



ARCHETYPE
A LITERARY JOURNAL

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ARCHETYPE
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“As far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light in the darkness of mere being.”

— Carl Gustav Jung

In *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott says that “good writing is about telling the truth.” The truth found in living a life and attending to it. Of being in the world and being aware of its rush. That constant hum. Pulling on a single thread—a single word—and crafting life out of language.

We practice art—singing, dancing, painting, acting, sculpting, writing—to become who we are. It helps us make sense of our inner world, or what some might call the spirit.

At the beginning of each issue of *Archetype*, you will find the following words by Carl G. Jung: “As far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light in the darkness of mere being.”

We started this journal with those words in mind, wanting to create a space for writers and readers alike to take part in telling the truth about life, whatever it may be.

We share immense gratitude toward the writers that trusted us with their work and the creatives that shared their skills with us to bring you this issue. A writer’s life is often filled with solitude, but the act of reading is one of togetherness (and so is the act of creating a literary journal).

Throughout the selection process, we read each author’s work with curiosity and watched as they shone light on disparate moments of life, tied together by the fact that they were being *lived*. Some pain and joy was shared, some mysteries revealed, some questions asked and answered. And throughout it all, we became a little more human, and grew a little more together.

Here’s to our inaugural issue, and hopefully many more issues after that.

Ali Taha and Melissa Barrientos



The World, Slipped Away

Paula Aamli

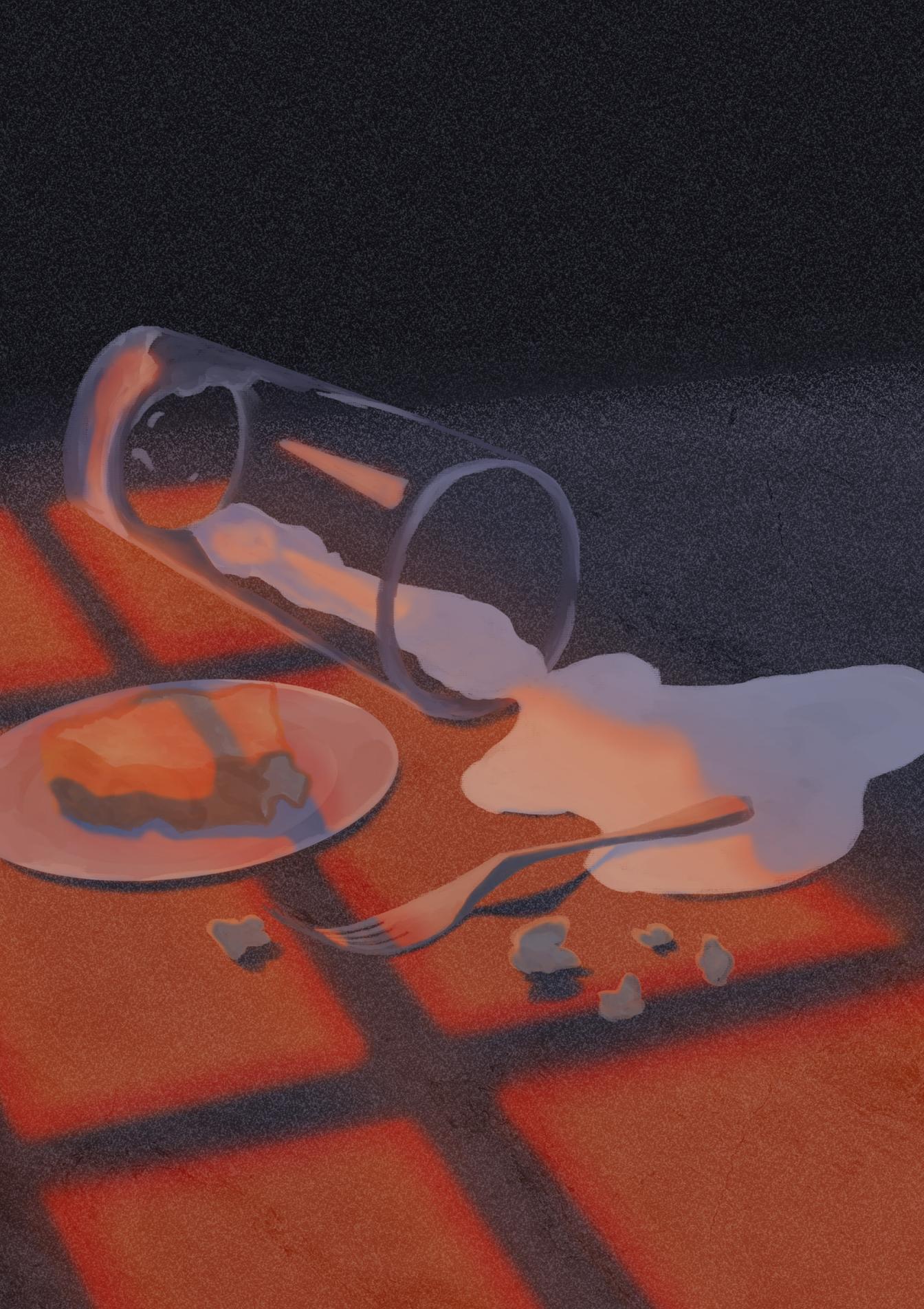
I awake to a view gone blank,
all but the nearest coast erased,
as if the world about us sank,

slipped mistily beyond our gaze,
and left our condo on the brink.
The window netting gently sways,

caressed to motion by the lan-
guid breeze. A salty crusting stays
on sill, on sheets, on skin. I thank

that happy chance—that of all days,
today is Sunday. Closed, the bank,
the doctor's, butcher's—every place

I'd need to visit. *Stay, instead—
Wait out this loss-of-world from bed!*



Protein

L Malik

There is a story my mother used to tell.

On a belated honeymoon with my father to Kabul, Tehran, and Istanbul from Kampala in 1968, she went to offer her prayers at the Blue Mosque. Svelte in her cotton churidar pajama, she was kneeling in supplication when she felt a sharp tug on the thick, black rope of braid that trailed all the way down her back, well past her knees from under a narrow 1960s dupatta. Swiveling in pain and shock, she came face to face with a stern-faced Turkish woman.

“Haraam,” said the woman, pointing at my mother’s braid.

My mother surveyed her accuser, clad in a calf-length cloak, her own hair hidden under a headscarf. She reached out her hand, pointing at the woman’s bare legs.

“Haraam,” she replied.

A Palestinian artist I admire recently wrote a love letter dedicated to her daughter. She said, I love my daughter’s laugh. She said, my love for her was one of the greatest love stories I’ve ever lived, honest, connected, and renewed. She said, I love my mother because she reminds me of how to extend to so many people before me. In her presence, I am not alone in time or place. She said, I hope her love for me is one of the greatest love stories ever told.

I am not Palestinian, though I was named after a Palestinian freedom fighter, and reminded often of the spirit of my namesake. Reminded of her resistance and refusals by my own mother, who did not name me (even if she did) and by my aunt, who did name me (even if she didn’t).

I think they named me in response to an echo, fading and mutating through generations of migratory upheavals and turbulent times. In response to a memory, something essential. Something about land, something about birthrights. They were indisputably convinced of their existence, from the perspective of blood and phlegm and bile, but their fixation on their point of origin, their truest genesis, grew inchoate and inscrutable over time.

And so, in naming me, they threaded yearning into mine.

We have been cautiously circling my mother's hair these past few years, my sister and I. After decades of being the only woman in her family to wear it in a short, neat bob, she stopped going to the salon for haircuts in her late seventies. It began as a sudden aversion to having strangers handle any part of her body, perhaps a way of reclaiming control after the death of a daughter and a quadruple bypass, compounded with theft by a trusted household employee.

Despite her advancing age, her hair blossomed as thick and healthy as before, and we watched it grow abundantly, even as the rest of her body receded. Ever faithful to her strict routine as a biology teacher, she washed her hair every Saturday, using a specific imported shampoo and conditioner. Every morning she brushed and fixed a ponytail on top of her head, and it grew and grew, as she entered her eighties.

Her gait slowed and her hearing dulled and her arms grew tired. She switched to a local shampoo and conditioner in one, and her hair continued to grow. Occasionally, my sister or I would suggest a trim, and quietly snip a portion of her ponytail while she ate, or conversed, or watched television, but over time, the filaments from her scalp began to commune and converge.

"Shall we get your hair cut?" we would ask in gentle desperation, fingering the matted clumps. "Shall I do it? Shall she?"

But my mother remained adamant. Her hair must be allowed to flourish.

We live in a time of desperate rupture.

For the displaced, the dispossessed, and the systemically discomfited, our inherited signposts are fragmented and lost. We cast about for the comfort of unbroken truths, increasingly turning to ancestors for guidance. Long chains of matriarchs, a spiritual scaffolding, rich with historical detail. Something to hold onto. Something to pass on.

But as her own life unfolded, with its mix of fortune and loss, my mother's rebellion took the shape of a staunch disavowal of memory.

"I don't remember," she would snap at my father any time he innocently attempted to re-live a shared experience.

"I don't go in the past," she would growl darkly, alerting us to an impending unraveling so we could spring to action, choreographing theatrics of distraction to right the balance of things.

It became a type of mantra, an ironic zikr, the thing she coached herself to remember through a daily act of repetition. A way, in all likelihood, to block out the eternally unmetabolized pain and shame of a lifetime of being out of sync with her surroundings. Perversely, to protect her own thinly strung psychic coherence.

I don't remember, an injunction and a plea, a new way of life, disconnected and discombobulated.

I don't remember what kinds of grain we ate as a child. I don't remember if or how long I breastfed you. I don't remember the story I once told you about vegetables that grew abundantly in the fertile path of the sewage truck trailing from our outhouse to the back alley. I don't remember the names of my biology professors, my favourite classes, my best friend, how it felt to be the first person in my entire clan to go to university in a whole other country.

"Don't go in the past," my mother impresses firmly upon my daughters on a family visit.

After a short pause to reflect, she adds, "and don't go in the present."

My daughters sneak baffled glances my way. I can only shrug helplessly. Our realm of possibility continues to shrink.

"Do you like diamonds," my mother asks my daughter as I squat on a stool beside her armchair, fingers working through tendrils of hair that have nested tightly unto themselves. I keep a plastic comb and a pair of silver scissors near me, fervently alternating between tools in a race against the ticking clock of her impatience. I don't know what prompted her change of heart, but I am not waiting around for her to change her mind again.

My daughter hesitates, knowing my own aversion to gems and precious metals, unsure of how to respond.

"I had a lot of jewelry," my mother continues. "All of it is for my grand-children."

I don't cringe or protest. Instead, I mutter at my niece, who sits at her other side, "keep her talking. Ask her questions."

I'm counting on the lottery of her answers to keep us all going.

When my mother rises in the middle of the night she is beatific. Ever the schoolteacher, she awakens my father on schedule, then shuffles to the kitchen for what my parents call the midnight feast. "She's like a young girl again," my father says later, smiling wearily, "different to the way she is in the daytime. I don't like to disappoint her."

They heat two cups of milk, cut two slices of pound cake, and sit at the round kitchen table. My mother's face lights up if either of my daughters happen to join them, and she punctuates the late night silence with an ever-shrinking orbit of anecdotes, pulled from the previous day or weeks or years, or the newspaper, or her Indian drama. Snippets of fact and fancy loosely stitched together into something like memory but better, benevolent if slightly loopy. She knows who we are, her inner cast of characters, and she replays her favourite stories of us, adding new flourishes with each retelling.

They say memory is the reactivation of specific groups of neurons. Synaptic plasticity allows neurogenesis, or the creation of new neurons, in the hippocampus. My mother's hippocampus is florid and febrile. She has applied herself with characteristic diligence, pulling from her lifelong well of discipline to create an alternate garden of history, which she rigorously manicures with a scalpel of forgetting. I wonder about where excised memories go, how they take up residence like fatty deposits in inappropriate places—arteries, liver, lymph nodes.

Hair.

That my mother, fastidious with personal grooming all her life, disparaging of the slightest crease in clothing, thrusting lipstick and perfume and kitten heels on any unembellished woman in her vicinity, is trying, despite herself, to communicate something urgent and unspoken through her hair.

I think of rules as I work her skull.

A younger brother, sitting with her at a different kitchen table in a different era, casually remarking on how women shouldn't wear short sleeves, pointedly not looking at her short sleeves. A younger sister flipping a roti and commenting on how women shouldn't wear their hair short, or down, or uncovered while my mother busies herself in another part of the kitchen.

As I pry apart her strands of keratin, massaging them with conditioner and bisecting them with a scissor blade when they refuse to yield, I think of boundaries, whose rules we allow to permeate our psyches. How we internalize and ossify them, then hold them up as legacy. Of who, after capitulation, is there when your long, long tresses turn serpentine, folding in on themselves. I think of what feeds my own choices around how I practice memory.

And I think of protein. Every morning, my mother asks me what protein I have fed my children. *Eggs? Tuna? Chicken?* Time unfolds and my mother's purpose distills into essential strings of amino acids.

I love her umbilically, in the way of an untherapized virgin.

I know that my love for her sits on a quicksand of roiling emotional magma. I know that love is ferocious and primal, and also pocked with betrayal and regret. I love her with and despite her, as she builds and undoes us all. I listen intently for messages of ancestral wisdom in her rejection of the past. There must be some connection in this disconnect, some way of ensuring we are not alone in time or place.

When they are done their midnight feast, have returned the milk and leftover cake to the fridge and wiped the crumbs off the table, before turning off the

fluorescent kitchen light and slowly making their way back to their bedrooms, my mother grasps my father's arm.

"My mother," she says. My father looks at her with the same open patience he has had since they married sixty years ago.

"What about her," he asks.

"What was my mother's name?"

Perhaps our ancestral scaffolding will not be a long chain of matriarchs, but an unbroken strand of amino acids, an intricate protein complex spanning time and land. A love story beyond borders and the hubris of human-made rules.

My mother was a biologist, after all.

Wolf Radio

Riley Manning

The wolf woman called into the show Thursday afternoon. “Long time listener, first time caller,” she said over the wind rush of a rolled-down window.

“Look,” she said. “I need you to do something about the wolves outside my house.”

“This is Perennial Hour, a program about plants and botanicals,” I said. “I think you have the wrong number.”

“No,” she said. “No. You’re Succulent Susan, right? Last week, you told a woman to add lemon balm to her baby’s bottle to make it stop crying. You’ve got to help me with all these *wolves*. They come in the evening. They eat my mint. They dig up my squash. They come right up to the windows and look inside.”

That stumped me. I sat back in my chair in the booth. I could hear her sucking on a cigarette. My producer rolled her eyes and wound her finger in a circle near her temple.

If this were a mole problem, I’d have told her to fling her coffee grounds out into the grass each morning. If stray cats, I’d have told her to plant a bed of rue.

“Call back tomorrow,” I said. “I’ll try to have an answer for you then.”

That night, during dinner with my husband, he kept having to tell me things two or three times before I heard him.

“I’m sorry to bore you,” he said, reaching far across the table to get the dressing himself. We kept the lights low because of his headaches, which he described as a railroad spike behind his right eye.

My husband worked as a data analyst at a bank, which was sometimes interesting, and sometimes not. The data, he said, revealed patterns you might not expect. Two customers might take the same action for different reasons, to different effect. It is at once intimate and detached, to see people through such a shrouded glass. Gardening is like that, too. The way a garden yellows up when it has been given too little water is the same as when it has been given too much. Changes on the outside result from a confluence of factors that have been taking place under the surface for a long time.

He deposited the bowls into the dishwasher and wiped the glass-top stove with a wet sponge, then turned up the carpeted stairs to our bedroom.

I took in the stillness which sometimes catches me off-guard, though stillness is easy to come by, here. We had no pets, no children. Our lives were spacious and out of the way of others. I put away the cups and, at the base of the stairs, I paused. I couldn’t stop wondering about the wolf woman, wherever she was.

At the top of the stairs, the dusk light crept through the thin curtained windows, the gravity of the bedroom, the evening. I turned away from it, easing into my chair in the study, pulling books down and poring through them, muttering *wolves, wolves*, until my husband nudged me in the morning, his coat folded over his other arm. He was a tall man with brown eyes and a bright face, humor always there beneath his thick features, as if his last name were something playful, like “Dunklee,” which it was.

She called at the same time, though it didn’t sound like she was driving.

“Where are you now, ah—”

My producer shrugged.

“Wendy,” she said. “I’m on my back porch looking out over the farm.”

“That sounds lovely.”

I pictured her leaning against the post, a shed or barn beyond it.

“They know I stay back here a lot. They creep up behind the silo, keeping it between them and me. That’s how they get so close. What’ve you got for me?”

“Globe thistle,” I declared. “Plant a ring of globe thistle around the area you want to protect. Leave no gaps, no holes wider than a foot.”

It would be a lot of work, a lot of digging. But she didn’t complain like I expected her to. She thanked me and hung up, and for the rest of the afternoon, I answered callers through a fog.

“I could have said anything, I don’t know,” I told my husband over a Greek salad.

“Do you think she’s pulling your leg?”

I didn’t. There wasn’t a trace of bullshitter in her voice, and after ten years on the radio, you get pretty good at picking up on that.

“You’re worried about her,” Dunklee said.

I sat back from my plate. How oddly right he was. I was terrified she’d never call back.

“I just wonder what’s going on, wherever she is,” I said. “Whatever’s making those wolves do this.”

We put the dishes away. We only ran the dishwasher every few days; that’s how long it took to dirty up enough dishes for a full load. The house wasn’t large, but we were small enough that a vast portion of it was always being unused.

Upstairs, my husband lay in bed behind a book, one leg crooked out from under the cover. The dark walls, the paper shades of the lamps, the

sun-shaped mirror above the Cherrywood bureau—they seemed as strangers to me, as if a remote part of me had woken up that had never been here before and recognized nothing. I dressed for bed like a pretender, cautiously, and I pretended to doze, but I kept finding myself still awake, staring at the grime of the skylight.

Sometime during the night, I got up and went to the study. *You're not supposed to be here*, the air seemed to say, as I slumped into the love seat's buttoned leather.

Are you up? I wondered to the wolf woman. *I am, too.*

Dunklee woke me in the morning, his silver face only half as amused as the morning before.

At the station, I felt myself behaving strangely, answering calls abruptly. "You should have gone Fescue, how could you think of planting Zoysia with that much shade? Next caller."

"Blair," my producer buzzed in, "I'm going to need you to calm the fuck down. We're talking about *grass*, here."

I couldn't imagine never hearing from her again. If she didn't call, I'd assume she tried, but couldn't get through, and I truly felt it would kill me. In my mind, there were a certain number of calls I had to get through between now and the time she called, and that was true enough to get me through the day.

But at 4:30 p.m., there was still no word.

I smoothed my blue blouse as I stood up and gathered my bag, my notes from the day an empty page with a poorly doodled wolf panting in the margin.

My husband was surprised at how little I knew about her.

Over our spaghetti, I guesstimated her age to be in the early forties, like us.

"Does she live alone?" he asked, his shirt sleeves rolled a quarter up, his elbows on the table, a piece of garlic bread at his lips.

I hadn't thought of it, though hope stirred in my gut that she did. "She mentioned a farm, a back porch, a silo."

"Oh, for grain or for corn? If it's corn, she may live over toward Otsego."

"I didn't know to ask."

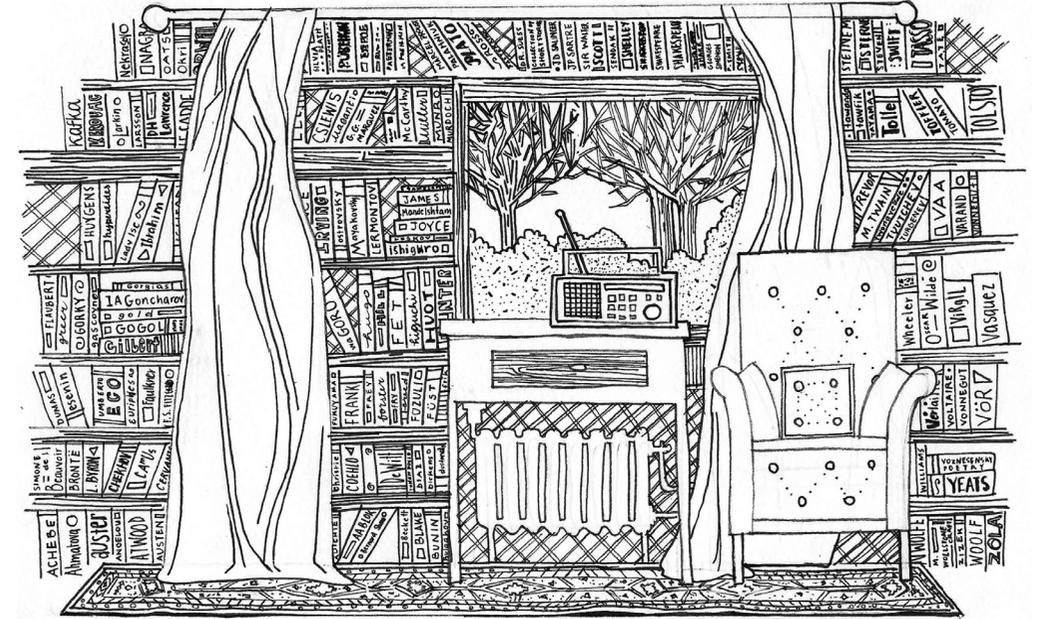
What if she's dead? I wondered, *and there is no one there to find her?* I felt guilty for my hope, as if by wishing it, I'd brought this fate down on her.

"Surely she has a gun," he said. "Farm girl like that."

"She sounds... strong," I said. "Even when she's afraid."

I thought of a pair of hands throwing a square bale of hay; gripping the twine, the rough, impersonal jerk.

"My old high school principal was a farmer, who wore his cowboy boots to school with his pleated khakis," he said. "He'd gotten kicked by a bull



somewhere along the line—a total mush mouth. You couldn't help but snicker when he read the morning announcements."

"One day, this fight broke out by the busses, and he tore out there to break it up. He was a short man. Beady eyes. You couldn't see him but for the path he cleared. He got in to the two boys—big, football-playing boys—and man alive if he didn't throw them apart like it was nothing. He picked one clear off the ground and slammed him on his back and put a knee in his chest.

If he'd had a piggin string, he'd have tied that boy up. The way he looked at us, like we were coyotes closing in around him out there. When I shook his hand at graduation, his grip was a vice."

Dunklee's expression was one of having stumbled across a memory you didn't know you had, much less recalled with such clarity. It was easy to forget he grew up a country person. He didn't wear any of it on him at all anymore, not even an accent, unless he got deep into a story about those days, which he'd only done in front of me a handful of times.

She called again after the weekend. "Didn't work."

"Wendy?"

"It didn't work."

She sounded rattled and tired.

"They dug all my globe thistle up, left it in a pile on my doorstep. They left one on the windowsill outside the room that used to be my son's. A dirty paw print on my door handle. The windows to my bedroom. You could tell where they'd been licking."

I thought, fingering through my knowledge as if each tidbit were a file in a drawer. To deter squirrels, plant nasturtiums; to repel hornworms, plant borage. Stand near a weeping fig when your heart's in your throat.

"You mentioned your squash and your mint—do you have foliage near your house? Boston ferns or herb beds or anything?"

I could hear her looking around in her own head, a train's low moan somewhere near her.

"I have hedges right up next to the house. Crepe myrtles, off to the side, though they're ate up with some bug. And ivy, all on the back."

"Go to the store," I told her. "Buy the strongest Tabasco you can find, along with a bottle of Indonesian fish sauce, and combine both bottles with a liter of water. Mix it well, and spray it on your hedges, your crepe myrtles, your ivy."

"Indonesian fish sauce," she said. "You're serious."

"I am. For good measure, you could add half a cup of cayenne pepper, depending on how mean you want to be."

"Mean," she said. "Yeah, okay."

Silence. She was waiting on me, I realized, to say something else. I felt a locking up in my throat, like burning out the clutch of my old stick shift Volkswagen. I felt her sliding away, leaving me needing something I couldn't name, something that she had ripped from me, or, perhaps, touching a place where a thing should have been but wasn't and hadn't been for a long time.

I barely made a dent in our quiche, and I didn't even notice when Dunklee, annoyed, left me at the table. I came to in the empty kitchen staring at my hands, my eyes dry, not knowing the time. When I got up to bed, he'd already rolled over. The ice-pack he used for headaches had slid off onto the floor, his graven face cut by shadow to resemble some primitive statue or totem. He no more dreamed than did a rock, I thought, but, no, that wasn't fair. These flippant grudges are not of my character. Whatever was happening to her was happening to me, too. I wanted to howl up at the sky light.

Sleep took me back to Iowa, to a morning when I'd gotten into a fight with my sister. My father pushed me against the wall so hard my spine cracked from the bottom up. His yelling, his woolly breath, tore through me, crept into me. He threw me out onto our screened-in side porch wearing nothing but the oversized t-shirt I'd slept in. The drizzling rain cast a haze across the yard, the street, the cars that crept church-ward. An old man stuck his eyes on me and I saw things in them I wouldn't recognize until later. I followed them down to my own crotch. I'd wet myself. I'd wet myself, and all the folks driving by could see it, and the more I tried to cover it up with my hands, the more noticeable it was. In real life, my father leaves me out there until dark, but in the dream, the cars never stop passing and each one is driven by a hulking grey wolf.

In the morning, Dunklee had died. I had gotten up and fixed the tea before I realized. I sat in the study and read more on irritants for mammals, until 9 o'clock snuck up on me, and I rushed up stairs to wake him for work. He felt heavy and gone when I nudged him. "Dunk," I pleaded. "Dunk."

The EMTs pronounced him on the scene. I rode in the back of the ambulance with him, holding his big flat hand. "If he didn't wake you up, he went peacefully," the doctor told me, then said something about a blister in a blood vessel in his brain rupturing.

"Rupturing," I tasted it. "Peacefully."

The day spit me out where it had found me: in the study, the tea long cold, then the bed, Dunklee's dent. They'd cut him out of his white t-shirt. They never gave it back to me.

It was the longest I'd gone without thinking of the wolf woman in weeks.

For the next month, it felt like I'd missed a turn and found myself in a strange town I didn't much like, a town inhabited by people who were dead to me, who gave me directions for the price of my husband. But the road I got back on was wrong now, though it had once been right. I dreaded wherever it was leading me, but I had no better ideas for myself.

She called my first day back in the station. When I heard her voice, it was like two hot wires touching behind my right eye.

"No, the fish sauce didn't work," she said when I asked. "But it's alright now."

It sounded like she was chewing something. I pictured a wrinkled mouth, a toothpick.

"Everything's gonna be fine from here on out."

Behind her, I could hear their rough panting.



Hotel Room in Fairmont, West Virginia

Ace Boggess

Curtains, off-white
with fat avocado stripes,
remind me of prison
which had no curtains,
but plenty of stripes.

Bed, not unpleasant,
not a thin mat over steel,
assures me I'm free,
although alone—

a different prison
I've wasted forty-
seven years inside.

Digital clock, television,
artwork of two leaves
embracing—not sure
what to make
of these accessories.

The hanging mirror swears
at least I haven't
robbed today or waved
a threatening knife.

I'd look absurd
in my Hawaiian shirt
with pink & orange
birds of paradise.

Robbie

Ace Boggess

He looked cleanest among twenty of us—
young, pristine—a dozen years ago
in rehab, checking twelve-step boxes,
slinging Big-Book jargon like computer code.

I left that place for prison,
he the streets, & today his eyes swear
I drew a better pebble from the bag.

Bearded, shirtless, dirty, worn.
I don't recognize him; he spots me first &
asks if & when & who?

His arms are scarred with a map
of beachheads in the existential war.

I want to tell him, *It's not too late, get well, move on.*
Having been like him, I understand how history is written.

“What Evidence Do You Find of Your Life?”

—Heather Dooley, Facebook post

Ace Boggess

Gut-smudge impacts of spider genocide
mark my passage, &
theirs—
my absolute ever-war with fear.

Debts—those I intend to repay &
those that survive me—
I collect in a trove
for future scholars to acknowledge.

A few words in Times New Roman,
a few more in Garamond,
confessing
the bloody truth of lies I've told.

Broken computer gathering dust
in basement storage (it has
proof of my life before)
the man-I-am can't power up to read.



Shenandoah Valley

Joshua P. Ewalt

I

The time for moving to Virginia happened upon the couple quickly. It seemed that way even to Dan, who induced relocation by accepting a full-time supervisor position at Dogwood Vineyards in the Shenandoah Valley. He loved almost all of his work in Michigan: pruning vines in the summer, harvesting in the fall, and then pruning again through late winter. His childhood had been spent picking strawberries on his grandparents' and uncle's farms, and he always wondered if he wore that tradition on his face, if Marie could read it. However, he also knew that a laborer's pay created challenges for the family budget and constantly worrying about finances exhausted Marie. He felt it too. So, when the owner of Dogwood Vineyards approached him about the position, circumstances compelled him to accept. Moreover, since she offered him the job after only a single weekend of watching him showcase wines at a convention, she must have been impressed.

He hadn't been sure how Marie would respond. She would probably be upset that he didn't ask her first, and she was. "You could have called from the hotel room before accepting, Dan. I'm sure she would have waited a day," she told him. Whether or not Marie wanted to move, however, remained a mystery long after Dan informed her of the decision. She spent significant time in bed the week following his return from the convention, yet the prospect of moving seemed to have excited her. She couldn't restrain that look of hers: the one where you could take her green eyes and insert them onto the body of a matador and everything would seem perfectly in place. Dan became especially optimistic one week before the family's move, as they sat together watching news coverage of the miner's strike in Britain. Their daughter Iris placed her head against Marie's brown dress. With an atlas in hand and Marie's long fingers gliding across colored roads, they traveled through Virginia together, inventing stories about the place they would soon encounter.

Early one morning in March of 1985, the fields of the northern United States, still accented by snow, gave way to the industrial landscapes of the lower Midwest. Rolling hills, creeks, and wave-like mountains framed Virginia's

Shenandoah Valley, which reminded Dan of the kind of place an exiled prophet might happen upon, scan widely, and designate as his people's new home. By evening, the family entered downtown Woodstock, Virginia, passing small retail shops and colonial-style homes. Dan took a brief detour down a narrow state road that crossed the north fork of the Shenandoah River and led to Dogwood Vineyards. "This is where Daddy is going to work," Dan told Iris, and Marie followed: "We're proud of him aren't we?" She looked at Iris and smiled at Dan. Eventually, the family arrived at an old, red brick schoolhouse that had been transformed into an assortment of two-bedroom apartments. The building sat on a large parcel of grass. A ranch-style fence bordered the property. Marie caressed Iris's hair and said, "Well, it *is* beautiful here."

II

It was either fate or cruel coincidence, Wilson thought as he moved his laptop to the small table just outside of the bedroom where Emily still remained during the late hours of the morning. Virginia Mountain University resided less than forty miles from his birthplace of Woodstock, Virginia. Wilson long wondered why his parents initially moved so far away from home and then moved again a little less than two years later, first to North Carolina and then back to Michigan. They never really talked much about living in Virginia, and for most of his life, the Shenandoah Valley lingered with him like a blurry photograph tucked inside a wallet; its contents remained as much a mystery as its capacity to provoke nostalgia. For a scholar whose research considered human interactions with place, this alignment of improbabilities promised to potentially disclose worldly insight or finally produce his madness.

Many things had to align for Wilson to receive an e-mail with an offer for a tenure-track position at Virginia Mountain University. The fact that he obtained both his Ph.D. and a secure academic position remained the unlikely outcome of a largely chaotic life. White privilege certainly stacked the odds in his favor, but he kept one foot in troubled legal waters during much of his youth. He also attempted suicide twice: once in community college and once during a flirtation with doctoral studies in South Carolina. After returning to Iowa to complete his graduate education, Wilson struggled with the cultural distance between his academic peers and his life back home. On the worst nights, he laid drunk in parks or backyards, watched the stars, and imagined ways of offing himself. The desire to prove them all wrong became the only thing keeping him going; his academic peers needed to know he was capable of making it alongside them and the people back home needed to know he was capable of making it elsewhere.

Emily likely remained upset about the previous night. It was, after all, the third time it had happened. The first time, she found him on the floor next to the toilet. The second, between the coffee table and the television. This time, she hadn't even left the bedroom. She was waiting, disappointed, and

he couldn't blame her; she hadn't known his problems were like this before co-inhabiting. Still, he never knew what to say. He couldn't apologize because she thought that was a way to avoid direct confrontation with his problems, but he also couldn't stay silent because then her frustration would boil under the surface until it had a chance to escape randomly during a lunch, while watching a movie, or the next time he had a drink. Telling Emily about the offer and the opportunity to move to Virginia, which was also made possible by her recent acquisition of a sizeable dissertation fellowship, would hopefully distract her from focusing too much on his behavior the previous night.

III

Marie squeezed Dan's hand and he thought it felt like a loving touch.

She surprised him by still wanting to attend Sunday service. The congregation would have understood if she chose to remain home, but Marie insisted on her presence: "I'm pregnant, Dan, not diseased, and still perfectly capable of attending church." She also told him: "Look, we just need God to bless this baby."

Dan realized life in Virginia brought mixed blessings. They had good times, like at that picnic area on the Blue Ridge Parkway where Iris ran up and down the hill before laying at the top and Dan and Marie said, at the same time, "She's making good memories." The sense of excitement and adventure, however, collided with the realities of life in a new place—friends came and went, and the drinking common to their parties in Michigan started to produce anxieties that lingered and accumulated well after the hangover. Living so far away from parents and established friendships removed a safety net that otherwise guarded the spirited behaviors of the still newly-minted adults. Most nights produced a hallowed silence, a wide emptiness into which their souls dissipated during a search for home. Sometimes, when he couldn't fall asleep, Dan imagined people across the valley happily going about their lives, unaware that he, Marie, and Iris even lived there, oblivious to how desperately he wanted to influence their experiences in any kind of way. The supervisor money at Dogwood Vineyards also hadn't gone nearly as far as he'd hoped, a reality accentuated by the late bill payment notices piling up on their counter.

Marie grabbed his hand just a little bit harder. "We have to go," she said. "Now."

The labor proceeded far from smoothly. Instead, their son, Wilson, burrowed himself deeper into the womb. At one point, the doctor with grey hair and a skinny face informed Marie, "You have two choices: a c-section or the baby dies." He then asked Dan to persuade her into choosing correctly: "without the procedure, this baby *will* die."

"Well, he's an ass," Marie said as Dan looked at her with both empathy and frustration.

“They say the procedure’s safer these days,” Dan replied, even though he knew that safety wasn’t her primary concern. She was worried about Dan’s pay, his penchant to spend money, and the second eviction notice they’d received three weeks earlier.

“I really wish you would have accepted your dad’s offer,” she responded. “We would be in a far better position right now. Moving back home would not have been that bad.”

After his son’s birth, Dan escaped into the parking lot where the mountains rose across the street. He pulled a small bottle of bourbon from his jacket. Yes, the pregnancy had caused unanticipated financial problems, and yes, his dad offered him a job delivering oil back home, but the thought of accepting the offer caused an aching sensation to grow from his chest into his throat. By moving down there, he’d proven something to himself. Most of the people he knew from Michigan had never even been to Virginia, but he was living there. He wished Marie could see how much work he put into making sure they could survive somewhere else, *on their own*. He stared at a creeping thyme plant, with thin brown stems and only a few of its leaves, surrounding the herb garden to his left. He thought about how they should have covered the plant with sand or gravel over the winter. Nonetheless, like everything during late spring in the valley, the plant would be green again soon. He took a long drink, and then another. There were always ways to work harder, more ways to succeed in the agricultural business; he just had to devise an appropriate strategy.

IV

Since he and Emily moved to Virginia, Wilson had been experiencing the future through his dreams. It happened twice: in the first dream, he grabbed his cat by the neck. The cat escaped his grasp and ran toward Emily. Through eyes saturated with pain, it asked her, “why did he do that?”

After waking, unable to shake the guilty feeling, Wilson reminded himself: *I would never, ever do such a thing!* That evening, however, he discovered his cat staring out of a hole in the basement drywall. He panicked and reached into the hole, only able to catch the cat’s neck. Upon escaping his grasp, the cat ran upstairs to hide under Emily’s reclining chair.

The second dream happened about a month later. While pulling his car out of a driveway and onto a busy road, he crashed into the side of another automobile. The driver exited the car and, expecting him to yell loudly, Wilson cowered behind the hood. The driver, however, reassured him that “everything is going to be okay.” He knew, upon waking, it had predictive qualities, so he remained alert while driving to work and back the next day, monitored his mirrors and double checked every intersection. Finally, as he backed into the driveway, certain that he had made it through the day safely, he hit Emily’s car.

“I just want to run through my thoughts about all of this,” he told Emily, who sat across from him at their dinner table. A pile of books and three emptied beer bottles littered the space between them. “The future and past must exist in the present in complex, layered ways. I mean I got the job here, of all places, where my parents lived when I was born. And when I got here, these dreams started. I just can’t help but think that they’re telling me something: the present must connect to other events that exist in the supposedly distant future or past, events that occur *before we even live them*.” He searched for interest in her unlined face—a sense of happiness even—but such emotions, if they inhabited her at all, remained buried behind eyes that opened to a mind that drifted elsewhere, somewhere distant, disconnected from Wilson and their dinner table.

Now, before she disconnected, she could have been counting his beers or imagining the liver beneath his abdomen, working to process each one, maybe growing cancerous. She thought like that sometimes. Wilson also concluded that she might have considered the rumors from campus. It was true that he’d been growing impatient and angry in class, likely the result of his relatively permanent hangovers. However, as he tried to explain to Emily, he would not be the first professor to have a problem with drinking. Still, she worried because she had followed him to Virginia on a fellowship, and she wanted the two of them to move together and start over. If this behavior persisted, or continued to worsen, his reputation and employability would be affected beyond the confines of Virginia Mountain University.

Wilson wished he could repay that commitment. He wished his desire to abstain from drinking in front of her could overwhelm his overwhelming desire to drink. The truth was he worried about many things too, including being fired, and drinking helped him survive it.

V

Marie hadn’t seemed like herself since the delivery. Dan noticed she cried randomly and her interactions with him became increasingly polar: either almost completely devoid of emotion or featuring loud outbursts. She stopped going to church, and the congregation saw through Dan’s ever-shifting excuses. Sometimes, he even caught her looking at him with eyes that seemed almost violent. Upon his noticing, she quickly adjusted, looked down, and smiled.

He had done his part, though. That morning, he received a two-dollars per hour raise as a reward for his idea to grow and sell fresh herbs at the vineyard gift shop. He’d also been controlling his drinking. Sure, he wasn’t going to meetings as Marie had asked, but he was only drinking beer and only on weekends. He hoped, though he held doubts, that this would be enough to make Marie happy.

That evening, he convinced her to take a walk with him, Iris, and a four-month old Wilson down the trail that led from the small parking lot across

the street into the national forest, eventually ending at Settler's Overlook. The family sat near where the creek gathered in a pool along the face of a rock outcropping and broke as it encountered recently fallen trees. Iris poked a stick into the water and Dan wondered about fishing. Marie gestured toward Wilson and Dan agreed he looked happy. In the woods, birds traveled between the thin trees, and every now and then a car traversed the small, old bridge that carried state road 42 over the creek.

Dan daydreamed, and for a brief period, he felt connected to a future, almost as if he existed in two times: the present and a moment well into his time in Virginia. He experienced himself as an older man, near this same creek, but he was tending his own garden. Wilson was visiting. He held a basic, good job around Woodstock, and Dan thought there was something slightly weird about him, like maybe he'd gotten that trait from his mother where he could talk to you while his mind existed somewhere else entirely. Nonetheless, Dan felt happy he continued to visit on the weekends. Wilson asked about Iris and Dan said she seemed happy, the last time they talked. Marie sat at a small window in the house. And then he became connected to a third time: that first night in the hotel room after he'd accepted the position at the vineyards. All three moments seemed woven together in a singular knot.

The family returned to their apartment and Dan dressed a small wound on Iris's knee while Marie answered the phone in the dining room. Her smile widened slowly, hesitantly, and then her eyes lit with excitement. While collecting her long hair behind the ear opposite the phone, she responded: "I mean that's just quite the news, Dad. North Carolina. When will you be moving down?"

Dan should have been excited. To have Marie's father nearby in North Carolina would mean help—with the kids, with finances—and it would have been nice to have somebody, anybody, else around. But Dan also knew his presence came at a cost. He remembered when Marie's father visited Woodstock, just a few months after they moved there, and Marie learned she was pregnant with Wilson. They were going to dinner when her father pointed to his red truck and told Iris, "You can ride with me. You don't know if your dad's been drinking yet today."

VI

The future does not appear out of nowhere. Instead, the world features a realm of the actual and realms of the possible. All moments, all possibilities, have already happened. Everything exists right now in a network of possible events. Some of those compose what we humans call "real life;" they are the events that we live. Others hang in the air like energies waiting to be actualized by a consciousness. When we make decisions, we navigate this network of all

events and, based on our decisions, we actualize some and let others remain as latent potentialities. Still, they exist; we just don't live them.

Wilson edited the first few pages of his manuscript, which explored the question of human agency within a terrain of non-linear time. He maintained a basic premise grounded in the distinction between the wave and particle properties of matter: specifically, all possibilities play themselves out before collapsing, and actualizing a moment involves collapsing that realm of possibility into a lived reality, thereby turning the wave into a particle. He identified numerous sources for his theoretical account: Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*; Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway*; Kohn's *How Forests Think*; Dunne's own account of his own precognitive dreaming in *An Experiment with Time*, and Chiang's *Story of Your Life*. Wilson had not, however, fully come to terms with how this theory of non-linearity related to his return to Virginia.

Emily entered the living room wearing the jean jacket he'd bought her back in Iowa. As far as he could remember, she'd never worn it before. The jacket looked good on her, he thought, especially the way the faded blue color interacted with her autumn hair. She had sown a patch on the back near the collar. Emily looked at Wilson and her lips widened slowly into a smile. Her eyes lit with excitement as she said, "I just got off the phone with the University of Oregon. They're going to formally offer you the partner hire position later today." Wilson's eyebrows angled inwards toward his nose, while Emily loosened her posture, let her small frame breathe, and sat next to him on the couch to cradle his hands in hers.

A few weeks before, he performed the partner hire interview as a kind of postponing of the inevitable. He knew it would result in both of them getting offers, and that being at Oregon would enable them to remain together with secure jobs in the same location. This was not an easy achievement for the two academics. But at the same time, Wilson thought about it like this: if the universe brought someone back to the place where they were born, a place they moved from at such a young age, a place shrouded in lifelong mystery, and the universe did so at *the same time that it also jolted that person out of their comfortable belief in linear time*, wouldn't it be smart to dwell in that place for a while and learn what it has to offer?

"Look, this is a good thing," Emily reassured him. "It's going to help. Don't you think part of what's been going on here is that this place is just a bad fit for you? All the teaching, not enough time for research, colleagues who don't understand you and, frankly, might not like you very much. Leaving all of this is going to help with your drinking." Wilson knew if he voiced an objection to the version of the future Emily had become obsessed with actualizing, she would shut down. He would feel her anger not in words, though she would probably say one or two hurtful things, but as it manifested through a distant, unaffectionate silence.

Still, if he were able to be completely honest with her, he would have told her that being in Virginia made him feel like he was connected to an intelligent universe and that everything he'd learned about addiction suggested that giving your life over to a higher power was one of the first steps toward recovery. He would also say that leaving Virginia could actually make his drinking worse, and that every time he thought about moving with her, an aching sensation grew from his gut and into his chest. But Wilson didn't and couldn't say any of this. Instead, the words ran slowly through his head while he remained silent and nodded in agreement that the move would help him out.

VII

Dan didn't bother to check out shoes or a ball. He went straight to the bar behind a set of doors and to the left of the dimly lit pool room. One short man, shooting by himself, gave a nod in his direction. The bartender poured a shot and opened a can of Schlitz.

"Haven't seen you in a while, huh?" he asked.

After putting the shot glass back on the bar top, Dan replied, "Yeah, well, I quit about a month ago. She gave me a raise and then she took it back, so I quit. I straight up told her: you either let me keep the raise—which was our agreement and I'm sorry where I come from that matters—or I quit, and she said, 'bye.' Yeah, that's what she said. And, so, I left. I said a few things on my way out, too, that she didn't like, but she deserved to hear everything. All of it."

Dan finished the first beer quickly, and then a second one. On the third, the bartender slowly shifted his demeanor. By the fifth, Dan saw that look he knew all too well; the one that said, "Are you really going to put me in a position to stop serving you?" On the seventh, Dan encountered that singular moment which represented the reason he drank. It wasn't exactly that he became a different person, though it was something like that. He drank in order to feel like he was no longer in control of his actions, to stop analyzing every movement he made. When the switch flipped, it felt like the world flipped too, like he had entered into another universe entirely. The music became louder and more easily made direct contact with his bones. A liquid energy filled the air that kept him moving and speaking in ways that, under sober conditions, he would have been prone to resist.

He looked around the room and then to the bartender: "Get this. My father-in-law moved to North Carolina. Thinks 'cause he's a few hours away that he has the right to tell me how to live my life, how to lead my fucking family. You believe that? I'll tell you what. I'm over here, supposed to be expecting *another* child on the way and I've got him coming around like that, talking this and that. Let me tell you. He's lucky he's my wife's dad, and the kids love him, or I'd fuck him up. I'd fuck him up." Dan threw his beer can across the room, which cued the bartender to escort him out. He ended up walking the two miles to his family's apartment.

Dan never made it inside that night. Instead, he fell asleep in the woods near the creek across from their home. When he rose the next morning, an empty bottle of bourbon laid next to his body. He sat up next to an oak tree and worked to collect a sense of how he'd ended up there. He remembered thinking that if he went home, Marie would yell at him, appropriately, for once again arriving at the apartment drunk, causing Iris to hide in a corner and Wilson to cry loudly. He shuffled his feet, dug them into the ground, and brought himself back to the future he imagined that evening by that very same creek as Iris poked her stick into the water and Wilson smiled while watching the sky. He thought about everything he'd hoped for when moving down there, about working in the vineyards against the green mountains. His dream was vanishing, becoming more of a ghost than a vapor; still a figure with a form, but one that would now remain forever unlived.

He looked at his pocket knife, which he had used to carve into the tree, and then toward the empty bottle in the dirt. Somewhere along the way the pursuit of his goals had taken a toll on his family. He looked at his carving. "Stay," it read. It seemed like an especially ironic thing to write since he knew intuitively that a change was on the way and it would probably entail moving away from Virginia. Perhaps he was just exorcizing the word from his mind. He finished the final few touches on the carving, gathered the empty bourbon bottle, which he would throw away in the trashcan by the trailhead, and readied himself to enter the apartment, apologize, and become the type of husband and father Marie and the kids needed him to be.

VIII

Wilson found a spot across from his parents' former residence near where the creek gathered in a pool along the face of a rock outcropping and broke as it encountered long-fallen trees. The birds traveled between thin branches, and now and then, a car traversed the small, old bridge that carried state road 42 over the creek. The sound of water and light wind buzzed quietly but persistently in the background.

Sitting on a large rock next to an oak tree, Wilson imagined what life would be like if he were to stay in Virginia. He would have a good job around Woodstock and perhaps his obsession with studying non-linearity would make his colleagues think he was a bit weird, but he would be happy. Maybe he could buy a retirement house for his parents with a garden for his dad and a studio for his mom. Perhaps his dad could even get a part-time job again back at the vineyards where he used to work. He considered those few times that his dad talked to him about living in Woodstock. Mostly, he would just mention how much he loved working in the winery business, growing and trimming vines, and seeing the product move from soil to shelf. Once, Wilson asked him why they had left given that his dad clearly loved the winery business so much. At first, he just said, "It didn't pay well enough," but after waiting a

moment he continued with a lesson that, at the time, seemed far too distant from Wilson's experience to be relevant. Dan said, "And sometimes you just need to find the courage to do right by the universe, whatever that might be."

Wilson looked at the tree next to him and laughed loudly. The word was hard to make out, but the closer he got the more it confirmed his initial perception. "Stay." Either the world really had been communicating with him or his external reality now took shape around his own solipsistic absurdities. Wilson thought back to times as a teenager when he drove from Michigan to North Carolina, taking the long route just to make sure he traveled through Woodstock and the Shenandoah Valley. At some point, he had to accept that everything in his life up until that moment had coalesced around him being in Virginia, and it was time for him to stay.

Wilson knew there would be relational consequences to his decision to not accept the offer from Oregon. There would be a brief moment of rage after he told Emily, followed by sadness, distance, and then a quietness. Eventually, they would break up, and it would hurt deeply, especially because Emily cared so much about getting him sober. All those times when she found him passed out on the floor or became silent when he drank at their dinner table, his voice growing louder and more out-of-tune after every beer: she deserved to see the other side. And yet, as the cold air hit his face and the woods grew dim in the final minutes of sunlight, he knew that wouldn't be the case. Wilson gathered himself and began walking toward the trailhead. He took solace in the fact that, although neither of them would actualize it in this lifetime, the future where they stayed together was still real in the realm of possibility.

Enlightenment

Jonathan Gourlay

I decide to climb down the gorge, past the rice paddies and water buffalos, to the rocky canyon where nothing grows. Beautiful day. Clear skies framed by the mountains on either side of the gorge.

Children run around the square paths formed by earthen walls surrounding the paddies. They throw stones, trying to knock each other into the flooded paddy fields. As I walk by, a rock strikes me in the back. The children laugh.

Beneath the paddy fields is a steep, grassy incline. A twinge in my knees. It's been a long time since I have been to the bottom. Ages.

I visit the river below in my thoughts, though. My morning meditations. Nothing bothers me at the bottom of the gorge. My mental retreat. It's always cool and damp and shadowy. I make my own sunlight down there.

I grab a large stone for balance and cut my hand on a prickly nettle. The nettle pokes its spiky head out of a crack in the stone.

I sit down and rest. Not far to go.

I'm bleeding. My back and my knee hurt. I'm out of breath.

I stand too quickly. Dizzy. The sky is on the ground. I fall. A short fall. I think I broke a toe.

I get up and consider turning back. I can hear the children laughing. I can hear the rushing river below. I bend down to check on my toe and fall over, hitting my head on a rock. I think it's shale by the color. The wind and water erode everything to its essence here in the gorge.

Close now, but dizzy and hurt. Bleeding from the nettle.

I do a body scan. Minor injuries. I breathe. I notice the breath. Notice the rattle in the breath. I think I swallowed something. A beetle or a pebble. My chest feels congested. Am I climbing or falling?

Strange how you can live in a place and yet rarely visit the bottom of its gorge. People are so comfortable these days.

Three careful steps down toward the river. All rocks now and no grass.

I have dislocated my knee. This happened to me once on a school bus and the driver, a refugee named Gunther, popped it back in for me. Didn't even bother to tell my parents about it. I guess it wasn't a big deal. Not back then.



My kneecap travels around my leg about two inches, straining the ligaments. The knee area begins to swell. I'm afraid of bone fragments in the blood. Clotting. I don't think I can pop it back in myself.

I fall again, about ten feet, off a small cliff. I splash in about two inches of icy-cold water. The water feels good for a minute, but I soon become cold. My clothes are soaked. I can't stand. I try to roll toward the shore.

It's dark here. The sun and sky of midday feel as far away as the night-time stars.

Soon, I'm shivering. Soon comes moderate hypothermia. Soon comes the flourishing of foreboding thoughts, like flecks of shale hewn from the consciousness.

I can't think straight but that's OK.

Whenever I try to think straight, it comes out crooked.

That's what everyone says.

They say they can't understand me.

I am crooked and confusing.

I am communicating from the bottom of a gorge and I am in pain. Of course you don't understand me.

I've been here my whole life.

I appear on the surface, but really, I'm here.

I finally greet my original self after having wandered as a shade above the gorge for a time.

I believe the kids have started a small rockslide with their childish shenanigans.

I never had children myself. Too much trouble.

A rock the size of a bitter melon—I'm thinking granite striped with quartz—wrecks my other leg. I can see my fibula straight as a prayer flag.

The water seems to be rising.

Perhaps I am sliding into the river.

Focus on the breath. Imagine the light in the body.

The breath and the water and the sky and the rock are all the same. It is all one. Isn't that religion?

I'm cold.

I like how my blood curlicues in the shallow water. Looks like clouds.

If I keep sinking, I'll find the sky.

Merleau-Ponty's Knowing, Vibrant Bodies Replace the Day of the Living Dead

Glen Mazis

I remember the haunting, ongoing feeling I had when I became a teenager and observed the adults around me. It seemed to me that everyone I encountered was not really alive. It was difficult to discern exactly what “being alive” meant, but I could tell what it wasn’t: rushing through the world, not making eye contact, finding the worst in most things, and being bored. I couldn’t see excitement in the eyes of those around me, even though I found life itself to be an ongoing delight.

On the streets of New York City, I found my daily life reflected in the words of T. S. Eliot, “Under the brown fog of a winter dawn / A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many / I had not thought death had undone so many / Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled / And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.”

I wondered whether I was caught in one of those spooky *Twilight Zone* shows that my mother let me stay up to watch. I was stuck in a zombie world of only half-alive people. Yet when reaching puberty, with its myriad self-doubts, I thought maybe the problem was just me. Then, I was lucky or cursed enough to stumble across a copy of Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*. I read the play with fascination. The dead people in the cemetery were horrified after watching the citizens of the town. It seemed as though everyone was acting dead already, not open to the miracle of being alive. I wasn’t crazy, after all: a famous playwright had seen the same thing!

Soon after that, I read Sinclair Lewis’ book, *Arrowsmith*, and decided I had to be a biological researcher to seek out the mystery of life. I was swept away by the protagonist’s love of scientific discovery and his willingness to travel to distant lands and risk his safety to save lives. Caught by this inspiration, I spent a summer in high school at the special biology program at the Rockefeller Institute for New York City students. Afterward, I became a biology major in college. Only in my junior year of college did I have to take a philosophy course. It was then that I realized that the secret of life wasn’t to be found in a lab, at least not the *meaning of life*.

I switched majors. When all the kids went home for Christmas break, I stayed at school in my apartment reading Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time* at the tortoise pace of a page per hour, utterly fascinated. Heidegger’s

idea that we had to find Being in our daily experience clicked for me in a way that no other philosopher had until then (like Plato saying the true reality was in some other realm, unreachable).

However, when I began studying philosophy at Yale as a graduate in 1972, I realized something was missing that not many philosophers could appreciate: it was our bodies that were the key to our experiences, not just our minds.

The mind is great, don’t get me wrong, but as Steve Martin put it, our current culture sees the body merely as “something the mind rides around on.”

But I am not just my mind, and my body is not just a tool. I am my body. When I started to do Zen meditation in 1970, I experienced this reality firsthand. Then, during my time at Yale, I found a philosopher from the Greek-to-European tradition who had realized this as well. That is when I began my lifelong love affair with the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Who was Maurice Merleau-Ponty?

Maurice Merleau-Ponty was a Frenchman, born in 1908 in Southwestern France in the city of Rochefort-sur-Mer, a port on the Charente estuary. His father had been an artillery captain and a knight of the Legion of Honor. After his father’s death in 1913, Merleau-Ponty and his family moved to Paris. Merleau-Ponty felt that his childhood was “incomparably happy,” perhaps, in part, because he was very close to his mother. They remained close until her death in 1953.

Jean-Paul Sartre noted this closeness somewhat satirically in his memorial essay in the French journal *Les Temps Modernes*. It seemed to Sartre and others that Merleau-Ponty’s closeness with his mother made him feel too much of the debt we have to the nurturance and inseparable bodily connection with others that is afforded to us by the experience of mothering. Sartre returned to this idea repeatedly in the essay, saying at one point, “Everything was too wonderful, too soon” as the son was “enveloped” by “the Mother Goddess, his own mother, whose eyes made him see what he saw.” I have often wondered whether this reaction was inspired by Sartre’s masculine pride in keeping a distance from what was identified by the cultural and philosophical traditions as feminine sensibilities.

For quite some time, a long line of male philosophers had defined the human self as separate from nature, the body, and other people. Like Merleau-Ponty, my mother was a dear friend of mine until her death when I was already in my late sixties. It could be said that seeing the world through female eyes helped Merleau-Ponty to question this masculine discomfort with emotional closeness, sensitive sensuality, and embracing our interdependence with others. Merleau-Ponty’s senses of the world came from another kind of bodily sensitivity that was at odds with the masculine zeitgeist of his time.

The Child as Clue to How Bodies Connect Us

Merleau-Ponty was drawn to philosophy at an early age, winning awards for his study of the discipline in his lycée years. He attended the École Normale Supérieure from 1926 to 1930, where he befriended Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre, and Claude Lévi-Straus. He formed a close friendship with Beauvoir, who said that only Merleau-Ponty could have taught her “the art of gaiety.” Of course, Beauvoir and Sartre became the famous couple who spent their lives together in an unconventional way, but the three of them were good friends until Merleau-Ponty’s well-publicized falling out with Sartre in 1953.

Merleau-Ponty first taught university philosophy at the University of Lyons in 1945, but in 1949 was appointed Professor of Child Psychology and Pedagogy at the University of Paris, succeeding Jean Piaget. This back and forth between philosophy and psychology, as well as his avid interest in the arts and literature, were expressions of his ability to bring disparate fields together into a cohesive vision.

During the next three years, before being appointed head of philosophy at the Sorbonne in 1952, he explored and lectured about child development. He came to realize that, due to the lack of ego boundaries, children are first inseparable from those immediate persons in their environment: their parents and family, and even other children.

In his essay, “The Child’s Relations with Others,” Merleau-Ponty gives a striking example of what he calls “syncretistic sociality” or “transitivism”: when one child in a group of very young children has their hand slapped, all the children cry because “the hand” is all of theirs in a felt state of indivision among their bodies. Merleau-Ponty argued that persons only come to see themselves as separate individuals later in childhood, usually after three years of age. This argument rejected the common notion that humans are individuals at their core, and they must work to forge bonds with others.

This layer of experience remains in our adult life, within our psyches, through what he calls “an abiding acquisition” that gets drawn upon when we fall in love, for example, or form close bonds with others. Our body’s openness to the world is an openness to others, and our perceptions are, to some extent, shared. As well, our sense of who we are comes from the shared felt experience with others, not only as infants but throughout life. Our bodily sense of ourselves, which is our primary sense for Merleau-Ponty, is of a “we-self” and not an “I-self.” Philosophy’s stress on “subjectivity” is to be replaced by “inter-subjectivity.” Another way to say it might be to replace Descartes’ famous “I think, therefore I am,” with “we feel and perceive, therefore we are.”

Objectified Bodies

In the twentieth century, Merleau-Ponty became the thinker who articulated how the body was our inseparable link to other people and the natural world. He believed that the body was our saving grace for ongoing creativity.

What is so important for our current culture to heed in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is his warning that for all the modern attention to the body, it remains an unknown territory. The world as accessed through the body, with its immediate sense of the world, is discounted and unfamiliar. I believe he would think that is even more the case in the last half-century of global and American culture.

The body as the object of fitness, of fashion, of health, and as displayed in art, media, and advertising in postmodern culture, especially in North America, seems to have become the widely celebrated object of desire and an integral part of self-identity and the good life. This suggests that after a long tradition of treating the body as inferior to the mind (or spiritual realm), the body is finally being seen as an important aspect of a fulfilled life.

The body-hating tradition in philosophy goes as far back as Socrates and Plato. Socrates asks his friends to “give a cock to Aesculapius,” the doctor, as payment for his being cured once he drinks the hemlock, dies, and is rid of his body. Plato states in *The Republic* and the *Timaeus* that the body nails us to the Earth, which is a slimy, corrupted, and corroded realm. He adds that “seeing through the eyes is full of deceit, and so is perception through the ears and other senses.” He warns that the soul must withdraw from the body or else stagger around as if drunk.

The religious condemnation of the body cannot be portrayed any more vividly than the twenty pages of Catholic sermons in James Joyce’s *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* when the priest warns Stephen and his classmates that heeding the “corrupt nature of our lower instincts...gross and beast-like” of the body not only forfeits all that is good about humans but leads to unending torture. This excruciating torture is detailed page after page in the most fantastic terms.

By objectifying the body in this way, we come to view the body as something separate from our souls, something that we should overcome and disown. The current emphasis on the body as beautiful, athletic, and key to economic success also objectifies the body, but it is now seen as a vital possession to be honed and groomed. However, even a glorified possession is still something separate from who we are.

Perceptual Depths

Merleau-Ponty rejects these forms of objectification and instead argues that the body is vital to grounding our sense of reality by paying more attention to the richness of perception. By saying that we don’t know our bodies, he is highlighting how much we miss of our everyday perceptions. Perception comes to us with a thickness, like a many-layered cake. There is no bare sensation. We don’t just see an input of red. We see a wooly red with memories attached to it. We see connections to the red of anger, or the red of a bishop’s robes, or the red of a certain clay where we once lived. Metaphorical reds like the fires

of hell or physical reds like a forest fire on the west coast. Artists explore these many layers for us, but any of us can sink deeper into our perceived world and get so much more meaning from it. These inseparable bodily dimensions that are the deeper layers of perception are our access to reality. The sensual, the emotional, the immediate taking in of gestures, the kinetic sense of ourselves and the world, the imaginative working with the senses, the intuitive, and the world's never-ending symbolic play give us our existence in the world's dynamic energy and expressiveness.

Our first immediate sense of anything is these bodily perceptions, even though we are not immediately conscious of all the layers of meaning that are part of it. We feel them, and we can further explore them. We experience the world *through the body* before we think about it as the primary reality. Our culture sees what can be measured and quantified as what is real, as well as what can be rationally categorized. Yet, these are pale abstractions that distance us from our felt belonging in the world and with its fellow creatures. Often, we rely upon artists to remind us of our lived, felt connection to the world and others. However, we move through the world with our bodies. We hold our children and toss a football with our hands. We sit on a balcony, or on the roof of a house, and watch the sunset. We dive into a cold body of water, play an instrument, and listen to music from the speaker in our kitchen. Everything has imaginary halos and remembered intimations. We intuit connections. All these senses emerge not by thinking about them but by feeling them. There are more depths whispering to us in each thing or being we perceive. And at the center of this range of experience is the body.

Perception's Many Voices of Silence

An object is understood by science and our culture as something inert. It must be pushed, pulled, and interacted with externally through causes and effects that have no deeper meaning than its physical properties or the resulting measurable outcomes of these interactions. Yes, the water in the stream has a certain chemical composition, a certain temperature, a measurable viscosity and speed of flow, but its felt bodily reality is as a comforting presence that has a certain liveliness and intimacy on the particular day I feel sad or exhausted and have come to sit by it.

For Merleau-Ponty, there would be no perception of a human kind in such an objective world, just mechanically inputted sensor readings and material reactions. Merleau-Ponty borrows a phrase from André Malraux, asking us to listen to the things of the world in their "voices of silence." Perception is not the taking in of data, but the opening of oneself to a *dialogue* with the world, its things and creatures. Merleau-Ponty also calls perception a *communion*. A communion is not a coinciding, a losing of all boundaries and becoming one. It is two beings who have taken each other into themselves and have been transformed by the encounter. This only makes sense if the reality of things,



events, and creatures is not something static and unchanging outside of our taking them in through perception. If the reality of the world is within this perceptual dialogue, then the world is always changing, flowing, and transforming as its sense of meaning evolves.

However, the current cultural standard is one that does not trust experience. Everything must be turned into a number to be taken seriously. We focus on our salaries, reaching 10,000 steps a day, tracking how many hours we use our iPhone, and calculating how many lives have been lost to war and disease. People add up this tally of experience and try to make sense of life through calculations. But the world is dynamic. It moves with us. For Merleau-Ponty, humans carry with them a “perceptual faith” in which we view our experiences as the reality of the world, but we also understand that the world is open-ended: meaning can constantly be created and changed by our perceptions.

Historically, Indigenous peoples have carried this sense of the world with them. As a college teacher, I often read Paula Gunn Allen’s *Sacred Hoop* with my students, in which she thanks all the beings around her in the landscape for the spirit and thoughts in the book. In Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*, the protagonist, Tayo, must learn to listen to the world around him so he can return to feeling alive again after the horrors he experienced in World War Two, growing up in abject poverty and as an object of discrimination.

When the book opens, he is in a haze and feels like cotton wool has encased him, like he is not really *there*. It is only by listening to the silent voices of dragonflies, cattle, waving wild flowers, the looming mountains, the deep pools of water, and myriad other natural beings that he returns to his sense of vitality and presence. Silko suggests that, like Tayo’s condition, there is a wider sickness of our culture. We have all suffered a more subtle but continual violation—the violation to our sensitive bodies caused by our view of the natural world as a distant object.

For Merleau-Ponty, perception is a response to the beckoning of everything around us. In his Saturday afternoon lectures, he talks of how the lemon communicates to us through its colour, its smell, and its taste in such a way that we are *lemoned* in the immediate moment of experiencing it before thought. Another example he offers is water and how it calls to us with its flowing, resisting, and shape-shifting essence.

We all know this on some level but ignore its importance. When we are upset or tired from work, we go to sit on the banks of the river or go to the ocean and watch the waves endlessly roll into shore. A Zen Garden uses rocks, sand, and burbling water to instill in us a sense of peace, whereas days of overcast and gloomy clouds promote on us an oppressive sadness or lethargy.

We can resist these voices that all sensual beings impart to us, or we can finely tune ourselves to take in the world with all our senses. Yet, both the Indigenous and Zen Buddhist traditions would agree that besides the world

silently speaking to us, gesturing to our senses, it does so in a continuous and dynamic way. Just as we hear a melody and not individual notes in our immediate and primary experience of music, so do all moments of time become part of a flow and a duration.

The Buddhist thinker Dogen would simply say, “All time is now.” Where else could it be? The past is with us always. It is the source of our understanding of ourselves and the world, and it has already sketched out futures that are inseparable from what it means to be in this moment. This is how the body takes in time and is at odds with the “clock time” of our culture.

This web of relations that make up perception’s openness to the world can be understood through the German word *Gestalt*, which means “to express”: we perceive at first wholes in what we hear such as sentences, not isolated words, or melodies, not notes, and see forests first, not individual trees, or a person’s facial expression and not their eyes, lips, and cheeks separately. The body’s taking in of the world puts us within its interrelations.

Merleau-Ponty’s Warning about Disembodiment

Our postmodern, consumerist, and hyper-capitalist world tends to grind its way through these webs of relations in which we are situated. One can take things apart and see this as their reality as a way to manipulate these parts, yielding a certain power over things and events, but it is not dwelling with them and allowing them to come forth in their deeper and fuller meaning. Instead of openly taking in another being, one can slap a label upon them, having identified them by some characteristic, and then move on with a projection, a manipulation, of them.

D. H. Lawrence expresses this eloquently in his poem, “Two Ways of Living and Dying.” He contrasts those who “live the life...open to the restless skies and the streams flowing in and out from the darkly fecund cosmos” with those who “are only self-conscious and self-willed...while nothing comes to them from the open heaven, from earth, from the sun and the moon to them, nothing, nothing.” Lawrence continues to describe those who don’t take in the fullness of open bodily perception, writing, “only the mechanical power of self-directed energy drives them on and on like machines...full of dangers to the gentle passengers of growing life.” The poem is a statement of how gliding over the fullness of perception’s beckonings from the cosmos and other beings is the essence of a power mania that does violence to the environment and other sensitive beings.

Lawrence, as a poet, has expressed an important theme in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology: that being open to the sensual richness of perception has an ethical and ecological edge, and is key to personal fulfillment.

In Merleau-Ponty’s introduction to his last published essay, “Eye and Mind,” before his sudden and untimely death, he warns the world that the scientific objectification of the world “manipulates things and gives up living

in them.” However, it was not science itself that Merleau-Ponty felt was the problem. Rather, the problem was modern culture’s use of technology and “information processing” to interpret the world through algorithms and “operational thinking.”

He foresaw a time when, distanced from our deeper bodily experience, humanity would only manipulate things from an abstract distance. He predicted this would boomerang upon humanity, and with this obsession to manipulate the world, humanity itself would be reduced to a manipulated thing. Then, we would “enter into a cultural regimen where there is neither truth nor falsity concerning man and history, into a sleep, or a nightmare, from which there is no awakening.”

This is the only sentence of such a dire and bombastic nature in the writings penned by this careful and “tranquil” man, to use Simone de Beauvoir’s words. He pleads for humanity to return to “the soil of the sensible and opened world such as it is and for our body.” The essay that follows this plea is an intensely poetic exploration of the power of the arts to awaken us to the raw and wild voices of the natural world and the sensual world as immediately felt by our bodies. He says he is looking to encounter “savage” or “wild” or “brute” being and not the rational, objectified being which has had its vitality and depth squeezed out of it in the cultural traditions of philosophy, science, and religion.

This is the haunting theme of Silko’s *Ceremony*, the tale of how the Europeans came to be under the spell of “witchery,” which meant they no longer felt the vitality and meaning of the world around them but saw it as inert objects to be manipulated. The witchery gives rise to a whirligig of intoxicated and bewildered actions that culminated in unremitting violence toward the fragile web of life. This was the origin of the genocide perpetrated by the European settlers toward the Native Americans and native wildlife of America.

Waking Up through the Body

Although Merleau-Ponty saw how global culture was sliding toward a reliance on technology and an algorithmic approach to existence, he never lost his faith in embodiment to break through cultural conditioning and bring us back to a more primary and felt experience of the world. This experience could open us to the power of imagination and a different relationship to language. It would also open us to the power of the natural world.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche had pointedly portrayed the modern threat of nihilism in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as being the specter of the “last men” who “have their little pleasure for the day and their little pleasure for the night” and drift through life tranquilized and doing what everyone else does. They lack the courage to despise themselves, that is, to be critical of their way of life, only wanting comfort and constant distraction and “no longer able to shoot the arrow of their longing beyond themselves.” They will not take such risks to experience the chaos of having to

recreate oneself. Yet, Zarathustra warns, “One must have chaos in oneself to give birth to a dancing star.”

Always running here and there, being entertained, avoiding self-criticism, Nietzsche saw humanity as slipping into boredom, an underlying sadness, and having lost the love of life itself in its creative struggles. During the mid-twentieth century, Heidegger saw the same malaise and lack of self-challenge in much of modern culture. Technology was reducing humanity to a “calculative thinking” that could no longer meditate and, in silence, find depths of meaning.

For Merleau-Ponty, however, to experience the world in a bodily way, taking in the “thickness” of perception, which is enlaced with emotion, imagination, intuition, felt bodily sense, kinetic propulsion, implicit memories, and a wider background that surrounds that which we are initially focused on, allows us to break out of the taken-for-granted world and to experience things anew.

He says, “With the first vision, the first contact, the first pleasure, there is initiation, that is, not the positing of a content, but the opening of a dimension.” New ideas are not in a separate mental realm but are the invisible lining of all the visible things around us, their deeper sense. If we use our imagination to follow what the senses beckoning from the world are whispering to us, the invisible deeper senses will become experienceable. This is the source of meaning, the gift of our body’s perceptual dance with the world, its back and forth. It is not only the child but all of us who can perceive with freshness.

As Merleau-Ponty also says toward the end of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, “I still am that first perception.” This is also the possibility for humanity that Nikos Kazantzakis envisioned in his character Zorba in his novel, *Zorba the Greek*. An old man, Zorba rises every morning and engages with his senses as if he were still a child, as if for the first time, and to his jaded employer says, “What is that miracle over there, Boss, that moving blue, what do they call it? Sea? Sea? And what’s that wearing a flowered green apron? Earth? Who was the artist who did it? It’s the first time I’ve seen that, Boss, I swear.”

Merleau-Ponty agrees with Zorba when he declares that “Nature is at the first day; it is there today.” Yet, to experience this, we have to open ourselves to the full sensitivity and depth of bodily apprehension. As Zorba puts it, “I should fill my soul with flesh. I should fill my flesh with soul.” They are inseparable for Zorba, for Kazantzakis, and for Merleau-Ponty. It could be inseparable for all of us if we escaped our culture’s alienations and its opposition of body and mind, and mind to spirit. To become more still and take in the body’s perceptions requires us to slow down and to savor each experience. Even those experiences we might think are painful or boring might not be so if we really attended to them. When we become fully present in our bodies, these many layers of meaning sensed by us give us differing pathways to enter into experience. Some are straightforwardly delightful, like the hues of flowers or the rhythm of the passing clouds, but even others, like being stuck waiting for an appointment,

might yield new senses when we pay attention and notice the moment around us. At that moment, I am not just waiting for an appointment. The whole world is moving with me, and all I have to do is look out the window to see what else is right there around me: the joy of the children playing down the street, the self-assuredness of the gentleman standing outside his shop, the admiration of a parent watching their children walk ahead of them.

Embodiment Can Open the Poetic Power of Language

Lastly, for Merleau-Ponty, there is the trap in which we are enclosed in the way we use language. He called our everyday speech and writing “empirical language.” He saw this way of wording the world as passing around well-worn tokens that no longer awakened us to truly experience that which was being described. This everyday language presents the things, events, creatures, and people around us as if they are already sufficiently apprehended in a general way and no more attention needs to be paid to them. We slap a label on what we experience and pay no real attention to our perceptions. Worse still, we might slap a label on the starving person and pass by with apathy, instead of engaging them and finding our feelings of care and concern that might lead to fellowship and kindness. Entering the body’s perception takes effort and time, but it is infinitely rewarding. A culture that tells us we have no extra time mitigates against this dwelling in our bodies.

For Merleau-Ponty, our senses, open to the world, introduce us to a depth of meaning that has no end, or what he says is “inexhaustible.” Our rational, categorial, and everyday use of language doesn’t push us outside of its neat boundaries, back into the mystery of appearance. There is only one use of language that breaks up this sleepy order and awakens us again to wonder, and that is poetry.

Merleau-Ponty claims that “poetry melts ordinary language,” and in creating this opening, this disorder, new possibilities of meaning and experience come forth. Speaking of its power, he says that “poetry is like a song or a dance of language, nor is it for want of signification, but it is because it always has more than one signification.” These many meanings that flower forth from a poetic use of language are also born in the fiction writer’s craft or in any creative writing that becomes poetic.

Our bodily senses take in many-layered meanings from the world, and the poetic releases their possible dynamic play of coming to us. Merleau-Ponty agrees with Bachelard’s statement in *Air and Dreams* that poetry is “truly the first manifestation of silence.” Merleau-Ponty finds silence running throughout language as its expressive root and to which we must return to in order to witness the world’s mystery and meaning. Poetry contains this silence within its pace, rhythm, and metaphoric twisting of language.

Yet, our current culture is wont to noisily cover over any silences. In one of his French Radio Hour lectures, Merleau-Ponty claims that poetry could

rehabilitate our everyday language. It is at the heart of a deeper sense of language’s origin that is not lost to us. We do know this on some level since our culture is more ambivalent about poetry. Even though poetry is seen as inessential by much of contemporary culture, in moments of spiritual importance, such as weddings, funerals, commemorations, and rituals, people often turn to poetry. They stand before their loved ones or their community and read a poem to make the event special and deeply felt. In letting the richness of the body’s apprehension of the world come to the fore again, the poetic can awaken us and restore to us the wonder of the world.

As Merleau-Ponty got older, his philosophical writings became more and more poetic and moved away from traditional philosophical terminology. This poetic rediscovery of the sensible depths of the body’s apprehension of the world is a way to return humanity to its interconnectedness with other persons, but also with all creatures and the natural world, and to emerge from the cultural nightmare of endless algorithmic manipulation that tears at this fabric of interdependence. Merleau-Ponty saw the philosopher as having a responsibility and a potential sensitivity to embodiment in its poetic expression “because he has experienced within himself the need to speak, the birth of speech as bubbling up at the bottom of his mute experience.”

The silence and the sensual are the roots and leaves of a poetic expression of bodily wisdom. He says, “the philosopher knows better than anyone that what is lived is lived-spoken, that, born at this depth, language is not a mask over Being, but—if one knows how to grasp it with all its roots and all its foliation—the most valuable witness to Being.” Poetic language speaks from within the body’s felt connection with the world and pushes us back into the richness of that experience. It is a richness of being for which our culture is starved and yet it is all around us. Merleau-Ponty invites us to return to the world of the body. It is a fine place to dwell.

To My Son, at Three Days

Peter Lilly

Everyone who visits
says how tiny you are,
how little and delicate.
But I do not see it.
To me, you are larger than the world.
You fill my future
with a future of your own
that extends beyond my years.
You fill my vision
as I put my forehead to yours,
so close your features blur.
So close that you might be able to make out mine
with your fresh eyes
adjusting to the light and the cold.
My heart is forever in my throat.
You fill it with electricity and fear,
that your potential might be stifled
by me not reaching mine.
You fill my very person with possibility.
You fill my ears with gurgles, screams and
little bated breaths.

You are enormous.
An entire universe
laying between my chin
and my navel.

A Man Without a Mirror

Peter Lilly

He stood there
with all the bored self-assurance
of a part-time life model,
disinterested in the
impressions and expressions
of the scrutiny of his form.

With the apathetic vulnerability
of glazed eyes above
pale skin folds, below
unflattering lighting, before
focused pupils.

And there was something beautiful
in his anti-catwalk confidence,
the antonym of every script
of social media cameras
that keep the rest of us
glancing at mirrors.



Taking Notes

Shannon Terrell

cartoon duck

“Louise, I think the stomach troubles are related to the separation anxiety.”

I sit cross-legged on the yellow polka dot couch in Dolph’s office, Game Boy in my lap. My mother sits on the blue loveseat across from me, hands sandwiched between her knees.

“Hmm,” says Mom.

Dolph leans into the armrest of his chair, notepad in his lap, rolling the end of a pen between his teeth. The first time I came in, I asked if the duck on his notebook was from DuckTales. He said he didn’t know. So I sang the theme song until he asked me to stop.

“So, really, it’s more a case of managing the sleep disruptions—the bathroom trips. Getting her on a good schedule during the week while she’s with you, you know?”

“Uh-huh.”

I bounce my knees and tilt the screen of my Game Boy toward my face. Stupid that I can’t turn the music up. I tried to play with the volume on the first time we came in and Mom smacked my leg.

“But my concern is what’s happening when she’s with Frank.”

“You can’t control that, Louise.”

I flick the down arrow on my Game Boy to cycle through my Pidgeotto’s attack moves. I’m in the middle of the Cerulean City gym battle, and Misty’s Starmie has wiped out half of my battle team. I eye the volume dial on the side of my Game Boy. The battle music is the best part.

“Well—”

“You just have to do what you can while you have her during the week.”

I glance up from my game at my mother across the room. She’s looking at me, the corners of her mouth puckered inward like she’s got something in her mouth she wants to spit out, half-chewed, too sour to swallow. An unripe kiwi. Or the pit of a plum. When she catches my eyes, she raises her brows and smiles.

I smile back and return to my game.

leather

“And how often do you see your dad now?”

I can't help but wonder how Patricia picks her office each morning. Tuesdays and Thursdays she takes the one with the noisy radiator. Fridays she gets the parking lot window. There are enough counselors at Catholic Family Services that I haven't seen the same one twice. Are the rooms like musical chairs? Is it just a wild scramble in the morning to get the one you want?

"Hmm?" I glance up from the pigeons huddled along the outside eave.

"How often do you see your dad?"

"Oh. It used to be every weekend, but I have Friday night rehearsals for my highschool's theater production and I work at Fortinos now on Saturdays, so—"

Patricia's pen begins to scratch.

I don't understand why it's called Catholic Family Services. You don't need to be Catholic to access the free counseling and there's never been any mention of God. You wouldn't even know there was an affiliation save for the polished wood cross above the door.

"And how do you feel about that?"

I pull my eyes from the cross. "About what?"

Patricia stares at me, pen poised above her leather notepad.

"How do you feel now that you don't see your dad as often?"

"Oh." I shrug, crossing, then uncrossing my legs. "I don't know. It's sad? I guess?"

Patricia nods as her pen flits across the page.

clipboard

"Do you want to feel better?"

"Yes."

"Then you should consider a prescription."

I stare at the pocket of Dr. Oakenberg's white coat. The heads of three pens crest the crisp folds of fabric, one gold, two silver. A pocket square for a psychiatrist.

I stare at the framed smears of crimson and gold across the room. The art in this wing of Brampton Civic is all the same. Half-conjured shapes and abstract splatters of color.

"Do I have to?"

Dr. Oakenberg lowers the clipboard in his hand to his lap.

"No, you don't have to."

The stale light of the computer monitor coats the side of his face, seeping into each crease that fans from his eye.

I retract in my leather-padded corner chair, curling my toes in my sneakers until they ache.

"Well, what else can I do?"

He sighs, creaking back and away on the wheels of his rolling chair toward his desk.

"Follow up with your family doctor."

tree

"Have you heard of the MBTI?" asks Sam. She stretches her arm across a spill of sunlight for the bookshelf on the far wall. She sets her crimson notepad on the small wooden table beside her wingback chair.

I sit cross-legged on the loveseat opposite Pam. Her white terrier, Max, sprawls next to me, snoring.

I shake my head, squeezing and releasing my hands clenched in my lap. Through the long window that frames the space between us, I can see Sam's backyard. It's got a tree in it. A big one. With a face carved into the trunk.

Max's wet nose nuzzles into my sock.

"Oh, it's good stuff." Sam finds the book she wants, a creased, dog-eared thing that gives an elastic *whap* noise when she flips it wide. "I'll give you the test today, and we'll see where you fall."

I stare at the drooping eyes of the tree. A cardinal lights on its nose.

"Okay."

"It's not the be-all-end-all or anything. And you should always take things like this with a grain of salt, obviously. But it's pretty interesting!"

Sam smiles at me, her wide mouth splitting to reveal a gap between her two front teeth.

I don't know why, but there's something reassuring about it.

I smile back as Max's drool seeps into my sock.

nothing

"So, you're afraid to go to sleep at night?"

I sit across from Sean McMullen, who slouches, legs crossed, in a low-slung leather armchair.

I nod and feign interest in the row of succulents that line the austere wood paneling of his office window.

"Why?" he demands.

"Because of the—"

"Shadow people?"

I nod.

"Like we discussed last time, these are delusions. These things you've imagined in your head, keeping you from leaving the house? They are delusions. Do you understand?"

I pull my eyes from the fat, round leaves of the succulents to stare at him. His hands are in his lap, knobbled fingers laced. He stares at me, expectant and vacant, all at once. No notebook. Nothing at all.

Maybe he's got a great memory.

"Yes?" he raises thick, gray brows at me.

I nod and look out the window. I liked Sam and her creaky floorboards. I felt like I was getting somewhere there.

But then Mom's benefits ran out and Nanny offered to pay for therapy on

the condition that I went to see someone she knew. Someone she used back when Grandpa died.

The thought of my Nanny sitting across from Sean McMullen and talking about the death of her husband makes my insides curdle. I can't imagine it.

But maybe Mr. McMullen wasn't always like this. Maybe he's old and tired.

"Stop thinking about these things," Sean says from across the room. "They're delusions and they aren't real."

I stare out the window.

"Okay."

clipboard

"And how is the Buspirone going?" Dr. Oakenberg's dark eyes flit from his computer monitor to my face.

I pick at the skin above the nail of my index finger, then stop.

"It's going alright."

Dr. Oakenberg nods once, twice.

"Any nausea? Vomiting?"

I shake my head.

"And you're up to forty milligrams per day, yes?" The scroll wheel of the computer mouse makes a gentle whirl as blocks of black text flit past Dr. Oakenberg's face.

"Yes."

"And you're feeling better?"

The scroll wheel goes silent as Dr. Oakenberg pauses to stare at me.

My tongue, plastered to the roof of my mouth, takes conscious effort to retract.

"Not really."

"What do you mean, not really?" Dr. Oakenberg lifts the clipboard from his desk and studies me behind oval, rimless glasses.

"I feel weird," I say, crossing, then uncrossing my legs.

"Yes, but has your anxiety improved?" Dr. Oakenberg demands, clipboard braced on a thigh.

"I don't really know. I feel weird."

Dr. Oakenberg stares at me, the silence drawing across the space between us.

"Do you want to stop? The Buspirone?"

I pick at my finger again, then raise my hand to my mouth to chew a nail.

"I don't know. Maybe."

Dr. Oakenberg blows air through his nose and leans back in his chair, the leather squeaking against his weight.

"Yes. I want to stop," I say, blood trickling between my teeth from my freshly torn nail. I lower my hand to my lap and curl it into a fist.

Dr. Oakenberg places the clipboard back on his desk.

"Alright."

tree

I sit on the loveseat in Sam's home. I remember she told me once that she used to see her clients in a big office building. She said she didn't like it.

Remembering the path through the singing bowls and overgrown plants was easy. Down the aching, creaking floorboards to the small room on the right. Sam says she'll be with me in a moment, she just needs to make a cup of coffee.

I wait in the light of an afternoon that pours itself through the windows like pan-warmed syrup. Max leaps into Sam's chair and stares at me.

Outside, one of the eyes has come loose from the tree. It hangs upside down from its peg. It looks like a Picasso.

"Sorry about that," says Sam, closing the door behind her with a bare foot. She hands me a mug, sets down her own, and picks up her red notebook. Same as last time. The one with the big tree on it. "Now, then. How are you?"

Jones

—on reading *Alex D.* at Jones Beach State Park, Field 2

Susan Barry-Schulz

I took your book, *Love*, to the windswept
beach. Grains of sand hurled

themselves deep into its spine.
Pages fluttered—

feathers and pages,
papery wings inked in fire.

A single cloud slid across
the bluest of skies, darkening

the seawater, casting shadows
on the threadbare quilt.

We held our breath for a moment
until everything sparkled again,

as before. I took your book, *Love*,
to the beach—pelted by feldspar,

quartz, tiny fragments of shells—
and didn't we all

take shelter there; traveling monarchs,
herring gulls, ghost crabs;

all of us restless creatures
at the shoreline
wanting in.

Playing Scrabble with Pete Buttigeig

Susan Barry-Schulz

In my dream I worry about the way
he looks out the window. The way he looks
out the window worries me. He is pale
and thinner than he was last month. In my
dream we shuffle our tiles by the fire, draw
vowels from a velvety bag. But why would I
agree to play knowing he can easily
demolish me in seven languages.

Or is it eight? He stands by the window
in his navy-blue parka, looking out,
and I can tell that it's March by the way
the darkness falls on his face and the gray
piles of snow and the restless sound the wind
makes pressing against the panes. I want

to tell him to rest. My own son walks
across Spain in the way of St. James
and keeps walking. I bought him a navy-
blue parka too, once. Calvin Klein with a
removable hood. The last time he was home
he left it—just the removable hood—behind
on his dresser, but I'm pretty sure that he'll
come back for it someday.



Dwarf, Bearded Lady, Smudge

Jake Williams

The kids are screaming.

Blurring flashes of red and white, spinning heads lolled back, clenched fingers gripping. Their voices get closer, further, then closer again in a dizzying maelstrom. Parents watch indifferently or join the screams.

I hate working the Waltzer. You can't help but get dizzy even with Dougie's tricks, finding a fixed point or whatever. None of it works. Dougie goes out every few minutes and spins the cars a little faster. The kids scream louder. He lunges over the warbling metallic waves, a cigarette dangling from his mouth. He told me once he keeps an eye out for the kids getting paler, a faint candy green eking out. Then he goes out and spins them some more.

I'm stuck in the pay booth, making sure no one comes for the lockbox. If they aren't scared of Dougie, they sure as hell won't be scared of me. In the last few years, he went from a scrawny kid to a towering carny adult. Even Dad leaves him alone now, for the most part.

Dad's doing his showman bit, coaxing the boyfriends over to win prizes for their girls. The poor bastards always think they'll hook that damn duck. It's only ever shrapnel handed over, but the house always wins. Carol's on the donkeys again. She doesn't seem to mind too much. She doesn't have to lie to anyone or make them puke. It's honest work. Carol loves the donkeys. The only part of the job she gripes about is the kids that want to kick the tired mules into high gear. She doesn't even mind slopping out the piling dung. All the little round pieces littered with hay. It makes that squelching sound when the shovel goes in, like when Dad serves pasta bake. She used to grab a plastic chair and eat with us. Now she takes her food and eats it in the hay among the creatures. She's been getting so skinny I'm sure she's sharing.

She'll stink out the trailer again tonight, but it's better than when we shared with Dougie. We all used to muck in with Dad, then Grandma moved into a fancy vase they call an urn and we got our own trailer. Then Dougie shot up and skulked around until he got his own and started chasing the locals of wherever we landed.

The ride slows down and the greener kids make a beeline for a patch of grass to hurl. So long as it's not our property Dougie doesn't shout about loss of earnings.

I see Carol's using one of her myriad excuses to the parents of a fat kid that the beasts of burden can't hack. "Sorry, we got these cheap because they're allergic to denim. Why don't you give the ghost train a go instead?" Carol's the best for these scenarios, the least blunt of the clan and by far the most sharp. She's always got her head in a book. She talks about leaving the family trade. She talks about brick and mortar. She says if I'm not as dumb as Dougie when I'm his age I'll talk about it too.

If we were the kind of family that went to school, Carol would be ahead of all of us. Even though Dougie would be gearing up to leave, and she'd be gearing up to start. I think I'll be smarter than Dougie though. I won't smoke for starters.

One night Dad was asleep and Dougie was drinking with some local boys. They were by one of the rides, the magic carpet. He let me have a puff. I remember how smug he was leaning against the purple metal, the dodgy celebrity mural. He was laughing beneath the wonky Will Smith. I coughed my guts up in front of a circle of hooded elders and ran away to the trailer. I cried and confessed to Carol and she said the right thing just like always.

Sometimes Dougie lets me join in on the older boy stuff. The night before we leave town, we unhook the air rifles and chase the local boys. Nowadays he spends more time chasing the girls. The first time we couldn't find him, Dad sent us all looking. Dad and Smudge went into town. The only other adults that work the rides are locals. Dad pays them in two pound coins, and sometimes we skip town before it comes to that. So, me and Carol checked the rides. Being the oldest of the two, I had to check the ghost train. Even though the teenagers come out of it laughing, that night, with the generator powered down and all the goofy Dracula laughs and coffin squeaks switched off, it was hell. I navigated through all the comatose monsters with a dodgy flashlight. I could see my breath, and followed the ghostly blue shapes of it forward.

I had to walk just off the track where the carts lock in, through the scenery. Fake cobwebs clinging, Day-Glo painted murder scenes, Grandma's creepy dolls scattered everywhere. The only sound was the muffled hum of the generator cooling down and a vicious wind rocking the flimsy walls. The faint commotion made everything rock, mummies mid lurch threatening to finish the gesture. Hanging plastic bats animated into life. I tried to remember the bats close up and in the light of day, stringing them up with fishing wire. The "Made in China" in messy plastic letters.

There was a faint wailing sound, deep in the belly of the ride. Deep grunting breaths and that damn wailing. It was like those songs that sent sailors barmy and made them crash their ships, or a murder struggle from one of Dougie's videos I'm not supposed to know about.

The wind seemed to grow stronger further inside the dark labyrinth. Bolts rattled in their confines, thin sheets of metal throttled. The clattering of a gathering stampede sounded just around the next corner. Then there, behind

an upright coffin in the weak light of my torch, a pale squirming mound of flesh. Animal sounds spewing from behind the black plywood casket. Some hideous abomination, a featureless creature with four legs. I screamed an infantile yawp before the creature took a recognizable shape, and my eyes began to make sense of things.

"What the bloody hell are you doing, you little pervert?"

"Dougie?"

This was last year before I'd smoked a cigarette or swiped a video from Dougie's other collection I'm not supposed to know about. I know now that Dougie had wooed some local girl and taken her somewhere private, back before he had a whole trailer to himself. All those jokes Carol and me don't quite get? They were doing that.

Carol had led Smudge and Dad to the ghost train when she heard me scream. Dougie's girl gathered her clothes and ran the long way through the ghost train, past all the zombies and chainsaw killers and juicy stuff at the end. When Dad and Smudge found us, they just laughed and led us out. Dougie smacked me over the head before following in a huff.

A different patch now. A different horde of overweight families and bored teenagers, all laughing or complaining or asking for refunds. Dad puts Carol on the Ferris wheel, says she needs to learn the particulars. She's run out of reading material so she's going through the engineer's manuals for the rides. Dad's on the donkeys tonight. Stodgy, red hands picking the kids up by the armpits and plonking them down. If his technique hasn't changed, he'll grip too tight and you'll feel your body weight crush down into his knuckles and rings. Dougie's on the dodgems, hopping on the backs of the little cars and terrorizing the placid teenagers with their hands hidden in their sleeves. Smudge is working the ghost train, which is marketing 101. He's a thousand times scarier than the Dracula mannequin. Paint chipping off its hook nose, fang missing.

I should probably tell you about Smudge.

Way back when, when Dad was more like Dougie and Dougie was more like nothing, Grandpa ran the show. Dad says they had monkeys. All huddled up in the lorry, buried in the hay right along with the donkeys. Dad says one was so smart he could ride the donkeys and eat candy floss. And that another was so dumb he tried to climb behind the mules and do what Dougie did to that girl by the coffin. Back then Grandma used to put on a funny hat and make up stories about people's futures, and they'd pay her for it.

They also had what Dad calls a freak show. Dad talks a lot about how punters used to be easier to impress and harder to upset. They had a dwarf, they had a bearded lady (which was really Dad's cousin in a dress), and they had Smudge.

They all had little boxes they stood on, with signs underneath reading *Dwarf, Bearded Lady, Smudge*. One look at Smudge and you would know why he qualified. His silhouette made the shape of a rectangle, his small stump of a head peering out from square shoulders. About the width of two men. Strange folds and protrusions jutting from every inch. If a punter ever worked out they'd been duped by uncle Derek in Grandma's dress, Dad would make up the difference by having Smudge eat glass or hammer a nail into his nose. Dad says Smudge never said much against it, but Smudge never says much about anything.

Due to changing times and dwindling value, the freak show part of the racket ended. Uncle Derek didn't wear Grandma's dress anymore, he worked the rides until he got a girl pregnant and moved to Wales. The dwarf lady was left some place as she couldn't carry much and Smudge stayed with us because he could.

One time, some bad men came when me and Carol were supposed to be asleep. They came shouting about how Dad hadn't paid for Dougie's trailer, or paid enough at least. I could hear Dad talking through the wall, saying he'd give them what he could. Then the sound of the pounds and pennies shaking in the lock box. One said he'd have to do better than that and made the *click-clack* sound like the good guys in films before they go and kill the bad guys. The next two sounds were Smudge's trailer door and that sound like when times get tough and we crack open one of the coconuts and share it out. Then there was running and not much else. Then Dad came in and said we were leaving.

Who's that? There, by the coconut shy. They've got their hood up, and they're holding something weighty. They've got eyes for Dougie. They haven't moved for a while now. Haven't stepped out of the rain to one of the spots by the hot dogs or the duckies. God, they're walking over now. Should I get Dad? Maybe it's one of the bad men. Maybe whatever they've got in their arm is something bigger to scare Dad. Maybe it's a bomb. They're marching now, knocking into teenagers and prams. Dougie hasn't noticed, he's sliding around on one of the empties knocking into kids, using the rest of his brain and body to smoke. They're right there. Adjusting the bomb under the flashing bulbs and sirens.

They're walking right into the miniature traffic. They've flicked their hood back. They're a she with pigtailed trailing behind. She's holding the bomb up. I look at Carol and she sees it too. She's got her arms spread out, and her head on one shoulder like that Jesus on Dad's necklace. That *see what I put up with?* gesture. That *what do you want me to do?* The girl's shouting at Dougie but I can't hear over all the sirens and bells and music. Dougie's head follows her from the back of the empty. His face is screwed up like he's shouting back.

She's unwrapping the bomb and showing it to Dougie. It's stretching its little arms out to hug him. It has curly blonde locks. The dodgems are swerving. A word that sounds like "responsibility" climbs out of the mayhem. Carol's Ferris wheel queue is dispersing and heading to the row. They've got a better view from down here.

Dad shouts something to Smudge, and he barrels toward Dougie and the girl and the baby. Dougie hops off the empty, and she slaps him across the face. The baby's screaming now and it's shrill enough to cut through everything else. Everyone's looking now, air rifles and candy floss and fishing hooks dropped. They're watching Smudge shove the cars out of the way like King Kong. They're watching Dougie and the girl jab each other with pointed fingers and using words they shouldn't. They're watching Smudge grab the girl's head in one giant palm and push her in a way that her body and pigtailed have to catch up. They're watching a dodgem interrupt her trajectory and send her and the crying baby flying before they're separated midair. They both lie facedown on the cold copper floor as miniature rush hour traffic darts between them.

The crowd covers every inch of the scene. All I can see is the top of Smudge's misshapen head and the rods from the cars moving in every direction. I see Carol abandon her post and I run over too. They're all shouting now. It's all shouting and bells and sirens and overlapping oldies from all the rides. The kind of sound soup that makes you dizzy. Then a grinding sound. Mechanism meets flesh. Like a melon in a blender. The shouting turns to gasps. One of the rods stops and rattles violently in place. The punters rush in and converge at one point. Smudge's head sinks into the crowd, arms flying up like they're tearing chunks out of him. Dougie slips out with a split lip. Carol's crying. Dad's nowhere to be found.

It's been a week and I can't sleep. We skipped town early that night. We packed down in a hurry and left the dodgems and Smudge behind. Dad thinks me and Carol are asleep, but we can hear him. He's shouting at Dougie. He's yelling "mouth to feed." He's yelling "reputation." He's shouting about three damn kids and not a pot to piss in and where the hell is his bloody wrench? I listen until Carol's crying sends me to sleep.

I wake up to sounds that make me wonder if ghosts can haunt mobile homes. Wind whistles through the holes dotted around the trailer. Chains rattle somewhere close. I wonder if Grandma's lurking somewhere by the chemical toilet, behind the curtain. Maybe she's come back to tell me and Carol stories about our future. Maybe they're nice.

I'm keeping my eyes closed tight just in case. Maybe those people got to Smudge so bad he's dead and standing there, silent like always and watching us sleep. Folding his neck down so his head doesn't scrape the roof. I'm sure I can feel his dull eyes burrow into my neck. I try to wake Carol up so we can

talk until the haunting is gone. I look over to her bed and she's not there. I'm sinking into the bed. She did it. She's gone. Like uncle Derek, she's got herself a home and a job and a kid and a life. She's laughing by a fireplace, surrounded by books. I bet she's got a dog too. She asked for a dog every birthday and Christmas until she learned to stop. Until they were days like any other, and the family doesn't stop needing money just because. I bet she's sitting there with a puppy on her lap right now, laughing at me. Laughing at me in this trailer with sheets that don't get cleaned, shivering in the cold with Smudge or Grandma waiting there behind the curtain.

I can't do this without her. Dad and Dougie staying up late and smoking and yelling, and me here in the trailer on my own like this. I know this will be my fault. I bet Carol's howling. I worry until my thoughts stop making sense and I drift.

The going's good here. No one knows what went on in the last town apart from us. A local's filling in for Smudge. They're joking with the punters and smiling. They don't know there's no breaks or that they won't get paid. I'm on the candy floss stand. Dad's working the magic carpet and Dougie's on the ghost train. Carol's made up, she's back on the donkeys. I'd never been so pleased to see anyone. Lying there snoring, dribbling on her pillow. Engineer manuals piled up next to her bed, black oil all over the pages, staining her fingers.

This morning I'd woken up, sun backlighting my eyelids. Waking up to nothing but red. That point of first stirring when you can't remember the dream or your life and find a lost comfort in belonging to neither. Then I remembered Carol in her nice big house and felt the hole in my stomach and the incoming storm that would be my day. That would be all the days. Then I heard her snoring and felt like I'd heard an angel singing.

Carol's spoiling the donkeys rotten. Dad'll have to do a carrot run tomorrow, and he's watching from his spot like bad weather. Dougie's lowering safety bars and counting out change even colder than usual. The last few days it's been like there's an itch he can't scratch and everything he says is short. He doesn't want to unhook the air rifles or throw rocks anymore. I only hear him talk when it's late and him and Dad are clinking bottles.

Dad's got quite a queue for the magic carpet. The punters are being thrown into the air in large circular swings, throwing their arms at the peak and screaming. Dad's taking the kind of money that folds as he lines up the next batch. It's funny, what ride gets the most attention in what town.

I swear the generators are humming louder than usual. They're resting just under the usual wails of everything else. Dad's unloading the batch and showing the new punters to their seats. His pockets are bulging with notes, and he looks cheery for the first time since Smudge got swallowed by all those hands. The hydraulic safety bars are going down, and they're all smiling at each other in suspense. The magic carpet slowly starts its circular motion just as I'm making a new stick for a punter with a giggling little boy. His jacket's

so big on him he's the shape of a stick man even when he puts his arms down.

I stir the stick in a circle and turn the pink ghost into food. The motor's giving me more grief than usual. More forceful, more frantic. The kid's looking at me as baffled as every kid that age looks at everything. The stick's rattling against the rotor. It's like I'm a rookie. It's like I haven't been doing this since forever. Making little cups of it for Carol when she was still waddling and drooling like Smudge used to. The mother's looking at me concerned. The rotor's getting faster and the stick rattles violently against the metal rim.

The generator's getting louder. It's rising from a hum to a growl. I smell fire. The rotor spins until it gets loose and turns the circle into a spasming oval. The heating filament is turning the pink sugary mist into a black bubbling mass. The ghost becomes burning flesh and grips the gurning rotor. Sound booms from every direction. The other generators are heating up too.

The mother's looking at me horrified. She's grabbing the kid fiercely by the wrist and marching him off. His cries are smothered by the growling generators, kicking off a daunting heat right along with the candy floss machine. The screams from the magic carpet sound more real than usual. Through the smoking bog of the sugary burn victim, I see it's swinging more wildly. Dad's head is tilted up and he's watching. He never watches.

The hydraulics fail and the safety bars bolt up. They're all screaming and gripping on to the metal pipes above their heads. Another crowd is forming now. Everyone screams on their behalf. I try to catch Carol's eye. She's getting all the kids off the donkeys in a hurry and waving her arms at the parents. A few rag doll shapes are flung into the air and crash into various attractions or scraps of grass. One woman sinks through the tarp roof of the duckies and splashes among them, hooks and all. The crowd disperses into small herds rushing back and forth between the flailing bodies flung in every direction.

A loud screeching bite cuts through the sound of the screams and the generators. One of the arms of the magic carpet gives out, and one maniacal arm swings the remaining punters around like a clacker. It hammers the seats down into the metal floor and swings out again. Now the bystanders are getting flung too. The platform's digging into the ground.

Dougie looks at me with the same face as the cartoon ghosts behind him. He's about to run over to Dad when a clatter and shriek comes from inside the ghost train. The side with the picture of the giant werewolf vomits out a series of mangled cars and limbs. They spill out on the ground and vague human shapes try to crawl out from their seats.

Dougie stands over the writhing pile. He looks like he's trying to work out which hand to grab and who it might even belong to. The generators amp up again, and I'm glad I'm on candy floss duty. Carol's rounding up the donkeys and unlocking the gate. The generator by the Ferris wheel lets out a painful gargle before it bursts into flames. The motor shows some mercy and slows down. Then one of the gondolas screeches before hurtling to the ground. It's

part buried. Like a bomb in a garden. It's all screams and chaos and blurs now. The Waltzer's flinging kids and parents, the metallic floor spinning into a silver fog. The locals at its center can't do anything but scream along. I can't see Dad or Dougie now. It's all a mist of bobbing heads tearing themselves to shreds.

Carol's got all the donkeys lined up now. She mounts the youngest and calls back to the others. She's kicking her heels in and yelling. They're bursting through the gate and parting the sea of angry faces. She cuts a thick line through them and bolts. She's waving as she passes. She's making her way to the main road. Her head bobs among the shrinking row of tails and hooves. And then she's nothing at all.

I bet she's howling.

Uncle Abner's Grains

S.B. Borgersen

"I'm taking you to Uncle Abner," said Ma. She carried me across the hauling road, then down the overgrown track to Uncle Abner's place by the river. Bushes scratching, black flies nipping—all adding to my agony.

I'd fallen from the large maple tree in the backyard. I was up the tree in the hopes of sighting the famous prize-winning racing schooner, the Bluenose, out in the bay. There'd been a rumour she would pass this way on this day, and I'd set my heart on seeing her.

And there she was. Already anchoring in the bay, sadly not in full sail. I mean, I was just a boy and didn't know then, that full sail was for out there racing across the ocean, not when in the bay at anchor. But I could see the main mast. Over a hundred feet high. Flags flying. The crew waved, I'm sure at me, out on the end of the topmost branch of our old maple.

I hooted. "Come and see, Ma. Come and see the big boat." That was when I fell. Slammed into the ground face-down. I thought I was dead. Couldn't breathe. Couldn't move. Heck, I couldn't even open my eyes. I'd never known pain like it. Getting the strap at school was a mere tickle compared to this.

Ma came out, calm, quiet. She tried to lift me. Gently. Ma was a tiny woman with no flesh on her at all. Slender, I think you would call it now. But then she was just plain skin and bone. She must've had muscle—the tin bath of wet washing she lugged out to the line every day I know weighed a ton. This was the washing she took in to earn a few dollars because we had no idea when Pops would be back from working on Baffin Island. That's the far north.

The dollars and cents she earned were what fed us. Not sure about herself, Ma was always last to put her plate on the table. Always last to sit down. Always with a smile and a twinkle in her blue-grey eyes. "Let's eat then," she'd say.

I was in agony but starting to come around by the time she got me to Uncle Abner's. I was still having trouble breathing, still feeling my heart banging in my chest, still wondering if I would go to heaven or hell. But this felt like hell, so maybe...

Ma had to stoop to get in through Uncle Abner's back kitchen door. I could feel her breath going in and out as she held me tighter against her chest.

"C'mon in," said the soft voice of Uncle Abner.

“Yes,” said another voice, sounding more like the morning chatter of the chickadees,

“C’mon in Millie, coffee’s on.”

It was Aunt Effie. Always had coffee on, or fresh-from-the-oven barley bread, or Blueberry Grunt. That was always my favourite of all. If things had been normal, my mouth would be watering for sure.

But it wasn’t normal. I’d slammed into the ground and killed myself out cold. And Ma had come to Uncle Abner’s for him to bring me back to life.

He slapped their big pine table. Aunt Effie must have swiftly gathered up the coffee pot and cups, the oil lamps, and the hooked rug she was working on. “Lay the boy here,” said Uncle Abner.

The sun shone through the cracks in Uncle Abner’s tin roof. Like the sun’s rays shining behind Jesus in my Sunday School book. So I thought maybe heaven was really on the cards for me. I couldn’t see Jesus yet but I could smell fresh bread, which I thought was probably just as good. I could hear them talking, more of a whispering, like the tall grasses down in the swamp in the fall of the year as things start to crisp up and turn all shades of reds and browns. Rustling in the breeze.

Next thing I heard was a rattling, and I froze. Did Uncle Abner, so well known for his cures, use snakes to heal people?

They told me later what it was, this was after I’d got up from the table and eaten barley bread with homemade partridgeberry jam and walked home with Ma, helping her carry a basket of fresh dug potatoes from Aunt Effie’s garden.

Don’t get me wrong, I still hurt from the fall. I still ached in every poor bone in my body. But knowing I hadn’t gone to live with Jesus yet made me feel a whole heap better. I know I had a lucky escape because if Pops had been home from the far north, he’d have given me a leatherin’ for being right up that tree in the first place and causing Ma all the heartache.

We never did tell him. Ma and me kept a lot from him in those days; how we’d pick and sell berries at the roadside for twenty-five cents a quart. How I ran errands for folks in our lane. If they wanted smokes from the store I’d get his old bike out and pedal over the rocks and stumps and bring them back a pack of ten. They’d give me one for going. Lots of things like that. It didn’t feel like work.

Ma and me picking berries was the best though. We’d sit side by side and talk. Or not talk. Just listen to the quiet together, or the happy thrum of the hummingbirds, or the faint twitter of other families further out in the blueberry pasture doing the same.

One day we never did forget was the day we were out picking and Ma needed to stop for a pee. She found a spot behind an Indian pear tree and squatted. Her yells and screams you could have heard across the land. It turned out Ma had peed on an ants’ nest. A big ants’ nest. And they all went crazy and bit Ma, big time, for what she’d done to them.



It was a story that stayed with the family, a story to be told in the long winter evenings sitting in the kitchen by the wood stove, regaling tales of the “Do you remember when...” kind of thing. There were never enough chairs for everyone to sit; I often found myself under the kitchen table looking at all the legs. Many folks were already in their nightclothes by that time of the night.

The call would go out that Ma had made pies and the folks would get up from their beds and come in to gather around our kitchen table. I could mention who had varicose veins and who had ingrown toenails. But that would be telling.

Did I forget to tell you about Uncle Abner's rattling? I suppose I should explain more. He was known in the area for being able to cure things. From toothaches to warts. They'd probably call him a quack now, but back then Uncle Abner was all we had.

So there I was, stretched out on the big scrubbed pine table with the sun's rays belonging to Jesus shining down on me, when the rattling began. Uncle Abner had a handful of grains—what kind of grains I never found out, but hard dried grains that rattled. He shook them in his big hands, much like someone shaking a pair of dice, and threw them down hard on the table.

Ma told me the grains began dancing. Jumping up and down like jumping beans. And Uncle Abner watched them and said, “All is well. There be no bones broke, just bad bruising.” He was right. I got my breath back in the days that followed and I believed in him from then on. Aunt Effie, too. After Uncle Abner died, many years later, I took my own kids with their ailments to see Aunt Effie, who knew which herbs could cure anything from a cold to a spider bite and why certain people should not look at the full moon wearing green.

She made some kind of tincture she gave out in tiny jars. Putrid smelling stuff, but it sure gave you a good night's sleep if you put it on the sole of your shoe an hour before bedtime. She also never faltered from her theory that tying knots at intervals along a length of black thread—only black would do—was good for warts. The story goes she had a still in the woods and made some kind of liquor from birchbark. Apparently a small glass every night before bed got rid of arthritis, among other things.

Their granite headstones stand, side by side, on a little rise in the river-side cemetery. Aunt Effie lived to be a hundred and nine. Never once had a headache. Never once saw a doctor. On her stone is carved a sheaf of barley. There are wild blueberry bushes growing beside her grave. You can't really transplant wild blueberries. We always knew the blueberries found her.

Uncle Abner passed on just a few years before Aunt Effie; they reckoned he was around hundred and one, although no one ever really knew how old he was. I don't think he did either. There is a coiled snake engraved on his stone, and I've often wondered if it was a rattlesnake. The inscription beneath

reads, *Abner Gladstone McKinnon, lover of the wilderness, curer of all ills and keeper of everyone's secrets.*

On his grave there are little heaps of grains—those hard rattly grains I've never forgotten. And I wonder if, one day, they will jump up and down, like they once did for me, and bring Uncle Abner back to us.

Ace Boggess is author of six books of poetry, including *Escape Envy* (Brick Road Poetry Press, 2021), *I Have Lost the Art of Dreaming It So*, and *The Prisoners*. His writing has appeared in Michigan Quarterly Review, Notre Dame Review, Harvard Review, Mid-American Review, and other journals. An ex-con, he lives in Charleston, West Virginia, where he writes and tries to stay out of trouble.

Susan Barry-Schulz grew up just outside of Buffalo, New York. She is a licensed physical therapist living with a chronic illness and an advocate for mental health awareness and reducing stigma in IBD. Her poetry has appeared in The Wild World, New Verse News, SWWIM, Barrelhouse online, Nightingale & Sparrow, Shooter Literary Magazine, Kissing Dynamite, Bending Genres, Feral, Quartet, and elsewhere.

S.B. Borgersen is a Canadian author and poet originally from England. She shares her Nova Scotia home with her patient husband and three rowdy but lovable dogs. Her favoured genres are micro-fiction, flash fiction, and poetry. She is published internationally in literary journals and anthologies. In 2021, the following were published: *Fishermen's Fingers* (novella), "While the Kettle Boils" (micro-fiction), and *Of Daisies and Dead Violins* (collected poems). *Eva* (novella), will be released in May 2022. In 2023, another collection of short stories is scheduled for publication. Her publisher is Unsolicited Press. Sue is a member of The Society of Authors, The Writers Federation of Nova Scotia, and the international writing group, Pens Around the World. You can learn more about Sue at [WWW.SUEBORGENSEN.COM](http://www.sueborgersen.com).

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Dr. Paula Aamli is a Humanities graduate, writer, and poet, with a day job in financial services. Her thesis, "Working through climate grief: A poetic inquiry," explores individual and institutional responses to the emerging climate crisis, using arts-based research and poetry. Paula has had poems published, or selected for future publication, in The Lindenwood Review, The Tiger Moth Review, FreezeRay Poetry, and Paddler Press, among others. One of Paula's poems in Paddler Press was selected for their Pushcart Prize nominations in 2021.

Riley Manning lives and writes in Tupelo, Mississippi. His work has been published in Bridge Eight, Hobart Pulp, Rejection Letters, and elsewhere.

Jake Williams spends his days working in television and his evenings reading, writing, and procrastinating. His work also appears in Orchid's Lantern. Raised in Somerset, England, he now resides in London. You can follow him on Twitter at @JAKEWILLIAMSPEN

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L. Malik is a diasporic settler and writer in Adobigok, traditional land of Indigenous communities that include the Anishinaabe, the Seneca and Mohawk Haudenosaunee, and Wendat.

Her writing has been published in Contemporary Verse 2, Canthus, The New Quarterly, Ricepaper Magazine, Festival of Literary Diversity (FOLD), Qwerty, Room Magazine, Sukoon (Arab arts and literature), The Bangalore Review, and Open City Documentary Festival. Her essays have been long-listed for four different creative non-fiction contests (Even Magazine, 2016; Humber Literary Review, 2020; Fiddlehead, 2020; Room Magazine, 2021) and her first volume of poetry is forthcoming with Book*Hug Press. L. Malik was a fellow at the Banff Centre for Creative Arts in 2021 for her novel-in-progress, for which she has received funding from the Canada Council for the Arts.

Joshua Ewalt is an Assistant Professor of Communication and Media Studies at Northern Michigan University. He received his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. His work explores human beings' relationship with place through academic prose and creative fiction.

Glen A. Mazis taught philosophy for decades at Penn State Harrisburg, retiring in 2020. He has published more than ninety poems in literary journals, including Rosebud, The North American Review, Sou'wester, Spoon River Poetry Review, Willow Review, Atlanta Review, Reed Magazine, and Asheville Poetry Review. Additionally, he has published the collection, *The River Bends in Time* (Anaphora Literary Press, 2012), a chapbook, *The Body Is a Dancing Star* (Orchard Street Press, 2020), and *Bodies of Space and Time* (currently in press with Kelsay Books). He has published five philosophy books with the most recent being, *Merleau-Ponty and the Face of the World: Silence, Ethics, Imagination and Poetic Ontology* (SUNY Press, 2016). He is the 2019 winner of the Malovrh-Fenlon Poetry Prize (Orchard Street national contest).

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