



HOTHOUSE

H O T H O U S E





SPRING  
2017

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Dedicated to the writers  
who make their home in Parlin Hall



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## EDITOR'S NOTE

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As I reflect back on my years spent with Hothouse, I can't help but remember the first day I walked into a staff meeting as a freshman. I was wide-eyed, clutching the 'literary quote' I had been instructed to bring, and entirely too afraid to contribute to the interesting, bookish conversations happening around me. I felt like I had stepped into a Nabokov novel. I felt like I had finally found a home here at UT.

Hothouse continues to be that home. From our staff readers to our editorial board to our contributors, Hothouse is comprised of a group of people who have created a warm, cozy space for the literary ambitious at UT. This issue is no exception. Within these pages you'll find stories about what family means, what gender means, what it means to love and be loved. These are poems about loss: about losing our fathers, our lovers, our sense of what it means to be a writer. This issue is about togetherness. It's about empathy. It's about coming together to share our stories and learn from one another.

This journal comes from a place of passionate work ethic and an unbending appreciation for literature. From the Hothouse staff who worked relentlessly to sift through countless of submissions, to the writers who braved rejection and sent us their fiercely loved manuscripts: thank you. Without you, none of this would be possible.

— Mary Elizabeth Dubois



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# FICTION

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# The First Computer Had Teeth

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Colin Traver

The first computer had teeth. It struggled to turn on but it had plastic teeth. The teeth were fanged and fixed to its monitor. A houseguest placed the teeth there during a loud October night. No one remembers their placement nor which guest placed them. The teeth simply appeared to the boy two days after their placement. They stayed there for three years.

He sometimes squeezed the teeth when he sat at the computer. He tried to put his fingers down their throat and scraped the back of the throat with his nails until the monitor bore thin beige abrasions. He slid his thumbs on their dull fangs and play-pretended like fresh-cut blood dripping down his palms and wrists. Once he made his little sister kiss them. He had her open her mouth the same way the teeth gaped open. She yelled and ran to her room and placed finger-sized dinosaurs and neon orange war machines around her bedroom door to protect her.

He kissed them too. He chewed them.

They'd get a second computer, and the teeth went out with the first.

He played football and avoided playing the piano. He almost avoided playing football but his older brother and father wouldn't have it. His brother threatened to crush him. His coach talked about what he used to do in a faraway jungle many years ago before the boy was born. How fire fell into the jungle and smelled different from fire anywhere else in the world. How a place like that was damned to ruins and he may have been the only blessed one out. Some of the boy's teammates from grades above him said the coach had pictures in a box at his house of girls with bloomripe wounds for eyes. They said the girls were tied to rocks. They said the coach invited them to his house to drink beer, and he showed them these pictures and said that this is something you can't have anymore. The coach said school was useless save for football and Church and girls.

The boy took up her invitation for the first time when he was 14. She was only four years older. They snuck between the margin of the fence line and the monolith slate of light descended from her stepmother's kitchen window and shivering indelible on the night-time driveway as shadow confections of tenants came and went. They held laughter and she crouched down like she'd become some molting preter-shamanic ghoul leading him on a quest between ice shelves. Holding his hand, biding anticipation and voice with little leaps over cracks in the pavement that showed, in his mind, just how small his legs really were if they were so much thinner than a girl's.

In the shed she showed him her cot and lamp and posters of archaeological sites, monuments of once mammoth proportions now crumbling, humbled by sheave upon sheave of skyscrapers that now shimmer sterling, but they'll far apart too, she said. She said she'd like to help preserve the ancient monuments one day or at least recreate them somewhere far away, somewhere where imitations won't die. She said there would be circular colonies in space, but only statues and art and architectural monuments should be allowed there but no humans, because humans destroy their own monuments in pursuit

of new ones. They never want to imitate but always end up doing so anyway, in some form.

On her cot she had him kiss her tummy and her sides and hug her legs and arms like they were cushiony obelisks and kiss them too. And kiss her armpits and hands and palms and back. She led him in and said it was ok, it was ok, and that it wouldn't hurt her if he moved like that and he moved like that and collapsed immediately on her as a never-yet-heard signifier summoned its own degree of candela.

For one plush moment he fell within a person.

As she lay out beside him and repeated that what they did was ok, he said, "Finally."

The third computer had tinsel and a soulsame eye; he'd be arrested.

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# Devils

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Jeremy Scroggins

[...]

Completed flow meter maintenance and calibrations - metering off by .25ppm

operations manager not concerned - fixed metering - chlorine?

Dear reader, Dear town, Dear party, Dear human, Dear devil, Dear goat, Dear God,

I do not know how to start. This is my last thought. For the love of the Almighty God, please be safe in your reading of this. Do swear to me that you are safe and warm and unharmed before you read another word. Do not stay. I fear I am cursed. It is all wretchedness.

Forgive me. I simply want nothing of this sort to happen to you. And forgive me for being in such a state before you, if you even have discovered this letter with me--on my body. And what if you are not reading this at all? What if I am only writing this to be consumed by devils? They will eat the paper. They will eat my whole notepad. Days of useless notes. Evidence. Now this letter. They will eat everything. They will eat me.

It is cold. Not bitterly. Not the frost-fanged cold I felt whaling on the Laptev Sea, sea spray and wind like fire on the skin. No. This is the slow cold. The cold that starts at the skin and digs as the sun cowers behind the mountain. It digs into the body until it flushes it with a madness. It is a madness of hoping for the terrified sun, like my skin may taste the sweetness of the yellow warmth. It's there but I cannot taste it. I point my face to it like a prayer, but the devils steal it from me. I may perish from shaking or hunger before the cold gnaws the hole into me. Oh, God! Please let me pass into the blissful stupor before you send me into eternal damnation!

My name is Viktor Fedorov. I write you in English in hope that if you understand the words, you may understand my story without coming to judgment before reading. First let me tell you why I lie here dead before you. See my broken leg, that is why I am here, stuck on this rock high in these mountains. It is broken for many reasons, reasons that begin with a telephone call from Robert Popov. This man called one evening in Houston. He told me of an opportunity to help my countrymen in the old Soviet southern provinces: Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan. I have old blood in these areas and felt it was my duty to assist. I am an hydraulic engineer, water treatment specialist, and water conservationist.

Water. It does not judge. It is all powerful. We live by it. We die without it. We are often destroyed by it. It is the bond, the shape of it—the hydrogen and the oxygen together like the proud family tree. The father and two sons. The structure of water is like the ancient Roman armies; each molecule shield-to-shield for the purpose of being itself. I do not know why water is, only that it is beautiful. Even the crystals around me. I can not help but marvel.

This Robert told me that it would be a matter of one week, tour these areas to speak with leaders and provide my expert advice. He made it clear that I would be paid one-hundred and fifty-thousand US dollars for my consultation. He told me of a new Russian-American program under a branch of the United Nations to promote cooperation for international aid. I did not confirm this. I could have

retired on the money. I accepted the offer and within the hour Robert forwarded me the information for my flight booking to Almaty, Kazakhstan. I was excited to help these people, to do something that came so easily to me, making sure people had healthy water to drink, and not worry about the water flowing one day to the next. It was a lot of money.

I arrived at the airport in Almaty with no sleep. I could barely hold my bag from fatigue. There was a man in a brown suit and mustache that covered his upper lip. He held a sign with my name. I do not know if it was the time without sleep, the uneven lighting, or the strong smell of frankincense and oranges, but the man was like constipation. This is not to say he looked like a man constipated, but an embodiment of constipation. His shoulders, they were high, tight, and uneven. His torso was hard and contorted like that of frozen waste ejected from a high altitude. As I approached he nodded to me and the sign, his brown eyes under wild brows confirming I was his relief. I followed the man out into the darkness of the car lot. I was still thinking and watching the man; he walked like a man that never learned to walk, but I did not notice that there were no lights. Almaty is a city of repute and the international airport is unlike any other. But it was dark, and it was difficult to know where I was.

He drove me through the brilliant streets of Almaty to Hotel Kazakhstan. Warm yellow street lamps over clean black roads. Tall white-plastered buildings that reflected onto those glossy roads. It was all bright and shimmering, light floating on night-water.

I cannot even begin to describe the lavishness of Hotel Kazakhstan. It was monumental and old. It felt like my father's father's bones. I felt I had made the right choice when I laid in such an enveloping bed that night. Oh, how comfortable I was! Oh, how warm I was! I slept until my door opened and a different man, a quite normal-looking man wearing a shiny tuxedo. He informed me that my party requested me in the lobby. "Sir," he said, "they say that they will be leaving in thirty minutes, and to take your time, and to not rush, and," he pulled out a card from his back pocket, "Welcome to Kazakhstan."

We are pleased to have your expertise in the mission.” The tuxedoed man bowed a little, pulled open the curtains and left. I could not even say thank you. I was not even awake then, but I was blinded. Those curtains swayed back and forth, twelve feet from the ceiling, thick cotton fabric, purple with golden threading and golden tassels scraping the wooden floor. Maybe the sleep, or simply the beauty of the hypnotic motion of the curtain’s sway kept my eyes from the blinding window. I saw the mountains. Oh, the mountains! I could hate them now, but who could not love them from that place and that time. I was warm, and comfortable, and could see them as an ideal. They climbed so high into the sky, with white peaks blending into the clouds. They are the mark of purity. Angelic crystals, touched only by God. They were the reason I wanted to come, I had told myself. I loved the money. And here I am dying from what I lied I wanted and loving what I lied. It is a thing to be deserved. My desire was too powerful that not even the mountains could stop me, and so I dressed and met the party.

They were five men. Two I swear were twins. They wore matching blue jeans, black shirts, and black boots, and had faces that had never smiled and never ate a full meal. One man, mostly bald with blond hair warming his ears, wore a tight vest on his fat body and laughed too much. He said to call him Bog.

“Vik, nice to meet you.” He shook my hand. It was cool, wet, and weak. “This is Z and W,” he said, pointing to the other two men. Z talked of his sister getting pregnant and the man that did so leaving her. He wanted to kill him, and showed me his gun tucked in his pants. W did not speak, but pulled his long sleeve up to show me the tattoo of an elephant standing on a ball.

“We will head to the border and check one of the water treatment plants there,” Bog said. “It is a long drive. You should try and get some sleep.”

“Oh, no thank you. I would much like to see the mountains as we travel.”

“I insist, Vik. We want you to be in good order when we arrive.” He handed me a pill. “It will help you feel well and rest.”

“What is it?”

“Dramamine with Aspirin.”

I took it. I hate vomiting on the turns in the mountains. I can never ask for a break to pull off the road because I love the mountains. I know it is the pride. I took it, and saw the mountains as we drove from the city and had dreams of the mountains and beautiful flowing waters.

I woke with Z holding something near my face. What it was I do not know, but it was unpleasant. Smelled of cleaning. Bog laughed. I was awake but felt tired still. I sat in a room, a small office of a sort. There was a low, loud murmur and vibration in the place, and a console with monitors on one wall.

“We need to know what the proper quantity is for chlorinating the water.”

“I thought I was to speak with the leaders. The local engineers. Someone local here. What town is this?”

“We have already spoken with them. We need to know how much chlorine is safe to drink, but will clean the water quickly.” Bog pulled a red cloth from his vest and wiped his head.

“That is not how it works. Where are we?” The Aspirin did not work.

“Just tell us.” Bog and Z sat at the little table with me with papers and charts laid out.

“Four parts per million is the highest for human safety,” I said. “Everyone working water knows this.” Z left the room. The twins left with him as he passed the door.

“Thank you, Vik.” Bog neatly folded his red kerchief. “The machines here are broken.”

“What is wrong? I can fix them.” My head was still buzzing. And if the machines were broken why was the facility so loud?

“No time for that now. I need you to go with W outside to help the others measure the chlorine and mix it into the water supply.”

I could hear the single-stage centrifugal pumps running at around two-thousand rotations per minute. That’s close to six-thousand gallons per minute cycled through if the pump is in good order. But it was louder, so probably more. Maybe three pumps.

“Is it the valve exchange module? We must fix it before we calibrate.”

“It’s a different system. I’ll show you after.”

I don’t know if it was my head or the buzz, or the money that made me stand. Oh, God, but I did it! I stood and went to them by their large plastic tanks hovering next to the adding pool. It is like an American backyard pool, a square boring thing with concrete around it. But this had pipes and tanks instead of chairs and happy children. The water looked like it was boiling. Everything looked to be working. Maybe the output. Maybe the distributor lines.

“It is ready!” Z yelled over the churning waters.

“No! It cannot be. I need many measurements. I need to know the water supply. We cannot add the chlorine before I can calculate the volume needed.”

“It has been done already.”

“What? Then why am I here?” I could smell the chlorine escaping from the murky plastic tanks.

“You must add the chlorine. Specialist must do it for terms to satisfy UN,” Z said. I was standing next to him now.

“I need to see how the chlorine reacts with the water. The organic and inorganic materials as well as metals. I must test the free chlorine after the reactions to determine the level of disinfection and adjust the levels. It is a process. It takes time.”

“We do not have time. We must travel to many places.”

“What is the problem!” Bog yelled on approach.

“I cannot do this,” I said.

“Vik, you must. These are our old countrymen and they need our help. Do you not think we care for them?”

“No, of course. It is not that. I am simply used to a certain procedure.”

“And you must be. But here we do not need to have such procedures. People, they are suffering and we need to help them. This is a large population and the water is extensive. Add the chlorine and we will move on.”

“Where are we?”

“Vik, add the chlorine and let us move on. I will tell you. We’re running behind. You slept too much and we had to work slowly without you.”

I did it. I felt bad. Unprofessional. How did I fall asleep so hard with Dramamine?

I walked to each of the three tanks and turned the valves. The chlorine flowed out evenly down from the tanks through small tubes like at a death hospital. Almost like water, but it was not water. I watched the chlorine empty from the tanks into the open pool. The tubes were yellowish and old with cracks that let the chlorine seep onto the concrete. My head was worse with the chlorine vapors that escaped with the liquid. It is a burning sensation in the lungs that hits the head like white phosphorous. As the last drips fell into the pool, the twins came and urged me back out to the large van with the others.

“Welcome to the team,” Bog said.

“I don’t understand.”

“The people here,” Bog said, “they hate you. Now they will want to kill you.”

Z pulled out his hand-sized pistol and said to me, “Safety, off. Shoot. Bang. Bang.”

It was then that I realized that I was not in the southern borderlands. I did not know where I was, but I was farther south, and I had just condemned an unknown number of innocent Afghans. I tell

you, it was a colder, more damning feeling than how I feel now waiting for death to take me.

It took me some time to piece together their motivations as we drove to another water treatment plant. I do not think I will ever know how they managed their operations and why there was no one at the last treatment plant. I do know why I was there. I am the American on the dossier. The hole in the trust between nations. I am another bullet point on a deskman's list to why we should not be trusted. W showed me a Polaroid with my name on it. It was me turning the valves. They have a deep hate for Afghanistan. The war is still alive in them.

I do not know for certain, but I believe the twins were Chechen, possibly W as well. The others I am not sure. Bog especially. Such a fat man is not hard to find in these places, but to be fat, and have money, and with blond hair. He may not even be Russian. I am not fat. And I do not mean that to boast. I wish that I were, that I could last longer without food, maybe escape this death, or maybe if I was not small they would have not chosen me and I would not be here writing to you in my water data notepad from this frozen rock. But that is not the situation. Maybe in this, my life will have some further meaning beyond that of schooling and naivety, beyond poisoning populations by the means I wished to save whole peoples. This life is a joke.

Why me? Why must I have been chosen for this insidiousness? I fear it was my love for water. That I answer the phone. That I want to help. I want money.

Apologies. Let me continue. We arrived to the next treatment plant. I assure you, I had no intention of complying with them. I was to now show my loyalty. I did not know what was to come either way. I feigned a stomach sickness before we entered the gate of the treatment plant. Like before there was no personnel present. It is still strange how they managed to know when it was empty, or I fear they cleared them out. It was not possible for this area to be informed of

the chlorine poisoning this soon. People would not die that soon. And the communications were not always reliable, I hoped. I found a small hill to climb over.

“Ready to kill more, my friend?” Z said following me.

I pretended to vomit. Z stood next to me and turned away.

“When we are done with this, I will kill the man who did shame to my sister.” He unzipped his pants and a stream of yellow splattered into the dust.

I vomited. The tan and yellow insulted everything that water was to be. I heaved and heaved into the dirt. It was not enough water. It was not much. I needed to drink, but wouldn’t let myself. I then saw the rock in my bile. And by what courage struck me then, I do not know. Like never before in the life of a waterman, I stood and turned with such force and slammed the rock into the side of Z’s head. I fell with the effort. He fell half holding himself. Yellow dribbled onto his pants and blood ran from his head. I turned him as urine still escaped from his body, pooling in the dirt. I took his gun. Safety off. Shoot. Bang. Bang. I ran.

I could not hide here; the people, when they found out, they would kill me just the same. I ran between the squat buildings on the skirts of the town to get lost in the maze of them. Beyond the town, nearer to me than through the taller buildings, stood the rising mountains. It was stupid of me to think of them as the path to safety, but it was the only way away from danger. Maybe I thought it was North, or maybe into Pakistan. The truth is that I did not know where I was. The early winter sun plays tricks and I am never good with knowing my way. The mountains were still far away on the other side of the city.

I ran, stumbling and falling at times into the town’s rocky paths. I flew past narrow doors and human faces that had too much sun and not enough warmth. A man stood silent and examined his broken cart axle without moving. Children kicked balls without smiling. A goat blocked my path at every turn. Brown. Black. Grey. Some with longer hair. Some with short. They were devils. A people owned

by goats. Owned by devils. I hated them, the devils. The people were silent, as if afraid of the devils, or afraid to speak under the mountains. I could hear only my hurried stumbling and the devils crying.

Oh, God have mercy on me! I thought it was one of them. One of the five murderers. A man stepped into my way from around a corner and yelled at me. I did not understand. He pulled out something from his side. I shot him. In the face, I shot him. It was a small hole, just under the eye by the nose. His body fell back and to the side and did not stop moving. It was a stick that he held, for the goats, there were many of them between the buildings here. There were pieces of his skull and brains on the devils and on the wall. It smelled like freshly salted iron. It gleamed in the light like the only thing alive in the place. I tried to not shake. I could not move. The devils ate the chunks of brain off of the ground and off of each other. God help me!

“Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me,” I said to the man. I was kneeling by him with the bloody devils all around. The back of his head was gone and it was empty inside. The devils tried to chew at it. I dropped the gun and ran. I ran so hard to the mountains.

I do not know how they did not find me, the murderers, or the town. Maybe they found each other. I could not hear if they did. I did not hear a gun battle. I ran hard against the wind and my heartbeat filled my ears with constant ringing. I ran for hours until I collapsed in a grove of birch trees. They were tall and white and flaking away like snake’s skin. I slept here in the cold, the first time in the cold. I did not sleep long. And I hated when I woke.

I found a goat path and followed it up higher into the mountains until there were no more birch trees. Stupid of me to go higher without supplies, I know this. I did not know if they would find me and I knew I wanted to get further.

The sun is starting to set. It is getting colder. I must hurry to tell you now.

I followed this path for many days. It is the truth. I survived the cold night without food. I piled dirt and needles and bark over me each night and made a bed of the needles and bark to keep the frozen

ground from freezing me. I did not learn this until the second night. I learned I could eat the small gray worms when I dug. I dug more, but the ground was cold. The first night was endless with much pain. The cold ate at me and I could think only of the devils eating the man's empty head, and the numberless people now dying, blood slowing boiling and melting their tissues, the blood pouring out of them like diarrhea. They may never know what kills them.

On the fourth day I saw a devil with large horns on a high rock. He was majestic, evil, and stupid. I watched him jump from the rock to another and then another. I watched him jump and fall and fail. He became trapped in the rocks. And I thought I would not die. I thought that this devil would be my salvation. I would go to him and kill him with a rock and eat him with my teeth and live another night in my hole.

I climbed over to him with a large rock. He was unhurt, there was no blood. But the devil cried. And those devil eyes. They looked at me with horror. I could feel it in me. I slammed the rock down on the devil's head. It cracked loud. His long black hair shook, but nothing happened. He did not bleed, he did not move. The devil cried and looked at me. I hit him again. And nothing again. I cried, "Oh, God! Must I save this devil that cannot be killed?" It was clear to me that this devil was here for me to decide. I grabbed tight the horns and pulled up. His body freed from the tight spot and he kicked wildly and threw his devil horns at me. They missed and the devil jumped away. But I lost my balance and fell. I fell to where I lay and heard the snap of my leg. That is how I am here.

I have no wife. I have no kids. My family does not care for me and I do not really know them. I had a friend, but his wife had died and I never comforted him. This story is for you to know and for me to know. We know how I am here. Why did I come to be in this place? I will discover that in hell. Please burn my body.

I can see the stars now. They are warm. Orion is hunting devils. Devils. Orion's nebula. There was a man once who says he saw the nebula in the sky of day. His wife died. He was my friend.

It is hot. Thank you Almighty God. I will leave this note in my jacket. God it is hot!

The mountains are beautiful in the stars. They are singing. It is sweet. I think I will go walk to cool and sing with them

sing with me

keep your eyes up

do not look down

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# Intercession

---

John Calvin Pierce

Heaven is hot too, who told you otherwise? It burns with a rageful heat, the massive eternal wheels spinning rickety and worn and their friction warming all the great expanse of heaven – now the saints have removed their veils and robes and lie naked in the heaven-grass. The firmament is all evaporated and the celestial warmth falls to earth now and even the trees are sweating in their bark coats. Strip them down. They'll stand naked with the rest.

## 1. MORNING

In the early heat August stands undressed, watching from the first floor window which overlooks the edge of the small cliff, down into the forested valley spreading east and east until it falls off over the curve of the horizon. The predator birds circle above the shaded forest and slowly sink into its belly until he can see them no more. He fans himself with a folded newspaper and opens the window, first on one end of the long hall of the study – the walls lined with books which he recognizes not by their titles but by their color and width – and then the other window, and the breeze blows through the hall and the pages of the books long to flutter and shiver but they cannot, all shut and pressed up against one another on the shelves. The

wind leaps over them unthinkingly and whirls through the house and over all the shade trees and to the horizon where it continues still, to where? To the South China Sea, to Siberia. He does not know.

He runs his fingers over the hard fabric backings until stopping on a slim red-backed volume near the top of the shelf. The Confessions of St. Augustine of Hippo, his namesake, his mother's patron saint (she had been raised Catholic), that Doctor of Grace and ascetic desert prophet who loved intimately the Body of Christ and longed to be filled with it. The words within are all familiar to him. He heard them first in her womb, her whispered yearnings, late have I loved you, beauty so ancient and new, you are within me now and you hold aloft this fragile child-creature inside my flooded belly... and she read prayers to him before he went to sleep and sang the old hymns in the dark. His ears perk: a knocking above him, the thud of jumping feet, maybe denser than that. He dismisses it and takes the book in his hands and walks against the wind through the hallway and into the white-lighted bedroom.

Sunlight pours through the windowpane and the white covers are thrown off to one side of the bed. Heavy legs stuck under the blankets, waist and hips and crotch uncovered, ripple of abdomen, geographic spread of chest and shoulders, rivers of veins that crossed the arms and converged at the neck, glacier head turned against the pillow (all biomes contained in his form). August stands still in the doorway as the man in the bed readjusts himself, still heavy with sleep. With the red book in hand he climbs slowly under the covers and the man doesn't seem to notice, turning again and facing away from August and his mouth letting out irregular sleep sighs. August opens the volume and reads from it aloud, his voice a dart through the thickish stale air.

“Oh! that you would enter into my heart, and inebriate it, that I may forget my ills, and embrace you, my sole good! What art Thou to me?” The man stirs beside him, but doesn't raise up his head or speak. So he reads on, giving it the inflectional dynamics of the only preaching he's ever heard come from behind the pinewood podiums,

though it sounds strange applied to such an archaic tongue. “In Thy pity, teach me to utter it. Or what am I to Thee that Thou demandest my love, and, if I give it not, art wroth with me, and threatenest me with grievous woes? Is it then a slight woe to love Thee not?”

“August,” the man says. He clears his throat with a gravel cough. “August, what are you doing?”

“I thought it could be nice to wake up to—”

“Is it Sunday morn? You a preacher?” The man sighs and leans into the bed again. Then he runs a hand through his short dark hair and lifts himself from the bed and stands nude in the sunlight and finds his boxers crumpled on the floor and bends and pulls them on, and the jeans are next to them and so he puts those on too. Now the nightmagic is all gone, this man is again only a man, or even less. The divine hex is all but worn off as he buttons up the shirt and folds down the cuff to cover his wrists, the parallel rivers running below the ice-thin surface dried up. Mortal, dust. He is going back to somewhere where the rules still stand. The familiar prickling shame creeps into August’s molten brain but he pushes it back.

“Don’t you think she’ll be wondering where you been all morning?” August asks.

A clouted thud again from above them and the framed painting hanging on the white wall is knocked askew. The man doesn’t answer and he finds a single sock on the floor and turns around twice looking for its pair. August is still lying in the bed and he begins again to read from the Confessions, out loud but not just for the sake of the man but so that he could hear the words himself.

“Say unto my soul, I am thy salvation. So speak, that I may hear. Behold, Lord, my heart is before Thee...”

The man finds the sock underneath the bed skirt on August’s side and puts it on and as he moves to the door there is a loud thump again above them but August keeps reading, “narrow is the mansion of my soul. Enlarge it, that thou mayest enter in! It is ruinous – repair it!” and as the man is leaving the room he gives under his breath a short word of gratitude and plants a kiss on August’s forehead and

walks out of the house, then the sound of a car engine and wheels on gravel, and then all is quiet besides August's reading, lower now, and a small thud sounding again from the ceiling.

## 2. UPSTAIRS

The old man lies prone on the floor surrounded with boxes and files, strewn and fallen from the stacks that line the small room, only the bed in the middle starkly uncluttered, and the hum from metal breathing machine, constant wings. He is flipping through the dry pages of a photobook but this one is the wrong year, wrong season, that summer must be over here in this stack, right, yes, when we were all in Dallas for the wedding, and his shaky arms pay no mind to the damage done, yanking a cardboard box from the middle of the stack of boxes and sending the two on top of it tumbling to the floor. August turns the doorknob and opens up to see the shirtless old man rooting like a raccoon through the ruined pages.

The man doesn't notice he is in the room so August says, "What are you lookin' for here?"

"Gus, go ask your mother what year Norah's wedding was in. Katharine?" he calls, looking out of the door. "Go get your mother. She'll know."

August blinks slowly, is still. "If you'd tell me which album you're trying to get, I can help you look. You said Aunt Norah's wedding? I think that was when—"

"No, no, Gus, just ask your mother. Katharine!" he calls, louder. "Oh it was that beach vacation we took when you were, oh I don't know, we went to Australia together, or it was Romania, yes it was and there was the heavenliest wind... dancing underneath the..." He trails off and the machine beeps and hums. "Just get Katharine for me, boy!"

No words leave August's mouth, although it is agape, but he moves his face to make it still and cold again.

"Katharine!" The old man calls again. "She cain't hear me from here. Why ain't you getting her, boy? Takes me long to get up."

August looks silently at his father on the floor and his father looks indignantly back at him, but then suddenly the eyebrows relax and the eyes break away, and he croaks her name again, “Katharine?” looking back up at August with an animal’s gaze and then back down to the photos strewn around, and to the breathing machine and the mouth-piece on the bed. He reaches for the bedpost and tries to pull himself up but his shaky arms give way and August catches him before he hits the ground and helps him stand. He wrenches his arm away from August with bitter vigor and sits down on the edge of the bed and pulls on the mask, sucking the air into his gossamer lungs. A ticking clock beside the bed, a percussive chorus in tandem with the metallic hum. His breathing slows down after a minute and he glares up at August, newly acidic eyes aflame within their gray sockets. Fresh vitriol.

“And you bet your little cheeks I can hear you durin’ the night, indulging in your wicked pleasures below me. God spares not the immoral, the adulterer, the deviant!” His breath gives out and he sucks at the machine again, the contraption beeping and humming. Through the mask he says, “You saw how the Lord did prosper Leroy, oh yes how his life was so full and happy...”

August’s fists clench in his pockets. He stays quiet and the old man’s voice is muffled from behind the mask, punctuated by long sucking breaths.

“Yessir, we found Leroy your uncle on the porch, and he had been there for some time, his skin all tight and shiny, split apart in some places from the swelling, that rotten juice that leaked from his mouth... Yep, all sure worked out alright for him, didn’t it? And where was Aunt Eddy, that fairy boy Leroy kept as a little house-wife? Had he already run away with another queer old bastard who’d give him a bed for the month? Oh but only if Eddy’d give ‘em a good suck on the weeknights, though. I suppose he must’ve gotten tired of giving it to Leroy ‘cause there was no one around to find the poor fella but us days later when he had been dead on the porch in the ungodly heat, his eyeball bulging from his head like a sea creature out of its coral cave...”

The old man stops again to breathe at the machine. August unclenches his fists. He moves to the door and closes it and starts walking down the stairs but it starts up once more, the old man staring at the ceiling and speaking to no one, to everyone, to the empty air, to Katharine, telling them all about Uncle Leroy, how the house was covered in rat droppings, the clothes eaten through by a swarm of moths, the bare refrigerator, the plants grown over the bile-stained concrete of the patio where the corpse had lain disintegrating in the sun.

### 3. A VISIT

In the white bedroom downstairs August rummages under the bed and pulls out the box of her clothes, mostly denim shirts and graying sweaters, the cream knit shawl she wore in the church. He remembers the shawl hanging on her comfortable frame, forever taller than him in his mind, always looking down to him with patient eyes. Now she has missed all these years, a thousand years even. Is she with him now? As he undresses and as he pulls on the sleeves of her shirt and rolls them up, fastening the buttons around his gaunt chest – there, now, can't you see it? A ruby hummingbird outside the window. It hovers above the windowsill. He dons the shawl over his slim shoulders. Below the sweaters in the box there is a collection of her shoes, flats and low square heels, and he removes a pair, the ones she wore daily, gray and low-heeled, and he puts his oversized feet into the shoes and affixes the strap and his toes hang over the ends. He falls into the bed, his arms too long for the shirt and shawl and his heeled feet hanging off the end of the bed and the white sheets surround him but do little to muffle his cries. Outside another hummingbird hovering, and another, and soon they are swarming outside the windowpane, a huge mass of red fluttering wings and uncountable needle beaks, they float and expand, the wind from their merciless beating rattling the window open and raging through the chilled room and the books all fluttering in their cases.

He wakes up in her clothes and his chest heaves and churns. He strips them off and hides them in the box under his bed again.

No wind blowing outside, nothing moving by the window. Afternoon gives way to violet dusk. No sound from the old man upstairs. How mild he had once been, leaning down to speak to a child, animating his face and his voice undulating, and then his mother who recited the saint's prayers to him in the darkened room and as lullaby quietly sang the old hymns to him, as the deer panteth for the water so my soul longeth after thee...

In the kitchen August calls the man's house. A woman picks up the other end. He says nothing and there is a low buzzing on the line and he hangs up. Perhaps another night, or perhaps... In the kitchen he microwaves a bag of vegetables and eats them with ketchup and a cup of coffee. The pink and violet residue of sunset is all but faded to black. No sound from upstairs. He washes his dishes at the sink and dries them by hand with a towel.

He tries again. The woman'll be sleeping. The low gravel voice answers. "Speaking?" "Can't you come again tonight?"

Silence, a clattering sound, a shutting door. "August, I don't know."

"Please, Arthur."

Again waiting, the buzzing sound spreading out between them, and then: "Alright."

The rest was an oily blur. The man showed up at the door reeking of gin or whiskey but August let him in anyway and they two made drinks and took them to the bedroom and they didn't close the door and August's revitalized grief only strengthened the desire in his igneous brain, how the heat builds up in a small room like that, how it is unbearably hot inside this room.

#### 4. A PRAYER

Katharine I don't know how to tell all this to you so I will just say it. Katharine I found your boy your deviant offspring Katharine I can't even tell you what I saw or how I found them there on the bed and they didn't know I was comin' down the stairs but I was and

I heard it first, that slapping and slipping sound and I feared I knew what it was but I kept on down the stairs and oh I wish I had stayed put in bed! Katharine I can't describe it to you he was in your clothes, our boy wearing your shawl and your shoes and he wasn't just wearing them but was engaged in that most vile act and his face I couldn't see it for it was buried in the sheets and some other big fella was on top of him and I stopped by the wall across the hall but the door was flung open and it was no trick of my mind Katharine he was really there moaning like a woman. Oh I can't even tell it to you proper for it gets hung up in my throat, the other fella dripping spit out of his mouth and slobbering like a wolf! I couldn't bear it no more and I know they heard me shout "Enough!" because your son jerked his head up and looked me right in the eye before I hightailed it out of the hallway and left that condemned house (how could I ever stay in such a place) and here I am now, wandering the road into the forest to find you, Katharine pray with me now before the Lord sends down a rain of fire over this land, pray with me now for his very soul! His strange woman's heart heedless of the commands of God! Katharine it is dark here now and the woods, I don't remember where you are among the endless black trees. Call out to me so I will find you Katharine or call out to Christ! I can't bear it to think our boy would end up like your rotting brother on the porch, and do you remember how heavenly the wind blew on that day we spent with little August by the river? A single day. Katharine help me now I am lost in this twisting path, don't forget me here in the darkness Katharine pray for our souls! This wind's freezing the skin on my fingers.

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Inside the house the married man stumbled out in a hurry and offered an apology for it all but August didn't listen as he shooed the man out and heard the car's tires on the gravel again pulling out of the drive and away into the darkness. Melted iron shame flowed into the

cracks of his brain and hardened there and forged a new shape within it. He took off his mother's shoes and shirt and put on his own blue jeans and first rushed upstairs but the old man who caught them was not there in his bed or on the floor, the humming of the breathing machine the only sound in the room. How long could he last without it? Back downstairs he found the shawl there hanging on the bed and he held it tenderly in his hands and slipped it over his shoulders as he ran through the hallway and out of the door into the night.

The heat of the day is all but dissipated from the dewy earth and the fetal stars are buoyed in the amniotic fluid of the sky. August stops and sees no sign of the old man, hears no labored breath coming from behind the shrubs. The footpath into the woods is visible in the moonlight and he follows it to the tree line and gazes into the depthless black.

“Daddy!” he called into the woods. A cracking branch, an animal climbing the trunk. He entered the forest and followed the path, but what could he say to his father to console him? His one child, unfit to pass on the lineage he carried, the end of a bloodline. The wind blows harder across his face now and he pulls her shawl around himself. He walks past the unending trees and the path narrows and curves east towards the horizon and there is the flash of a lightning bug before his eyes in the dark. A bulge there in the earth, a manmade pile of fallen limbs beside the tree.

He is there beside the branches, curled into a ball like a pillbug, mumbling and repeating her name Katharine Katharine Katharine like a rosary and frantic his head rolling from one side to the other on the dirt. He doesn't seem to notice August as he approaches and lies on the ground beside him, mumbling all the while under his breath and pulling at his cheeks with his hands.

“Dad.”

“Remember the wind? And the day when... Oh Katharine pray for me...”

“You need to get back to the house.”

The old man coughs and lets out a small wheeze. August

touches his shoulder but he rolls over on the dewy ground, still calling her name with weak breath “Katharine, Kath...”

“Your machine is upstairs, Dad, come with me back to the house.”

The old man falls still and quiet, then suddenly rolls over to see August beside him on the ground and he does not pull away or speak at first, raising a finger that signaled “listen” and he looks around in the dark as if a bird were darting about his head. August takes his father by the hand and looks him in the eyes which are soft now, calm and gray. The old man only blinks and then says, “Not to-night.” August lets go of his hand and the man rolls onto his back and begins again his fervent praying, staring up at the depth of heaven. August recites the prayers too, in his head, the ones she had said over him all those years ago, narrow is the mansion of my soul! enlarge it, that you may enter in. It is ruinous; repair it! It has that within which must offend your eyes. I confess and know it. But who shall cleanse it? or to whom should I cry? August wraps his father in her knit shawl and the old man accepts it and speaks aloud no more.

Together they lie on the damp ground and watch above them the perpetual rickety spinning of the eternal wheels, the friction warming the great forges of heaven. They watch as the firmament evaporates and the celestial heat begins its long descent to the earth it will warm in the morning. Among the saints above them are Katharine and Leroy and thousands more and they all fan and disrobe themselves and in the grass they are naked and yet none is ashamed, none different from the other, each taking on the singular celestial sex which is neither man nor woman but another form of matter altogether and they hold each other as the great hot wind blows across all their shimmering faces.

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# Everywhere, America

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Elizabeth Werth

You've become amazed by how similar Nowhere and Everywhere can be.

Before, you were inclined to describe every small po-dunk town as Nowhere, America, a place whose population of a few hundred at most is probably smaller than the amount of farms there are, where you'd have to drive half an hour to get to the nearest grocery store, where the biggest landmarks are the trees that got struck by lightning and somehow lived to tell their scarred tale, or the old house that's been there since the first settlers arrived this way and set up shop, or the tiny little graveyards chock full of only a few family names.

And then you hit the road. It's the earliest weeks of fall, you've dropped out of college, you've got no job, nothing to shoot for, and you're bored, so when Ryan comes home for a few weeks' break from chasing the European dreams you've long since given up on, you pack everything up into the back of your car, and you forge forward to take on the greatest back roads of America like twenty-first-century pilgrims looking for a place to spread roots.

Right now, you're sitting next to Ryan in a parking lot somewhere in between Nowhere and Everywhere as the sun sets over a weather-worn truck-stop-slash-grocery-store-slash-restaurant-slash-motel-if-you-really-need-it sign that looks like hundreds of other signs you've seen this week, and Ryan is melting a stick of butter with a

plastic spoon in a pan on your camping stove (you remembered to pack everything but silverware, just like how you've remembered to buy everything but actual silverware every time you pass a grocery store) in a valiant attempt to make chicken à la king for the two of you with the things you could find on the shelves of the store behind you.

You look up, shielding your eyes against the sun, and watch an old truck putter by, kicking up dust to carve a murky path through the brilliant rose-reds of the clouds. As he passes, the driver nods, smiles. You exchange the sentiment as Ryan asks, "What are you thinking about?"

Looking over, you find that he's chopping up mushrooms and a bell pepper (the only fresh one in the shop), deft fingers easily controlling the pocket knife and the cutting board where it rests on his knees. You don't know how he does it; your own hands are shoved in the pockets of your coat, a preemptive measure to ward off the impending coolness of the night. Maybe it's been colder in England than it has been in Indiana, you think.

"Dunno," you say with a noncommittal shrug, looking back out at the dust settling onto the long stretch of road. It's quiet here. There are just the two of you, your breathing, the wind rustling the last leaves lingering behind on a dead tree, the buzz of neon in a sign in the front of the truck stop that's just switched from 'open' to 'closed', the gentle swish-click of a knife making cut after cut. "Just. America, I guess."

Beside you, Ryan snorts, bemused.

"Not like that," you mutter, rolling your eyes.

He adds the mushrooms and the bell pepper to the butter, stirring them carefully in an attempt to keep the spoon from melting into their meal. "Like how?"

"Like... I dunno. This." You free one of your hands to make a wide, sweeping gesture at the vast expanse of land in front of you. "They don't have stuff like this in Europe. The roads, and--yeah. It's all more...."

"Compressed?"

“Yeah. Compressed.”

Ryan bends over the pan, pokes at one of the peppers with a furrowed brow. It must meet whatever level of scrutiny he’s applying to it, because he wipes off the plastic spoon and uses it to stir in some flour, a sprinkle of salt, a dash of pepper.

And because everything is so simple here, because you currently exist in a place that seems so far away from everything else, that in-between place where nothing really exists but still somehow holds some undeniable truth, where you can take another person into your confidence with softly murmured words, you continue: “I missed it, when I was over there. Like, Europe was all cool for a while; I could basically do whatever the hell I wanted and everyone had sweet accents and everything looks about 400 years older than our whole damn country, but... I dunno. It was so claustrophobic.” Your hand sneaks back into your pocket, and you look at Ryan. “Do you miss it when you’re over there?”

The hum that breaks Ryan’s silence sounds like an affirmation, but it’s noncommittal enough that you can’t be sure.

You nudge him, gently, so that he doesn’t mess up the sauce he’s stirring. “You don’t gotta give me those prepping-for-businessman-life-boring answers, dude. I won’t tell anyone.” When he meets your eyes, you grin at him, just so that he’s sure.

“Yeah. I miss it,” Ryan admits, but it’s another few, long seconds before he adds, “I miss the summers here. We always used to road trip --my family. We’d always go find some park in the middle of nowhere and go camping. I mean, you can camp in Europe, but...”

“It’s just not the same.”

“Nah, it’s not.”

He leaves it at that, with no more elaboration and just enough nostalgia in his voice that you want to ask for more details, but you also don’t want to bother him if he’s lost in a reverie. There’s a dreamy, autopilot quality about him when he reaches for the milk and chicken broth, stirring the milk in carefully as he does so that it doesn’t curdle (something you remember your mom telling you once, ages ago, when

you were still young enough to sit on the kitchen counter next to the stove and learn the ins and outs of fractions through measuring cups).

It's still early enough in the fall that the rains have only barely started, too late in the season to mend the broken cracks of drought-ridden earth with knitted roots of crops. When the sun touches the barren horizon, the whole earth explodes into shades of red and yellow and brown that appeal to the part of you that constantly craves Ryan's touch. You want to wrap yourself up in the sunset, in his arms, to fall asleep in them by the light of a dying campfire. You've been so close to a lot of things—to a scholarship, a job, to the seductive call of a European job far away from Small Town, Indiana—but having Ryan's back pressed against your own, a shared blanket tucked over you, has been the closest you've ever come to making the intangible tangible, and for the first time, you've been too afraid to reach out and grasp it.

As the sun slips away and Ryan begins methodically pulling apart the pre-cooked chicken breast that the two of you bought in the restaurant portion of the truck stop, dropping it into the now boiling pot, you wonder if you might try reaching out soon.

“It’s so familiar here.” Ryan’s voice, soft as it is, nearly makes you jump.

“Yeah,” you agree. “I was just thinking about that. How you can go anywhere, and it’s all different, but you still kinda feel like you’re at home.”

“Yeah.”

“Places like this.” You gesture to the land around you. “They’re everywhere, y’know? It’s kinda nice, like. Knowing you’ll always know something even if you’re a thousand miles away from wherever. I dunno.”

It doesn’t make sense, you think, not outside of your own head. You’ve never tried to articulate this before, never attempted to put that feeling into words that has you itching to hit the road even if you’re not racing. You belong here. You aren’t from here; you’ve never been here, but you know this place like the back of your hand, and there’s comfort in that.

You've never thought anyone would really ever feel the same way, so surprise hits you hard when Ryan nods and murmurs, "I know what you mean."

Into the pot goes a package of instant rice, and you fish for more plastic spoons and the bowls you brought from home out of the milk crate you've been using to keep track of your food supply. You hand one set to Ryan, keeping the other cradled in your own hands; the promise that they'll be warm soon is enough to keep you from shoving them back into your pockets.

The sun is gone now, and so are the birds. It's no candlelit dinner, but the light from your controlled fire and from the single, dim overhead light bathing the nearly empty parking lot in shades of yellow and gold wraps you both in a sense of intimacy that has you unconsciously shifting closer to the man sitting next to you until you're pressed arm-to-arm. He looks over at you, a smile glittering in his eyes like the stars painting constellations in the sky.

"Here," he says, and he's so close that you can almost feel his voice under your skin, as if he's speaking through you. He covers his hand with his sleeve and lifts up the pot. "Gimme your bowl."

There's no ladle big enough to portion things out, so Ryan pours half of the chicken à la king straight from the pot into your bowl; you set it aside, take his bowl, and let him have the rest. The pot is set aside, the bowls change hands, and then the two of you are sitting so close that you're nearly wrapped around one another, letting the steaming food warm your hands before you dig in.

And this—there's no way to explain this. You're somewhere in between Nowhere and Everywhere, a place you've never been that you could call home; you're in the abandoned parking lot of a truck stop with a bowl of homemade chicken à la king made by Ryan, who's never been this close to you in your life. And you still have a whole country ahead of you, a whole country full of Nowheres and Everywhere, and you'll have Ryan by your side, the two of you making your mark and making your memories mile after countless mile.

You couldn't ask for anything more.

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# Fillet O' Fish

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**Tony Cartlidge**

*An excerpt from the short story, “Jimmy the Fish.”*

Jimmy the fish lived in a reef off the coast of Austral...

A reef?

Yeah, a reef. Off the coast of Australia.

Is it a nice reef?

Look around. Yeah. I'd say it was a nice reef.

But would I say it was nice reef?

Yeah, I suppose so.

You suppose?

Hmm. I think I see what you're getting at. Okay, Jimmy the fish lived deep in the jade blue ocean a hundred miles from the coast of northern Australia. Deep in the coral of the...

You've said deep twice.

I did?

Yeah, you already said I lived deep in the ocean. You probably wanna mix that up a bit.

Jimmy lived in a nook in the base of the coral...

A nook? Coral is full of nooks. It's all nooks, all the time. Coral is nooks held together by crannies, and made of calcium carbonate. It's an insoluble solid that occurs in nature as chalk,

marble, shells...  
How about if I make it your nook?  
That could work. Carry on.

Jimmy's nook was at the base of the coral in the jade blue waters off the coast of northern Australia. His friends live in the reef with him.

You spelled "friends" wrong.  
Jimmy's friends lived in the reef with him. Jimmy was long and sleek, with muscular flanks that opalesced and iridesced when the sun caught him as he flashed and turned just under the surface.

Opalesce and iridesce are the same.  
...with muscular flanks that opalesced under the bright shadow of the sun. His bronze scales lustered as he moved effortlessly through the water, carving his way through the sea ferns and red weed that draped across the seabed like an heirloom duvet.

A bit much but okay, carry on.  
Jimmy was in search of breakfast.

Cool. I like breakfast.  
His powerful black fins clawed against the underwater currents, agilely thrusting him through the hoops and tight turns of the coral, skillfully avoiding the snares and stings of the predators that sat patiently in wait, hidden in their lairs.

Agilely, skillfully, patiently? Adverbs, dude. Show, don't tell.  
Chill, fella. It's a first draft.

Whatevs.  
Jimmy's teeth glinted as he closed in on the tail of the shoal desperate to escape him, and he bore down on the straggler, a purple and black baitfish that swam with a limp. Two rows of deadly zippers lined his jaws and Jimmy snapped at the tail of...

I'm not sure I like this.  
Like what?  
The teeth.  
What's wrong with teeth?

I seem a bit evil. I don't even like fish all that much. Especially the purple ones. They taste overly salty.

What do you eat, then?

I'm mostly vegetarian. I like to suck on rocks a lot. Lots of good stuff oozes into the rocks. Electrolytes here, proteins there. A quick shuffle left and there's salted algae, maybe some seaweed root. It's like a soup buffet.

Soup buffet? That must be why the reef teems with life.

Teems?

Life always "teems" around coral reefs. It's one of those nature documentary rules.

What's a nature documentary?

Oh, that's where some old English guy sneaks up on animals and whispers about stuff while he films them mating.

Pervert.

Definitely. Hey, we have to skip ahead.

Skip what now? Ahead?

Remember the first story we did?

Yeah...

Well, this is just an extract.

Why an extract?

Well, the publisher wants the story, but they only have room for a few pages.

And you didn't tell them to fuck off?

Well, no... but the point is you get into print and we can totally make our own rules about how we do it.

I suppose so. Oh, hey?

What?

Soooo, if you get to make your own rules, then I get to break them, right?

I suppose so, yeah. As long as it makes sense. You have to have your own set of rules in order to know when you can break them.

So, like, we can have an underwater branch of the First National Reef Bank of Australia?

I suppose so.

Cool. I'm gonna rob it. Cash, baby. More cash I got, the

better Zadie'll like me.

Ahh, so there's a girl involved.

Always, dude.

So how does a fish rob the bank?

With a gun.

And how do you get a gun?

You give it to me. Like you said, we can break the rules if we want.

Okay, no. I don't think so. I don't like guns.

But you're okay with bank robbery? That's messed up.

I think your world-building needs a morally consistent set of rules.

Next draft, maybe. But for now, I think we're gonna end this extract right here.

Oooh, so not fair. We were just getting started.

But it's a nice cliffhanger, though, eh?

Oh, yeah. Always leave them wanting more, baby.

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# Involuntary Captive Seeks Same

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Morgan Laird

Dora Eikenberg watched herself. This is not a phenomenon unique to Dora Eikenberg. Women watch themselves. Through mirrors, reflective windows of buildings, during sleep, in the alabaster corners of unwelcome eyes.

Dora watched herself preparing dinner. She met her own static eye from across the room. Leveling a gaze with herself, she attempted to assert dominance. People who are afraid to make eye contact are weak and vulnerable to attack. This cautionary fact reigns even more true when you're afraid of your own hand. Dora Two oscillated back and forth in a faded mahogany rocking chair, her eyes making their way up and down Dora's body with no set destination. She continued to cook dinner but couldn't shake her own eyes penetrating her back. Dora took note of her ankles (swollen), she noticed her posture causing her stomach to puff out (and corrected it), and she noticed that she will never make a move without imagining it paned in glass.

The unholy union where pink linoleum flooring met avocado shag carpet was the shoreline dividing Dora from herself. A restored 1920s chandelier hung above them, dangling teardrop crystals from

the convex ceiling. The kitchen ran directly into the living room, a space parted graciously by a bamboo curtain. Her home became occupied with the decadent and hazy glaze of Mississippi light at dusk meeting the expanse of Magnolia trees. A feminine fog illuminated the room giving unsuspecting furniture a well deserved tint of blush.

On days when she was too afraid to assert dominance, she would allow herself to be crept up upon. She treated her roaming, slinking, counterpart like a roach—she'd see it scuttering about the room but choose to ignore its existence once it was out of sight. When it first began, during early morning sessions in front of the vanity mirror, she applied her makeup with a certain rigidity that suggested a motion sensitive bomb was placed beneath her chair. Were she to catch her own dark head of hair sauntering in the background she would become paralyzed. This paralysis acted as a harmless diversion for a while. She would often employ this trick as a means of getting out of school. In her head, the terror was a bit more romantic. She pictured herself as an icy member of some forgotten royal bloodline. Held upright by invisible string, she blacked out on her stool. She sat reposed as a frozen lake in front of a Tiffany window, while traces of scarlet, ivy, and gold formed an amalgamation of jittering lightning on her porcelain skin.

To the outside viewer, these reveries were less picturesque. The outside eye only witnessed the image of a needlessly bereft young girl, waxen, motionless and sullen. On many occasions her mother stood bewildered in the doorway, fidgeting nervously with her earrings. One morning it had been executively decided that something must be done. Her mother delicately entered the room and smacked Dora senselessly on the side of her jaw with the phonebook.

Dora Two rustled pages of the daily newspaper and channeled her attention towards biting her fingernails, signaling to Dora that she was free for the moment to mind her own business without further internal critique regarding her chubby ankles and self effacing body frame. Dora took this time uninterrupted to stick her head in the freezer. It was either this or the oven, and Dora grew up in frosty

Winnipeg, a creature of impenetrable habit. Feeling chilled and refreshed, she wasted no time returning to the careful business of cooking her signature ambrosia. Fresh strawberries, miniature marshmallows and chopped pecans graced the formica countertops. Ambrosia has been historically regarded as a dish of the Gods. Today, however, it would only be served to a bitter and unassuming man named Loudon. A man who pressed against her like a foreign cadaver in sleep and didn't generate a pulse until he rose from their queen size bed, breaking silence in the morgue with an emotionless decree ordering: "Make my breakfast. Toast and eggs." Loudon was due to return home from his job at the oyster factory within the next few hours. He would enter the scene and perform the following gestures of romance: Grab Dora's waist, whisper an oyster-scented lie, and kiss the nape of her neck with chapped lips. (A succubus named Allie or Rachel or Joan drained them of all moisture in a handicapped stall at the local Family Dollar.) If any of his faceless women inflicted pain upon his ego during the day it was inevitably Dora taking the misplaced outrage by night. Her apologies would spill all over her and pool onto the floor. She would reach for her gloves knowing full well the mess is hers to clean.

The cicadas in the garden were gossiping about her so she turned up the radio. The sympathetic sounds of Bobbie Gentry kept her home feeling less lonely and drowned out the piercing cackles of Dora Two erupting into a riot as she began to dance. Her twin form swayed to and fro under the pale sky of neglected indoor ceiling. Dora Two swayed listlessly, embracing an imaginary breeze, holding herself tenderly: a one woman prom date. The mumble of her whispering along to the radio carried into the kitchen:

It was the third of June, another sleepy, dusty Delta day  
I was out choppin' cotton and my brother was balin' hay

A rotary phone hung loose from the cradle. The device began having conniption against the wall, beating the faded cherry wallpaper without remorse. Assuming the call was coming from her mother, Dora did the only sensible thing there was to do—closed her eyes,

took a deep breath, and slapped her left cheek so hard she'd be seeing fragmented stars chasing bright orbs all afternoon.

“Hello?”

“Hey! Just wanted to check in... see how things are going...”

“Yes, they’re good. Today actually I—“

“So, Dora, you’re aware Aunt Doris has been sick.”

She said this as if it were an accusation. It was enough to make one wonder: have you poisoned Aunt Doris?

“Mm...it’s really awful you know she—“

“Right. So, what we’re trying to tell her is— it’s time. Everybody’s come to say goodbye to you! Hopefully she will die today or tomorrow and be out of pain and suffering.”

“What are the doctors saying?”

“I don’t have a clue. All that doctor talk. Her face is grey! You know, like how dead people look. And she walks around with her arms folded for christ’s sake. You know, like she’s dead!”

Dora eyed her half completed fruit salad.

“Lord knows we’ll die strangling each other. Well, that’s all that’s going on here... The cat and dog are fine. I’ll give you another call this Sunday.”

Her mother had a keen aptitude for shifting her into a violent state. The days felt increasingly long and heavy. She carried their weight while her aging twin sauntered about the house, encouraging self-voyeurism. With eyes closed she saw herself through Loudon’s eyes. When awake, she had Dora Two. She was the only component left out of the equation of sight and self.

Dora opened the veil of the screen door, making her entrance to the front porch. She took a hard seat in the patio swing and pouted, feeling her forehead for worry wrinkles. Dora Two parted the blinds and gave a disapproving glance at her outward display of insecurity. Her fingers appeared longer now, elastic. The long pale limb that mirrors her own had aged rapidly. Her own hand remained unchanged which gave her an immeasurable sensation of relief.

She enjoyed washing dishes because it allowed her to wear gloves indoors during the summer. Preferring the claw of a mustard latex glove to signs of physical maturation, she washed dishes with lightheaded ease. Ease does not flow freely in a home where you're a voyeur of yourself. Fluorescence, once a friend now a foe, patrolled her home cautiously like a hawk. Dora masked herself from the omniscient guard, taking all the precautions a good victim should. She had the night cream, the day cream, the eye cream, the neck cream, the keep-me-fuckable lotion. Despite her best efforts, however, the lines that spread across her face became like plump scattering mice to the hawk.

In a futile effort to ignore the face leering at her from behind the curtain, Dora maintained a resolute stare towards the driveway. In spite of how much she utterly despised him, she caught herself waiting for Loudon's car to pull up. He would lurch his disgusting '62 Volkswagen into the garage. He would see her in a loose sundress and think her frail and vulnerable. He would see her perched upon the patio swing, curled into the corner like a baby bird in its nest. His mind would draw comparisons likening her to a waif in need of his care and pity. She was the abandoned puppy he took in. Trained well enough to refrain from shitting on the carpet but still skittish around strangers—as the undomesticated are liable to be. These realizations began catching up with her and instilled greater fear than any set of eyes lurking behind a curtain. She only knew how to exist in relation to other people. This would no longer do. She took a moment to compose herself before returning to the dollhouse. Dora's neighbor, Miss Lottie, trotted past the house and feigned a smile. She twitched her hand in a weak waving motion at the sight of Dora laughing on the sidewalk.

Inside, the radio shifted to its Tuesday night oldies special. Dora Two cawed in protest at this transition. She slumped over the couch, allowing her body to go limp, burying her head face-first into a pile of magazines. Dora approached fast behind, grabbed hold of her

arms and tied them together. Her darling feet were not spared either! The stalker who once trailed behind Dora and caused such never-ending nervousness, reduced to mewling.

Dora responded to her wails with a splash. Brandishing a tin can of gasoline she began dousing every surface in the living room. Sparking that match was the easiest thing she'd ever done. The bamboo curtain was the first to ignite, rising up to the chandelier which resulted in exploding light bulbs and melted crystals falling in an electric snow. Natalie Wood looked up from a burning copy of Movieland magazine, soggy from gasoline, her doe eyes burning to ashes. Dora sat down next to herself as flashing bits of crystal fell sporadically and seared their skin. She held the paper hand of Dora Two, she stroked her flimsy grey hair, and between bursts of flames—she fed her small spoonfuls of ambrosia.

Outside, the sound of a Volkswagen screeching. Outside, a pail of oysters falling hard on the concrete. I think—correct me if I'm mistaken—that we are hearing the final screeches of a hawk burning.

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# NONFICTION

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# What I Found When I Opened Pandora's Box

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Nori Hubert

1917: Half Choctaw Indian, half messy combination of Irish-British-German-Czech, if such things can be halved. Halfbreed named Kitty. I can only imagine the abuse you must have taken in tiny Rockdale, Texas. I remember you as Mimi, my great grandmother, with powdered sugar spun hair who always smelled of the sugar cookies you baked in your green and white kitchen. You died before I was old enough to really know you. Now I crave to learn your story. Were you ashamed? Is that why you didn't learn your Native tongue, why you didn't teach your daughters? While they grew inside you, did you pray they would have white skin, fair hair, eyes blue as the ocean Pawpaw's family crossed? Did your heart shiver or do a secret dance inside your ribcage when they presented themselves with ebony hair and, in the case of your middle daughter, deep chocolate eyes and rich brown skin? Was it because of some hurt you sustained, or just sentiment of the times, that you instructed your girls to wash their "nasty places" in the bath?

These things, I will never know. Perhaps you never came to know them in your lifetime. I'll have to fill in the gaps myself, but one I need not fill is the knowledge that you loved me. Your love flows through my blood, oil on water to the surface of my veins.

1933: A Depression baby who came of age during World War II, you refused to utter "obey" in your marriage vows. You worked a fulfilling job while raising two kids in the sexist 1950s, all the way to the early 1990s. You only stopped when a certain changeling landed on your doorstep.

In your senior prom portrait, you look just like Snow White with moonlit skin and midnight black hair. She was your favorite princess. Did you identify with her because you, too, felt cursed?

Depression was your poisoned apple. I know because the curse is genetic. Electrowaves broke your spell. Writing breaks mine over and over into pieces I can use to create.

I was not the perfect grandchild, as changelings usually aren't. I could be stubborn, and sometimes the anger and hurt I kept locked up would explode out of me in screams and tears. You always asked me to tell you when something was wrong, but I rarely did. It made me mad when you pushed, but now that I know about the gun you once fired in your closet, the electroconvulsive treatment, the box you made in art therapy that rests on my dresser where I can look at it every day to remind me it is always possible to create beauty out of pain—I think you pushed because you didn't want me to be ashamed of the sadness.

I cried so easily as a kid. It embarrassed me. But now I know the sadness is a gift, in its own way. You and I, creators—transcending sadness, transforming it into art and love.

1961: I understand so little about the body I came from. You confuse me more than algebra, and I flunked algebra twice.

Who hurt you so bad that you reject your womanhood, your mixed-up blood? I'm also convinced you're a closeted lesbian, considering how adamantly you insist you'd rather stick rusty nails in your eyes than eat twat.

It could not have been Meem and Peep. Although they were Silents, they would never have said to you the things you said to me: men have superior brains, be afraid of female pilots, I will be used goods if I get a tattoo or have sex before marriage.

I might have believed you, if I'd known my father. If I didn't have a stillborn half sister. If I hadn't found the photos you took with the boyfriend who said all women were whores.

I still have an ache deep in my bones, Mama. I wish I knew what it felt like to look up to you. Sometimes I miss how things were when I was small, when you played Precious Pets and watched Disney movies with me. Sometimes I even miss the photographs. I hated it at the time—I just wanted to play, not play Supermodel. I wonder if you had known that Thomas Jefferson was a pedophile rapist, would you have made me kiss his statue for your photo collection? It stopped when I was twelve, no longer a fair-haired sprite. But the truth is, I am grateful. Not for the books of childhood snapshots, but because now I am the one behind the camera, peering through the looking-lens into hidden worlds.

2016: To My Daughter, Yet Unborn,

You do not exist yet, my child. I'm still not sure if you ever will. But if you and I decide to make your debut, this what I want to tell you.

I will give you Pandora's Box, and tell you what is inside. You can open it when you are ready.

I will not protect you with lies and ignorance but with truth and art.

You will know of every woman, from every land, who came before you.

Unlike your mother, you will know from the time you can comprehend what your vagina is. It is power. It is strength. It is beauty. It is yours.

In spite of what you will hear at school, from TV, and the Internet, I will do my best to teach you that your body belongs to no one but you. That no matter its appearance or ability, it is divine and worthy of respect. It can carry you wherever you want to go. The only limit is your imagination.

Yield for nothing. Speak your truth loud and proud. Sacrifice your dreams for no one.

Most of all: remember that inside Pandora's Box, there is always hope.

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## An Open Letter to My Immigrant Mother

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Pantuflas

Querida Mamá:

En este tiempo o fase de mi vida no puedo parar y reflexionar en cómo llegue aquí.

Mi primera lengua fue el español y luego, por los libros que nos comías con el poco dinero que te daba papá, I learned to figure out the sounds of the words on the pages. De ahí, surgió mi amor por las historias de encanto, de misterio, horror, y sobre todo, de amor.

Little by little, as I mastered the English language and got a hold of all the books my small hands could get from the library, empecé a tratar de escribir mi historia.

“Ya para por favor! Deja de pegarle!”

Los gritos de esas noches que se me hacían tan largas era la realidad que me arrancaba de mis historias. At some point, when I saw the blood dripping off of my older brother and your silent cries, both of you pretending to be strong, I felt rage—hot, white and angry rage.

Rage for the injustice of this man accusing you of lies, of the constant:

“ERES UNA PUTA! NO SÉ POR QUÉ ME CASÉ CONTIGO!  
DESGRACIADA! CHINGA TU PUTA MADRE PENDEJA!”

Or whatever bullshit he came up with.

I didn't recognize that man hollering en la sala. Ese era un hombre borracho y abusivo.  
Borracho (drunk).

Abusivo (abusive).

Two words I didn't recognize in either of the languages that switched back and forth in my six-year-old mind.

Still, the rage surged in me my need to join the fight too...  
...only to be pushed away, scolded for what I thought were my brave actions.

Conforme fueron pasando los años, traté de escribir mi enojo, frustración y miedo del señor que vivía con nosotros.

Solo que tu, al buscar entre mis cosas, encontraste mi primer intento en relatar el horror en nuestra casa.

I was mad that you had gone through my things and found something so personal. I felt embarrassment. I understand that las cosas de la familia se quedan entre familia pero necesitaba a alguien que comprendiera lo que era vivir en esta casa. I just wanted someone to hold me and say that it was okay. That this was not normal and it was not your fault.

Why couldn't you do that? ¿Por qué no pudiste llorar junto conmigo y mi hermana?

¿Por qué seguiste viviendo con ese hombre que aterroriza nuestras vidas todos estos años?

Pero no te culpo. Being in a new country where the language was not yours, in a country that our people are still hated for, far from everyone and every comfort you knew because of your new marriage.

Cada triunfo y cada error que he vivido a sido para poder comprobar y demostrar que tus sacrificios, como los de mi papá, no son en vano. I am not capable of knowing the struggle that you went through with

this abusive man, all these years while we were kids just trying to figure out the day and pushing through for the well-being of my siblings and me. Of having only my siblings and me as your whole world. Entiendo que va a ser un poco difícil vernos crecer y uno por uno, irnos de la casa a formar nuestras propias vidas.

I may not be capable of knowing it, but trust me when I say that I wish you had gathered that fierce strength you had when faced with the sexism as one of the few females in the Industrial Engineering program in Mexico and the same strength you had when your new spouse moved your little family to this foreign land—to leave him. No te puedo culpar toda mi vida.

Al igual que no puedo culpar a mi papá por todo lo que ha pasado. El tuvo sus tiempos de felicidad, de reír y de ser el padre y esposo que desvanecía con una gota de cerveza o el Hulk que llevaba dentro se hiciera presente. Papá también tuvo sus penas, sus lágrimas y aunque eso no es motivo de quien sufrió más o no sufrió tanto, no nos tuvo que tratar tan mal.

Al final del día, él es mi padre y será por daño psicológico o no se que mugrero, pero lo amo y respeto.

En estos tiempos inciertos donde el odio, muy descaradamente, a tomado las riendas de este país que has hecho tuyo, I have flown away from the nest to take a breath from that house and to begin writing the joy, the horror, the mystery and above all else, the love that has shaped me en la mujer fuerte, confidente y trabajadora que tú y papá ayudaron a forjar.

Con esto, te quiero decir que te amo y que las palabras nunca serán lo suficiente para decirte cuánto respeto, amor y gratitud tengo de que yo tenga el honor de ser tu hija.

Con mucho amor y sinceridad,

Tu Tortolita

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# The Seeds in Our Teeth

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Sydney Bartlett

I visited my grandmother every summer when I was young. Those were good days spent outside under the sun, running through sprinklers while old, strappy tank tops hung off of my skinny body, all ribs and legs.

I'm nineteen now, and it has been a long while since my bare feet have felt the morning dew resting on my grandmother's back yard early in the morning. I still love the smell of lavender because she used to put its dried petals beneath my pillow when I was homesick. She taught me how to pick the best berries from the vine, the right color and tenderness at the touch, and I eat a tall stack of French toast with an even taller pile of powdered sugar on top just like I did then. Well-versed in the plants that littered her backyard, I'll tell you all about those kinds you can eat without getting sick, the way to make a snapdragon talk, and even how to make a doll from a bright pink flower. Because of my time there I'm drawn to the oddest things: out of tune pianos, half-hearted cuckoo clocks, even soap shaped like seashells, because while I haven't been to Michigan in the summer in a long, long time, it has still been with me.

At times I can't predict, like the silences between songs in my car, or as my heel hits the pavement at home in Austin late in the afternoon, or just as I'm dozing off late at night under a thick comforter mocking the Texas heat, when the desire to bring back those summers will overcome me. The faint taste of mulberries fills my mouth, and I swear the tops of my shoulders get hot, turn a faded shade of pink.

I close my eyes to remember it all, noticing that Time has smashed all the memories together, as if the individual moments were berries being crushed by a greedy set of crooked teeth. Nonetheless, if I think hard enough, I still remember how the juice tasted ten years ago, sweet and warm. I remember how the moments felt, like they could last forever. I even remember how I felt, like I, with a gap in between my front teeth and red shoulders and fruit in my hands, could last forever, too.

I tell myself: Okay, okay. Slow down. Go piece by piece now. Don't go letting the jaws of time swallow your memories. Bite back. Separate the skin from the flesh, from the juice, from the stem. Taste how forever felt.

See how the past sticks around like tiny seeds stuck in your teeth.

During those summers I woke up with the sun and watched it peek over the tree line, heard the birds announce its arrival. My grandmother handed me some warm milk in a chipped mug with a few drops of coffee tainting its white color, meant to fool me, to make me feel older, mature. I was a quiet child, so we sat there together—quietly. I didn't like the taste of coffee, still don't, so much as the feeling of warmth between my hands and on my face as I brought the cup to the edge of my lips, almost like communion. And I admit that the time did feel holy. As day broke, my cousin and grandpa remained asleep, so it was just my grandmother and I on the back porch for a few sacred minutes. The world restarted, and it seemed to me that our silent morning practice existed as some sanctifying measure necessary and important to the very structure of our reality.

Now, my grandmother had, and still has, a gap in between her two front teeth, which you can often see because her life is one full of open mouths, talking and laughing and storytelling and praying. She stopped dyeing her hair its long outgrown shade of auburn, so that now it has an indelible silver hue, mimicking the wedding ring that has always been stubbornly stuck to her finger. Christ hangs from her neck, and she has an immense distrust of the government.

A little later, when my cousin would stumble onto the back porch, hair sticking out and up in a thousand directions, my and my grandmother's moment ended; it was time for breakfast. Trails of flour mingled with powdered sugar, egg shells littered the counter, and the smell was powerful enough to lure even my grandfather from bed to the table. Stacks of French toast, the bread's surface a crisp, even brown that gave way to a soft center and mingled with butter and powdered sugar, sat next to fat slices of bacon on floral plates. Now, my grandfather has a mustache that tickles my cheeks and, unlike my grandmother's poor locks, remains a practical shade of brown that refuses to age. I inherited my sweet tooth from him, which is probably why he lacks those very same teeth now. Instead, he relies on a false set to chew the candy bars that he never buys, yet somehow always end up in the house. He loves to chop wood. We could hear him hammering out back for hours on end, loading the wheelbarrow, stacking the logs. A mad cycle only a man like my grandfather could handle.

The phone, sitting right next to the table, usually started ringing at this point in the morning. Oftentimes it was my aunt begging my cousin to come home, my cousin in turn begging my grandmother never to send her back. My presence, an annual, rare thing, usually played the trump card and Elizabeth stuck with me. We scraped plates into the trash and from there were free to roam at our leisure under the sun.

There was little-to-no variation in our daily rituals. The proper amount of hours were spent on a few, crucial activities that never ceased to make the day pass quickly, the sun rush across the sky much, much too fast. First off, there was the mulberry tree. I think I still have stains on the bottoms of my feet from stomping around back there, the edge of the yard closest to the forest. During years when the cherry tree failed or Grandpa accidentally fertilized the apples, or something "wasn't quite right" with the strawberries, the mulberry tree never failed to produce an abundance of plump, dark purple fruit. They weren't good for much except eating right off of

the branches. Grandma told us they were lousy in the kitchen and even worse at turning themselves into jam, so we ate. It was an old tree, and such a staple in my life that it ceased to be just any old piece of nature making its way in the world from my grandmother's backyard. Instead, as odd as it sounds, the mulberry seemed to not be a friend, but, well, a guardian of some sort. I thought that the tree must be somewhat protective of my cousin and I, just as we, quick to defend its value, were of it. The cool dirt under which its roots stretched must have recognized me from just a single footprint. The tree's limbs had to have remembered me by the way my small hands gripped their bark as I, ever cautious, made my way up its trunk. Even now, I have to believe that the mulberry tree would know me.

I remember how the juice tasted, how its seeds stuck in the crevices of my teeth.

Elizabeth and I would inevitably join my grandmother under the direct gaze of the sun in the strawberry patch. Together, sweating, we combed through the vines in search of the small, sweet berries that we put in our greedy mouths and on toast and in shortcake and with ice cream. Grandma whistled all the while, and laughing, told us how her own grandmother said that "whistling girls and crowing hens must surely come to some bad end," an adage that sticks with me when my own out-of-tune whistle pierces the air now. Elizabeth and I probably ate more than we picked, but every once in awhile a few soft plunks in my grandma's bucket indicated our small contribution. I was a sucker for stories, still am, and begged for them as our hands skidded across the hot sand upon which strawberries rested. I like the one about my dad running to catch the bus in his underwear or my great-great grandma Fults hiding from the Indians on her way home from town. One time Grandma's dad walked through a blizzard in March to buy ice cream for her birthday, and her mother, my great-grandmother Bernice, had the most beautiful auburn hair, all red and gold and brunette. My Aunt Lavina would sit under a massive Weeping Willow in an old white wicker chair and read when she felt like being alone.

My family's pretty ordinary, and such stories don't attempt to disprove the fact, nor do I want them to. Instead, what my grandmother's stories have always shown me is the subtle beauty, the absolutely extraordinary grace, which ordinary life does indeed possess.

Lunch was always a simple affair. Cold cuts and bread, resting sloppily in one hand as the other traipsed across the piano upstairs. My cousin and I had this ridiculous duet we sang with the specific purpose of driving my grandfather insane. Most days, to our intense satisfaction, it worked. The rest of the afternoon was spent in a similar way as the previous hours, outside under the sun and over anything we could climb.

One of those things happened to be the tire swing. It seems to me that everyone in my family lacks any mechanical or practical skills, so it has always shocked me that a tire swing even existed, that anyone convinced himself he was capable of such a feat. In contrast, it's not a shock to me at all, really, that the same tire swing came crashing down one afternoon, long hair and limbs flailing onto dirt beneath, the tire rolling, free at last, down the road. I tell you, it was a great joy for me just as all small, domestic disasters seem to be at that age.

Once in awhile we visited an ice cream shop that put these candy eyes on top of my cones that I always ate last. They watched me the whole time and never tasted as good as I really wanted them to.

So those were the afternoons, not so promising as the very early morning, or as exciting as just the plain early morning, or as satisfying as just the old regular morning. They were sleepy and lazy hours spent falling off of tire swings and playing out-of-tune pianos and dragging the life out of ice cream cones. Grandma started cooking dinner as the lids of afternoon eyes started fluttering. We swarmed the kitchen like roaches. Sticking fingers into things that weren't quite ready or pinching dough off of crusts slipping themselves into the oven. The outside world lost its allure, momentarily, and my cousin and I ran up and down stairs, dug through old bins, and flipped the yellowed pages of crinkly books. Clothes from my grandparent's

grandparent's youth smelled like the city library, which was almost as unused as that fabric, unless I was there in the summer. I loved slipping the smooth fabric over my head. I lifted a corner of the dress with the tips of my fingers, dainty, and walked down stairs like a young debutante over and over again. I talked with an exaggerated accent that didn't resemble anything.

Now it was evening. The best evenings, the very best evenings, were those when the house smelled like chicken noodle soup. Only the thick smell of homemade noodles could force me back into the 21st century, and following a flurry of folding and dust, my cousin and I rushed back up the stairs. We stood on stools and uncoiled the dough rolled in the shape of a snail's swirled shell. Sometimes the longest ones rolled off the counter, even when I stood on my tiptoes, and lifted my arm as high as I could. I wish I could be more descriptive when it came to the soup, for your benefit and for my own, but, to be honest, I didn't pay much attention to any of the details. We dropped the noodles into the pot on the stove, which had carrots, I think. And maybe onions.

When the soup was done I was never patient enough to wait for it to cool off. Instead, I dove right in, melting ice cubes swimming across its surface. My belly grew twice its size. I slurped the noodles, feeling them slip between my teeth, and chewed on soft carrots. I went back for seconds and thirds and, following my grandma's urging, fourths, too. I've never had soup that tastes quite the same as it did during those summer evenings as the sun set against the kitchen window, beckoning the night sky to quickly follow.

After the dishes sat soaking in the sink, an apple pie shoved into the oven, the house was filled with the scent of sweet dough and the faint sound of "Heart and Soul" played slowly, as if our fingers were just as sluggish and full of soup as our bellies. I dozed off next to my grandmother and cousin with a piece of pie in my lap, its sweet taste in my mouth, and *The Sound of Music* on the TV.

And that's where it ends for me. Whether I'm in a silent car, walking on Austin sidewalks, or dozing off miles away from Michigan,

my memories of those summers come to a sharp end just as Maria falls in love with Georg von Trapp. Perhaps I've exaggerated and those old summers weren't half as lovely or sweet as I have written here. But I'm inclined to believe that they were.

My experiences eating chicken soup and climbing mulberry trees are bound to become another ordinary story told in another ordinary strawberry patch telling of another ordinary life.

You rarely choose what seeds from a berry get stuck in your teeth.

We rarely choose what encompasses our past, much less what we remember.

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# Reign of Terrier

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Olivia Zisman

## *The Dog's Function and Portrayal in Fantastic Literature and Film*

What happens when man's best friend becomes man's worst nightmare? Or when the loyal companion he hunts alongside begins to, instead, hunt him? As Sherlock Holmes challenges in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, “the devil’s agents may be of flesh and blood, may they not?” (43). Indeed, the dog within the horror genre is one of the devil’s agents—both of flesh and blood and, at times, with a hunger and thirst for flesh and blood. A sentient and transient fantastic beast, the dog negotiates the borderlands in-between the living world and the underworld because it also is in-between in every way. Its hypersensitivity to the supernatural allows it to choose life over death, or vice versa. In “Christabel,” “The House and the Brain,” *Dracula*, and *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Cerberus-like dogs either subvert or fulfill their role as hellhounds in servitude to a hellish master, which underscores their choice of either guarding or attacking the living world.

A recurrent image in the horror genre is that of the wolf and dog howling at a full moon, bathed in both darkness and moonlight. In the motif, they occupy a liminal space between the dark and light, which parallels the role they serve as a medium to the dead and living. The wolf and dog's relation to the moon extends back to classical antiquity. Puppies were sacrificed during a full moon at crossroads as food offerings to Hecate, the “goddess of ghosts, darkness, and witchcraft” (Cavendish 63). Even though her suppers consisted of dog meat, Hecate owned packs of man-eating hellhounds, as well as

the most notorious dog in the Greco-Roman world: Cerberus (“Hecate”). Like the moon goddess Hecate, Cerberus stood at the cross-roads between earth and the house of Hades, preventing “the living from entering the underworld and the dead from leaving it” (Cavendish 62). Richard Cavendish, author of *The Powers of Evil*, asserts, “the dog is a creature of the threshold, the guardian of doors and portals, and so it is appropriately associated with the frontier between life and death, and with demons and ghosts which move across the frontier” (Cavendish 62). The wolf and dog’s recurrent image in lunar lore as ‘a creature of the threshold’ contributes to its symbolism as a psychic medium in folkloristic literature and film.

Certain cultures, however, do not consider the dog’s sixth sense for the supernatural symbolic. For example, some Muslim communities in Africa and Asia reject dogs because, in a religious and hygienic sense, they believe rabid dogs are “unclean” (Wandeler et al. 684). ‘Unclean’ dogs are supernatural or are attuned to the supernatural powers of deities, demons, and witches (Wandeler et al. 686–87). In rural areas of developing countries, traditional healers neglect Western medicine to treat rabies from dog bites by performing exorcisms (Wandeler et al. 687). The belief of the dog to be occult is not limited to practitioners of Islam and traditional African religions. Revelation 22:15 states, “outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood” (ESV). The polysyndeton in the English Standard Version emphasizes how Christians in the ancient world likened dogs to heretics. As such, the dog’s associations with life, death, and the occult pervade community cultures, geographical areas, religious beliefs, and even time. The dog’s supernatural associations, however, do not determine whether it is inherently good or bad, whether it is man’s best friend or worst nightmare.

In “Christabel” and “The House and the Brain,” the domesticated dog is situated in a liminal space between the underworld and the living world but still functions as the family pet. When Christabel sneaks out of the castle to pray in the woods, a “toothless mastiff

bitch” sleeps in her kennel at the gate, never stirring to the clock striking twelve (Coleridge 7). Just as Cerberus is put to sleep by the strumming of a lyre, Christabel’s Mastiff is put to sleep by the ringing of the castle clock. Although the Cerberus-like Mastiff does not stir when the loving, charitable, and “sweet” Christabel crosses “the threshold of the gate” and enters the wood, she does growl in her sleep at the deceitful, enchanting, and maleficent Geraldine, who enters the castle grounds with a beguiled Christabel (132). The Mastiff’s “angry moan” surprises Christabel because the gentle-natured dog has never before shown aggression in front of her (149–51). Contrastingly, Christabel is not surprised—startled, but not surprised—upon meeting Geraldine, who is dressed in a white silk robe and whose features shone “shadowy in the moonlight” (60). Christabel’s first impression of Geraldine perceives her as an innocent, describing her as a damsel robed in white but shadowed in spite of the full moon’s light. Already, Geraldine is occupying the in-between of darkness and light, which puts into question the purity of her character. As the story progresses, Geraldine reveals her true nature—a witch—when she casts spells of deep sleep, fearful and painful visions, and dizzying trances on Christabel (115,120–21, 125). According to Cavendish, “Greek and Roman writers associated witches with the night, with the moon shining and the darkness” (97). Their association can be accredited to the moon goddess Hecate, who also presided over witchcraft. Possibly, Samuel Taylor Coleridge was influenced by Greco-Roman mythology when he attributed characteristics of Hecate to Geraldine. If Geraldine is Hecate, then Christabel’s watchdog is Cerberus, growling only when a threat to the living world has violated the rules of the threshold. By rejecting Geraldine’s ownership of her as a quasi-Cerberus serving a witch-figure, the Mastiff assumes her role as a companion animal to her companion, Christabel, when she warns the young woman of Geraldine’s malevolent spirit.

Another dog who serves as both psychic medium and man’s best friend is the narrator’s Bull Terrier in Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s “The House and the Brain,” who may not have been dozing like

Christabel's Mastiff but who went from inquisitive and eager to terrified and dastardly in the face of danger. Thinking his Bull Terrier is "fond of prowling about ghostly corners and passages at night" and is "a dog of dogs for a ghost," the narrator decides to bring his "favourite dog" along with him to a haunted house (94). When the dog runs in "eagerly" past the front door's threshold into the haunted house, it immediately senses a malign spiritual presence and slinks back, "scratching and whining to get out" (95). Dogs "seem to have psychic abilities denied to most humans, in sensing the presence of ghosts or the approach of danger," speculates Cavendish (62). Indeed, the Bull Terrier appears hypersensitive to ghosts and danger. It howls when a chair moves from one wall to the other "quickly and noisily," and with "trembling" legs and "bristling" hair, the dog presses into a wall of the bedchamber "as if literally striving to force his way into it" when ghosts haunt the room (95, 97, 99). After a serpent-eyed shadow's evil will snaps the Bull Terrier's neck, the narrator is distraught, taking his "poor favourite" into his arms and feeling "acute grief" (104). The narrator later explains that the immense force of will from the "Thing of Darkness" did not kill him because his "intellect" and "spirit" were supremely more powerful than his dog's (107). Unlike his dog, however, he was unable to detect such deadly influences within the bedchamber because, in his opinion, what dogs lack in willpower they make up for in brutish instincts (107). But "the instincts of the brute creation" are not the only reason, if not the real reason at all, behind why dogs are able to detect supernatural phenomena (107).

James Serpell, in his book *The Domestic Dog*, has an interesting take on neither the wolf nor the wild dog, but the domestic: "the domestic dog exists precariously in the no-man's land between the human and non-human worlds" and has "the ability to travel as a spiritual messenger or psychopomp between this world and the next" (254). Thereby, the dog is endowed with supernatural powers, separate from its fight or flight instincts as a "brute creation." To use the narrator's words, his Bull Terrier is the "the medium" whose

“peculiarities” allow it to see “strange phenomena” (100). Despite the differences between dog and man in their supernatural-sensing capabilities, the two share a commonality in that they are both living and sentient. The tablet found underneath the trap door of a hidden room in the haunted house had a Latin curse that translated to: “on all that it can reach within these walls—sentient or inanimate, living or dead . . . so work my will!” (110). Although foreboding, the curse makes an important distinction: “sentient or inanimate.” Even the narrator does not consider his beloved dog to have an intellect or a spirit, suggesting he would also consider the Bull Terrier non-sentient if asked directly. But as the curse declares: one either is “sentient or inanimate, living or dead;” therefore, dogs are animate, living things. Possibly, Lytton is making a statement that, at least in the context of the story, animals should be held to the same standard as their fellow sentient beings, humans.

The wolves in Bram Stoker’s novel *Dracula*, on the other hand, are not held to the same standard as their master. They are the heretical hellhounds to a throat-puncturing, living corpse; they are the servants to *Dracula*, always answering his call and never showing any agency because, as editors Nina Auerbach and David Skal observe, they “fall under *Dracula*’s spell” (18). For example, when a grieving woman beats her fists against the door to *Dracula*’s castle shouting, “monster, give me my child!” *Dracula* whistles for his wolves (48). Within minutes, his wolf servants “from far and wide” pour into the courtyard and, without even a cry from the woman, consume her, “licking their lips” as they trot away (48–49). Like may call to like, but in the case of *Dracula*, the hellish wolves and *Dracula*’s likeness ends at them being supernatural. Despite Stoker portraying “the children of the night” to be as monstrous as *Dracula*, the wolves are never given a chance to act outside of *Dracula*’s command (24, 209). The vampire himself transforms into a wolf once he and his cargo are shipwrecked in Whitby, North Yorkshire because of a heavy wind and fog that he manipulated (79, 211), and the townspeople by and

large warmly welcome his wolf form, mistaking it for the form of a large dog. Stoker writes, “A good deal of interest was abroad concerning the dog that landed when the ship struck, and more than a few of the members of the SPCA, which is very strong in Whitby, have tried to befriend the animal” (80). With that said, some of the townspeople fear the dog may “become a danger” because they see it as “a fierce brute,” lurking—rather than “hiding in terror”—by the moors (80). Dracula does become a danger when he savagely attacks a half-bred mastiff, tearing its throat away and slitting open its belly (80). The townspeople did not identify the large dog of the moors as the “savage opponent” fighting the half-bred mastiff, but they did find the mastiff’s dead body and mourn when they did not find the shipwrecked dog (80, 84). Clearly, the moors are the “the borderlands in-between” the living world and the underworld, the seaside town symbolizing life and the harbor symbolizing death (Williams 93). The dog is supposed to mark “the uncertain transition between life and death” and guard innocent lives from potential threats crossing the threshold (Williams 93). But in a perversion to the dog’s “social symbols” as “guardian” and “hound of hell,” Dracula was the dog; thus, the dog was the threat (Spears et al. 88). Moreover, the townspeople’s non-resistance to the “brute” (the exact word the narrator of “The House and the Brain” uses) highlights their powerlessness to sense and identify supernatural phenomena or fantastical creatures (the exact powerlessness the narrator has in detecting phantoms).

Like “The House and the Brain,” *The Hound of the Baskervilles* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle has human-canine relationships that are comparable to those in *Dracula*. In the manuscript of the Baskerville legend that Dr. Mortimer reads to Sherlock Holmes, a diabolical and fiendish “hound of hell” mauled Hugo Baskerville to death after he sold his soul to the devil so he could rape a woman, and the hellhound has “plagued the family ever since” (20, 36). In the end, Holmes discovers the hound to not be spectral at all but

rather a bloodhound-mastiff mix that only looks hellish (252). Like Dracula, the hound haunts the moor, which the manuscript warns the Baskervilles from crossing “in those dark hours where the powers of evil are exalted” (20). Evidently, the Baskervilles view the moor as an interstitial space, and even the townsperson, Mr. Stapleton (who Holmes later unmasks as the villain) warns the detective early on that one “false step yonder” into the boggy ground by the moor “means death to man or beast” (109). Similar to how the fog rolls into Whitby upon Dracula’s arrival, a blanket of fog settles over Devonshire upon the half-bred mastiff’s arrival and does not lift until Holmes empties “five barrels of his revolver into the creature’s flank” (251, 258). The ominous fog, neither solid nor liquid, reflects the moor’s interstitial space, neither of the living nor of the dead. Similar to how the townspeople find the dead body of the half-bred mastiff killed by Dracula, Holmes finds the dead body of Dr. Mortimer’s “favourite dog,” which is “larger than a terrier and smaller than a mastiff,” killed by yet another half-bred mastiff (7). The mangled bodies of the dogs, as well as the reversal of roles for the mastiff mutts, add a layer of perversity to the horror insomuch that both canine deaths were caused by other canines.

Dracula’s malicious intent is in his nature, the Baskerville hound’s fearsome aggression is nurtured by Mr. Stapleton. The legend of the hellhound plaguing the Baskerville bloodline was, after all, just that: a legend. As Cavendish divulges, “some families and houses are warned of an imminent death by the appearance of a spectral dog” (62). After Mr. Stapleton paints the dog’s eyes and muzzle with glowing phosphorous to make the dog look infernal, the bloodhound-mastiff mix appears on the moor, and the people of Devonshire begin to circulate rumors of a spectral dog seeking vengeance on the Baskervilles. The dog itself never seeks vengeance, and in fact, he never shows aggression or kills anyone until months of Mr. Stapleton’s maltreatment leaves the dog “savage and half-starved” (278). Only when “incited by its master” does the hound attack Charles Baskerville (268). Unlike the other examples of human-canine rela-

tionships in “Christabel,” “The House and the Brain,” and Dracula, the Baskerville hound does not start out Cerberus-like or a psychic medium but rather becomes the hellhound in the end due to his master’s abuse.

Dracula’s wolves, Dracula as a wolf, and the Baskerville hellhound-bloodhound-mastiff show the fearsome aggression of Cerberus, juxtaposing with the more tenderhearted natures of Christabel’s mastiff and the narrator’s Bull Terrier. The latter two dogs, in spite of being able to sense the supernatural more keenly than their companions, would rather sleep or flee than fight. A similarity the domestic dogs share is that they are all bully breeds. Not mentioned are the three terriers owned by Lord Godalming, one of the four men who tracks down and destroys Dracula (223); of course, bully breeds belong to the terrier group. Dr. Seward, another of the four men, whistles for the terriers to kill Dracula’s rats. To paraphrase, the dogs suddenly stop and snarl “at the threshold,” lifting their noses and howling together at the “evil presence” of the rats—actions very reminiscent of Cerberus (222).

Why, then, are Cerberus-like dogs, either by way of their form or function, nature or nurture, portrayed as having the physical characteristics of bully breeds? According to Elizabeth Zinda, author of “American Cerberus,” we as Americans project our anxieties of death and the afterlife onto what we fear, and for many, pit bulls are fearsome. Meisha Rosenberg, author of “Golden Retrievers are White, Pit Bulls are Black,” argues that the public’s perception of pit bulls reflects current breed and racial discrimination, which might explain the symbolic, racialized “otherness” that solidly-built, large dog breeds have in the eyes of the media and public opinion. In her article “Irrationality Unleashed,” Kristen Swann agrees that there is, indeed, a trend toward large dog breeds being perceived as demonic and monstrous. However, she herself passes a value judgment on bully breeds when she claims, after giving credit to Sports Illustrated for starting the negative media coverage of pit bulls, that the pit bull featured on the magazine’s 1987 cover page looked like

Cerberus (844). Unfortunately, large dog breeds are not only demonized in literature. In the 1939 film adaptation of “The Hound of the Baskervilles,” a critic for Time magazine said that Associate Producer Gene Markey cast “a friendly old Great Dane” to play the hellhound (Miller). Certainly, this is not the only time a Great Dane has played the role of a supernatural or supernatural-sensing dog; take, for instance, the well-loved and well-known Scooby Doo. Other well-known roles are that of Fluffy and Fang in Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone. CGI animators appear to have based Fluffy’s physical appearance not only off of the three-headed Cerberus, but also off the Staffordshire Bull Terrier, a pit bull. In addition, a Neapolitan Mastiff portrays Hagrid’s dog, Fang. Even though Hagrid calls Fang a “bloody coward,” Malfoy wants the dog to protect him as the group splits into two to find an injured unicorn in the Forbidden Forest (Harry Potter). Fluffy, like Cerberus, falls asleep to the strumming of a string instrument, and Fang, like Cerberus, is used as a watchdog to sense a fantastical creature that is in the in-between of life and death. Though these dogs may be demonized in the canonical sense, not all of them are demonized in a moralistic sense.

A canonical demonization of the dog versus a moralistic one resonates with how the dog may function as a quasi-Cerberus but chooses to either subvert or fulfill its role as hellhound. Yes, the dog may be of demonic or supernatural origin, but its origin should not be synonymous with its behavior, as proven by the more gentle-natured dogs in “Christabel” and “The House and the Brain.” At its core, the symbolism of the dog—wild, domestic, or wolf—within the horror genre is that it possesses a preternatural ability to sense “otherness” because it is also “other.” Nevertheless, simply because the dog is “other” as a fantastic beast does not mean its assigned breed should be demonized as the other.

Footnote 1: Dogs are also intimately linked with evildoers in Philippians 3:2 and Psalm 22:16 (ESV). Moreover, similar to Hecate’s man-eating hellhounds, dogs are depicted eating human corpses and drinking human blood in 1 King 14:11, 16:4, 21:19, 22:38, 2 Kings 9:10, and Psalm 68:23 (ESV).

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**POETRY**

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# She's a Bust

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Delia Davis

I. Geometric lines but smooth,  
like a satin tablecloth over a hard mahogany table.  
She is all curvature, all sinuous and hushed and uninterrupted  
and—  
smooth, you interrupt her to tell her: she is so smooth.

You want to scamper, you want to scoot, you want to scurry on  
down  
to the backwoods with her,  
so you grab her hand and drag her through the mud, let the sticks  
scrape her sides and  
the blackberries smear her face as you trample them, too,  
and at the end of the long hike you'll turn to her and say,  
Wasn't that *romantic*?

Don't give her a chance to respond. The answer's all in her eyes,  
her big, bright blue doe eyes, so beautiful and so sad—you glance  
at her—  
Why so sad, honey?

You don't get it, but you want to save her, tame her, wipe the  
blackberry smears off her cheeks—*who did this to you, poor*

*thing, I'll take care of you—*  
stuff a sock in her mouth—*in my strong arms, come on, darling—*  
throw her over your shoulder  
take her home  
lock her in your bowels and throw the key away  
  
tell people she's the songbird in your ribcage, silence the  
groans and bellows from the bowels of your ego.

II. *I want to take you to the Louvre*, you tell her. *You are a work of art.*

You kiss her and taste sulfide on her lips, wince to yourself, almost  
say something, then remember  
her cool marble bust, her smooth geometric lines.

You take her to the Louvre; she does a twirl for the curator.  
I'm sorry, he says, there is no more room in the Louvre.

III. She goes home alone that evening. You offer to drive her home.

*There are bad men out there*, you say.  
She says, *I can handle myself fine, thank you.*  
Something sharp is lodged in her throat.  
She's been trying to spit it out at you all night, the bitch.  
*What a bust*, you think. *All of that effort, for what?*

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# De derrière les fagots

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Riley Ratcliff

Not without something unbelievable  
about to happen, would I ever consider myself a transient  
in your home. New streetlights are posted by the highway,  
and I have never seen them above the trees  
behind your house. Whatever twilight is  
underwater, it doesn't change  
the fact that I heard birds  
chirping inside the streetlights last night,  
under the humble photography of skies  
full of rain, unfolding in the wind like taxis  
full of scarves like virgins  
trapped in latex or the forest-  
green heat of it all. It doesn't take much,  
once you're home, to check the truth value, to see us all  
up from the hum-colored storehouse.

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# An Amateur Astronomy

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Asa Johnson

The places one may lay and gaze at stars  
Are hard to come by where the endless day  
Meets streets *carrés*, drugstores that always stay  
Open, and men who shut themselves in bars.  
Unsure of when they ought to disembark,  
Pedestrians float down wide concrete ways  
Ignoring heaven's stark, beautiful rays,  
Inured to the city's neon never-dark.

Yet I know of a hidden glade or two  
Where fairies still build rings and then, supine,  
Sing from their hearts, their backs against the earth,  
With melancholy of forgotten mirth.  
Let us go now—on moonlight we will dine  
With gods that all may see, yet so few do.

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# Borders

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**Nora Greenstein Biondi**

Don't proselytize here.

Eat blintzes stewed in cherries,  
seeped in New York, like my father  
and the potatoes.

Fill  
hamentashen with  
prune for Moses  
our angry uncle grew  
tongue long  
enough to sip  
brisket to seep  
lady fingers  
in espresso-colored  
cups.

Four times we slurp  
sweet tar on pillows  
carved from backs  
of pharaoh, from  
our loveseat  
braided like challah,

like bubbe's hands  
when we tore the gefilte Fish  
from her name, stomped  
her Pearls

secret daughter,  
but she made matzo  
balls from bricks  
of worse-  
than-nothing, of straw  
and backs bent from leaving.

Momma pleased  
with sweet punams  
for her to fill  
with puttanesca,  
Ricotta,  
manicotti,  
while brickmakers lay

charoset and set our streets  
with mozzarella cheese.

The goyim  
lies with the chosen. We fill the tabernacle  
with cherries, float the mikvah in olive oil.

Greenstein Biondi.  
When butchers break rooms  
throw it in the pot with the people.

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# Like Father Like Son

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Thomas Ngyuen

Consider that you will never  
be able to run fast enough  
to forget. Accept that your father

is more alive in your dreams than  
in the texts he sends you every year.

*Hi son, Bố will be in Houston*

*this weekend. Hope to see you soon.*

Lose your Vietnamese heritage  
over and over again, and realize

the only word you will never struggle  
to translate is *father*. Remember his  
footsteps, the way they pressed

down on carpet, hollow with  
weight. Wake up each day to the  
sound of his voice, tires scraping

loose gravel, telling you to get up  
and start the morning with a run.  
*It's good for you, son. It's good*

*for you.* Rub your eyes the  
way you did twelve years ago  
when you woke up, tangled

in bed sheets, and see how the  
world gets a little dimmer as it  
becomes clearer. Keep running.

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# Till Death

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Emma Berdanier

praying mantis,  
gorgeous mess of  
lithe limber limbs  
perpetually dressed  
in a coat of green  
eyes a delicate black  
glittering somewhere  
among the blades  
body bent  
backwards always  
in conversation with some god  
or two, can I wash  
the grass stains from you  
with holy oil, can I bathe  
you in the finest perfumes:  
sandalwood, violet, myrrh...  
can I feed you communion  
wine & bread  
the body incarnate  
within you  
the blood all over your  
hands, can I go searching  
through the whole earth

for a mate for you, through all  
of eden until I find one thick  
& juicy perfect for a mid-  
afternoon snack (or  
do you prefer them frail &  
brittle & crunchy, salt in your  
mouth)

& if I do  
can you teach me  
how to be like you  
can you teach me  
how to kill my lovers  
& after the killing what  
to do with the bodies  
what to do with the  
ever-growing  
grave yard that  
remains

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# Benediction

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**Asa Johnson**

Remember how it feels to weep at joy!  
I had forgotten. Each of you has taught  
Me once again how capable my heart.  
Beneath the boundless ceiling dappled blue  
And every other hue may grace the eye,  
The spirits of heaven are born of ladies' sighs  
Of sweat, of laughter sweet, of you and I  
And I can no more bear it with dry face.  
I've not prayed in years but now will supplicate  
To beg the heavy hand of fate to hold  
Me still and keep me always in this place.  
Immortal ecstasy that cannot be!  
And yet already was, and will have been  
Where stars fall and the summer's evergreen.

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# Beast

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**Afarin Allabakhshizadeh**

Bundle my body with dotted lines  
that stop just below my eyes.  
Despair was mom's pistachios  
compared to what I felt

alone in a little green car at age nine  
when freshly crumbled flowers were Tuesday  
and I read rainbows at nightfall beneath my bed  
made of twisted scarlet beams until I found

a pink princess journal encrusted in dust  
under glossy trash bags that held singing dolls  
that I threw away at dawn while mama was sleeping  
and through the misty morning air I spotted

a nightingale lingering above our innocent street  
and then plummeting into a pool of oozing  
crimson melting cherry lollies liquefied poppies  
and I forgot this at age eighteen when I discovered

a cul-de-sac that caused my lungs to sprout  
moss and compress between two immaculate  
stones leaving my lashes incurably twitchy  
and in the searing summer I finally understood

that eyes are meant to glisten like gooey dates  
wrinkled hands should always be kissed  
and soaking toes in tea tree is the purest form of affection  
while sitting still within a trapezoid room.

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# Arabesque in Tactical Boots

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Joe Lozano

She moved her body into cambrè,  
A crescent moon  
In the sky above the Capitol,  
In suspension like plastic horses in the park,

Merry-go-round the midnight carousel  
Illuminated autumn leaves caught mid-air;  
Paratroopers over Normandy advance the battalion and  
New season breaches the sidewalk.

Lamina and stem wear the wounds of a Tuesday in November and  
Mild breezes carry the fallen to shore,  
They ebb onto the dew-tipped lawn  
And sink deep beneath footsteps in reverse,

Rubber stiff souls that support fantasies of greatness  
On grounds that have never been; the sea roars in  
Rebellion against a fourth reich, waves crash upon the streets and  
The spirits of Omaha join with those Trumped and trampled

Like the dirt beneath soldiers' feet *en pointe*,  
Trenches born from landmines scattered domestically,  
Protesters pirouetting across the battlefield  
Plowed by stolen hands on taken land by a supremacy

Whose legacy is the shepherd of history.  
Whose flock stampedes the borders.  
Whose wool clothes the compliant and  
Whose hooves prance on graves behind reservation lines.

Dakota calls for the wolves to unbury the pipes  
And stop the Flint faucets from breathing fire  
Into the glasses of the thirsty and scared,  
Revolution in promenade

Like a ballerina in a music box without sound,  
Her cries silenced in a room full of trumpets  
Playing Taps to grieve a different grief,  
Veterans of the American ballet.

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# in case time runs away

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Thomas Ngyuen

again we go over your spelling, baby sister. words you can't get right. preparing for weekly fourth grade spelling tests. those ie and ei words. receive and believe. your hand on lined page. fingers curled over creases that haven't formed yet. grip strength. taut like drum skin. you tracing letters one by one. shadows dancing along. black hair catching light from the May sun. recess.

no more spelling tests. because you're in middle school now. I don't believe you. remember reading word lists for you until I was angry. and I realize I've been gone. busy. watching you grow up in snapshots from afar. each time I come home I notice differences. the way you dress. waking up at five am to straighten your hair. makeup age. boys. the way you treat mom. wondering who created the stars you use to find your way.

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# They Say He Has A Monster

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Caroline Read

Remember when you brought pancakes to bed / hot / buttery / an  
early morning  
love letter / I did not notice then / the smell of blueberries / and  
needles.

Hide smoke plume bruises / peacock feathered imprints / jagged blue  
map trails of your swollen veins / underneath cotton long sleeves / so  
that you can bloom / in the sizzling Texas spring /  
into a liar.

Call most Wednesdays / send me apologies over white static silence / that  
settle like dust in my marrow / in the creases of my soul / as you forget  
to mention / your one last glorious splintering take-off / in the bathroom  
outside airport security.

Don't forget to scrawl some poems in my honor / but never send them /  
because "it hurts too much."

Everything is about you / even me.

Crack my chest / open to the star stained sky / so you can unhinge my  
ribs / peel them back like wings / in order to rummage through my  
organs / destroy my heart halls / take until there is nothing left / but the  
shattered ruins of us.

You asked me while we roasted inside out on a stranger's porch /  
how I could leave you now / when you needed me most / and I do  
not know if I spoke / if I could fish words out from under my  
tears / but if I could go back / press my lips to your cheek once  
more / I would whisper / that you have never needed me / that  
you have only sometimes wanted me / that you made my  
decision for me / that I loved you / so much / that I screamed for a  
whole year after.

Now / I redefine my edges / smear charcoal blurs into a new  
shape / taking pleasure  
in the slithering burn of gulping fire / in the beauty of making  
scars bleed / scars left by your monsters / the demons scratching  
at your shadow / nestling on your shoulders /  
licking at your skin.

Remember / in the consuming chaos you created /  
those monsters destroyed me.

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# Final Thoughts: A Poem for Pulse

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Julia Schoos

*One, two, three, four –*

There was music but  
our song was cut short

And the bass dropped out.

*Five, six, seven, eight, nine –*

Rounds of shots – I'M GOING TO DIE.  
(we spilled upon the ground like night)

*Ten, eleven, twelve –*

I came to dance  
I came to sing  
to laugh.

*Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen –*

Line us up: 1, 2, 3 – a goodbye never said.  
I loved, and you didn't.

You laughed, and I'm dead.

*Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one –*

It was my birthday.

*Twenty-two, twenty-three –*

I just wanted to feel safe.

*Twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty-six and twenty-seven –*

EVERYONE GET OUT AND KEEP RUNNING

*Twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty, thirty-one, thirty-two, thirty-three –*

HE'S COMING

*Thirty-four, thirty-five, thirty-six –*

I'M GONNA DIE

MOMMY I LOVE YOU.

*Thirty-seven, thirty-eight, thirty-nine, forty –*

(we're spilling, falling, dying)  
*Forty-one, forty-two, forty-three, forty-four*

We are suspended in time.

*Forty-five, forty-six, forty-seven, forty-eight, forty-nine*

The club is silent.

Meals unfinished.

Drinks half-empty.

Phones ringing in this disco morgue.

ARE YOU HURT?

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# Wednesday, October 21, 2015

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Vanessa Martinez

It was like breathing,  
you being there.

W

D H W E  
N E U R IT FELT LIKE THIS...  
A N O E T  
Y N

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## Two Pieces Reclining – Yorkshire Sculpture Park, 1986

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Tony Cartlidge

1.

We slept together,  
for the first time yesterday,  
and skipped off work today.

While we roll around in lazy emulation  
of the night, our empty desks regard each  
other across the office.

Smiles fill the space  
between twin absences.

Let them whisper; we're busy. Or we  
were until interrupted: a delivery banging  
at the wrong door. I watch you, gathering you  
into pale blue satin, cinched at the waist,  
too short to hide you. You stop, hands on hips,  
and grin before you leave the room  
to float downstairs and answer the door.

Grains of me tumble through you.

disappear to  
we swelter until we

2.

We spend  
the afternoon strolling through

the Henry Moore sculpture park, waiting for the heat to break,  
running hands over curves and feeling the smooth exultation of shape  
and frustration, unable to make sense of inescapable differences

between desire and imagination. Fingers trace  
edges and curves, searching for hard limits.

We press foreheads against frigid concrete,  
sweat against cold blue copper. Friction-hot palms clasp together  
and we melt into the dense topiary that borders the exhibit,  
make our own sculpture. Grunting muffled against each other's necks,  
break, and rain runs in torrents over marble and steel and flesh, until we are  
once more

two pieces  
reclining.

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# The ‘I Hate Poetry’ Sonnet

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Tony Carlidge

I simply can’t abide poetic verse.  
Its rhymes and rhythms feel unnatural,  
And freeform poetry is even worse.  
I’d rather skin a cat. I think you all  
Quite twisted, you who turn and bend the tongue  
To make the language fit your lofty goals.  
Much better poetry exists in dung  
Deposited on flies from cows’ arseholes.  
But then, occasionally, you fall in love,  
And every spoken word’s transformed to song.  
A sonnet, *handed down from heav’n above*,  
You think. But you could never be more wrong.  
So put away your rhymes—it’s quite perverse—  
Before you make a Bard thing even verse.

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## Brief Author Biographies

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**Sydney Bartlett** is a second year English and Religious Studies major. She is from a small town with a population comprised of more cows than people. Other than writing and reading, in her free time she enjoys listening to Elton John, running, snowboarding, and appreciating the sun.

**Nora Greenstein Biondi** is a third year Plan II and Women's and Gender Studies major. She is also currently working on her Creative Writing certificate, LGBT studies certificate, and English minor. A person of many interests (and all of them nerdy) she likes books, comics, sci fi television, the vlogbrothers, and talking about Judaism.

**Tony Cartlidge** is a former corporate whore from Liverpool, England, who divides his time between social media Marxism and tinkering with his Assam-powered fiction engine. He shares a home with three dogs, two birds, and one wife. He attacks his stories with the poise and panache of a starving rat at a cheese typewriter and hopes to one day write something important.

**Delia Davis** is a junior studying English Honors. She's a devoted cat and plant mom. Mostly she just wants to travel the currents and see where they take her.

**Nori Hubert** is a fourth year English Honors major, with a certificate/minor in Creative Writing. She published a creative thesis preoccupied with the Sleeping Beauty mythology and an Honors thesis on human-animal interdependency in *Life Of Pi*. She writes for a nonprofit music magazine and enjoys burlesque shows, reading tarot cards, and spending time with her feline overlords.

**Asa Johnson** is a senior English and Radio, Television and Film major. He has spent time as a video intern for Austin Poetry Slam, which sparked an interest in combining writing with elements of performance. In addition to poetry he enjoys writing for the screen and is in the process of revising his first feature-length script *Oasis*.

**Morgan Laird** is a third year Political Communication major. She is currently a DJ at 91.7 KVRX. In her free time, she enjoys listening to Joanna Newsom and is the mother of a young bearded dragon.

**Vanessa Martinez** is a child of God, who was given the talent of writing. She hopes to glorify the Lord with her writing and become a best selling novelist. She also hopes to edit for a book publishing company one day.

**Thomas Nguyen** is a fourth year Neuroscience major. He is currently the Poetry Editor for *Analecta Literary and Arts Journal*. He tends to gravitate mainly towards family in his writing, although he is currently at work on a creative thesis that also incorporates some elements of science.

**Pantuflas** enjoys the simple things and is hoping to get through with two majors. Sometimes she'll wrestle with her demons. Other times, they'll sit down and laugh together. In her free time, she likes to go on adventures.

**Riley Ratcliff** is a fifth year English and philosophy major.

**Julia Schoos** is a first-year English major from Düsseldorf, Germany. She's a member of the poetry board of the *Hothouse Literary Journal*, a member of the English Council, and runs a blog for her writing. When she's not reading or writing, Julia routinely binge-watches Netflix shows, quadruple-texts her friends, and sings.

**Jeremy Scroggins**, Air Force veteran and Appalachian Trail thru-hiker Class of 2013, has since taken advantage of the get-paid-to-go-to-school military gig they call the Post 9/11 GI-Bill and has learned how to acquire a bachelor's degree. He enjoys very long walks that take him out of contemporary society for months at a time.

**Colin Traver** is a fourth year English major. He is currently an associate copy desk chief for The Daily Texan. He enjoys reading, writing, fishing and swapping good stories with good people.

Hailing from the Northern tundra of rural Michigan, **Elizabeth Werth** is a third year English major and Creative Writing minor. She was likely last seen wearing a pair of heart-shaped sunglasses at a race track around the world or writing Formula One content for Red Bull.

**Olivia Zisman**, a third-year English Honors student, has contributed to Hothouse as a fiction board member and now as the poetry editor. To paraphrase Andy Dwyer from Parks and Recreation, by day, she serves as fairy godmother at the University Writing Center; by different time of day, as content writer for an online women's boutique; and by night, she does whatever she wants. No job. Passionate for pit bull rights, her Hufflepuff heart wishes she could break Fluffy out of Hogwarts. In her spare time, she is protecting (or fighting off) other fantastic beasts—in a book, of course.

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