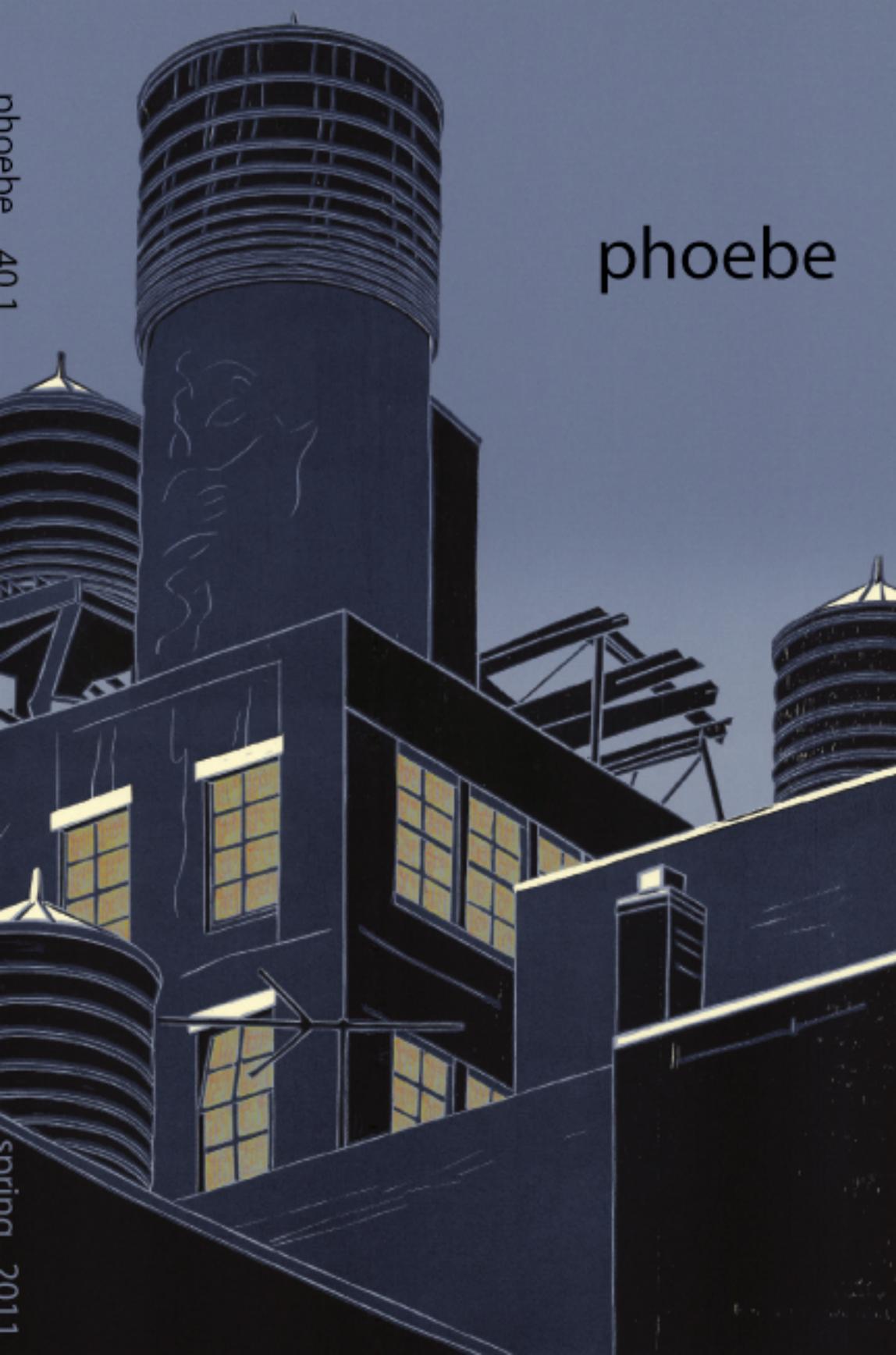


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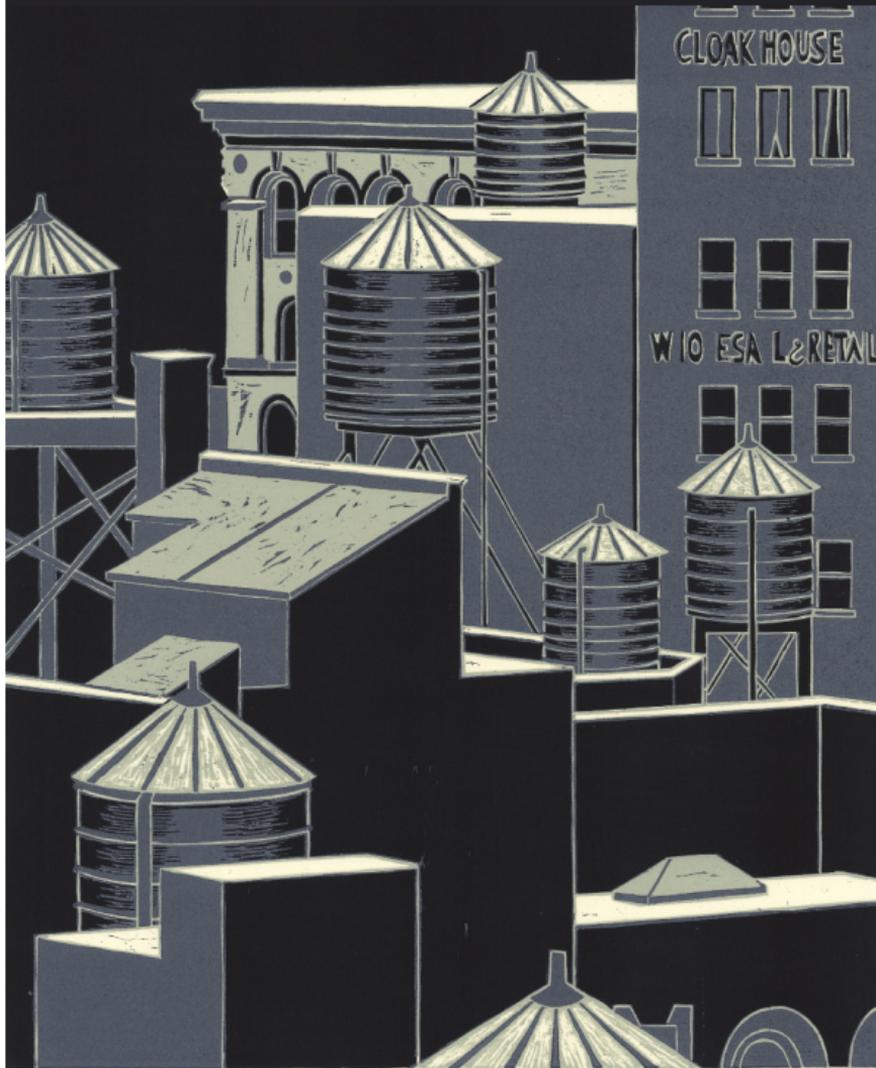
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Night Towers at Union Square

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Emily Trueblood
Night Towers At Union Square
Woodcut

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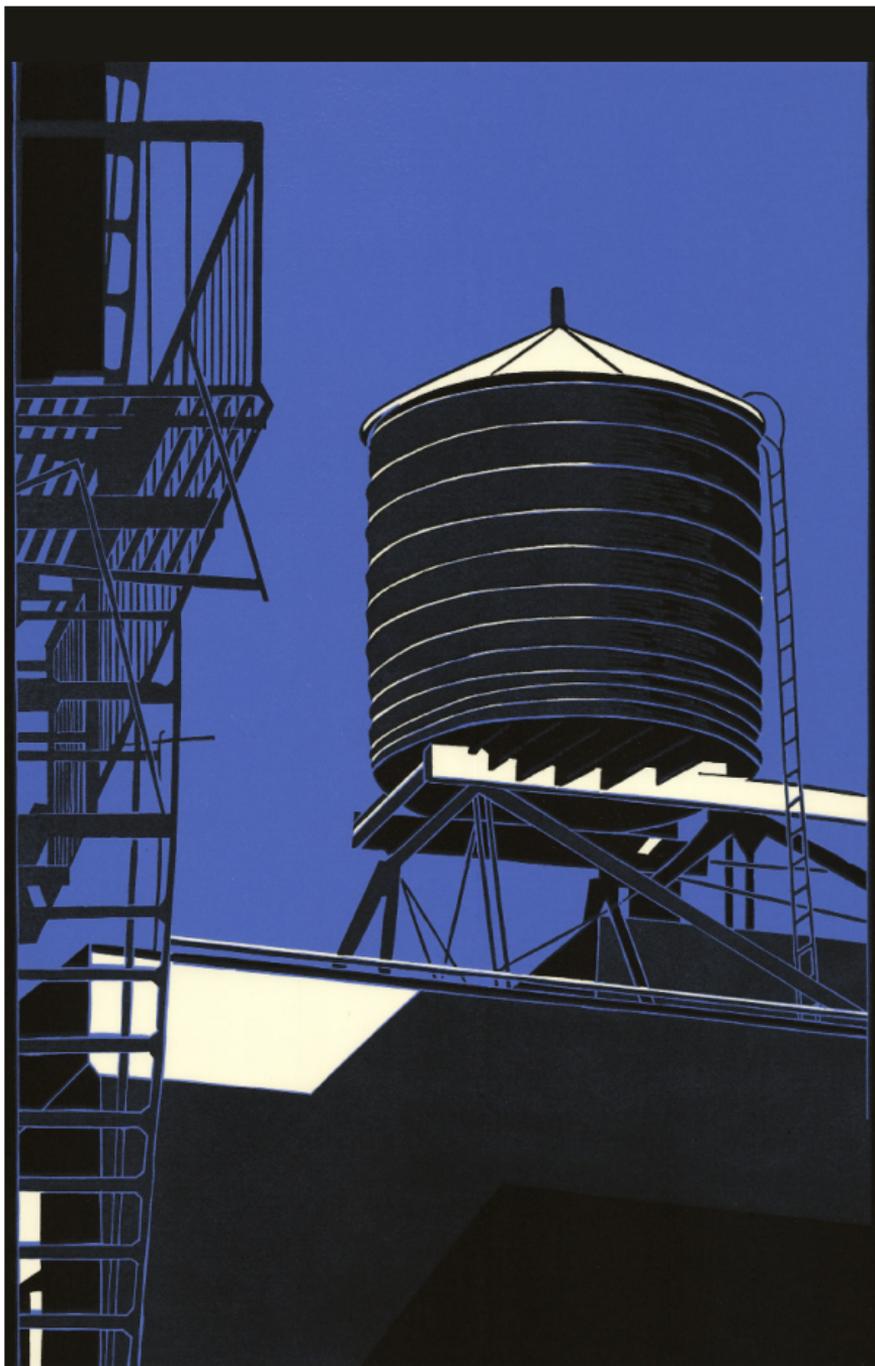


vol 40 no 1



Spring 2011





Night Tower

Stuehler

Emily Truexblood
Night Tower
Linocut

PHOEBE



vol 40 no 1



Spring 2011



PHOEBE

Phoebe is a nonprofit literary journal edited and produced by students of the MFA program at George Mason University. We welcome online or postal submissions in fiction, poetry, non-fiction, and artwork between August 15th and April 15. Our subscription rate is \$12 for one year or \$20 for two years. Back issues are available for \$4. *Phoebe* sponsors annual contests in poetry and fiction. For complete contest and submission guidelines, please visit our website: <http://phoebejournal.com>.

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Emily Trueblood is an award-winning New York based woodcut and linocut artist. Her work can be seen in galleries and museums all over the United States, and in Spain, Israel, Germany, Brazil, Switzerland, and Argentina. Ms. Trueblood has studied at Beloit College, the University of Wisconsin, Academia Artium in Madrid, and at the New School. Her prints explore the geometry of natural and urban vistas, using color to create a mood or to render the feeling of the weather. She does all of her work by hand, and says she enjoys working in woodcut and linocut methods because once carved, “the blocks are almost impossible to change,” which “forces her to focus on what she most wants to express.”

www.emilytrueblood.com

SARA LEFSYK

MINT HONEY LOCKS AND COMBS the hair
yes doll

she lifts even in the corner lifts corners
i couldn't even empty the box

why I'd even been holding down
like holding down the fillings

i thought he did so much
then in the shower we licked sodium from each other's eyelids

fine then
i couldn't even feel this animal come bite me

i said neo-cortex then stroked the pony
all the pain centralized in the motion picture

i couldn't even feel the animal
come take this cash little girl that's it

the surgeon flew into the limitless beyond
i said something like: my knuckles bleed from under-use and: catch-me!

who's the poultry
who's the appropriate public figure

is it necessary to function
yes i have transportation into the inferior

whose doll house are we living in
whose iodine mixture

our salt has reference to the official's podium
that's it stroke the pony there you go that's it

little girl listen you like that now don't you
she lifts and lifts

what's the consensus
must i always explain my percentages

please don't touch me there this is my correct mixture
please become more frequently pull open the window and let's work

SARA LEFSYK

BUT IT'S DARK AND BIRDS SLEEP in there at night/at night

which means i couldn't stand her standing in there and then A Savior lashing herself to herself to
himself in there at night

i'm sure they must do fall out of dreams

sometimes i also hold my own head then put it down waist-high: what a thing!
she did that

i done she did that "what if my egg" thing then someone found the baby for a long time:

rock the baby

you went down you ate that Rice

my next step was letting go of my head but what if Church falls out

we are susceptible to many birds dreaming in our heads

my fear is that they will get stuck in there

she did that then took eggs from Savior and offered them to Rice

what if Savior gets stuck in there and you can't pray her out

what if Savior eats Rice/eats Rice

that's it rock the baby

"to make things with our hands means to make things with our hands" said The Husband and "i
need more lengths of rope"

THEN THIS NEW BIRD SANK OUT IN MY CHANNELS far out

says the multi-cultural gown: mmmmm i like yr talent

we are the shit watch us walk through this door
we are the things you want

under-the-house i mean it she met doll there
yr dentist does gesticulate then does touch things like yr teeth

mmmmm yr dentist does touch yr teeth mmmmmmmmm does touch yr teeth real nice-like

we spent a long time in the public sector studying science
my parts move i want you to remember this

her body located through the crack
she found doll and took her body to the gypsies on that day

said i can't stand the chloroform sometimes
it has needles and i am a kitchen

there's no room to wonder those men told me
i did make a good blindfold anyway

that night we shut down their guesses after fainting
no matter i can make holes and sleep in them

what animal

SCOTT ALEXANDER JONES

from ELSEWHERE

In these messages I have yet to delete
we grow toward death

together—

Sungazers blinded by Vitamin D
waiting with

the patience of trees

for the sun, our day, our only star to consume

what/s left

of everything
we/ve never known—

SCOTT ALEXANDER JONES

from **ELSEWHERE**

So we wait for what shape this windowless room will take
& talk of Ben Franklin

spending sleepless nights in Paris—

The way blueness

touched the dusty corners of his room before sunrise in 1792
& one Frenchman replied

how his open blinds

did not allow light in, but rather let

some of the darkness out—

SCOTT ALEXANDER JONES

from ELSEWHERE

And in your final cellphone message

I have yet to delete

you say you followed the sun to Dublin & jetlag now sets it
sadly as cenotaphs—

Trembling poplars spider-

webbed with Christmas lights along Celtic canals—
How it/s pretty goddamn magical

& there/s \$39

left in our Wells Fargo account—

How your paycheck should go thru some Thursday
eventless enough to excuse from

the nuisance of memory

& you wish you could loan me your eyes

on lamplit water—

IN YOUR HUNGER DREAM

for Stacy Heiney

To make them glide you dip each dog in Bud
 and gulp them down, two bites apiece. Buns too.
 The judges twitter Japanese and stare
 as if you've gained twenty seven pounds.
 You have. Snickering with *schadenfreude*
 your opponent mops the floor with you, flexing
 his guns as they crown him at the dais.
 His outstretched arm raised above the crowd
 swoops down with a baton. Whirlwind maestro,
 he sprints your cello hands through William Tell
 so fast you almost puke. Your cummerbund
 stretched tighter than a timpani zings off
 and strikes a bloated heiress sawing Zs.
 Mink stole askew, she slams her monocle
 enraged. Her trembling finger points you out
 as the hall itself takes one colossal gasp.
 You drop your bow and dash stage left with hopes
 to ditch the whole ordeal. Each mile you run
 melts another pound. Your quadriceps
 bulge like stallion flanks. From Carnegie Hall
 you're a red line pulsing down the map—
 Trenton, Philadelphia, Baltimore.
 Panting, waif thin, you find a ghetto shack
 abandoned. In the door's shattered glass
 you see her hushed ghost, your overdose friend
 as your reflection. Jonesing, you dash upstairs
 to cook your final hit sprawling in the tub.
 The faucet sputters sludge. You puddle your spoon
 and thumb your lucky Bic. Each cell flares
 with noise. Your body dies as your body wakes.

ADAM TAVEL

GHAZAL FOR TOADSPAWN

An underwater lens: the thousand greens of Lac
de la Motte & celadon warts on one toad's arms.

The thousand thousand eggs—a clutch bubbled
in reeds. Which will hatch to know their arms?

Is it a lone mother or father breathless here
crucified with a beam of sun across its arms?

Forty years one captive toad was said to live.
It croaked for hydrilla swaying like arms.

Weeping for the garden Adam hugged
his boy's bloody sheep-shit tunic in his arms.

In the tinfoil glare of morning you will taste
the fleshy orb you vised with both your arms.

NOT A FAMILY

In the middle of a mandatory office meeting about proposal distribution, the girlfriend excused herself and took the stairs to the second floor bathroom, where space belonged to her: all these cubes she could enter, doors she could latch. Here, she could carefully read the directions and administer the test. She could sit on the toilet watching the white stick's cloudy window without the boyfriend asking, asking, asking. What's that? What's wrong? Are you...? Are you?

At home, the boyfriend was everywhere. He occupied the bathroom with her: flossed while she showered, shaved while she peed - because, he once told her, the windowless, linoleum-floored room, with the ceiling fan cranking and the curling water streaks and the clumps of hair in the corners, was the loneliest room in the apartment.

The girlfriend went into a bathroom stall and took the pregnancy test. She waited. The bathroom door opened and a pair of red Mary Janes paused in front of her stall.

"Do you mind if I get on the phone?" the shoes asked.

"I guess not," said the girlfriend.

The shoes walked away, and then shortly: "I meant to wake you. I want you to be a thick-tongued idiot when I tell you if I'm driving and I see you in the street, I'll smash you into a fire hydrant."

The girl in the red shoes laughed.

The girlfriend was pregnant. Two pink lines made their way to the stick's surface. She stuffed the test into the trash receptacle.

When the girlfriend exited the stall, the red-shoed girl stood stooped with her elbows on one of the sinks, looking into the mirror. "He's a puddle I keep slipping into," she told the girlfriend.

The girlfriend nodded. There were a lot of puddles. Big ones were easy to avoid, but small ones seemed a moderate challenge. People walked right into them.



Already, the girlfriend's senses seemed heightened to damage. She avoided coffee in the morning, tuna at lunch. Hot tubs could injure the embryo; strenuous exercise and soft cheese, too: she recalled these things she'd read or heard or imagined. She moved slowly around the cold apartment, crossed the icy drive with her puffy-mittened hands in front of her like she wanted the whole world to pause. Wait. Hold it. She inched forward.

On their food-stained loveseat, the girlfriend sat down with the boyfriend. The boyfriend pressed his lips together. She knew he had his suspicions. They'd been reckless with protection: a test-tube experiment. Maybe, maybe, maybe. They were, after all, in their late twenties with no reason to move further down the path of Standard Expectations. But the path was there: in the increased telephoned pleadings from parents, in the pictures of wedding-cake smiles and babies-in-beanies their co-workers posted in the office. The girlfriend and boyfriend hovered before the paved path shaded by thick-trunked trees, lined with trim grass and manicured mansions, where miniature houses played mailboxes and animals played lawn ornaments and people played happiness.

She told the boyfriend, "Don't be angry or nervous or excited." She suspected all such reactions were momentary and dishonest, learned responses to what had happened to millions before.

"There will soon be a reason," she said, "to go down the toy aisle at the supermarket."

The boyfriend nodded. "That is not an inconvenient aisle."

They shifted so slightly their ankles touched.

The boyfriend asked, "Will you marry me? Should we buy a house?"

The girlfriend shook her head. She did not like being referred to as "the girlfriend." She knew the boyfriend found this amusing, but was also hurt by it; and it was for both reasons he called her the girlfriend all the time. Meet my girlfriend. My girlfriend likes boiled chicken. My girlfriend's feet are always cold. He forgot her real name.

But the fiancée would be worse; the wife: the worst. They had crossed over the threshold and could run down the path if they wanted. The girlfriend felt like hobbling around the entrance for awhile.

When the girlfriend got pregnant, the boyfriend watched family sitcoms with a notepad before him, sniggering and jotting things down like *father: clumsy (trips over tricycle—should look at the ground), mother: stupid (bright-eyed—need clothesline, oven mitt).*

The laugh tracks bothered the girlfriend. Sometimes she came into the living room just so she could boo when the laughter started. She was sick of everything. She threw up all the time.

The boyfriend frowned at her. "You're ruining it."

"That's not a family," the girlfriend said. She pointed at the black and white figures. She stood in front of the television and smiled broadly, lifted her eyebrows, then pretended she was laying fish forks at a table.

The girlfriend wore an apron and high heels. The girlfriend applied makeup for only her husband and children to see. She was beautiful.

"I watch modern ones, too," the boyfriend said. "I want a comprehensive sample."

The girlfriend stood stiffly in front of the television. "Maybe we can raise the kid like this. In thirty minute segments, where we stop his accidental involvement in a cock-fighting ring with a friendly parent to parent chat. We buy him a new hat in the last four minutes, and the kid smiles. We send him off 'til tomorrow."

"I've nowhere else to look," he said. The boyfriend came from a broken home. His parents had been alcoholics who slept in different rooms with different people, but they all lived in the same house with large rocks instead of couches and a fire pit in the kitchen and kids playing kick-the-can in their underwear in the street. Now his parents were recovered. They lived and slept together and only tentatively left home to go to work or visit their grown kids, who they encouraged gently to show them how wonderful family life could be.

On the screen, a mother smiled over a tennis shoe, her delicate hands crafting a double knot with floppy loops. "Now be home before dark," the screen said.

"There's got to be a middle ground," the girlfriend said, "between this kind of happiness and that kind of suffering."

"You don't realize there's a lot of scenarios." The boyfriend looked at the screen and wrote something down.

The girlfriend left the room. "Just mute the volume," she called. "I don't need to hear how hilarious my life's about to be."

Her parents said: "Take vitamins every day and don't stuff yourself like a pig. The more cereal you eat the more likely you'll have a boy."

The parents clipped out pertinent articles about baby hangnails and diaper bags bursting, sent them to the girlfriend in an envelope with money stuffed in: a crumpled five, a few ones. They called her together, the father upstairs on the green rotary, the mother cordless in the basement, her feet propped on collected *Better Lives and Gardens*.

"I'll still be a dad," the father said. "But I like the addition of grand to the title."

"Will the baby sleep in a closet?" the mother asked. "Or the kitchen?"

The apartment the girlfriend and boyfriend shared was very small. The carpet flapped up in corners; they strung sheets over doorways in place of doors. There were cracks in the ceiling that sometimes centipedes and furry spiders crept through.

"This is where we live," the girlfriend said.

Her parents said: "It's time you became owners instead of renters."

"Does the boyfriend have a fear of commitment?" the mother asked.

"I told you he was a street-jumper," the father said.

"He's educated," the mother said.

"You can be more than one thing," the father said.

The parents said: "That boy's the father. You can't unmake him that."

While the boyfriend watched sitcoms in the evening, the girlfriend sat on their small slab of a porch. She entertained the image of a frazzled single-mother pushing a stroller down an icy street, with plastic grocery bags hanging from the stroller's handles, the mother's frame obscured by a fat purple coat and huge boots and shoulder-slung duffels. This seemed a heroic image. "Single mother," she whispered to the frosty wind, and although muffled by the scarf wrapped tight across her cheeks and mouth, she liked the way it sounded.

Through the thin wall, she heard the boyfriend laugh. He had discovered closed-captioning; he no longer took notes. He recounted whole shows to her; and when she told him to stop, he developed this pleased, distant look, and she knew he was just recounting the episodes in his head.

"They feel like my friends," he told the girlfriend later, in bed. He yawned happily and placed his head in her lap; and she stroked his long black hair and didn't let a single strand fall forward to tickle his face while he slept.

The baby grew. When the girlfriend started showing, she wore big jackets to the office and hunched over hoping no one would bump into her. She

was quiet at work, a non-nuisance. Professionally-dressed, hair-bunned, high-heeled: a respectable administrator of other people's problems.

"Just tell me what to do and I'll put it on your desk."

She wanted to have the child, wanted to raise the child to be exactly like her, like all those fervent religious people got to do, except she would use logic instead of faith. Don't you see, child? Doesn't that make sense? Isn't this the way it should be?

She wanted to hold that happiness inside, huddle around it like a big fiery secret shared only by her and the child. But there was all this interference.

The baby grew, and when the girlfriend could no longer hide it, her co-workers smiled knowingly and told her dirt-eating, crib-buying, tears-of-joy stories. She nodded politely. Was she excited? Yes, she was exhausted.

All these appointments to keep, various tests and measurements, fingers pricked by women in clown-patterned scrubs, doctors with chalky fingers and smug smiles. It was convenient to attend with the boyfriend. He talked to the doctor. Held the girlfriend's hand. Suppressed his smiles when she asked him to. "What do you want?" he asked.

He carried all bags and duffels. They bought a stroller, and on the test-run around the block, the boyfriend pushed it down the icy street with the girlfriend unfettered beside him. She bent over the stroller where the baby would be and made cooing noises. She made up a song about how going over the curb was fun. Bump bump up.

The baby grew, the baby grew. The living room filled with laughter.

Then it was spring. There once was a path called Standard Expectations, and this path was paved and kept clean and every week a maintenance crew came and groomed the grass and trimmed the big shaded trees making passage as easy as possible. Here is the path, the path said. Don't you want me?

Then it was spring, and the boyfriend wanted to get married. "Based on my studies," he said. "As parents, husbands and wives fare better than girlfriends and boyfriends." He quoted several TV shows. He quoted the girlfriend's parents. He quoted the makers of the path. "Besides," he said. "It's a nice picture."

He flipped the channel and showed her clean individuals in clean living rooms and kitchens and backyards, and they were smiling and laughing and even fighting: but that was a part of it, the boyfriend told her. "You throw manila folders and wind-up clocks at each other, and then you go to the bar or your neighbor's fence or brood awhile on the park swing-set, and you come back misty-eyed with your palms turned up." He showed her. "Isn't that nice?"

The boyfriend's parents called. The girlfriend excused herself to the small porch, where the purple-leafed bushes needed a trim and the Morning Glory the boyfriend had planted crept closer and closer to the door.

The air had turned thick and muggy; mosquitoes hovered and darted around her bare limbs. She heard the boyfriend's aggravated voice through the wall. He blamed his life on his parents. Stories tied to every flaw, every mistake. This is why the boyfriend refused to accompany her to the roller rink. This is why when he searched the closet for the garden spade and discovered one of her roller blades, he held it in his lap crying. This is why, when particularly upset, the boyfriend shut his eyes and whispered: "I wish I was never born."

The boyfriend's parents wanted to speak to the girlfriend. The girlfriend took the phone and inquired about their jobs in children's vitamin production and asked if they still liked the new stove they'd bought to replace the fire pit. They had become good nervous people who wanted to know if they were doing right in the world. "Every day is hard," they said. "Sometimes we wish for a second chance."

They said: "We would be honored if you took our name in marriage."

In the middle of a mandatory office meeting about proposal distribution, the girlfriend went to the second floor bathroom and sat on the toilet in the same stall she'd taken the pregnancy test eight months before. Alone with the stale soap smell, the girlfriend whispered all titles available to her. Single mother. Pregnant bride. Gun-toting madwoman. She worried over connotations, paths lined with pansies and dogs that wagged their tails from a distance and never jumped or barked too loud.

The girl in the red Mary Janes came in and asked if she could get on the phone. The girlfriend said fine. She was accustomed to interference. She was ready to hand her life to whoever wanted to take it. If you get bored, pass it on. Just tell me what to do. She served food at a table. She tied shoes. She smiled.

The girl in red Mary Janes pronounced her vowels with a strain to them, like they were tightrope-walking a very straight line.

"No," the girl said. "Not until you screw me one more time."

"No," the girl said. "There will never be a last time."

The girl laughed and made plans to meet in the alley behind the office. And the girlfriend wished she was the girl in red shoes. The girlfriend wanted to lie on the gravelly road and fuck some monster, the baby sandwiched between

them, jostled, maybe, yet still alive.

When she came out of the stall, the girl in red Mary Janes watched her in the mirror. She looked at the girlfriend's stomach.

"Is the boyfriend in the picture?" the girl asked.

The girlfriend nodded. He was in the picture. They had become the picture. Two parents put their hands on kids' shoulders. Mail slid into miniature houses and then into large ones. Birds flapped around birdfeeders and ants turned away at the door. Home smelled of laundered clothes and gas from the grill on the porch. The sun was so bright the sky filled with over-exposure, wilted the corners to orange, to red, to black.



FACE

The motherfuckingist cat comes to me
and mollys. He's strange. I yell at this cat
GET A JOB. The cat regards me less now
Alexander Alexander McQueen
Now in this time we are speaking in terms
of Lion things. Princely coy smiles here.
Alexander if we pride together
And you throw your royal body off of
a low cliff I will turn my eyes and say how
Decadent— how Opera— All that Lion
and This— Darling, did you hear me whisper
'Darling' A hard K sound houses in my
spine now— here— this— Alexander I did
not get it at first but now I do and

COCHLEA

Everything is better now that Daniel
is a Radio. Cute blond girls and I
play weapons all the time. I get to throw
knives too close while they laugh skipping away.
I whip Daniel with an extension cord.
He says R & B things like I'm still in
love with you. Like I'm *so* in love with you.
And I hit him without smiling. A
blond girl says let's throw him in the water.
No one really agrees. Someone throws a
ninja star into my back. Someone hands
me the Radio. Through bad reception
you can hear Daniel make a plea— Tonight
I'mma be a naughty girl do you think—

MARKS, MEYERS, MATTHEWSON

(headstones in the funeral yard)

Something here has gone beyond the lunar.
A slackening mouth means another black outfit,

another day left a gloomy mess and reading
the names on the graves until I reach

the Greek section. This, the place
with space still left for sale and a handful

of headstones still spelled
with their old alphabet.

But, now, a divine shut-down edging
a grave digger's plot. A re-shaping

of the pituitary gland into its own body,
a laser-brushed moment that's a simple practice

for the things that move in their slow radians.
A kind of formula I can recognize

only when you turn to me, your voice
high-pitched and dry, your eyes squinting

and pointed, a moon turning retrograde.

WILLIAM STOBB

JASON SAW SUN TUNNELS

for Jason Howard

When he saw photos of *Sun Tunnels*
Jason wondered if he'd recognize them
as art if he walked up. I imagined

walking up—fifty miles from anywhere
headed south along playa into water
-color sky purely blue, nearly believable.

What's gone wrong? And what slim
hope might those segments increasing
by step on the horizon represent?

For a while they're cars and the question
is whether cars exist in this time frame.
Eggs, then, gestating in one hundred

percent sun. Then clearly construction
materials on the outskirts of some invisible
development. Is the place abandoned

or invented? Water? No. What
kind of space suit will the next person
who sees these lost culverts be wearing?

By now his silk shirt's drenched
and his office coif's plastered to his blistering neck.
If the sky won't intervene—liquidate

and plunge the basin—he'll die here
days from fresh water. Just to survive a little longer
Jason enters the tunnels for shade.

Delirium. Carved designs channel
sunlight into projections—the futility
of any realization—that these are pieces,

commissioned, positioned
within history's weave of petroglyphs
through modern objects

in a double helix of symbolic expression
unraveled to the brink of extinction
might not occur to him. We don't know

what the walker named Jason has studied.
We think of Charlton Heston on his knees
under the ruined symbol of his former nation

—it's later, Bright Eyes, not elsewhere.
Your mission's a failure.
Movie over. Baffled philosopher

walks up on *Sun Tunnels*. Theories
evolve and dissolve as his body
changes in the light of the nearest star.

Nancy Holt, *Sun Tunnels*
near Lucin, Utah

WILLIAM STOBB

SOME PARABLES

for Juliet Patterson

There is no special name
for the sounds old houses make
when it's twenty below, mid-morning,
and the sun overtakes the pines.

There's gunfire at night
but it almost never comes closer.
It's just quiet again, though there may
be moaning elsewhere.

For the holidays, he gave the gift
of horrifying images to develop,
new continents never to visit because the fauna's
specifically evolved to devour you.

No hope is as accurate as hope.
You'll have to continue having experiences.
One thing happens and then another.
He does the awful thing every time.

Another channel in luminous flux
is as accurate as sequence that might have been
prevented. It doesn't have to determine you
or it does.

Radiant warmth, if temporary,
is practically a fact and as good a place as any
to begin. Your house is popping
in full sun, brittle cold. We could say it's alive.

FRAGMENTS/ FIGMENTS

the chartreuse breath of moths. poppy seeds brushed by shadow.
at night the heart gathers fragments—the heart never sleeps.

ladders of clownfish. behold—the four-chambered cirque,
displaying detritus spilled from the dark. a tin whistle's violet
weeds. roots of indigo grass.

the hidden sixth chamber revels in dream. dust shaken from star
rags. a coyote's eyes, unfurling moonstone leaves.

the heart has its prerogatives—one of them, to serve as the body's
metronome. slivers of coal from the crow's mouth. the raindrop's
lyrical wails.

absinthe drawn from a chameleon well. the heart, a toy castle of
mirrors. its drawbridge, the wing of a junco.

blueprints limned in the cellar by sepia crabs. with its two atriums,
a train rolls over moon tracks. carrying peacocks from the attics of
sorrow. masks left by raccoons.

the heart kayak floats in the wake formed by melted snow. opal
needles of ice darning the dark. a forget-me-not collage of frost.

undertow that wrenches—behind
this world of subterfuge—
intimations of another world—

serenity, the endless heartbeat

o, the tongues—
listen—hyacinth laps our shore

THE PROBLEM WITH BRIGADOON

I was supposed to be funny crazy, not crazy crazy. There's a difference. Funny crazy is wearing tinfoil hats and washing your hands until they bleed and talking to magical gnomes that only you can see. Maybe occasionally referring to "the voices" so long as they're not telling you to do anything too scary. Crazy crazy involves pounding your head into the wall, screaming obscenities at men of the cloth, and rocking and moaning, clutching your heart, your body a husk of itself, a trail of spit seeping out of your useless mouth.

At sixteen, with at least as many shitty community theater productions under my belt, I considered myself an experienced actress. So funny crazy I could do, though I'd had much more practice in crazy crazy. This was the brand I had for years rehearsed in front of the full-length mirror, sitting atop a hamper full of never-washed costumes, waiting for my mind to split. This was the kind I was sure would eventually win, and I wanted to be ready. I'd stare into space for a couple of hours, occasionally stealing glances at my pasty skin, the baby crescents of moon emerging under my eyes. What I wanted to see most was the expression in my eyes – what others would eventually witness when they looked into their nutty, hollow terror. There were times when I could feel the perfection of the look, so exact I was sure that madness had finally arrived, only my need to see it distorted it. I felt like one of those cartoon paintings where the gaze suddenly sweeps to the side, a real person hiding behind the wall. Other times, though, I could master the balance. Could hold the empty in my eyes and see it all the same.

This was my third show with NightLight Productions, which I know sounds like a porn studio, but was really just some Middleton locals who met at karaoke and started a murder mystery dinner theater troupe. Stace (she insisted on Stace, not Stacey), was the writer and director and, while none of it was pornographic, she usually scripted herself as the seductress and would regularly "forget" to wear underwear for the scenes where she stood on a table to sing a murder ballad. Stace had turned 29 about 29 times, but with her throaty voice, full red lips, and shiny black hair, the men didn't seem to notice, happily chewing their chicken marsala and stealing glances at her freckled cleavage or

kingdom-come legs. I took my cue from Stace, and started folding over the waists of my skirts. In school, I'd adjust my tights more often than necessary, working my way up from ankle to thigh.

I was not part of the original karaoke crew (they were all over 30, singing songs I'd never heard of), but was invited to join NightLight by Stace's brother Vince. He'd played my father in a recent production of *Brigadoon*. He had been in an off-Broadway play once and wasn't an asshole about it. I think he had a thing for me because once, during the scene where we gathered in a crowd to search for Harry Beaton before he could leave *Brigadoon* and make the village vanish forever, I felt Vince grow hard against the back of my thigh. It would have been creepy if he didn't look exactly like Mandy Patinkin.

Usually, we performed in restaurants in the Hudson Valley. Two or three times a month. I made \$100 for each performance, some of which would go towards rum and cokes and karaoke afterwards. No one bothered to ID me in the company of the other actors, and my parents, glad that one of their daughters left the house on a regular basis, never asked why I didn't come home until 3 a.m. For whatever reason, they trusted the cast and would ask in the morning, oblivious to my hangover, "How was work?"

Cruel Christmas was a new script, a new show. The debut was not at a restaurant, but at the private residence of a rich woman in Yonkers -- Mrs. Devereaux -- who looked so much like the slutty Golden Girl I was sure they were sisters. She hosted a fancy holiday party with men in tuxes bearing hors d'oeuvres, guests clinking real crystal glasses, laughing through bright teeth, and a live band in one of her cinnamon-scented living rooms. The band made me a bit nervous, used as I was to the cues on the karaoke tapes that usually accompanied us. My character, Holly Pine, the nutjob / number one suspect with an insatiable Elvis-obsessed bent to her madness, had three numbers: "All Shook Up," "Blue Christmas," and, of course, "Don't Be Cruel." The victim, for once, was Stace's character, Mary Christmas, a (surprise!) beautiful seductress. Stace was rarely the victim because she wanted as much stage time as possible. But occasionally she craved the kind of admiration reserved for the dead. The motive for her murder in *Cruel Christmas* was a bit muddy. When we questioned it during rehearsal, she got defensive, "Jackson's character kills me because I'm *too beautiful*," she said. That's right. I, Holly Pine, was the red herring, not the murderer. It was Jackson, or Don Apparel. Don (short for Donner, the audience learns, an inexplicably reincarnated ex-reindeer,) is the gruff, studly neighbor, who strangles Mary Christmas with the Christmas lights. Stace insisted that her body remain for the final act of the show, sprawled out on the floor. "I am really good at not breathing," she said. Jackson agreed. "She

looks like a corpse when she sleeps!” It was common knowledge they’d been doing it since *Die on the Fourth of July*. I figured Stace just liked the idea of a lot of wealthy men staring at her fishnets, her parted lips, her blinking, deadly necklace of knotted reds and greens.

Vince played the detective and was better than Columbo. The final character was Carol Pine, Holly’s caretaker and older sister, the one driving when our car mysteriously breaks down on Christmas Eve at Mary Christmas’s house. Carol’s real name was also Carol and she believed in method acting. Minutes before my first performance with NightLight, she pulled me into a restaurant kitchen and taught me how to apply lip liner using a mixing bowl for a mirror. “I’ve got two words for you, Lydia,” she said to our reflection, “Stanis Lavsky.” She thought Stanis was his first name, and so did I for a while.

I decided to believe in method acting, too. It didn’t seem that hard. You just took stuff from real life to make you feel the way you need to while acting. I tried to explain it to Zoe, my actual sister, who was older than me by thirteen months. She was annoyed that I was gone all of the time, and that, when I was home, I made her help me practice. When I told her about Stanis Lavsky, she said, “Oh, so like if your character has to be a bitch, you just act like yourself?” To which I replied, “No, it’s more like if my character has to deal with a passive-aggressive freak, I just pretend that they’re you.” Zoe and I had both become big fans of the term “passive aggressive,” recently learning that the harshest insults are those that include some curt psychoanalysis. Its effect had eclipsed that of “hypocrite” which had a meaner bite to it, but which we used too much and incorrectly, interchanging it with “liar.” We’d grown tired of hypocrite.

The truth is, we were best friends, and had never fought as much as we were those days. A year before, she had moved out of our bedroom and into the den, sleeping all of the time with the lights on. She stopped eating meat at dinner, not because she wanted to be a vegetarian, but because it was, as far as she could see, “all fat.” And it’s not that she cared about *getting* fat; she just couldn’t handle the texture of it between her teeth. I’d point at the center of a pork chop or a lean cut of chicken and say, “Look, that’s meat right there. There’s no fat on it.” And she would try, cutting away as much as she could, until she gave up altogether and just ate extra potatoes, then wandered down the hall with a box of cookies and shut the door to her room. Her laugh had shifted from when we were kids. It came at a higher pitch, and louder, like she was resetting something in her field of vision.

These are the things I noticed. We didn't talk about them, or why we had become more argumentative, and I knew even then never to say she was being just like mom. She wasn't really. Mom's was an illness of rage, of lost logic. Of talking to herself, of staring at the wall, of threatening a violence she could only half-heartedly shake from her limbs. Of disappearance. Hers were the stories I bragged about when my friends vied for most fucked-up family. As Holly Pine, I used mom in method acting. Other than my sessions at the mirror, I felt craziest when I was trying to make sense of her anger and constant sadness. One thing I did, as both Lydia and Holly, was sing off-the-cuff arias composed of drawn-out curse words. At home, this allowed me to say all of the horrible things in my heart while stirring a pot of soup, my mother none the wiser.

I had never known my mother when she was young and un-crazy. It didn't occur to me that it had been a process. I assumed that, at one moment, she was laughing and leading the sopranos in her college choir and marrying my father and, in the next, she was throwing a handful of silvery spoons at the kitchen window. Crying into open books, the pages of which she never seemed to turn. It was this flash of shattered glass, this cut of the spirit, that I feared for both Zoe and me. Not a subtle shallowing of the breath. Not a shift in expression, not the feeling that the textures of our world – the angle of the sunlight, the wrists of our sweaters, the judgment of our friends – would grow harsher by the day.

Luckily, as Holly, I didn't need to worry about nuance, and the first half of our show went great. The guests drank steadily, complimented my baby blue bell bottoms, and tried to get me to break character. I mingled and compulsively rubbed the back of my neck and announced on occasion that The King was alive. In the scene where I mistook Jackson for Elvis, the audience howled as I wrapped my whole body around his leg and cried out, "It's a Christmas miracle!"

Stace was supposed to act like this house was hers, this party hers. She spent a lot of time pretending to know the guests, asking them how their Christmas-themed jobs were going. "So Fred, how are things this year at the elf temp agency?" "Maggie! How's the big lawsuit against Grinch Corporation going?" Mrs. Devereaux absolutely loved it, and followed Stace around, correcting her. "Oh, he's not a cop, he's an insurance salesman!" Stace smiled blankly and tried to pass Mrs. Devereaux on to one of us. It was easy for me to avoid taking care of her; I was in the midst of theatrically counting all of the black shoes at the party, avoiding eye contact and whispering gibberish.

I had just finished my first song (after two false starts), and could see Stace scouting out a good spot on the floor to drop dead, when it happened. Now, when bodies drop to the floor in plays, it's always pretty noisy. A vase gets knocked off an end table, the person falling lets out a shout, and the body makes a decisive thud. In real life, I learned, it can be quiet. No one even heard the old man fall; what alerted us to his body in the hallway was the piercing laughter of a woman in a red velvet pantsuit. "They've killed Gregory!" she shouted. "I found him!" like she might win a prize.

I met Carol's eyes first and she took my hand as we followed the others. Maybe she was trying to stay in character, or maybe she was frightened. When we got to the body, the guests, now well past drunk, were celebrating, animated. A few of them jostled Gregory's skinny legs with their black shoes. Others clapped their hands like expectant children. The only quiet witnesses were me, Carol, Jackson, Stace, and Vince. We were frozen, eyes wide, hands covering our open mouths as we tried to recognize the blank face from earlier in the evening. All except Vince, who removed his detective hat, cast his face to the side, and shook his head, just like he'd rehearsed.

Stace broke the tableaux, gathering her wits about her and dashing towards the kitchen for a phone. The woman in the red velvet pantsuit didn't want her moment to end. "I came out of the bathroom and he was just lying here!" she kept saying. Another woman seemed to be tickling Gregory's sides, reporting to the man behind her, "He's quite good!" The man found this attractive, pulled her towards him, and kissed her like it was New Year's.

Jackson couldn't take it anymore. "Get away from him!" he yelled. "This isn't the goddamn show!"

"Whoa, Buddy," said Mr. New Year, wiping lipstick in a streak down his jaw. His ladyfriend was half-laughing, not sure if she should be embarrassed or flattered by Jackson's attention. Before anything could escalate, Mrs. Devereaux appeared and whisked him away, tugging Carol and me (hands still clasped) behind her. We ended up in the upstairs bedroom where we'd left our bags and keys and coats.

"This is not going to ruin my party," said Mrs. Devereaux, her waxy smile nowhere to be found. "Stay here while I figure this out." She shut the door, which Carol immediately checked to make sure it wasn't locked. "People can be twisted," she said. It wasn't locked.

When we heard the approaching sirens, the three of us went to the front window, awaiting the commotion. It wasn't long before an ambulance was there in the street. Somehow, the paramedics stayed focused, despite the gleeful cries of Gregory's friends. "It's just like a real ambulance!" we heard. He

was on a stretcher, with a plastic oxygen mask. His shirt was open like a set of curtains, his tie missing. Maybe they had cut it off his neck. “The whole kit and caboodle!” they cried. I wondered how long this could go on. I imagined a funeral for Gregory, a burial. The party guests still in their party clothes, waiting for the priest to say he isn’t really a priest. He’s a choreographer. And Gregory isn’t really dead and Holly Pine isn’t really crazy. Everybody is fine. These sirens? Rock ‘n’ roll.

“This is bullshit,” said Jackson. He sat on the edge of the satiny bed and pulled his lumberjack suspenders off his shoulders.

“This is just what I needed,” said Carol, still at the window, clutching a fistful of drapes. Jackson glared at her. He knew she enjoyed anything that would make her better at method acting. He told me once that she got into fender benders on purpose.

“This is bullshit,” I said, feeling like it was my line. It was then that I realized I still held the cordless microphone I’d used during “All Shook Up.” Somewhere along the way I had switched it off. Now it was beginning to feel, in my hand, like some kind of weapon. I found myself holding it out to the two of them.

“Anybody want this?” I said.
Nobody did.



In *Brigadoon*, the village only comes alive for one day every hundred years. I imagined if Zoe could live in Brigadoon, she wouldn’t be tired when it was time to get up, go to school, learn to drive. She wouldn’t ignore me as I warned her that we’re going to be late, you’re going to make us so late. I wouldn’t go to school alone and come home to find she had stayed in her pajamas all day. No. In Brigadoon, she would be well-rested. Even a little antsy, ready to roam through the heather on the hill and take her SAT’s. She wouldn’t try to hide her swallowing of the little pink pills I had found in her dresser. They said 20MG. They huddled in a slim orange bottle, the kind that took over our mother’s sock drawer before either of us was born.

The problem with Brigadoon is that no one is allowed to leave. Which is why we had to chase Harry Beaton. Which is why Harry Beaton ends up dead, his skull crushed. If he had escaped, it would have been curtains for all of us. No waking up in a hundred years to sing songs in our vaguely Scottish thrift shop costumes. No nothing. It was this same idea that kept my mother coming back. She never stayed away for long – a couple of weeks. A month once. When she returned, sometimes wiry and dirty, sometimes plump

and stoned on hospital food and lithium, she would take up residence in her staring chair, cast her yellowed eyes in our general direction, and mutter, “You look terrible. What would you do without me?” As kids, we didn’t think to point out the neat braids in our hair, the tidy kitchen, the way we had found our father again, free from her jealousy that usually drove us to withhold affection from them both. We just hugged her, if she let us, and said that we didn’t know what we would do. As we grew older, we said the same, only from across the room, the embrace fallen out of our repertoire. And we noticed that, though she had disappeared, we had not.

Mom did love theater, and she and dad came to all six performances of *Brigadoon*, even though I was only in the chorus. Dad didn’t even bother to videotape the scenes I wasn’t in. For those he did record, he ignored the main characters completely, zooming in on my exaggerated background gestures. If you watch the tape, you can clearly see my lips take the shape of my ad-lib mantra, “Peas and carrots. Bubblegum! Peas and carrots. Bubblegum!” Over and over again, no matter the emotion. My father made several copies for my fellow cast members, who were polite enough not to tell him they thought they were getting Middleton Community Theater Presents *Brigadoon*, and not Two Hours of Lydia Drinking Out of Empty Cups. After my mother watched the video, start to finish, she concluded that she “didn’t like this episode.”

My parents’ first date was at a two-bit off-off-Broadway musical. Lousy show, said mom. True, said dad, but your mother was one hot ticket. And then mom would repeat, it was a lousy show but your mother was one hot ticket, like she was speaking of some fun-loving older sister. But then her hand would find my father’s. Her hand was bigger than his, stronger. She never seemed to notice. I think she liked to believe he could stop her from breaking anything too important. The night of their date, my mother refused to be photographed, but did take a picture of my father smoking a cigarette during intermission. He is positively dapper in a red tie and the Chelsea boots he was so proud of. His free hand is outstretched, brandishing a wide drape of fabric that he’s trying to keep from brushing the pavement. Bright yellow. A single wing. “That’s my pashmina,” my mother said, “I must have been there.” But she wasn’t always so distant from her former self, didn’t always look at that pashmina as if it were a missing girl’s ribbon stuck in a barbed wire fence. Other times, she showed me the strapless little number that accompanied the wrap, even tried it on for me and Zoe one impossibly happy winter night where, sitting on our snowy stoop, she allowed each of us to dip a finger into her glass of white wine and taste it. Her hair was twisted up and her shoulders were bare and the moon above, a chipped but glorious spotlight, found all of us. “What a night,” she said, always

oblivious to the cold, and we didn't care if she was talking about us and the wine or that night with my dad, that dress. There were times when she was the mother we imagined. Times we wanted to be like her.

The bell-bottoms were hers. They were too long on me. Zoe offered to take them up three inches. She'd recently bought herself a used sewing machine and announced she was making a quilt. Mostly, she seemed to be cutting her favorite clothing into imprecise squares. I recently had seen her tearing the back pockets off of the jeans she'd begged for just a month before. My pants were her proof she had learned to actually thread a bobbin. She hemmed one blue leg, perfectly, and hung them on my doorknob. I didn't bother trying them on until ten minutes before I had to leave for Yonkers.

"Zo!"

She was at my bedroom door almost instantly.

"You only did one leg! I can't wear these! I have to leave like now."

"Shit," she said. "I thought I...it took me forever." She scanned my room, our old room. "Okay." She went to the shelves and pulled two of the fattest encyclopedia volumes. "Stand on these."

I stood. C and S. These were how most things started.

She found my stapler and went to work around my left ankle. I had to hold on to her head for balance. "Your hair is getting darker," I noticed.

"I know," she said. "I hate it."

When she was done, it was slightly uneven, but I sort of liked the shine of the staples, a slim trail of jewelry. I swung my leg a bit, enjoying the small weight. With a nod, we agreed that she should staple the other side, too, for symmetry.

"Thanks," I said. Her cheeks were a bit flushed when she stood. She looked familiar, pretty. "So what are you doing tonight?" I asked.

She grew confused and looked back down at my staples. "You know what? Fuck you."

I acted like her response was bizarre, like I had simply asked a friendly question. But I knew, almost as the *fuck* and the *you* were clipping out of her mouth, that I had asked because she hadn't done anything on any night in months.

Sometimes our fights dragged on for hours, involving every door in the house slamming at least once. Other times, we found that simply resurfacing in another room was enough, like the defeated girls staring into the fridge together had hurt each other in different ways than the angry girls in the bathroom who brushed their angry teeth, took an angry leak or two, and occasionally took angry turns showering while hashing it out. After I finished getting ready for the

show, Zoe turned up in the kitchen and helped me find my keys, handed me my bag, even kissed me lightly on the cheek. I kissed her back, my lips smeared with crooked lipstick. On purpose.

“Do I look crazy enough?” I asked.

“Totally.”



They were fighting in the hall, Stace and Mrs. Devereaux. Through the door, we heard *of course* and *inappropriate*, and *contract*. And then *contract* again. And then Stace stormed into the bedroom to find Jackson, Carol, and me strewn about the bed.

She shut the door behind her and took a long, slow breath.

“Well, this is ridiculous.” It wasn’t clear if she was talking about Mrs. Devereaux or the scene before her: Carol squeezed into one of the black evening gowns she’d found in the closet, sitting campfire-style in front of a dozen bottles of expensive perfume. Jackson still seated at the edge of the bed, calmly hunched over like an actor in a flight safety instructional video. Me, stretched out on the bedspread, propping my head up on my hand like a teenager, growing ill from Carol’s sampling. She kept shoving her wrist under my nose and I kept saying I can smell it from here.

But Stace was talking about Mrs. Devereaux.

“She’s making us finish the show,” she said. “Her brother’s a lawyer or something.”

“Was her brother the guy who dropped dead?” Carol asked. She adjusted her cleavage in Mrs. Devereaux’s gown.

“No.” Stace seemed now to notice Carol, disapproved, and then turned to me and Jackson. “Her brother is at the party, though, and told her if we left, it’d be a breach of contract. And the guy...Gregory... didn’t drop dead. At least I don’t think so.” She went on to explain that he was at the hospital, conscious, his wife by his side. Everyone else, except the lawyer brother, still thought it was part of the act. They were waiting for us downstairs. Vince was nowhere to be found. We had ten minutes. I met Stace’s eyes and tried to match her expression. Outrage. Disbelief. Underlying sadness. I must have done a good job because she rushed over and sat beside me, tugging her skirt down in respect for the situation. “Lydia, you’ve got to do it.”

At first, I thought she was saying that I had to stand up to Mrs. Devereaux. That she hadn’t been strong enough. I would tell her that we would not, under any circumstances, go on with the show. She could keep her dirty money. I’d tear up the contract. Maybe I’d march down the stairs and announce

to the party guests that what they had here was a *real* tragedy. A cover-up! And that the cast of *Cruel Christmas* was not going to stand for it and we were leaving. And anyone who wanted to was welcome to join us! Crowd exits front door. Blackout. But it quickly became clear that Stace was saying something else. Carol nodded in approval and Jackson sat up and pulled on his suspenders, running his thumbs along the inside to untwist them. It was obvious. I had to kill Gregory.

Or, rather, I had to *have killed* Gregory. Strangling with the Christmas lights was out, obviously. Poison was probably the best weapon – something I slipped in his drink. Stace began talking through a new plot for Act Two, a shortened song list, a few encounters, my ultimate confession. I barely heard her.

“But I’m the red herring!” I said. “This won’t work!”

“Hon, it’s just for tonight. You know that. Next time we do this, I promise, I’ll die. And Jackson will kill me.”

Jackson put his giant hand on her knee, “Yeah,” and put on a pathetic Godfather accent. “It’s the family business.”

Stace pushed his hand away, not unkindly.

Carol said, “My aunt was almost an extra in that movie.”

“Look,” I said, grabbing a few of the perfume bottles to have someone else on my side. “It doesn’t make sense. There’s no motive.” They looked at me blankly. “I just love Elvis.”

“Those people downstairs are tanked.” Jackson was trying to reassure me. “Plus, you’re nuts. That’s the beauty of it. It doesn’t have to make sense.” He slapped his thighs and stood up. “Let’s get this over with.”

Carol needed five minutes, and help getting out of the gown. While I tugged on the silk in the walk-in closet, I tried to gain her support. I told her I didn’t see how I could possibly pull this off. My whole success with Holly Pine depended on my knowledge that she was innocent. Crazy, but not, you know, *crazy*. And how was Carol going to handle her own character? She, too, had been ready for Holly’s vindication. She said, simply, “When I was a kid, my favorite cat committed suicide. I can always use that in a pinch.”

“My god, that’s terrible.”

“You’ll think of something good.”

She put on her Christmas tree sweater and I redid my perfectly fine ponytail. Method acting was losing its luster. Besides, I wasn’t actually concerned about the believability of my performance. Our original script had Jackson as an ex-reindeer, for god’s sake. The guests *were* tanked. I just needed to sing another song, deny an accusation, lose more of my mind, and admit everything. I just

needed to get it together.

I was not one for stage fright, and I'd played everything from a hobo to a showgirl. I'd been an old man, an orphan, a pirate, a milkmaid, and, at age four, the wind. Zoe draped me in a blue sheet, hesitated, and drew a big "W" on it, in case people didn't get my costume. "It's windy out!" I said. It was my first line. Never once did I worry, or understand why the kids around me were always throwing up and crying. Why the teenagers and adults always wanted to hold hands in an "energy circle" and breathe together. At the finale of my second grade dance recital, I bowed so close to the edge of the stage that the curtain closed behind me, vanishing everybody else. I remember the crowd laughing; I remember turning around to see what was so funny. It was me. So I hammed it up. I did some of my favorite moves from my routine (jazz squares, three quarters of a pirouette), and then did my best leaps, back and forth across the apron of the stage until my teacher emerged from the wings and guided me where I belonged.

In *Brigadoon*, I'd had a two second solo during the song of the vendors. Vince pretended to sell salted meat and boomed in a low baritone, "Come all to the square." I was next, with my erratic soprano, selling nothing. I called out "The market square!" I cracked about half of the time, but didn't really care. I'd learned early on that if your character was sassy enough, you could screw up your song and no one would notice. As a chorus member, I didn't have a character, per se. But all I had to do was plant my hands on my hips, take a wide stance and wink at the audience. It didn't matter that I sounded like a bird with a broken neck. It didn't matter that I was no good. They bought it.

Mrs. Devereaux's friends were no different. I sang "Don't Be Cruel" to no one in particular, thrusting my hips and curling my lip in time with what was left of the band. The dwindling audience clapped or imitated my moves or tried to show me their moves, to teach me, but my heart wasn't in it. When I finished, a man offered me a shot of something dark. I took it, and said, "Lousy show, huh?" He asked me whodunit and I said wasn't it obvious and accepted another drink. Then he asked if I knew that Elvis had a twin brother named Jesse who died at birth. I said of course I knew that, because I was supposed to know things about Elvis, and who would lie about a dead twin. Then Carol was there, chiding me about the drink and reminding me about my "medication." Then she sauntered over to the band to gear up for whatever song was next. Likely a breathy pop tune suited for her insubstantial voice.

In the next room, Stace and Jackson were pretending to fall in love, surrounded by the sleepier party guests who were draped across the furniture. I took the opportunity to escape to the bathroom. I didn't have to go but

needed a moment alone, and was new enough to alcohol that I still took a visual inventory of its progression. When did my skin flush. When did my eyes brighten. When did I lean too close to the mirror and whisper “fuck” in a mix of regret and delight.

The one time Zoe and I had been invited to drink with actual high school students, I’d made the mistake of challenging Tiffany Wells on her level of inebriation. “Tiffany,” I said, “you had two strawberry wine coolers. Two strawberry wine coolers do not make you strip to your underwear and have a screaming fit about the destruction of rain forests.” Tiffany, still half-naked but no longer screaming, would have none of it, and neither would her friends. They told me I had no idea, that there were times they’d been so drunk they don’t even remember what happened. That I was naïve or repressed if I thought she was faking it. That I had missed out on some wild, crazy shit and two wine coolers was a lot ‘cause Tiff was so skinny. On the way home, Zoe asked me if maybe they were right; it didn’t take much for some people. She said what if normal, well-adjusted Tiffany always wanted to rip off her clothes and scream about global warming. What if a dose of alcohol was just the permission slip she needed.

In retrospect, it would have been a good night to get good and drunk, but I didn’t get the chance. As I came out of the bathroom, into the hallway where I had murdered Gregory, I saw Vince. He was interviewing the woman in the red velvet pantsuit, handing her his detective business card. She put it in one of her red velvet pockets and then excused herself to go to the “little girls’ room,” winking at me as we traded places.

“Some interesting stuff,” Vince said, flipping through his notebook. “The guy was on heart medication.”

“Where have you been?” I asked. “Have you found Stace? Did she fill you in on the plan?”

Vince raised his eyebrows. “Plan?” and clicked his pen into the ready position. “What plan?”

“Forget it.” I said. Vince never broke character. He’d probably been interviewing people this whole time, swabbing the lips of their wine glasses and noting their shoe sizes. When the last matinee performance of *Brigadoon* was interrupted by a spastic fire alarm, Vince was the only one who didn’t mingle with the audience outside the theater, waiting for the fire trucks. We were all asking for sticks of gum and clarifying plot details for the hard of hearing and sitting on the concrete steps with our kilts and skirts hiked up, feeling the afternoon sun on our legs. Vince, on the other hand, was still hocking a plastic pork roast, which he’d instinctively grabbed when the alarm sounded, the one

thing he couldn't bear to lose in the flames. I knew a real fire was unlikely, but did consider if there was anything back in the dressing room, in the pockets of my jeans or the bottom of my backpack, that was worth saving. I couldn't think of a thing, just evacuated.

So I tried to walk away from Vince, to leave him in the hallway, but he was tailing me. "Plan?" he kept saying. And then, more loudly, "Holly Pine was just talking about some secret plan!" I stopped in the living room, where there were the most people. "Perhaps a plan...for murder!?" We were in it now.

Carol came to my defense, apparently done with her song. "That's enough! My sister couldn't hurt a pussy cat!" I wondered how her own cat had done it. Hanging. Falling from a window ledge. Carol was summoning real tears now. "And she's too....(*sob*)...out of her mind...(*sob*)...to execute any kind of plan!"

I could feel a slight second wind fill the room, as if a nearby window had broken and the winter air had revived us all. This is what the audience had been waiting for. By the fireplace, I saw Mrs. Devereaux. She was holding an expensive camera to her eye, and smiling again, if only to help her close one eye to get a firm focus. She was waiting for the perfect moment to press the button.

I don't know when she did, just that we delivered. The show became a madhouse, exactly what they wanted. I denied it all, pointed fingers, covered my ears and curled up in a ball on the floor. Stace and Carol engaged in a much-applauded catfight. Jackson got to practice his fake punch on Vince, who leaned back on his heels, his arms circling like a bird backing up, until he tumbled over the furniture, an acrobat. Audience members jumped in and out of the way, rescuing their skirts and wine glasses. We shuffled our positions, lied about alibis. I went the wrong kind of crazy. Not funny at all. Slapping my palm against the bricks of Mrs. Devereaux's walls until my hand went numb, moaning in protest. No one seemed to notice; it was all the same to them. By the time Carol made it over to me, my hair was matted to my face, darkening with sweat. She spun me around and grabbed my shoulders and said, "Holly, my god, is it true?"

I planned to laugh here, to really lose it for them. Only I couldn't think of anything funny. Just a dead baby Elvis that looked a lot like Gregory. And Zoe. And me. So instead, I nodded and dropped my head, unable to look at any of them. I didn't even resist Vince's handcuffs, just stared at my staples which I realized looked nothing like jewelry. They looked exactly like staples: hasty, crazy. I hated them. Vince guided me up the stairs while the others wrapped up the show. Carol Pine, Mary Christmas, and Don Apparel would make apologies and forge some new kind of family. Holly Pine would never be heard from

again.

We didn't do curtain calls, so I started changing once I got rid of the handcuffs. I took off the bell-bottoms first, shoving them into my backpack, a shiny blue fist. Vince was there, and maybe looking, but that was fine. One of the perks of acting was that you were always getting to take your clothes off in front of people. It was normal to stand around in your underwear, asking if anyone had seen your car keys. It was encouraged. Downstairs, the band was starting something slow, and Stace began to sing the ballad she wrote for *Cruel Christmas*. She wrote one for every show; it was our trademark ending. The songs were mediocre, but her voice always made everybody forget to breathe. Vince and I both stopped undressing to listen. With the new plot, some of the details didn't make sense. She sang about "a reindeer without a chance to dance" and crooned, "Will she miss us, that Mary Christmas?" I doubt anyone cared. We were rapt.

"Wow," I said.

"My sister's got quite the pipes."

"Mine, too." It didn't matter that she didn't. She had other things.

"You got a sister?"

"Yeah."

Stace finished, her final note embellished with that shimmery thing a drum can do. The applause downstairs was generous, forgiving. Vince and I clapped too, half-dressed, until we felt the air begin to muscle around us. I laughed to dissolve it, and this time the laugh came easily. And didn't want to stop coming. It sounded young in my ears; I wanted it to. I wanted Vince to see I was a kid. I wanted to not be in a house where you could stumble upon a body in the hallway. Where everybody had a sister that was better and worse than them. Where everybody had to stay. I changed into my t-shirt, my back to Vince, and found that Zoe was not as forgiving as the audience. At the center of the chest, a perfect diamond of cotton was missing, a stolen square for her quilt. I put my hand over it and cursed her and loved her for it, and covered it with another layer.

Despite Gregory, no one could deny the buzz of a good performance. I heard Jackson say that maybe they could tweak the script so Holly Pine could stay the killer. Carol agreed, smearing her face with Mrs. Devereaux's cold cream. I bowed out of karaoke, said I needed to get home. Stace begged me to come, but then we just hugged like actors and the rest of us hugged like actors and I said I'll see you at rehearsal on Tuesday. Vince looked sorry for something but the truth is, if Mrs. Devereaux's house burned down he would have been the only thing I'd have cared to save.

Mostly everybody was gone when I got downstairs. A few men were shaking each other's hands like they meant it. The band had vanished. In the foyer, I ran into the lady in the red velvet pantsuit.

"Oh! What fun. You did such a great job as Holly!" She spiraled a long scarf around and around her neck, still proud to have found Gregory, still lucky.

"Thanks."

"Really. Excellent show."

"Thanks." I opened the door, letting her go first.

"Really. I think Holly was my favorite."

"Thanks," I said. We stood on the stoop together. It was cold but not that cold. She appeared to be waiting for a car to pull up front. "You know," I said. "It wasn't supposed to be her."

"What now?"

"It wasn't supposed to be her. She didn't do anything. It was Don. He used to be a reindeer or something. They kicked him out. He wanted revenge."

She cocked her head at me. I wondered how much of my lipstick was left. Her mouth tightened in sober distaste. "Okay, sure." She checked again for her ride home. "Sure it was that tall fella."

And then she spotted the headlights, the car slowing at the curb. She made her way down the steps to meet it, flapping one arm as if it might not otherwise stop. As if she might be left behind for good.

"No, really," I said, but she was already pulling on the door handle, anxious for the driver to unlock it. "It's true."



❧ **SPECIAL FEATURE** ❧

CAPITAL REGION POETS

MAUREEN THORSON

ATMOSPHERIC

I'm still upset
about what happened in
the haunted house.

Its silent congress
of ghouls peering
from under little cotton cobwebs.

Did you hear that shriek?
They're hanging themselves
in the bathroom again.

That's the problem with spooks—
no new ideas,
just repeat performances.

Like an owl in a broken wall, they sing
their ooo-ooo hoodoo
night in and night out.

This place is lousy with candelabra,
the expected dust
and simulacra of violence:

a bloodstain, a hammer,
a punctilious moon admiring itself
in the gleam of the moldy wallpaper,

slick and embroidered.

There's a saying round these parts –

“We're off to have an immense adventure!”

And then the ghosts all laugh their tinny laughs,
leaning this way and that.

Their story's been over a long time,

but they're obsessed with allusions,
all subtext and no substance,
like a crumpled page

thrown into the fire,
shrugging on
its flowing coat of flame.

DOGSBODY

Baby ensign, there's nobody will listen,
Not the boilermen, not the admiral—
Of course we can't let you enter
The wardroom: you haven't recited
The label on the Budweiser bottle,
And anyways, you have orders to go
And relate certain idiotic messages
(Are they coded?) to a lieutenant who
Will turn out to be entirely fictional,
And really, you should know there's
Nobody called Pflugerhorn on the entire
Planet but for now, that's Lieutenant
Pflugerhorn on E-Deck to you, and yes,
We must now tie potatoes over your
Bunk so that tonight, during your first
Nor'easter, you can watch them swing
At right angles to the ship's steeped
Pitch as we yaw toward hell and back
All over god's blue ocean turned black
As boiling tar in the searchlights that
Fan over the shipping lanes. Your turn
For watch, to grip the ladders like
The devil's down the shaft. By the time
A month's gone by, you'll learn to let go,
To turn your feet like a dancer's, leaning
Your weight against ball and heel
In a slow roll that keeps you upright,
And when the spray stings your eyes,
Making them tear incessantly, it won't
Be anything you haven't lived through before.

THE WORST THAT COULD HAPPEN

You're lost. The gunmen don't speak English. You forgot you had a test and you're naked and it's a shop test and you crush something vital in the drill press. You make a scene at a dinner party. You drop a dime off the Washington Monument and it kills the First Lady. You drop a dime on the President and wind up in a windowless room in Langley. Your ears fall off. Your toes turn black. Your stomach rejects cheese. You're a city of tiny monsters, waiting to be fed. You get mustard on your guayabera and your drycleaner won't even look at you. Your gray hairs start a Facebook group. Your best friend is perfect and you have to kill her in a fit of tragic rage. It's not worthy of Shakespeare. It's petty. Your sleeves are too short. A beggar startles you from your superhero reverie and you're too cross to part with a quarter. You cheat on your taxes. You vote Republican without even believing in it. You drink to forget. You forget to drink and die of dehydration. Your teeth are crooked. Your kids are dirty hippies. The dog growls at you. At night, the wolves come. It's raining. No one likes you. You're alone. Your teeth are still crooked. Your only friend is a cactus. You're afraid. You're afraid. You love your wife and eat well and greet the sunshiny morning with vigor and you're afraid.

JUSTIN SIROIS

IMATAYM

when the metaphor fails us
we just talk directly at the thing – like your
body is a temple, but it's squishy & I love
to put my face in it. The man who
invented the knock-knock joke
shot himself & lived. He was a
rotten & charming man

*

you need no excuse today. There's an app that
calls your boss & says

_____ *won't be coming in today*

because _____ *...zzzzz... zzz*

& then there's horrid screaming! & a lion
roaring! & the kitchen stove turns inside-out! & it's
obvious why _____ might have to
lay in bed until the drawbridge relaxes
into dystrophy

*

as much as we labored, it didn't totally work out.

It was awesome, though! I promise!

Look at us glowing

over the internet. I know you were

here

& I take comfort in knowing

you're still curious

about my rotten charm

*

who is more grateful for the drawbridge

the cruise liner or the car? Or maybe the news anchor

who made & then ruined his career by

open & closing

& open

things he knew nothing about. I'm just as happy

watching the drawbridge

as I am driving over

or floating under it. Is that weird?

Simply watching? It's just a

damn drawbridge

from **SAME IN THE AFTERLIFE**

fantastic neighbor dancing—guy talks
shit with his shirt half-
buttoned even
winter

the crisp sibyl

the cracking sky

blue over all

TONY MANCUS

from **SAME IN THE AFTERLIFE**

our feet—hatted
with shadow a spectacle
one block over

a strike and goodbye

my sign you're dancing

you spray an ocean sized salt
the neighbors above and below us
belted with their bones and leaved

AUTONOMY

Quartered photos provide evidence of fissure—of artifice.
In this way art inhabits emotion, folds it in an embrace.

At some point I begin to ask all the wrong questions.
I fill my pockets with useless notes, with X's and O's.

Let me tell you about my fantasies of being cool, a bridge between us.
They're what I have to work with—butterfly, pen, tape of demos.

Ampersand after ampersand, distractions pile like parts.
I erase and record by imitation so no one can guess which are guises.

Water recovers so quickly after its surface breaks.
It's not that I want to cast aside this or that; just readjust, finesse.

Repetition never promises to be good, just to expect what fits.
To dream is most important, is youth, is pleasure.

High tide misrepresents how much water there is.
If I could collect all the extra drops around me like cushions.

What do you do—hope the glass breaks?
What will you make with all of the pieces?

OF DAVID IGNATOV

during business. I apologized
again, get the same reply; and dial—
very funny, forgetting in the second verse
i am an accuser. Being a human being
daughter of my belief, I am the cloud

i have been organized and formed
grey-haired, though young in the hips—
nude photos
and what were her arms doing around my neck?
the son replies, The roof is leaking
of this she says nothing, but speaks
wielding a knife, my mind

OF CID CORMAN

Cold thought thinking
is. They want the sound
difference?

case the difficult
out? The whitewash
ready to be silent—if possible—
membering
And only God is
never *be* enough.

CHRISTOPHE CASAMASSIMA

OF JAMES TATE

jesus called the sons of Zebedee the Sons of Thunder
and started to dress very quickly.

my name is Spoimo, which I find strange
except me, and I by necessity had moved on
stop him stop that man, but I thought

then someone spoke my name
a bat-eared fox. I was desperate, and temporarily
this was a very sick man, one might even say dangerous
eye will be

ALWAYS MATERIALIZED

buzzcutter aggregated
subjective desire

 this is not the way
 I came to life,
but it's how I live now

building or biomass
disentangled
up in love

the return of the sight unseen

 drumming her tattoo
 on the line

another fake deadline
to change the road I'm on

galvanic skin response

 a suicide
of suggestions
 my figurative death
 was a life saver

NEGATIVE EXPRESSIONS OF GREEN MIND

my fugitive favorites
blue jeans and pearls
here I find
the words
that fail me

wet and dry goods
in her cupboard bones

scattered unrelated pieces
of the light
that runs through it

the code and the virus
that runs through us,
the communication

what is language play
but talking to yourself

my long love life
size dependent
clause of manufacture

a glass eye shooter
or maybe two

INVERT DRIFT

listening to her scars'
stories
slow-K ruffle
of the lights

I hardly thought
about how
I would react
that was a problem

imploding spatter
a pocket gunsmoke
of pictures
we run in the night

time releases pieces
useless at the top

JOE HALL

GASOLINE CHAINSAW JESUS

Forest blinking in stuttering out, soiling itself under
The moon's sterile spotlight, forgetting its name
Snatching as much Sudafed as we could
The lights turned on, the vacuum hum running over
Lists of what needs doing, the cinema carpet
The prison camp of heaven
Of broken things, of things thrown away
Or ovens—On wet prairie grass
Between my fingers and hands, your name does not
Appear: Zombie rapture thing, survivors clinging
To hell, Nazareth—what needs repair
What you deliver and seat beside you
Is not a body, like copper wire
Ripped through walls, flowers made of
Blah blah blah, what you salvage
Is a mobile of nerves on an electrified wire
Writhing in the ecstasy of
You were kicking me in the stomach, yelling
Meatball Sandwich Meatball Sandwich
Trees don't understand sin—a column of fire expanding
The limit of your endurance in this bifurcated universe
Pushing through mounds of sassafras and rising insects
So why sit in your accelerator's ring where constellations rust
On long ruined axes and you give
Smashed particles a name? Lord Jesu

Thou didst bow Thy dying head
Upon the tree, this not a prayer without your
Following O be not now / More dead to me! Word
Without which—I urinated on myself
In a blackout in the land of frames
They booted me from the library
Morel, Puffball, Turkey Tail
Where does one find enough
Blood to turn back the fire?

JOE HALL

CLEAN SONG

If this is weeping, it isn't; it's
The shuttered mouth of a flooded subway
It's bees iced in their hives, a crocus' spears
Shaking from soil; goodnight
Goodnight, I love you, I love you too
Ok, sleep well; it's the man who draws maps
Of non-existent continents, naming cities
After corrupt and dead popes or linebackers
From his second favorite football team's twilight
It's a web page of clumsy pornography
Waiting, hopefully, for its very first hit—
Svmer is icumen in, sing cuccu, I miss you
Goddammit, you're like an actor with a gorilla
Head and an elephant head and all the animal heads
There's no need to go to the zoo and I'm
Already walking on all fours; to give it
A name, to give it anything—I know
This isn't weeping, but it has the same rhythm

DERAPTURE

It's June and someone is stopping in an empty corridor of
SR 26 to abandon a rust colored Christmas Tree
It's June and packed into my spine is a cache of pearls
Soft as slush—I am a registered sex offender and you are a public school
Lord, I abused your name the first time I said it—the building burned
And I can see the house in the ash
Better than I can see the house, the sores in my mouth
And the sugar that stings right through
It's June and I could lay down in your soft arms
The road-side weeds on some holiday
Wild onions sprouting from my titties

JOE HALL

PILGRIM GATE

The stage broken down, dead guys rising from the ash and mud unpeeling
Raw wounds like latex gloves—this grail, its what I have
To give, a prop, and you retreat
Into mazes of coral in beds of evaporated seas
Through the soft, piston-like links and couplings
Of centennial orgies and two headed serpents going blind
In pepper groves—A maimed, boring gloss: imperial imaginations
Imagining themselves king, the upside of being so
At loose ends at a donut shop in a strip mall
Outside of Golgotha, dropping aspirin into a cup of coffee
Like a real killer losing the home he wants in the post-blast
Deafness—without a place to start, the pilgrimage is abandoned
As nomads revise nations indifferently
Under a strange banner, a strange fragrance
That leads us back—Kid-ghosts outside
Under a green cloud wearing their flesh like rags
Rolling through cemeteries
Returning the citizens of heaven to their graves
In a subdivision called Armageddon, resting
On a friend's bed, my vertebrae malfunctioning
My ears and eyes sealed with wax

THE LOVE-HATE THESES IN 10 PARTS

1.

Nurse lifts up a band at the baby's ankle and turns it over for identification. "A little girl," Nurse says, as if she *hadn't* just seen the kid's genitalia when she was rinsed, diapered, and wriggled into a yellow body-bag of long felt sleeves and footies. She's holding a clipboard and pouts out of a face of orange rouge while my mother makes up her mind, and I'm there picking my nose right in front of her because it's too clogged-up-warm in this room to breathe.

There's trays and trays of babies here. Each in a pee pan, each looking sucker-punched and raw as a skinned carrot. This one on her back has this scream like she's got a spike in her chest. And ours—it's not what a baby's supposed to look like, bubble-gummed onto Mom's chest. With a face like *that*, the nose acting more like a corner than an indicator of a center, one brown eye hunkered down under a banana bruise of an eyebrow, the other peeping out a cave in her face because the face hadn't understood that what an eye *really* needs are lashes and tear ducts and sclera and lids that click shut. She makes a noise like *gnawm gnawm* while she eats. And here she still was two years later, pooping like a puma in our living room. Little broken baby Olive.

or

What I saw was a rotten, dirty kid and what I saw was it is hard to make up your mind.

2.

Sixteen years later, I'm a bicycle cabby in D.C. for the summer. It's drowsy warm and drizzling and I can only wear sundresses on my days off. I need a whole year off. I cut the phone lines by simply not ever installing them in my apartment, and I moved out of my house without leaving a forwarding address. I cut my hair. I wear ball caps.

Still, Olive finds me somehow, wearing a poncho they sell for five dollars on the street. The rain comes down like thumb tacks and I've got my own

company-issued poncho on, plastic hood over my cap, when she turns the corner on the street and, with a little hiccup in her stride, turns towards me straight through a puddle and walks up. I can hardly see her face through the hood around her head, the draw-strings tight as a fist. She's come from the Portrait Gallery, or I'm imagining she's coming from there – and I'm jumpy at first when she climbs into my cab pulling her poncho down to cover her butt, and she asks me how much. She'll know me by my shoulder blades, she'll know me by my voice.

I cough a little, fake an Indi accent, ask her where she wants to go.
The Cloisters on Michigan Ave.

This is where I live.

I bike her there, hanging to the right of the road, trying not to rub tires with the actual cars. She's light as a Cocker Spaniel, or I'm just getting stronger.

When we arrive, she pays me. She pays me, she looks into my hand when we arrive, she keeps her head low and out of sight, says thank you through the fist, and walks up to the door where presumably she buzzes for me.

or

I wait for her hand to come down on mine before I get nervy enough to say *All live*.

3.

Our father chews away at a hangnail with a dirty pair of clippers while I watch Olive cross-legged on the rug, puncturing Birthing Bunny in the gut with a letter opener. She needles it in slowly, experimenting with the cushiness of bunny's tummy as she tries to dig her babies out. There's no real reason to. Birtha's got a Velcro incision in her crotch where six miniature rabbits are stored, but Olive wants them out her way. Poor stabbed Birtha spasms in her lap, being gutted alive in a dramatic Cesarean.

I creep towards her, make a little vulture circle till my shadow stretches across her banged-in head. I'm eight and policing the dangerous tools since I know how to use them and Olive's just four. I'm twice as old, which means twice as smart, and bending down, I snatch the letter opener from her, going, "No." She looks right at me, that is to say into me. Her face is like a melting face. "You do *not* kill bunnies." I nab the punctured rabbit from her and set it

on a high ledge far away from Olive and safe in Stuffed Animal Hospice, where the beans can fall out of her stomach in peace.

Of course she screams. Olive wails right from the abdomen, one eye in a pinch and the other wide open like a squid's. Her hands are on me before I can get away and she pinches her whole fat body around my calf, squeezes tight with surprisingly strong legs, and shoves her front teeth down in the soft space behind my knee.

Our father is an advocate of the hands-off model.

"Oww Ow Ow Ow OW OW OW OW OW GET OFF ME," I yelp, pounding on her head as her teeth come into me like an apple. My knee buckles. I start kicking hard kicks at her with my free leg, pull down on her hair, her ear, dig my fingernails into her neck, anything, using the bone in my ankle like a sledge.

And I perfect this technique so I'm a knockout for soccer in the spring.

or

Maybe what our father actually practices is eye-for-an-eye theology and maybe what our father *actually* does is unfold Olive like an ironing board, flatten out her arms and legs with his arms, pushing her rug-burn-firm into the beige carpet, and chomp his full-grown-Dad chops down hard on her little leg till *she* bleeds, and then comes after me. And my head.

or

She's put to bed instead in a beige burping-gown and below the blankets is frumpy and frog-like, and I'm nervous she'll fall asleep and choke on her spit or something. We are forced to share a room. I poke my finger through her crib at night and she takes it.

4.

When I'm sixty, Mom is finally dead and gets put in a little ceramic cup, and that gets put in a plot in the ground next to Dad, who wanted to be buried whole. Olive is at the wake and, when I ditch after cold cuts, it means I don't know anymore where Olive is.

or

I die first, and everyone comes and argues over what to do with me.

5.

They called it private family educational tutorials, when Olive was so small she could still fit in a sandcastle bucket. Dr. Whitmoyer the Thin, who was all legs in leggings, had us sit on the couch as a family, and it sunk under my tush like a bag of rice. The whole room smelled like pencil shavings. Sunlight came in a slab from between the curtains and I made shadows across it by lifting my legs and twisting at the ankle.

“This family is here to comprehend the neuropsychological impact of facial deformities in newborn and infant peoples,” Dr. Whitmoyer said. She was supposed to be a fresh, young genius on the subject, and she crossed her legs when she opened her mouth. “What’s most vital to the child’s neurodevelopment from infancy to normal adulthood is the role of the face in communication and human-to-human bonding.”

She had us take turns holding Olive in our arms and making faces at her. First positive expressions, then negative. What she needed was variety. Creativity. I choose goofy and cranky.

“Use complete sentences to develop higher brain-functioning capacity,” said Dr. Whitmoyer. “Communication between one human and another is the hallmark of our species.”

Mom gripped Olive by her fatty sides and concentrated, rolled her eyes back so her lids fluttered and sloppily licked her lips and groaned, “Marinated steaks. Shish kabobs. Tender chicken tenders drizzled with honey mustard. Lamb chops. Turkey legs. Fish sticks. Meat on a stick, that sounds good... One word for this is *ravenous*. Or wolfish. Think archaic brute man.”

Olive reached out with perfect pudgy baby fingers to explore Mom’s nose and ears. She took what she found into her mouth.

or

Sometimes when we would go I would put my hand out to Dr. Whitmoyer to see what she would pluck up from her desk and set into my hands seeing as how empty they were—there was a candy dish and a laser pen and a koosh with a hedgehog head—and what she chose was an interactive plastic mold of the human brain, whose hemispheres and sub-regions—variously labeled “frontal lobe,” “parietal lobe,” “occipital lobe,” “cerebellum,” “temporal lobe,” and a purple “brain stem” which had little plastic veins in the end connecting the brain to the neck and back—could be pulled apart and put back in

place via Velcro strips.

or

When it came time for me to hold Olive, it was all I could do to not smell her. Her diaper was ripe and whatever it was full of settled when she curled there in my arms. A little white worm of snot poked out her nose and her breath was not like baby's breath.

There was no other way for me to hold her but like a tennis racket lying on its side. Whitmoyer the Thin told me to prop up her head, so I did. Whitmoyer the Thin told me to talk to her face, so I did.

6.

I'm waiting around for her to die. All this time, I expect it. She gets the flu, she vomits a puddle around herself, and while they strip off her onesie and drop it like a hunk in the kitchen sink, and our father uses the sink sprayer to hose her down and our mother cleans out her mouth by getting Olive to suck on a cool wet rag, I *know* she's a goner. She will die and millions of people will come to the funeral in a congratulatory flock, a hive of pathos around a miniature coffin. We will spend good money on it and purchase a soft plot on a hill under a tree. And the people will apologize and fog-horn and weep raccoon rings around their eyes. The aisles will be blooming with used tissues, and they will really be happy there's one less karate-chopped face in the world. Our mother will be too distraught to have children ever again and will insist on immediate sterilization and our whole home will undergo vehement sanitation. New carpets, new sinks, new wallpaper and paint and knobs on the kitchen cabinets. She will be overcome with tenderness for me, petting my hair root to tip, me, who she loves, an heir, and when she turns cold to my father, he will kneel down to me too and learn to love me as if I were a canal between two countries.

and

When she doesn't die, and she keeps not dying, and she's gotten through grade-school, middle-school, high-school with that punched-in melon, gets into Oriental Theatre with it, gets a part in a *Bunraku* – that's puppet theatre – where she wears all black and holds a doll nearly as big as her that looks like it's wearing a red-and-white striped serape, meets one night when a mop slops over her shoes at the theatre an ugly Indonesian girl with rotten

pig's skin and really *bad* scoliosis, her life becomes the block over which I try not to trip. When they come home for Thanksgiving together and hog the drumsticks and Mom gives us all champagne, when she never goes to college, when she fills up her life with a collection of antique paper fans and asks for the puppets for Christmas, when she keeps not dying and the telephone rings and it's her with a voice like a mouse nest, and I'm still in school or I'm not still in school, I talk from way up high in Impatience, waiting for life to begin.

7.

She is ten and one half, blond, turning her head crooked when our father brushes her teeth. He invested in electronic brushes that massage a tooth from enamel to gums, and while her teeth shake in the front of her face, our mother brushes her hair from the bottom up in the back, so that her head rocks back and forth like a wooden horse.

I am in the shadow of the mirror, watching this while a pasty Clearasil is filling the holes in my face, the way they lay her on the ground to floss her teeth for her. They changed the bulbs in the bathroom recently—and the room hums with yellow light. Olive is pristine in cleanliness. Blue nightgown, beige slippers. She clomps off to bed where she is gobbled up in dream.

Our parents take me into the living room, where our father laces his fingers together and sets them on his belly, and our mother perches in the fireplace hearth on a small black cushion. They are telling me for the zillionth time to watch over her, because they too are expecting her to die, and that's what they're thinking when they purchase a big ceramic garden angel, and that's what they mean when they fill up her room with pillows, clean linens, fresh lilacs, curtains that fall splendidly from her little window like a capital M.

Ten years old. That makes me fourteen, and into bicycling. Anything having to do with legs and forward momentum.

and

They are flying to Ireland in the morning. It is simply time for a vacation. They've earned it, certainly, and take two separate planes, in case one of them comes down like a roasted goose, so we'll still have one parent left over.

8.

Our roads were the last to be plowed in the winter, or always seemed like the last because the slush turned worry-brown, and where it melted into puddles one day, it was sure to scab over in ice the next. The plows couldn't

scrape it up, and what snow they could push, they pushed up on the sidewalks. They built snow banks around parked cars. I know this because I was ten when I picked up a local job delivering newspapers by bike. I wore a knit cap under my helmet and specially lined boots and long underwear and double gloves and when Olive asked to come one day I bundled her up myself and snuck her out with me on the back of the bike, her kneeling in the crate above the back wheel and gripping my shoulders with both hands until she got nervous and tipped the bike like a waterglass. We fell into the road in a splosh together and thank God she wasn't scraped up, though all the newspapers got ruined in the brown slush. And we walked the bike home shaking and a little nervous about all those papers people weren't getting but we couldn't do anything about it now but stand over the heat grates together, in our wet socks together. The heat rumbled through the vents. And we shivered into the warm, in stockings and four cold puddles, and then changed back into our nightgowns, and then curled up in the same bed together for heat.

or

Olive stayed asleep and inside when the snows came down and the newspapers were want to smudge. She stayed in, I went out. And so there existed separate space.

9.

Her name is *Lastri*, which is a common Indonesian girl's name. None of her teeth are aligned—they grow out of her gums at odd places and the upper front teeth splay apart like windmill wings. There are lines in a curve down her cheeks that make a closed parenthesis around her mouth. Mascara and thin, black eyebrows. She's got a nose ring and wears a headscarf, babushka-style. I *cannot* stop staring at her when she talks. The sounds that come out of her mouth are wooly soft.

She sits with us when Olive performs in Chicago's Oriental Theatre. I'm next to Dad and Lastri's next to me. "I want to get to know Olive's sister," she says, and squeezes my knee. My leg tightens and I can't stop feeling strange because of how after dinner she sat on the steps idly until Olive squatted down and kissed her the way beavers gnaw wood. Olive didn't even need to tilt her head to get her awful nose out of the way.

"Please let go of my knee," I say.

She does, and puts the offending hand to work retying her scarf.

"Aren't you an athlete?" Lastri asks.

“I was.”

“You were in crew?”

“Yes. And soccer. And I ran.” There were scholarships. I was good. And now I bicycle my way everywhere.

She asks, “Do you like these plays?”

I tug on my earlobe and I say, “They’re alright.”

Olive’s puppet is fluid and, if you don’t watch Olive’s body, the thing seems so queerly alive. It floats. It reads a letter and leans forward. It’s got a little hand in a fist under her chin. She climbs up a wall up a ladder in her long dress, and her arms stretch up so much, and when she gets to the top, she looks behind her into the theatre at us, and the way she pulls one leg up behind the other is so strangely human. Not like a string puppet, knocking its parts together. Here, Olive had a little dance to get the puppet to crawl up off the ground, a little rhythmic routine to show the doll panting. Olive behind her there like a black cloud, while a narrator stage left reads the story in Japanese or something, and an orchestra provides tone and movement.

Later, when the play is almost over, I lean over secretively to Lastri, and hiss, “Do you even *like* Olive?”

She nods a deep Buddha nod. “Peculiar,” she says. “You two have the same knees.”

The seats are velvet and bristle when I run my fingers against the grain.

or

“You are not the same,” is maybe what she said.

or

She prefers to go by Dwi, which means ‘the second child.’

or

She may talk nice, but she sang like an asthmatic when she lullabied Olive to sleep.

10.

You’d think the Museum of Medicine is pretty boring, but you’d be wrong. Me and Olive are forced to go one summer to learn about history

and baby-making. Our mother and father lean down towards us and when we finally button up, they give us jelly-beans as treats, and while we chew them so the flavors bleed together, they guide our arms through the leash straps. We are there for an interactive exhibit running the entire length of a corridor: *The Pelvis from Fish to Man*.

Olive is by this time five and likes to get her hands on *everything* so that our mother has to keep the little muscle between her elbow and bicep tight as a pinch on the harness. I am nine and take two steps to my father's every one.

What I like is the strangeness of evolution. What Olive likes is the wooden, human pelvis with a matching rag doll with the smooth, wooden head.

or

When I say 'smooth' I mean 'featureless.'

or

In the Museum of Medicine there's an old model of a pelvis that was used to teach proper childbirth technique. Olive is half-way through pushing the doll back through the vagina head-first when my mother jerks back on the leash.



JAMES GRINWIS

A FORENSIC

Usuyuki, Japanese for “light snow.”

It was raining on the snail,
he looked mighty next to the foot.

A photo of an 18th century family stared back.

In the darkness was a container

a darkness inside the container may be more.

There are octaves in the skeletal book,
it is very dark.

Linear formulations and colanders
where hope is stuffed and stored.

Lovely, a nice word

like chimichanga, or dalliance, silly.

Watching for the taxi is a form of beast, unknowingness,

or knowing, of forms, “something talk”

special delivery.

NEAR THE OCEAN OF SHREDDED CHUM

He was clear, the Swiss pirate.
Clear as a glass plate loaded with transparent worms.

I am not giddy, I am reading a supplement,
a supplement for you to take, like chromium picolinate.

A Swiss pirate, and his black binder. Dropped thoughts
fill the binder, their feet falling under them. Innermost thoughts.

Dolphins make things meaningful, leaping around the sea,
the blue like a huge slate full of an insignia written millions
of times over so it is rendered invisible.

It was chill, being Swiss pirate: everywhere you look,
nowhere.

Shipwrecked. A beach covered by dead crabs. Sun
a big splinter.

Swiss pirate props his cleaning lady on a home improvement manual.
Like a princess, he says, in that netted thing.
He says they are unclear, his feelings for her.

Their heels were broken. A collective of abandoned individuals
angry with poor speech therapists.

And then I enter the great desert city.

The book lovers and the Silk Road travelers fill the sushi bars
and mead taverns. Merchants of beads, soaps,
and mummification instruments.

At the gate, the master chiseler says, "Let me unwork you."

JAMES GRINWIS

TALE OF THE UNIVALVE

Corer, one who cores.

Fox-like, the she-sluggler opening the fridge.

Soma is the Orwellian drug.
However it is an existing eastern vine
of intoxicating milk.

As well as anatomical parts.

Thinking in French is occasionally

Sizzling and un-sizzling
leftover pop-tarts clogging the brain.

Quail-like.

Soirees of people wearing single pieces of thread.

A large tusk hangs over the scene.

She is perpetually opening the fridge
and pulling from it crucifixes.

She is surrounded by wood stoves
the night makes

for to sense the work of the dusk.

An auk dives.

THE TEACHER & THE TUNER

The stricken passenger jet circled the city in an unending loop.

It was said that the piano on board had caused some malfunction and now the plane could not land.

Pianos on planes had only recently come into vogue; skeptics abounded, the naysayers were legion, but ultimately the piano lobby had won out.

Now this.

A call went out for piano teachers and piano tuners to come forward with solutions.

There was no time to quibble about qualifications, so the first teacher and tuner to come forward were chosen.

The teacher was confident a solution could be found. The tuner watched the passenger jet in the sky, circling like a kite caught in a draft intent on imitating itself into infinity.

“How will you get us onto the plane?” the tuner asked the ground engineer. “I don’t like flying and I’ve never jumped out of a plane before.”

“That won’t be necessary,” said the piano teacher. From her leather valise she produced a large tuning fork. “Do you have radio communication with the plane?”

“Of course,” said the ground engineer who couldn’t help feeling embarrassed such a question had to be asked.

“Can a pair of headphones be placed inside the plane’s piano, near the strings?” asked the piano teacher.

“Yes.”

The piano teacher handed the tuning fork to the tuner as they were led to the radio. “Can you produce a natural F major third as a diminished fourth?”

“Yes, I believe so,” said the tuner.

Contact was made with the circling plane.

The first steward on the circling plane made contact with the piano on board, placing a set of headphones exactly where the piano teacher suggested.

The tuner struck the tuning fork against the edge of the ground engineer's desk and held the base of its stem against his forehead, while making an "O" with his mouth. A natural F major third as a diminished fourth was emitted and transmitted to the discomfited piano, which soon unclenched its teeth.

The circling plane was released from its loop and allowed to land.

The piano teacher and the piano tuner were honored by the Mayor before an admiring crowd the following day in the city square.

"Can you do anything about the traffic gridlock in the city by the method you employed to free the plane?" asked the City Council president.

"Not unless a piano is installed on every corner in question," said the piano teacher.

A CLICK & DIAL TONE

From where I'm on my own to.
Or somewhere in between

for the moment—only mayflies
recover silver, vibrate

in the halogen hum
of the Amoco I'm at—

waiting out the rain,
cell against cell,
not flying.

Transit means to go
between two places—
and leave them both.

Sorry wings.
Sorry message at the beep.

—sounding like water.

NETS

This time a different pool.
No concrete
catching flesh.

The only breathing thing—
the candle of the moment

—adrift on choppy water.

Without lights beneath,
without stars—

a paper fades in the chlorinated rinse.
Blown

from where I left it
for you to find. And this time

just two things
floating—

what the water does
with its thin, black ashes.

Then the ash-tray,
ice-bucket,
door-key.

Down the hall a Coke big enough to hold me.

Even here—

the smell of water
washed with smoke.

At first I pushed
only one button.

Then, with my foot,
I pushed them all.

I told you
I could hold.
Hold water.

—tough, though
on winter minds—

snow failing on the grid,
throwing its damper over—

papering the window
I said I'd be
a shovel,

I said—

morning accumulates

in inches—can diminish
in a moment

—over everything.

Evidence *is* the thing

when the thing cannot be seen:
not morning.
Not at all.

A puddle underneath
your boots—you'd
been out.

Darkly for the time, being

winter elsewhere.

At first I resisted
the mountain.

And what we made of it—snow pebble
rolling,
or beginning to.

At first slow mounting.
So began.

You wanted to get over it—

We *made* it
grow

nearer some fact
of avalanche—

At first, I did not think
to call out:

In here—

I'm in here.

Say this mouth—
in the head dissolving
mountains.

And what the mouth does
in the mirror. How it is

—put on,
put upon.

I was trying to get
your attention
wearing
the negligee of all
I did not do for you—

watching the mouth

move nearer
to you not looking on the bed.

Not looking.

there, there—

I wanted you to say.

Even here—

coins

turn slo-mo
to the bottom.

Here a low note
blown
over an empty chamber.

You too
used to whistle—

—breaking the surface,
failing the quiet—

with your lips.

over the pool,
over our house—

 you stayed there,
your hand like that your finger
like that,
like cork,

 no bottle.

For a long time

 —because I let you.

CONTRIBUTORS

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