Transfer

111

Transfer 111

Spring 2016

Transfer: In some transportation systems, a ticket given or sold to passengers, enabling them to continue their journey on another route.

Acknowledgments

Transfer Magazine would like to thank Daniel Bernardi, Dean of the Humanities; Maxine Chernoff, Chair of the Creative Writing Department; Barabra Eaton and Katherine Kwid and the Creative Writing Departmen; The Poetry Center; our neighbors at Fourteen Hills; and the San Francisco literary community.

A special thanks to our Faculty Advisor, Dodie Bellamy; Award Judges, Summer Star; Michael Krasny; Jan Ellison; Truong Tran; Kurt Otis for the cover art; past editors, contributors, and staff; and to all our readers who have helped to make Transfer Magazine what it is today.

Contents

FICTION

POETRY

ART

◇ I, Rio Pierdras ◇

In the past, I was my own municipality, a whole self contained entity. In 1951, I was absorbed into San Juan, capital of blue cobblestone roads and ancient stone forts, with visitors arriving in huge white ships like floating whales. Gringos, we call them, sunglasses and bikini straps imprinted into bright red skin. They flock to El Viejo San Juan with its picturesque old city charm: adoquines, garitas, El Totem, and the charming Spanish colonial architecture of the buildings. The houses are painted the brightest colors you will ever see: red like an amapola, green like the forest in shimmering daylight, blazing turquesa like the color of the unpolluted Caribbean Sea. A line on a map erased and I am part of this something else.

El Viejo San Juan. It's the muse of painters and songwriters, poets and artisans; it's the heart of San Juan.

But I—I have become every other vital organ. I am its kidneys, its lungs, its liver. I am La Ciudad Universitaria. I am the venous system of its economy, home to its people. I am not as pretty, I'll admit. I have no maze of bright colored façades, no alluring glimpses of indoor patios in between bakeries and bars. Everyone wants to see the fields stretching in front of El Morro—wide, green, open, alive, adorned with flying kites of all shapes and colors, and children running, running before their kites, cheering when their chiringas rise into the air for the first time.

I don't have anything like that.

In my streets there's no flamboyant architecture. My buildings are loosing their color, my walls crack, smelling like the homeless men that sleep and urinate against them. I will never have the same appeal as El Viejo San Juan, that viejo coqueto, viejo encantador.

I don't have the charisma.

But I have something better. Youth runs through my streets. Avenida Universidad— full of life, always crowded, always moving. The split concrete on the sidewalk, the hoyo in the street. They are the constant reminder that La Avenida is in motion, that it changes, that life pulses through it like blood through my veins.

You see that crack on the pavement? The one in front of La Torre China, the university's token Chinese take-out establishment, the one where you order fried chicken and French fries, KFC style, instead of General Tso and Lo Mein—no noodles, no soy sauce—crispy breaded deep fried chicken with a side of extra greasy fries so that your abuela wont complain that you're too flaco and pinch your sides saying there's no meat left, just pellejo. That crack was from a flamboyan, its roots insisting in their growth, uncontainable.

Next to La Torre China is Café 103. Sandwiches and leafy greens served on pita bread, so that those girls convinced they need to look like the gringas on the television— chumbas, hollow cheeks, bony shoulders—won't starve while waiting for La Torre China to find the salad. They avoid the frituras, thinking it's the way to hollow out their collarbones, to make them jut like ledges off the edge of the world, trying to make their thighs match their necks, trying to turn their hipbones into empty goblets. They avoid the frituras like it's poison that will eat them, kidneys first, but they're still drawn to the smell of bacalaitos and sorullitos like it's a magnet and they are the iron filings.

And while they strive to look like something else, we fall in love with the Boricuas they already are. Hair curled by the humidity, loud voices, careless laughs, big brown eyes, and hips that demand to sway to the music like its their birth right.

As the sun begins to set, La Avenida transforms. People stop ordering food. Establishments stop selling it, and bartenders stand behind the counters instead. At El Vidi, there are two cashiers, one finishing the food orders, the other starting on drinks, each with their own workspace as if food and alcohol can't mix. Except for beer because that counts as both.

The bar tenders move rhythmically, as if to a song only they can hear, and students call out what they want. Dance this, dance that. A woman from Polar Ice is in charge of serving beers. Her large breasts

stretch the logo on her black t-shirt. The drink mixers are always busy, never stopping, making a Cuba Libre for the Biology student wondering whether he still wants to go to med school, Bacardi with cranberry for the newly single girl, a crowd of friends urging her to let loose.

El Vidi fills with students trying to pour their stresses onto the counters, to beat it against the hot pavement of the road, or to slam it against the wall of El Ocho. They stand outside drinking Medallas, the effervescent coolness sliding down thirsty throats as they watch other people parade up and down the streets, eyes instinctually trailing behind big asses in tight skirts, because right here, right now, no it's not a crime to spill out from your mold, to break your measures, here tremendo culo is more than a compliment, it's a song.

Next door, a line forms in front of El Ocho. The bouncer pats down the boys and flashes a light inside girl's purses. A long haired girl, a Freshman, stands halfway down the line, fidgeting with the strap of her purse, nervously glancing up and down the street. She forgot her driver's license and she prays that they won't ask for identification. She imagines what she would say, begins to compose the answer in her head, that she really is eighteen, really, she swears. And she is ready to explain how her ID is in her other purse, when the line moves and she is suddenly next.

Her friend steps into the bar, but stays by the doorway. The girl steps up to the bouncer. He motions towards her purse and she obediently opens it up. He shines the flashlight inside, looks for a seconds or two, and nods for her to go inside.

Down the street, music blares from El Kool o Loco. The tired-from-dancing have drifted to the balcony where they lean against the veranda or take claim of a white plastic chair.

A tall, brown haired boy stands facing the street, resting his forearms on the railing. He doesn't go to laiupi. No, he's one of those who left his friends, his parents, his house to study in the states. But he still doesn't know. He hasn't figured out which one he likes more—the culture here or the culture there. He doesn't know which one he misses more when he's gone. He begins to feel he doesn't belong in either.

Next to him, a L'Oreal blond takes a drag from her cigarette while he tells her a story of some hook up from the last semester. She listens half heartedly while her eyes scan the crowd looking for some-

one attractive. Next to her, his eyes land on a boy, short but handsome, brown eyes and a perfect jaw line. His parents wouldn't understand. Sometimes it's easier to just not be home.

Two streets down, El Refugio closes at the strike of twelve. A new wave of people washes onto Avenida Universidad. And they drink. And they dance. And they have philosophical discussions about what makes the world go around and what keeps the skies above their heads. And they dance some more.

It's not till morning is imminent that bars clear out. People emerge from their philosophical entrapments, only to find their energies depleted and that another Medalla no longer sounds appealing. The trashcans brim over with bright yellow cans. The cars that lined the streets have thinned out. Those who rent places nearby walk to their apartments, the rest pack into the remaining cars and drive through near empty streets all the way home.

There is peace in those hours. It's early in the morning, too early to be called morning; it is mañana, a word that simultaneously means both morning and tomorrow. It is not today. In this morning, it is still tomorrow. The roads are empty. You breathe.

It will not be like this for long. In one or two hours, cars will pour out of garages into streets. The train will awaken with sputtering beast noises, starting its charge up and down the tracks, up and down, up and down. The city will move unthinking through its routine. You will sit alone in your car, surrounded by people on their way to school, on their way to work. You will sit listening to the same radio station you listen to every morning, thinking about how big your children are. You don't remember them growing that big. Yet that's how they are—that big, that old, that smart, but kissing them goodbye after dropping them off at school, one kiss for each forehead, you can't help but notice. You promise yourself to spend time with them when you get home. You promise yourself the same thing every week. You promise in the morning and in the evening you forget. You get home, complain about how tired you are. You have your partner pick up dinner on their way home. You sit on the couch and watch television. One child on the computer, the other playing Xbox.

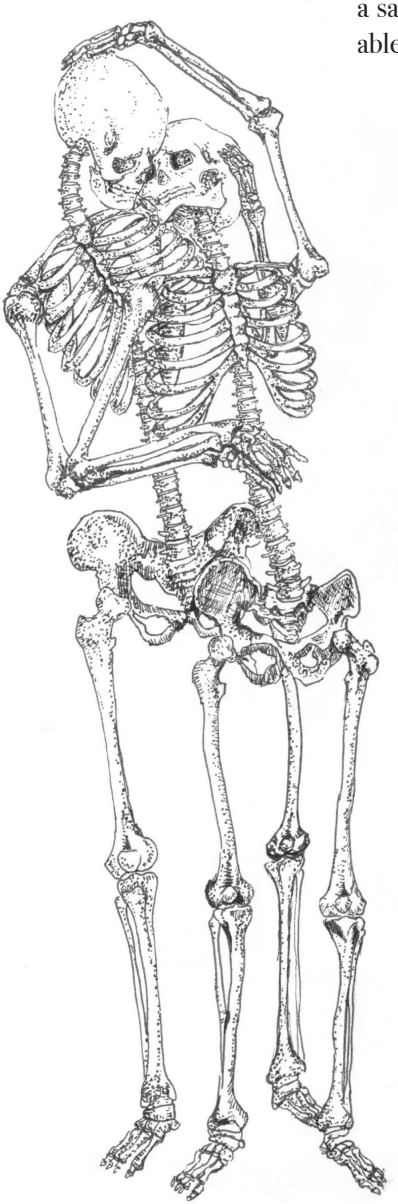
You will all sit alone in the car, on your way to school, on your way to work. Every morning the same routine, inching forward

in the heavy traffic, passing the same stores, the same people, the same triumphant golden sunrise behind proud palm trees, the same call of the guacamayos flying above the cars in their own ornithological commute, the same hunched man sitting in the same street corner selling lotería tickets, the same sights you have learned not to notice in favor of keeping your eyes glued to the glowing clock on the dashboard.

You sit alone in the car, on the way to school, on the way to work, and you forget to live. But I cannot forget to live. I am part of San Juan. I am its kidneys, its lungs, its liver. I cannot forget to live because I am alive.

Ellipsism

a sadness that you'll never be able to know how history will turn out



~ Also a Ghost ~

My hands crack and bleed
all over your carpet
and you silently get the
vacuum out of the closet

as if you could erase me
just like that

My blood is not thick and hard
like last week's bread:
it will seep into the
soul of your house

I will be your silent phantom
making the toast pop up
too late, constantly changing the
channel to Spanish soap operas

te amo

I will never whisper

My bloody desert palms press
against your windowpane and
leave no mark
you see, I'm outside now
and it isn't snowing yet

won't you please let me back in

Also a Ghost

I promise not to rearrange the furniture
I'll sit in your least favorite chair
and blend into the walls

there are crumpled poppies in my
pocket
I picked them for you
they only need a little water
to resurrect
in a crash and burn
but all your dishes are broken
and I saw the pile of letters stacked
next to the bulging mail box

when was the last time you left home?

~ Collective ~

every
body
breaks

every
one knows
explosion

sum
—time

sum of
the times—

be it the
belt or breath of
you, you break

someone
said syrian
like they broke

down but what
—differs is how

down but what
differs is why—

what am i
to the boom in
beirut

am i what
to the bomb on
beirut is

but a bomb
—and a tomb

boom of device
& swipe & swipe—

lebanon, i am
listening in french
to his trap queen

anonymous,
spaghetti on
the western front

on the radio
—is explosion

and unready
in the uncurling

tide.

~ Cherry Ave ~

There was a swing set on the corner of Cherry Avenue where I would sit and stare into the face of God at night. Tonight the air was pure from the rain that washed away the thick layer of smog that painted the sky and I made sure to suck in all the air I could as I sat on the wet blue swing. The water seeped through my skirt and touched my thighs making those tiny bumps poke through my skin, chilling my body. I stared at the black mass in front me and began to pump my legs back and forth to try and get as high over the building as I could. As I gained speed the breeze picked up my skirt and chapped my lips and with every kick of my legs I was over the church and under it. The tip of the cross rose just above my feet before I fell back down to the gravel and scraped my boots along the rocks, only to swing my self in the face of Him again. This was the highlight, when I could see the roof of St. Paul illuminated by the whiteness of the swelling moon and how small it looked when I was closer to the stars.

There were three black bees in the puddle beneath my boots. They looked like a large black mass, huddling together in a clump. I could see their bloated bodies floating in the water and the thought of the wasted honey inside of their stomachs made my eyes sting. One of the bees floated away from the others, grazing the edges of the puddle with its now useless wings that twitched in attempt to fly.

I looked to see the church doors open and started to walk over. It's midnight and my mother still hadn't noticed I was gone. I made my way down the dark house of God and a faint smell of smoke from the candles crossed my nose. As I got closer to the alter, that's when I saw her. She was spread with her legs open on the stairs like she was making snow angels on the red carpet. I remember the girl from the corner store on Brunswick St. She would stand in front of it

every day with a lollipop in between her lips wearing a fur coat that looked like the skin of a brown bear had been sewn together to keep her warm, while she waited. Her skirts were always two sizes too small, and the same pair of dazzling green heels strapped around her ankles made the skin fold over the rhinestone straps. One time I saw her inside the market buying gum and I saw a gold rose necklace around her neck and I told her it was so pretty I wanted to rip it off her. She laughed and told me her son gave it to her and that she never took it off, not even to shower. Sometimes she stood outside for hours, before a car pulled up and she grabbed her bag and stuck the cherry lollipop in her mouth and walked knees slightly bent to keep from falling over in her heels into the awaiting car.

The moon shining through the stained glass windows lighted up the Church. The Virgin Mary's face was illuminated by the light and it made red, blue and yellow prisms along the walls of the church, making it look like a kaleidoscope held by God's hands.

"Are you okay?" I asked the body already knowing she wouldn't answer. I knelt down by her head. The smell of her baby powder perfume, and the glitter on her cheeks made me think of the people who would miss her. How beautiful she looked lying there in a plain white cotton dress that I'd never seen her wear before; her neck was bare and the lights from the window painted her cold body. My stomach began to cramp and I felt the waves sloshing around in my stomach and the tears of the whore began to seep out of my eyes. By her left hand there was a compact mirror that had naked cherubs painted on the top. I stuck it in my pocket and sat on the stairs, twirling a piece of Mary's soft brown hair, and called the police.

The officers prattled on about how they weren't surprised at Mary Sinclair's death. Everybody in town knew her; she was our friendly neighborhood dirty secret, reminding the godly folk that people of this town still had sin no matter how many times they've been wiped down with the blood of Jesus. They'd still keep a hooker from going out of business. The cops asked me questions like why I was there and if I touched the body in any way. I told them I was there to pray and I didn't touch the body, but they would find a pile of fresh throw up somewhere around her hair. The big-bellied officer gave me a ride home and told me that they tried calling my mother, but no one

answered.

The next morning the death of Mary had spread around town and when I walked into the kitchen I found my mother sitting at the table in her silk robe, talking on the phone.

"Yesinia found the body!" she yelled into the receiver, pride dripping from her lips. The headline on the news was 'Murder on Cherry." My mother was cackling, so I walked over to the TV and turned up the volume. They showed the church with caution tape all around it and a mob of suburban moms and dads with crossed arms and smug faces.

"The cops have been calling all morning-" my mother covered the end of the receiver with her pale manicured hand and turned to look at me for the first time since I entered the room,

"Turn that off!" She said, hitting her hand on the table. I glanced over my shoulder to see her face pinched, exposing the deep wrinkles in her forehead.

"I want to know who did it."

"Nobody knows. That girl was in and out of so many cars I don't know where the police are gunna start." She was back to talking on the phone and giggled at whatever the person said. I grabbed a red apple from the bowl on the table before turning off the TV.
I walked away and my mother yelled,

"Take your meds before you leave the house!" I heard her sigh under her breathe and explain to the phone how her daughter was on three different medications each of which was more expensive than one her car payments.

I stuck my headphones in and grabbed the white bottle that sat on top of the stool right by the front door. I popped two baby blue pills and put the bottle in my bag before slamming the door behind me. As I walked, I took the mirror from my pocket and played with the latch, opening and closing it. My mind kept filling with images of Mary's body spread open at the alter. Her white dress looked like the baptism dress my mother dolled me up in when I was seven. I remember coming home from my sprinkling and my mother yelling for me to take off my dress before playing. I ran to my dad and he winked and told me his princessa could wear it for just a little while longer. I never felt more beautiful than I did in that white dress and I remember

running around the living room pretending I was an angel.

I ended up at the church and I noticed how different it looked from last night. Now it was covered in buzzing voices gossiping about the defilement of their Lord. News vans and reporters scattered the green grass trying to get information from the cops. I stood next to an old woman who I recognized as the deacon's wife. Her name was Ms. Anna and she always wobbled around with her cane that had a dove's head carved into the top. She would poke girls with it and say things like, "'Hell is real and it burns, baby girl, and the devil is waitin' to grab you any chance he get." Her face was brown and caked in thick make-up that sunk into the cracks on her skin. Her lips were pulled back into a satisfied smile and she said to a plump woman next to her,

"We just can't question the Will of the Father." I snorted and looked at me, scanning my body and stopping at my chest; Ms. Anna let out a chortle before saying,

"I don't know how your mother lets you out like that." Before turning her attention back to the scene in front of St. Paul's. I walked over to the swing set and opened the mirror. I sat with my back towards the church and lifted the mirror to see brown skin like my father had and a mess of bottle red hair. Through the mirror I saw the neighbor boy, Andrew, come up behind me and he plopped himself down in the swing next to mine, shaking the entire set. He was four years older than me, but had the face of someone in his thirties. A long face, with rough black stubble on his chin, his skin was a soft white that I often kept my hand from touching. Andrew dug his feet into the woodchips and said,

"Did you hear she had a kid" He looked up from the ground, his black hair falling into his eyes and let out half a laugh. Andrew's eyes were a dark blue that always looked tired, with wrinkles in the corners of his eyes. I told him he was too young to have wrinkles, and he said that age was never a concern of his. When my mother saw him in church she would tell him how she could see the light of the Holy Spirit in his eyes and each time she said this Andrew's eyes would darken slightly so I don't think my mother could see. His knuckles would turn white as he clenched his fists behind his back, and his cheeks would turn red before smiling a smile that never reached his eyes and said, "That's because I ate Him." This made everyone laugh

and my mother laughed the loudest.

I told him I didn't know she had a son as I thumbed the mirror and noticed my fingers were beginning to feel the familiar numb sensation, making it harder to open and close the latch. Andrew stood up from the swing and reached out his hand telling me to come over to his house. I reached for his hand noticing dots on the back of it that looked like teeth marks. He was staring at me the way a cat stares at a mouse, waiting for it to make the first move. I put the compact in my pocket and put my hand in his.

Andrew and I sat on his hardwood floor in his bedroom with bags of hot cheetos surrounding us. He took his pet snake, Eddie, from the tank, wrapped it around his forearm, and told me to touch it. I stroked the snake's skin as he watched and felt the roughness of its body and felt how cold it was on my fingers. I noticed Andrews fingers, stained from the cheetos and they looked like Mary's. Her fingers were long like Andrew's and when I found her body her nails were stained a deep red as if she had been finger painting, the way I used to do in Sunday school. I remember dipping my fingers in the paint and imagined Mary, in her white dress doing the same, dipping her dead hands into a can of paint and drawing a heart or an angel, making sure not to drip.

Andrew stopped me by taking my hand and moving it the other direction, saying that it would feel smoother if I rubbed it the other way. This reminded me of when I was at my job in the mall selling lotions and beauty creams from the kiosk next to the pretzel stand. I stood there, shoving lotion samples on to people who complained about the flakiness of their skin. I liked when they swatted my hands away like the bees. I remember Mary coming to try a sample of lotion and I poured the rose scent cream into my hands and massaged it into her skin. She giggled and told me that roses were her favorite flowers because they still smelled sweet even after they died. I could almost smell the baby powder again when Andrew asked me what I was thinking about. I told him I had never touched a snake before.

"He's not so scary is he?" he asked before looking down at my hands and let out a small laugh, showing his teeth and saying how he loved how the cheetos left a stain even when his hands were washed.

We sat on his floor for hours, watching Eddie slide around

the room, not saying anything to each other, only listening to sounds of our breath escaping from our chests. The room was dark now; the only light was a dull yellow from the streetlights outside. Andrew was sitting so close I could feel his breath on my skin. His eyes caught he light from outside and he whispered in my ear, "She was beautiful." I looked at his face and the light made his skin look like yellow wax and his eyes were empty. I wondered if he was even really there and I put my hand on his face, hoping it would melt away and I would be back in my room with no one noticing I was there, but my fingers were met with his warm skin and my body went cold. There was a crunching noise in the room and I was able to take my eyes away from his. Eddie was in one of the bags on the floor and I stood up and walked over to the window, watching the lights from my house across the street. As I stared past my reflection in the window, I saw my mother sitting on the couch with a magazine, not thinking of me, not thinking of anything at all. Andrew stood behind me, his reflection in the window next to mine, and he let his stained fingers rest around my neck. I stared at his face in the window until all I could see was my own.

On my way home from Andrew's I stopped back at the swing set. I threw my bag down and my dad's old Woody Allen matchbook with the words, "I was thinking about Christ," printed on the front and the white pill bottle fell onto the woodchips. I put the matchbook into my pocket and picked up the container and saw something glistening in the woodchips. I picked up a golden rose necklace and felt the cold metal in my hands, thinking of Mary, dead in the church, and of Mary in the cars of men who wore suits and drank from the communion wine every Sunday, and Mary, naked, covered only with the shame of forgotten wives. I stared at the necklace and my stained red fingertips and my eyes began to sting.

I opened the bottle with the white label that had Zoloft printed in bold black letters. The first time I saw these I was six and sitting in my dad's office playing with the blue-eyed Barbie dolls my mother bought me for my birthday. I remember ripping the heads off of the dolls and delicately placing their headless bodies in the purple plastic convertible and pushing them around the room. With one hard push the car went flying across the room and rammed into my dad's desk sending pens and papers and the white pill bottle to the ground.

I couldn't pronounce the name them so I called them Daddy's blue candy. I only got to hold it for a few seconds before my father took it from my small hands, patted me on the head, and told me he hoped I would be a better driver when I was older.

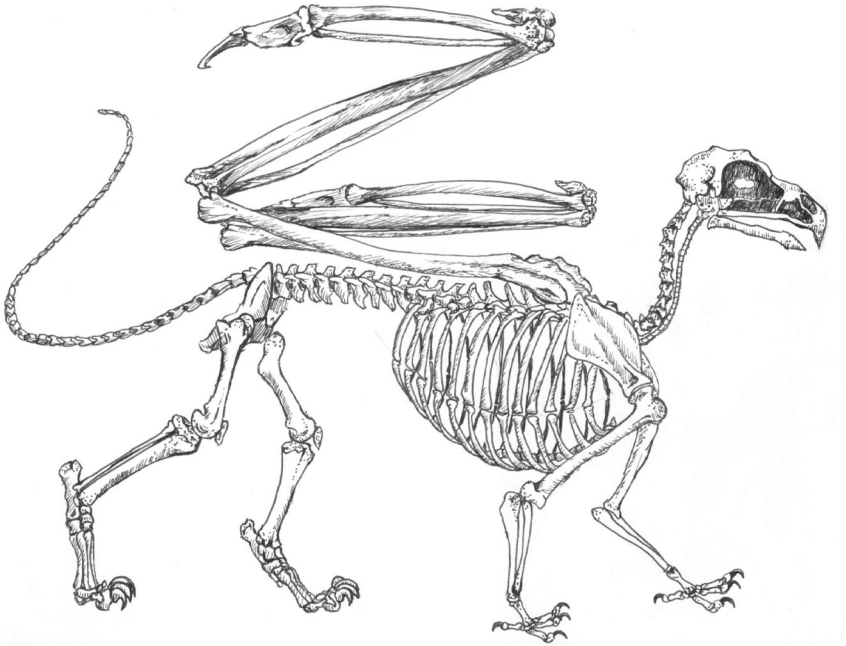
As I sat on the swing, boots digging into the woodchips, I popped open the cap and I swallowed. I swallowed the eyeballs that rolled around in my mother's eyes when I talked, I swallowed the ink from the pen that Doctor Yu used to prescribe and fix me, I swallowed the thin wafers and the thick blood of Jesus, I swallowed the tears and the mucus building up in the back of my throat after the boy next door zipped up his pants and said I should go. I swallowed the baby blue candy like my daddy did and I swung through the air until my hands turned white and red from the cold and I couldn't hold on to the rusted chains anymore.

I don't know how I made it home. All I remember is being shaken awake by sweaty hands and of my mother. The church was on fire. My mother dragged me out of bed and back to the church. The building was crumbling fast and the same mob that had been there earlier that day was now gazing into the flames. I reached for my mother's hand, but she was gone.

I left the crowd and sat down on the swings, looking at the way the fire crept up behind the stained glass window and highlighted the cheekbones of the Virgin Mary and the somber color in her lips. I thumbed the golden chain around my neck and as I began to sway softly with the breeze and the muffled shouts of the firefighters a quiet giggle slipped past my lips when I saw that Mary had never looked so alive.

Onism

the frustration of being stuck in just one body, that inhabits only one plce at a time



Amusement Park of Latin America

If you're quiet, you can still sense it at night.

Not in the daytime. In the daytime,
the screeching roller coaster wheels,
smells of caramel cotton candy,
salty perros calientes, acidic Coca-Cola,
and the joyful yelping and howling of pequeñitos,
mask it. But once El Paraiso Parque de Diversion
closes its gates and dusk wipes away the sun
and a cool breeze from the Atlantic drives out
the infiltrating odors of the day,
the imprint remains there, night after night,
like a foul aftertaste.

If you stand on the south-east corner of the amusement park, you'll notice a tall line of trees behind the fence, clustered so closely together that they seem to be clutching each other with their branches. The soft light of the moon cannot penetrate them, causing a long black shadow to form on the ground in the shape of a monolith.

If you stay long enough, you'll see rats,
raccoons and sometimes even wolves,
make their way into the park
and roam around for garbage,
yet always avoid threading in that dark spot.

If you bend down and breathe near the soil,
copper-sweet particles will seep
into your nostrils and down the bridge
of your nose until they coagulate
in the back of your throat and choke
you with the salty metal taste of blood.

If you close your eyes and listen,
you'll hear the leaves of the trees
(the only living witnesses) shiver
and chatter like teeth,
as if attempting to whisper.

And if you remain there until just before
dawn drags the blanching sun out of hiding
and the day drowns the park again with life,
you'll see shadows moving inside that dark
spot. Some shadows small, some big, some
that look like figures kneeling in a line,
some that look like they're standing erect
and training menacing objects on the small
ones.

And then just for an instant,
so quick that you'll swear
it was only the wind, you'll hear
the shrill yelping and howling
of little voices and a pop pop pop,
followed by the deafening sound
of hundreds of years of silence.

Yes, if you're quiet, you can still sense it
at night.

Not in the daytime. In the daytime,
they rise from the shadows
and ride the rollercoaster.

~ Aswang ~

Dark-hued scales
Withered-ragged wings
tik-tik
wak-wak
sok-sok
kling-kling
Cowmilk eyes
Needlebeaked claws
tik-tik
wak-wak
sok-sok
kling-kling
Stretched-forked tongues
Dirty-shrilled lungs
tik-tik
wak-wak
sok-sok
kling-kling
Unborn children
Empty wombs
tik-tik
wak-wak
sok-sok
kling-kling.

~ Monochrome Magpies ~

with a dash of blue, their pica pica
mix chattering stubble-tweed men with

aunties talking. Young women
behind greybrick walls
squat in flower
beds taking pictures of
their celestre bianchi track
"fixed"
gear
bicycle, but that was
then, and then is still here.

Drinking red tea. Smoking
the last cigarettes of the day.

Jiang means river and ginger.
Zhu means Pearl and Pig and Live and
bambu banks
Chengdu, the erhu hums

flute whistle

string pluck

drowned by a hundred clacking Mahjong tiles. And
opening the earth, exposing basins like torn organs
with blunt diesel dinosaurs.

Monochrome Magpies

Dozens
beyond age dance
in every space possible:
        by the freeway
        under its shadow
of Temple,
        skyscrapers
                familiar jungle.

Banyan tree
palm
fern spring
its gui-hua er fragrance,

Young couples' kneeling into West Lake
balancing on its chipped edges.

They climb a willow over water restless like plastic
wading against its banks.
In the shade of a crescent moon bridge,
weeping branches,
a dry fountain.
A camera they forgot.

The infatuated will walk
up and down West
lake stone sides looking for poet gondoliers,
bewitched from closeness to its waters waiting for night
        or Themselves in love
or at Two old men
contemplating chess for the past
two hours.

Two Generals and their Two Advisors are confined to
castles on both sides of a
Clear River that never floods;
War's border luring

Pawns forward,
the only direction they can move before they wade in
during the dry years,
when plums are no longer sweet, but sour and
preserved in a tunic pocket
of the pawn, now soldier in enemy territory along the
grid of battle

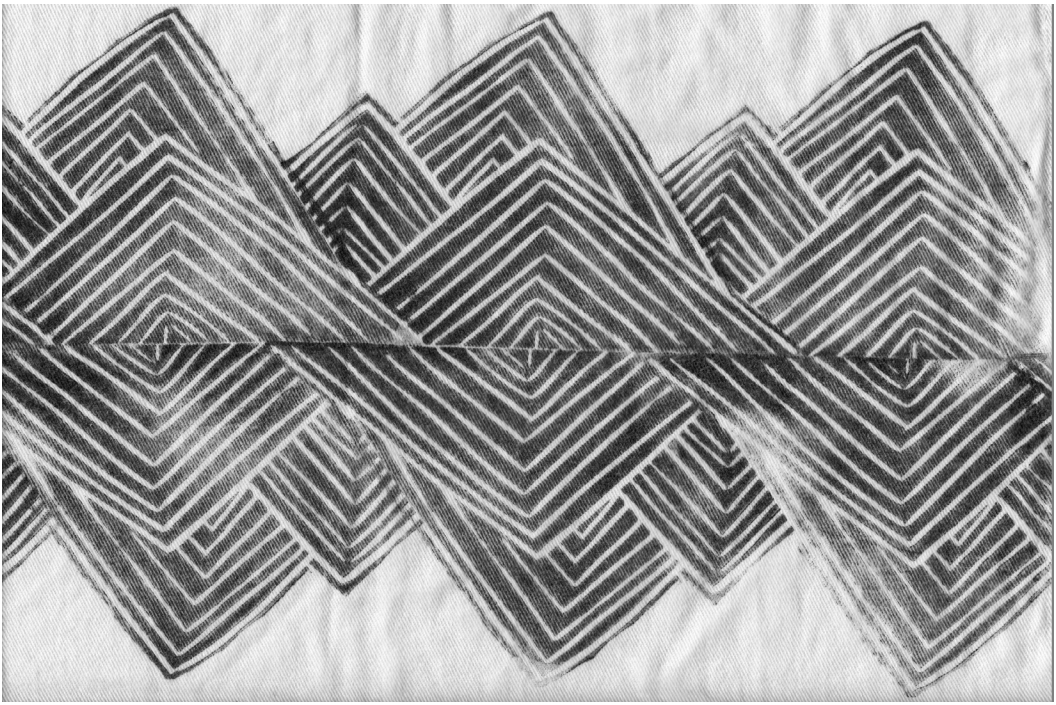
Artillery fire wooden rounds
overhead carved into
chariots and politicians
ideograms in
red and
green.

She sits across from me
engraved in lakebed boulders, as if stones contained the
moon's midnight,
asleep since
in its shade. The boat cradles
faint mornings

old men chattering.

And as long as the game continues, their day is free; they have the park's silence to enjoy.

Mauerbauertraurigkeit



the inexplicable urge to push people away,
even close friends who you really like

~ Nanay's Garden ~

I'm in love
with the stool
where you sit outside
in the backyard; Nike shoes,
tsinelas, squeaking
on concrete; grandchildren
swooshing oranges down hoops.

I'm in love
with the rubber gloves
stained with patches of brown
from an afternoon's work:
rose bushes, poppies, gardenias,
sampaguitas under the sun,
promising new days ahead.

I'm in love
with the garden trowel
digging deep into the earth,
as I dig deep into the depths of
your room: small hands searching
for rainbow straw fans and lush red
lipstick from your bag.

I'm in love
with the soil
where I listen, to the roots,
speak our language; reminding me
to water and grow my thoughts

about our homeland; teaching me,
how to be strong, how to grow up,
to be the girl I am
today...

(In a far-off dream, garbed in white, you whispered,
"Neneng, you are the most beautiful girl in the world.")

...I accept my love
for your stool now unoccupied
as I carry on your legend.

~ Blue, for Frida ~

Look at her,

tender chasms in the flesh and she wears
a halo of marigolds.

See the effigies of her face,
look at her face pregnant with mirrors—look

in the silver midsummer,
when the ever-green magnolia tree dies in her blood.

Shivers and the air of morning is blue and comes from afar,
she awoke to dancing butterflies
pinned to the ceiling.

It's what we do: re-create, re-carve, look back over the brilliant green of rotting thoughts.

Look at her necklace, a string of pomegranate peels and thorns

the color of

old blood,
of a deep-green forest of dreams—
sleeping to the sound of expansive thickets and tongue clicks and mouths in the dark.

Disembodied sounds—no body, full body,
invasion of her body,

look at her body.

Her flesh a grove of oranges in grey rain.
Her pelvis is a twist of breath,
and bathed in light,
a bowl of fire.

Look at the silk, soil fragrance of her blood,
and the blue air fills
the caverns of her body, and her
possessive sling, viva la vida,

rings; it rains.

See her colors and her fears
as she looks at you through time,
and you would eat her ash if she ever died.

Look at the way she eats exquisite flight, creates wind with the colors of dark trees and her injuries,

for wings could bloom, the blood could settle; we return to the earth.

Kyleigh McPhillips

Accordion

You have taken this humdrum girl
And made an accordion of me;
Quietly sitting while alone
But when I'm outstretched
Reaching towards your company
You make me behave
Musically.

~ The Slanting ~

A raven by itself upon a splintered telephone pole. Puffs of dust swirling under tires after the slamming of a car door, a hollow clang as sharp as a toothache in the late afternoon light. A footfall crackled on the crisped stems of cheatgrass and yellowed fireweed that spread across the sand. Another footfall, another, the same scuffed boots, dark stains on their once-white piping. Beneath the naked sun's hot breath, the green had sighed its way out of stalks and leaves, so many that a dropped match would set fire from horizon to horizon faster than a dog could run. Spring had brought more rain than it almost ever did, cloud after cloud billowing above the alluvial fans and side-slapped sandstone cliff faces to the north, punching down from the higher, greener place to the east, and swirling with chopped-off tops above the the ridges and lonely peaks to the south, before skidding into the western horizon, stealing the sunset from any watching eyes. Behind him as he walked away, the flames lashed out along beams that groaned as the clapboard crackled and sashes split, piles of paper blackening and tangles of old clothes curling, all of it reflecting off the fistfuls and fistfuls of shattered glass that had long ago fled their places in the gaping windows. He had stood until his eyebrows singed, watching the fire jet across the remnants of the floor, race around the couch with the missing leg. He probably hadn't needed the gasoline, he thought, as it spattered onto a floor as dry as his cracked knuckles, soaked into old newspapers and dog-eared Maxim and Penthouse magazines too brittle to be held without the pages crumbling or falling loose. The dust motes were there, too, there still, when he had opened the door to that place, catching the sun in tiny flashes as they circled in a wind only they could feel. He had stopped before the porch that slanted to his right, a small duffel in his left hand and the dented metal

can in his right, but he hadn't lingered for long. The whistling of the wind and the sand in his teeth. The flapping of the curtains like the waving arms of someone in a dress. The creaking of doors, springs, splintered wood on splintered wood with the nails sticking out like the fingers of unclenched hands. Groaning over cables and power lines with a sound of fading voices.

There was a time he'd walked from that porch, bracketed in silences, before the last panes of glass lay shattered on the ground. He had called it a fort, along with his two brothers. He was young, six or seven, and his younger brother nearly the same age. The third brother was older, only seen in summer and some holidays, and called himself Wolf.

"Now you can become an adult." Wolf said it like a benediction, not much louder than a whisper, in a voice meant to tuck around the middle brother like a blanket. And he could almost have missed the humid breath of the words somewhere above his head because he had been looking at the dust motes. The sunlight bent through the warped glass and came slanting into the room, populating the air with the glint off specks of detritus, winking on and off like headlights winding down a mountain side. Most were so small as to be anonymous, nothing more than dust, but others were revealed for what they really were: the tiny frayed end off a piece of thread; a short, fine hair from someone's arm; a grain of red sand; a flake of shed skin. They spun slowly, sinking almost out of the beam of sunlight, only to rise again on some current of air. Sometimes they looked to all be falling, but the room never ran out, a steady dance like snow past a window, their boundless source as mysterious to the boy as that of a river. Several times he picked a single dust mote and tried to watch its path, tried to not lose it in the crowded air. He lost each one eventually. A shadow stepped closer, loomed over him.

The three had been coming here for 2 weeks. "And then you put your hand on this part of your body and move it like this." "You use the tongue for French kissing" "Look at this picture. Do you see that?" It always started with the glossy pages of magazines. Wolf wanted to share what he had learned in the act of growing up.

It was not so far to walk to get to that slanted porch. The

pavement was cracked only every few feet, the dirt too dry to offer many plants to sprout through the gaps. The three boys would step off a porch that was not slanted, leaving a less old house where the dust motes were harder to see, where they lived with parents who worked full-time in the emergency clinic an hour's drive away. Sometimes, in the days before they had discovered the old, abandoned house down the road, Wolf would transform himself, crawling on his hands and knees on carpet in the middle of the living room floor, roaring, the most fearsome of beasts! The younger boys' shouts and laughter would bounce around the room as they launched themselves at the Bengal Tiger, striking it with small soft fists, pummeling it into submission, trying to avoid the swipes of its paws. Wolf had always made time to play with his little brothers.

≈

The porch was not always slanted at the old, dusty house. In the years before the interstate bypassed the town and made the two-lane highway obsolete, there were three service stations, two cafes, a general store. The train stopped sometimes, and the town had a sub-station and telecom terminus. People turned off the two-lane highway into parking lots or down lanes. The train whistles woke the railroad workers who lived in small pre-fab houses that sat at acute angles on the western edge of the community. Leaning out on the porch when the paint was not peeled, someone could feel the weight of the town in the air: brothers who felt left out, mothers bowed beneath the yoke of loving, lovers who were always leaving, fathers whose shoulders ached, sisters watching the horizon roll away to every side, friends who were always nearly home, grandparents clutching doorframes against the fading of the day. And, too, there were the sounds that came winging through the air: the barking of dogs in yards at night, the slamming shut of pickup truck doors, the cries of coyotes and rabbits running circles beneath the new moon, the flickering of the wings of bats, the keening of the mourning doves at dawn—

≈

Smelling of smoke, singed hair, and gasoline, he drove across the bluff backs of shrunken seabeds that undulated into the kicked-dust haze of the horizon. Behind him the smoke rose above the end of a town full only of dust motes and the shadows that slid through emp-

ty windows. He had returned with his own ghosts sleeping in his chest, catalogues of loss that came fluttering back at night, drawn to the small blue fires of memory that flickered behind his eyes. He used to clutch at the ghosts, trying to keep them from the flames, from igniting and scorching the inside of his ribs, but they would always slip past into the small, fierce blue light, where they would glow and glow without ever burning up.

Looking down from the edge of the mesa's top, the last embers of the old house had nearly faded, and the blackened husks of acres of weeds were already invisible, the fire having gone out of them almost as quickly as it had come. Somewhere, the call of a single raven, as ghosts slid off into the after-midnight air.

The fabric of night billowed with the crackling of fireflies and beating wings around trunks of trees, glimmering with the flash of small eyes, yellow beneath the wedge of moon. The clacking of the boughs upon themselves was no louder than the night wind, sliding through the brambles, the standing deadwood, the saplings, like a sigh that wouldn't run out. He was only trying to count the rise and fall of his own chest, a darker shadow against the shadows in which he lay. Above his, the forest's splayed fingers leaned in over him, keeping the moon from his face.

> She was standing in the canoe as it rounded the meander,
> but he did not know what to say. The seconds flickered
> in the sway of her skirts, pinpoints like the flicker
> of fireflies inside the heavy air of a summer night,
> when the heat won't leave the back of your neck.

No. He opened his eyes into the night. But if she were to come—

There was a place he had to go. And then. Outside of the dream, in the darkness beneath the trees, he listened for the sound of water.

The time had wheeled in flocks, starlings on the wing at dusk, the moon fattening and sluicing off again, since he had left the hard angles and the grinding in his teeth of the desert, the sunlight that hammered down out of the cloudless sky and left an ache in his temples and the base of his molars. He lay on top of a square of dark brown oilcloth, wrapped in a thin wool blanket. The earth was dark

and loamy beneath him, made even softer by the matted leaves of seasons past. As he shifted, his weight would crush them again, their sweet, heavy scent slipping into the air around him, hanging in his nostrils like the moss on the sides of the trees.

The roads had become nameless days before, asphalt giving onto washboarded gravel giving onto mud-rutted dirt as he wound higher into the rims, the plateaus, the saddlebacks, drawing nearer the sawtoothed, naked peaks that kept always the darkness of grey clouds guarded in their midst. Even before the gravel had run out, he'd had to stop, get out of the truck, twist the dials on his hubs, get back in, and reverse to lock them, before grabbing the transfer case lever in both hands and hauling it down to engage four-wheel drive. The lever bucked and slapped against his thigh as the gears struggled to mesh. He cast a glance back at the dented, five-gallon metal cans fixed to the back of the truck that would now be emptying faster. They would have to be enough.

Just before he had turned East and left the desert floor, he had pulled into a service station on the side of the second-to-last paved road. A flag rose and fell in the gusting wind, slapped its faded, frayed edges against the flagpole. He refilled each can before stepping inside the building with its yellowed vinyl siding. He called out, but no one came to the counter. Leaving bills on the register, he grabbed a book of matches and drove on.

~

He could not remember his first ghost.

He could remember Halloween and his favorite decoration, a card paper shape that got tacked to a hallway wall, snow-white with half-formed arms, a body that trailed off like a tail, a purple bow-tie.

He could remember the costume his mother would make his younger brother and him, old sheets with holes cut for the eyes and mouth; he could remember how they would run down hallways, hide behind couches and the doors of closets, filling the air with a single, quavering syllable, the sound of their haunting drawn out in their unbroken little-boy voices; he could remember how they would burst out into the softened sunlight of partly cloudy autumn afternoons, their shoes crackling in the unraked fallen leaves.

He could remember sitting in the bathroom with the door

shut and the lights off, closing and opening his eyes and seeing the lights that flashed and floated, white, pale yellow, red, blue, wondering what messages, what voices they held inside their rise and fall.

He could remember the endless middles of nights, the darkness that welled and pooled in the corners of the room, the shell-shaped fan of light from the nightlight in the wall by the door only serving the give the darkness heft, form. And he could remember the shapes that slid past the corners of his eyes, through that space between his bed and the bed where his younger brother lay awake. Sometimes, when the gap would ebb in the tides of night, one or the other of them would run across it, arms full of stuffed animals, and they would flick their plastic flashlights on, arrange the animals in a circle around them, pull the covers over their assembled heads, and keep the darkness away with their conference.

Other nights, the gap was too wide, the dark too thick, and they would lie still, awaiting sleep. On his bed by the window, though his eyes were closed, he could feel the ghost of a grandfather he had never known standing at the foot of his bed, watching him as he breathed shallowly, too scared to look, while the blood in his veins rushed in his ears.

The blood that rushed through his ears as he lay in the wool blanket beneath the trees was a river inside of which he could almost lay down, float on his back like summers in public pools beneath the sun when he fought the redness from his skin. Veins and arteries were the courses that prows of canoes could follow, the space between banks from which otters could leap, vanishing beneath the water without a splash, as if they were the same element as that in which they swam, water into water.

Once, in a city far to the north from where he was born or where he lay now, he stood upon a bridge made of stone in short, close arches that leap-frogged across the biggest river in the country when it was young, but already bigger than the river that flowed through his childhood. He stood in the middle and looked north toward the old mill in ruins, the flour billboards, the great bend in the river that lay across the city like a heavy arm, and the people on the other side of it whom no one talked about. The mill in ruins, and yet the locks still

ran, the dam wheels turned, and electricity hummed from the churn beneath the ground, arcing out across the rooftops, through the blank spaces left by renewal, and between the trees that lined every street. Down the small cascade, the river cleft around a small island, the same proud, steel-gray granite as the bluffs the river had cut into the ice-scoured earth. The otters were on that island, with its tiny, stunted trees and brambles, bobbing their heads and looking side-to-side before disappearing, water into water. No one else saw. The other people who were there were walking along the cobbled-over railbed, seeing the beauty in the skyline, in the strength of the oaks and maples and their shadows, in the loamy prairie horizon with its scudding clouds and the acute angle of northern light. But his eyes kept sliding back to the otters' rock, the place to which they were not returning; and, above the rock, above the falls, the mill in ruins. When he knew for certain that the otters were not going to appear to him again, he walked on, across the bridge and back into the city, back onto the ground. The first flush of sunset caught the rust in the twisted iron beams, the glint in the windows' shattered glass, and the red in the earth of the bricks of the mill where it loomed above the falls, where others' eyes flickered across it and did not remember the fire.

His lashes would have hooked together, parted, hooked again as he lay beneath the trees, except that he had singed them off. He remembered the fire. The walls bowing and cracking, the black smoke chugging into a blue sky sharp as a broken bottle, the fire at his heels as he ran, each brittle weed becoming ash almost as quickly as it took the flames. The tires kicked up gravel, rusted bits of old cans, and flecks of glass as he slammed the accelerator pedal in the old denim-blue truck. Dust shot backward in a rooster tail as he folded into the horizon.

He did not know how long it would be before someone found the ruins, did not know if he had left tracks that could be followed. He only knew the flames had been eager, only knew he had been burning before he released them, burning for years. The bits of charcoal and banked embers would give off their tiny orange glow when the wind would sigh across them, stoked as by the breath of a bellows, each gust never a gust enough to blow them out. And so, buffeted by memory, the sparks fell out of his chest, rolled off the ends of his fingers, and chased the old house to ashes.

It was into the gap that Wolf had come, a shadow seeping into shadows in summertime nights. At the close of each day, a trundle bed was drawn from beneath the youngest brother's bed, and Wolf's shape would fill it, old for its age, the body of a man. The darkness shrank away from the gleam of a Maglite, and naked bodies lifted off of glossy pages to stand before the little boys' eyes. Wolf's voice damp, one hand now pointing, now holding the pages to their faces, now laying aside the magazine and sliding his hands beneath his own waistband, as the night stretched thin like tacky dough smeared across a counter. It always started with the glossy pages of magazines. Wolf always made time to play with younger brothers. He only wanted to share what he had learned in the process of growing up.

The middle brother was not sure for years what it meant to have a brother, to be a brother. His throat closed around the nights, the afternoons, the old house, the dust motes. The brackets reared around him, slats on a fence taller than he through which nothing more than glimpses could be seen, and only when he pressed his face against the wood. And on the other side, his younger brother, with fists balled against the slicing of the middle brother's tongue. The way they would not replace the cracked glass of their windowpanes. The hardest fistfights they knew, knocking over chairs, crashing into bookcases and cabinet doors, bodies bruised with what they would not say, but almost believed they had each forgotten. But even the stoutest fence will fall before the swollen water of the springtime thaw.

When the morning came crashing over the mesas' shoulders, he drove on through the trees, up past the trails where his family had ridden mules, up past the bald, hawk-nested ridges where he had scattered his father's ashes, up past where the aspens would not grow and the pine trees became shorter and scarcer, drove until the truck could go no further. He put his pack upon his back and went on into the thinning trees, into the rocks where the pikas' cries echoed. Between two peaks hung a jagged sliver of lake, a blue-green color he could not name, with water so clear that he could count the transparent bodies

of tiny swimming things that lived beneath the surface. Before the fading embers of the day, he made his camp at the water's edge and then slept beneath the open doors of the Milky Way.

The horizon of the new day began to appear, toothed with the naked peaks that rose from the tumbled scree to every side. The faint greying of the fringe of the sky was the first sign, a band that faded borderless into the domed dark where scattered stars still glittered, grains of sand, flecks of foam on the sea.

Sleep had slid off his shoulders like rainwater off the flanks of cattle standing tail-in to the north wind, had pooled under his ribs and the chinks in his spine until he sat up, cloaked in the weight of dreams of flight with an ache between his shoulder blades.

A blush crept up behind the peaks, turning them darker still, and bled up across the sky, stoked by the bellows of the coming day. One by one, the stars hid. Dawn.

The sound of song flitted around the lichened faces of standing rocks, and the chirp of pikas darted out into the light that still cast no shadows. The shapes of things took on a burnished rust beneath the quiet fire.

Away from places, still he thought of the rust-streaked sides of machines, standing still above the rustle of weeds; the rust-streaked sides of water tanks and diesel tanks, reared on spindled legs of steel above the speckled sand; the nodding heads of oil pumps, rising and falling like chickens pecking for feed. The husks of glassless houses and the cracks in old cement. The haunting of the land that does not end when the last footstep has finished falling in the dust.

He had trekked here once before, eleven years ago, to this cut and cusp, this tiny shore above the water's plummet to the sea, and sat in the evening's slanted light alone, apart from the school group with whom he'd come, on the back side of the last hill on which a tree could grow below the bald shoulders of the peaks. Out of a place he had not been watching stepped a mule deer, a doe, coming through the scarcity of branch and leaf and drawing near until he could almost have touched her. Her long ears tilted forward and back as the two of them looked into each others' eyes. A moment, and then she stepped off again, wending around solitary boulders until she faded into the shadows of treeline.

The morning sun now in his face, he wished he could see her again.

The day before he met the doe, as a sixteen-year-old, he crouched atop his backpack with his tent mates as lightning crashed above their heads. They had crested an almost-sheer stone face that now stood like a closed door to the west and had traced treacheries of scree until they wound down to its base. The ground they landed on was streaked with tiny streams that murmured through the spongy thickness of moss and matted, curling grass. Stands of skunk cabbage huddled in the dampest places, while to either side rose naked granite ridges, mirrors of one another. They had stood in this well only a moment when, faster and earlier than on the days before, dark-bellied clouds reared above the ridge lines, billowing, swirling, doubling in minutes. Then, with a crack that lost its edges in the crashing of its echoes, lightning flung itself down upon the rocks. The air thickened, crackling like shattered glass as the twelve backpackers broke up into their three tent groups and ran toward the lowest spots they could find. He tried to set the tarp up over his companions, eyes pelted by the jagged brilliance of strike after strike as rain tore down upon them, seeming to pour not from the clouds but from the very air itself, a sky turned to electricity and water. Raggedly knotting the line on the fourth corner of the flapping nylon, he dove beneath it into the shuddering dryness. The four of them crouched on the balls of their feet atop their packs, desperate to break their conductivity with the earth. The air grew heavier each second with a continuity of crashing, a single sound that swelled inside his head, transfixed him, erased the edges of his body, of the lightning-blinded ridges above him, of the lead-dark sky, until he was a single point in the sizzling wave of sound, a tiny, quivering animal wishing its way back into amniotic darkness.

And then it was over, and the sun split the clouds, but the ringing was still in his ears.

The storm had plumbed him, surged into his animal heart, into the hot rushing of his reddest blood. The immensity yawning out around him.

This was no place for him, he knew, watching the new day grow, no place for him in the parchment-brittle thinness of the air, the

treeless heights, the sudden fierceness of summer storms, the snowy mantles that lay year-round, the jagged glacial waters that were a shade his eyes could hardly comprehend. No place to try to slip free of the press of human dreams. He knew he could not leave behind the trickeries of sunlight on flecks of quartz and glass in red sand, the slow spinning of dust motes in slanted shafts of dusty light. The whispering of ghosts around small blue fires, the sound of breathing and the weight of three brothers in an abandoned room. The part of him that split open like a peach pit with the small voice that wondered how do we be good again, that sat within a silence deep and steep-walled as a well. How far must the bucket drop before it slips beneath the dark water? Desire a bridge on which he stood, casting sticks into the canal, waiting to see which will float the fastest.

He wondered where it started. He wondered where it ever started, the shadows that slipped into spaces between sleepers, that darkened the night. The shadows that fell into the spaces between language, that slipped around words. He inhabited those nights, and yet for years could not name them, though they lodged between his ribs, twisted themselves around his stomach, hid like tiny stones walled in behind proud flesh on a horse's hock. What was it that hung the oaken door upon its hinges, that slammed it shut, leaving his younger brother on the other side? And where had Wolf come from, what had made him Wolf? The middle brother wondered where it started, wondered where and if it ends.

The early afternoon sunlight was strong, streaming through the wooden slats of blinds and warming the thick-piled carpet that had been chosen for its color, a blend of shades of brown that would not show the desert dirt. The lanky boy was not Wolf—he was just their older brother. And then, dropping to his hands and knees and taking off his glasses, he became something else —with a roar and a swipe of his front paws, the Bengal Tiger! The two younger boys launched themselves at the beast, yelling with the shrill joy of small children, filling the room with the noise that made their overtired father always say "That's enough now, sons." Their shouts, mixed with the Tiger's roars, bounced from wall to wall until he buckled beneath their weight and

they leapt up, victorious. Although the two younger boys were small, their older brother was only barely a teenager, and the game was over after no more than several minutes, his strength spent.

Within a year, though, he would taller, thicker, with a full beard that he used to buy cigarettes, 3.2 beer, and magazines with brown paper covers. They quit playing Bengal Tiger. When he came back the next summer, he was Wolf.

Her name, Wolf said, was Jacqueline, though who could say she had been anything like he said she was; who could say she had even been real. But within the pool of light from Wolf's Maglite, the younger brothers believed everything about her: how she stepped down from the bunk above Wolf's bed in the boarding-school bedroom; how she slipped free of her clothes and stood before him, naked in the half-light; how she drew back the covers and slipped in alongside him; how when she stepped out again, Wolf was no longer a virgin. There was something that thickened in Wolf's voice as the story drew near its end. "And that's how you become a grown- up," Wolf explained, when he had finished his story. "You have to stop being a virgin, and then you can grow up."

Then Wolf slipped the magazines from beneath his mattress, slipped them free of their brown paper covers, opened them and shone the Maglite on their glossy pages, pointed at the pictures. "This is a woman's body." He turned page after page.

The middle brother thought, as he cast his mind back through the years, that he should remember the feeling of Wolf's beard against his face, but it had faded.

He thought, too, that he should remember when he first encountered words that he realized were supposed to describe the shadows and the endless middles of nights and the afternoons of slanted light where the dust motes dipped and spun. But even after he discovered those words, they did not feel quite right. They ricocheted off the brackets that reared above him; they clung around the slats of his fences like unraked autumn leaves.

He could remember driving with his younger brother and sitting in the waiting room of a sheriff's office for an appointment with a detective. He was there to support his younger brother, and to tell his

own story in corroboration. He would not have done it for himself, by himself, but the weight of the shadows had cracked something open, and his hand had found the cold metal of the deadbolt, the cold metal of the knob, and swung the heavy oak door open. His younger brother was standing on the other side.

What was it that had cracked? Or was it a melting?—the fissures that run through ice when the springtime sun has remembered to cast again its warmth; the trickling of water giving way to currents giving way to torrents in the well of springtime thaws.

And sitting in the waiting room he cast his mind back and thought, What I remember most is the slanting light on the dust motes. Outside the sheriff's office, the hard pinched light of early January glinted off the days-old skiff of granular high desert snow. Spring lay weeks away.

Sitting before the daybreak at the shore of the jagged lake, he began to sing, with the scratchy throat of the just-wakened. The words hung for a moment like the flight of a bird before fading with the fog of his breath into the sharp-edged air.

Perhaps he first began to sing one evening while watching the sunset's glow, eyes alight with the colors that slipped between his ribs and made him stand more upright. Perhaps it was when he looked around after the colors had faded to dusty lilac petals and saw that, in the dusk, the light casts no shadows. Stars began to populate the sky, and the sounds drifted off on the wings of the night breezes. He could not remember the moment when the stone that butted against the inside of his ribs first began to be dislodged. The percussion of the wings of bats and the nightbirds' cries as the moon slid up across the sky.

When he stopped to listen at last one night, he found one of the songs he had been singing:

Darling,
your eyes are like a desert moon
your hips the rush of water on sandstone in the fierce rains of each generation
your mind the polished quartz air through which a coyote's

call can fly and fly

I know what lies in the silt of the box canyons' floors

Through the cleft spires of my heart the stars wheel
and you will never know quite what I mean

He named it longing before turning back to go inside the house. The mesas and monoliths dark beneath the Milky Way. The sound of the night pressing in around him. Moths rushed toward the porch light before he turned it off.

The eastern sky grew brighter before him. There was a place he had to go.

On the far side of the sharp-edged lake, the water slipped past the lip and cascaded down, tumbling over boulders and around barkless logs, plummeting over ledges and rushing through cataracts, falling through finger-raked canyons and foaming with the breathlessness that only mountain water can have, until it swirled into the currents of the river that flowed through the town where he was born, the river in which he never swam, the river that swelled with the snowmelt and brought tangles of barbed wire and whole downed trees from the high country to smack against the bridge girders and catch in the eddies, the river that churned with mud and danger and made his hometown possible, made the desert bloom with webs of irrigation canals, before flowing through hotter and lower lands, carrying the twigs he threw and the desire in his sunset gazes, the shapes of his hands and feet. Near the river's end on the southern coast, they floated again to the surface, trailed around her standing knee-deep in the water, years before they knew they had met, years when he sang softly to himself in words he thought only he could understand—words that swept on a southward wind, that caught in her hair and drifted across her tongue as she stood amidst what the river carried. Each syllable sleeping like a tern inside her chest.

With the dawn, he flew along the arced lines of their twinned poles, soaring from where the water welled up between the mountain

peaks, through the canyons and the basins and the forests and the scrub, flowing between banks where he saw a baby bear, herons, and the footprints of otters, until one day he was at her side, sitting in the warm, sandy water that swirled around them, that folded the shapes of their bodies together. One by one, the old embers slipped out of his chest and floated away to wink out at last in the salty wash of the gulf coast.

Over their heads the stars wheel unbracketed.

Occhiolism

---

the awareness of the smallness of your perspective

≈ The Cost of Living ≈

Ever since she happened to watch a report about a young couple who'd crashed their graduation present BMW on the West Side Highway at ninety miles per hour, Marta had started watching the news more often. In fact, lately it had become routine for her to come home from her job as a homecare aid attendant and sit in front of the living room TV for a few hours after she cooked dinner for her son Marco. She preferred Fox News, not only because it helped improve her English, but also because they seemed to have an almost admirable obsession with tragedy. For example: when the other stations had stopped reporting on the couple's death, a Fox reporter had dug through the trash outside of the girl's house and had found a photo of her in an old yearbook. It was the only picture of the girl that had been shown anywhere at the time.

Now, as Marta watched the evening news, she heard Marco's heavy footsteps approaching from his room. She didn't turn but listened as he shuffled past her on his way out of the apartment. Three days earlier, she'd almost fainted after seeing two penny sized rings hollowing out his ears. Why would you do that to yourself? she had wanted to ask, but had said nothing. She had stopped asking him questions like these because all she ever seemed to get in response was a different version of the same answer.

"Why do you color your hair like that?"
"No reason."
"Why do you wear that?"
"Just cause."
What's wrong with your eyes?
"Nothing."

He had changed from the skinny, asthmatic boy she used to dress up as a shepherd for Christmas pageants into an overweight boy - she still saw him as a boy despite his sixteen years and what she suspected was makeup on his face - who now dressed with things she had only seen on Halloween. If she would have paid more attention to the signs - the nail polish; the bloodshot eyes; the weight gain; the drinking; the school psychologist he'd been seeing for the past year without her knowledge. Weren't schools supposed to notify you about things like that? - she thought she would have done something, like change his school or have him talk to a priest or at least ground him; anything to steer him the right way. Although she couldn't really say what the right way was. Things had been so different for him, growing up in a metropolitan American city, than they had been for her - she'd been raised in a South American village - that she had no idea what he was supposed to turn out like anyway. And sometimes, when a report card came, showing that he was doing surprisingly well in school, or when she felt guilty that he'd grown up without a father, she would think that maybe he hadn't turned out so bad after all.

But as the news turned to the weather, she wasn't thinking about Marco or the TV anymore. Instead, she found herself thinking about the baby girl, whose ears she herself had pierced all those years ago. She had never thought of how cruel it must seem to some people, the tradition of cutting holes into a baby's flesh. But as the wails that the girl had made echoed in Marta's mind - it had become the most vivid memory she had of her daughter - she couldn't help but wonder.

The woman arrived in Marta's hillside village on a warm afternoon in February, during the rainy season when mudslides were common, but it hadn't rained that day. The woman wore a blue florid dress that made her look like a picture of a movie star on vacation that Marta had once seen in a magazine. Marta noticed that the turquoise shoes the woman wore didn't seem to get dirty, as if the material was repelling the dirt somehow; which for all she knew it might have been. The woman was still young, late thirties, Marta figured. Marta was younger; had turned fifteen a few days before the baby had been born. Everyone in the village knew why the woman had come, though no one talked about it out loud. Yet somehow, whenever people from

Europe or the U.S. arrived in one of the villages, the news got around quickly.
Martha's mother did most of the talking. Marta restrained herself to looking down and answering only when asked.

"Yes." "No." "A boy from the village."

Her mother had told her she was lucky. That the woman could have chosen anybody but she was choosing her. Her baby. It would have a good life in the U.S., she said. It would grow up with everything and be somebody. All Marta had to do was give her up.

Inside the shack, Marta picked up her sleeping daughter and handed her to the woman, who looked like a natural, taking and cradling the baby in a manner that Marta had not yet been able to master. And in the way that the woman looked at the baby, with a longing that Marta wouldn't experience until many years later, Marta knew that the woman would make a better mother than her. She half expected the woman to get up and walk out with the baby and was startled when she handed her back. For a moment Marta became scared that something had gone wrong and that the new life of possibilities that had been laid out for her daughter was gone. But the woman just smiled at Marta. Then she turned to Marta's mother and said that there was paperwork to be done.

Marta had never told anyone about her daughter. Not Marco or Marco's father during the three years they were together. Not even the priests at confession when they asked, "is there anything else?" She didn't know if it was a sin to give a child away like that, and she preferred not to know. Because she didn't feel guilty about it. Not in the way she felt guilty about other things, like letting Marco grow up without a father figure, because she had rejected all the men who'd approached her after Marco's father had walked out and disappeared on them in order to avoid paying child support. But then again she herself had been raised with a father figure. With a man that her mother had met in one of their trips to the city. A man who provided for them for awhile. And who would sidle up to Marta's bed in the middle of the night and stick his hand between her legs.

But whenever Marta thought about the baby, she almost felt a sense of pride. Because the way she saw it, it had been the one unself-

ish thing she'd done in her life. To give a child a chance at a life she never would have been able to give. Wasn't that real sacrifice? Love? She hadn't even kept the money. When the woman had stretched out her arm and said in broken Spanish, "un regalo," Marta had only taken it because her mother had made her. But the next day she'd gone down to San Nicolas Church and had thrown it in one of the iron collection boxes, which her mother had later unsuccessfully tried to pry open after the pastor had refused to give the money back. And now, twenty-three years later, whenever Marta saw girls of about the right age, on the trains or in the sidewalks, dressed in beautiful clothes, seemingly in a hurry to some place important, she thought of her daughter, and wondered what bright future she was living. And then she was sure she'd done the right thing.

On Sundays Marta liked going on walks, and that Sunday she did just that. The train in the city traveled in an elevated railway above ground and Marta would walk on the streets below, following the rail line as it curved and straightened itself across the landscape, like a green metallic spinal cord. That day she followed it all the way down to the beach. She liked going there in winter when the tourists were gone, and the children's games and Cyclone and Pirate Ship, which had been her favorite ride when Marco's father had taken her there on a date, were closed. It had been winter when she had first arrived to the U.S. at twenty-one, and when the hotel job that was supposed to have been waiting for her never materialized, and she couldn't afford a place to stay, someone had directed her to the boardwalk where she now stood. In certain sections underneath, there were big gaps in the sand where the homeless lived, and even though it was near the beach, the insulating grains kept them relatively warm. This is where she had stayed for three months before she finally found a steady job in a sweatshop factory and could afford to share a room with one of the girls who worked with her.

As Marta walked across the boardwalk, she attempted to see through the tight spaces between the faded slats. Then she sat on a bench, looked out onto the calm water and waited for the sunset. This was another reason she liked going there in winter. Sundown was different in the cold. More intense. In her village there used to grow

pomegranates, which she would gather to sell in the city. And this dusk light was like that; like the color of their insides.

Marco came home at midnight, smelling of beer, which Marta kept warning him against because she'd heard in the news that it triggered asthma attacks. He had begun to come home later and later ever since he started high school. Marta had suspected that his new friends were a bad influence on him, but that was until she met them. Because whenever they came over they were always polite and better dressed than Marco. She wondered if when he visited their homes they reversed roles. He, becoming the well-mannered one, and they, the ones that with a look would tell their parents to fuck off. She'd only found out that he was seeing a psychologist because he'd accidentally dialed Marta during one of the sessions. The call had gone to her voicemail and when she'd asked him about it, he'd said, "oh, that was the school psychologist. I guess I must have butt-dialed you," as if there was nothing odd about that. That was all he had wanted to say about it, and when she had gone to the school to talk to the psychologist, the woman had barely even acknowledged that she was seeing her son. "It's a confidential matter," she had said, despite Marta's tantrum that she had a right to know what was going on because she was his "maldita madre." And when the woman suggested that maybe Marta could use a consultation, Marta had walked out.

She hadn't heard anything understandable on the voicemail either. Just thirty minutes of muffled sounds before it cut off. For a while Marta had replayed it at night trying to decipher something. A clue. At times she had thought she heard sobbing, but it could have just been the static.

It was stuff like that that made Marta wish, now that she was on the other side of it, that things were the way they had been when she was growing up. When you could beat a kid half to death without having to worry about child protective services coming to your house. She was sure that if Marco had feared her a little more, things would have been different. She had been too lenient, she thought. But a woman with no papers had to be careful, even from her own son.

The next day Marco walked into the apartment at 2 a.m. He

shuffled slowly down the unlit hallway; a hand dragging on the wall. When he reached Marta's door, which was on the way to his room, and halfway open, he put his hand on the knob and stood there for a moment. Then he looked inside. Marta was snoring softly, lying on her side. She coughed and woke, and when her eyes opened, the door was closed.

In the morning, as she prepared for work, Marta listened to the news. It was always more upbeat in the mornings, with hopeful predictions about the weather, and live shots of the boardwalk and seagulls and fishermen that inhabited it as the sun went up. And if it was windy or raining, there was always a reporter in the street comically braving the elements. There was less tragedy in the mornings too, or at least the reporting of it, as if it were impolite to bring up too much unpleasantness before people had had their coffee. But that morning, as Marta sipped her Folgers, the breaking news was about a rape scandal involving an Ivy League fraternity. The photos of the boys who were implicated were being displayed. They all looked so pleasant and clean cut - so unlike her son - that Marta couldn't see them doing the things they were being accused of. The photos of the girls who'd made the accusations weren't shown.

For the years when Marta's daughter would have been in her teens, whenever there had been an unexpected knock at the door or Marta had gotten a call from an unlisted number, her heartbeat would suddenly pick up. She had promised never to seek out her daughter - in fact she didn't even know what state the woman had taken her to live in. But deep in her heart she had always thought that someday the girl would try looking for her - nobody had said anything against that. But as the years had gone by, she had felt herself letting go of that idea, until finally she had stopped waiting altogether.

Another channel that Marta watched - one that she turned to now - was a news channel from her home country; which she paid extra for in her cable package. They were showing a report about the city near her home village, which had become one of the top spots in the world for retiring Americans to live in, because of its "quaint

beauty, good health care and a wonderfully low cost of living." Marta knew all this already, not only because some of her elderly patients had mentioned it, but also because her mother and others from her village had gone to work there as servants for the incoming retirees. Growing up, Marta hadn't found anything special about that colonial city, with its cobblestone paths and old Spanish churches. But as she saw it now, through a clear LCD eye, and thousands of miles of distance, and as she thought about the American woman who must have been nearing retirement age, she felt that maybe she'd made a mistake.

When the phone rang at 3 a.m., Marta woke, sat, and after she saw Marco's name light up, answered immediately.

"Ms. Garcia?" said a vaguely familiar voice.

"Yes?" Marta answered, feeling the cold of the floor traveling up her bare legs.

"I'm sorry to bother you. It's not that bad, but Marco just had an asthma attack," the voice said. "He needs his inhaler and he left it in his room."

Marta let out a sigh. The voice asked if she could bring it to where he was.

Marta asked for the address and hung up. She dressed quickly, feeling the heat in her body winning against the cold with every layer of clothing she put on. As she walked down the hallway, she wondered why he hadn't spoken to her himself. She wondered if the asthma attack had had anything to do with alcohol or drugs.

It'd been at least two years since the last time Marta had been in Marco's room, when she was still picking up his clothes and taking them to the Laundromat. If it had been up to her she would still be doing it, but he had told her to stop. He'd said he wanted to do things for himself, and that he'd appreciate it if she would respect his privacy. He was always so calm and methodical when saying things she didn't like, that it made it impossible for her to quarrel with him. Marta couldn't even remember the last time they'd gotten into so much as a heated discussion. His method of arguing, with cool, calculated words and logic, a method he'd started employing as early as elementary school, was not something Marta was used to. This was another reason they

rarely talked anymore. It was almost unfair; all the things he knew. Things he could use like grenades, while she was stuck throwing rocks. How could you ever win against someone like that? How could you not resent them a little?

It's not that she hadn't tried going into his room after that, but every time she'd tested the doorknob it was locked, just as it was now. Marta hesitated in front of the door. But after a moment, she reared back, and with the strength that years of pushing wheelchairs and Sunday walks had built up in her legs, kicked it open.

The thing that surprised her was how well kept the room was. Yes, there were jeans and t-shirts on the floor and a dirty plate and empty cans of Red Bulls on the desk, but it was nothing like what she had come to believe a troubled teenager's room was supposed to look like. She'd heard on TV that people's rooms were a reflection of their interior self - she swept hers daily - but his revealed nothing to her.

She spotted the inhaler immediately, next to his laptop, which was open but whose screen was dark. She walked across the room, picked it up, and put it in her pocket. Then she just stood there, looking at the black screen.

The woman came back a month later, wearing jeans and dirty walking shoes that for some reason disappointed Marta. Marta noticed that her Spanish had improved too. In the previous month Marta had become more and more curious about the woman. She wanted to ask her things, but had been told not to by her mother. "Eso solo lo hará más dificil para ti," she had told her.

It was sundown by the time the woman started to leave with the baby. As she walked out of the shack, Marta suddenly ran up and grabbed her arm. The woman turned and their eyes met. It was the first time Marta had dared to look into them. Even years later, she would recall those blue eyes every time she saw the ocean. Marta's mother grabbed her arm and pulled it away, saying that the baby would be okay. But Marta wasn't thinking about the baby. She wanted to say, take me with you.

Marta thought she would just take a look. Marco could wait a few more minutes. She swiped her fingers across the touchpad and the

display came to life. She had feared there would be a lock screen, but there wasn't. Little icons shined in front of a picture of a beach. With her middle finger she guided the onscreen arrow and clicked on the files folder. There, she found essays with titles she didn't understand; music from artists she'd never heard of; movies she would never see. She closed the folders and clicked on the Internet browser, which automatically logged onto his Facebook account.

Years before, Marta had made a Facebook profile of her own, with Marco's help, who'd been nine at the time, and she'd found and had been found and friended by people she'd known growing up; some of whom were now living in the U. S. She'd thought it fascinating at first; how easily she could follow the lives of all those people. But as time went by, something about that familiarity at a distance had started to feel wrong to her. As if it was somehow cheating, or not real, that you could see intimate moments of people's lives on display, and yet you would never feel close enough to them to be able to call them up and talk. After a while she stopped logging on altogether.

As Marta scrolled through Marco's newsfeed, the public lives of his friends drifted by. Photographs in front of mirrors; photographs holding coffee cups and bubble teas; photographs holding each other. They looked so happy in their digital lives. She clicked on Marco's profile - his name read Mark - and there too she saw happiness. As she greedily scrolled through his pictures, he looked strange to her. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen him smile. Marta had always felt pity for her son and for the children of his generation. She felt they were growing up in a more complicated, more cynical world than she had known. She thought that all their consumerism, all their knowledge, and technology that seemed to fuse itself to them, was creating an isolated, depressed population, that lived one instant gratification at a time. Always unsatisfied, always selfish. She saw this confirmed in the way Marco dressed and drank and mutilated himself. In the fact that he was seeing a psychologist. But now, as all those smiles flashed on screen, another drastic thought entered her mind. What if there's nothing terribly wrong with him ? What if he, and all these kids are fine? She knew, of course, that everyone puts up pictures of good times for the world to see, and hides whatever there is to hide.

But that still didn't take away from the fact that these were genuine moments of joy in their lives, and that there were so many of them. She thought that if Facebook had existed when she had been a teenager, she wouldn't have been able to fill up, with good moments, half the photo albums that these kids had.

Now, Marta scrolled through the names and profile pictures of Marco's friends. There were so many of them; hundreds. She had always thought of him as a loner, but here again was something contradicting her. Her heartbeat picked up as she scrutinized the profiles, one by one, especially the ones of girls who looked a certain age. It wasn't until she'd gone through all of them that she realized she'd been expecting to find her daughter there.

But she wasn't there. She hadn't reached out to Marco, as Marta had secretly feared. Still, she couldn't help but feel let down. Because at least that would have been an explanation for the way he had changed; his disdain towards her. A woman who'd given away his half sister. Instead, she found herself more lost than before. Because even in his room, in his things, she found nothing. But there had to be something. And she continued looking. Rummaging through drawers. Pulling clothes out of the closet and checking the pockets. Knocking down neatly stacked piles of how to manuals and manga magazines. Turning over the trashcan. And almost an hour later, when Fox News was reporting on yet another shooting taking place on a campus somewhere across the country, she was still searching. Having forgotten all about the inhaler in her pocket. Until the phone rang one more time.

Art Gallery

Featured Artists

Jahneah Taylor and Salvador Perez

Raku Orange Peel Glaze

Jahneah Taylor

Raku Blue Jean
Over Copper Luster

Jahneah Taylor

Raku Copper Luster
and White Crackle

Jahneah Taylor

“Aurora”

Salvador Perez

Salvador Perez

Flowers for Jasmine:
Forgotten Flowers

~ Ring Toss ~

When she got the call about the car, Tara wasn't sure what she was going to find. She took Little Cat with her to the police lot where the car had been towed. The cops had found it out near Marin, dumped next to one of the nicer docks. The folks who ran the place thought it looked suspicious and wanted it out of their sight. It was early morning and Little Cat wasn't quite awake. Tara let her take the butterfly stuffed animal on the bus as long as she promised to remember to take it home with her. The young girl nodded off against her sister as they drove deeper into the city. They got off the bus two blocks from the lot. Tara took the butterfly from Little Cat and stuffed it into her backpack. The little girl wobbled next to her, still not awake, blinking away dreams. The impound lot looked just like any other parking lot in the city. There was a station to check in where a worker was watching TV with his feet up. Tara knocked on the glass that separated them. The man looked up, wiped his mouth, dropped his feet, then stood to slide open the small door.

"I'm Tara Calvin," she said. "I'm here to pick up my brother's car." She handed over the letter she had been sent yesterday. The man took it, flipped it open, read about two lines then put it on his desk and grabbed a clipboard.

"Calvin," the man repeated, Tara nodded. He ran a finger down a list on the clipboard until he stopped at a name. "For a Pete Calvin?"

"That's it."

"Yeah, I got you all set over here." The man exited the station and led Tara and Little Cat through rows of cars. Most where shit. They were cars that no one was ever coming for, too many tickets and not enough funds to buy it back. Pete had always payed his tickets.

Hidden behind a giant SUV was Pete's car. The state ofthe old Ford that Pete had bought when he was seventeen, broke Tara's heart. The hood had been caved in, smashed with what must have been the baseball bat. The windshield was cracked and had taken on a spiderweb look. Both headlights were busted and the front bumper was hanging on by just a little piece of metal. Tara pressed a hand to the windshield tracing over the webs with a light touch.

"They told me it wasn't bad, that I could probably drive it home." Tara walked around the car running her hand through her hair,pulling it out in some places. The sharp pain made her wince. Hair tangled in her fingers which she balled up in her palm, then threw to the ground. She had neededthis car.

"It still drives, I just wouldn't recommend driving it in this condition." The station worker said.

"No shit." Tara hissed. When she got to the back of the Ford and saw the key marks they had made she felt like punching something. Instead, she kicked the tire and liked the way it hurt.

"You can call a service and have it towed out of here." The man suggested. Tara looked up at him and found him looking back down at his clipboard, uninterested. She kicked the tire again, biting her lip when her toe caught it wrong and sent a spike of pain up her leg.

"I don't have the money for that." Tara bit out. "Not right now at least."

"Well, it'll be here for another six months before it goes to auction." The man wrote something on his clipboard. Tara wanted to slap it out of his hands. She peered into the back seat and saw Pete's jacket and a pair of running shoes. On the seat next to them was a folder with papers hanging out and a couple books.

"Could I take his stuff?" The man finally looked up from his work and shrugged his shoulders. He tossed Tara a set of keys. They weren't Pete's keys. They had made a copy and attached a bright orange tag which stated the make and model of the car, along with the last name and first initial of the owner. She unlocked the front door then auto unlocked the rest. "Help me out Little Cat." Tara smiled at her sister. "Take what you can hold, all right?"

Little Cat opened the door across from Tara and picked up

the jacket then moved to reach for the shoes.

"Why don't we leave the shoes?" Tara told Little Cat. "Let's just take the small stuff." Little Cat nodded behind a yawn and started looking through the pocket behind the passenger seat. Tara opened the driver side door and sat down. She felt weird about it, like Pete would jump out of nowhere and tell her to get out of his car. She opened the ashtray and found only coins and a few bobby pins. Popping open the glove compartment she found the registration, a pen, more coins, a pad of paper, an old ring toss ring, and a gold colored tube of lipstick. She swore under her breath before taking the ring and the lipstick and tucking them into her pocket.

She took the coins from both the glove box and the ash tray and let them dance around in her backpack. She shut the glove box then thought better of it and took the registration too. Pete's keys sat on the passenger seat, glinting in the morning light. There was a key for their house, his apartment, one that was for his work, and one that looked like it was for a locker. They were all separated by a few novelty keychains. Tara took the keys, clipping them onto the belt loop of her jeans

"Tara?" Little Cat spoke from the back seat.

"Yeah?"

"Do you want these?" Tara turned around to see what Little Cat had. In her hands were
cases of fake eyelashes and a lighter.

"No Little Cat, we can leave them here. Come on let's go home."

Tara got out of Pete's car and shut the door. She knew they weren't getting this car back.
They couldn't pay for the tow truck, they couldn't even afford to fix it up to get it to driving condition. In six months the car would go to auction, then it would be gone. Tara threw the keys back to the station worker who caught them easily. She took Pete's jacket from Little Cat and shrugged it on her own shoulders. She felt sick wearing it, but also warmer than she had been in months. Little Cat held onto the books and the folder from the back seat.

Tara thanked the man and let Little Cat lead them out of the lot. As they passed through the maze of cars Tara couldn't help but

peek into the windows of the ones they walked next to. What had other people left in their cars, what was so unimportant that it could be let go of? She felt the tube of lipstick move against her; it made her shiver. They made their way back to the bus stop and waited for the number 8 outbound towards City College. Pete's jacket sat heavy on her shoulders. It was big, the sleeves kept slipping down over her hands. She pushed them up, only to have them fall back down. Little Cat thumbed through the books Pete had left.

"What are they about?" Tara asked.

"I dunno." Little Cat mumbled. "I like the picture on this one." She held it up and Tara smiled when she saw the familiar cover. The BFG was one of her's and Pete's favorites from when they were kids. This copy was new, it was shiny, the edges weren't chewed on, and there was no top right corner missing from when they had fought over it.

"I know that one," she said. "I can read it to you if you want."

"Can Mom read it?" Little Cat asked.

"Sure," Tara said stiffly.

On the bus,Tara watched as Little Cat tried to read through the book. She flipped through
the pages, but her eyes never tracked the words. She only stopped to focus on the pictures, watching them as if they would come to life and tell her the story. Tara put her hand in the pocket of her jeans and pulled out the ring. It was about the size of a half dollar, maybe more, she hadn't seen a half dollar in a long time. She spun it around on her fingers feeling its smoothness from years of wear. Her nail caught in the groove that connected both parts of the circle. It had been a long time since they had been to the boardwalk, Little Cat hadn't even been an idea since the last time they were there. Tara did the math and laughed to herself as she remembered their last time down to Santa Cruz.

She had been nine and Pete was fifteen. The rings were taken from the merry go round, where you would snatch the metal rings from a dispenser then toss them into a clown's mouth, all while riding one of the pretty horses. The clown was painted on the back wall, smiling with his mouth open. He would laugh and his eyes would flash red when a ring made it into awaiting grin. Only the horses on the outer

rim were close enough to grab the rings, so it was a race to find the best ride. Tara could remember lifting herself up onto the white horse with the purple streak through it mane. She would tie herself in with the leather belt around the golden pole then see how far she could lean over without losing her balance. She was only able to grab one ring at a time, but Pete had mastered the art of taking three. He would lean forward pluck one ring with his index finger, wait a moment for the next to come, then take the second with his middle finger. Finally he would lean back and snag one last copper colored ring on his pinky. Tara had tried over and over to get more than one, but her hands were too small and her arms were too short, but it didn't stop her from trying. Every lap she would lean forward, stretching out and clasping the first ring in her hand, then grasping only at air as she rode by. They would spend hours chucking rings at the clowns mouth basking in the laughter and flurry of lights that a crack shot would earn in reward.

The bus dropped them off in the Bayshore. They walked the few blocked to their house and when they got inside their mother, Lin, was waiting for them. Lin wrung her hands nervously together, folding them over and over. She never did this before Pete died. Tara wished she would stop, it made her feel like she wasn't doing enough to help.

"Did you get it?" She asked.

"No," Tara shook her head. "It's not worth it, it's more messed up than the cops told us. It'll go to auction in six months."

"You got his jacket." Lin reached out a shaky hand to touch the brown leather and silver buttons. Her face changed, her eyes narrowed and her lips parted. Tara thought she looked angry at first, then watching her she saw the love that was held in that gaze. She looked at Tara as if she would magically turn into Pete. When she didn't Lin turned away, still wringing her hands.

"Mom, Pete had this in his car too." Little Cat held up the books then pressed them into her mother's hands. "Will you read it to me?" Lin took the books and flipped through the top one quickly. The pages fluttered like a fan.

"Okay." She said giving the books back to Little Cat. Tara heard something in her voice, a tiny inflection that she could remember from her own childhood. Her mother was lying.

"Why don't you go put those in our room?" Tara told Little

Cat. "Make sure you find them a good place, okay?"

Little Cat nodded and ran down the hall into their bedroom. Lin wrung her hands again and stepped into the kitchen. Tara followed, watching as the older woman took down a wine glass, opened a cupboard, pulled out a bottle of red wine, popped off the stopper, and poured a little into her glass. Tara looked at the clock and sighed.

"It's nine in the morning."

"And you're wearing your dead brother's jacket."

Tara bit the inside of her cheek to stop from saying something she would regret. Instead
she put her hands inside the pockets of Pete's jacket and rolled lint between her finger and thumb.

"Was there anything else in the car?"

"Not much," Tara shook her head. "We took what we could, but really we didn't leaving anything important behind."

"What did you leave?"

"His running shoes, some papers, just junk really. He didn't have anything in his car."

"He must have had something." Lin said taking a long drink which almost drained the glass. Tara could smell it, sweet and dry; it made her stomach flip.

"There wasn't anything." Tara told her.

"He must have had something that they wanted. Money? Maybe he had another cell phone, or a computer?"

"Mom," Tara said, trying to stop her mother from continuing to dream up reasons for her son's death.

"If there was nothing in his car then why did they kill him Tara? He had to have had something. He was just helping them out, he gave them a ride, picked them up and they...they..."

"I know Mom, I know." Tara wanted to hug her, to tell her things would be all right, but she couldn't. She took her hand from the jacket and moved it to where the ring and lipstick were. She felt the outline of the lipstick and clenched her jaw.

"I just want to know why they got rid of the car?" Lin asked, but Tara knew she wasn't asking her. Her voice strained with each word, confusion and anger latching onto them. "Why did they leave the car, it was the most valuable thing he had? It just doesn't make any

sense."

"Mom," Tara took a short step back before bracing herself to say something she knew her mother should have known. "Mom, they didn't kill him because they wanted the car, or money, or anything like that. They killed him 'cause he was gay."

Tara stared at her mother and watched the array of emotion she shifted through. Lin blinked rapidly before shaking her head as if she was clearing a thought, then she laughed. The laugh, joyless and sharp, made Tara flinch, as if her mother had hit her.

"No," Lin chuckled, smiling gently at her daughter. She looked at Tara like she was going to explain how she had done something wrong and that it wasn't her fault, and that it was all okay. "Pete wasn't gay."

"Mom." Tara said waited for her mother to say something. When she didn't Tara took a deep breath and repeated herself. "They killed him because he was gay, Mom. You have to know that. You have to."

Lin shook her head and kept a taut smile on her face. She took the last sip of wine and put the glass in the sink. Tara watch her hover over the sink and run the water to break up the silence.

Tara knew what Pete looked like to those hitchhikers he'd picked up. Hell, when they had gone to the morgue to identify the body he still had lipstick and eyeliner on. They had clean him up, but the colors still stained. She knew her mother hadn't seen it, she was too focused on the dent in his skull from the baseball bat. She knew that in her backpack Pete's keychain had a little rainbow pendant with the words 'God loves fags' on the reverse side. She knew that on the third Friday of the month he could be found downtown, dressed in drag, and singing Purple Rain at the top of his lungs. She knew that in high school he had kissed Marco Diaz, because everybody in school knew. She knew that Pete moved out as soon as he could because he could never be himself in their house. She knew what those hitchhikers thought about her brother. She knew what they had engraved into the back of his car with their keys.

Lin snapped off the tap and turned on Tara. Her face had gone red and there was a worry line down the center of her forehead. She opened her mouth then stopped and stared just behind Tara

where Little Cat was standing in the doorway.

"Mom?" Little Cat asked and stepped into the kitchen. Tara didn't know how long she had been there, but the quiver in her voice told her it was long enough.

"Come here Little Cat," Tara stepped forwards pushing her little sister out of the doorway and back to their room. She shut the door behind them and sat Little Cat on the bed. "Where did you put the books?" She asked, keeping her tone light and happy.

"There." Little Cat pointed to Tara's small bookshelf that rested under the window. Little Cat had put them atop the others, since there was no more room on the shelfs.

"Did you want me to read to you?"

"No, I want Mom to." Little Cat pressed her face into Tara's arm, muffling her words and hiding tears. Tara wrapped an arm around her tightly.

"I know, I know." Tara sighed.

"I took it from the car." Little Cat sobbed. Tara frowned in confusion.

"You took what from the car?" Tara pulled Little Cat off of her and wiped away tears.

"It's okay, whatever you took, it's okay. We were there to take stuff, remember?"

Little Cat reached into the pocket of her dress and held whatever she had taken tightly in her hand. Tara held out her hand and Little Cat dropped the rosary into her palm. It was red and gold and Tara knew it well. Their mom would always put it in Pete's car when he came over and somehow it would always make it back to her. Lin would find it back on her dresser or in her sock drawer, each time she would say nothing about it, but whenever Pete would stop over Lin would insist on changing the oil for him, then later he would find the rosary in the ashtray, the glove box, the pocket behind the passenger seat, or even hanging over the gear shift.

Tara held the rosary up to the light. The tiny cross spun around and the red jewels reflected no light.

"Did you want to keep this?" Tara asked Little Cat.

"It's Mom's right?" Little Cat said. "I thought she would want it back."

"Right." Tara said and handed the rosary back to Little Cat. "Why don't you go give it to her. I'm sure she'll be happy to see it."

Tara helped Little Cat off the bed and let her go find their mother alone. Tara stayed in their room. She took off Pete's jacket and folded it gently and lay it on the bed. Then she picked it back up and hung it up on a hanger in her closet. Both places were wrong. She thought about walking it down the hall and up into the attic to Pete's old bedroom, but she couldn't allow herself up there, not yet. She took out the ring and the lipstick and set them on her dresser. She spun the ring around a few times, liking the sound it made. The golden tube of lipstick began to glow as the sun spied through the window. Tara twisted it open and pushed up it up. It was red, a dark cherry, that reminded her of movies about the 1940's, and cranberry juice. She lifted it all the way out to see how much was left. It was hardly used, only the tip of it had been flattened. She closed her eyes and thought of Pete trying it on for the first time, of him looking in the mirror and liking what he saw. Tara looked up into the mirror resting on her dresser. She watched herself raise the lipstick and part her lips. It was warm from being in her pocket and went on smooth. She carefully outlined her lips then filled them in. The dark color made her look pale. She rubbed her lips together then ran her tongue over her teeth to clear any mess. She spun the lipstick back down, replaced the cap, and set it inside the ring on the dresser.

She couldn't remember if she looked like him. Tara stared at herself and tried to picture Pete next to her. How he stood, the way his mouth quirked in a smile. How his nose would crinkle when he thought something was really funny. How his eyes rolled back whenever he was bored. How his hands were always moving, never settling in one place. She could see all the pieces of him.

She wiped off the lipstick with the back of her hand. It smeared across her face, staining her chin and cheeks. She lifted her shirt and rubbed at the red only succeeding in coloring the inside of her collar. There was still red on her lips, just like there had been on Pete's. She wiped again and again, until she wasn't sure if her face was red from lipstick or her own actions.

Tara watched in the mirror as Little Cat opened up the door. She wiped harder to make sure Little Cat wouldn't see. She wasn't sure

why she didn't want Little Cat to she her wearing lipstick, but when she turned to face her sister she kept a hand over her mouth. Little Cat held the rosary in her hand and rolled the red beads between her fingers.

"Mom didn't want it." She had puffed out her cheeks, something she did when she was about to cry.

"That's okay." Tara got down on her knees in front of her sister. "You can keep it. If you want." Tara didn't want the rosary. She didn't even like being in the same room as it anymore. It was once a joke, between her and Pete, now it was a dark, pitiful, reminder of him. She wished her mother had taken it and kept it. She touched the dangling strand that fell from her sister's fingers. The little gold cross kept spinning.

Final Comments

Bradley Penner

≈ Indian Rock ≈

Berkeley, CA

Vemödalen

the frustration of photographing something amazing when thousands of identical photoss already exist

What Color Am I?

"What is blue?"

"It's a color."

"I know, but what is it. Describe it to me."

I could do a better job of describing pi or Greek philosophy or Milton, I'm sure. "Well it's cool. Or cold."

"Like water from the fridge?"

"Yes. Like that. It's like lotion."

"Lotion is blue?"

"Not usually. Blue is like lotion."

"Ok. What about green?"

"Trees are green."

"Yes, I've heard, but what is green?"

"Green is the sound trees make when they rustle. It's the taste of a fresh, cool salad."

"With lettuce or spinach?"

"Both are green. But lettuce, I think. The crisp, wet kind, the kind that barely smells like anything."

"And yellow?"

"Like sunlight?" Clichéd. I try again. "It's what cornbread smells like."

"Five minutes," they call.

"Yes, ok," she says. "Orange, now."

"A warm towel. We've got that towel warmer now, but it's like the towel, not the warmer."

"And?"

"And...it's that pop you hear when the firewood crackles. Or maybe the smell of the glaze on a Thanksgiving Turkey."

"Red?"

"Pepper on your tongue. The burning feeling."

"What else? You've gotta have something else for red."

"That warm feeling in your face when you're blushing, especially the tips of your ears."

"I've run out of colors." And time.

"There's purple," I say. "And white. And black. And-"

"Tell me about them after," she says.

"We're all set," they say.

"Yes, ok," she turns to me and sees nothing and is smiling.

"I'll see you when I get out."

"That isn't funny. Never was."

She laughs. "No, I guess not."

They wheel her away for her last surgery before she knows what purple, is. White or black.

It's your skin after half-a-dozen shots. And it's the way the hospital smells. It's the color we wear at your funeral.

"What color am I?" she calls as she turns the corner. "What color am I."

~ Unexpected ~

He handed me my sentence,
Quite, somber,
. Catastrophic.
Stagnating words: Deadly. "Do you always use protection?
Have you ever use intravenous drugs?
Do you engage in high risk sexual behaviors?
Umm…, your immune system is….;
(you mean it was). You've contracted the virus also known as…"

Letters
more dismal than a (.)
powerful
repetitious hemorrhaging
vocabularies pleading while living comatose.
A log on my living room floor decomposing under celestial voices from the TV canceling out the silence of my thoughts, for weeks, angry at God, myself, ignoring the world knocking at my door. I ignored them all until the police and fire department arrived, twice in one day, threatening to bash in the recognition that this wasn't a nightmare. Even though it was.
"A horror ."

~ Isabella, Jezebel ~

Isabella and her adoration for milkshakes
Strawberry
Of cream and of pink
Of girlhood and angelic clouds
A concoction that tastes of a childhood book
Or an adolescent dream
Whipped cream flag nestled its way into the pink pink pink
And a maraschino cherry put on top, only to take off
Suck.
Suck. Suck.
Stomach painted, coated and turned
Milky heartbeat dripping up her throat and back down again
Suck.

Isabella and the word suck
She is only drinking a milkshake
Suck
Is what happens

Isabella at the diner
Did not invite you to
Squeeze yourself into her booth
Isabella and her milkshake suffer from
Hyper Association
Keyword: Sexualized

From nostalgia to pin up
From cherry to popping, no- taking
From whipped cream to a performance

Isabella, Jezebel

From pink to porn
Men who want girls to ask for it
From suck to you can only imagine
And you will
Her Girlhood turned timber to build up your Manness
Isabella is just drinking a milkshake
Isabella
is 7
and half
It doesn't matter
The word suck is one Mom doesn't allow in the house
Isabella thinks because it's a mean word
Maybe it is
Maybe meaner than we think
Jezebel and her name
Will never be picked again
If you didn't know her story
Would you put her in your baby books?

Jezebel and the scorn
Men who urged to claim
Women who thrashed after convention
Men who wrote convention

Jezebel
Daughter
Jezebel
Wife
Jezebel
False Prophet
Jezebel
Prostitute
Jezebel
Eaten by the dogs

Jezebel, aren't we all?

Isabella and Jezebel
Show me the difference
Circle me beyond the letters that are far enough apart
Milkshakes
Pink
Makeup
Pink
Women
Pink

Isabella, Jezebel
Suffer from Hyper Association

Keyword: Enough

Kenopsia

the eerie, forlorn atmosphere of a place
that is usualy bustling with people but is
now abandoned and quiet

≈ Dying By Beauty ≈

There are worse ways to go
no one says when it's their turn
even though there are worse ways to go

I thought of you Marie Curie the other day
and the test tubes you carried
in your pocket
The faint mysterious light
killing you with its beauty
But there are worse ways to go

And yesterday I thought of you mom
and those children you cured in Louisiana
But physician you could not heal thyself
as much as you tried
And I thought of a little lamb
because even lambs sometimes refuse
to give up their throats
But there are worse ways to go

And now it turns out
you were right once again Albert Einstein
Gravitational waves have been confirmed
here in the lab today
Champagne stings the eyes
so I have my goggles ready

These mysterious waves
that compress and stretch all matter

(even these cancer cells)
we know are harmless

And how I wish they weren't
Because it seems to me
that it wouldn't be
such a bad way to go.

died.

6/27
~ Numb Silhouettes ~

waves slap
the shoulders of giants that have slept
so long

moss has grown on their
stone eyes
close to pine sipping mountair tea.

Her ears sprout ficus
forests, moist air,
furry inhabitants. They receive dew dreams under
storm,
develop concrete treated wood
barnacles rising
resembling towers

under salt spray and foam
under surface algaeic and opaque,
latch onto tide and rubble dumped, floating

RUBBISH

Wake, stoic granite
smoke a cigarette.
pop already.

~ Matt the Meat Bag ~

Matt's a street cleaner, and there's a lot of street to clean in the domes. People are always bleeding from their feet, or from other parts of their bodies. Blood wells up in their meat, sweating out of the twine of their exposed muscles when they're nervous. Gushing out of elbows brushed in passing or flicked from hands wet from bloody handshakes. Matt's no exception, except he has to wear blue plastic bags around his feet when he works. Ultra-absorbent push mop squelching against the glass street in front of him. If anything, Matt's meat, his veins and soft balls of muscle and awkward globs of fat, are even more delicate, and when he empties his footbags at the end of a shift in the staff steam shower, they are always full and sloshing.

Friction is the enemy. You learn that early. No clothes. No touching, or very little. Even the slight hand of the wind can cause waves of pain all over a body. A person, after all, is mostly exposed nerves and meat. Hence, the windbreaks, then the walls, then the domes. Great bubbles of white glass like upside down toilet bowls that cut even the pounding rays of the sun down to a sepia haze that hangs around everything like a mist. Matt can't imagine how people used to live.

Some people wear gel clothing now to cut down on contact, moving causes friction with the air for example, but it can suffocate you if you wear it too long and it's very fragile, plus it looks really pretentious. It comes in tins or tubes with names like "Zero-Gazz" and "Blue Nexus," and it smells chemical and sweet, like freshly disinfected footbags, which is off-putting to Matt.

A Zero-Gazz man walks by him now, thin layer of icy gel over his fatless chest like cellophane warped around two impossibly budging spools of wire. His pectorals are comically large, like baby heads, and the gel makes them shine as if they've been digitally

enhanced. The man eyes Matt lidlesssly with the perfect flat-muscled expression of a dome politician or salesman, as if he really isn't feeling any pain at the moment. Matt's own facemeat, he knows, is a twitchy mosaic of involuntary micro-spasms.

"Good work," the man says, swinging his arm, much faster that Matt would ever attempt, indicating the bloody swirl of the street behind him. "My taxes pay for you?"

Meatbag, Matt thinks as he mops at the man's bloody footprints, trying to erase them but only succeeding in smearing them around. The mop has a greasy, hydraulic handle which minimizes friction and smells kind of industrial and good, but it still hurts.

Matt sometimes pretends he is mopping the outside of a rocket ship in outer space. That he is some kind of robot that shouldn't feel anything but has somehow developed the ability to feel pain, but he has to keep it a secret, or he'll be taken apart for scrap. These layers of pretend, of pain and not-pain on top of each other, are hard for him to keep in order. Is he in pain or is he not? Distraction is another key, along with slow-motion. Focus is another enemy.

When he gets back to the 556th street janitorial station to turn in his mop head for a new one, he meets Abigail. She's in the equipment room with Boss Jon, and he's showing her the mops and the footbags and the steam showers. She's moving her fingers at her side like she's testing the quality and texture of the air. He likes her immediately. She's got delicate veins, the kind Matt's seen in magazines, and they're arranged in such a modest, clean network that he's almost dizzy. With his eyes, he traces the veins all up and down her while trying to make it look like a nervous tick or, better, some mysterious clue to his inner, more interesting self. Maybe he is, really, drawing constellations between the floating dust mites caught in the porcelain colored fluorescents as in sterile tractor beams, or he is reading off lines of dusky poetry in his head. Really, he is trying not to look like he's staring, and making her into an object. Although, everyone is kind of an object. And that's not his fault, is it? Boss Jon, on the other hand, doesn't seem to care whose fault it might. He practically licks her with his eyes.

The tile floor in here is green and hard, and it hurt his feet. The air is thick with hydraulic fumes and the odor of oil-based mop soap and wrung blood. She spots him, then rolls her eyes, her brow muscles arching feline and exaggerated. In that movement, Matt thinks he can feel some mirror of the motion of whole earth turning under him.

Boss Jon notices him at last.

"There he is! Lurking in the corner," Boss Jon says. "Come here. This is Abigail. You get to train her in the ancient ways of the mop."

Boss Jon's got the dark red, jerky face of an old man. Lear lines and scowl lines bent permanently into the dry flesh of his face-meat. But, at that moment, Matt could fall to his knees and kiss Boss Jon's bloody, pervert feet.

Abigail is some missing muscle finally returned to him. Some beating section of his heart or brain that he'd misplaced. Plus she was beautiful in all the classic, cut-beef ways. The suggestion of hipbones through her dainty waist meat. The shadows of her organs, under her meat, just visible in the right, old-timey light. The possible length and spring of the muscle fibers running up and down her thigh were painful for him to contemplate.

"What're the ancient ways?" Abigail asks, when they are alone with their matching mops and fresh footbags out in the bloody streets.

"There are 122 ways to look like you're like working without working."

"That's wrong," she says, sniffing her hand where it had touched the mop in a board way, and Matt is momentarily heartbroken. "There are at least twice that many."

And drowning in the reddish-brown light that is everywhere, always, like some kind of skin on the air, he falls in love all over again. Sometimes he worries about this, drifting to sleep in his bed-tub of red plasma at night, floating like some boneless fish, that he falls in love too easily. He's lost count. They always disappoint him. Or, someone is disappointed. But then, he thinks watching Abigail reach out a tentative tongue to taste the smudge of oil on her hand, better too easy

than too hard. Plus it's better to be heartbroken than to be nothing at all.

Days slide by like they're oiled. She tells him about the finger thing, about feeling the air, which does hurt. It's something she does to get people to notice her. Most people are completely still, and they move all at once in jerky, self-conscious flashes like biting down on wood. It's something about her that points to a depth, she says, that probably isn't there. He disagrees. She has also told him how difficult and painful it is to arrange her veins each morning, which come loose and float in the bed-tub plasma. She uses a pair of rubber tipped tweezers and locks the veins in place with surgical staples so that they accentuate the pleasing curves her hips and breasts, which she believes are too small. Her red silhouette, glistening and slick, is the one and only thing she can rely on in the world. In exchange, he tells her about making constellations out of dust mites and about being an imaginary space robot.

"It's about protecting yourself," he says.

"I know," she says, perpetually unimpressed.

Of course, she isn't perfect either. She's a bit lazy, will hardly ever mop anything, and as a result, Matt works harder than he ever has, buffing the street till his hands bleed even through the low friction oil, but he doesn't mind. She's also vain. She enjoys being looked at, he can tell. But that's alright too, because he likes looking at her.

One day, near the end of her training, he doesn't know how she'll get along without him and vice versa, returning to the 556th street office, they run into Jay. Matt feels a bulging vein pulse of anxiety pump through him at the sight. Jay's sitting on one of the greased, soft rubber benches in the steam showers, one ankle crossed over his knee. The knob of his ankle must be digging something bloody into his thigh meat, but he keeps on smiling his lippy smile. Jay's got more lip meat then most, it covers his teeth and can frame his smile and make him look deceptively handsome. A devil-may-care-but-I-don't grin. Matt, who's got almost no lip meat and whose teeth are always exposed in an air-dried, skeleton grin, has always pitied him for this. Smiling, for him, must be very painful.

Jay is talking about the new high-speed transport between domes with some of the other mops with meatbags attached. Jay was recently promoted to supervisory mop with a meatbag attached. Matt can practically feel the interest radiating off Abigail's meat. He imagines the strips of fluorescent bulb above him are actually comets with brilliantly white tails.

"They're called trains. They run as fast 60 miles an hour," Jay says. A few of the meatbags gasp, including Abigail. Jay catches her eye and stretches his lip meat even wider. "There's nothing quite as sexy as speed."

The veins in Abigail's cheekmeat fill with blood and turn a bright red. Blood is such an honest thing. Matt scoffs. Jay snaps his neck toward him. A quick motion, quicker than Matt would ever try to look at something, a motion that says, I am in control, and I am painless.

"Yes?" he asks, looking straight at Matt while at the same time appearing to barely register him, as if he were looking through the web of his muscles and tendons and into the stringy, dark mess of his brain.

"Well, it's just, 60 miles an hour?" Matt says, blood welling up between the fibers of his muscles at his brow and under his arms. Everyone, even Abigail, is looking at him now. He can smell oranges from somewhere, a dangerous fruit to eat. The uncontrollable sprays of citric acid like spurts of blood in the street. "Isn't that painful?"

Jay gives him a flexed muscle, bemused look. "You're confusing acceleration with velocity, Matty Boy. Velocity doesn't hurt."

Matt has his doubts about that, plus it sounds like something recited from an advertising pamphlet or even a math book, and he doesn't think Jay should get points for that. But, of course, he does. A long braid of steam escapes from one of the nozzles on the wall. It sounds, to Matt, like an incredible sigh.

"I can see how it might scare some people," Jay goes on, lazily turning his eyes back to Abigail as the steam gathers around him and fogs up the lights on the ceiling. "But I'm not the kind of person who won't do something out of fear."

Fear is a friend, Matt wants to say. Nobody else in the world is really looking out for you. For example, when's the last time you

touched somebody and didn't come away bleeding? Instead, he shifts his weight uncomfortably, and the blood sloshes in his footbags, and the regular kinks of pain radiate from all the places that move and especially from his feet, which have never stopped hurting through all the days of his life. Except once, when he was sick with a blood parasite that almost killed him, and he couldn't walk for three weeks. That had been a kind of paralyzed heaven. Under brighter comets than these.

Abigail says something nervous and flirty, and Jay responds with a chesty laugh like something echoing in a barrel. But their voices are becoming indistinct to Matt, drifting away from him. He is floating up and away into the cool fury of outer space, and all the nothing and the frozen comets and the absolute absence of all friction.

"You're sure you don't mind?" Abigail says, as if at this point there's s still a kill switch Matt could flip inside himself, some eject button he could still press that would deflate his heart and reset it to a factory blank. In the dull moonlight through the superdome roof high above, Abigail's meat is a light red color, almost pink, a color that feels intimate and embarrasses him. She must have taken a blood thinner to make her veins look lighter and more translucent. As she speaks, she leans forward and turns her neck, so it's almost as if she's looking up into him, through the weave of his meat and into some softer space inside him. A lot of people, it seems, could see right through him.

"I don't mind," he says. They're standing together outside a club called Bloody Euphoria, but which everyone refers to as The Meatbar, one dome over from where Matt lives. They're meeting Jay who had asked Abigail out who had been "too nervous" to go alone, and needed somebody to go with her.

"You're a good friend, Spaceman."

The sepia light of the moon is different than the sepia light of the sun, softer and kinder, and in it, he notices things about her that he hadn't seen before. The surgical staples that keep her veins in that pleasing cascade look garish, and they throw light like cheap jewelry. Her irises are not true blue, more a muddy sort of gray. Her muscles lack tone, and look sickly to him. She's a bit stubby. The marbling of

her cartilage is dry, and painful looking. Everything about her, in fact, bespeaks a kind of pain.

"Space robot," he says. "Not space man."

But she's already turning away, and her silique, he has to admit, is still bloody beautiful.

They're dancing, not touching but following the shapes of each other's body's with their hands. As if they were shaping statues of each other out of the neon laser air. Matt watches from one of the oiled up couches set up along the walls. The music makes his ears bleed. Jay moves a bit faster than Abigail. He's all gelled up like a freshly birthed seal. Light slides off and around him like water. Abigail is all mysterious bending and points of light off her staples.

Later, they are sitting next to him, making out in slow-motion. They're being careful, but blood still runs down their chins and necks. Matt's quite drunk now, sipping on a soft plastic straw through his teeth, and the whole world's got a motion to it that has something in common with the shaky pumping of his blood. Makes him sick. Matt wishes he could close his eyes, but he was born without eyelids. So instead, he summons all his powers of nonchalance and turns half away in his seat. Jay and Abigail turn into frisky shadows at the edges of his eye.

"Matt!" one of the shadows says, pulling back from the other, he doesn't know which, can barely hear through the blood and music. "Is this too fast?"

Then laughter. His eyes are on fire. Somebody's smoking weed as harsh as fiberglass a couch over, and the laser lights bounce off his eyes like crossbow bolts. He won't cry though, no, that's another kind of pain. A girl once said to him, You have a sad face, meaning, you're got enflamed tissue where your tears have irritated your cheek and chin meat, and it makes you look frantic and emotional, which isn't attractive.

"Matt! Matt! Can you hold these?" Something pressed into his hand. Blood vessels popping in messy, Rorschach patterns. What does this feel like? And this one? And that one?

Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

He opens his hand. A palm full of surgical staples catching

scraps of light.

He is a broken robot that doesn't/does feel pain, and he is the space mechanic running conflicting diagnostics on the robot, and he is the rocket ship that they are both riding, and he is the void of space griping all three so loosely, and he is the stars about which they all dream and dream and dream.

Maybe he'll cry just a little.

Matt's walking home in slow, drunken motion through a tunnel that connects his dome, 46-G, to the superdome behind him, 6-A. The tunnel is aboveground and semi-transparent, like the domes, and he watches the night wind toss vales of sand this way that out in the purple planes. A train passes outside, right through the wilderness of unbridled air, on magnetic tracks. A slight shuttering sound. Empty windows lit against the night. It passes him so quickly.

"You'll never get me in one of those," he says, then makes some beeping noises like he imagines a robot might. He watches the train recede into the blur of 46-G light. Who would even want him in one? His ghost reflection in the tunnel wall has no answer.

He looks away and up through the ceiling. He's between the polluting lights of the two domes now, and he's struck by the stars. Their sheer number. Their hard brilliance. Their forgiving light. Pain radiates up from his feet one clumsy step at a time, but the alcohol makes him numb and warm. He has heard that story about old light and dead stars. Stars that he's seeing now that have already punched black holes into the fabric of the universe or else have just fizzed out into loose fists of celestial gas and debris. But he is struck now by the realization that all light is old light. He sees nothing as it is. No one as they are. By the time light reflects off of someone, say Abigail, and travels through space and hits his eye, fractions of seconds too small for him to really hold on to, they are already different. They are already changed. He can never catch up to their real time. To real time at all. He can never see anything as it really is, only as it was. He's a few broken seconds behind it all.

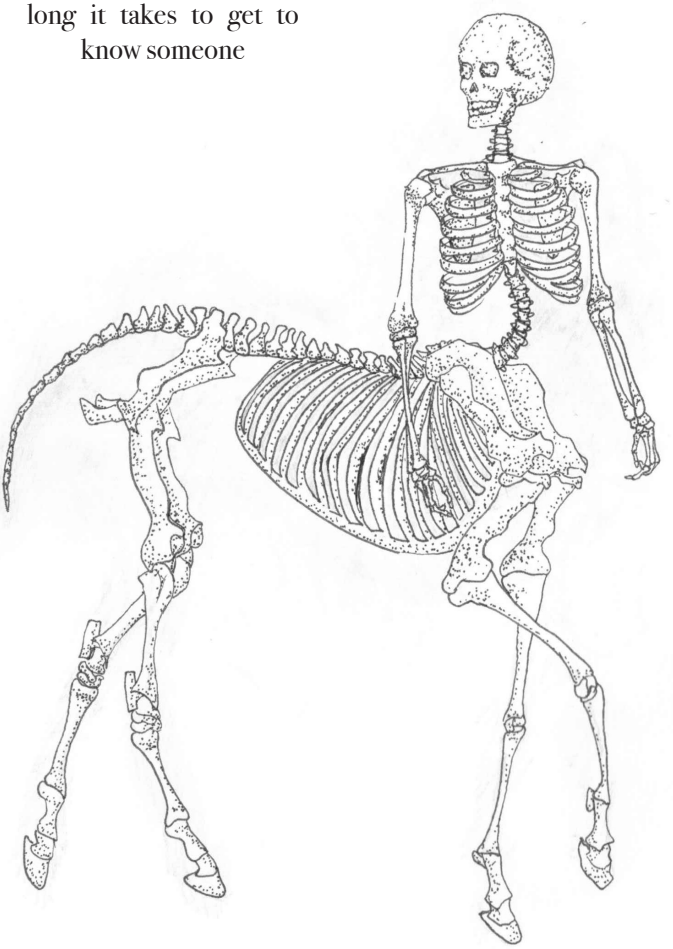
This realization makes him giddy, like a dirty kind of secret, and, even though it hurts, he can't seem to stop laughing and making little beeping noises at the stars. They've never seemed so close.

~ Sausage is for Lovers ~

Driving in the rain makes you desperate. Once
upon a time, I craved for a chilidog by Valencia St.
and there you were, slipping yourself casually
into my car thinking I was your Uber driver.
And it went from "Who the fuck are you?"
to "I'll give you a ride if you pay
for my food," to "Have you ever made sweet
love with a stranger ---" to "It's been good
sleeping with you but I gotta go." And I went,
still dreaming about all beef frank, sauerkraut,
and mustard.

Liberosis

the frustration with how long it takes to get to know someone



Dirk Petersen

an excerpt from

≈ Mule People ≈

Synopsis:

This excerpt forms the opening of a book-length work of non-fiction that is concerned with elucidating the subculture surrounding the humble mule. In carrying out this task, Mule People relies on narrating the equine experiences of my immediate family, beginning with our first mule acquisition when I was 7 years old and proceeding through subsequent stages and developments into my mid-twenties (i.e. the present day). Along the way, readers get a chance to meet a multitude of mule traders and mule lovers, as well as many of the mules themselves, and thus gain an understanding of just what this world is like. While many people are at least obliquely familiar with horse culture and the role of the horse in the popular imagination, I believe that mules and mule culture are much less understood, despite the vernacular richness contained within this slice of American culture.

However, this work is not meant to only be an exposé of a little-known subculture. Rather, Mule People is also a personal narrative that charts the transformations that an association with mules wrought upon my family. Some of the main dramatic energy arises from the tension of straddling the boundary between insider and outsider status in the world of mules, as well as the question of authenticity versus affectation. My parents' commitment to their hobby farm and equine herd was not always popular with the rest of the family, and my brothers and I grated against it at various times and to varying degrees. As the narrative unfurls, though, the narrator comes to see how, despite different levels of investment, the closeness with these Longears ultimately has left an indelible mark upon each member of the family. My family may not all be mule lovers, but we are, to some extent, all Mule People, and these animals and the subculture that attends them have been an inextricable facet of each of our lives.

Into the Paddock

A bray shatters the brittle silence of the air. A wind snakes along the ground, coiling itself around fenceposts and rattling the remaining husks of weeds and summertime grass that edge the boundaries of the fields and poke up through the days-old skiff of snow. A lone figure in an olive-drab, military surplus jacket, one size too small and straining around the belly, stands in the middle of a sandy paddock, the desert wind sucking the moisture from his tongue and leaving bitter grains of sand and dust stuck in his teeth and throat. He drags a cart on bicycle wheels across the stiff peaks of sand, the bright blue polyethylene the only flash of color in the early afternoon. Stopping and releasing his grip on the finger-numbing aluminum handle, he draws a tool from the stained blue well. Wrapping both hands around the wooden shaft, he squares his hips, draws back, and thrusts the tool toward something on the ground—Poseidon, hurling his trident!

A split second after making contact, one of the plastic tines snaps off on a frozen heap of manure.

He sighs. That was his favorite manure fork. And now he could no longer claim, with a gravity rather more befitting a baby-saving ER surgeon than a pre-teen chore-master, to be the only member of the family who never snapped a tine, but at least he would no longer have to go through the effort of hiding his preferred fork from his dad, who, in feats of frustrated brute strength, had snapped between one and every tine on all the other manure forks. Yes, no more need to tuck the fork behind the haystack, bury it under splintery old boards beside the ditch, or ferret it away in the bird poop-laden barn loft. As he trudges back toward the run-in shelter and tack shed, ruminating on this nearly-silver lining, several pairs of eyes gaze at him from the windlessness under the metal roof, hoping that, instead of looking for an ice-busting shovel, he's actually come back to give them hay, grain, cookies, carrots, or...really, any edible thing. Flabby flanks shudder with the sputtering noises of anticipation; long ears twitch. Mules.[1]

1 And a horse or two, but that's a tale for another time: the ardent love of a drugstore cowboy for his strapping palomino steed. Sound familiar?

And yes: that lone figure, gently straining the seams of his pilling Army surplus jacket and thinking 'Things weren't always like this..." is a younger I. But this isn't entirely my story, or those mules', though the former is its filter, the latter its raison d'être. Rather, these pages dole out the tale of a world crafted and curated by the lovers of these most singular equine, and how that world ended up having an inexorable and enduring—if, at times, not entirely welcome— impact on the lives of each member of my family.

Wait, a What?

Most people who live in the United States are familiar with horses. The horse occupies a special place in the national imagination, reaching its apotheosis in the twin pillars of Bluegrass- country horse racing and the "Wild West." Seabiscuit, Trigger, Man o' War, and Hi-ho, Silver! Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and the manicured spectacles that let the sweating colonizers in the crowd pretend they "won it" fair and square. he rodeo circuit, and that high 'n' lonesome sound. And car after car: Mustang, Bronco, Pinto, Colt. And you want the best Bud money can buy? You better believe it comes thundering in behind a team of Clydesdales, their dinner plate- sized hooves drumming the ground in time to the jangle of their traces.

But another equine makes its way through this nation. Little-known to many, but adored with singular devotion by those few who swear by no other steed, this animal is the mule. Before we go any further, then, it may be helpful to answer the question, "What is a mule?" (And pardon me if you know or think you know; this will take but a moment.) A mule is a hybrid achieved by breeding a horse and a donkey. Specifically, a mule has a donkey father (a Jack) and a horse mother (a mare). If the hybrid has a horse father (a stallion) and a donkey mother (a Jenny), that hybrid is called a hinny. For whatever reason, hinnies are rare, though people in the know (i.e. Mule People) will assert that a mule and a hinny are two distinct beasts. A hinny is allegedly more horse-like, evincing less robust bone and fuller, more horse-like manes. I have met one confirmed hinny, and felt sure that I had met two others, but who knows—maybe they were just gracile, mane-y mules. And maybe the "science" of hinny-mule differentiation

is crap. But it has its believers—and, I'll be honest; I think "hinny" is just fun to say. Anyway, a horse- donkey hybrid, by whatever name, is a sterile animal. Because horses have 64 chromosomes and donkeys 62, their offspring possess the odd and fertility-inhibiting quantity of 63. Except, once in a long, long while, through some mild genetic mutation, one of the chromosomes gets lost in the conception and a fertile mule is born. However, none of these mules have ever been males (John mules); fertility falls only upon the females (Molly mules). If you don't believe me, just check the back issues of Mules 'n' More magazine. I do believe they have every miraculous mule birth on record.

Moving from genotype to phenotype, mules always have the long ears of donkeys, though the shape of their bodies can range from very donkey-like (small butts, no withers[2], large, heavy-boned heads) to somewhat horselike (moderately beefy haunches, modest withers, smaller, finer-boned heads). Mules also have the benefit of a longer life span than horses. While a horse will make it to 30 at a stretch (25 is more typical), their usable life is often over by 20, after which time they are mainly suited for casual ambles around the field with little kids on their backs. In contrast, mules have a commonly advertised usable life of 35 years (though that number is a bit generous), and can often live to be 40. A select few can even make it to a heroic half-century of life, which is the upper end of a donkey's common lifespan. Sonically, they are quite equanimous offspring: many mules split the difference fairly exactly between their horse and donkey parents when it comes to the sounds they make. A characteristic mule call is a sort of "whinnibray," a mash-up of a whinny and a bray. The first half could easily be mistaken for a horse's call, the second half for a donkey's. It sounds something like "NEEEIIIGGGHHH-hey- hey-hey-hey...HEE-HAW! HEE-HAW! HEE-HAW!" Go ahead—try it out.

Of course, not all mules are so even-handed in representing both parents, and those who favor one parent's voice almost always operate on the donkey's side of the fence, using the bray as their calling

2 not the scapulae, as one might initially think, but the spines of the anterior thoracic vertebrae, which give horses their pronounced "shoulder hump"; they serve as anchoring points for muscles

card. Some mules also go their own way, with sounds that are altogether unique. Pedro, my family's sweetest and shyest mule, sounds like a small-displacement engine with the idle speed too low, a subtle and endearing putt-putt that says, "Please sir, I want some more." Other mules are more terrifyingly chimerical in their vocalizations. Imagine yourself on a cool evening in rural western Colorado. You and your friends have just finished an hours-long band practice, and have decided that you deserve a dip in the hot tub to unwind, make fun of each other, and talk alternately about new song ideas and the romances in your lives. The night is moonless, though stars fill the sky overhead, the milky way not yet lost to the march of city lights. Your piss-your-pants-funny best friend and drummer is in the middle of a story about the importance of shaving one's nipple hair when the night is splintered by a high-pitched, lusty cry, so much more than a screech or a howl, more even than a scream, a sound that seems to start somewhere in the dark uncertainty of the adjacent field but almost immediately swells until no one can say for sure where it's coming from. You all yell in terror and dive beneath the hot, foamy water, as if some safety exists in a giant outdoor bathtub. Western Colorado is a place where coyotes pick off cats and small dogs so regularly no one really bothers to comment on it; where a mountain lion was seen hiding in the brush in a wash, watching elementary school kids get on and off the bus; where another crazed mountain lion tried to take down a draft horse, leaving long, bloody gashes in the huge horse's flank; where a bear tore into a pen and killed an alpaca. A place where being terrified by sudden, primal outbursts of sound is not unreasonable. Was it some slavering, ravenous, mutant mountain lion, raised on uranium tailings and family pets?

No. It was Max the mule, complaining because more than an hour had passed since he was last fed.

So that's a mule in the broadest sense, but surely another question comes to mind: "Why mules?" At least, that's the question I've often been asked when telling people about the passions that governed much of my childhood. The pitch goes something like this: mules are much smarter than horses, which means that they are more dependable riding animals in many ways. A mule is much less likely to

bolt or "blow up"[3] than a horse, because they have a thinking mind—they will consider if something is really worth being terrified about. Furthermore, if you're some young hothead galloping a horse through the mountains at night, just be prepared, because you could make a horse run plumb off a cliff. A mule would never do that. No sir, a mule would come to a skidding stop-on-a-dime and let you go hurling off the cliff on your own.

Beyond this heightened instinct for self-preservation, mules are vouched to be more sure- footed. This means that they are genetically predisposed to be better at putting their feet in the best possible location while ambling down a precipitous and rock-strewn trail. A few reasons are offered to explain this tendency, all of which point to mules' donkey heritage as the key. One of these reasons goes something like, "Because they are. It's instinct." People who dwell upon this point in a Darwinian light conclude that, because donkeys evolved in arid landscapes that were characterized by steep, narrow, rock-strewn canyons and washes, a heightened "mind your step" instinct was more important to survival than for horses, who evolved in wide-open grasslands, where blind, brute speed was the most important key to evading predators. However, because not all Mule People subscribe to the theory of evolution, the explanation often stops at "Because. It's a donkey-mule thing."

Another explanation given for this sure-footedness is the compact dimensions of mules' feet. A mule will have smaller, rounder hooves than a horse of its same size, and the thinking is that a smaller foot can more easily find a secure perch. As with "instinct," mules' foot size is also due to their donkey genes. No one argues with that.

The third reason, and my favorite, is the assertion that mules' eyes are positioned farther back on their heads, allowing them to see all four feet at once. This last argument is often given as the coup de grace in a demonstration of the intrinsic superiority of the mule over the horse. Because sure, some horses can have small feet, and a real

3 This bit of equine lingo is not much of an exaggeration. Equine are fiercely strong, and a panicked equine is profoundly irrational. Imagine snapping leather, steel posts pummeled into scrap metal, riders flying through the air like sack of potatoes launched from a cannon.

seasoned trail horse with a good mind could learn how to be nearly as intuitive as a mule about picking a safe path, but your horse is never going be able to scoot his eyes back on his head and see all four feet at once. So take that, Shortears. As with the two reasons above, this wide-eyed trait is also attributed to donkey heritage.

In fact, most everything positive about mules is attributed to donkey heritage: their longevity, their strength, their endurance, their thoughtfulness, their sure-footedness.[4] So why not just use a donkey as your riding animal? Most people are probably familiar with the conception of donkeys as lazy, but, as someone who has ridden donkeys, I would argue that that old opinion is a misjudgment. What many people call laziness in a donkey is actually a side-effect of their not inconsiderable intelligence. Simply put, a donkey is smart enough to wonder why the presence of an ape on its back, feebly kicking it in the sides, should make the donkey feel like going for a long stroll that it had no intention of taking. The result of this pondering is often a decision to stay put. So to be blunt, while horses certainly can be very intelligent, a mule needs a little shot of horse-brain to dampen the critical thinking skills of its donkey father.[5]

Invested with the potency of such rhetoric, these Longears came power-walking into my life one winter day, and, as they say, things ain't quite been the same since.

That muley winter day, however, was not my first brush with equestrian dreaming. Long before the first copy of Mules 'n' More Magazine had entered the equine-free, in-town house of my early childhood, I had fallen hard for the high romance of the noble cowboy. I was not content, though, to let this fixation be constrained to the open range of my ravenous imagination. No way—I was going to bring it out for the world to see. Step one: the boots. They appeared

4 Likewise, almost every insult a mule could receive is related to that same donkey heritage: "jugheaded," "coarse-boned," "sway-backed," "pot-bellied," "ugly," "damn ugly," "rumpless," "ratty-maned," and the list goes on. These are, of course, subjective judgements assigned by the horse-supremacists one often encounters in the brush country of Western Texas.

5 Sorry, horses, but you gotta admit it's true. You know I love you, though.

one day in a closet or corner of a room, bright red and just my size. Put those on, and there was no trail I couldn't gallop through, no errant cow I couldn't track down. The jeans were easy, because this was America, but the belt—the belt was a talisman. On the tarnished brass buckle, a cowboy clung to a flailing bronc, one hand trailing in the air and his hat making a dramatic exit. Cinch my trousers with that belt, and I could feel the dauntless brass cowboy's riding skill course through me. The shirt, a snap-fronted double-breasted number in navy blue, just like the cavalry or John Wayne used to wear. Tied loose around the neck, ready to be drawn over the nose and mouth in the event of a high desert dust storm, a bright red bandana to match those buckaroo boots. And lastly, a tight-woven straw hat with a high, narrow crown, cinched under the chin with a stampede string, just to make sure I wouldn't lose it like the cowboy on the buckle.

So there I was, dressed for action. And what was the action? Oh, a trip to the mall with my mom to do some errands, or dinner out with the family at a restaurant. One time, in the food court, a kid, maybe a year younger than me at the time, jumped up, eyes wide, and shouted "Look at the cowboy, Mommy!" I whirled around, hoping to catch a glimpse of just such a hero. And then I realized: the kid thought I was the cowboy, all four of five years-worth of me. 'Wow,' I thought, 'guess my costume is really good!' And then, '...but I'm not really a cowboy.' Caught up in the embarrassment of my success, I soon abandoned the practice.

Where would such a buckaroo yearning come from? The effort I invested in my yee-haw show still baffles me (and how I wish I could summon such dedication for all my undertakings these days!), but before I write my masquerade off as entirely cringe-worthy, just imagine that you grew up in a place where a slice of the populace did wear cowboy boots, snap-front shirts, big belt buckles, and cowboy hats. A place that was on the big-league pro rodeo circuit. A place where ranchers still ran cattle all over the mountains, and still rounded them up with horses as often as with ATVs. Then, you can imagine my excitement at the prospect of equine in my 7- or-8-year-old life. Horses! At last! I could finally live down what I had begun to consider the shame of being a huge poser as a younger kid, because I would be the real deal.

"No, not horses son. Mules." What? My shoulders slumped. All those hours of reading Black Beauty, The Black Stallion, My Friend Flicka; all those nights filled with dreams of sitting astride a snorting horse as it galloped across the sand and stone of a desert that it glowed like embers beneath the flames of sunset...so nearly fulfilled, and yet—mules? Why? Well, for all of the reasons mentioned above. And just to prove it, my parents produced a low-budget VHS checked out from the Mesa County Public Library (housed in a leaky former Safeway, because taxes [and libraries] are for communists, according to Western Colorado) that explained how mules are the only mount sure-footed and trustworthy enough to carry tennis shoe-clad, white- knuckled Easterners up and down the narrow trails that lead to the floor of the Grand Canyon. I saw a lot of that video in the next few weeks and never found it entirely convincing, but my credulity was a moot point. The deal was sealed. We were to become Mule People.

Where to Put a Mule

If a person gets a hankering for a hamster or starts jonesing for a gerbil, some lifestyle changes are required. One has to, for instance, clear the detritus of their days off the top of their dresser in order to make space for a tiny enclosure (a home—don't call it a cage). One also has to make sure to refill a pint-sized drip bottle and dish out some pellets, some seeds and nuts, some little tooth-whittling treats. And of course, the most riveting part—scooping out and disposing of wood chips or recycled paper bedding soiled by the activity of tiny bladders and bowels. Furthermore, one cannot simply leave home for days on end without making provisions for the care of the little heart that beats above the underwear drawer. The joy of a rodent's companionship will engender a lifestyle change.

Scale this activity up through increasing sizes of non-human room-mates and the commitment is commensurate. Cats need scratching posts, lest they turn their critical artist's eye to remodeling the curtains; dogs need to be walked, to run, to have balls or frisbees or cats to chase. And though no one has decoded the emotional life of hamsters and gerbils as thoroughly as we like to think we have decoded that of cats and dogs, it is probably fair to say that these larger, more

involved animals also need larger, more involved affection; a handful of pellets and a nub of carrot dropped from above simply will not do for Fido and Desdemona.

From before my birth, my family's household was never less than a two-dog affair, and sometimes featured three or even four. Beyond this, the parties involved were no mere lapdogs, but consisted at various points of a breeding pair of Olde English Mastiffs (the male of whom, in addition to being named Chaucer, also weighed a feathery 185 pounds), an Airedale terrier, two Rhodesian Ridgeback mixes, and a German Shepherd.[6] My first Chores® and lessons about ResponsibilityTM came round age five in the form of making sure that each dog had a proper portion of food in the widely spaced bowls in the basement, while my younger brother Jack had to ensure that their water was topped up. For our pains, we were even, within a couple of years, awarded the tax-free sum of $0.50 each week, with the possibility of upgrading to an entire change-free $1.00 a week if we managed to perform our jobs well over time. For boys whose grandmother could elicit high-pitched and quickly hushed yells of delight by hiding nickels, dimes, and, occasionally (the jackpot) quarters around her family room, that chore allowance was serious business. And it came with serious consequences: the discovery of a bone-dry water bowl could mean no pair of quarters that week.

With these canines came a large fenced yard that took up at least half of the 3/4-acre lot. A patio sat directly outside the kitchen, beyond which a hill ran down toward the far fence line, where a set of monkey bars and a slide resided, a structure that was often turned into a ship with the application of scotch-taped paper flags bearing inscrutable insignia and the occasional lumpy Jolly Roger. Multiple garden planters hugged the walls of the house and processed down one side of the hill, each with their own theme (tomatoes, herbs, desert succulents, various flowers, and even the disappointing strawberryless strawberry plants, which my parents planted as ground cover and my brother and I considered a minor crime). There were three steps down from the sidewalk to the grass, which were made of redwood. In ad-

6 a 30ish-pound Keeshond stray with a cantankerous streak did somehow sneak in there in those early days. Some things are inexplicable.

dition to not being a wood that my 5 or 6-year-old judgement considered "red," these steps were painted gray. I stood by and watched my dad do it, confounded by this collapse of nominal logic.

With this yard—which was, according to my mom, for 1) the kids, 2) a pleasing scene, 3) kitchen accents, and 4) the dogs, and, according to my dad, for 1) the dogs, 2) the kids, and 3) to look good—came the labor of upkeep. Leaves and had to be raked, planters weeded, dog-gnawed chain link reattached, plants watered, grass cut, and dog poop removed. All of which is to say that the act of upsizing to equine was not without some logistical precedent.

But that yard was not fit for the hooves and heft of a herd, so, with my parents' mule acquisitions beginning in earnest, other arrangements had to be made. Enter Reimer's Rainbow Ranch, a commercial "horse-boarding"[7] operation located a twenty-odd-minute drive from 627 Fletcher Lane. Reimer's cut it for a little bit, but the greater intimacy, nearer location, and opportunity for our herd to share a corral as a unit drew my parents to Reflection Farm. They would catch their mules, tie them to a hitching rail, and get to brushing and bonding and tacking up. I would crouch on my heels by the edge of a small, just-for-show pond in front of the property owners' house and watch the tadpoles that swarmed around the water's edge, looking on as they threaded stalks of grass and thin, patchy blankets of algae, looking on as they grew larger visit by visit, until one day there were only frogs hiding out of sight and no more tadpoles. And always, my parents voices would come calling sooner or later for me to saddle up and ride.

Despite the smooth set-up and idylls of Reflection Farm, the desire for something more was brewing in both my parents. Brewing, had I only known, for years, long before my birth. One day, that desire gathered itself and rose up, and Jack and I learned that we would be moving.

I do not remember the words or even the moment that the decision was revealed to us. I only remember the feeling of the impending motion—moving. I cannot speak for other children, but

7 Alas, mules and donkeys are excluded even in the nomenclature of much of the equine scene

for my Jack and me, few possibilities in those elementary school days were more terrifying. The words seemed to float around school in a hush, in the breathy tones that are saved for subjects like the boogie man—subjects that, if they hear you name them, can come and claim you as their own: "Abby's moving. Sean is moving." Maybe the fate accumulated such gravity because no one ever seemed to know why they were being moved. Moving always seemed to have something to do with parents, grandparents, guardians, jobs, marriages—categories that floated above the understanding of of most grade-school minds, and that involved something utterly beyond any kid's control: the decisions of grown-ups. Bedtime stories, snack items, and sandwich contents could be chosen, and sometimes things like activities could be appealed (a bike ride instead of a walk, for instance), but "moving" carried the weight of inevitability, the weight of a logic that was not the logic of peanut-butter-and-jelly or monkey bars. It seemed to emerge from nowhere, but to be even more unbudgeable than a fifth-grader hogging the high slide.

By this time, Jack had already experienced the vagaries of that gerund. Kimberly, brown- haired, blue-eyed, bedimpled; Kimberly, with whom he had already picked out each of their four children's names; Kimberly, who once gave him a big wet mushy kiss inside the cardboard house in the preschool's playroom, imitating whatever daytime television drama was playing at home when the half-day was over; Kimberly, the love of his preschool life, had moved away. In their sorrowful parting, she gave him a portrait of herself, ensconced in a white ceramic frame that was shaped like a teddy bear with its arms encircling her face. The painted blue ribbon around its neck matched the blue in Kimberly's eyes. For years that picture sat in his bedroom, and even still sits in the project room of my parents' house, amidst the sundry hardcopy photos of another era.

I had nothing to compare with that loss, but even second-hand, I knew that moving was nothing I wanted any part of.

"No!"

"But—!"

"My friends!"

"The playground!"

"The attic!"

"Why??"

"Nooooo!"

The protest was stirred up by all of these reasons, and others—the trampoline that our next-door neighbors, the Kelleys, let us use freely; the ravine (aka "The Ravine") between our two houses that provided hours of exploration and endless opportunities for commando squirt-gun skirmishes; the excellence of the Kelleys' steep yard for sledding in winter and rolling down in summer; the lowing of cows that drifted in the evenings from the field below the far fence; the way the train whistle could just be heard at night, a faint keening as you drifted off to sleep; and even the tiny brown bat that lived next to the light by the door in the carport. In short, all those things that add up, that weave into a place and make it home.

My brother and I sprang to the defense of staying put. For my part, I emphasized how close our current house was to the hospital where my dad most frequently worked, and how downtown, where my mom kept her office, was only a couple minutes further on. And what a great school Pomona Elementary was, Mom and Dad! Think about that end-of-year program we put on last year—wow! Each of my classmates and I, dancing in paper dinosaur masks we had made ourselves while tossing multicolored scarves into the air to the tunes of "The Locomotion" and "The Twist." Remember? Where else were you going to find a performance like that? Or Mr. Lasse, the principal who knew every single student by name, along with most of their parents. And all the neighborhood walks, and how City Market was only a hill away, and really, the yard —I mean, I hate tomatoes, but look how many tomatoes we have here! And just...what a nice house! What a great house! It's just...a great house. I mean...look at it! It has a carport! And that tree out front is great for climbing. And that tree on the patio out back is great for climbing. And it has a great big attic that could hold almost anything, even a mule. I mean...the house...!

My brother, for his part, took a more cunning tack. Our neighbor three houses over was the venerable Gene Taylor, founder of Gene Taylor's Sporting Goods, the outfitting mecca of Grand Junction, CO. How many Gene Taylor's price tags—affixed to lanterns, vests, hiking boots, tents, sleeping bags, jackets, pairs of sun glasses, etc.—had been snipped off at 627 Fletcher Lane? More, I suspect, than those

of any other establishment. In addition to being the local mogul of the great outdoors (that are, I submit, greater in Colorado and Utah than in most other places), Gene Taylor was also a good-neighbor-turned-family-friend who lived on a seven- acre parcel that had somehow snuck its way into our 1960s-era subdivision. Most of the land was undeveloped, given over to the brambles and scrub like that which lodged in the maw of The Ravine. Lying dormant. Ready for somebody's great idea.

Perhaps it was my parents who first broke the news to Gene about the probable move, but it was Jack who saw an opportunity. With the tactless yet innocent guile that characterizes some children (he was also known to yell "I get the fullest!" when glasses of chocolate milk were being passed around preschool), Jack somehow directed Gene's attention to the 5 or 6 acres of unused space that stretched beyond his yard. Surveying the territory, something sparked in Gene's eyes. In short order, he presented my parents with a proposition: "There's plenty of space down there for a pen. Even a few pens. Keep a couple mules and your boy's pony on the place. It's no problem. I'd be glad to have them! Hate to see you all move away."

"Well, thanks Gene," my dad said. "Really appreciate the offer. But we really want to have our own place to keep our critters. And besides, if we put them down there, where would I keep a tractor?"

And no one could answer that question.

Nicole Jost

Thug

CHARACTERS

BLACK MAN #1, 20s

BLACK MAN #2, 20s

WHITE WOMAN, OLDER THAN 20s

WHITE MAN, OLDER THAN 20s

SCENE

BLACK MAN #1

When I was born, I was called:
Baby boy

BLACK MAN #2

Son

BLACK MAN #1

My son

BLACK MAN #2

Brother

BLACK MAN #1

Cuz

BLACK MAN #2

A gift,

BLACK MAN #1

A gift,

BLACK MAN #2

A gift.

BLACK MAN #1

When I was 5, I was called:

BLACK MAN #2

Lil B

BLACK MAN #1

Playful

BLACK MAN #2

Creative

BLACK MAN #1

Smart

BLACK MAN #2

Rowdy

WHITE WOMAN

Wild

BLACK MAN #1

Wild?

BLACK MAN #2

Wild

BLACK MAN #1

When I was 9, I was called: Be-hind

WHITE WOMAN

Cut-up

BLACK MAN #2

Class clown Poorly behaved Common

WHITE WOMAN

A problem

BLACK MAN #1

A problem?

WHITE MAN

A problem

BLACK MAN #1

When I was 13,

BLACK MAN #2

When I was 13,

BLACK MAN #1

Only 13,

BLACK MAN #2

Oh, for real? You were 13? Cuz I was only 12.

BLACK MAN #1

When I was 12,

BLACK MAN #2

And when I was 13,

BLACK MAN #1

And 14,

BLACK MAN #2

And 15,

BLACK MAN #1

And 16,

BLACK MAN #2

And 17,

BLACK MAN #1

And still not 18,

BLACK MAN #2

Never to reach 18.

BLACK MAN #1

I was called:

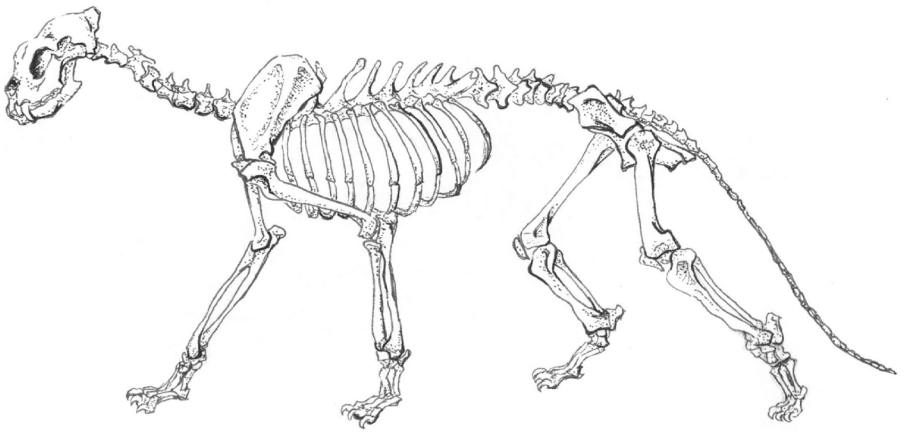
ALL

THUG.

End of play.

Ruckkehrunruhe

the feeling of returning home from an immersive
trip only to find it fading rapidly
from your awareness



O Odysseus

I wonder what happened to him, O wily Odysseus, travelling the world of his own imagination
around the city by the bay,
He whose hands break every day from the malnourishment, dehydration and the sun poisoning
that might disease a man lost at sea or alone in the city with no Ithaka to yearn for—
He who cannot help but be curious what he can lay his hands on, either in desperate need to
survive, or the in fear of having had nothing to eat for at least
the span of a voyage, only to be driven away again
He who cannot help but hear the sirens
He who cannot reveal his name
He who will not be at rest even when nostos is all around him but in his kingdom of tragedies,
the gods' wills or destiny
He who spends his days hearing no loving words from others
He who travels on despite men dying around him
He who has spoken to the inhabitants of a true hell, all suffering with their stories to be told to
the first spirit they see
He who remains cunning in the manners of deception
He who sleeps in the bushes of his own homeland
He whose past wars weigh heavy upon him
He who longs to see his son and wife with more than his memory's eye
He who can lose sight of home
He who begins each days somewhere different then when he sleeps again, variously contained

for years at a time, banished to a new world nowhere nearer
home than Hades
Yes, I wonder where you have gone, Odysseus of San Francisco, cunning and wily, storyteller
and diplomat, warrior and traveler, father and son, husband
and brother in arms,
Where have you gone?

≈ To Fit the Description ≈

How does a beige or tan Toyota become a burgundy Maxima?
When "occupied by four black males," the 911 caller explains.
Watch. Watch it happen:
Choppy steps, backwards:
"Turn away!" the ghostladen white men in state trooper brown scream.
"Backwards!"
Their guns are up and paralyzing, but they insist the pulled over quickly:
"Turn. Away."
It speeds up.
"What are we doing here sir?!"/ "Who's in the car?"/
"My kids."/ "How old are they?"
"6, 8, 9, and 10!"
The car door opens, he steps out. Fear sits him back down immediately. He reemerges. His skinny (hot) brown arms (under the cops white lights), flailing up.
He peaks out, the wideeyed 6, 8, 9, or 10 year old.... with his hands up.
How does he know to do that? Who knows to do that, at 6, 8, 9, or 10?
All I can think is when my brother learned to do that. My brother used to be 6, 8, 9, or 10. Now he's 6'2".
He told us about one of the times, just one of them, over runny Sunday meatloaf and hard swallows around the table. When the officer's light bounced off the whites of his rapidly aging brown eyes. He knew to put his hands up.
I'm not sure how far up his hands could reach back then. And we made sure the story remained a blur. I'm not sure if he was 10, and 5'10. Or when the mark on the wall marked him.

Notes from Contributors

Ryan Row writes both literary and speculative fiction. His work has been published, or is forthcoming, in Bayou Magazine, Daily Science Fiction, The Sierra Nevada Review, and elsewhere. He is a recent winner of The Writers of the Future Award, and will be graduating from San Francisco State University's graduate program this May. You can find him online at ryanrow.com.

Kayla Eason is currently in the MFA Creative Writing program at San Francisco State University. Prior to graduate school, she had an arts column in her community where she interviewed numerous painters, scultors, photographers, musicians, and the like. She is grateful to have heard their stories and witnessed their passions.

Amanda Chardonnay is primarily a playwright and a poet but if you ask her, she will write anything. Amanda is interested in the small absurdities of life, softly calling attention to the unnoticed, and of course celebrating and fighting for women everywhere. This is her last semester at San Francisco State University. She looks forward to new adventures and to missing the ones she had here.

Kimberly Reyes recieved her MA from Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism in 2013. She's since been a post-graduate journalism fellow at the Poetry Foundation, a Callaloo fellow, a Watering Hole fellow, and is currently a William Dickey fellow and MFA candidate in poetry at San Francisco State University. Her nonfiction has appeared in the Associated Press, Entertainment Weekly, Time.com, The New York Post, The Village Voice, Alternative Press, ESPN the Magazine, Jane, Honey, NY1 News, and The Best American Poetry blog. Her poetry has appeared on The Feminist Wire, The Acentos Review, and in Belleville Park Pages. She has been a featured reader at numerous Bay Area events, including Beast; Crawl; MFA Mixer; and for the MOAD Vangaurd in San Francisco.

César Coraizaca has a BA in Creative Writing from San Francisco State and is currently finishing a Teaching Credential there. He hopes to still be writing many years from now. César has previously been published in Transfer Magazine, Cipactli, and J.C.F.B. Send him stuff to read at crcs714@gmail.com.

Nicole McKeon lives on the top of a hill with her partner and dog. When not writing she can be found reviewing popcorn and gawking at dogs. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in Transfer Magazine, Uncanny Valley Magazine, and These Fragile Lilacs.

Bradley Penner is a fourth-year Creative Writing student, born in Fresno and raised in California. His work is found, or forthcoming, in Milvia Street and Sutro Review, as well as the Berkeley-based journal/zine Something Worth Revising which he co-curates with cohorts. He lives under a rent-controlled roff in the East Bay and won't take the settlement.

Sofia Lopez was born and raised in Guaynabo, Puerto Rico. She received her BA in English from Cornell University and spent a year working as a web developer before moving to San Francisco to pursue a career in writing. She is currently an MFA candidate at San Francisco State University and her fiction has appeared in Rivet Journal, as well as previous editions of Transfer Magazine.

Transfer 111

César Coraizaca
Briana Williams
Nicole McKeon
Kimberly Reyes
Danica Ronquillo
Dominique Santos
Amanda Chardonnay
Kyleigh McPhillips
Bradley Penner
Dirk Petersen
Tsang Clement
Meaghan Krey
Erik Hermstad
Ramon Jackson
Paris Vasser
Sofia Lopez
Kayla Eason
Ryan Row
Nicole Jost

Jahneah Taylor
Salvador Perez
Vanessa Hamill
Jennifer Alton
Phillip Harris
Kurt Otis

Spring

2016