

Cover art here

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Icarus | Zoe Gordon

He smokes his cigarette like a toy
Sucking at the filter—blowing smoke like an artist
Each flick of the wrist—premeditated

He is flying—up and up
The ground from here is a memory
His old life comes through telephone wires
Covered with postage stamps and postmarks

He flaps his wings
The smell of tobacco soars on updrafts of warm air
The spiral taking him—higher and higher

The taste of the dream stays in his mouth
His mother's scowl—the house without his father
The gold table cloth—the drum set he left behind
He hopes the burn of vodka will make it go away

The voice on the line is distant
Cracks of bad reception
Trickle into the conversation
When are you coming home?

He feels the heat on his face
The molten wax trickles down his back
He is suspended for the tick of a second
And then the plummet, starting in the pit of his stomach

The earth rears like a tidal wave
Tears sting with honey-beeswax scent
The angel wings disintegrate
But now the burn
First degree—second degree—third degree burns

His mother's voice on the other end
Slices although he can hardly hear
Static dances—vocal chords drone
He braces himself for the collision

The Things I Can't | Brandon Willitts

The A.A. meeting is held every Wednesday evening in the Fellowship Hall of First Baptist Church. I hate Wednesday. As my afternoon crawls into evening, I have dreadful visions of being surrounded by a depressing circle of alcoholic strangers and a suffocating stench of stale cigarettes and lifelong desperation. A sourness forms in my throat like acid reflux. Eventually, the anxiety overtakes my brain, and I am useless for the last hour of work.

I leave work, walking down Second Avenue, and get to the church fifteen minutes early. I keep a distance from the others, standing across the street, watching them drift zombie-like toward the stairs. I think of Pavlov's dogs, from the small semi-circles formed, to the furious chain-smoking, even in their repeated weekly-conversations concerning the attendance patterns (or lack thereof) of other members. I wait until the last member puts out his cigarette and make my way into the church.

The coffee machine sits on a rusty card table that's littered with used stir sticks, half-empty sugar packets, and Styrofoam cups. The coffee is syrupy like used motor oil. I pour a cup, grab a gray metal folding chair leaning against the wall and join the circle.

The chairperson, a short, pudgy woman, asks if anyone would care to share a story. Ricky's hand shoots up in eager excitement. Ricky is an emaciated addict with deep lines that cut into his face. His skin hangs loosely on his frame and his fingertips are stained with a yellow tint. He stands at his seat, says he's an alcoholic and drug addict, and thanks us for listening.

Before Ricky found Jesus and the meetings, he delivered an adult classifieds paper. He says the company downsized and then fired him. He needed some quick cash to pay a dealer. His options were limited. He had overheard his sister brag about her daughter's savings quest. Ricky did what any other respectable drunk or junky would do and walked over to his sister's house, scaled the lattice up to her daughter's room, and broke the window with his fist. The glass cut deeply into his hand, severing a nerve. Blood sprayed all over the little girl's carpeted floor as he crawled into the bedroom. He frantically searched, light-headed, for her small, pink piggy bank. He smashed it into pieces. Nickels, dimes, and a few quarters mixed in with the blood. Small shards of porcelain littered the carpet. He stumbled crashing into her dresser, collapsing to his

knees. He crawled towards the open window, blood smeared across the walls like finger paint. He threw himself violently through the window's small opening but passed out. He awoke, halfway hanging out the window, to two EMTs working frantically to save his life. An overweight sheriff read him his rights. His mother, sister, and niece screamed out in disbelief. The judge was surprisingly sympathetic.

I slowly sipped my coffee, staring at the flood of teardrops streaming down the lines of Ricky's face. He drools out words of regret and apology. The room is in tears. I am not crying.

No one says anything. The silence is paralyzing. I want the silence to be a flood that will wash me away from here, take me anywhere, anywhere but in this circle, anywhere I don't have to look at emaciated Ricky, anywhere I don't have to pretend that I believe in God.

The meeting is over. We all stand. I join hands with the two people to each side of me. To my left, a tall, bearded man, and to my right, a young red headed girl adorned with several homemade tattoos. Ricky, with tears unabashedly flowing, volunteers to lead the group in reciting the Serenity Prayer.

Ricky's voice merges with mine, then the others. The words echo throughout the Fellowship Hall:

"God grant us the serenity / to accept the things we cannot change / courage to change the things we can / and wisdom to know the difference."

I set my chair back up with the others. Suddenly, as I turn around, there, in front of me, is Ricky. Without saying a word, his arms reach out and pull me in tightly. His embrace is stronger than I imagined was possible from such thin arms. I can feel his ribs pressing against my stomach as he pulls me closer. His chest heaves up and down between sobs. The tears pour onto my t-shirt and soak through to my collarbone.

"Jesus loves you. Jesus loves you. Jesus loves you," he whimpers.

I pull away. He wipes his running eyes and nose onto his sleeve.

"I know, Ricky," I tell him.

I give him a quick side step, pulling my phone from my coat pocket as if to make a call. I keep my head down hurriedly making my way out of the room, through the old wooden doors, and down the marble stairs.

The night air hits me hard. I feel beneath my arms. A fresh sweat stain extends from my armpit down my side. I am soaked.

Crossing over Third Avenue, I turn onto Seventeenth Street. I make eye contact with each passing pedestrian. I want to see their faces. I want to look into their eyes. I want to forget Ricky's face. I want to forget Ricky's story. I want to forget Ricky's tears.

It is the faces that make me dread that room so much. In the faces, I see entire lifetimes of mistakes, lifetimes of hard luck and disappointments. I see divorces, break-ups, abused children, forgotten birthdays, ruined weddings. In some, I see the father or mother that drove them to it, and in others, the father and mother they drove away. I see the impossible truth of their sickness: hopelessness. The world will always be against them.

I cross over Fourth Avenue and turn onto Twentieth Street. I stop in front of Kelly's bar.

In the faces, in the stories, in the circle, in that room, in that church, maybe, I see myself. Maybe, it is me who is afraid, maybe, it is me that needs to cry, or maybe, it is me who needs to apologize. Maybe, I need to find redemption.

Maybe.

Maybe I just need a drink.

* * *

All We Do is Talk | Rue Flynn

Nine shots of Sailor Jerrys

we toast

to your music,

to my writing

and talk about our goals for hours

hours

hours

Later we sleep, side-by-side, naked

in the hot twilight where

our bare sweat glands

profuse alcohol tears—

Unknowingly

we cry

together

as all we do is talk

talk

talk.

Satisfying Cut | Patience Lanier

I lived a few weeks
while summer turned on wide wheels,
slow, fat, ripe and easy to taste.
My mother taught me to
seize creation; form the earth into mountains and canyons and
add seeds from a paper envelope.
Eat dirt! kernel, pit, here's some water too.
Then I'd scurry
full of birth and conception
to gather tree limbs my father had broken
with his saw—cut off arms lying in heaps.
I asked my parents if they enjoyed
their children.
My mother smiled and gave me
a full glass to irrigate my throat.
Parenthood had never been rewarding
for my father
though he did love me;
he said so as he patted a tree
with a gloved hand,
its leafy head lying on the ground.

The Daughter's House | Lyndie Wood

I.

The girl is building a house out of clay. It's fake clay, the kind you buy at the toy store in foil packets. She has it in the primary colors and she's made dark muddy purple by mixing some blue and red.

When she starts the house, it's a lumpy structure, with windows that don't line up and fingerprints all over the walls. But she adds trim, curtains, shutters, and window boxes with flowers. She is a very thorough girl.

She builds creatures to live in her house. They are disproportional and even lumpier than the house. Some of them have very long limbs, others very short. Some have no limbs at all. She gives them eyes and teeth and tails (for balance and combat.)

At first glance, this is clearly the work of a child, something made by a creature with underdeveloped motor skills. But when you look closer, you see that house and its inhabitants are textured and precise. Shingles and muscles are outlined. Marigolds and poppies have individual petals and leaves. And you'd swear that the clock in the kitchen—yes, the house is fully furnished—always tells the correct time.

The girl is in the basement of her own house, where she lives with her father. He is a kind man, though serious, with an irritating ability to read faces. It has never occurred to the girl that she may have a mother.

Upstairs, there is faint music and a shadow of voices. There are almost always other people in the house. Some of them are clearly friends and associates of her father's. Others seem to be lost strangers. The girl pays little attention to them, and they pay little attention back.

After finishing off her house with a chimney billowing smoke, the girl decides to venture upstairs to find her father. The girl takes the steps two at a time, even though she knows this way is both slower and harder for her.

People are mingling on the first floor. There are quiet old women talking in hushed voices in the kitchen. They recognize the little girl and give her iced tea with lemon. It is too sweet. The

girl takes a few sips and dumps the rest out in a houseplant.

Her father is on the third and top floor. The floor lamps around him make the edges of his silhouette glow, but the rest of him looks like it has eaten up the light and done away with it. He is deep in discussion with one of his associates. Though his shape is sharper and more defined than many of the other guests, the girl cannot tell if he is male or female.

Staring, perhaps rudely, the girl notices something curious. The associate seems to have the exact opposite interaction with light than her father does. Instead of light on the edges with shadowed features, the associate seems to exude light, but the immediate surrounding area looks depleted. The girl enjoys the contrast and mingling of the lighting in the room and files it away as something to ask about when she is older.

It's not that her father won't tell her now. It's that she's not sure she wants to know yet.

II.

The Devil watches his daughter come up the stairs. He smiles a little at the sight of her stained hands and the bits of clay under her fingernails. She looks very serious, as she always does after finishing a piece of art. He wonders why she never lets him keep anything she creates. Within a week, the clay models are in the trash with the bag knotted, and a very firm, "No, Daddy."

His daughter sits down patiently and the Devil turns his attention to the thing in front of him. "Thing" is the only appropriate word in human language—or perhaps "Nothing" would be more appropriate, for what is God other than a very strong idea? A self-perpetuating idea. The Devil sometimes thinks that God could believe himself out of existence, if he so desired.

God and the Devil would not describe themselves as friends, but God often shows up at the Devil's house to talk. Sometimes they don't talk, instead just sitting across from each other staring at the burgundy carpet.

The girl regards God with a distracted nod. God opens his mouth to deliver a kind word, but only manages to exhale. He is usually quite eloquent (to say he invented eloquence is no

hyperbole), but this girl is not something God created. He's not even sure if the Devil created her. But she is, nonetheless, the Devil's loving daughter.

The Devil excuses himself and goes to his daughter. He wants to hug her, but she's at the age where parental affection in public is embarrassing. She told him so, very sternly one day, in almost exactly those words.

"I built a house." She wipes her sticky hands on her dress.

"Can I see it?" The Devil twirls his tail hopefully.

His daughter, who does not have a tail, nods. She's already thinking ahead, to the next house she will build, which will be better than the last one.

They travel down to the basement, sneaking past the ladies in the kitchen. The Devil notices ice cubes in one of his houseplants.

The basement is very dry and bare, in contrast to the warm, humid air and deep colors of the upstairs. The girl's clay house is sitting on her worktable drying. Her father raises his eyebrows, impressed, as he looks at the scale patterns on the creatures. When he notices the clay clock with moving hands, he smiles.

"Will you do me a favor?" He puts a hand on the top of her head.

"Yes, Daddy?" She pokes at an imperfect brick on the house's doorstep.

The Devil sighs. "Will you build another house? A strong one, self-contained, that's not attached to anything? One that can withstand the end of an æon?"

The girl nods. This is a challenging idea. Nearly forgetting her father's presence, she sits in her chair and begins playing with a small leftover chunk of purple clay, squeezing it in her palm as she thinks.

III.

The Devil is confident. He knows that God is just about done with the game, ready to throw its cards down and move onto less complicated pursuits. God did not know what it was getting into with humans. At first, it thinks that they were masterpieces, but now it's decided

they're stunning failures. The Devil thinks they're just stunning, with all their blundering creativity. He knows he couldn't create something like that no matter how hard he tried.

When the Apocalypse comes, the universe will fold in on itself. The Devil will have no part in this. He tried to show God the value of human creativity and the unbelievable scope of human emotion, the wondrous things they can be manipulated into. Over and over, he's asked God to simply leave it to him, but don't let the myths fool you: God can hold a grudge like no other. It has not, and probably never will, forgive the Devil for testing the trueness of its omnipotence. (The Devil also has a theory that things made of matter are significantly less prone to insanity than thing made of very strong ideas.)

The day of the Apocalypse smells like chlorine. Everyone instinctually knows it's going to happen, but few develop the conscious knowledge. The Devil has been keeping an eye on his daughter and her new house. She's done magnificently. They've yet to set foot in it—the Devil feels it's better to hang around until the last minute.

The girl is staring at the house. She's not sure she made the best color choice for the doorknob—orange instead of her usual yellow. She bites her lip.

Upstairs in the house, the old ladies in the kitchen can't find any lemons. The vampires on the patio tap their feet restlessly, and the mice in the attic are perfectly still. They all know that this house has been good to them, and when they think about tomorrow, they become a little sad and a little cautious. The end of the world is not smooth.

The Devil feels the corners of everything starting to unravel, and he hurries down to the basement. "Are you ready?" he asks his daughter.

The girl nods and puts on her purple backpack. The Devil moves her chair away from her workbench and gets ready to step into the six-inch tall house.

"*Wait,*" his daughter snaps. She looks at the house, rocking back and forth on her heels. She drops her father's hand, grabs the house and runs to the trashcan.

The Devil's eyes widen as he hears the fake-clay smash.

The girl sighs. Her father always gets so sad when she throws away her projects. "I'm going to make a better one," she assures him, vaguely aware of the people screaming in the floors above them.

There is a crumpling sound. The Devil hangs his head.

Calm Hands | James McDonough

You find calm in the woods on a bank at dawn when the moon is still bright;
Where you can see the ghost-children play pick-up sticks
And then skip stones across the stream to blast the moon to pieces;
Where the budding twigs hold their skins tight against the chill;
Where the silhouettes of trees seem closer to each other like friends around a bonfire;
Where the newborn sun blows cloud rings of silver and gold;
Where the water never looks back and carries the crisp leaves down to the ravine;
Where the ants leave their graves to follow the farmer's path;
Where the bridge creaks underneath even the most careful steps;
Where the blue heron waits for his catch;
Where the snakes tuck themselves under stone beds;
Where the roots sleep forever while the branches stay awake;
And where the wilted anthers attach themselves to your wool coat
As you step through dew covered fields towards your white house on the hill.

Between the bank and the hill you cross windswept pastures.
You stop walking to draw in a memory of the receded landscape into your mind;
The relative size of that broad expanse has changed how you feel,
You think about whether or not the calm of the woods compares to the calm out here –
You note: How small and still the dark woods are before the breakout of life;
How a ditch by your feet looks like a small road, and it is filled with ants holding scraps;
How all of them, running along the sides, look like they're in a funeral procession;
How the wheelbarrow furrows that stretched up the hillside are now covered by straw;
And how they seem to create laugh lines across the hill's face.

Halfway up the hill you eye the house's condition like a livid mother.
The slatted roof is dusty yellow and the window's thin shutters hang from their hinges.
This house is cold and spent like the rest of the farmland – yet it still has its own spirit.
It sleeps on top of the hill like a retired wrestler – gaudy, gaunt, comatose –
The porch sticks out like propped feet;
Patches of paint are curled and frayed to bits like dried skin;
The boards underneath bend and warp like strained muscles;
You can almost see the edges of his bones between the sunken boards;
Streaks of water stains curve down his long face.

Finally, as you step to the covered porch,
You shake your cold feet on the doorstep and
Stomp them like a wild cherub.
You turn around and stand by the banisters edge.
A creased bed sheet hangs from a line in the yard;
Like you, its stiff body resists the wind and tightens its grip.
And you watch the night –
Angels wink while they fall.

You follow their light-trails over roof and treetops.
You stop to think about the distant fading stars and how
This house is a small beacon on a wispy patch of frontier farmland, and
While telegrams are building bridges the harvest keeps shrinking.

You look down through the screened windows. Inside,
On the mantelpiece, a candle preaches to empty pots and pans;
Matches sit below to hear its sermon – waiting to warm up;
The whiskey stands next to the candle staring at the tomfoolery;
A spinning loom hugs her corner of the room;
A packed pipe lays sideways on the table dreaming of dinner;
A note that reads “To the Moon:” sits next to the layman’s pipe.

You enter your quiet haven. It is warm;
Mice scatter from the scene;
The stone covered flue is caked in cobwebs;
A broken chair died inside the fireplace;
The newspapers sit by the familiar bed;
A dishtowel someone brought drapes over the sink’s edge;
A ladle hangs from the countertop;
The woodstove cradles an iron pot;
The oven hisses and pops.

You breathe in a sharp breeze coming through the door;
The approaching North knocks on the windowpanes;
You hang your hand like a swinging noose; the other trails behind your back.
You walk over to the table and close your eyes to the opened note that explains:

“Don’t frown, I am a star hanging onto the corner of your crescent brow.
If you shake your fists at me in your sleep
My dust will tip into your eyes at night.
I have no place but here on the edge – waiting
To slip and fall, or to be saved by the glow of your smile.”

You fold the note in half again and close the door and whisper to the empty room.
Nothing responds from inside this old wrestler’s mind, nothing moves but a fly.
The knocking and tapping outside grows louder;
A train across the bank gives out two owl-like cries, You set your back against the door.
The shaking floor means the wrestler is hungry,
The smell of burning wood changes to oil,
The layman’s muddy hands carry a wooden candle-lantern up the hill.
Light passes into the room as the sun begins to set,
Your memory of the farmer’s path is blending into the woods.
You feel the woods carrying your mind away just like the ants in the field with their food.
You strum your fingers to a brass song that only a farmer can hear,
And you put the note on top of the stove and wait. Your story will sit there with you
Until you join the march. You hold a trumpet with calm hands; you are Gabriel’s last call.

Like Me | KathrynLee Williams

My friend Drew introduces me to her. Three or four years back, the summer after high school, they worked together at the car wash. Her hair is brunette, cut off at the chin, the ends punkishly flipped in a U. “Hi, I’m Alethea,” she says, her voice suave. Noticing her eyes, I wonder if they are really that angular or if it’s just the eyeliner making them seem that way. My torso and limbs go warm, like embers. But then I realize she’s staring at me, waiting for a response.

“Hi, I’m Jen.”

“Jen,” she hums. “I like that name.” Alethea smiles widely. Her incisor teeth are razor sharp, wild. “Jen and Drew, this is my friend, Danny.” She gestures to the girl sitting next to her on the brick stairs. Danny is petite and Asian, her hair straight and thin like paper, lips heavily glossed. She wears tiny shiny white heels, a mini skirt, and a tight white spaghetti tank.

“Hi Jen!” Danny squeaks. “By the way—don’t call me Danny, my name is *Dan-ielle*.” She enunciates her name slowly, as if she’s talking to a person new to English. She then frowns at Alethea, who, in response, gives her that wild grin with those crazy teeth. Danielle flips her hair behind her shoulders.

I smile reassuringly. “Don’t worry—I’ll call you Danielle.”

Drew sits on the stairs at Alethea’s feet, his legs sprawled widely apart. I sit beside him, in front of Danielle. Drew and Alethea talk of the car wash—how nobody continued working there for over a month. The streetlight behind us flickers and then turns on, illuminating everything in its reach. I notice that Alethea is wearing completely black attire. I try to imagine her working at the carwash with the large white tee-shirts, navy pants. I chuckle. This is impossible to imagine. But, intrigued, I let my eyes trace her, as a child would trace his favorite picture.

She crosses her legs, bobs the top ankle. Her boots are knee high stilettos, shiny, like a just waxed car, reflecting slivers of light. I wonder if when walking they are silent like a cat, or loud, annoying—*Click—click*—like a teacher. Her dark jeans are tucked into the stilettos,

grasping the contours of her legs, tightly like saran wrap. Her shirt is a muscle tee—black, of course, with tiny circular pieces across the chest, silver and shining, like stars. And I notice her breasts—they are large, but round and well-formed like—

Something taps my shoulder, like a beak.

I shift. Danielle looks at me, beaming.

“Jem—that’s your name, right?” she chirps, while fumbling through her overly large white purse, extracting a large piece of pink gum.

“No. It’s Jen.”

She flings her long stringy hair behind her back and tosses the gum into her mouth. “Oh, okay—that’s what I thought. I’m so bad with names—like I can hear one, one second, and then forget a second later.”

I smile in response.

She pops a blister size bubble with her pink gum.

“So how old are you?” she asks in between the chewing.

“Twent y-one,” I reply, calmly.

“I’m twenty-one, too!” she exclaims. She smiles widely. In the light I notice how heavily glossed her lips are—like they are layered with Vaseline. She pops another bubble.

“So, are you in school, or are you working..?”

“I go to *Traditie* College. It’s my senior year.”

“Oh that’s cool. I’ve always gone to private schools, and so has Alethea. We go to *Blanke* College.” She smiles, proudly. “We’ve been in school together since kindergarten.”

Blanke College. The most expensive school nearby. The Yuppie school. Danielle fits the stereotype perfectly, minus her lack of snobbiness. The cute tiny shiny white heels, cute face, cute white tight shirt. I watch Alethea bum a cigarette off Drew. From her small dark purse she

pulls out a shiny steel lighter. She flips the top open with the smoothness of a guy and lights the cig in record time.

Drew and Alethea just sit there, silently puffing their cigarettes, as if completely drowned in the taste, the sensation of the smoke. Behind me, Danielle begins to smack the gum loudly, popping a new bubble about every five seconds. I wonder if the chewing and popping noises annoy Drew and Alethea.

But Drew and Alethea remain oblivious while smoking their cigs. They watch a clan of middle school girls skip out of the movie theater and across the Downtown Mall, giggling, talking at once, arms linked.

Alethea spits. The loogie is yellow from the tobacco, and it lands a couple yards away.

Drew grins. “Niiice.”

Surprised, I study her once more. She’s curvy—her breasts large and well-formed, like round fruit; her hips wide. I wonder if she has any extra flub. I think of my own body, when not veiled by my shirt or tight jeans. When naked, my stomach isn’t a plateau, but a small bowl. And my thighs are wide, like pancakes, jiggly like Jell-O.

I wait for her to move her arms, so I can check them for flub. But she keeps them glued to her stomach, her right hand at her mouth, with the smoke.

“So what are your hobbies?”

She’s positioned away from me, facing the theater, blowing smoke into the air like ribbons.

“Who—me?” Drew asks, confused, while flicking the ash off his cig.

“No—not you—everyone knows you’re obsessed with cars. I was talking to Jen.” She turns around and faces me. Her eyes are green and feral, like a cat.

“What are your hobbies?” she repeats.

I rub my arm, as if I there is an itch. “My hobbies?”

“Yes, your hobbies.”

I look at her, wondering if her completely random question was some sort of joke. But those angular eyes stare back at me, unblinking. Coldness rushes through my chest and stomach and I look to the ground.

“Well—I like art.”

She smiles wildly, licks her lips. “Everyone ‘likes’ art. Are you trying to say you create art?”

I frown. “Yes.”

She stabs the cigarette butt into the ground, and leans forward, towards me. She smiles.

“What sort of art do you create?”

“I mostly paint—with acrylics.”

“What do you paint?” she asks, her eyes still attached to me like a nail in wood.

I rub my forearm, watch her lips instead of her eyes. Images of my art class fly through my head rapidly, like birds. “Well, I really like faces—and roses.”

“Is that it—just faces and roses?”

I think of my diary—an inch thick unlined book full of drawings. I think of staying up late at night, lying on the floor on my stomach, furiously drawing, the only light illuminating the room’s darkness being the reading lamp. Print outs from the internet and cut-outs from clothing magazines surrounding me like a halo. Charcoal pieces placed on a napkin, a myriad of dark pens and pencils lying beside me, threatening to stain the white carpeting.

But I feel Alethea’s eyes now—intense—waiting for a response.

“Yeah, that’s it—just faces and roses,” I reply softly.

From the corner of my eye I watch her bite her lip, her eyes tracing me from toe to head.

“So what are your hobbies?” I ask, realizing I haven’t asked her any questions.

“I like a lot of things—” she yawns, stretching her arms. I notice that they’re delicate yet sinewy, like curtain rods.

Her eyes catch mine. They dart to my arms, and then back to my eyes. She smiles. “I like dancing. Preferably to Trance, New-age or African. I don’t do country or ballet. I hate ballet.”

Danielle pops a bubble so loudly that it seems to echo against the movie theater walls. “She doesn’t like ‘my’ music either.”

Alethea laughs. Surprisingly, it’s a girly laugh, warm like a cashmere sweater. “We’re not even going to talk about your music, Dan.”

Danielle loudly clicks her heel against the brick. “Ugh,” she pouts. “My name is *Danielle*.”

Drew laughs. “Does Alethea annoy you, DanDan?”

“Yes! Since I was like five. Like there was this one time—”

“Hold on,” Drew interrupts. He stands up, throws his smoke to the ground, rubs it clean with the sole of his shoe. He sits back down, next to Danielle.

“I didn’t want to speak over those two.” I hear him say behind me. I wonder if I am imagining it, or did he really say “those *two*” instead of “those two.”

No, he didn’t. He couldn’t have. Why would he?

Soon, Drew and Danielle become completely absorbed in each other’s conversation. Alethea and I talk of art, dancing, music. But now, we are silent. And again, she’s staring.

“So—” She pauses, licks and twists her lips into a halfway grin.

“So?”

She leans forward. I can smell her perfume. *Zwarte* by *Homoseksuele*. She’s still grinning.

“Are you gay?”

Tension rushes through my chest, limbs, like ice water from a quick faucet.

Again, I remember my diary pages, adorned with ink, charcoal drawings of bare women, breasts.

I remember the sensation I felt when watching that HBO movie with the two lesbians making love, secretly, when the other roommate was out.

I remember the time I got smashed at a party and made out with some blonde chick under the willows.

My eyes are warm, insides frozen, iced over. I look at the ground. The crevice between the bricks is a clean white. But on top of the crevice is a piece of gum, soiled black, a shoe imprint covering it like paint.

“Are—you—gay?” Alethea repeats, crisply enunciating her words.

Her green eyes are lasers now and I have to respond. My voice comes out soft and forced, as if a parasite lives in my voice box, speaks for me. “No.” I shift, avoiding the laser stare. “I’m straight.”

Through strands of my hair, I watch her pupils dilate. Her green eyes are completely pitch now, like round pans.

“Well, I am gay.”

Her voice is triumphant, honest—she is the one who is speaking.

A sharp pain pierces my chest, like a cold blade. I look at the gum in the crevice. I remember reading somewhere that gum has the capability to stay stuck in the same place for over a hundred years. But it looks so misplaced, with the dark black over the white.

I tuck my hair behind my ear and glance at Alethea. Her arms are crossed, lips pursed. She looks at me momentarily, but turns away.

I look at the ground. There’s no gum. Instead, there’s a tiny shiny white heeled shoe covering the crevice.

“Alethea—look at the time!” Danielle exclaims. She shoves her silver watch in front of Alethea’s face. “It’s eight thirty!”

“Yeah—so?”

“We were supposed to be at Kyle’s apartment like—over forty minutes ago!” She shrieks, stamps her heel. *Click!*

“Oh.” Alethea’s eyes are still, like water, puffy around the edges. She stands up. I stand up too. My head reaches her nose. I can still smell the *Zwarte*. I stand close, our arms almost touching.

I realize Drew is beside Danielle. He looks at Alethea, then me, his eyes granite question marks.

Danielle flashes Drew and I a glossy smile. “I’m sorry we have to leave so quickly—it was so nice to meet you...Drew,” she hugs him, lightly, with one arm, “and it was nice to meet you too, Jem.”

Flicking us a wave, she pulls Alethea away. Danielle’s tiny shiny white heels echo against the walk, like a woodpecker—*Click—click. Click—click*. She walks with her shoulders high, allowing the tight white shirt to flaunt her bony blades. And Alethea walks with the grace of a black feline, silently treading beside her. And as I watch that thin, curvy silhouette get smaller and smaller and smaller, Drew stares at me, not saying a word. My eyes go hot and on my lips I taste wet salt. But I ignore it, let my hair fall before my face and sit back down, on the brick.

* * *

Suicide Watch on the Locked Ward | Susan Horne

When asked to think of work once done
My mind went back almost twenty years.
When, barely nineteen, I sat on the cold, hard floor.
Of the bathroom with no doors on the stalls.
And I waited for hours on suicide watch
As my legs went numb,
Counting the tiles of the puke-green walls
My mind wandering aimlessly,
Listening to the rain
Falling steadily on the tin roof.

The patients came and went.
Some yelling or laughing, but mostly
Shuffling like zombies in shoes without laces.
And they paid me no heed, for which I was glad.
As I fingered the cord of the alarm
Hung 'round my neck and inside my clothes.
Not the smartest invention, I thought to myself
In a place where shoelaces are banned.
And I watched as the patients came and went,
During suicide watch on Chestnut ward.

I walked home that night through the rain,
And jumped in the shower.
But couldn't wash away the smell of the place:
Hospital cleaner mixed with human excrement.
The institution lingered in my hair
And followed me to bed.

Pilgrims | Patience Lanier

They come to me—a priest of the laundromat—seeking
absolution,
shoving quarters in my hand.
As if forgiveness is that easy!
They think I can swallow the sins of a day, two days,
a week;
lipstick smears, mustard, cigarette stink, some other man's cologne.
I listen to their confessions, load after load, as they sit there
thumbing their magazines like a rosary.
Some stains remain; I am no savior
just a cleric of streams spinning holy water from rusty pipes.

When I Was Sixteen | Emily Beker

My name is Jenny Parsons and when I was sixteen I killed three people with a black magic marker. This is not a joke; I swear to tell you the truth.

You have to understand that this is a small community—nothing much happens here. We talk about the weather and some of us are still fighting the Civil War. Old men sit in plastic chairs on front porches and spit tobacco and look into the far distance.

Sure, there are a few “out-of-towners,” but they are greeted largely with suspicion. This is a small community, a place where the legion hall’s annual catfish supper is a much-awaited event. And nearly everyone goes to church.

And it is because of this county’s small-time attitude that my story happened.

When I was sixteen, I lived with my parents on over a hundred acres which I largely managed. Sometimes I supervised our two groundskeepers - one was prone to take long afternoon naps - and sometimes worked with them in the gardens and scrubby forest. My parents were hardly ever around, and even when they were I was left mostly to my own devices. Despite all the work I did, I was often bored.

I suppose it was that boredom which made me wander into the Mt. Caramel Church cemetery on a May afternoon in 2005 with my drawing pad and a box of sketching supplies. I suppose it was thanks to that boredom that I killed three people.

I had to sketch a landscape for art class at school, and I sat cross-legged near the Turner stone. The wind was blowing, faint strains of bluegrass came to me from across the street, and I had the perfect view of an old farmhouse with the great blue mountains behind. The drawing was going well.

The sun was a great bright orb and I stood and stretched, knowing I had to head home soon. Just behind me was the stone for Mary Elizabeth Turner, born May 25, 1939, and not dead yet.

You have to understand that this is a small community, a community where lots of people order stones from Martin Memorials along Route 692 well before they die. It is, in fact, a source

of pride for each of them to point to their reserved plot and the stone with grass growing all around and say “I’m prepared. I’ll be ready for when the good lord takes me.”

To some people, I’m sure, this would seem macabre, but to this community it was just a matter of reserving “prime real estate” - not waiting ‘til after they’d passed on and letting the children stick them somewhere in the back, out of the way and easy to forget about.

Mary Elizabeth Turner, about to turn 66, ran Turner’s General Store with her husband Wade. Just off Main Street, the store brooded well back from the brick-faced pharmacy, merchandise spilling off the sway-backed front porch and onto the asphalt. The wood-burning stove just to the left of the front door was something of a fire hazard - what with the bundles of yellowed newspapers all around - but nobody ever complained to the fire marshal. He could often be found smoking a sweat-stained pipe along with Wade, watching the cars on Main Street with a contentedly glassy stare.

Turner’s sold everything, though little was actually sold. Mary attended every auction in the county and bought every odd lot for 50 cents a box. Huffman and Sons, auctioneers, loved her - she helped set up when one of the boys was sick and she took all the odd stuff off their hands.

She was something of a standing joke for some of us, and we watched her pursed lips, tight permed-gray curls, and tank-like body with amusement as she sorted canned goods from some time in the late 60’s.

I had a black felt tipped marker in my hand and on some adolescent whim I found myself crouched before the smooth-surfaced gray stone writing May 15, 2005 in the blank space. Just an instant, nine neat black characters, and my life was changed.

* * *

The obituary said she died at 4:30 in the afternoon, in her rocking chair, knitting on her lap. Survived by two fine sons and husband Wade of 41 years. She would have been 66 in ten

days.

She was, by all accounts, in excellent health. Some said at the funeral later that week that she was sprightly as a teenager. Not quite, I thought from the outskirts of the crowd around the graveside, but she sure did get around.

I waited till dark that evening, waited till the casket was buried, the red clay soil tamped, grass seed sprinkled, fake flowers placed. I waited till the bluegrass music was extinguished to creep like a thief into the cemetery. I picked my way between the stones and finally stopped before the fresh-dug earth of Mary Elizabeth Turner's grave—born May 25, 1939.

Kneeling, I saw that the space for her death-date was blank. No trace of black ink, I thought with relief. Martin Memorials would send a man over to carve the date tomorrow, probably.

I had decided last night, lying sleepless in bed, that while this had to be a really weird coincidence it would be better if nobody noticed that inked-in date. I had tried to check on the stone the morning of the funeral, but the pastor waved and with that I had to turn back, just hoping that nobody noticed the written-in date. But I suppose that the rain of two nights ago must have washed away the pigment.

Feeling prickles of fear at my neck - it was dark and I was in the middle of a graveyard, after all—I rose and slunk home. Gently shutting the screen door behind me so that it would not squeal in protest, I returned home and to bed. Back to schoolwork, housework, outdoor work.

It was no more than two weeks later that I was again relaxing on the sunny knoll which the Mt. Caramel Church crowned. My back was against the blank side of an old marble marker, one of the oldest in the cemetery. This time I was reading John Grisham's The Client, cheering on the twelve-year-old who knows a deadly secret, shrinking in fear of the mob boss who wants him dead. I did have work to do at home, but it was a beautiful, crisp summer day and I had hiked my floral skirt up my thighs to get some sun on my still winter-pale legs.

Checking the screen of my cell phone in the side pocket of my purse, I saw that it was almost 7:00 pm, and setting down the book I decided to go home. Just in front of me, the words

only a few feet away, was the stone of Burry Crowell of Burry's Used Cars, born March 29, 1939 and definitely not dead. "I planned way ahead," he'd tell everyone who asked, spreading his hands, permanently grease-stained to the elbows, wide as though inviting a comment. Burry's Used Cars was a sort of final resting place for ancient Buicks, battered Ford pickups, and along one wall were a dozen cracked windshields.

By now I had decided that Mary Turner's death on the evening of May 15 was a surreal coincidence, but nothing more than that. Still, there is something alluring about power, about harnessing the supernatural. Maybe that was what bent me to my knees, groping for a magic marker in my purse's side pocket and then fast in an eye blink writing June 3, 2005 - tomorrow's date. I thought I could always come back tomorrow and wash it off; I thought to justify the unjustifiable as I got up and straightened my skirt, brushing off a stem of grass.

It was perverse adolescence which made me stay away from the graveyard all day.

I was driving through the center of town on my way to some food shopping on June 3, 2005 with the stereo blasting when I saw the cars all around Burry's cinderblock bunker of a business. These were cars with seats, hubcaps, windshields, paint—and emergency flashers. They were there because Burry Crowell had just been found slumped under an '86 mint green Toyota wagon, with a cup of cold coffee near his right hand. Dead.

My skin went cold with panic, with fear of being found out. The words in my mind were like headlines—Murderer, Cold-blooded Murderer, Cold-blooded Murderer is 16-Year-Old Student who Says it was an Accident, Teenage Murderer Sentenced to 30 Years Without Possibility of Parole—it all came through my head in an instant and then I kept on driving, keeping the speedometer below 25 all through town.

That night I sat upright in bed, thinking a hundred illogical thoughts, fiddling with the lace bedspread as I watched the moon rise out my open window. The power almost thrilled me - the ability to determine life and death, the ability to control the world in my hands—like God, I almost thought and then buried the idea somewhere deep in my mind. But it was a terrible power, this killing of people who had no reason to die other than that I wrote a date on their gravestone.

My mind drew back at this, doubting. Maybe it was all a terrible accident? This is the 21st century, I told myself. This is an age of logic—but, the question remained, can this be a coincidence?

I fell asleep after a time like this, my troubled mind still trying to understand something which cannot be understood.

* * *

Ann Louise Henshaw was a thin-bodied, thin-lipped, narrow-minded woman. She wore pink rouge on her sunken cheeks and her face was deeply lined, but not from laughter. She was the postmistress of one of the four one-room rural post offices left from a time when people arrived on horseback. Ann Louise Henshaw brooded like a buzzard, cramped behind her counter, officiously stamping envelopes. When I was eight, she had yelled at me for coming onto her lawn, and later that year at the street festival she'd grabbed my arm and dragged me back to my parents because I had wandered near the country band in which her son played. I remember her sharply curved fingernails digging into my skin.

The gossip was that she read everyone's mail. I don't think it surprised anyone. And this was such a small community that nobody ever felt more than mild annoyance—the notion that it was a federal offense was never considered. The fact was that there were many envelopes with curiously ragged flaps, and others were lifted and picked at on the corners, as if in a failed to open them.

Her husband, Jacob Henshaw, had died years before and two daughters had moved out somewhere in the Midwest where nobody had heard from them in a decade or more. And the son was a no-good whose wife had left him a year ago. Ann Louise was not well liked, but she was tolerated in the way only a fellow old-timer could fathom.

On the morning of August 12, 2005, when I'd walked down our quarter-mile long driveway to get the mail, I found a little green official slip claiming that the end of our driveway

was muddy and unsafe, since the mail carrier, Tom Yowell, was too low in the ditch to reach the box. The slip was signed with Anna Louise's perfect script.

I returned home, dragged the phone book from under a stack of bills and looked up Tom's number. When I called, his wife answered and I finally convinced her to let me talk to him. I explained about the slip and he admitted mentioning it to Ann Louise, but assured me that it was no issue, he'd been planning to stop by and mention it to me—or maybe just call James at the Highway Department and ask for some loose gravel. Really, it wasn't any problem.

I thanked him for his time, wished him a good afternoon. Setting the phone in its bracket with some unnecessary clatter, I collected keys, cell phone, license and that officious green slip. Striding out the door to the car, I slipped some letters of my own to mail into my purse and readied myself to complain to meddling Ann Louise.

It was just after 2:00 that afternoon as I pulled into the post office's too-small lot, jammed the gear selector into park and jumped out. Burry's Used Cars across the street was still up for sale, I noted without emotion before going in. Of course there was a line and I waited impatiently, clicking the heel of my boot against the cabinetry, as a little old lady counted out dollar bills for sheets of stamps. By the time I set down the letters on the counter in front of Ann Louise, I was annoyed. I don't remember exactly what I said as she stamped my envelopes, but I tried, nicely at first, to explain that I'd talked to Tom Yowell, who said it wasn't a big issue. I told her that I'd take care of it soon, but I didn't understand why she'd gotten involved.

Her lips pursed tight, she glared at me and said, practically spitting, "I don't like your attitude. I've never liked your attitude. That postal box is a hazard."

I told her, sarcastically I'm afraid, to have a good evening and stormed out the door. It was almost 2:30 and as I headed home through golden-lit auburn hayfields and tall green corn, my mind spiraled of its own accord to Mary Elizabeth Turner and Burry Crowell. I'd tried to forget it all but death, murder, is not something I could easily forget.

It was nothing but hotheaded, depraved adolescence that made me pull into the church driveway, parking in the back by the education building where the windows hung with children's

decorations. Swinging purse to my shoulder, I walked amongst the graves until I found the Henshaws' stone. Jacob O. Henshaw, born December 5, 1928, died June 11, 1989. Ann Louise Henshaw, born February 15, 1931, currently presiding over the post office.

It was with clenched teeth that I crouched before the stone and with quick violent strokes wrote August 12, 2005. And with that, as I capped the marker and slid it into my jeans pocket, I had killed three people.

* * *

I have no pride in this, for how can there be pride in the supernatural, in something so inconceivably out of our control? Yet I feel no sadness either. I never felt sadness, even when I snuck into the cemetery the evening before Ann Henshaw's funeral, and, wetting a finger, rubbed out the date, knowing that she was dead and cold in Praddy's Funeral Home.

I still think of that summer sometimes, but I have never told anybody but you.

Jenny Parsons

Where I'm From | Jamell Maxey

I am from hand-me-downs,
From Jordans and Timberlands,
I am from the drug users in the street,
I am from the pine trees, the dandelions,
From the nosey people, the know-it-alls,
I am from cookouts and watermelon,
From pretty boys and the Boatwrights,
I am from the gamblers and the fighters,
From the money-makers and the go-getters,
I am from the drug dealers, the felons,
From the place where cops would ride by but never stop,
I am from the basketball courts and card parties,
From the big family reunions,
I am from the heart attack my grandpa had,
From the high blood pressure, the cancer,
I am from the dinners every Sunday,
I am from the church choir,
From the young outlaws,
I am from the hood,
From staying out late all night trying to make a dollar,
I am from 15,
From the guns and knives,
I am from the love givers, the picture takers,
And the people that will give anyone a helping hand.

a willing vessel | Andrew Dugan

i.

if you goan keep knockin down my doors darling
let me advise you this:

i aint one for maudlin acts,
and to sympathy i'm amiss.
but you goan come round my
place and piss and moan and
bitch? they a hellhound on my
trail and i got a grave to pitch.

and if you goan crack my windows in twain honey
i hope you do it quick:

i been tryin for nigh five years
and all you been is sick. i been
splittin rails and drivin nails and
all these posh white folk, and still
i came no closer to what i already
know.

but dont break your nails rippin up my porch baby
cuz it aint all i got to give:

i stole myself an inkpen hon but
poetry aint but lovers' purgative.
so i grew for you a mustache and
wore for you a beret. o i learned
that velvet french but i couldnt
put no words to page.

ii.

my bridal dress:

wet from waistdown
and all the cashmere
hearts of it purled with
passion and pain now

followed the river.

and the river followed
its course elsewhere.

i drowned:

your raw hands pressed
against the subtle bends
of a neck you once said
was that of a mallard
duck.

i drowned:

you spoke and signed in
numbers and thought
yourself a machine.

preprogrammed. ill-
equipped.

you motioned to me like
one would a ghost or a dog
or a slave. walked me thru
an escher maze of metaphor
and cliché.

iii.

when televisions had no color and
summers bore no heat, we strolled through fields of
music notes and plucked out three new beats. on

top this hill, i rolled my thumbs across your
pliant flesh. you stood staticstill and hand-
filled the glen between your breasts. and i, staid

as i am, waited only so long for
you to run. and i have waited again,
counting thirtysomething years one-by-one.

iv.

motherfucker
i been sick for centuries
and what you done for me?

you been robbin pens and
talkin french and hittin
jails and cities.

so i'll break your house
and deconstruct my hands
and draw your panes in
quarters,

all until you sit with me
and genuflect:

we need spontaneity.

Modesty | Joy Meyer

The moist air hung around the city, enclosing it in a damp dome of spring. Sounds of the city crushed against the soft air, the residue of which filtered slowly into my room and wafted around me in the moonlight. All around me the noise of the city tapped the walls of my townhouse like a soft rain. Each night I closed my eyes and listened to the murmurs and the rush of the city. These sounds so distant yet so close feel, each night, as though they will crush me. I listen to this city, a city that builds itself each night anew and is renewed each morning.

The Paris of the Pacific, the city is sometimes called. San Francisco, where all dreams are destined to come true. Springtime weather changed dramatically, sunny then fog, sunny then fog. I didn't sleep at night, but I try to. When the trying didn't work, I gave in to pretending to sleep. This pretending was done each night as I lay in bed.

Lying in bed, I strain to hear the cable car in the distance making its dinosaur climb to the top of Knob Hill. The brownstone on the hill is perfect, the perfect symbol of what will be our new life together in San Francisco, my new wife and I. The bank happily lent me the money to buy the house because I was their newest gold and silver banker. The Bank of New York was eager to get their hands on a portion of the gold and silver being discovered around the bay. All I needed now was her safe arrival by train.

The next morning, feeling nearly rested, I rushed to get the rest of the things prepared for her arrival. I rushed out of the house and nearly slipped. I was so happy, I felt nearly drunk. I laughed with my teeth showing towards the sun as I smiled into the sky. I had come here to be happy, to escape the bitter sadness of betrayal and rejection in New York. Wrapped in shawls warmed by sunlight, the people of the city milled through the streets that morning and I followed the hazy mass of walkers. I was headed to the train station to collect my bride.

It was springtime and the city was seeping. The clouds were low that day, and hung like lazy weather balloons that levitate close to the ground, not landing, not soaring. Clouds disguised as fog. Clouds slipped and sped by rooftops. Clouds brushed past the flags and the palm trees with the grace and ease of a pickpocket on a trolley. Clouds dripped down the sides of building like condensation, like ice cream sneaks down the cone, to the thumb then wrist. The wind

picked up the dust from the alleys creating eddies on the boarded sidewalks. I walked past the snake oil posters on the wooden walls of the sloppy wooden houses that line the streets.

It was springtime and the city was seeping. Palm trees drooped in the rising heat of the day and the heat beaded the faces of strangers selling apricots and fish. One hour before my bride would reach me by train, I hung in the balance of space and time, just waiting. Is it possible to sustain happiness? I will always remember the day as bright and fantastic. I will remember a day bright enough for the shadows of birds to drag the ground. Flocks of pigeons charged from rooftop to rooftop shaking the earth with their wings. I will always remember that day, how I looked up through the phalanx of the birds' shadows, my eyes straining past my fingers and smiled. Their shadows hold me to that moment, ghost shadows frozen in my memory.

Sixteenth Street erupted around me. Bums milled around as though on a track, crossing streets, pacing walkways, like nervous people pace rooms. Silver miners winked at each other with crooked grins, faces full of greed, then friendship, then greed again. The Chinese laundry was pouring a fresh smelling steam into the sky. There was something else to this day, I felt like something was being decided, the sky held a certain tension. There was something hanging in the air, or maybe just underfoot, a sort of rumbling. I arrived at the station and stood by a pole and leaned against it.

With my mind racing, I waded around in my thoughts, in the moment and got stuck staring into the palms of an old man. I stared and stared at his wrinkled graying hands with pink undersides, the color of pale roses, dewy palms filled with wisdom. My fingers flexed and I felt myself reach out to touch his hand, I caught myself and stopped. No one noticed and I shifted my gaze to his well-cared for nails. I thought of my grandfather's hands. My heart went wild, beating and flapping, and for fifteen minutes I felt all of the three thousands miles from my home. I felt a million miles from anything safe or familiar as the train pulled into the station. I watched every person depart the train with a growing sense of dread and glee.

It was clearly her when I saw her. Her modesty was an insane mask, a Morris code face with two dots for eyes and a dash for a mouth. She was so lovely with her pointed purple mouth and

eyelashes damp with sleeplessness. She had apparently remembered to pack her rouge for the eight-week journey by train. Her hair was a black tangle of weighty curls and ostrich feathers pinned into place, all of it ~~was~~ scattered by trying to sleep on train. Her jacket was a warm brown and her ankle flashed under her skirt as she stepped from the train. She had a very large crimson flower pinned over the breast of her jacket. It was a red slash of a flower, which was to be our sign that she had arrived.

I felt at once unworthy. I am the residue and the fallout of a life carefully planned. I have only the silt left of a life where the tide had gone out. I have lived just below the surface of other people's dreams for my life. I held out, I didn't marry. I had fancied myself a free man. The truth is that I was waiting, for the right moment, for the right women, for the right city. But none of these factors ever added up. I traded a rebellious passionate heart for the assuredness of a predictable life of mediocrity. I lived constantly reassuring myself that I would be ready when the time came. But the time didn't come so easily.

My last lover, Eleanor the actress, left me nine years ago in New York. She was the ship leaving the sinking rat. She left while I was at work, at the bank. I came home to the emptied flat. She left most of the things because they were mine but gutted entire sections of the rooms. Two shelves of books were missing sporadically like teeth knocked out of a face. Stockings were dashed about the room in an obvious hurry to pack, in a hurry to get away from me. I looked longingly at the circles left on the dresser where her perfumes had been only hours before. I touched one damp ring then put my fingertips to my nose. I can almost see her when I smell the lily of the valley. I can see her dark hair damp with snow, we are walking back from the theatre and she is laughing. Were we ever that happy?

From this room [what room?] I can see all the way down the narrow hallway to the kitchen where the red curtain blew like an abandoned tri-color. I walked to the kitchen mesmerized by the red and the breeze. I am a bull headed man walking towards the red curtain in the kitchen, walking towards it like I have no other choice. I sat down in the kitchen on a wing back chair, a chair that means nothing now. I sat in the kitchen and watched the red curtain blow in the slight

breeze from the window. I watched it for hours. There was no way to bring her back. I began to laugh and then I began to cry.

I began to wear the red curtain as a scarf. It would unwind as I walked through the streets of New York and blow behind me in the early morning light. I would wind it back around me again and steady my walk. I felt farther each day from the people of this world and closer to some unseen cliff. I forbade anyone from saying her name and slowly began to liquidate my assets. I sold my small flat to a sagging family and accepted the bank's job opportunity in the west in the up and coming city San Francisco. No one envied the journey by train that I would make. But I grew a little bit brighter.

It was in the shuffle of packing my carnival glass pieces and delicate porcelain plates that I spotted the advertisement in the paper.

"Modest and clean women. Reasonable and attractive wives for sale."

Below the caption bore a small list of details and a number. I raced to the pub to use the pay telephone. In what seemed to be an eternity I had the operator connect me. I hoped the company wouldn't announce its purpose while the three of us were all on the phone together. The operators hear too much and there is always the awkwardness of too many people on the line.

"She has rare heart condition," the dry voice on the phone explained. "A quiet and desperate life has isolated and enclosed her heart."

"What do you mean?" the telephone's black horn was chilly against my ear.

"Her heart has turned to marble," said the voice distantly as though located far away by a cliff. It was as if the voice were competing with the sound of waves crashing against a stone cliff in the distance.

"Is that even possible?" I asked.

"Apparently so" croaked the voice.

"Is it chilly to the touch?"

"We can't touch her heart, Sir," said the voice sternly now and beginning to lose patience.

"Is she very lovely?"

I wired the enormous fee to the company and instantly worried that I may never see my bride. We arranged for her to arrive shortly after my move to the new city. She would arrive by train with all the papers we needed. I had only to sign them and it would be official and contracted. Three trains a day came into the city over the Sierra Nevada Mountains, as I sleeplessly awaited my marble-hearted wife. We would be inseparable and very, very happy.

She arrived with the heat of steam from the smoke stack. She carried only a worn leather suitcase wrapped in belts with brass buckles for strength. The buckles reflected the light from the sun and the fragments of light disappeared in the dulling steam. The dust eddied and circled the train's giant steel wheels. The ground seemed to tremble, seemed to undulate, below my feet as she put down her bag. A coil of hair broke loose and dangled across her right eyebrow and trembled slightly on her nose. I longed to reach over and push the hair aside.

"Hello," she whispered, showing perfect alabaster teeth. Were those marble?

"Will you have me in marriage?" I tried to joke with her, show her I was nothing to be afraid of.

"I already have." The smile broke out again.

"Are you ready to go home?" I reached for her suitcase.

She nodded and another curl escaped. I picked up her suitcase and offered her my arm. The weight of this moment and the salt of her fingertips grazed my wrist, and as she took my arm I was frightened. We walked the one hundred and thirty-seven steps to the cable car. The car then chugged its way to the top of knob hill where we now lived together. Is it possible now to be happy? I tried not to scream and I smiled at her as the trolley chugged on.

At home to break the silence I turned on the phonograph, wound it up and played a scratchy wax favorite of mine. An endless waltz played out of the horn and the yellowed electric lights of the house rose as the sun set outside. I stared at her. Her skin glowed yellow against the lights. I pulled out my tobacco and began to roll a cigarette.

"Do you smoke?" I asked her and she seemed frightened by the question. "Come on now, I know women smoke. So do you smoke?" Not waiting for her reply I lit the match.

She extended her fingers, fingers that looked pale and luminous in the light, towards the burning cigarette. “Sure.”

“When I was younger,” she began and laughed snorting some smoke through her nose, then the rest through her mouth. “When I was much younger, I wanted to be the emperor of some distant land. Not any real place but a magical distant land.” She took another drag and recalled her favorite story. “I wanted dragons at my disposal, beautiful maidens to dress me, and an endless garden of flowers. Mostly I just wanted those great green beasts as friends, as allies.” She laughed again, throatier this time. “Only fools dream this way my mother told me.”

We spoke all night skimming the surface of our lives, taking only the parts that seemed to illuminate us and make us seem supernatural. We talked only of the things that made us interesting and worthy of dragons. Eventually, I showed my bride to her room. I sat on the chaise and watched her as she drifted into sleep. I lay down next to her and stared at her eyelids until I found my own sleep.

In the morning, I lay in the bed trying to locate where I was before I would open my eyes. So much had changed I was afraid all that had just happened had not actually happened. I was afraid that I had actually finally fallen asleep and dreamt the whole night. I had seen entire days slip away and cease to exist. Entire parts of my life before had slipped away and become some obscure memory. Parts of my life didn’t even seem to have actually occurred and I was afraid the night before was one of those parts.

I reached over and felt her face, her jaw. It felt porous and rough like the fine porcelain I brought with me. My heart seized in fear. I felt farther up her face, and to her temples close to her hairline; it was still warm and made of skin. I opened my eyes. I leaned over to kiss her and realized her mouth was frozen. Her lips slightly parted and had turned to smooth pink marble. The skin below her mouth was starting to harden into a porous crust of marble. Her eyes held mine and we waited.

“I am afraid,” I whispered into the crack of her mouth. She put her fingers to my lips to silence me. She got out of bed slowly. I watched her limbs sway beneath her slip and her shoulder

blades twitched like wings as she pulled something out of her bag. She pulled out a leather bound journal and took a quill from the stand. She paused at the desk to write something and walked slowly back to the bed. I watched her for what seemed like an endless waltz back to me. I took out the outstretched journal from her hands and read, "Do not be afraid." She climbed back into bed and I held her as the entire room began to sway and shake. Buildings across the street crumbled and a portion of our room fell away.

* * *

Sole Food | Patience Lanier

Walking, feet falling apart,
toes rolling, pushing
reaching for the buried soil.

Small, hungry

shovels

tasting the ground, filling my legs with earth.

The marrow chokes on bits of sidewalk,

scrapes

of tar and

glass from a bottle that was kissed, sucked dry, bled.

Men sweep dirt off dirt

giving powdered filth a breath

to rise.

Breathe the dust,

foot, lung, bone,

inhale the street's detritus.

The River | James McDonough

In these Scandinavian woods, dawn broke the soft summer air and raised a hazy morning;
It ran up to the river's end and ate the deep-blue waterfall.

I agreed to go to that place where the ancient pines bend close to the coast;
Where the rune stones were still young to compare and the burial pits still fresh;
Where the birdsong never ends and the skies glow like a newly-risen child.

When you heard the day break you woke up
With a righteous mind. You strapped a golden shield to your back;
It became an emblem of your just cause.
You tied your heart around it to secure your ship, and
You laughed at the beat of the distant waves.
I know you thought it was worth taking the risk
To avoid the slippery cracks as long as you could
Before you dove headfirst without looking,
And forded the surging river.

I thought I was the anchor of your ship,
But I became a flying gull instead.
These waters are no more territory
And I am honestly afraid of nothing
Besides myself. There are no challenges left,
Save the ones of my own mind's making.
I could be selfish like the river,
But today my bare back is like an open sail –
I watch the sun dance on a tightrope, and
I gauge the distance and watch the knots unfurl.
Time moves faster as we grow;
There is a bend in the course
Ahead – a short-cut to mend
The hours lost in transience.

You cannot escape the river's end – its churning waves.
You throw a cry at its expectant mouth;
Its frothed lips taste your ankles and thighs, chest and eyes.
You bend like a bow to its willful hands;

It holds you tightly around the waist
Guiding your body downstream.
It knows how far you have left
As you wade across its currents
And you catch and release your breaths
One at a time
Anticipating the other side.
You cannot escape the oncoming rumble.
Your voice decreases and moves,
In one sound second, from firm to flaccid.
The silence below its surface caresses you to sleep.
The shadows behind your eyes disappear
When you realize that there's nobody near.
The inevitability of it seems cursed, yet
Blessed
By beauty.

You are part of the river now.
If you can hold on for so long,
You'd be bitter alone – I know
It could last an eternity.
Just follow the water's edge
And let the fall come slow.

You said I would find you there – I knew you lived
Among the slow laughter and slight applause of the forest canopy;
Among the hills, the banks, the rivers;
Among the mossy undergrowth and the blackcurrant shrubs.

But I found you lying on the shore by the delta instead.
I used my feather's edge to sweep the sand off your skin.
I watched the penitent tide lower your feet, in reverence

I placed beads of dew in rows along your naked spine.
I saw them tremble as you sighed, and I imagined
They looked like the tears in the corners of your eyes –
The kind that stream inward and never leave.

They Serve Budweiser in Heaven | KathrynLee Williams

Listen,

on earth

trillions

of people pray

a day

while in heaven,

god lounges languorously on his cloud,

one ankle over the other in an X,

chugging a Budweiser (inebriation like a
shield),

wearing shades so pitch and thick,

earbuds so loud with bass—

the combination like a

wall

utterly impervious to

his people's

trillions of

cries of succor.

Rewind | Zoe Gordon

The Devil was helping Meena build a time machine. He liked to play with time. He loved the way time felt in the human form. A tangible strain across the skin. He loved moving the hands of the clock backwards and forwards, in spirals and half-circles.

The Devil showed up on a Tuesday. Meena heard the doorbell ring and thought that maybe someone had ordered pizza, but when she opened the door there he was on the front porch. Meena knew him instantly. She must have been expecting him. They were old friends; they had known each other forever. Since childhood perhaps, before her memory began. She couldn't remember how they met, but it didn't cross her mind. Meena asked for the time machine for her birthday. When she blew out the candles that was her wish. Of course it made sense that the Devil was here to help her build it.

They set up shop in Meena's basement. She shared the house with roommates, but no one ever went down there. Maybe they had forgotten that there was a basement, or maybe they didn't use it because it hadn't been divided up among them like the rest of the house; this is your shelf in the refrigerator, your half of the couch.

The Devil spread his plans across the old carpeting. They were drawn on tracing paper that was turning brown with age, and covered in illegible scribbles. He beckoned Meena closer, and they wrinkled their noses at the mildew in the air.

"First," said the Devil, "you need to know that when building a time machine it is best to use forgotten or unwanted things. Most often these items already know how to move through the past. We are going to need quite a few pieces." The Devil squinted back down at his plans, "We'll need something to hold down the weight of time."

Meena nodded, writing this down on the first page of her notebook, right underneath the heading TIME MACHINE, which she had written all in caps, underlined a few times, and then doodled around with hearts and spirals.

"Then we are going to need some pieces of the past."

Meena wrote this down as well.

“We’ll need someone else’s secrets, and of course a time piece.” His fingers traced the patterns of his plans as he spoke.

“There should be something that can move backwards or forwards, and of course we are going to need some duct tape.”

Meena’s list grew.

When the Devil was finished with his list he sent Meena to fetch the items. Meena went the flea market, and puzzled over her own handwriting. The list was like a scavenger hunt, and she had a hard time trying to figure out what the Devil meant. A piece of time, someone else’s secrets? She wandered down the rows of junk, hoping that something would click. There were heaps of forgotten Beanie Babies, Barbie dolls, and children’s clothes. There were collectable plates, decorated with McDonald’s characters or the face of Elvis, even one of the Virgin Mary, but none of this seemed to fit.

When she finally returned hours later she had an old weight bench covered in cracked, black vinyl, several rusted weights, a dusty penny collection with every penny in order of year starting in 1818 and ending in 1981, and—of course—duct tape, piled in the back of her car. The Devil was pleased. There was the part to weigh down time, some pieces of the past, and the duct tape that he needed. Together they carried the bench down the stairs to the basement. Meena was surprised at how light it was, but it was likely that the Devil was lifting more than his share.

The Devil arranged the prizes across the basement floor, and sent Meena off again to search for more items. While she was gone he began the spells. He started with the weight bench, which would be the framework of the machine. With a piece of chalk he inscribed the rusted legs with runes and symbols, letting his mind wander over their meanings.

On the rusty underside of the weight bench the Devil drew a large clock face inscribed with roman numerals. This was not a power symbol, but an elegant rendition of time. Time was one of the devices God thought up, to give the world a sense of order. He didn’t have to abide by it, but he watched as the humans moved through it. They strained against it, like walking through

quicksand, their skin sagging in the effort. It was perhaps God's own hypocrisy regarding the physical laws, which made the Devil enjoy tampering with time so much. He shaded the clock face exquisitely, and if you didn't know that it was chalk you might believe that you could pick the clock up out of the bench, and hold it in your hands.

* * *

Meena returned again at dusk. She brought with her an ancient tape recorder, about the size of a hardcover novel with the buttons on the front, and several David Bowie tapes. She found them after much searching, in the back room of a thrift store called Happy Monday.

"Perfect," the Devil said, "something that moves backwards and forwards." It was the mechanism that he needed; the piece that could pull things into reverse, and then propel them forward again. Meena had understood brilliantly. He took the tape recorder and the cassettes from her and laid them beside the bench where they could wait for installation.

Meena felt as though the options of the thrift stores had been exhausted. She began to search the house. She snuck past her roommates watching football in the living room, and crept through their rooms and bathrooms. She picked up some purple Mardi-Gras beads, an old shaving kit shoved far back underneath the bathroom sink, several Polaroids that had developed poorly and only showed blurred shapes, and a pair of pink plastic sunglasses.

Meena took her stolen prizes, and went into her own room. None of her things seemed like they would help the time machine, but she decided to look anyway. From under the bed she retrieved the shoebox that she kept her precious things in. She pulled off the lid and looked through the mismatched pile of memories. There was a photo of Meena covered in mud, and smiling happily. It was taken when Meena was fourteen, and her parents sent her to a summer camp in North Carolina. It was called "Adventure Camp," and involved lots of camping and canoeing through warm lakes. It was the first time that she had been on an airplane by herself. She was practically shaking as she passed through the security gates. She had put a change of clothes and a toothbrush in her carry on bag because she was terrified that her luggage would be left at the airport. When the plane lifted off the ground she had felt it in the pit of her stomach.

She still remembered this trip vividly, and it often felt to her as though it was both the first and the last time she had an adventure— and it was a contrived one at that.

Meena put the photo aside and pulled out a birthday card with a picture of Alice and the Queen of Hearts. *Meena— We've had such a wonderful year together...* The card began. Meena couldn't remember the last time she had spoken to the best friend who had written this card. She put it back, and carried the box and the roommates' things back to the Devil.

*

Days moved quickly. The Devil didn't have to sleep. He worked through the night, keeping Meena awake with the clatter of construction. The first night was fine, but by the third Meena, who was not used to the lack of sleep, became a little spacey. The Devil had to repeat himself often, it took her several minutes to remember that by "hand me the time piece," the Devil really meant "hand me the clock with all the little birds on it, that chirps every hour with a different birdsong, and does not help Meena fall asleep in the slightest."

By daylight Meena was dreaming on her feet. The entire world had taken on a glittery quality. Meena was supposed to be looking for more items. She couldn't think in the stuffy halls of the thrift store anymore, so she went driving instead. The sky was blue, the pavement still wet from the night's rain, and Meena was making figure eight's around the blocks of neighborhoods she barely knew. She drove another circle, and realized that she seemed to have found her way out of the residential part of town. The houses had been replaced with high-rises. She pulled over at the side entrance of one of the office buildings, and got out into the glistening morning. She had never been dumpster diving before, but she had a feeling that it might pay off. She lifted the lid, and braced herself for the smell. It actually wasn't terrible, most of the trash seemed to be paper and old office supplies. She pulled the top bag out. It was full but very light: full of paper shreds. Other peoples' secrets. Meena ached with excitement, as she brought them back to the car and headed home to show the Devil.

When the Devil took the garbage bag and dumped the paper shreds on the basement floor he was surprised. It had been a long time since he had worked with material like this. Meena

was a clever one. Usually when he sent people off to get secrets they came back with the obvious. He was grotesquely sick of working with diaries. They didn't realize that people's best secrets were usually the ones they were trying to get rid of. Meena's strips of paper would work superbly.

Meena seemed to love the paper as well. The soft pile reminded her of when she was a child, and used to jump and burrow in the leaf pile every fall. She couldn't resist falling into the shreddings, and lying back in them like a beanbag chair.

"Why do you want this time machine Meena?"

"Because I want to go backwards."

"Backwards to what?"

"To all of the things I could have done with my life. I feel like so much time was wasted. I kept taking the easy path, or the safe path. My life is mediocre now because of some of those choices. Nothing bad ever happened to me, but nothing that great happened either. My life has been predictable, I want to have stories." Meena was still thinking of those falls in the leaf pile. Her childhood had been an idyllic one.

"There's still time for that in the natural progression of things. You could find an adventure now if you wanted to."

"I know, but so much time was wasted. I don't really know where to start without going backwards." She was thinking now of people who she didn't know anymore.

"There are things I would like to do differently."

"Do you ever think about time outside of your lifetime? If we build this time machine there is a lot more that you could see. You could find the beginning, or fast forward to the end."

"I like my lifetime, I don't think I want to leave it, what if I couldn't get back?"

The Devil laughed, he could smell Meena's fear.

Time does and does not exist simultaneously. You can decide how much or little of time you want to abide by. The Devil knew this, but Meena did not. It was possible that the machine bit of time travel was entirely unnecessary. But then again, maybe it was. Maybe it was the tool that people like Meena needed.

When you live with time things have to “take place.” They cannot just be, they have a date. When you live without time the rules don’t make sense, but you know this and that makes sense in itself. The Devil had lived without time for so long, that although he liked to play with time, he always grew bored with it eventually.

“You could visit the future.” The Devil said.

“I wouldn’t know anyone there.”

“Do you like anyone here?”

Meena was silent.

*

With nothing else to fetch, Meena had little to do. The Devil asked her to do small tasks—like wrapping the ski poles in wire— but mostly he preferred to work alone. Meena would watch him from her nest of secrets, dosing off intermittently to be reawakened by the clatter of his work.

Meena dreamed of her past. She went there often in her head. She had a tendency to be a bit anachronistic; she listened to songs for their level of nostalgia, and not their musical prowess, she rarely read the news, and she decorated her walls with old photographs. The Devil knew all of this about her. He dipped into her dreams as he watched her sleep, infusing his work with them.

Meena wiggled in her pile of paper shreddings, she might have been asleep. Or maybe she was dreaming.

“Do you love me?” she asked.

“Of course I do,” said the Devil, “I love all of my human children.”

Meena sighed, and curled further into her nest of paper. The Devil especially loved the weak; they gave him hope. While Meena slept the Devil might have stayed beside her and worked on their time machine, or he might have gone forwards or backwards, or he might have gone back to hell, or maybe he did all of these things. When Meena awoke he was standing over her with his hands on his hips.

“It won’t be long now.”

*

The Devil was working on securing the tape recorder to the front of the weight bench. The machine looked like Frankenstein, sewn together from the junk graveyard. The cracked vinyl was the cockpit, the weights were on the floor, like the tracks of a tank. The ski poles, wrapped in wire, stuck up from either side, and the bird clock was strapped to the back. The entire machine was stuck together with duck tape, wire, and aluminum foil, and covered in the Devil's symbols. The Devil smoothed down one last piece of duct tape, and stood back to admire his work.

"It's finished."

Meena was wide eyed. She stood up, strips of paper were caught in her hair.

"Are you ready?"

She nodded.

"Okay, carefully climb into the seat."

Meena lifted her legs high to avoid the wires and duct tape, and slid onto the vinyl. The Devil nodded. She reached up, and grabbed onto the handles of the ski poles.

"Great, now I'm going to start the machine, and after that you're not going to be able to move okay?"

Meena nodded, still looking shell-shocked.

The Devil reached down, and pushed the PLAY button on the tape recorder.

And we could be heroes David Bowie sang. The chalk designs began to glow. The birds chirped. *Forever and ever—*

"Are you ready?"

"Yes"

The Devil pushed REWIND.

* * *

The 14th Morning | Kathryn Ziegler

Father's flipping,
screws up his face.
Pessimism can kill a man.

Joints swollen, worn out from stress
of sitting. Too still. It's a crime.
Man's got a face full
of tears. Blood
shot, eye drops missing
their mark. Eyelashes flip.
Face messed up; just tryin'
to smoke the damn joint.

Watching stove grease flip
and slip off the grill. Baby girl's still classified
"missing."

Flip
Out. Can't face
It.
Papa knows she's
Gone.

The Fall Line: the boundary separating the hard metamorphic rocks of the Appalachian Piedmont to the west from the sedimentary rocks of the coastal plain in Virginia.