seemed to have melded together so that instead of grasping things, I lobster clawed them. What had I become? Anger swirled deep inside my expansive gut — a grinding nausea ached against my ribcage. I cried.

This wasn't the life I had wanted.

This wasn't who I was supposed to be.

I screamed.

I wept some more.

I grasped Mom's love chain with the force of what little will I had remaining and pulled. And pulled. And pulled. I summoned strength I thought I had lost long ago and I pulled.

It snapped.

The living room faded away. What faded in was a long, grayish-blue crescent of water, spread across the horizon, like the scimitar of God. White fists of foam battered a shoreline in front of me. A fresh, cool breeze washed over me tangy with salt and seaweed. In the air was the stench of sour fish rot, barbecue, alcohol, and sweet ice cream. The rushing surf made a breathing sound as it whispered and washed the sand. Overhead, gulls sang out in squawks, and, somewhere, children were laughing. There was a scorching heat on my back that burned my pale Elmore's Glue flesh. My big pink feet squished into white sand and were suddenly on fire. Insanely, I

got the absurd impression of roasting piglets.

I unfurled. I trembled. I vibrated with an almost electric terror. What came next was hyperventilation, and a long bead of sweat rolled down my back. My eyes closed, and I begged God to take me away from here. I wanted to be home that instant.

The heat waned, and I dared to open my eyes. Mom was there on the couch and I was comfortably nestled within the bean bag chair again. Its folds, caressing my folds. The View was on the television, and the women were yelling at each other. A bowl of potato chips and dip sat reassuringly on the end table. I released a sigh so deep and long that the Grand Canyon would've been jealous.

“You came back,” said Mom, smiling. “I knew you would.”

“Yeah,” I said. “But could you do me a favor?”

“What?”

I retrieved the two broken lengths of chain. “Could you fix this?”

She nodded. “Sure, but you don’t need it. It never kept you here. You could’ve teleported whenever you wished.”

No. I was chained.

Mom shook her head as if she could read my thoughts.

I wiped a big palm across my face unsure of how to deal with that revelation. In the end the answer seemed clear. I held up both halves of the chain. “Fix it anyway,” I said. “It’s good to be home.”

MY BROTHER VISITS ●

DS Maolalai

he looks around
at what the new place
looks like,
sees the pictures,
the bookshelves
and the guitar
in the corner
and asks politely
if I still play anymore.
I tell him
I don't - it's pretty much
just all
decoration.

we sit down
on the easy
chairs;
two quiet men
uncomfortable
in a familiar silence,
making occasional stabs
at conversation
like someone with a broom,
nervous to kill
a mouse.
I offer him a bottle,
but that doesn't work. my parents
are having dinner nearby. that's
why he's hanging out here. just killing time
until it's time
to drive them home.

we try a movie then;
talk a little

about Fargo
and lapse in silence - more comfortable now
with someone talking
on tv. we've almost gotten to the spot
where the dad gets shot
in the carpark
when the doorbell
finally rings. I pause the movie,
feeling glad for a release.

our dad
comes in. another
not a talker. relief shot again
like a guy
in a carpark.
he casts around the room
for conversation,
sees the guitar
and asks me
do I play. I tell him
not really
anymore.

THE AQUARIUM ●

DS Maolalai

we solved
a murder together - well,
it was only cluedo,
and we were in a friend's apartment
on the fifth floor,
overlooking
another apartment building. I had six beers
and failed to nail the location,
then went out on the balcony, to celebrate
my success
at being such a good loser
with another bottle and a borrowed
cigarette.

across the gap between buildings
most of the windows were black, some light grey
where the curtains had been drawn. a few stood out
as white blocks like ice or lump-sugar
or like the aquarium you keep
in your bedroom. and party-goers floating
like drifting tropical fish. this was 2am.
no-one normal up
and through the windows
everyone looked european. but that's just
the way the neighbourhood is; no-one from ireland
in grand canal dock. my girlfriend guessed wrong too,
and joined me
and we got very focused
on this one couple - you could see sex,
movements rippling like fields in the wind,
in glimpses through their cracked open window-blinds.

sometimes in the countryside
you're walking on the road in summer,

the asphalt broken from the stress of tree-roots.
and out of it
weedish flowers growing, showing their colours and their
hardy strength
like life
escaping from everything.

CLAWING AT THE GROUNDED MOON #79 ●

Darren C. Demaree

i refuse all heavenly prostration acts i refuse to believe the
moon fell for us that the dust kicked up was a god dragging
knuckles across the face of our world that there is any
tenderness in a rock i prefer the negligent over the fiend i
want humanity to lift up humanity i lower myself for no
conjecture i lower myself for no ideal i'll bow to you reader
to you to you to you you don't even have to ask

CLAWING AT THE GROUNDED MOON #80 ●

Darren C. Demaree

the pulled weeds are not calm they are dead we are not the
pulled weeds we are calm because we have not yet given up
on the idea that we might be the bloom

SUNFLOWER ●

Alison Hicks

The bloom becomes too heavy
after a season of moving toward the sun,
the face turns down, trains on the earth
from which nourishment no longer rises.
By the time the birds have lightened the burden,
the neck, dry with bending,
touches the pavement.
Presses its ear to the place it grew away from,
to the scuttle of creatures below that sleep in its roots.

MOUNTAIN ASH ●

Alison Hicks

The mountain ash grew next to the stone wall.
This wouldn't matter except that everyone remembers a tree
from childhood. I had a book about a doll
carved from a piece of mountain ash
carried for luck by an old peddler
who makes the doll for a little girl
to thank her family for sheltering him
during a snowstorm in Maine.
Odd pinnate leaves, white flowers, red berries in fall,
smaller and lither than the maples and oaks and pines
that thrived through the winter it too survived.

I had a wooden doll, carved from a single block
of brown wood, two braids coiled at the base of her neck,
that came to me through my mother from the grandmother
I saw only once, in a hospital bed in Philadelphia.
Her disease turned her body into wood.
She could wiggle her nose, that's what she said to me.
Like a bunny, she said. When my mother told me
that she'd gone to meet God, I pictured her rolling up the big hill
to the stand of pines outside our old apartment in a wheelchair.
When I told my mother this, years later, she said,
Did I really say that? And then,
Well, that's what she would have wanted me to say.

There were other trees:
the maple in the upper meadow, next to the woodpile,
from which my father hung a rope and a board
to make me a swing. The white oak with its shaggy bark
that hung out over the driveway. The lilacs
that reached to my second-story windows.

Unlike these, by whose growth you could measure time,
the mountain ash never seemed to change

much in size or proportion.
It wasn't a tree I played in or climbed on.
In Europe it was said to ward off witches
and the pentagram on the shaft of each berry to bring good luck.
I don't know what happened to the doll
when my parents packed up the house.
None of this would matter, except that
things made of wood have qualities of trees,
breathe, absorb, and release,
offer up fruit for birds and small mammals.

TURNING 40 IN PORTSMOUTH SQUARE ●

Carolyn Wilsey

In Chinatown today, the unhappy air
puffed with cigarette smoke, my mouth
filled with the sudden loose teeth
of an old woman without children,
my jaw a leather strap

Birds thread their torpedo bodies
through trees
in a gray mist of knowing
how not to shatter themselves

Red lantern shades fit
like a film over my mouth,
gray pigeon daylight
clamping a scream I never unclamped,
but it lifts, with amazement

Beating into the fog,
spraying into a score of club-footed pigeons,
their flight does
a little of the work for me,
pulling me into the sky

HARVESTING. MIDDAY ●

Patrick Kelly Joyner

I came to
on my back, grass blades
sawing my ears,
the recollection of blood below my knees.

You'd better raise yourself up.
I wiped at the words until
realizing my hands hadn't moved.

In the distance, I heard the engine. Idling
but sounding like—
from the bump and shudder— it
was drifting still, and I ached
to look around for it.

I want to tell you.
All my hairs seemed to taste the breeze, every uncovered inch
of skin
crawled in tiny circles.
And my eyes swelled until I could not see.
I cursed God but asked not to be taken
too soon.

Instead,
he brought Anita to me, our new baby Jess in her arms.
I didn't fear for them. Many a time, she had
the measure of me, and
she would've done the same now:
"selfish man.
Staring down purgatory."

And then our firstborn, Charlie, for my sins,
placed his cold hands upon me.
If his mother ever suspected

the worst of what I'd done, she kept it to herself.

It was in a drunken state that I fell.

But she watched my grief,
looked around at her life,
and decided to believe me—
Sometimes, young as that, a child stops breathing.

The sun bled over to my left side.
My body pointed like an arrow at the house.
The engine began to sputter.
More and more its dying seemed something I shouldn't miss.

A mighty rumbling built until it covered the engine,
and a jet plane filled the air —
I thought I was dreaming
 it flew so slow.

It was coming for me.

My eyes had dried by then, and I looked through them
like through a tube shrinking, the edges gray
the middle shifting
purple wheat grass and burning sun. The plane
dropped a crooked line of people who
 dove at me
waved and passed

some of them hung up in the caterpillar contrails
some plunged into my middle
and filled me with longing to stand
and race to my front door, throw it open,
take my wife and child in my arms,
heave them skyward, and

stand below them,
smoke, stars, and all.

The whoosh died down and the tractor
fell silent. A single
black bird
cut me in two, flew off
with part of me trailing behind it like a canopy on a string.

USEFUL ●

Patrick Kelly Joyner

While cleaning the gutters, I hear a noise —
a hollow stirring in the chimney. I climb to the peak
and down again to the man-high stack.

Kneeling, I place my ear against the masonry for a time.
The late fall birds keen overhead and wave goodbye,
soot against the sky.

On the kneecaps of my jeans—ground black stains
from the flower bed this morning. Next
I will take in the table umbrella.

But, there, again, the stirring.
I rise to the cap
and bend my head to the mesh siding,
listening, a voyeur atop my own house,
exposed, half-mad, alone—
eager for disturbance.

Is it her, moving in the house?
Throwing a log on the fire,
stirring it with the iron
until flames lash at her face?

The sun thrusts a shard of wet light through the clouds,
and I shut my eyes,
still listening, my grimy hands on the
brickwork like two spent logs.

My usefulness has come to this.

She lay next to the fire eleven days, still.
I confess I spent much of that time
elsewhere. In gardens, extending ladders,
mending downspouts. Useful.

Now, down the chimney,
I hear the sounds of love — love expiring
beside the chaste fire,

she and some younger man
who used to come around
between the necessary chores
to pay her the compliment of attention.

I shiver against the bricks.
The cold-boiling clouds retract the shard.

Slowly, I straighten, slowly,
knees popping, resting my head
against the metal cap.
I don't live in this house anymore.

I climb to the peak again,
feel my heart catch.
The ladder ends protrude.
The dormant grass waves.
A low black bird parts from the flock,
sees its double in the window below me,
kisses the glass, and falls dazed
onto the patio stone.

In descending, I nearly fall myself.
In cradling the bird, I am bitten,
my pulse in my fingers.

Under the umbrella,
with a makeshift nest on my lap,
I resolve to quit for the day.

The gutters are half-clean, and the black bird dies on the bench
while I rummage in the pantry for seeds.
It glitters darkly in the leaves like creosote.

VW BUG ●

Patrick Kelly Joyner

It lay in the back of the closet like the carcass of a baby whale
metal stays like ribs
canvas straps like sagging tendons.
I would climb overtop suitcases and blankets and
paper bags of clothing, shut myself inside the narrow
space under the stairs and push toy cars along
the lines. Voices filtered in
like the furnace clearing its throat.
the whirring of insect wings

A wet March morning when I was three,
she rushed from the sitter's house,
her throat thick with desperate longing.
At top speed, the semi flashed ahead

she went spinning, flipping like
a toy in a parabola
across the obsidian grass.
My brother remembers the day. We
were fed an extra meal
looking out the back window at the jagged
fence rails.

Years later I remember long sullen silences
dim motionless rooms at midday.
Mute arguments.
Selling lemonade on the front walk after she'd
run out like a storm with car keys in hand.
My father calling after.

My brother made mistakes, fought, took it,
slowly became a young man.
I closed myself in closets, crawled
back to the body brace.

DEAL ●

Patrick Kelly Joyner

He said he couldn't deal,
so he left the apartment and the marriage.
He took almost nothing.

My wife and I went to help her pack their belongings.
We know her—rather Misty knows her. We didn't know him
much.
Seemed a decent guy. A bit squinty when you talked to him.
I chalked that up
to shyness.

Didn't seem the sort to up and leave.
Then again, could I identify the sort?

The wife—actually let's call her the friend now—was a hot
mess.
Hired a couple guys she knew to move her, but
they sat in their truck waiting for the boxes to be packed.

So Misty and I did that.
The friend sat on the floor in her bedroom,
pulling wet tissues apart.
I always leave Misty to the emotional stuff.
I'm a systems guy. I can pack a suitcase. That's my deal.

So they had a Precious Moments cabinet. Whatever.
That took me thirty. Stonewear the same.
Drinking glasses, pottery, and knicky knock crap, et cetera.
By noon
the shatterables were done.

Misty and I did the living room and the den together
while the friend hid in the bathroom.
The husband had a porno collection. I hid that before Misty
saw it.

No need to add that to the shit list.
Could've thrown it out to spare the friend.
Didn't. Don't know why.

Well, yes, I do know why.
I hid the stuff in a box I labeled family photos. The friend
would open it eventually. She'd see what a man her old hubby
had been.
Maybe it'd lessen her regrets. Or maybe
she'd hate him like new.
Or maybe she'd throw the box out unopened.
Whatever. That was my original thinking.
Of course, maybe she was a porno, too.

She came out of the bathroom and bumbled a thank you to me.
Misty hugged her. I had that one box in my hands, about to
take it
To the living room where the rest were stacked.

But I stood watching them, Misty and the friend.
My wife started crying, too. Only time that day. Not sure why.
She glanced at me and shrugged. I shrugged back.

As I walked by her, she—my wife Misty, I mean—touched my
shoulder. Helping
this friend had been her idea, of course.
She had thanked me already. But she was a thanking person.
That's where we were different.
You do what you should. Thanks are not requisite. But alright.

Why did she go emotional at that moment?
We'd been together seven years.
Two kids, house, minivan, the nine yards. Stable.

Mind you, I once had a thought that maybe I'd split.
Not seriously, but before the kids, before the mortgage. When
the splitting

wouldn't so much break Misty as rock her a bit.
But I could deal. So I dealt. And if Misty
ever had a moment like that, she probably decided
she could do it, too.
Inertia is strong.

We followed the two guys in the van straight back to our
house.
First thing I did was find that one box and hide it up above the
garage.

The friend flopped in our back room for a month.
Finally moved out last week.
Misty was, to be honest, done. But still she and the friend
hugged a long time.
Then the friend left. Moved out to her parents' place at the
beach.

That box is still up above the garage.
I'm no porno. I just don't think it's right
to throw out what a man carefully collected.
He might come back someday.

Anyway, Misty wouldn't approve if she knew.
Part of my job is to protect her.
No harm no foul.

THE PARENT LICENSE ■

Daniel Kenitz

The clock in the Licensing Center is the kind they always have at school or the DMV: black digits pimpled over a field of white. It tells 3:34 p.m. Seth DeBerg follows the clock's only color, the ceaseless second-hand, with its obvious color of red tape and its bloodletting speed. By now the ice in his McDonald's Diet Coke has melted into a pool of pale brown and there's a ring of sweat worn around the form in his other hand, the PL-514: *Application for Permanent Parent License and Special Adoption Exemption Transfer, Expedited Request.*

Josh tugs on his hand. "How much longer do we have to wait in line?"

"Shhh," Seth says. "You can sit in one of the chairs."

"Can I play Switch?"

"Mmmmmmaybe," Seth says, their private catchphrase. Seth shrugs, pinches Josh's nose. "All right. *Honk.*"

Josh tenses like a cat about to sneeze. Then, with a nod to himself, he decides the nose honk was funny and bounces over to the seats against the wall. Then there's a fuzz sound coming through the intercom and the lady behind the glass announces, "now serving number thirty-seven."

"I have a PL-514," Seth tells her. "I was hoping I could do the interview today."

"You mean you didn't mail it?"

"They told me I have to file it in person. And if I did, I could have my Parent Interview the same day."

"That's PL-514A. This is a PL-514B."

“Well, I’m here. Can I file it? Can I have my interview?”

“Assumin’ you *meant* to file a 514B.” The lady of the glass flips it his way and gives him an scanning, insulted look like the hot air under his arms just wafted through the glass, hooked a right at her nose, then surged in a beeline through her nostrils. “You had a death in the family?”

“That’s what it’s for, right?” Seth looks at the clock again and—he could swear—the minute hand now points to 3:33 p.m.

“Two problems,” she says. “The boy in question—Joshua DeBerg—it says on his school file that he was caught drawing a breast during math class...”

“I’ve already talked to his teacher.”

“...and it says *two* breasts.”

“The usual, yeah.”

“This is while he was under your temporary custody?”

“Yeah. But I don’t think—”

“The other problem: you have an incomplete PL-1A dating back to January.”

“I filed that already. It went through. I still have the confirmation email.” Seth slaps the Diet Coke to the counter and the hard paper rim makes a cracking sound.

“That’s nice.” The lady of the glass mashes a button and a form prints in front of him. “You’ll have to fill out another PL-1A. Next?”

Seth plants himself next to Josh and holds the PL-1A against the particle board of the coffee table, writes carefully. Name

of child: Joshua Jacob DeBerg. Sex: male. Age: nine. Race. Race. . . . Josh's mother was Korean-American and his father, like Seth, was white enough to model for a North Face catalog. Seth checks *Asian/Pacific Islander*. After he writes *deceased* under "Previously Licensed Parents (If Applicable)," his phone buzzes. Liz wants to know: how's it going? She told him that morning she would wait for his text with a bottle of champagne on ice. Seth stuffs the phone in his pocket. She'll hate that—it's against the rules not to respond to important texts—but he wants to wait until there's a more definite answer.

The lady of the glass buzzes him over. "Now you'll have to take this to the second floor."

"For the interview, I hope?" Seth cringes. He doesn't like that he has to fill in the blanks himself—on the forms, in conversation, in giving color to the foglike nothingness of the air. But Liz is ready to celebrate their impending engagement and has the champagne on ice, and besides, the guardians whom The System would assign Josh would crush him.

"Mmm. We have a playroom for children under twelve. You can leave little Joe there."

"It's Josh."

"Didn't I say Josh?"

He leads Josh down the hall where the lady of the glass pointed, hooks a right, and finds a playroom. It's more of a loosely-carpeted cell, with a vending machine in one corner and a tube-style television in the other. It's turned, for some reason, to Bloomberg. There is a woman rocking in a chair underneath it, and the ID on her neon lanyard says STATE SUPERVISOR, but she's half-asleep and doesn't rouse when a boy starts shooting Nerf darts at her. Seth looks at him. With that bowl cut and the braille of blackheads across his face, Nerf boy reminds Seth of his 7th grade bully, Terry Smith. It only takes two seconds to

recall the name, but the act of it makes Seth clench his teeth.

Seth always keeps two one-dollar bills in his pocket, so when he sees the vending machine, he hands one to Josh. “In case you want a soda.”

“You don’t let me have sodas at home.”

“It’s illegal. But, I don’t know. Guess it’s legal here.”

“Can we go home right after you’re done?”

“God, I hope so.” Seth looks at the clock. It’s the exact same model, and it’s 3:35 p.m.

In Mrs. Deirdre Levine’s office, his phone buzzes.

You didn’t respond, Liz says. No sex for a week. And the ice is melting.

She uploads a snap of the Argyle Brut. Most of the ice is floating now and the Argyle is leaning against the brim like the ass-end of the Titanic in a wine bucket. He types in:

Nothing yet. Waiting on the interview. I’m on a new floor, though. Progress.

Buzz.

Melting, Seth!!!

Three exclamation points. Def Con 3. He starts typing a response, but gets lost thinking about earlier in their relationship when he thought she was joking about the no-sex rules. She beats him to the buzz. She loves Josh and all, she says, but this is what’s best for him. Isn’t it? Alice is a better mom than she’d

ever be. They've had him for what, five months? And Liz just feels like roommates. With a 9-year-old. What does that say about *Liz*?

There's only time to finger in a thumbs-up emoji in reply. Liz won't like that, but it's too late—Mrs. Deirdre Levine is clomping into the room, stiffening, scanning him. She has cat-eye glasses and wears them without a hint of irony. There's no telling her age, but the pleating around her lips suggests decades of sipping Fiji from a safe distance. She sees the crinkled McDonald's cup in her garbage can and points. "That yours?"

"Uh, yeah." Seth shrugs. "It was Diet."

"You understand that there are to be no fast foods or fast food derivatives once you have your license?"

"So I read."

"Mm-hmm." She sighs, sits, then reads from her monitor. "Mr. Seth DeBerg. You just put in a valid PL-1A...I see we have references on file, blood work, STD tests, interviews with previous sexual partners, character witnesses, tax returns, pay stubs, credit history...it says here that the boy's parents are deceased, hence the form PL-514B. Car accident. Evan and Grace DeBerg."

"Yeah."

"Your siblings?"

"Brother. She was my sister-in-law."

"Mm-hmm. Mr. DeBerg, it's now my responsibility to perform your formal Parent's License Interview. Are you of sound mind, and do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?"

"I do."

“Mm-hmm. Keep in mind, Mr. DeBerg, that if any answer you provide me today is not to my liking, I am duly authorized by the State of New York to deem you unfit as a parent which, in turn, will render you unfit to marry.”

“I understand.”

“Now—first question. What is currently in your refrigerator?”

“My refrigerator?”

“Right now.”

His phone buzzes, no doubt Liz tacking on another week of penance. He smiles at Mrs. Levine, feels for the side buttons through the khaki and culls it silent. “Sorry. My fridge? A water filter, I guess. Milk, cheese, eggs. Leftover soup.”

“Any fresh produce, Mr. DeBerg?”

“Mmmmmmaybe.”

Mrs. Levine looks at him.

“Sorry,” he says. “Just a little joke me and Josh have. Yeah, I think I have some baby carrots in there.”

“And if I were to send an inspector to your home tonight, he would verify every detail?”

Seth clicks his tongue. “Uh—maybe some cold pizza. Leftover macaroni and cheese. Josh likes it.”

Mrs. Levine types something into the computer, double-clicks. “And how do you know the adopted?”

“Josh. We covered that. He’s my nephew.”

“How did you meet your fiancée?”

“Does this really matter—”

“It *all* matters, yes.”

“All right. It was at a bar down on 44th.”

“How often do you drink to excess, Mr. DeBerg?”

“I don’t hang out in bars. Just because I was in a bar in that one instance doesn’t mean I’ll be a bad parent—”

“Mr. DeBerg, we don’t like to use the terms *good or bad* to describe parents. There are simply licensed and unlicensed parents.”

“—well, I don’t drink to get drunk, if that’s what you mean.”

“And when did you have your *first* drink of alcohol?”

“Are you really supposed to ask that?”

“A study once found that parents are likely to gauge the appropriate time to give their children alcohol by when they had *their* first drink.”

“I was eighteen.”

“Mm-hmm,” Mrs. Levine says. “And, at the time, was the legal drinking age thirty-one, as it is now?”

“Twenty-one. But I don’t see how any of this matters if we’re just going to transfer Josh over to my sister—”

“You might have a child one day, Mr. DeBerg. If you get married without a valid and permanent parent license, who’s to say

what will happen?”

“If you say so.”

“What is your sexual orientation, Mr. DeBerg?”

“I have a girlfriend.”

Mrs. Devine looks at him, pulls a bottle of Fiji up to her lips, and never breaks eye contact.

“That means hetero,” Seth says. “They let you ask that?”

“Mr. DeBerg, this is standard procedure. I assure you, there should be no personal overtone to these questions. Now. Including vaginal, oral, and anal sex, how many sexual partners have you had?”

“That seems pretty personal.”

“You can round if you like. Less than 5? Less than 10? Are you, as your appearance suggests, a virgin?”

Seth stiffens. Perhaps that’s a fair assessment—he’s wearing a Dwight Schrute short-sleeve-and-tie combination and still has his work ID clipped to the chest pocket. Junior Sales Associate. *As your appearance suggests*, though. An insult? A question? What? For a moment he wants to snatch the last of the remaining Diet Coke from her garbage can and drink it in front of her, but he can’t. Instead he squeezes the wood arms of the profoundly uncomfortable chair and realizes it’s not child-proof; there’s a nail head sticking out the side. He lets it go. “Not a virgin. Why? Do virgins do better on the State Approval Score?”

“Those numbers are proprietary to the State of New York.” Mrs. Levine looks away from the screen and slides the glasses down to the edge of her nose. He can see her eyes without computer glare now, and they’re foggy and pinkish, permanently sore from the strain of judgment.

“Mrs. Levine, if I can be honest—”

“You’re under oath, Mr. DeBerg, so I expect you to be honest—”

“Turn of phrase. I never thought of myself as the parenting type. I never asked to watch Josh. My sister, Alice—she’s the born parent. I’m sort of a grown-up boy. If you approve me today and authorize the transfer, you’ll be doing what’s best for him.”

“Not to mention serving *your* best interest as well.”

Seth shrugs. “Some situations are win-win.”

“Mr. DeBerg, my job today is to evaluate your potential as a parent, transfer notwithstanding. You say you don’t want children. That may change. Accidents happen. If you get married, however, that means the State of New York has to anticipate you as a potential parent. If you want to be married, you’ll have to stand to this scrutiny no matter what. So—please, let me do my job. Agreed?”

“What if I move to Georgia?”

“Excuse me—what *Georgia*?”

“North of Florida. Georgia. There are no parent licensing requirements there. I Googled it.”

“Nevertheless. It says here, Joe recently had some issues at school. Sketching out portions of the—to put it kindly, the female anatomy.”

“Again—Josh is his name. I saw them. He didn’t draw breasts. He drew four circles. Even those were barely within the lines. It was practically cubist.”

“Is that a *joke*, Mr. DeBerg? You shouldn’t take these concerns lightly.”

“I don’t.”

“Mr. DeBerg, have you ever struck another human being?” The answer is easy, but Seth hesitates. His throat locks. A little air moves through. It was the same sound he made when he was in seventh grade, his head pushed down so close to the floor he could smell the linoleum, and he remembers Terry Smith above him in all his blackhead-pocked glory, kicking his shins, standing on his knees. He’d forgotten that. He’d forgotten how hot tears can feel when they come right from the eye, or the thunder-clap sound the locker made when it pinched his hair, chaining him in. The principal—come to think of it, his name was Levine, too—came upon him later that afternoon, saw Seth with his hair locked in the bottom of the locker, and gave him such a pitying look of irrelevance that Seth wondered if maybe he deserved the ass-kicking after all. That stuck with him. One Friday night in high school, when Terry Smith had forgotten the name *Seth DeBerg* and sat leaning at the top row of the bleachers, Seth thought how little it would take to send him over. Just a single shove. But he had determined never to fight back. It was too late by then anyway. By high school, life’s lottery numbers had already come sucking up the chute.

“No,” Seth says. “I never struck anybody. How could you ask that?”

“Were you ever bullied?”

Will it lower my score if I was?”

“Studies conflict. A recent one—I was just reading *Parent Licensing Today*—concluded that men with traumatic childhood experiences tend to transfer that same trauma to their children—”

He’s been holding his breath, but it bursts out of him. “I don’t care what the studies say. I would never raise a hand to Josh—his name is *Josh*—and I would throw myself into traffic before

I so much as had the thought. What's the matter with you people, anyway? What gives you the right to say who's going to be a good parent? You measure that by how many baby carrots I keep in my fridge? He draws breasts in class because he's a curious kid who doesn't even know why breasts are significant, and you want to put a permanent ink blot on his record. You know, the substitute teacher recommended therapy for that. Therapy. She didn't even know about his parents. She just wanted therapy for a nine-year-old boy who doodles. This was a 24-year-old woman whose chief experience in life probably comes from a mission trip to the good part of Guadalajara, and she thinks that just because she's the one sitting in the chair behind the desk that she can reduce one poor orphaned boy's entire psyche into a doodle, God dammit—"

"Mr. DeBerg. Please. Sit down."

He does. His phone buzzes again. He wants to pick it up and tell Liz to pour out the bucket and put the champagne back on the shelf. Mrs. Levine is clicking the mouse into oblivion and her lips have puckered out so far they resemble a deflated, flesh-colored balloon, except there's a little smile in them. Then she produces a stopwatch from under her sleeve and clicks it.

"How long until I can re-apply?" he asks.

"Re-apply, Mr. DeBerg?"

"I failed, right? You're going to fail me."

She looks at the stopwatch. "You did about average."

"What?"

"You lasted about the average time before you broke. Don't be ashamed, Mr. DeBerg. There's something about parenting that brings out something ancient our brains, the fight-or-flight. I'd be more concerned if you didn't break. You're ready to see the

Parent General now, for the swearing in. Do you have time?"

Seth wipes the film of sweat on his cheeks and looks at his phone, swipes out the eight new texts from Liz, and realizes that yes, he has time. It's 3:39.

Several months earlier, at approximately 10:07 p.m., Evan and Grace DeBerg were driving home from a dinner party in Westfield. They were about to merge onto the 78 when a Semi rolled through a red light, through the passenger side, through Grace and halfway through Evan who, according to the examiner, technically survived long enough to die in the emergency room. The truck driver would survive to be charged with involuntary manslaughter, but he anyway survived, Seth thought, and the sentence would probably be light as far as manslaughter goes, so what did it matter? The half-asleep asshole still had his whole life ahead of him. The wrecking ball always survives.

The weekend became a kaleidoscope of uncertain decisions. What hymn did Evan want? Seth had heard of "Amazing Grace," so, sure. What did the will say? It was ten years old and gave guardianship of Josh to Seth. Why wasn't Josh crying and why was he staring at the wall? Was that worse than crying, somehow? Post-traumatic stress? Seth Googled it and obsessed over the conflicting answers until Liz made him stop. You'll never find out, she said. There's no mapping this out. Seth insisted that Josh needed to cry, but he wasn't sure if that was true, so he never said anything. Sunday ended with an afternoon funeral and the remaining DeBergs gathered at his sister Alice's home in Chatham.

After the torrent of the weekend subsided, they all played Monopoly, their old family Thanksgiving-home-from-college ritual. They used to get drunk and loud arguing about Free Parking, and dad would always come halfway down the stairs and shout

It's *Nine-Thirty!* with the righteous indignation of someone who genuinely thought that was late. Now Liz took Grace's spot and Alice's husband, Mark, took Evan's. There would be no parents to yell at them, no greasing Evan with 500s so his final decisions as Supreme Monopoly Justice went your way. The loudest sound was the stuttering of orphan dice on cardboard.

"Where's the car?" Seth asked. "That was always Evan's."

"That's okay," Mark said. "I'll take the top hat."

"Just play," Liz said. "You're obsessing."

Seth shook his head. "Did somebody *steal* the car? It's weird."

"It's an old board," Alice said. "It doesn't matter."

"It's not the same."

"No," Alice said. "It wouldn't be."

Alice was the youngest—chronologically. She dressed far above her age, all First Lady cardigans and hamburger bun hair, and her forearms were already meaty from a few years of lifting toddlers in and out of cribs. Mark, a stock broker in the city, was stiff, always wearing starched shirts; precisely the type of consistently tensionless man you'd want to marry your sister. Together they made good, boring parents.

Somebody won—Seth wouldn't remember who—and after Mark went to bed and Liz went to the guest room, Alice and Seth sat in the hand-me-down couch together. They stared at the TV that Alice kept, muted, on *National Geographic*.

"So we should talk about Josh," Alice said.

"Sure."

“I can take him. It’ll be the closest thing to his old family life. He’ll have cousins to distract him here, he’ll be in the same school district...I don’t expect you to help financially—”

“You’re maxed out, Alice.”

“What do you mean? Mark makes a good living.”

“No—I mean, with the kids. You’re three years younger than me and you have bags under your eyes.”

“Aw. Thanks.” She threw a fake punch in his shoulder. “That doesn’t matter. This is our nephew and he doesn’t have parents now. We’ll take him in. Gladly.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. I know how Liz is about kids.”

“Well, they left him to me in their will. I was doing some Googling...I’ll get a temporary parenting exemption, but I can’t transfer him to someone else until I get the full thing. Then I can transfer him to you.”

“You know, Seth, you’d make a great parent. You’re great with kids.”

“That’s because I am one. He’ll do just fine with you.”

“Well, you’ve been applying anyway. To get married, right? Just transfer him to me and Mark when you can.”

“Thanks.” His phone buzzed.

“Who’s that?”

He twisted the phone around to show her the alarm registering 11:55. “Liz says she can’t sleep unless she knows I’m in bed with her before midnight.”

“Come on. Really?”

“Yeah, really.”

“What happens if you don’t go? Does she turn into a pumpkin?”

“She’s a good influence on me. She gives me discipline.”

“And under Mussolini, all the trains in Italy ran on time.”

“I’m not going to have that conversation if you can’t say something nice.”

“All right. She’s...pretty.”

They heard the swishing of socks on carpet that could only be one of Alice’s kids coming up the hall. Instead Josh came slump-shouldered into the room, pinching something small between his fingers.

“Hey, little guy,” Alice said. “Why aren’t you in bed? You need to rest.”

He only shrugged at her. He found his way to Seth, then moved his hand over him. He dropped something small and metal into his lap. Seth pinched it and held it to the shifting TV light of hippos v. crocodiles.

Then he saw it: Evan’s Monopoly car.

“My dad taught me Monopoly,” Josh said. “He always let me be the car. Sorry. I was gonna keep it.”

“No, buddy,” Seth said. “You keep it.”

“I *heard* you. You need it.” Josh shook his head, sniffed, then rubbed his face with the inside of his elbow. It left a streak of tears across the inside of his shirt. Then, dry, he turned and

shuffled back to the bedroom hall.

Alice smiled. “You sure you’re gonna want to give him up after five months?”

Mrs. Levine and Seth arrive at the third floor. There must be high turnover here, because the frosted window only reads PARENT GENERAL and above it, there only remain the hieroglyph remnants of the previous name.

Inside, the window is open, but there’s a hemp smell lingering in the air. The PARENT GENERAL is chewing gum behind his desk, his arms crossed, his gut testing the integrity of his Oxford buttons. Seth finds him familiar and wonders if he saw his photo on the government website during the application process. He doesn’t think so. He would recognize the fault lines of acne scars running through the beard, the puffy neck, the eyes bright and lifeless as marbles. PARENT GENERAL might have dyed his hair since then, because what hair remained close-cropped to his head is jet black, making the great spot in the middle of his horseshoe head as obvious as Jupiter’s. He looks like a human wrecking ball.

“Seth,” Mrs. Levine announces. “Dr. Terry Smith, Parent General of the 117th district.”

Seth freezes in place. He remembers where the acne scars came from. The braille of 7th-grade blackheads across Terry Smith’s face. *Doctor Terry Smith? His Terry Smith, a doctor?*

PARENT GENERAL.

It’s over.

Seth feels the various hydraulics of his limbs tangle inward,

dry, dead. His face, as he imagines it, is translucent and bloodless. He can hear the saliva crackling on Terry's tongue as he readies to speak. Maybe he won't recognize him. There's a second or two of flickering on Terry's face, then his bloodshot eyes go wide. "Seth DeBerg...DeBerg...no way! St. Ambrose Jaguars?"

Seth makes a pathetic wheezing sound that only technically pushes air through his larynx. "Yeah. Uh, yeah."

"Didn't recognize you at first. Ha! *You're* gonna raise a kid?"

Mrs. Levine steps to the desk and sets down the PL-514B. "Mr. DeBerg is actually here to get his full license, at which point he can transfer guardianship to his sister, Alice. She holds a license in good standing with the State of New Jersey."

"PL-514B," Smith says. "What's that again? Oh." He runs his fat finger down the rows. Seth can't fight the feeling of a horse at auction. "Let's see, let's see...income, taxes, good, good..."

"Isn't there some sort of bias rule—"

"That was a long time ago," Smith says. "Promise I'll be fair. Interviews, good enough...predilection for McDonald's. Hmm. I know the struggle. Recommended approval, signed Mrs. Levine. Okay. Good enough for me. Mrs. Levine, do you know of any reason this man should not be approved for a parent license in the State of New York?"

Mrs. Levine says, "I'd recommend regular refrigerator inspections. That should suffice."

Smith scribbles that on the PL514-B, then pulls a stamp from the drawer. "Regular...how do you spell 'refrigerator'... inspections...recommended. Good. All right, I think we're ready—oop, nope. What's this about the boy, uh, Joe DeBerg, drawing breasts in school?"

“Uh—”

“What?”

Seth coughs his throat clear, but the crackling is still there.
“I’ve talked to the teachers...”

“What’s that? Sorry, Seth—could you speak up?”

“I’ve talked to the teachers about it,” Seth says. “He’s on therapeutic probation. The substitute teacher is young. She was alarmed. But the school counselor said it’s nothing I can’t handle and normal for a kid his age who’s been through what he’s been through.”

“Yeah. Okay. I sign this and your sister gets custody, is that it?”

“That’s the idea.”

“I remember Alice. Nice kid. All right. Signed. Come back for a license update in two years. Otherwise, congrats. When you gonna tell Joe he has a new permanent home?”

“Oh—right away, I guess. He’s in the playroom downstairs.”

“Ha. So is my kid. Divorce, you understand. This is one of the days I gotta have him. You wanna go tell Joe together? That’s my favorite part.”

As the three of them round the corner on the first floor, they hear struggling and groaning sounds coming from the playroom. Either a debate on Bloomberg has lost all semblance of decorum, or there’s a fight going on. They open the door and find Terry Smith Junior standing on Josh’s legs and shouting at him to cry uncle. Neon lanyard lady is still comatose in the

corner and half-buried in Nerf darts.

“Mr. Smith!” Mrs. Levine shouts. “Get off that boy this instant.”

“Little orphan bitch.” Terry Junior struts around the floor when he says it, like a pro wrestling heel tweaking the crowd, then circles around and jumps back to Josh.

Mrs. Levine gasps. “General Smith?”

“Best to let boys sort out their natural pecking order. Saw a study.”

Seth barely hears this. He’s looking at Josh, at the defeated look on his face, and Seth feels the same pitying expression of Principle Levine blushing in his cheeks. Then the tape of Seth’s life fast-forwards. Seth finds his palm is cold, because there’s a can of Coke in it, and now he’s standing at the vending machine in the hall and he’s just put in his last dollar. He walks through the door again, through Terry Senior and Mrs. Levine, and he doesn’t hear any sound, as if someone muted Bloomberg. He doesn’t remember opening the can, but it’s open and fizzing. He’s standing over the kids and Terry Junior is looking up at him with his dumb mouth open.

Then Seth watches himself pour it all over the little shit’s head.

It soaks opaque through the YOUR MOM meme T-shirt until the words disappear. Terry Junior freezes on contact. The soda wets his hair, curves around his earlobes, and spreads down his pant legs until ending in a brown puddle on the floor. Seth shakes the last flecks from the can, tosses it to the ground. No need to worry about spilling. This is a new world and spills no longer matter. Seth lets out the kind of happy sigh that expels the air of thirty-five years.

The rest of them are silent. Terry Senior has an hourglass-cursor look on his face, though he seems to be mouthing *what*

the hell. Mrs. Levine stares at the clipboard but has no idea what to write. Josh squints up at Seth. Only Terry Junior seems to know what to do: he starts crying. The sound is shrill and sweet.

“He pissed his pants,” Seth says. “Wow. Would you look at that? Kid *pissed his pants*. What the hell, kid?”

Terry Junior begins to weep. There’s another moment of stillness there, until Josh pushes himself to his elbows and laughs. Only he knows how Seth jokes. Soon it’s the funniest thing Josh has ever heard.

“Seriously, kid,” Seth says. “Control yourself. You can’t go around bullying people if you’re just gonna piss your pants.”

The look on Terry Senior’s face has worn off, swept aside by a sweaty alcoholic blush. He goes for the approved PL-514B in Seth’s hand but Seth pulls it back, holds it up high, above his reach, then shows Terry Senior his back and tears the paper in two. This is a new world after all.

“Let’s go,” Seth says, and lifts Josh up. He leads him out the playroom, through the hall, out to the lobby, past the letter board signs pointing to every office in the building—Driving, Marriages, Parenting, Internet, Retirement, Trial-by-Combat Applications, Euthanasia Exemption Applications, and, in front of the only clerk without a line, Death Licenses. There had been a time just hours previous when all the official power of the lobby mattered to him. It no longer does.

“Does this mean I won’t have to live with Aunt Alice?” Josh asks.

“Mmmmmmaybe,” Seth says. “You still want to live with your lame-ass uncle?”

“Mmmmmmaybe.”

The phone buzzes in Seth's pocket:

Okay, I put the bucket away. You can't even respond to me now? EIGHT WEEKS.

His phone reads 5:02 p.m. now. Time has finally moved forward. He ignores whatever it is Liz said and types in:

You wouldn't want to move to Georgia with me, would you?

Winky-face.

"Who's that?" Josh asks.

"Just an ex-girlfriend," Seth says. He lets Josh go through first, then presses through the suction-clasp of the revolving door. The moment the rubber lip bursts open, he smells the sweet monoxide air of the city. There will be questions later—from Liz, from Alice, notices from the State of New York. But he's in the air pocket between sterilized air and natural world. It's cold, though, and he's thinking of somewhere warm. The world has its warmer places, its golden isles. Why hasn't he been there? He should have been there all along.

"Where do you want to go now?"

Josh shrugs. "Home?"

"It's about five. You hungry?"

Josh nods.

"Come on," Seth says. "I'll buy you a Happy Meal."

FURTHER DOWN THE BAR ●

Merridawn Duckler

First you have a darling little baby boy
and the next thing you know he's in a full beard
shredding a guitar on stage. And someone else
has a sweet little baby girl and before they can turn
around, she's six feet of talent,
standing in front of everyone in a red dress.
Further down the bar the skinny
kid in a black and dirty muscle tee, sucks at a glass of beer
so hard you understand why they call it "nursing
a drink." And maybe he's wanted
or unwanted
as he rushes angrily into the August night
meant to be warm and enfolding,
but now awash in starlessness
and all that keeps him upright
on his bike (lost his license)
is the ballast of loneliness.
And if you say this will not stand you are right
as feedback roams the bodies,
trying to give everyone either a hug or a concussion,
and the girl is in flames
the lines between her and the music so slurred,
she's a lion's paw maraca.
Parents, single and together, stand
behind the video players with their luckless faces
and hold their own hands,
the feel of that baby
never leaves the skin, out in the world, crying:
what, you are closed?
I have more of this world to drink
to the bottom of this glass.

HOLY MOVIES ●

Merridawn Duckler

When I was a child
I was a child of the Super 8
positive image in reversed stock,
my father a whirr,
my mother a skirt waft
as we strode toward the little eye
hands held red rover, no one may break through.

Now movies play again re-mastered with mad color
my mother crying, her tears trouble me;
why do I care nothing for the past?
A discontinued technology which owes us nothing.
Nor care for any future;
the world that never existed,
who dares record it?

Behind me my watchful sisters
whisper each name: Geordie, Heidi
Alysia whenever a face appears and I think
as I did then, for I believed no film could fail:
here I am, unretouched, my gait the same,
following no one to oblivion. I have no master,
not even the lines on the street.

**TOURIST NOTES: WHEN I WATCH MY
GRANDDAUGHTER, AT HOME, CONNECTICUT ●**

Cathy Allman

I'm also looking back at her father's
childhood and ahead to when
I'm no longer here.
She roams each room.

I revisit our house through her eyes.
She holds my fingers, toddles
toward her reflection in our mirror,
bends forward and kisses her glass lips.

We play piano,
I sing scales to her
until she pushes my hand away,
bangs her own loud notes.

I follow her like a phantom,
while she pulls every drawer,
cupboard handle,
opens each door.

OUTLINE FOR HER NOVEL ●

Cathy Allman

She wants to write about who she is as the heroine, but her mother creeps into the story. Her creator and her foil haunt every plot twist. She's trapped with her mother's character, eclipsing the beginning and pulling her back toward the place she's moved from.

When she speaks of her husband, she writes of the woman she is to him. It's important to her to be this woman: this homemaker, this lover, the mother of his children, his friend. That woman she writes about from her own point of view is a lovely lady who keeps house, and cooks, and she's funny, and she works out, and she got the kids through fine educations and into good marriages. She has friends. She has deep thoughts that she keeps between herself and the entity to whom she prays. She fills daily blank pages with questions.

But if she writes about herself from his point of view, she's critical. She objects to his habit of not courtesy flushing. She doesn't like the way he piles projects on his desk or doesn't wipe his fingerprints from the counter. She takes offense to the fact that when he feeds the dog chicken, he helps himself to some of the dark meat and skin—a bite for the dog, a bite for him. She doesn't like to watch him pick meat from the bones with his greasy fingers. She wants his portion on a plate, with silverware, napkin, and conversation.

And if she tells you about her children, she can't tell you what they think of her, the way they were unhappy that she made them build snowmen in the backyard so that the front yard stayed unblemished. When they bring this up, they laugh. She explains that the front yard is where the septic fields are, and she didn't want them eating snow that might have groundwater seepage. And that's not a lie. But they aren't wrong. She liked the snow without footprints.

She can't tell you about how they felt driving themselves to school, where their thoughts were, how they felt about merging into rush-hour traffic. She doesn't know how safe they felt when she was behind the wheel. She only knows she was afraid of some collision from a blind spot. Even if it wasn't her fault, there'd be damage.

She doesn't see herself when trying to write these stories.

She doesn't see what other people notice: the gap in her teeth, the gray at the roots of her hair, that sometimes she squints and has an expression that might look like disdain. Often her smile could appear forced. Her children called it her perma-smile. They never had reason to understand her superpower of smiling. They had no idea about her relationship with pretending.

They do tell her their feelings. She knows when they're nervous, knows how they talk their way into finding the positive, of keeping track of the good. She likes to think she passed on, by example, the vision of process, the possibility for change. But does she lie to herself? Does she try to focus on good when she writes in order to not mention the things that are wrong? The mold under the sink where the spray hose leaked; the corner of the garage where the drywall stayed wet and needs replaced. The fact that her daughter-in-law doesn't like her and her son-in-law thinks she's silly.

On a sunny day, you'd never guess that when it rains hard all the water rolls down the hill and turns the bend to saturate her front lawn and pools in her driveway. When it rains hard, she wanders in the runoff without boots. She carries a shovel, cursing, trying to unclog leaves from the drains.

THE PLOT ■

Mika Seifert

The writer laid down his pen. “To hell with this book and all its characters,” he said through clenched teeth, and with a spiteful temper none of his characters had ever possessed he snapped the pencil in half.

The reaction from the plot was not long in coming.

“What a pity,” they were saying in there when the news broke.

“Yes, a pity.”

“He showed such promise.”

“What a waste.”

“But if he’s going to be like that.”

“Yes, you’re right.”

“If he’s going to be like that, it’s for the best.”

“Still, what a shame.”

Jacob Mattes was his name, and he had been with them for two years now; in fact, they could still remember when they had wooed him. He had already written two novels at the time – solid works, both of them, and critically acclaimed; the first one had done surprisingly well for a debut, the second had put him through the roof. What a talent, they thought. They were sure he could do even better than those two books, and the vote among them had been unanimous. Still, they kept their

distance. They knew that second book had taken a lot out of him, had brought him to the brink of total exhaustion, and so they sat back and waited, letting the poor guy go on vacation, enjoy his day in the sun, maybe write a short story or two, and when the time came for him to consider writing that all-important third book they were there, proposing to him.

He did not disappoint them at first. What he did with their ideas, how he developed them was beyond their wildest hopes. The language was pure, it was adventurous, the words sparkling on the page like pebbles in a river bed. And then.

What happened? They were still trying to figure that out. Was it the money? They didn't think so. He lived comfortably, but he was by no means rich. He had a string of girlfriends, but they didn't think it was that, either. No, the more they thought about it, the more convinced they became that it had nothing to do with any outside influence at all and everything to do with the man himself. And they blamed themselves for not seeing it sooner. Could the disaster possibly have been averted?

The man himself, meanwhile, had no inkling of the plot's thoughts. He went on another long vacation, slept with a long line of beautiful women, and forgot completely about that book he had meant to write. He knew it could be writer's block, but for the time being he refused to entertain that thought. A lot of his writer friends had been afflicted with that disease, but he had laughed at them in private and there was no way he would ask them about a cure now.

A month, two months later, and he could no longer deny that he was sick. He tried his hand at a few haphazard plots, but nothing worked. In the end he returned to *The Iron Mattress*, not because he felt any love for that book – in fact, the

thought alone gave him stomach cramps - but because he had convinced himself that he would be unable to write anything else until he had finished it.

In the plot, too, they had kept an eye on developments, and when Mattes took up the pen again they were stunned. Warily they watched him settling into his old routines – waking up at six sharp, a hurried breakfast, then work until noon, lunch, sleep for an hour, then work until eight.

They hadn't foreseen this, and no one knew quite what to do. What was the protocol in a situation like this? They would have to confer with other plots, maybe call for a general meeting. But the man still had supporters. There were quite a few who argued in favor of giving him a second chance, and in the end they did.

By the end of the first week, they knew it was a mistake. Mattes was no longer the same man, or if he was, then he had managed to hide this part of himself remarkably well until now. He was hitting the booze hard, kept his apartment in a state of disrepair and squalor, and had started beating his girlfriend.

They had meant only to scare him. When Goro, the one-armed dwarf from *The Iron Mattress* stepped out of the manuscript, it was meant as a warning, nothing more; they wanted Mattes to leave the book alone – if he lost his mind as a consequence, then so be it; that was a risk they were willing to take, if only he would leave the book alone for all time.

But the writer was not in his study; he was outside, on his

way to a rendezvous, and when he saw Goro with his one arm dangling he was so upset and the timing was so unfortunate that the poor man was run over by a tram.

They couldn't afford to grieve; the subject matter was time-sensitive after all, and what's more, they already had their eyes set on someone else, a fine specimen this one, if slightly unusual – a schoolteacher and a Frenchman, recently retired, with not a single novel to his name yet. He would have been an unlikely candidate, except that Pierre Robichaux, who had read voraciously all his life, had quite recently – only in the last couple of days, in fact – thought to try his hand at fiction. His first attempts were enough to convince them; Robichaux was their man, and they were willing to try him out. One afternoon, with half of Paris out for a walk and with the sun pouring molten gold onto the sidewalk before the Elysee, they approached him. “Hey,” they said. “Listen.”

CITY PIGEONS ●

Rochelle Jewel Shapiro

Don't you love the way they humble us—
crapping on the manes of the august
New York Public Library lions
and the pate and cape of the gleaming bronze
of William Tecumseh Sherman
in the Grand Army Plaza,
and the crest and croup of the horse
he's mounted on and even on the outstretched arm
of the angel standing on the pedestal before him.

More egalitarian than the American eagle,
from its cloaca the white goop
is as likely to land on salon blonde hair
as the disheveled greasy mop of the guy
in camouflage pants hunched on a milk crate
that leans against the locked metal gate
of Gramercy Park or the transparent plastic raincoat
of the old woman who strews crumbs from a bag,
pigeons on her shoulders and bobbing
at the toes of her molded shoes.

How ordinary, a city pigeon, gray as soot,
but ah, the green iridescence of its neck
in sudden sunshine and the wide-eyed gaze
of my five-year-old granddaughter
from rural upstate, throwing her head back
to see them roosting on ledges.
“Keep your mouth closed,” I warn.

One afternoon, inside Penn Station, a flock of pigeons
flies overhead, some landing on Jamba Juice,
others on Dunkin' Donuts, the rest on CVS.
I look forward to seeing them again,
but the next morning, they are gone.

WHEN COUNTING SHEEP FAILS ●

Catherine Stansfield

They say when you're having trouble falling asleep,
it's because you're running around in someone else's dreams.
What does it mean when I'm never in my own dreams?

I think it's because I have always slept the most soundly
during thunderstorms. But there can't be a nightly thunderstorm,
rain on glass and tangled trees and murderous, electric clouds,

or I would be sleeping on an ark.

My mom would say that thunder was the sound of
angels bowling in Heaven. I believed her.
Why wouldn't Heaven have a bowling alley?

When day after day the angels watch a sight as pitiful as a human
who can't even sleep, the one prerequisite being closed eyes,
I could see why they would need to decompress by throwing
something.

I still believe her.

I use a white noise machine. It doesn't work.
Maybe the sound of these fake storms hijack my brain to create
the illusion of resting with open eyes to compensate.

The machine doesn't have a setting for an
angels-only bowling team, but it has a five-star review
for the way it simulates a night without stars.

They say it sounds nice, so I listen to it all night.

LA BALLATA DI CABO BRANCO ●

Julio Monteiro Martins

Scelgo questo nome per te,
Yolanda,
perché è quello che una voce di miele
cantava alla radio
sul comodino dell'albergo
mentre godevamo insieme
nel falso tramonto
delle tende gialle

I crackers, gli anacardi,
le lattine di birra, di guaraná,
e il telefono muto
assistevano divertiti
al riflesso sullo specchio
dei nostri giochi d'amore

La vera Yolanda, la donna cubana
che ha ispirato Pablo Milanés
in quella vecchia canzone
non doveva essere
tanto diversa da te,
Yolanda mia,
e di sicuro aveva il tuo profumo

Il vento che soffiava dal mare,
balsamo per un sole spietato,
portava via le parole
con le quali
tu volevi parlarmi
di linfe e di radici.

Parlarmi di tuo nonno
divorato da un giaguaro
mentre credeva di cacciarlo
nel *sertão* di Paraíba.
Parlarmi di tua madre
delicata
come il fiore del *cajú*,
morta per una puntura
di zanzara.

THE BALLAD OF CABO BRANCO ●

Translated from the Italian by Donald Stang and Helen Wickes

I choose this name for you,
Yolanda,
because it's the one which a voice of honey
sang on the radio
on the bedside table of the inn
while we enjoyed ourselves together
in the false sunset
made by the yellow curtains.

The crackers, the cashews,
the cans of beer, of *guaraná*,
and the silent telephone
witnessed with amusement
our games of love
reflected in the mirror.

The real Yolanda, the Cuban woman
who inspired Pablo Milanés
in that old song
must not have been
very different from you,
my Yolanda,
and surely had your scent.

Blowing in the sea,
the wind was a balm
for a scorching sun,
but carried away the words
you wanted to speak to me
of lifeblood and roots.

Of your grandfather,
devoured by a jaguar
while he believed he was trapping it

Di tuo padre immobile
su una sedia a rotelle:
quarant'anni fa era soldato
nella guerra più sporca
dell'Araguaia.
Cacciatore di uomini,
portò al suo sergente
le teste tagliate dei guerriglieri
legate per i capelli
lungo un palo, come granchi
strappati dal fondo della palude.
Intrepido combattente
di una causa ignobile
trema ancora
al solo ricordo delle torture
inflitte,
e nello sforzo insano di descriverle
scuote anche la sedia.

Yolanda mia,
tu mi hai detto
che ti consideri
una donna senza storia.
“Sei il mio primo capitolo”,
mi dicevi.
Ti sbagli,
Yolanda.
Sei piena di storia,
e io invece
sono fuori
dal tuo libro:
sono elegante carta d'imballaggio
in toni pastello,
e porto il tuo libro dentro di me
altrove, lontano da qui,
come regalo per altri amici
che non conoscerai mai.

Yolanda,
farfalla inchiodata
sul mio letto,
sulla sabbia di Cabo Branco,
mi sorridi sempre,
mi guardi sempre
con meraviglia:

in the sertão of Paraíba.
Of your mother,
fragile
as the flower of the cashew,
dead of
a mosquito bite.

Of your father, immobilized
in a wheelchair:
forty years ago he was a soldier
in the dirtiest war
on the Araguaia.
Hunter of men,
he carried to his sergeant
the severed heads of the guerillas
tied by their hair
along a pole, like crabs
torn from the depths of the swamp.
Intrepid combatant
for an ignoble cause,
he still shudders
at even the memory of the tortures
inflicted,
and even his chair shakes
from his insane effort to describe them.

My Yolanda,
you told me
that you think of yourself
as a woman without history.
“You are my first chapter,”
you told me.
You are wrong,
Yolanda.
You are full of history,
and I instead
am outside of your book:

sono il vecchio toro
che saltò il recinto del mare
dentro il tuo podere,
e per sette giorni e sette notti
lo inondò di semi.
Ma ora devi restituirlo contro voglia
tirandolo per il muso
al nuovo proprietario.

In un sertão diverso
tra affreschi restaurati
e cappuccini,
anch'io, Yolanda,
soffro la stessa sorte di tuo nonno:
ogni giorno
sono sbranato da un giaguaro
di cui non oso nemmeno dire il nome.
Ho un'Araguaia
di sconfitte dentro il petto
e non so proprio
dove trasportano
la mia testa
dopo che l'hanno
staccata dal corpo.
Temo che metteranno
niente meno
di un oceano
tra i due ritagli di me.

Yolanda,
ti guardo da fuori di te:
Sei tu la mia storia,
la favola delle mie impossibilità,
e sono io invece
la farfalla schiacciata
sotto il fondo trasparente
di un vassoio:
souvenir dimenticato
nel bagagliaio di un aereo
da un amore vacanziero
che rientra.

Eternamente,
Yolanda.

I am elegant wrapping paper
in pastel tones,
and I carry your book within me
elsewhere, far from here,
as a gift for other friends
whom you will never meet.

Yolanda,
butterfly pinned
to my bed
on the sand of Cabo Branco,
you are always smiling at me,
you always look at me
amazed:
I am the old bull
who leaped the fence of the sea
into your farm,
and for seven days and seven nights
flooded it with his seed.
But now you must return him unwillingly,
pulling him by the muzzle
to his new owner.

In a different outback,
among restored frescoes
and cappuccinos,
I, too, Yolanda,
suffer the same fate as your grandfather:
every day
I am ripped apart by a jaguar
whose name I don't even dare to speak.
I have an Araguaia
of defeats in my breast,
and I have no idea
where they will carry
my head
after they have

cut it from my body.
I fear that they will put
no less than an ocean
between the two scraps of me.

Yolanda,
I gaze at you from outside of you.
It is you who are my history,
the fable of my impossibilities,
and it is I, instead,
who am the butterfly pressed
beneath the transparent bottom
of a lacquered tray:
a souvenir forgotten
in the hold of a plane
returning from
a summertime love affair.

Eternally, Yolanda.

The Araguaia guerrilla (Portuguese: Guerrilha do Araguaia) was an armed movement in Brazil against its military dictatorship, active between 1967 and 1974 in the Araguaia river basin. It was founded by militants of the Communist Party of Brazil. (Wikipedia)

WHEN THEY PUT ME IN CHARGE ●

Peter Leight

of the arrangements I moved into the area I used to be afraid of, the area I wasn't even aware of before they put me in charge, it's an area that didn't even exist when somebody else was in charge. I'm opening all the doors, leaving them open like a dispensary, handing out free tickets, even though you don't need a ticket to get in—it's better to have something to hold onto, better to give something away. I'm wearing one of those friendship bracelets that makes you feel friendly, I mean everybody is my friend. Now that I'm in charge I'd like to find a way for everybody to be satisfied—I'm spending the medal money, opening up the money jar like a vault that turns into a tunnel, if everybody takes some there's nothing wrong with that. Honestly it's better to share, better when every account is a joint account—this isn't the kind of level where you advance to the next level. When you're in charge people want to know what you have to offer, there's nothing wrong with that, it needs to be satisfying, when it's satisfying it's proportional, like a punishment. When they put me in charge I started cleaning things up, clean on the surface, I don't know about the area underneath the surface—of course what's clean doesn't always stay clean, when people do bad things it's not because somebody lets them, they don't need permission, as when you don't have room to open something until you close something that is already open. I think I'll move people around when I'm in charge so everybody is in a place somebody else was in—I'm trying to be fair the way Kant said beauty is separate *from any interest*, although I'm interested in a lot of things, honestly I'm interested in practically everything I can think of. I'm not going to be disappointed or to pretend I'm not disappointed.

THIS WAR ●

Peter Leight

This war is different This time it's a better war This war is improving This war is already an improvement This war is easier to turn on This is a war you turn on and it stays on This war is in your home in your room in bed with you This is a war you fall asleep with This is a war you're never tired of This is a war you're not tired of as much as you're tired of the ones who are tired of it This is a war it's better to be tired of It isn't as painful This is a war that doesn't hurt If it doesn't hurt it's not a true war This hurts even more When they ask you where it hurts you tell them where you are I mean it doesn't matter where you are It doesn't matter to the war This is an indifferent war This war is more indifferent than the others This war is different from the others This is a different war This is a war with highlights This time it's better This is a war that makes you feel better This is a war with better service This is a better service war In a service war you're a server or else somebody is serving you Let me take your order

THREE ●

Robert Beveridge

after Éluard

I

I built three castles
and dedicated them all to my love

she is beauty it is she
who can take the sky and paint it
in any color
or in a variety of colors

and for her I would tear those castles down
if she asked

II

I saw three lights
blaze like fires in a purple sky of sunset

it is my beauty it is she
who has taken the sky and lit it
with a paintbrush a cigarette
or possibly a long match which one uses in fireplaces

and for her I would douse the sky-flames with water
if she asked

III

I whispered three words
in the ear of my love as the sun rose above us

it is my beauty it is she
who whistles a tune by a composer
as yet unborn
her music hangs still in the air
as if the very atoms themselves had parted
to let the notes shine in all their brilliance alone

and for her I would dream these sweet melodies forever
if she asked

NOTHING TO CROW ABOUT ●

Eva-Maria Sher

I.

Two crows took up residence
in the conifer across from my
bedroom window, built a nest, and
proceeded to raise a family.

That was a while ago, and
I have studied their habits
and those of their progeny.

They are by no means a quiet tribe.
In black-frocked dignity they strut
across my lawn, commenting and
muttering their apparent displeasure.

Their courtship has its musical
moments but often sounds
like an argument spiraling out of control.

When it comes to child raising
they don't hesitate to let the
whole neighborhood in
on their trials and tribulations.

Once the young ones have tumbled
out of the nest, intense quarrels ensue
in the branches below.

II.

I dreamt about crows last night.
A whole flock was flying silently
outlined against a flaming sky.
Their wings moved
in perfect tandem, and I was

keenly aware that this dream was a gift.

But then I felt a great loathing
for their black-frosted presence, their
dignified waddle, their quarrelsome
morning voices, their flight
across my evening sky—
felt myself (one of them) veer and
wing away.

III.

All markers were gone.
All wilderness.

No one
belonged to anyone.

My voice
a strange tongue
even to myself.

When I looked back—
I was filled with longing.

IV.

And why won't I let myself
dance to the tune that is mine?

I am small, I am big
I am everywhere and nowhere...

And why won't
I let myself dance?

I am small, I am big
so big I'd rather not.

V.

That crow, wearing cowboy boots
and a city attitude—that crow
in her black and blue coat, that thief
that trickster. Why does she
choose to eat French fries from
city dumpsters, hobble across
city streets, caw her opinions
from rusting lamp posts?

VI.

In my morning kitchen
I can hear the arguments outside.
I have nothing to crow about.
The sun's throwing a bright
rectangle across the pine floor.
I hear the kettle humming.
There's toast and blackberry jam.

PROKOFIEV ●

Monty Jones

When he first wrote the music
for his ballet *Romeo and Juliet*,
Prokofiev let the lovers live,
so that as the curtain began to fall
they twirled together into the wings.

When all his friends complained,
telling him he must be crazy,
he explained, most patiently,
that this is after all a ballet
and the dead don't dance.

His friends said, "That's all
very well, but why in that case
even call them Juliet and Romeo?
Call them Eddie and Imogene
or Frank and Louise
and then change the title
to *Happy Happy Happy*."

"Would it be *Julius Caesar*,"
they went on, "if the great man
gets re-elected four times
and dies only of tired old age?
Or would it be *War and Peace*
without all that snow?"

They spoke at him with one voice,
like a Greek chorus,
or a Committee on Arts Affairs.

Moved by their argument,
and after counting the receipts
from the first lame production,
Prokofiev stopped being provocative

and reworked the piece
so it ended in its expected desolation,
Juliet hanging in Romeo's arms,
then Romeo drinking from the vial,
the Kirov's wide stage purged of love,
few dry eyes among the Commissars.

Even now, as if fed up with death,
someone will try again the happy version,
but it meets our needs no better
than it did in Prokofiev's time.

KIND EYES ■

Andrew Condouris

The day after her son blew his brains out, I received the call from Ms. Wilder asking me if I was available to tutor him that evening.

“Is seven o’clock still good?” she asked.

“That should work,” I replied, unable to think of any other response. I called the police after our conversation and explained what had happened. They said they would pay her a visit. I hung up. My cat, Sashimi, jumped up into my lap and looked at me like we’d never met. The boy’s math tutor, who also worked as a teacher at his high school, was the one who told me the boy had killed himself. I was upset when I heard the news, but mostly I was confused. He’d shown no signs. Sashimi jumped off my lap before I could pet her.

Ms. Wilder called again two hours later. I was busy in a coffee shop with a student, so I called her back when we were finished and I was in my car. She asked me again if I would be able to tutor her son that night. I didn’t know what to say, so I didn’t say anything.

“The cops came,” she said. “I understand why you called them, but please don’t do that again.”

“I apologize.”

“I was able to convince them that I’d had a momentary loss of sanity. Didn’t take much work, really. Alex stayed in his room. So, are you available?”

“I...I suppose.”

“Good, we’ll be expecting you.”

Alex had been sick with mono. I'd been tutoring him in English for about two weeks, but he hadn't really engaged with me on any level. We'd been reading *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Alex sort of just nodded his head (at least when I looked at him) while I talked about the dehumanizing effects of World War I. While he surreptitiously looked at his phone every now and then, I kept returning to the same question. "How does one endure in such a world where human life has no value?" Alex had no answers at all, just a shrug and then a phony look of interest while he muttered something I'd already said. But, to be honest, I don't think he'd even heard the question. His mind was always elsewhere. I don't think he'd even read the book. Though he repeatedly told me otherwise, bullshitting his way through it whenever I tried to put him in the hot seat.

All that aside, I still wasn't going to go over to the house; I wasn't an idiot. But then I remembered that I hadn't received payment on my last two sessions. At eighty dollars a pop, I simply couldn't avoid some serious weirdness to so pricey a tune. Since my wife had been the breadwinner, making the rent since she'd left me had been quite a challenge. So, yes, I was desperate to make ends meet and couldn't miss out on this opportunity.

When I arrived, I was greeted by Ms. Wilder at the door. Her hair was in a messy bun on top of her head and her face was raw from crying. She was wearing a sweatshirt and jeans with no shoes or socks on. This was not her usual classy dress or tennis wear. She moved out of my way so I could enter. The house as usual was spotless. Though I couldn't help but think it was a McMansion, it was probably worth millions. Widowhood had treated Ms. Wilder well.

We stood briefly in the entry hall, which was the size of my apartment building. A gigantic chandelier was above us. Whenever I saw it, I wondered if it would ever fall down and shatter

into a million pieces, proving its worthlessness in the greater scheme of things.

“So,” I said, “I suppose I should get started.”

“Yes,” she said, “he’s in the kitchen right now finishing up a grilled cheese sandwich.” She was always making him grilled cheese sandwiches. I never saw him eat anything else.

“There’s the matter of payment.”

She was surprised at my candidness, but quickly went to her purse on the side table and wrote me a check for three times the amount owed me. As she passed the check over to me, she held my hand for a moment and looked into my eyes. I had seen such desperation before, but I did not indulge in the memory. I pocketed the check without fanfare and followed Ms. Wilder as she walked me underneath the two-way stairs into the kitchen. Alex was sitting at the large oak table eating his sandwich. I was surprised that he wasn’t scrolling on his phone—in fact, his phone wasn’t even on the table. I walked up to him and put my backpack on my side of the table. He looked up and I saw that his eyes weren’t grey but still blue. I had expected them to be grey, like a zombie’s. But he wasn’t a zombie, at least not more so than he normally was in his general apathy. I looked at his mother and she nodded at me to go ahead and say hello.

“Greetings,” I said.

“Please have a seat,” he said in a well-modulated, seemingly adult voice. I shot a glance at Ms. Wilder. That was not remotely like something Alex would say. She shook her head, started to cry again, and ran out of the kitchen. I had expected a typical grunt to my ‘greetings.’ Who was this person sitting across from me? I sat down and looked at him for a moment before he slowly looked up at me.

“Is something wrong?” he asked. His voice was eerily warm, like the voice of an old actor who was semi-retired and was now only doing voice-over work, a scarf loosely fitted around his neck. I was unfazed by this new weirdness: my past experiences in the war had left a hole in my head where such things fit rather nicely. “Who are you?” I asked, focused and determined.

“I’m me.”

“No, you’re not.”

He scoffed in exasperation. “Are you going to sit down or not?”

I sat down, compelled by the fever in his voice.

“I’m not sure how to help you,” I said.

“Who says I need help?” He was down to the last bite of his grilled cheese. “Maybe I just want to talk.”

“Talk about what?”

He finished the sandwich, leaned back in his chair, and sighed. “Is there anything greater than a grilled cheese sandwich made by your mother?”

“I’d say that’s a subjective experience.”

“Is it?” He rubbed his belly. “Maybe it is.”

“Who are you?” I asked again, leaning in.

“Jesus... First my mother and now you.”

I interlaced my fingers and placed my hands on the table.

“Considering the circumstances,” I said, “I think our reactions

are perfectly reasonable.”

He rubbed some food loose from his teeth with his finger.

“Why do you teach?” he asked.

“I beg your pardon?”

“You don’t seem like a teacher, really. What are you?”

“We should probably focus on you at the moment. Now, please elaborate: if you’re you, then why are you *not* you?”

He sat forward again and looked out the window at the thick woods behind the house. He had a certain, hard-earned wisdom in his eyes. “Look,” he muttered, turning his eyes back to me. “There’s a lot of things in the universe that don’t make sense. I wish I had an easy explanation, but I don’t. At first I thought maybe I was just me at an older age. Like, if I didn’t off myself and continued on with my life. But that doesn’t seem to be the case.”

“And why is that?”

“Well, I don’t have any memories of anything. I mean, I have all the memories of killing myself and everything before that. But if I was in an alternate timeline where I didn’t kill myself, then why would I not remember anything from that alternate timeline?”

The phone rang. I heard Ms. Wilder talking in the living room.

“The memories could be gone,” I said.

“Like I blocked them or something?”

“No,” I said, taking my coat off and hanging it on the chair behind me. “If you are you from an alternate timeline, but you’re here now, then it might not be possible to have two sets of memories.”

“But why shouldn’t I have two sets of memories?”

I stammered a bit. “Like you said, there’s a lot of things in the universe that don’t add up. The brain isn’t capable of...”

He noted my hesitation.

“What?”

“How did you do it?”

He gave a single chuckle. “I suppose you want the nitty-gritty?”

“No, just an overview will do.”

We heard Ms. Wilder in the living room getting a little frustrated with whoever was on the other end of the line. Though I couldn’t make out much, I thought I heard her say “How should I know where his body is?”

“Fair enough,” Alex said. “My father had a gun collection, which my mother sold when he died. But before she sold them, I took one, a Luger, and a couple of bullets. I went into the woods behind the house. I chose the mouth. I watched from the ground as my mother discovered me. And then the first responders and all that. They put me in a bag and everything was dark and then I woke up in bed. As if nothing had happened.”

“I see... So, the fact that you’re here at all is nothing short of miraculous.”

“I’m not sure if I would call it miraculous.”

“Why not?”

“Well, miraculous would imply some divine intervention. But I don’t think that’s what this was. It just doesn’t feel like anything like that. Believe me, I wish it was; it would certainly make more sense.”

“What does it feel like, then?”

He thought about his answer for a moment. His mother slammed the phone down and yelled ‘Ugh!’ in the living room.

“It feels like when you die in a game and then come back after a few seconds of a black screen.”

“Oh...”

“I know, I know. It should be more imaginative than that, but I’m just being honest. I wish I could say that there was a tunnel of light or whatever, but that would be lying.”

He sensed my hesitation again, but this time just nodded at me to go ahead and say what I was going to say.

“*Why* did you do it?”

He grunted and looked out the window again, this time with a glaze over his eyes. Then he stood up, went to the fridge, and took out two cans of soda. He put one in front of me and then sat down again. He popped the can open and took a few sips.

“Like I said, it felt like a game. Dying. But everything was becoming a game, I think, before that. My life was a game. I don’t mean to imply that I was playing so many games that I thought I was in a game. I don’t actually play that many

games. This was more like I was detached from myself. Floating above myself somehow. I started to notice that life was functioning without me. I couldn't figure out how that could be."

"That sounds a bit conceited."

"No, that's not what I mean." He sat up a bit and put his can down on the table. "I mean, it didn't matter whether I was here or not. Not in an emo way or anything, but like on a truly realistic level. Then I thought about the book we've been reading. Well, *you've* been reading, I should say. I didn't read a word of it."

"I assumed as much."

"But I was listening to you when you talked about it. Do you remember that passage about the screaming horses?"

"Of course, the soldier who's a farmer back home is horrified by the sound and wants to put them out of their misery. They eventually do, but it takes so long."

"But they carry on, the soldiers." He furrowed his brows.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I mean, after hearing and seeing something like that, you shouldn't be able to move on. But those men move on. How do they do that?"

"They have no choice."

"Right, they *have* to move on. I think there's some sort of freedom in that."

"In not having a choice?"

“Yes.”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow; there’s no logic in what you’re saying.”

“It’s not about logic!” he slammed his fist on the table. His blue eyes glowed like burner flames on a stove. I heard his mother gasp in the other room. I didn’t know she was listening to our conversation, but then I figured why wouldn’t she? He sat back and rubbed his hand.

“It’s about a feeling.” He picked up his soda and took three big gulps. I took a sip and put my can back down on the table quietly. The air in the room was getting heavier and heavier and my head felt light and giddy as a result.

“I heard those screaming horses,” he said. “I mean, they were faint, but they were getting louder and louder. It was only a matter of time before they were all I could hear.”

“Listen,” I said. He flashed his eyes at me, but waited for me to continue. “When I heard about your death, I was rather confused. But I wasn’t upset. I just wasn’t. Do you want to know why?”

“Why?” I could sense a leveling of the playing field.

“Because being upset required overlooking all the advantages you had and would continue to have over billions of other children. In a capitalist society, where certain souls are considered more valuable than others, I couldn’t help but feel some relief that, with your suicide, the scales had tipped—albeit ever so slightly.”

He smiled and chuckled. “Now, this is educational.”

“I could fit my entire apartment into your front hall...several

times over. The amount of money your mother is worth could feed hundreds of thousands of people for years. The college you would've gone to will put most people into debt that will take a lifetime for them to get out of. Do you want me to go on?"

Ms. Wilder cleared her throat. She was standing a few feet behind me. I didn't know how long she'd been standing there.

"The police are probably going to be coming back," she said, walking up to the table. "You need to hide."

"Where the hell am I going to hide?" Alex said.

Ms. Wilder looked at me and sighed. "Would you be able to take him? Just until this blows over? I'll pay you. How much would you like?"

I couldn't believe what she was asking me, but my guilt at having said the things I'd just said about their wealth made me reply with a modest, though somewhat indulgent number.

"Of course," she said. "Of course." She went into the hall to write me another check.

Alex looked at me, lowering his eyebrows.

"I suppose everyone has a price?" he said.

Despite Alex's odd evolution into an adult after his death, he still had the habits of a teenager. He didn't clean up after himself, which Sashimi liked because it gave him plenty of opportunities to snuggle in dirty clothes. Also, I don't think Alex ever took a shower. I was worried that maybe he was starting to regress to his old self, but that didn't come across in our talks, which usually went late into the night. However, I was starting to wonder what he was going to do with this

second lease on life. And if it would happen somewhere else, preferably outside my apartment.

One night, we were sitting in my living room talking about extraterrestrial life. Sashimi, having taken a shine to Alex, was sitting in his lap and purring loudly while Alex petted him. One of our theories about what had happened to Alex involved aliens intervening and regenerating him. Why they would go out of their way to do that for him, however, was a mystery. Was there something about him that was valuable to them?

“But then there’s also the chance that there’s nothing out there,” I said. “In which case, it must be some sort of a spiritual thing, maybe? God or something.”

“But what about all those galaxies and stars and planets?”

“Exactly. If there’s so much potential out there, then why haven’t we seen any evidence of life? ‘Where is everybody?’ as the phrase goes.”

“Maybe they don’t want to be found. Maybe they’ve been watching us and they know what we are capable of and they want nothing to do with us.”

“But then why risk being caught by reanimating you?”

“I don’t know, but maybe they saw that I had some potential or something.”

“So, out of all the people committing suicide, you somehow get a second chance?”

“Is this really a second chance?” Sashimi, perhaps noticing the change in Alex’s tone, jumped off his lap and walked out of the room. “I mean, I’m hiding from the world like some

kind of criminal.”

“That’s why you need to find somewhere to start over again.” At this, our conversation stopped. Whenever it came down to him leaving, he lost all interest. Perhaps he saw me as a friend and as an adult in his life, but it was starting to get a little too close for comfort. That he saw me as something of a father figure did cross my mind, but I wasn’t his father. And, yes, the money his mother had been giving me was wonderful, but I knew it couldn’t last.

Later that evening, Alex stood in my bathroom door while I was brushing my teeth. We were talking about the rainy weather we’d been having lately. He leaned against the doorway and changed the subject abruptly.

“You shouldn’t be a teacher, you know,” he said. “You should’ve stayed in Afghanistan.”

“Hmm?” I said, mouth full of toothpaste.

“You’re a cold fish. Teachers should be warm. I don’t know, maybe your wife did the right thing leaving you.”

I stopped brushing my teeth, a bit of toothpaste foam making its way out of the corner of my mouth. Alex knocked on the door frame twice and then walked down the hall to the guest room and shut the door.

At the end of the week, I was cooking dinner (steak sandwiches) for us when Ms. Wilder called her son. He was sitting at the table, talking to me about politics, when he took the call. I could hear her over the phone and she sounded frantic. He got up and went into the living room for some privacy, but I could still hear him.

“Are you drinking again? Mom, you’re not making any sense.

Okay, okay, we'll be there soon." He walked back into the kitchen, putting his phone in his pocket.

"We need to get over there now."

We brought the sandwiches with us, eating silently in the car. When we arrived, Ms. Wilder was again wearing jeans but with a plain grey t-shirt on top. She had on sneakers and her hair was pulled back. She quickly ushered us in and led us upstairs to Alex's bedroom door. She put her hand on the door knob, then turned to us. Alex and I looked at each other as she started to speak. Her voice was high and weird, like she was letting the air out of a party balloon.

"I don't know why this is happening," she said, "but it's happening."

"You can't mix wine with your medication, Mom. Remember?"

She turned around and put her hands on his shoulders.

"That's not what this is. Open the door and take a look for yourself."

Alex Number Three was filled with glitches. He seemed to speak in tongues and when he moved he ended up repeating the same movement over and over again. When he saw us standing there in the doorway, he raised his hand to scratch his nose. It took him fifteen times before he could actually scratch it.

I turned to Alex Number Two and he said, "This is weird."

Ms. Wilder let out a sob and ran down the hallway to what I guess was her bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

"Is it?" I said. "I mean, on the continuum of weirdness we've been experiencing lately?"

"No, I guess not."

I sat down in the large leather chair at the desk. Alex Three looked at Alex Two in the doorway and then at me. Then he started to pick his nose. Of course, we had to watch as he kept repeatedly bringing his finger to his nose before achieving a connection. When he produced the booger and wiped it on the side of the bed (actions which took a total of five minutes with all the repetitions), he looked at me and spoke.

“I’m not...I’m not...I’m not...I’m not gonna do it.”

“Why are you here?” I asked.

I’m going to spare you the stuttering and the repetitions of phrases. To make a long story short, Alex Three only had one focus in life and that was to make sure people knew he wasn’t going to do it. This was rather irritating to hear since every time I asked him *what* it was he wasn’t going to do, he just repeated that he wasn’t “going to do it.” It was pointless to keep asking him questions, especially since he started to masturbate in front of us.

Alex Two and I left him alone to his business and went downstairs into the kitchen. He took two sodas out of the fridge and we sat at the table and drank.

“Hmm,” I muttered. “I wonder why your body didn’t disappear this time.”

“I think I was meant to see this version.”

“What is he— I mean, what are *you* not going to do?” I asked.

He sighed, then put his head in his hands. I thought maybe he was going to start crying. But then he looked up again and shook his head. “It’s not very complicated,” he said, “but I

can do a pretty good job of making it complicated.”

“What is it?”

“I wanted to find some relief. Those screaming horses we talked about, they were just getting louder and louder. I figured I’d put them out of their misery.”

But he wasn’t talking about horses, was he?

“Who?” I asked.

“Whoever I could get to.”

I didn’t understand what he was saying at first. His eyes were tired and his voice was quavering.

“Did you take more than just one gun from your father’s collection?” I asked.

“Yes, I did. I just needed enough to make them quiet.”

“The kids at school?”

“Yes...”

“The teachers...?”

“Yes...”

“But nobody’s screaming, Alex.”

He stood up and walked over to the window over the sink. He looked out the window at the woods for a few seconds, then turned to me.

“How can you not hear it? Over and over again. Pleading,

begging for mercy. It gets so you can't hear anything else. If you could just ease the pain."

I took a sip of soda, then sat back in my chair. "Afghanistan is a beautiful country. Sometimes we'd just be sitting there watching the mountains. They were so silent, so calm." Alex came back and sat down at the table. "One day," I continued, "we stumbled upon these snipers. Ghosts, we called 'em. I had no cover so I kept running until I found some. Fell in a crevasse. I was a fucking idiot. I'm stuck down there, useless till someone comes along to get me out. Gunfire ricocheting off or thudding into the ground above me every now and then. So, I'm down there and I'm looking up at the blue sky and I see the goddamn moon looking down at me, wondering what the fuck I'm doing. I got nothing to say to it because it's gonna leave me down there and move on. And I kept thinking how I'd rather be on the moon than where I was right at that moment. And then I realize I'm not alone. Down in the dark, I see this kid looking up at me, watching me. Sixteen years old. Gun. Taliban, but he's not doing anything. Just staring at me. He knew some English and I knew some Pashto. He had a Donald Duck comic book in his pocket that some Jarhead must have gave him when he was little. It was all worn-down, like he'd been reading it over and over again. We talked about how Donald was always angry. He offered the comic to me, but I just shook my head. I don't know how long we were down there. The moon disappeared, that much I know. When the guys finally found me, the kid hid away in the dark. I said nothing to Gunny about the kid. I tried, but I just couldn't. I knew he wasn't gonna do anything. You can't hide kind eyes. The next day, I caught up with him again in an abandoned kalat. They hadn't expected us and they left a bunch of RPGs and shitty old rifles behind. And that's where we found him, behind the pile. According to the medic, he'd been gut shot. The Donald Duck comic book was partially ripped up, its loose pages flattened against the wall. And I've been wondering ever since what would've happened if I'd taken that

comic when we were stuck down there in the crevasse.”

Alex took another sip of soda and then turned the can three times on the table, full circle. The sliding sound raised the hairs on the back of my head. I stood up and pushed my chair back under the table.

“What am I gonna do?” he asked. He put his head in his hands. “They’ll just keep coming, the other Alexes.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “Let them come. It’ll stop someday.”

“How do you know?” he asked.

I walked over to the windows and looked out. A deer was grazing near a thicket, just before a steep rise into the woods. “It’s the only thing guaranteed,” I said. “Everything will be quiet again; the horses will have no reason to scream.”

He took the soda cans and dumped the rest of the soda into the sink. He threw them in the recycling and then walked over to me. He shook my hand and patted me on the back. I fell into his arms, then held onto him as tightly as I could.

“You can go home now,” he said.

MIRRORS AND ARCHIBALD GEORGE BARNES'S *CONTEMPLATION* ●

Kelly R. Samuels

Never a mirror you bought yourself.
This one, now: round with etching
and a flaw just left of your left eye.
Given and hung by others.

And the first: inherited, fixed
in the three-drawer dresser
with its curves, those you fit your back into
as you sat and read, the heat
from the floor register reddening
your thighs.

And all those in the middle years,
if we are to break this up
into stages, as if you are an artist.
Those in the rentals, cheap
and thin, the glass not even glass.
That space where it wavered, and you briefly believed
in ghosts, spirits that dropped by,
floating, clamoring to be seen.

The one hung on the back of the bedroom door that fell
and splintered that time.

Even the handheld, the one made of pewter.
Heavy and dull. A present, this, after.
As if he were saying: *Go ahead,
take a good close look at yourself.*

Here she is, contemplating something.
Her hands at her hip, weary.
She's not smiling, but who does looking
in a mirror? You've never known anyone – all those girls

leaning forward over the sinks in the dorm.

It's a plain enough tabletop mirror,
certainly not one she chose. Her mother, probably.
Or part of the furnished flat.

And, so, we have this in common.
And how we sometimes
just gaze – not out of vanity. No busyness, no plucking
and application. No admiration.
Nothing but a good long steady stare,
trying to figure out something,
trying to understand.

All these mirrors not really our own.

SHORT PROSE FOR TWO ●

Brendan Todt

I asked him to stop and he did. We both ate our slices of cake. He got up on the stepstool and laid his square plate in the sink. Then we both cried like candles dripping wax. There was no birthday. No anniversary. No one had retired from work and sent the extra cake home with me. We had bought it for ourselves, him and me, four days ago, and now it was gone. He had pointed at the glass display case and the baker made us a face in orange icing. I asked her if she could add two gaping buck teeth and she smiled and added a tongue as well. It's not just crying and eating we do. Or remembering. There are leaves outside, still on the trees, that we know will fall and the falling will make us happy. It's only when we leave them there, in their great piles like torn-open mouths, that everything beneath will begin to go brown.

WE ARE ALL ALONE ●

Brendan Todt

This was toward the end of September. Something in the garden was blooming but I didn't know what. It couldn't have been the first year, but it was brand new to me. Maybe it was something my mother-in-law put in, but she usually makes sure we all know what goes where, how often to water it, and when we can expect it to "*beautify!*" I was and remain clueless. One of the neighbors stopped by to say something about it. I don't know why I lied, but I did. I said it was something to attract the hummingbirds, which all of us in the neighborhood were trying to lure to our yards. She asked if I was having any luck and I told her at this point it was too early to say. It's kind of a late bloom for that, isn't it? I said we were pretty much willing to try anything. What about her, I asked. Was she having any luck? She shrugged. We all wanted to have the most hummingbirds without having to admit it. Stephen's coming home for November, she said. Stephen was her oldest, most distant son. He did something having to do with the shipment of produce in Oregon. I told her that was great. I said I probably wouldn't recognize him it had been so long, which was true but I was afraid, afterward, sounded a little cold. You and his father both, she said. But a mother— she continued, but she could not go on.

IF YOU BELIEVE IT ●

Brendan Todt

We're fine. We are. We're here. There are trees and grass and people, all living. Someone comes along and takes all of the dead ones away. Grass clippings in the garbage cans or yard waste bags. Bodies in the ambulance first, and later the hearse, and thank goodness for all of us they don't bury them anywhere nearby. The trees die, too, but want to stay put. Or they die, but only in part, and fail not only in their lives but in their deaths. Sometimes someone has to cut down a tree, and we can all understand that. One of the new neighbors didn't have to but cut them down anyway and after two years left the house when he left his wife. Nobody I've spoken to misses him any more than they miss his trees. It has nothing to do with the tire swings, though those were nice. Or the shade or the fresh air. Maybe, if I was told I had to explain it, I'd say it was the color of the leaves in fall, but there are many more trees with many more colors more beautiful than those. In the end, it's like all things a matter of preference: belief and disbelief. Carl, before he left, said he was convinced all the trees were dead already. And remains convinced to this day. That may be the only difference between a man and a tree; a man will believe far more than what can be believed.

NOTES

“La Ballata di Cabo Branco” first appeared in the final poetry collection of Julio Monteiro Martins, *La grazia di casa mia* (Rediviva Edizioni, 2013). The poem has been republished in *The Virginia Normal* with the permission of his family.

CONTRIBUTORS

Cathy Allman has her MFA from Manhattanville College. Her poems have appeared in many journals including *Blue Stem*, *California Quarterly*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *The Potomac Review* and *Terminus*. Her poem “Not in the Wonder Box” has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She is currently working on expanding the poem “Outline For Her Novel” into a novel.

Jacob M. Appel is the author of four literary novels including *Millard Salter’s Last Day* (Simon & Schuster/Gallery, 2017), nine short story collections, an essay collection, a cozy mystery, a thriller and a volume of poems. His collection of ethical dilemmas, *Who Says You’re Dead?*, is forthcoming from Algonquin Books. Jacob currently teaches at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City. More at: www.jacobmappel.com.

Robert Beveridge (he/him) makes noise (xterminal.bandcamp.com) and writes poetry in Akron, OH. Recent/upcoming appearances in *The Virginia Normal*, *Credo Espoir*, and *Chiron Review*, among others.

Madelyn Camrud completed her formal education with degrees in English and Visual art at UND, and a Master’s degree in English in 1990. But learning continues as she makes art and writes poems. Two full collections of poetry were published by New Rivers Press, Moorhead, MN. She is currently working on a third collection entitled *Rowing to the Moon*.

Andrew Condouris is a deaf English tutor living with his astrologer wife and two cats Lili and Vali. In the past, he has worked in New York City in film, television, and theatre as a writer and actor. He has spent the last two years working on the novel *Negative Paradise* with René Steinke, author of *Friendswood*.

Andrew writes: “‘Kind Eyes’ is a simple reaction to the school shootings and wars since Columbine and 9/11. While the root cause (fear) is embarrassingly obvious, the solution (love) is not exactly accessible to men and boys. This story is merely an attempt at asking why.”

Holly Day’s poetry has recently appeared in *Asimov’s Science Fiction*, *Grain*, and *The Tampa Review*. Her newest poetry collections are *In This Place*, *She Is Her Own* (Vegetarian Alcoholic Press), *A Wall to Protect Your Eyes* (Pski’s Porch Publishing), *Folios of Dried Flowers and Pressed Birds* (Cyberwit.net), *Where We Went Wrong* (Clare Songbirds Publishing), *Into the Cracks* (Golden Antelope Press), and *Cross Referencing a Book of Summer* (Silver Bow Publishing).

Darren C. Demaree is the author of eleven poetry collections, most recently *Emily As Sometimes the Forest Wants the Fire* (June 2019, Harpoon Books). He is the recipient of a 2018 Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Award, the Louis Bogan Award from Trio House Press, and the Nancy Dew Taylor Award from *Emrys Journal*. He is the Managing Editor of the *Best of the Net Anthology and Ovenbird Poetry*. He is currently living in Columbus, Ohio with his wife and children.

Merridawn Duckler is a writer from Portland, Oregon, author of *INTERSTATE* (dancing girl press) and *IDIOM*, winner of the Washburn Prize. Recent work is in *Ninth Letter*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Queen Mob's Tea House*, *Ibbetson Street Press*. Fellowships/awards include Yaddo, Southampton Poetry Conference, Poets on the Coast, Horned Dorset Writers Colony, Death Rattle. She's an editor at *Narrative* and at the philosophy journal *Evental Aesthetics*.

Merridawn writes: "In 'Further Down the Bar' there's an experience—youth—which belongs to everyone, no matter where they are in life. Energy, disillusionment, power, beauty are represented as a lit up wild band and a solitary drunken ride. We are the center of attention and also the center of loneliness; world-swallowers, who always want more. 'Holy Movies' came from an experience of watching old home movies with my family. Every time anyone appeared on screen, my sisters whispered their name. I don't know why, it was very spooky. I saw our positions and gestures were exactly the same as they are in us today, as adults. I walked apart then and I still do. I used the actual names of my brothers and sisters.

Alison Hicks is the author of poetry collections *You Who Took the Boat Out* and *Kiss*, a chapbook *Falling Dreams*, a novella *Love: A Story of Images*, and co-editor of an anthology, *Prompted*. Her work has appeared in *Eclipse*, *Gargoyle*, *Permafrost*, and *Poet Lore*, and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize by *Green Hills Literary Lantern*. Awards include the Philadelphia City Paper Poetry Prize and two PA Council of the Arts Fellowships. She is founder of Greater Philadelphia Wordshop Studio, which offers community-based writing workshops.

Monty Jones, a writer in Austin, Texas, is the author of a book of poems, *Cracks in the Earth*, published in 2018 by Cat Shadow Press. The book is available from Malvern Books, an independent bookstore in Austin (malvernbooks.com).

Patrick Kelly Joyner's writing has appeared in *The Orange Willow Review* and *Wild Violet*. He teaches at American University in Washington, D.C. and lives in Northern Virginia.

Patrick writes: “These poems have some autobiographical elements, but they’re also reflective of the common experience of calm clarity that descends upon a person during physical labor.”

Daniel Kenitz is a writer with short stories in *Limestone*, *Strangelet*, and *L’Allure des Mots*, and poetry in *Adelaide*. He lives in Wisconsin.

Sharon Kennedy-Nolle is a graduate of Vassar College and holds an MFA and doctoral degree from the University of Iowa. A participant in the Bread Loaf Conferences in both Middlebury and Sicily in 2016, she was also accepted to the Sewanee Writers’ Conference in 2018. This year she was awarded a scholarship to the Sarah Lawrence Summer Writing Institute as well as a full scholarship to the Frost Place Summer Writing Program. Her poetry has appeared or is upcoming in *Zone 3*, *The Round*, *Prism Review*, *SLAB*, *Potomac Review*, *Pennsylvania English*, *OxMag*, *Bluestem Magazine*, *Juked*, *Euphony*, *apt*, *Cape Rock*, *Sanskrit*, *Vox Poetica*, *Talking River*, *Storyscape*, *Delmarva Review*, *FRiGG*, *Qwerty*, *Jelly Bucket*, *The Dickinson Review*, *Lindenwood Review*, *Rogue Agent Journal*, *Elm Leaves Journal*, *Door is a Jar*, *Radar Poetry*, *Schuylkill Valley Journal of the Arts*, *Chaffin Journal*, *Free State Review*, *Edison Literary Review*, *Streetlight Magazine*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *Chantwood Magazine*, *Menacing Hedge*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, and *The Midwest Quarterly* among others, while her dissertation was published as *Writing Reconstruction: Race, Gender, and Citizenship in the Postwar South* (University of North Carolina Press, 2015). Her chapbook *Black Wick*, a collection of elegies for her son, was a semi-finalist for the 2018 Tupelo Snowbound Chapbook Contest.

Sharon writes: “My interests in history and traveling have informed both my scholarly and creative work. Exploring the wild, unbidden parts of the earth has always served as a key source of inspiration for me. These poems focus on the trauma of family loss.”

Peter Leight lives in Amherst, Massachusetts. He has previously published poems in *Paris Review*, *AGNI*, *Antioch Review*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *FIELD*, and other magazines.

DS Maolalai has been nominated four times for Best of the Net and twice for the Pushcart Prize. His poetry has been released in two collections, *Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden* (Encircle Press, 2016) and *Sad Havoc Among the Birds* (Turas Press, 2019).

Julio Monteiro Martins (1955–2014) was born in Niterói, Brazil, but lived for many years in Italy, where he was a prominent teacher, publisher, and writer of essays, stories, theater works, and poetry. In his home country he had worked as a lawyer for human rights and environmental causes; in Italy he was director of the online journal *Sagarana*. The poem that appears in

this issue of *The Virginia Normal* is from the final poetry collection of Julio Monteiro Martins, *La grazia di casa mia*, published in 2013 by Rediviva Edizioni (Milan).

Michael Pasley grew up in Southern Indiana and briefly attended Indiana University in Bloomington. His publications include “You Just Don’t Get It,” which was published in *Germ Magazine* and *Dirty Girlz Magazine*, and his story “Double Zeros,” which was featured in *The Avalon Literary Review*. He also the winner of Causeway Lit’s 2019 summer fiction contest. As a young African American growing up in the housing projects, Michael often felt alone in his love of poetry, Sci-Fi, and fantasy. He began at the age of eleven to write poems and short stories. Michael now lives in Jeffersonville, Indiana where he spends most of his free time attending book club meetings, hiking, playing with his kids, and writing. He is currently working on a novella, his first love story.

Rebecca Givens Rolland writes poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. Her work has appeared in *Slice*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *The Literary Review*, and her poetry book is *The Wreck of Birds*. Her debut nonfiction is forthcoming from HarperOne.

Kelly R. Samuels is a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominee. She is the author of two chapbooks: *Words Some of Us Rarely Use* (Unsolicited Press) and *Zeena/Zenobia Speaks* (Finishing Line Press). Her poems have recently appeared in *RHINO*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *DMQ Review*, *Quiddity*, and *Atticus Review*. She lives in the Upper Midwest.

Mika Seifert is a concert violinist and writer, whose short stories have been published in *The Antioch Review*, *Chicago Review*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Salt Hill*, *The Southern Review*, *World Literature Today*, and elsewhere. He is currently at work on his first novel.

Rochelle Jewel Shapiro is the author of *Miriam the Medium* (Simon & Schuster) and Indie Finalist, *Kaylee’s Ghost*. Her essays have appeared in the *NYT (Lives)*, *Newsweek*, *Empty Mirror*, and many other publications. Her short stories and poetry have been in *The MacGuffin*, *Iowa Review*, *Peregrine*, *The Broad River Review*, *Reunion: the Dallas Review*, and more. She was nominated for 2019 Best of the Net by *Spry Journal*. Currently, she teaches writing at UCLA Extension. Rochellejshapiro.com @rjshapiro

Rochelle writes: “Inspired by the photographer Walker Evans and the poet, Frank O’Hara, I love to walk the city, observing, taking notes. When I transcribe the notes onto my computer, I battle to shape them into a poem. Lines begin to fly to me, landing like City Pigeons. (My mother always said ‘If a pigeon craps on you, it’s good luck.’)”

Eva-Maria Sher was born in Germany a year before the end of WWII. At seventeen she emigrated to the United States and currently lives on a farm in Clinton, Washington with her husband Ron and their two Leonberger puppies Minnie and Tasha. Her poems have appeared in *Euphony*, *Prism Review*, *Soundings East*, *Westview*, *Willow Review* and others. She recently published her first book, *Chewing Darkness*, the love story of her parents during the Hitler regime.

Eva-Maria writes, “Since I wrote ‘Nothing to Crow About,’ which is one of my favorite poems, I have moved from Seattle to a farm on Whidbey Island and miss my inquisitive friends. They certainly knew me and my family members as well or perhaps better than I knew them and their tribe. They did think our vegetable garden was created just for their pleasure. But their courage, their quirky habits, their cleverness, their loyalty to one another, their uncanny ability to gauge who in our family respected and liked them, and who might prefer to murder them, fascinated me. While on my afternoon walks, I often saw them organize a relay, taking turns to chase a Cooper’s hawk or an eagle way beyond the borders of their communal territory. After the young ones fledged, I would see about two hundred of their tribe fly overhead every evening to their common roosting place. It did inspire a sense of awe, and of course poetry in me.”

Donald Stang is a longtime student of Italian. His translations of Italian poetry have appeared or are forthcoming in *Carrying the Branch*, by Glass Lyre Press, *Silk Road*, *Pirene’s Fountain*, *Newfound*, *Catamaran*, *Ghost Town*, *Apple Valley Review*, *Apricity Magazine*, *Two Cities Review*, *Mantis*, *Blackbird*, *The Opiate*, *America*, *We Call Your Name: Poems of Resistance and Resilience* by Sixteen Rivers Press, thecreativeprocess.com, and thedreamingmachine.com.

Catherine Stansfield’s work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Mount Hope Magazine* and *The MacGuffin*. She served as an editorial and promotional assistant for *Presence: A Journal of Catholic Poetry*. She has a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Caldwell University and currently works as a publishing assistant.

Brendan Todt lives in Sioux City with his wife and two boys. His poems and short prose can be found...blah blah blah. He runs a Facebook page and small website dedicated to listing and sometimes reviewing local art events (arthubsioouxland.com). He mows his neighbor’s lawn in exchange for piano lessons.

Brendan writes, “‘We Are All Alone’ and ‘If You Believe It,’ I guess, must have something to do with buying a house and becoming part of a neighborhood again. My wife and I were not first-time home-buyers when we moved to Sioux City, but it was the first time we gave a damn about our

house and our yard and, to some degree, what our neighbors thought of us. So while there is some inwardness on the part of the speaker in these poems, he's also got his eye on the Joneses--and knows that they have their eyes on him, too."

Helen Wickes's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *AGNI*, *Atlanta Review*, *Boulevard*, *Confrontation*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Sagarana*, *Soundings East*, *South Dakota Review*, *Spillway*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *Westview*, *Willow Review*, *Zone 3*, and *ZYZZYVA*, among many others. She has published four books of her poetry and contributes Italian translations to thedreamingmachine.com.

Carolyn Wilsey loves living within walking distance of the continent's edge. She has an MFA in creative writing, fiction, from Emerson College. This is her first published poem in a print journal; her poetry has also been published online by *Pretty Owl Poetry and Rogue Agent*. In "Turning 40 in Portsmouth Square," her aim was to contrast feelings about time passing with a mystical sense of being uplifted by nature.

Lee Clark Zumpe, an entertainment columnist with Tampa Bay Newspapers, earned his bachelor's in English at the University of South Florida. He began writing poetry and fiction in the early 1990s. His work has regularly appeared in a variety of literary journals and genre magazines over the last two decades. Publication credits include *Tiferet*, *Zillah*, *The Ugly Tree*, *Modern Drunkard Magazine*, *Red Owl*, *Jones Av.*, *Main Street Rag*, *Space & Time*, *Mythic Delirium* and *Weird Tales*. Lee lives on the west coast of Florida with his wife and daughter. Visit www.leeclarkzumpe.com.