ARCHETYPE

A LITERARY JOURNAL

Issue Two

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"…but Nature, whose sweet rains fall on unjust and just alike, will have clefts in the rocks where I may hide, and secret valleys in whose silence I may weep undisturbed. She will hang the night with stars so that I may walk abroad in the darkness without stumbling, and send the wind over my footprints so that none may track me to my hurt: she will cleanse me in great waters, and with bitter herbs make me whole."

– Oscar Wilde, De Profundis

Water is wet. That's the beginning of the story. It's poured into a glass, boiled in a pot, sucked out of the earth, and contained in a system of pipes. It dips and runs and floods. It rushes in, it rolls out. When you're on a beach, you hear the sea whisper—shiny, blue—and you listen for something. You stand there forever, but you never hear a word. Maybe it will take years, you think, and then you leave, the trance broken. That is how you encounter water.

Water is not just, in its most literal sense, a liquid. Water cleanses. It represents life and fertility. The ocean reminds us of our insignificance and mirrors our psyches—deep, endless, and subterranean. A river is the ebb and flow of time. The lake is a mirror and a mystery. Floods are essentially destructive, but they also signify ablution and re-birth. We are "flooded" by overwhelming feelings, of love, of erotic passion, of anger, of fear.

To compress all these endless associations into one word is to wish for understanding. To make sense of everything. In *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Annie Dillard says, "What have we been doing all these centuries but trying to call God back to the mountain, or, failing that, raise a peep out of anything that isn't us?"

We're trying to pull meaning out of anything we can find. When you read a book, you rarely interpret it as the author intended it. You read it through your own lens, through your own associations that have come from your own experiences. As you read this issue, you'll likely draw your own conclusions—your own associations.

All these endless associations...We'll leave it at that. We've likely already said too much.

Ali Taha and Melissa Barrientos

A Muse, the Orchard

Ariel K. Moniz

Reaching, stretching those supple summer muscles
designed by long, generous hours in the sun.
Into the nest of fluttering leaves,
you pull down a fruit, a small sun
so perfect in your hand it stings me.

I'm reminded of the myth, and the hero
who does not think twice about taking
what and who it is he wants.

How it must surely cause a heart to molder
to be so venerated and so flawed,
to be so brutal and so memorialized.

How saccharine, this moment,
how gentle the gasping breeze.
How soft as early morning light it is for us
to stand here in the shade and think nothing
of journeys or grandiose tasks,

other than cutting the supple flesh,
spitting out the stony seeds,
and reaching, stretching upwards
for another one.

Arcosanti

Selen Ozturk

> *"Form follows function' is a planetary lie."*
> **– Paolo Soleri,** *Arcology*

In a *Rolling Stone* feature on the architect Paolo Soleri, Thomas Albright describes architecture as a compromise between prostitution and dictatorship, between developers plying drafts to bidders and visionaries plying societies by their schemes. Arcosanti welds Soleri to the latter. Arcosanti is a city planned in an unwieldy book (fourteen inches tall and forty-eight inches opened) titled *Arcology: The City in the Image of Man*. "Arcology" denotes a blend of architecture and ecology for dense, low-impact human habitation.

The book begins with the epigraph: "This book is about miniaturization." Arteries and breath span the distance between oxygen and blood, mouths and food between sweat and waste, people between thoughts and things. The city is a contraction of this distance, or it is a death knell. For Soleri, an architect who prioritizes forms above the systems of movement between them is sure to build what is eventually quaint or ruined. Energy is the stuff of cities, the cause for their boom and ruin; the static is secondary. As neural pathways iterate a compact matrix in the brain, so does life in Soleri's Arcosanti. Practically, this means that no commute exceeds five minutes. Automotive forms alienate life from itself. To compress within these—greener cars or cleaner sprawl—is to wreak "a better form of wrongness." While Soleri's terms are baldly neologistic and benignly futurist, his aim is clear: shelter which precludes ruin—life unsevered from its land.

This is unremarkable with a half-century of hindsight. However airy Soleri's idea of meaningful life may be, it is not to be found in a suburb. It is his distinction to have wrested the dream from the page in Arcosanti, a utopian city in a 4,000-acre land preserve 3,700 feet high. It spans a deliberate and mere 15 acres. It bears in equal measure the hardscaped communal arteries of an Italian hill town and Soleri's ex-mentor Frank Lloyd Wright's clear meld of inner and outside. For years I could make nothing of it, the practiced rigor of this curving and jutting mass of concrete and cypress. The gall to build paradise upon a lava-rock mesa 70 miles north of Phoenix. About 150 volunteers broke ground during a five-week construction workshop in 1970; 8,000 have since. *Newsweek* declared it "the most important experiment undertaken in our lifetime." Soleri cast concrete from silt—a city hewn from its land.

Soleri was born in 1919. In 1946, he earned a Ph.D. at Turin Polytechnic. After World War II, he apprenticed himself to the architect Frank Lloyd Wright at Wright's Arizona desert laboratory, Taliesin West. Post-war anti-urbanism surprised Soleri, given that civilization was urbanization, a movement from the tribal to the metropolitan. No American city was urban in this sense, dependent upon expansive isolation as they were. Soleri was Wright's most critically outspoken student during his time at Taliesin. Wright's Broadacre City was the final horror. The proto-suburban utopia planned the freedom afforded by the car to metastatic extremes. In the blueprint, pedestrians wandered paved and listless one-acre plots. For Soleri, this was no freedom at all. The very form of suburbia barred the life which cities reared. Accordingly, the obdurate Wright ousted Soleri by 1949.

He found a patron—Nora Woods—and planned for her a dome of rocks and war surplus. He stripped to his skivvies and built it. Woods' daughter Colly visited; she married Soleri by year's end. In 1956, they bought five tumbledown acres in Scottsdale and christened it Cosanti, meaning "before form." He worked there for the rest of his life, drafting butcher paper and selling bells. His plans drew notice. The architecture critic Ada Huxtable called them "some of the most spectacularly sensitive and superbly visionary drawings that any century has known." Disciples flocked. The Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., exhibited his work in 1970; a hundred thousand people came to visit over two months. He made lecture circuits in the fashion of a less messianic Buckminster Fuller. Soleri insisted that this architect, preaching a limitless and cultureless world, reduced his votaries to "naked apes." If life was to be both meaningful and civil, frugality was to generate form and culture to relate to its inhabitants.

Soleri published *Arcology* in 1969. The art historian Sibyl Moholy-Nagy said that it "touched every aspect of human existence, defying summation." The pop artist Peter Blake had "never seen a book on architecture or urban design that bothered [him] as much as this one." Soleri used the analogy of an elephant and a mouse: though one is 10,000 times larger, it uses 1,000 times the energy. A form should not be conceived in terms of its units but its function. In the book, there are thirty plans, from Arcosanti I (population 1,500; seven acres) to Babelnoah (population six million, 18,000 acres). The World Trade Center would not have pillared it. Life set one mile high renders the car ridiculous; it has nowhere to go. Nor does density bar the unmarred open: a city compressed to Soleri's degree alone yields wilderness so close at hand.

There is a consciousness which density rears. Soleri called it the noosphere, a human planetary force distinguished from biological processes by its cognitive character. He borrowed from the Jesuit priest and scientist Teilhard du Chardin: in all the world, intelligence alone resists entropy. As communication spreads, it compresses toward an "omega point." This represents a universal unification; for Teilhard, God. For Soleri, religion is religare—bonding on the subatomic and social scale—or an alienating substitute. The rational

transcending of form is the condition of a meaningful life. Mind and matter don't oppose but co-mingle. Organization *is* consciousness. It is an essentially urban phenomenon. Soleri urged, half-glib, half-grave: "Work hard, play hard, Teilhard."

He intended to house 5,000 people; there are currently eighty. Ground broke in 1970. Volunteers attending construction workshops first built a psychedelic Hooverville at the base of the hill where the city stands, a brute smattering of eight by eight foot cubes now joined by yurts and commons. Then the vaults. Each arches sixty feet toward the other from north and south. Vertebral windchimes hang. Then two pneumatic apses; one is a ceramic studio, the other a foundry. Bell sales fund the city. For a half-century, yippies in wife-beaters and Carhartt trousers have sanded and leveled, welded and poured. Colly ran the town. She died in 1982. Soleri, now beside her, had tucked her in a grave visible from his studio. He built an amphitheater in her name.

More housing was built as more people came, then a craft building,

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"The world the city eluded—a grid at once too rote and fractured—verges upon it once more. The past and future are spaceless but for relics half-solid and plans half-dreamt. Space is the reality. Social coherence is as much a matter of its partitioning as social control."

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archives, and commons. A 75-foot pool. Soleri swam daily. At his Scottsdale studio, Cosanti, he built its twin, canopied with cast concrete and telephone poles. Soon, visitors came not to build but to study the place. As the late-seventies ecological hangover relegated to eighties science-fiction, the population lapsed to twenty-five. With the environmentalist resurgence of the nineties, it grew larger and more transient. Building resumed; upward, not out.

Through it all was the running meld of organic architecture. High complexity need not call for high technology. There is no central air or heating. Buildings form an apse-effect, whereby the quarter-sphere of an apse creates a microclimate allowing year-round outdoor work. The shades curve in summer when the sun molders high. The bowl sears in winter when the low sun floods the blowing winds. Furnace exhaust heats through concrete sinks, greenhouse air through duct tunnels. A skylight lines the studio lab. It was the slated gate to Arcosanti; visitors would come through a vaguely Biblical bazaar of welders, carpenters, and merchants and out to open land and air: compression and release (again, Wright's terms).

Basalt insulates and cools Arcosanti. It allowed for simultaneous

construction (no need for broad footing) and left arable land as far as the eye could see. All of life which a city can offer is a few minutes' reach, and nearly just as near—a mile, a half, a quarter—is earth on which none have left a living trace. But here, around, a stretch of green. It is both bone-dry and densely verdant. Tenders work with the elders of a local Hopi tribe to flood-irrigate dry corn. The farm is predictably organic: rye crops choke weeds and bar bugs. Mesquite sprawls, as impervious to the elements as green life can be. Gaps are hedged with paulownia, the quickest-growing hardwood in the world. Olive, fig, and cypress line the paths and cool the people, earth, and air. The olives are picked each fall and pressed into oil at a nearby mill. Through the whole, a frail but self-held play of heat and density.

As the forms seem to be outcrops of the land around, the land seems to take up the form. Here, too, Wright's influence is clear: even in his mildest houses, the Usonians, he dropped glass walls into flower beds. The outside turns into one's dwelling, and one's dwelling turns toward the land. Native plants range and scrub; wall- and sloped-roof-gardens warm, waft, and sweeten the air within. Soleri recognized that built form serves the constant need of flesh; there is no better model than the "life-giving and cleansing" matrix of arteries and veins. He insisted that we need only "leave the land to do what it must do to nourish us all." But these are plains flat enough to scrape and dry enough to starve without the most neurotic of farmers. Arcosanti receives fifteen inches of annual rain; a desert by any other name would be just as dry. The fields are soused in purified greywater.

There are no cars, and thus no roads or streets. They bar civic life. The suburbs are not, for Soleri as they were for Wright, a matter of architecture but of storage; a freedom of stasis between units, cars, and cubicles. Half of the average American city's infrastructure is devoted to the car: parking garages, lots, arterial roads, grids, home garages. Community becomes a matter of outcome and sprawl. The poorest are kept to privation tolerable enough to ignore, the richest, to consumption autonomous enough to hide. Human communication without human presence is, for Soleri, a catastrophic fact. In a pedestrian city, community becomes the becoming itself, a continually and collectively iterative conversation. Space and time compress, cooperation inflames. One imagines that eighty people under what is effectively one roof learn nothing more rapidly than conflict resolution.

Arcosanti is still bone-worn curves and bare earth, still the bright dazed glint and chime of bells, still a molten hour in the dim shade where the sun spells out, still a cool hour in the clean gaps where the breeze steals in. The "radiant garden city beautiful" of old is as neat on paper as it is a choresome sprawl to walk. Life in urban numbers on a human scale calls for great heights. Soleri's master plan is five percent complete. It calls for twenty-five-story towers. A reporter quipped matter-of-factly that, "If this was [sic] China, you could probably complete Arcosanti in about a year." The city is still bootstrapped by

workshops, tourists, lectures, and bells. It is independent neither with respect to food, nor publishing, nor money. There are enough cars for some to make the weekly schlep to Phoenix to pick up food, drop off bells, and grab a beer. Soleri remained aloof: "I only build the instrument; others must make the music." He thought utopia a stupid notion—that to dream a world and build it somehow legitimizes its value.

After Soleri's retirement in 2012, a man named Jeff Stein led the Cosanti Foundation. He lives above the Office of Design; his commute is a seven-rung ladder. He makes twice the average salary at Arcosanti (minimum wage). He brought talk of bakeries and retirement towers, privation and possibility. The how and when were deferred to the county planning department. There was an operating budget of less than $1 million, a tenth of that required to wrest from a dozen masses a living city. Still, it saw Betty Freidan, Phillip Johnson, and Jackson Browne. Jerry Brown came and conceived the California Urban Initiative, which sought to increase the sustainability of city populations. Then the English TV crews, then the Japanese. They always begin with: "We are here in the desert where a small group of people are reinventing the city."

Soleri, when asked whether Arcosanti met its aim, said, "Don't be silly." Stein deemed it the world's most beautiful construction site. The fact that the world had not taken to Soleri's vision no more led this breezy prophet to compromise; he'd suggest sincerely that all enquirers and detractors build their own arcology. But sculptors and scientists may wrest their dreams with their own hands. An architect who does not sell his dreams to investors and tycoons merely draws curiosity.

Soleri wrote that the urban effect in its simplest form was a virus. Albright wrote with eerie insistency that Arcosanti had the efficiency of a flu: "How do you send the kids outside to play? What happens when there's an epidemic?" As it turns out, little in the way of people and much in the way of the whole, locals ceased events, recorded no cases, and continued pouring concrete, welding steel, and stacking desert stones. The COVID-19 pandemic spurred a change more in kind than in degree. One perversely practical and demonically short-sighted columnist on the Arcosanti website wrote that if only Apple or Facebook had built arcologies, "they could have continued operation until they ran into supplier problems […] the only way to prevent the threat from becoming catastrophic is to eliminate the ways people catch it, and you can't do that unless the entire environment is contained and controlled."

The world the city eluded—a grid at once too rote and fractured—verges upon it once more. The past and future are spaceless but for relics half-solid and plans half-dreamt. Space is the reality. Social coherence is as much a matter of its partitioning as social control. All which differentiates them here is the care, the *religare* that people have for the forms in which they dwell. On the one hand, if it had not stuck to the plan, it would not be Arcosanti: still the bells, still the informal efficiency, still the fifteen acres. On the other, predictability

(as far as utopias go) is out of the question for the next half-century.

All the certainty Stein admits is that it could have been worse. At times he makes a glib analogy to the slow food movement; at others, he admits that architecture is not in the business of sustaining at all. To build is to scrape life from a patch of earth and set life to dead matter. Forget development; succession at Taliesin has dragged on since Wright's death in 1959. Accordingly, I've heard no more realistic prediction of Arcosanti's course than that of Jeffrey Grip, the Wright Foundation chairman: the city could crystallize as a museum, consolidate as an archive, or adjust to an increasingly unknown and fatal market.

Stein, when asked of the worst case, said, "You're looking at it." He meant it optimistically. There is no mortgage. All is paid for. Half of American energy use fuels the construction and maintenance of buildings; Arcosanti uses a sixth of that used by institutions of its size. It is a utopia far more practical than, say, the 460,000 empty houses in Arizona. Green intentions on an inhuman scale yield brown results.

But it is one thing to describe utopia and quite another to live in it. After a half-century, the concrete has a habit of flaking onto your bed. It is to Arcosanti's credit that there is no one ideology motivating residents, as in most other intentional communities. A secretary, when questioned as to why she came, cited a need to live in something larger than herself. She was the oldest person there, short of Soleri. Every resident, when asked, stressed one point: in school, everyone was urging the same thing and *doing* nothing about it. Here was someone doing something, however much one must give up for it. Soleri himself seemed not to know. He insisted at some times that to house a city under one roof does not require a revolution, and at others that it would require an evolution in the species.

In any case, he did not see it as a giving up but a freeing up, streamlining what life may be. Better put, "the virtue of leanness is eventually worthiness": it is by paring one's options—reuse over consumption, community over planetary hermitage—that one values them. But to compress human life without killing its mundane and fatal aspects is to amplify them. Most are *products* of density—disease, pollution, distraction. Most planned solutions on grand scales tend toward social control. Does Arcosanti not literally concretize the most tiresome bits of urban life? Is this arcology or bare life living off the corpse of its excess? If I were not more sympathetic than Albright, I would not be writing; still, I have not found that we can hold a human connection to a smaller space and time without doing the same of agitation.

Even granted that Soleri allows (in Albright's terms) "anarchists, atavists, and barbarians" the "option" to live in the country, I'm most struck by what Arcosanti overlooks: privacy without confinement. Nor is there allowance for children: At last count, the city housed four. A visitor, seeing the bells and barrenness, couldn't

help but recall a Shaker village. Albright wondered whether Arcosanti was not "a subtle Roman Catholic conspiracy to come up with an alternative to birth control." I do not believe, as he does, that architecture is too important to be left to architects, but thus far, no one has exempted himself from the final say of commerce. I have never known an attempt to condense life that did not project its most oppressive attributes alongside its holiest. I write only wanting to prove myself wrong. Fifty thousand come to Arcosanti yearly. It begins at the end of a two-mile washboard road. Perhaps this is why everyone takes this lapidary city as a matter of course: it stands at the point where all alternatives have waned.

However naive this opposition of salvation and ruin may have seemed in the early 1970s, it seems more justified with each passing year, as spaces exempt from natural disaster and collective rancor wane vanishingly few. Hope of salvation grows familiar as more realistic mitigation grows less viable with time. Barring Vegas, I have never enjoyed the desert. I should not like to live in a city with every man, woman, and child within five minutes' reach, let alone in Arizona. But the more we cannot sustain our Arcosantis without recourse to apocalypse-alleviation workshops and the patronage of golf-shy retirees, the less there remains for us but desert. This is no mere turn of phrase: a third of the world's deserts have formed since 1900.

I always considered that Soleri, far more than Wright, resembled the seminal Wright figure, Howard Roark—the same protégé exiled by his mentor, the same upstart draftsman getting with the daughter of a loaded patron during a slapdash construction job in the sticks. He would sooner implode a plan than see it serve the world it spurns. Arcosanti's survival now does not hang upon its function—it works so well that gawkers come from the world over. The problem is another: the city survived to a point where it is not enough to live off the world at hand, a point at which the sprawling Phoenixes of the world seem more unreal than their exiles. "The main fault is me," Soleri confessed. "I don't have the gift of proselytizing."

As usual, he was half-shrewd. Four years after his death and two decades after informing his inner circle to no effect, his daughter Daniela published an open letter detailing the attempted rape and monthly sexual abuse that he forced upon her as a teenager. She'd rendered them in her letter of resignation from the Cosanti Foundation six years prior; a colleague wrote that he was "disappointed in everyone." Given that he later eulogized Soleri, it seems unclear whether he was more disappointed that the sexual abuse occurred or that it was voiced.

The news was neither shocking nor wanted; Soleri was a sprightly lecher well into his 80s. He would publish flyers informing "Women age over twenty-one" that any "interested in modeling for one or two sittings with Paolo Soleri will get one sketch of themselves free." A sixty-two-year-old

Margie Goldsmith recalled studying the corn on Soleri's left foot as he asked her for "the privilege of kissing her nipples." He drew her breasts like upturned bells. She ran out in fright and bestowed Soleri with the fraught honour of spawning the first moment in her life wherein she didn't feel ashamed about her body. A perfect one, after all, wouldn't have made for an interesting sketch.

After one month and many attempts to contact her, the Cosanti Foundation

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"Soleri was dire in the short-term and rosy in the long. 'From dust we come,' he stressed to skeptics. Perhaps the counterpart is not so much a matter of omission but optimism: to dust we go."

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stated that they stood "firmly with Daniela." Daniela replied that it was a strange time to talk about standing firmly. When the Board first learned of Soleri's actions in 2011, they retired him. Daniela cut relations. The life drawings ceased. Everyone was silent, and no one was relieved. They resolved to praise the art, not the artist. Daniela held that no such cleft was possible: "The same hubris and isolation that contributed to my abuse also made him, and some of his coteries, incapable of sustained engagement with the intellectual and artistic worlds they felt neglected by." Art from art was apparently a different matter: seventy percent of her father's corpus was "really valuable and helpful and realistic," and thirty percent was poison. When asked why she didn't speak sooner (one gets the idea, at this point, that this is not exactly a useful question), she held that she bore the burden "for the greater good," a star-eyed heap of graphic diagnoses of civilization's ills. When Soleri died, there were hagiographies as if the deed were null. It set his "better form of wrongness" to a hellish new meaning.

What is it, organic architecture? That we draw an image of a world, we do not poison and hope to resemble it? How to shore a form against its time? It is easier to apprehend those who brought us here, prefabs and carports along some unseeing, unending grid. Sustainability is far removed from any function that our present cities have, and predictability is far removed from our alternatives. As Soleri argues, the notion that form follows function is a planetary lie. There exists no function in search of a form—a seed is no function in search of a tree, a girl no function in search of a woman, a cell no function in search of the neurotic web of love, fear, and need which rules the mind. The form unfurls

the function; the truth is not given. Motion is the prima materia—the original material. The static is secondary.

Soleri was dire in the short-term and rosy in the long. "From dust we come," he stressed to skeptics. Perhaps the counterpart is not so much a matter of omission but optimism: to dust we go. To delude this is to hasten it. What is at stake for a nation of box-dwellers and box-watchers but life itself? The end is not, in Henry David Thoreau's terms, "a wildness no civilization can endure," but a civilization that wildness can endure. The accord of bodies with the earth beneath them is precarious and perpetual. There is a threshold of planetary ill at which the choice to live off our lives as they are will no longer be ours. We are past it. Is it that we did not resist it in time or that cities and plains cannot live long in one man's shadow?

What form, whose will, abides past entropy? Can it hold apart from history's waste? Phoenix has long metastasized Scottsdale. It creeps northward. The I-17 coils round; on a moonless night, beams and blares from 18-wheelers, yips and wails from coyotes, peals and tolls from bells. The past gnaws at the future and swells as it advances. At the heart of the desert, no one tends the balance. At the end of the tunnel, no one tends the light. Take to open air, open time, and try once again to build by human need (or build a better planetary lie).

Welcome Home

Patty Somlo

I can picture a rustic cabin, its once dark wood bleached by the sun. The small square structure with faded cedar siding sits at the edge of a black volcanic cliff, overlooking a windswept, white sand beach. Gray clouds scurry across the sky while rays of sunlight sneak through to brighten the water.

A wisp of a girl about the age of six, with sun-browned legs and arms, stands next to the cabin, watching nearly translucent walls of blue-green water rising and falling. Her fine blond hair is gathered in a high ponytail; the damp tip twirled to a narrow point. The movement and colours of the waves keep her spellbound. From her time in Hawaii, she's already learned that once a wave climbs as high as it can go, it will start to fall, first with the farthest edge curling over and then the rest of the wave following. Finally, the wave will steal a kiss from the quiet pool of water underneath.

By the time the wave wets the beach, only a thin veil of water will remain, hemmed by frothy white bubbles. As suddenly as they appear, the bubbles vanish, and the wave will begin easing its way toward the horizon.

This less crowded part of Hawaii, on the Island of Oahu's Windward Coast, is frequently stormy. From here, it's a short drive to the North Shore, the site of even more spectacular waves and renowned surfing beaches, like Ehukai, home of the famous Banzai Pipeline. On both the island's sunny Leeward side near Waikiki and here, where dark clouds scuttle across the sky, I, then a young girl, learned to surf, using my body as a board.

My parents and two other couples have rented this remote beach cabin and the ones on either side for a week-long vacation. Though I can't see them, I know the adults are inside, playing pinochle and canasta and drinking beer and Seven and Sevens. I also know that while we're here, I'll ride the waves from morning until close to dark. Sometimes, I'll catch the wave perfectly and ride it all the way to shore. Other times, I'll wait too long to duck, and the wave comes crashing down. That's when I get furiously tossed around until the wave spits me out and smacks me against the shore.

Between the breaking waves, saltwater keeps me afloat, helped by my circling legs and arms. I have no idea that I won't be spending the rest of my life riding the waves on this idyllic coast.

But less than three years from this moment, my mother will announce that

my Air Force dad has gotten orders. I'll learn that my family has to move miles from Hawaii to the Atlantic Coast.

Barely a week will pass before I'm helping my mother wrap and pack dishes and all my father's crazy knickknacks, including the bare-breasted hula dancer whose legs open and close to shatter open walnuts. Once we're done, moving men will tote the cardboard cartons we've packed, along with tall wardrobe boxes containing our clothes and furniture, including the red Naugahyde and bamboo bar, the rattan Queen's chair with its huge fan-shaped back, and the low Japanese tables, out of our duplex to a waiting van. Once the rooms are empty and my mother has vacuumed the carpet and mopped the kitchen and bathroom floors, we'll leave our small Hawaiian home for the last time.

We'll board an aircraft carrier-sized ship, the S.S. Matsonia, docked in Honolulu Harbor. After a raucous going-away party, with people shoved in my parents' stateroom and crowding the hallway outside, I'll stand on the deck and watch my parents' friends in their red, yellow, and green Aloha-wear traipse down to the dock.

The boat's horn will let out a loud, deep moan. My mother will announce that the time has come.

Standing at the railing, I'll slip the string of purple and white orchids and pale yellow plumeria over my head and cradle it in my palm. Then I'll pitch the lei as hard as I can over the railing into Honolulu Harbor.

Legend has it that if one throws their lei to sea, and it makes its way back to shore, they will one day return to Hawaii. As the boat inches away from the dock, I'll try to keep my lei in sight.

But the boat will turn, and I'll no longer be facing the shore. By the time I swivel around, my lei will be gone.

"As soon as I step out, I'm greeted by that sweet, familiar fragrance. Waves roll onto the shore, feet from a perfectly tended lawn. Everything looks like the paradise I imagined. I should be happy, but I'm not."

As the plane makes its gradual descent, I peer through the window. Ribbons of colour run through the ocean, from cobalt blue to a pale glassy green. Above the white-sand beach, rugged emerald cliffs form an imposing wall. Thirty-five years have sped by since I sailed out of Honolulu Harbor on the S.S. Matsonia after three idyllic years living on Oahu. I haven't been back to Hawaii since.

"*Aloha*. Welcome to Kahului, Maui," drifts out from the loudspeaker.

I slip into line and follow other passengers to the door. After stepping down the metal staircase, I pause, basking in the delightfully warm air. The tropical breeze licking my neck feels strangely familiar.

I try taking in my surroundings as I hurry through the terminal behind my friend Katie. Unlike airports on the mainland, this one in Kahului, Maui, has low ceilings and is open on three sides. Earth-toned wooden planters, bursting with red, yellow, and orange tropical flowers—of hibiscus, birds of paradise, and ginger—sit underneath the open windows.

Seeing those colourful flowers, an unrecognizable emotion rises in my gut. The breeze drifting through the building also has me choked up.

We claim our bags, arrange for a rental car, and head out on the highway. Katie is talking, but I tune her out, caught up in the new but somehow familiar sensations and sights. Fields crowded with chartreuse sugarcane line the road, bordered by striking strips of red dirt. The long, graceful leaves dance in the breeze.

After arriving at Katie's parents' condo, where we will spend the next week, I walk to the sliding glass door and step onto the lanai. I see that I missed the sunset. Only enough light remains to glimpse the white tips of waves rolling onto shore.

I take a deep breath and slowly let it out, happy to finally be able to relax. I take another deep breath, but this time notice a strong, sweet scent.

"What's that sweet smell?" I ask Katie.

"That's plumeria," she says, pointing to a plant in the corner.

I walk to where she pointed, lean over a yellow-white flower, and take a whiff.

"It's beautiful," I say, lightly fingering the petals.

Inhaling the sweet aroma again, I realize the scent is locked somewhere in my memory.

"I remember this," I tell Katie. "From when I was a child."

The next morning when I open my eyes, sunlight is brightening the living room. Last night, I left the curtains open to see the ocean when I woke up. I slept in the living room, on the pullout couch. Katie's in the bedroom down the hall.

After peeing and brushing my teeth, I walk out to the lanai. As soon as I step out, I'm greeted by that sweet, familiar fragrance. Waves roll onto the shore, feet from a perfectly tended lawn. Everything looks like the paradise I imagined. I should be happy, but I'm not.

I drop down to one of the white plastic lounge chairs, close my eyes, and begin focusing on my breath. In the past year and a half since starting therapy, I have been stopping to tune in like this as a way of breaking through my depression.

Scooting to the edge of the chair, I set my feet flat on the concrete lanai, unclench my fists, and rest my hands, palms up, on my thighs. Then I take a

deep breath and feel the breath flow past my throat, through my chest and belly, and into my thighs. By the time the breath reaches my feet, I've started to cry.

I soon figure out why the scent of the plumeria seems so familiar. As I quietly weep, I unravel the story in my mind exactly as I would do with my therapist, Janice. Living on Oahu, I used to string plumeria into leis before performing with my hula troupe. Now, other memories of my life in Hawaii start bubbling up, which I haven't thought about for decades.

But more than remembering, until this moment, I haven't ever grieved the loss of what was left behind when my family and I sailed away from Oahu.

I imagine my therapist asking what feels so sad. It doesn't take long to come up with a response. *I was happy then.*

A few minutes later, Katie joins me on the lanai. Her eyelids are swollen, and her face pale. Without a word, she drops into the lounge chair next to me and sighs.

"I'm sick," she announces, her voice low and raspy. "I think I might be coming down with the flu."

I rush to wipe the tears from my cheeks and the corners of my eyes. Great. I'm in Hawaii for the first time in thirty-five years, and the only person I know here has the flu.

"I'm sorry you're sick," I say instead.

"You might be on your own for a couple of days," she warns.

We sit in silence until Katie gets up and announces she's heading back to bed.

I stay on the lanai, nursing my disappointment and kicking myself for having used my savings to come. When my stomach starts to growl, I head inside.

The only way to see anything in Maui is by car. Katie rented one, but without her driving me around, I'm stuck. At forty-three, even after lessons and practice drives at home in San Francisco, I'm too scared to drive without someone in the passenger seat acting as my instructor. I don't admit this to most people, including Katie, who's not a super-close friend and lives in a different city from me.

So, instead of telling the truth, after she offered me the car, I said, "I don't want to go without you. I hate trying to find my way around a new place alone."

I toast an English muffin, butter it, and slowly chew while I linger in front of the sliding glass door, considering what to do. When I finish eating, I quickly change from my sleep T-shirt into a sleeveless white top and gray cotton knit shorts. If I don't get out soon, I'll feel even gloomier.

As hard as I've worked this past year and a half to heal the depression, with weekly therapy sessions and on my own, I still struggle, especially in the face of disappointment. Step by small step, I have been learning to feel—sadness and

anger, in particular—rather than pushing those feelings down and dropping into depression. But sometimes, I just wish I could take a vacation from it all.

"I can see the little bungalow where we first lived, the red hibiscus, brown wood roses, a Koa tree with curved black pods in front, and a banana tree with wide shiny leaves and the tiniest curled fruit in the back."

The wind is churning the water when I step onto the beach. Katie warned me that this stretch was too dangerous for swimming. Without the courage to drive to a calmer beach, I'm left with the pool as my only option.

While I'm watching the waves, ominous clouds roll in, turning the sky gray. It looks like rain might start any second, but I'm determined to take a walk in hopes that it might cheer me up.

I start walking. When I stop paying attention to my feet, I stub my big toe against a shelf of black lava. As I look down, a wave washes over the surface, then backs off. Even under those gray clouds, a slender point of light caresses the lava and makes it shine.

I stare at the lava, stuck in a time past.

The shiny black lava reminds me of an instrument I played when I danced the hula. For certain hulas, I wove two smooth, palm-sized black lava stones between the index, second, and third fingers of my hands. Hips swaying and bare feet moving from side to side, I clicked the stones together like castanets.

The memory leaves me with a mix of excitement at having discovered something and sorrow for what has been lost. Looking around at the waves, with the palms dipping and swaying and gray-brown coconut husks scattering across the sand, I think, *Patty, you have finally come back home*.

We had already made three or four moves by the time my family landed on Oahu. Since I was young enough to believe my whole life existed in each moment I was experiencing then, the places we'd lived before Hawaii barely left the faintest memories.

Once I left home for college, I kept moving, as I had done with my family nearly every year growing up. I tried on every place as if they were blouses on a sale rack. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't find a place that felt like home.

Something did fit, though, like a favorite pair of loose jeans. That was the beach. So, the notion that I'd come back home to Hawaii wasn't all that strange.

For the rest of the day, I feel as if I've opened a long-locked trunk full of memories. I can see the little bungalow where we first lived, the red hibiscus, brown wood roses, a Koa tree with curved black pods in front, and a banana tree with wide shiny leaves and the tiniest curled fruit in the back.

I smell the freshness of sudden showers and notice the sun's still out. Then I remember how we would roll up the canvas screens we dropped over the school bus windows the second the rain stopped. Outfits I wore while performing the hula reappear in my mind, including a floor-length lavender satin dress I had on when I danced on King Kamehameha Day on the Island of Niihau. I imagine I'm able to feel the smoothness of that satin against my palm.

In the afternoon, I head to the pool that overlooks the beach, dragging along a fat paperback, though I barely get through a few paragraphs. Like my walk on the beach, the pool stirs up memories.

In the pool, I do something I haven't done since I was a child. I lower myself into the water with my right toe pointed toward the sky. I used to call this move my Esther Williams imitation.

I learned to swim in the officers' pool at Hickam Air Force Base, across the street from our duplex at 4A Julian. To the left of the pool was an outdoor theater with a large white screen and seats on the lawn. Some nights, my sister, Carol, and I sat on the curb in front of our house and watched the movie, though we couldn't hear the sound.

Beyond the theater was a bar housed in a small grass-roofed bungalow, a "little grass shack," like in the "Hukilau Song." The bar was called the *Wahine Kapu*, or as we translated it, Women Keep Out.

Lying on a lounge chair by the condo pool, slathered in coconut-scented sunscreen, I close my eyes and picture my mother, who was my first swimming teacher, in a strapless one-piece bathing suit covered with big red and yellow flowers. The water comes to her waist, but it feels deep to me. Over and over again, she tosses me away from her and shouts for me to paddle back.

Water swims up my nose and stings my eyes. Eventually, I learned to blow bubbles out and kick my legs and pump my arms. Before long, my mother will have to drag me out of the pool. By then, I will have learned to do a one-and-a-half somersault off the high dive.

The hot sun, and the laps up and back in the small condo pool, relax me. *Happiness*, I think. For some reason, I blocked out those years in Hawaii. Letting them in now, I understand. I was happy in Hawaii.

A week after arriving, I board a Hawaiian Airlines plane in Honolulu, bound for San Francisco. Katie is staying another week before heading back to Seattle. We slowly taxi down the runway, and I peer out the window, waiting for my

favorite part when we'll speed up in preparation for takeoff.

Before that happens, I notice a line of navy-blue planes, and I realize we're passing the Hickam Air Force Base airfield. I think about my father and how he used to look in his olive-green flight jacket and pressed khaki uniform slacks in the days when we lived here. A wave of sadness washes over me as I recall saying goodbye to him on the flight line before he climbed aboard the plane for one of his all-too-frequent trips to Japan.

The plane climbs, giving me that picture-postcard view of the coast, the sparkling blue water and dark Diamond Head. No one has slipped a lei over my head, but I can pretend.

Honolulu Harbor lies far below. *Aloha*, I whisper, keeping my face to the window so the man in the aisle seat doesn't catch me crying.

In my mind, I lift the orchid and plumeria lei over my head and bring it to my face for one last sweet whiff. Then I toss the string of delicate purple and yellow flowers into the water.

I feel certain my lei has already made its way to shore.

Sharing Fruit

Shannon Bernhardt

I am thinking about
the way the sun
pours over your face.
How you peel an orange,
open half for me to taste
the sweet joy of its juice.
What do you know about love?
Messy as pulp around the mouth.
Sometimes rot on the skin.
And if we are lucky,
picked clean from the tree.

Beth Gordon's The Water Cycle

Jillian A. Fantin

In the late 1980s, French immunologist Jacques Benveniste proposed the theory that water held the "memory" of previous substances and particles once dissolved within it. Although this idea has not found traction in the mainstream scientific community, it offers an interesting lens to view the essence of water through. I would argue that the memory purportedly contained in water is the same as the memory contained in a word. Think of the word itself, *water*. As I type it out, every single use of the word converges on the page regardless of my intention or not. Even the most abstract usage of the word *water* encourages the performance of concrete actions within daily life—actions as simple as fixing yourself a drink to quench your thirst. Whatever a word conveys to you, it still proves its ability to retain meaning and memory across time and space.

Regardless of whether science demonstrates that water carries within it memory, the word itself, water, has memory, and Beth Gordon's prose poetry micro chapbook *The Water Cycle* uses twenty-six individual prose poems to ensure that you recall and remember more than just that single word. Gordon's newest collection contends that perhaps water and language contain even more similarities through a careful balance of narrative and lyric and an unwavering, recollective cyclicality bent on explicating the meaning, experience, and intersections of time and water.

Formally, the individual poems of *The Water Cycle* do not lazily leak, and, at first, the prose blocks visually appear to reject any elements of wateriness. However, Gordon's use of language ensures intentional slippage and reflects the flowing capacities of water. Rather than existing as hardened concrete, each prose block is a sponge, a porous vessel for the poet's linguistic experimentation and narrative recollection.

For instance, the first lines of "Hydrology (xv)" read: "My lover is an apostle of indelible ink, flower petals on my chest, a black X for the nipple that was incinerated with medical waste…." Gordon's use of the sensory is soaked up by the prose construction, ensuring that the language carries itself unencumbered by formal line breaks or multiple stanzas. The prose construction also supports moments of surrealism, such as when the speaker's ears fill with "turtle hymns" in "Hydrology (x)," or when the speaker recounts, "your mouth destroyed my tongue's ability to soak paper with saliva shaped

like angels." By maintaining the same formal construction of their titles with very few titular variations besides a single Roman numeral, each of Gordon's poems act as a container for her language, much like a glass holds water. This similarity draws together language and water and provides an immediate point of similarity between the two entities, a study that continues throughout the entire collection.

As she continues *The Water Cycle*, Gordon does not rely wholly on either narrative recollection or lyrical musing. Instead, each "Hydrology" installment contains a multitude of moments that merge both narrative and lyric to illustrate the unique process of the speaker's reminiscence. In *The Water Cycle*, which is a text often centered in narrative—that is, the poetic connection of both adjacent and distant moments—lyric refers to Gordon's keen ability to pause narrative for the purposes of experiencing the minutia and elevating them to a place of poetic importance. "Hydrology (v)" exemplifies this merge:

> The second time you almost drowned I wasn't there to stop you, at the edge of a frog pond while the grownups downed shots of whiskey, stars croaking & water lullabying you with the promise of cotton candy or infinity when you sank like sunlight. The first time you almost drowned, I turned my back to help your sister cross the tangle of crab claws & seaweed & fishing lines to the spot where babies can float & when I turned again a yellow circle bobbed against my feet.

Gordon's narrativity is clear as her speaker begins the poem detailing two different instances of nearly drowning by the referenced "you." The first-person pronoun of the speaker, however, does not remain in this narrative realm. Through her first-person speaker, Gordon pauses the forward momentum of the narrative to engage in the recollection of memory and detail, including the croaking stars and the lullaby of the water. She expertly weaves together this short narrative with the previously-defined lyric, allowing the speaker's "I" to function as the individual driver of narrative recollection and the signifier of greater memory that the reader is welcome to share.

Furthermore, by crafting these moments that combine narrative and lyric, Gordon's poetry is unbound by the constraints of linear time. Indeed, even the stories the speaker recalls in "Hydrology (v)" occur in reverse chronological order, and perhaps rightly so: the water that nearly drowned "you" did not conceive of a "first" or "second" time of drowning. Further, these experiences communicated to the reader are situated so clearly within a moment—thus, a particular, definite time—while also existing in a totally timeless space. Among all of this paradox and pliable writing, one thing remains clear: all that exists without *any* doubt is the experience. Thus, *The Water Cycle* further equates language with water. The blending of lyric and narrative results in moments that do not follow the human conception of time as a direct progression.

The similarities between language and water continue, particularly as the collection explores time. As readers near the end of the collection's twenty-six poem sequence, the speaker remarks in "Hydrology (xxiii)" that they often forget about water because water is always there, ubiquitous and intertwined with all aspects of life. Gordon mirrors water's entanglement with life through the relationships between language and the speaker and between lyric and narrative. The speaker's acknowledgement of their failure to recall water—as well as their aforementioned paradoxical explications of timeful and timeless experiences—combines with the poem's final statement that "a green ocean waits to take [them] home." The speaker cannot ever totally recall neither time nor water, and thus, they cannot "own" them within their memory. Ultimately, the speaker's recollections reveal that time and water live in communion together as entities that flow outside of linearity and resist separation and containment. Time and language, then, exist in a similar relationship to time and water. Just like they cannot own water or time, Gordon's speaker is unable to own their spoken memories and future. And since language itself is necessarily independent and intertwined with all life, language reflects the qualities of water in its relationship to the speaker, to time, and to memory. *The Water Cycle* manages such sophistication through Gordon's formal decision to combine her narrative and lyric in each prose poem.

Perhaps the reader's first instinct upon reaching the final installment of the collection is to believe that we never really end the collection. However, I would contend that we never really started. Just like water, *The Water Cycle* does not have a beginning nor an end. Consider these lines of "Hydrology (iii)": "Rain is coming. Today. Tomorrow or next week." Like the certainty of a sometime-rain, Gordon's collection simply exists with the knowledge and memories it contains, flowing in and out of linear time with an unwavering liveliness and an unrelenting resistance to ownership, capture, and damming.

The ending line of "Hydrology (prologue)" reinforces the arguments Gordon makes throughout the entire collection—that is, the claim that water and language contain a great deal of similarities: "We order another round, knowing absence has a shape, tastes more like bourbon than gin. It has a name, like a gray-haired incantation, too dangerous to put onto the page." The speaker's admission that the true word for absence is a word "too dangerous to put onto the page" reveals the power of language and the speaker's self-aware inability to contain language's power. This moment hearkens back to "Hydrology (xxiii)," wherein the speaker states, "Baptism belongs to rivers." Water is shown to own a practice that the speaker recognizes as unable to be contained by anything but water itself, just as they recognize in "Hydrology (prologue)" that only language can contain the true power of the word for *absence*. As her readers reach the end of her micro chapbook, Gordon ensures that they exit the reading with an understanding of water and language as necessarily connected entities unable to be contained *but* able to be explored

through the combined power of narrative and lyrics.

Readers begin *The Water Cycle* in a bar and end *The Water Cycle* in a bar. But did they ever enter? Did they ever leave? Or has the bar always been there? Again, this realization at the start and end of the sequence reinforces the previously stated suggestion that Gordon's collection does not end and does not start but rather exists in a timeless, uncontained space alongside language and water. A word like *water,* placed in a virtually infinite number of literary contexts, contains every emotion, every memory, and every moment of life—the condition of every human—one that flows like water, like time. In Gordon's collection, water itself functions like its word.

So, though Jacques Benveniste's hypothesis about water containing memory is not scientifically proven, *The Water Cycle* renders the theory poetically correct. Ultimately, through a carefully crafted sequence explicating recollection and merging narrative and lyric, *The Water Cycle* reveals language and water to be similarly constructed, capable of holding memories and nostalgia yet unable to be contained and captured by any individual entity.

Peach Pie

DK Eve

I'm holding flowers and almost drop the waxy stems as you stride through the arrivals gate, chiseled in slim jeans, garment bag slung over your shoulder. Everything slows, Matrix-style, with you at the center, closing the distance between us.

Since we've been together, we've both grown softer around the edges (husky-sized, you joked), expanding in the middle as couples tend to do. But look at you now.

"I've missed you." I embrace you as a gift, sliding my hands up the unfamiliar, leaner torso, mapping every sinew and muscle fiber in your back. Your hair is longer too, and I brush errant bangs from your face. You tense and pull back.

"We're allowed to hug now, silly," I say.

I take your suitcase and lead the way to the car. I sneak glances while I drive. You're quiet, facing the window as we pass fields and warehouses. As we enter the city.

"I'm so glad you're home."

A four-day trip south of the border had morphed into cancelled flights, then quarantines. Seven weeks passed before travel opened again and you could get a flight.

"You must've felt so trapped," I say, imagining prison-type food lines and bored inmates pumping sit-ups beside steel cots with lumpy mattresses.

"There was a group of us and never enough food," you say. "No bread, no cheese. Nothing but bland soups and mystery meat stews. I would've killed for lasagna."

"You look amazing." My fingers graze your thigh.

"Had to buy new jeans at O'Hare," you say. "Nothing fit after weeks of starving."

We arrive at the apartment, greeted with the scent of sun-warmed peaches arranged in a bowl. They're your favourite, but you don't even give them a glance. You drop your bags in the bedroom, and I come up behind, wrapping my arms around your waist.

"Sorry," you say, unlocking my hands. "Jet lag."

I curl into your back as you sleep. When I wake, you are buttoning your

shirt in front of the mirror, wearing charcoal grey dress pants I haven't seen since we first met five years ago. It was at that fundraiser for the art gallery. My company had donated, and I was there for work and had bumped into you accidentally, slopping Prosecco on you, trying to brush the damp stain from your hip. *Don't worry about it*, you had said, moving away, disappearing into the crowd, then returning moments later with two fresh drinks. I tingle at the picture of us when everything was fresh and new and reach for you, walking my fingers up your leg.

"Are you sure you need to go so early?"

You grasp my hand, and set it gently on the bed beside me. "I'll call at noon."

"Let's go for dinner tonight," you say on the phone later. "We should talk."

I sense something special and try on three outfits before I decide on one, linger in the bath, and rearrange my hair to get it just right.

At the restaurant, you seem distracted, talking fast and waving your hands. When you knock a fork off the table, we both reach down, and our fingertips touch before you pull away.

"There'll be a woman," I say.

You startle. "What?"

"When you drop a fork. It means a woman will visit. If you drop a knife, it's a man."

You place the fork at the edge of the table and look away. The waiter breaks the silence by setting steaming plates before us—fragrant pasta you've been craving, eggplant parmesan for me. I watch you spoon up a mouthful, chew, eyes closing, before I taste my food. You pause after a few bites, dab sauce from your lips with the linen napkin.

This is the moment, I think, grinning, taut with anticipation.

"I've met someone," you say.

I couldn't have heard that right.

"What?" I choke. I'm caught completely off guard. I reach for my wine glass, needing something to hold.

Your face contorts, mouth working on an appropriate expression. Your eyes reflect the candlelight, and I try to focus on the flickering spark while you go through an explanation, a speech that sounds as if it had been rehearsed over and over. You met her several weeks before the conference—an expert consultant brought in on a project. It wasn't planned, but you ran into her again at the hotel.

"So, you understand," you say.

I don't understand. I begin to sob into the linen napkin.

"We wanted to be fair to you," you continue. "We…waited. Decided I should talk to you first."

Is this really happening? I want to scream, smash China, throw things. *We decided…we wanted*. I seethe, silent, as you pay the bill.

That night you pack a bag, and I beg you not to go. I fling myself to the floor and clutch at your leg. You pry my fingers away and leave.

For days I alternate between howling in grief and staring listlessly out the window. I can't eat, I don't shower. I sleep on your side of the bed, inhaling your pillow. I wander from room to room where parts of you are everywhere, each item clinging to a memory, and I can't bear to clean any trace away. Your keys gather dust on the shelf where you left them. Dark liquid oozes from the cracked skins of overripe peaches, a cloud of fruit flies hovering above.

Eventually, I surface from this morass. I wash my hair and launder the sheets in a compelling urge to *do* something. As I tidy the kitchen, I get an idea. Selecting a knife from the block on the counter, I run my thumb over the blade and plunge it into a peach. I peel the withered skin, slice, add sugar, roll pastry, and shape it into pie. I'm reaching into the oven, admiring the perfectly golden crust when you call. We need to meet, you say.

I walk downtown and find you at a table on the sidewalk. We order and discuss how we will divide our things. I twirl the same piece of pasta on my plate of fettuccine while you offer the bookshelves in exchange for the sofa.

"I'd like to keep the KitchenAid," I say. I have the pie in a paper bag. I add the box with my uneaten lunch and push it toward you. "I'd hate to see this wasted. And the pie is for old times' sake."

You open the bag, and your eyes widen at the scent of peaches and butter.

"Oh, one last thing." I smile, conciliatory. "What's your new address? I can forward your mail."

Over the next few weeks, I drive to her house, where I hover, watching. On Saturday mornings, she goes out jogging, and you are there alone. I cook cheesy sauces and creamy desserts. Leave them at the door. I wait to see the gleam of delight on your face when you discover freshly baked bread or spicy pasta, each gift more delicious and irresistible than the last.

"Selecting a knife from the block on the counter, I run my thumb over the blade and plunge it into a peach. I peel the withered skin, slice, add sugar, roll pastry, and shape it into pie. I'm reaching into the oven, admiring the perfectly golden crust when you call. We need to meet, you say."

You call again, and we agree to meet at the mall so you can collect your apartment keys to gather the rest of your belongings. I fill a basket with pâté, brie, and crusty bread and tuck in your keys and a bottle of wine. I carry it to the mall and find you in the food court.

You've ordered a Big Mac, and there's sauce on your shirt. Your jacket strains at the buttons, snug over your old, soft jeans.

"No hard feelings," I say, offering the basket.

I order a garden salad. A few months ago, I would've scarfed down half your fries. Now, I feel a little surge of pleasure with each handful you dip into the ketchup and cram into your mouth.

You rush off after lunch, and I spend the afternoon shopping. I pick the richest cheeses and finest cuts of marbled meat, organic sugar, and pastry flour. When I return home, the apartment is lighter—airier—without your things.

Dishes continue to appear on your doorstep. One day she was home and opened a still-warm box of cinnamon rolls and tossed them directly in the trash. I started sending them to your office.

"I don't think of you for a long time after that, not until peaches are in season again and I discover the first picks at a farmer's market. I wonder how you've been and decide to make another pie and deliver it to your door."

Two months later, I hear you've moved again, living on your own. I track down your address and deliver dishes to your new door. *Do you think they're from her?* I wonder. I park in the darkness and watch from the car. You appear in loose, flannel lounge pants and strain bending over to reach the food.

On your birthday, I prepare a feast—six-cheese lasagna, toasted garlic bread soaked in butter, pie, and whipped cream. I pack the food in a box and place it carefully on the car seat. I've dressed in new, slim-fit jeans in dark denim.

It's been months since we've spoken, and when I arrive on the doorstep, I decide to knock this time and present the gift in person. You seem confused when you open the door—as if you don't recognize me. I'm surprised at how you look too, in baggy joggers and a too-tight T-shirt.

There's a grease stain on the upper curve of the full moon of your belly, and your face is red from the exertion of walking to the door. Inside I hear machine-gun fire and voices shouting—the new *Call of Duty*, I presume.

"Happy birthday." I remove the napkin I had tucked around the food, releasing fragrant curls of steam.

"You, you look good," you say, accepting the box.

I look great, I want to reply, then realize your eyes aren't on me. Your eyelids are hooded and heavy, pupils dilated, fixed on the food. In all our time together, you never looked at me that way.

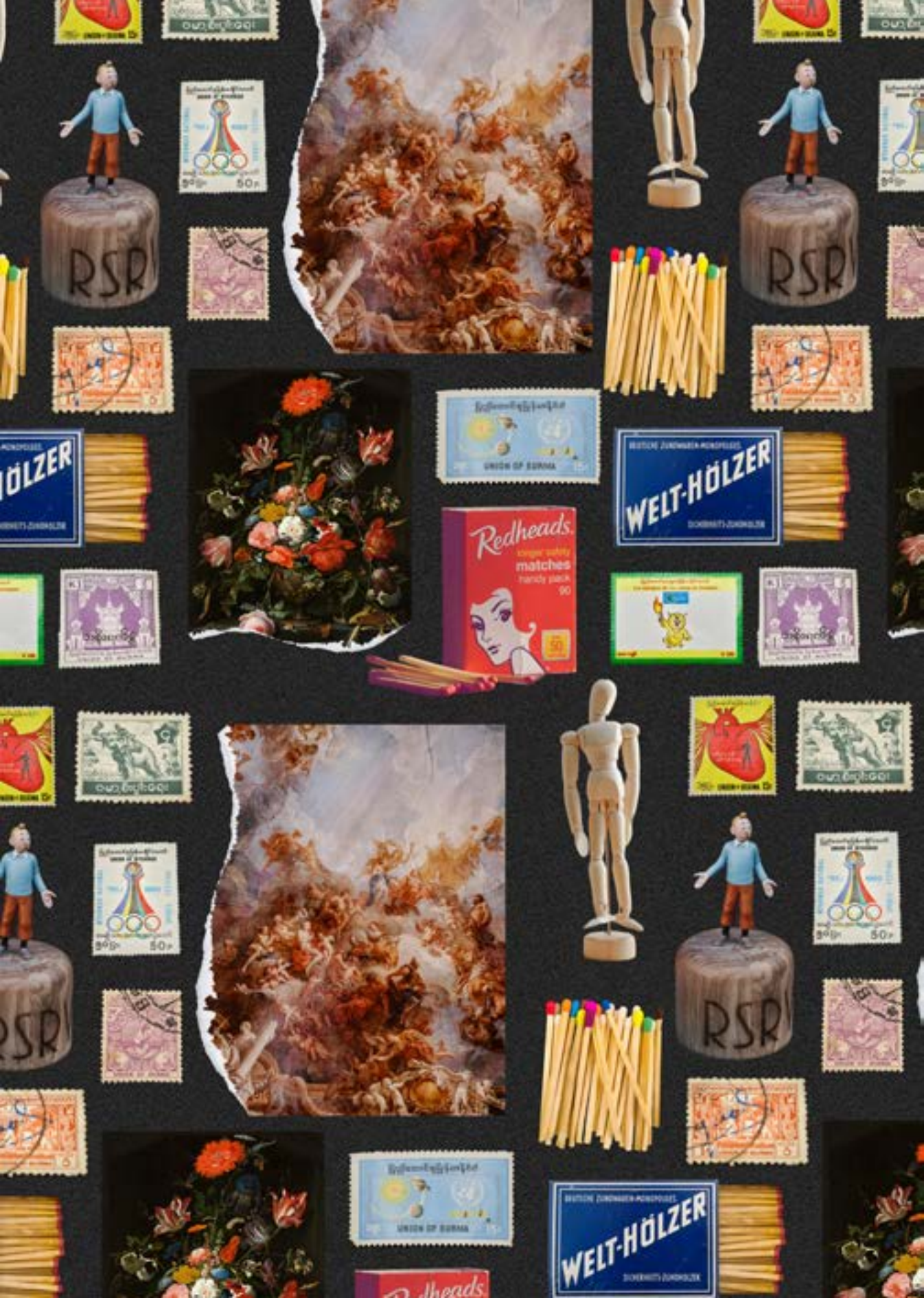
"Well, I just wanted, you know, to bring you this," I say. "For your birthday."

You release your gaze on the box and remember to say thank you. I watch you turn and shuffle through the doorway.

I don't think of you for a long time after that, not until peaches are in season again and I discover the first picks at a farmer's market. I wonder how you've been and decide to make another pie and deliver it to your door.

When I arrive that evening, your building is pulsing red from the ambulance outside. An attendant emerges, walking slowly to turn off the flashing lights. They bring you out, a thick lump on the gurney, wrapped in a white sheet.

I open the box on the seat beside me, dig out a spoonful of pie and hold it aloft in silent tribute. Savouring the sweet fruit and crisp pastry, I close my eyes and conjure the memory of you I will hold forever, the chiseled vision in the airport, walking to me.


RSR
WELT-HÖLZER
Redheads
matches

Collections

Laura Khoudari

1.

I tap *purchase ticket* with a flourish and declare, "something different," to myself. My vocal cords strain against my feigned enthusiasm.

I don't go to the Upper East Side of New York anymore. It's not a rule that I don't go; it's a choice I make again and again. It's hard to get there from where I live in Greenwich Village and the memories I associate it with transport me to a confusing and unpleasant emotional space; somewhere where nostalgia gives way to grief.

Parenting is taking me there, though. I am dropping my daughter, Gloria, off at her friend's apartment on East 91st Street and Fifth Avenue. Without other plans for the day, I choose to make the most of my unusual uptown circumstance and visit the Guggenheim Museum, though I have reservations about going. I take my phone out of my back pocket and send a text to my friend Chelsea, inviting her to join.

After I say goodbye to Gloria outside of her friend's building, I squint into the sun as I turn to walk down Fifth Avenue's Museum Mile. I notice that the Callery pear trees lining the sidewalk are in bloom, and their tiny white blossoms cling to the branches, where not too long ago there was snow. Their petals tremble in the wind, stirring my spirit the way only early spring flowers do. Sunshine warms my face, and my camel coat keeps the unpredictable winds at bay. There are plenty of upper eastsiders doing Saturday afternoon things. A few people catch my eye. I mentally catalogue them to share later:

> *1. a slender, old, white woman with a perfectly coiffed cloud of white hair—a cotton swab in Celine sunglasses—walking her small black poodle, smiling.*
> *2. a group of white, gangly teenage girls, trying to hide what they don't know with a full beat of make-up and an air of self-importance, all carrying the same designer handbag. Contents inside unknown.*

I realize I like having this small collection of characters tucked away in the soft tissue folds of my brain.

We all have collections—intentional ones like stamps, art, and figurines, or accidental ones like matchbooks in a junk drawer. I am curious, dear reader—what is in your collection? Not what you collect, but what ethereal, spiritual, emotional thing are you making concrete with these artifacts? What stories breathe life into your collection?

2.

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum is an iconic building designed by Frank Lloyd Wright that sits across from Central Park, spanning an entire Fifth Avenue block. The central rotunda of the museum is what sets it apart from any other building in the city. It is six stories, cylindrical, and open in the middle. The main exhibition hangs in the rotunda, and visitors walk around a ramp that coils its way up along the walls. It is thought to be inspired by a nautilus shell. While I wait for Chelsea, I step back, look up, and admire the building as best I can from my vantage point.

This is my second visit to the Guggenheim. Twenty-five years prior, I took the elevator to the top floor and walked my way down the spiraling ramp to take in a Claus Oldenberg retrospective. Oldenburg is famous for his tremendous, and sometimes soft, sculptures of everyday items. His retrospective made me feel like an ant in a well-curated shop.

"Kandinsky's early work surprises me. I didn't know he had a period before abstraction. His impressionist paintings invite me in, and his early abstracts are alluring and often playful."

This time I'm at the Guggenheim to see a collection of works by Vassily Kandinsky, a nineteenth-century Russian painter. Chelsea and I take the elevator to the top floor so we can walk down the ramp. As I step out of the elevator, I wonder if museum security would let me in if I were wearing my roller skates or carrying a bag of marbles.

Apparently, *Vassily Kandinsky: Around the Circle* starts at the bottom of the spiral, and viewers are to work their way up. The upwards trajectory takes you on a backwards walking tour of Kandinsky's life from later works to early works. If you are confused reading this, please know that I was confused learning this.

"I should have brought my skates," I say after Chelsea and I step off the elevator and admire the view from the top of the rotunda. We lean over the railing and look down. Chelsea jerks herself back with a start.

"You're afraid of heights. That's right," I remember.

"Yeah," she says with a big smile as her hand lightly pats her chest as quicly as a hummingbird flaps its wings. She peers over again. Chelsea collects thrilling experiences as well as decorative crosses and charmingly weird housewares that often have a produce motif.

I take some photographs from inside the rotunda that makes it look like the building contains shelves of people looking at art. We make our way toward the Kandinskys, and I realize that we are looking at the last painting of the show. Without thinking, I shrug my shoulders.

"Apparently, the show starts at the bottom," I say. "I don't care." Chelsea shrugs back. We elect to view the show in reverse.

Kandinsky's early work surprises me. I didn't know he had a period before abstraction. His impressionist paintings invite me in, and his early abstracts are alluring and often playful. At the bottom of the circle, our end of the tour and the beginning for others, we find the late Kandinskys. These are the paintings I recognize from posters in dorm rooms in the 1990s and therapists' waiting rooms. They don't draw me in, and I don't appreciate them.

A plaque on the wall tells me that Kandinsky's work is unified by the fact that he puts his spiritual expression into each one. I look at my feet when I realize that I don't like his *spiritual expression* later in life. That feels different from not liking a painting.

Before we leave, we go to the gift shop. I don't buy anything. I don't want to be responsible for carrying anything that doesn't fit in my purse, and I don't want a postcard.

3·

In whatever you collect, you will find magic and memories. They will be made by you and by others too. In fact, I would venture to say that even a stranger's magic and memories are in your collection of plates, thimbles, knick-knacks, and spoons. They are in your collection of buttons, books, and baubles. In your collection of fine art and postcards, too. Their stories and intentions are woven into your rugs and socks, polished into your clocks, and tumbled into your rocks.

I can say this with confidence because this is true of all our collections. What we hold onto is someone's artifact or our own.

4·

I don't like the way I feel when I am out on the street uptown; I dread the inevitable overlay of grief that drapes itself across my moments uptown. But that is what comes with visiting the Upper East Side—where my grandmother used to live. I choose to lean into it.

I say to Chelsea, "I think I want to walk down Madison Avenue and go by my grandmother's apartment. When I'm up here, I like to stand outside her old building and get all moody."

She laughs at me in a way that feels nice. Our friendship is still pretty new. I take this as an acceptance of my weirdness.

"I purchased each with an intention that was prescribed by its maker and aligned with something I desired at the time—like a whispered request to the universe. I can no longer recall what it was that I wanted or if what I wanted was ever received."

I wish I had a snow globe featuring 45 East 66th Street. In New York, you can get snow globes with the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty, and One World Trade. But I want one of my grandmother's building so that when the dome's glitter settles, I could look at the fourth floor's curved corner window, the one with the balustrade, and know that was where my grandmother lived.

We sold the apartment at 45 East 66th Street to a foreign banker about fifteen years ago. As far as I know, he never moved in. Today, I wistfully hope her home is full of life again.

My mother and grandfather-figure Ed asked me to arrange for an auction house to collect and sell items none of the three of us chose to keep. When my mother, uncle, Grandpa Stanley, and grandmother moved into this apartment in the 1950s, my grandmother said, "That's it. They'll have to carry me out in a bag." She was then widowed, remarried, divorced, and partnered again and, true to her word, she never left until she was carried out in a body bag. We were faced with a lifetime of her things to sort through.

Ed kept some practical and sentimental items to furnish the much smaller two-bedroom apartment he was moving to. He and many of those items were lost even before he passed away.

My mother and I kept the silver and some art. I also took a small glass perfume bottle that I knew nothing about, a pewter alligator purchased as a souvenir from Charleston, South Carolina, a collection of Hermes scarves that still smell of my grandmother's perfume sixteen years later, and her 1970s Aurora clock that she kept in the den on the bureau, just left of the corner window.

I always try to be selective about what I keep, and yet, I still have so many small collections. One is of cat figurines, which I keep next to a green tin on a small white shelf that otherwise holds bowls of crystals representing every

color of the chakra system in my office. The tin is sealed and contains my cat Flaquita's ashes (I now find myself wondering what you think of me).

Among the cat figurines are three small maneki-nekos—the Japanese cat figurines with a raised paw that beckons you. I purchased each with an intention that was prescribed by its maker and aligned with something I desired at the time—like a whispered request to the universe. I can no longer recall what it was that I wanted or if what I wanted was ever received. The maneki-nekos are still magic to me.

Marvelously, when I see my maneki-nekos, I don't think about cats, past or present. I don't know why, but I am without space and time, and with all the memories of all the times that my daughter and I stood together—her body leaning into mine as I held her wishes as my own. Those moments fold into one another and manifest love in my blood and bones.

While I packed up my new collection of some of Grandma Gloria's magical things, the rest of her belongings were unceremoniously packed up by movers from Tepper Galleries for auction.

5.

Twelve years ago, I sobbed in the eponymous shop, John Derian, as I handed over my debit card. My friend Martine had accompanied me, and she also cried. She gave me a big hug while the saleswoman hurried to ring me up. The clerk's impassivity and quick movements broadcast that she wanted to get our tear-stained and snotty faces out of the shop.

I spent $1,100 I didn't have on my grandmother's library ladder. John Derian bought it at auction for $300 three years prior and marked it up over three hundred fifty percent. I couldn't believe it when I found it in some shop in the East Village, but it was most definitely my grandmother's. The clerk shared proof of provenance with me.

In an effort to help me calm down after I paid for the ladder, Martine ushered me around the corner to an almost empty hotel bar and bought me a dirty vodka martini and french fries. She assured me that it was fate, magic, or destiny that I found the ladder and that it was totally reasonable that I bought it back even though I most certainly did not have a library, the space, or that much spare cash lying around.

The salt and fat of the olives and french fries brought me back into my body while the icy vodka mellowed my visceral homecoming. I was shaking, and my hands would continue to tremor for days. It was shocking to stumble onto the one thing we sold of my grandmother's that I regretted parting with. It was just sitting there in this shop, showcasing expensive linens also for sale. I decided Martine was right: the ladder was waiting for me.

The ladder now holds my collection of art books, the Aurora clock from Grandma Gloria's den, and a couple of bud vases. Fairly open and made from

a darker wood, it stands about five feet tall, three feet wide, and four feet deep, making it more stair-like than ladder-like. When I visited Grandma Gloria as a young girl, the stairs made for an excellent castle tower. Its height provided a view of the moat below and the forest that seemed to extend forever, or at least beyond her dining room. When I pretended to flee from potential captors, I discovered the mouth of a river in the foyer. Riding the current on my make-shift raft, I learned that the river led to an island, the shore of which was the low and deep corner windowsill in the den.

6.

Eleven years ago, I sat at the dining table paying bills while my four-year-old daughter Gloria was bustling around in costume and keeping busy pretending to be Snow White.

"Are you going to make gooseberry pie," I asked her, looking up from my computer. Her gaze met mine, and for a moment, I was breathless. She was (is) perfect.

She examined all four sides of her Snow White pop-up cottage and found that there were no berry bushes printed on its nylon sides.

"I don't have any berries," she said.

"Well, then you should head into the forest and pick some," I replied.

"There isn't a forest here," Gloria replied with a sweep of her arm, gesturing at the room around us. Understandably, she was confused.

I mirrored her confusion. "What!? No look, that is the mountains," I said, pointing to the library ladder behind her, which sat empty in our new apartment like a stairway to nowhere. "And this here is a giant gooseberry bush," I said, pointing to our Christmas tree. I got up and walked over to the tree-cum-gooseberry bush, picked a handful of imaginary gooseberries, put them in my imaginary berry-collecting basket, and handed it to Gloria. I then returned to my adult station at the dining table and continued to pay bills while she looked over at the mountains, smiled and picked some gooseberries for her gooseberry pie.

7.

VASILY KANDINSKY
Colored Sticks (Bunte Stäbchen)
1928
Varnished tempera on paperboard
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York,
Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection,
By gift 38.306

I didn't notice the title of this painting until I got home, and I looked at the picture I snapped for reference. I guffawed. At the museum, I knew I would write about it later because when I saw it, all I saw were toys: Pick Up Sticks and Colorforms. I hadn't even glanced at the label on the wall.

Colored Sticks is a time machine that took me back to afternoons with Grandma Gloria. After she would take me to the Museum of Modern Art, FAO Schwartz, Woolworth's, or Central Park, we would return to her home, and I would play on my own until dinner. Her apartment, with art-lined walls, deep and low windowsills, and a long hallway, was the ideal container and inspiration for my imaginary adventures. When I was done saving myself from storms, quicksand, and miscellaneous malcontents, I would sit and quietly play with Pick Up Sticks and Colorforms.

When I looked at *Colored Sticks*, a voice in my head told me to buy new sets of Pick Up Sticks and Colorforms, but my gut knew that I didn't miss the toys; I missed the time.

———

"As soon as I can see the building, the sidewalk becomes quicksand—drawing me down—but there is a forward momentum that comes with walking with a new friend. I keep going because it is more important to remain connected with the living than with the dead."

———

8.

I opened the cigar box diorama and set it up in my office.

LAURA KHOUDARI
Small Objects of Importance
2008
Found Objects, Ink on Paper, Varnish
Laura Khoudari's Personal Collection, New York

There are seven objects inside that you can pick up, handle, and interact with:

001 - *Le Carré Hermes*, France: 1996.
002 - Perfume bottle.
003 - Turtle figurine.
004 - Turtle figurine.
005 - Jean Evans, *Alphabet*.

006 - Maneki-neko.
007 - Laura Khoudari, *Body & Soul*. 2000.

Small Objects of Importance is one of the dioramas I made during a year-long period in which I made an art object every day. Sometimes I close it up and put it away. I have moved three times since I made it, but I always know where it is.

I set it up for the first time since we moved a year and a half ago. Then I picked up my phone, looked at the Guggenheim's mobile site and decided that, yes, I would like to go to the museum. I tapped *purchase ticket* with a flourish and declared, "something different" to myself.

9.

Chelsea and I have lunch after the museum, and then we window shop our way down Madison Avenue. Extraordinarily expensive resort wear, gowns, and handbags call to me from each storefront. I have no need for any of these things, but I love looking at them, and I even enjoy longing for them. Sometimes we go into a store, touch things, and imagine taking them home.

Chelsea and I slow our pace but don't stop as we approach Madison Ave and 66th Street. As soon as I can see the building, the sidewalk becomes quicksand—drawing me down—but there is a forward momentum that comes with walking with a new friend. I keep going because it is more important to remain connected with the living than with the dead. Part of me disagrees, though, and it keeps making words—many of which fall out of my mouth.

"That window on the rounded corner… the fourth floor with the decorative balustrade…that was my grandmother's apartment."

"Oh wow," Chelsea says. She keeps walking, so I keep walking. With Chelsea's help, I save myself from the quicksand.

"Yeah, that was my mom's room at one point." I crane my neck as we walk on by and consider asking if we can stop. I ask myself, "Stop and what, though?" I realize I have all my memories. I have been with so many of them today.

More words tumble out of my mouth: "I think it is hard for me to be up here because it's confusing. It brings up wonderful childhood memories of my grandmother. She was tough on everyone but me. She thought I shat ice cream. And she made me feel so special. But then she got sick so suddenly… I came up here almost daily for a month to be with her while she died."

I was done spilling words. The air felt heavy. "And to eat sandwiches," I continued. Chelsea chuckled, and I smiled back. "No, but seriously we ate so many sandwiches when she was sick and right after she died that I lost it at her shiva. I didn't eat another sandwich for years."

We laughed. My gaze shifted downtown, and my thoughts turned to

getting home. I catch the Q train from the station I used sixteen years ago for all those days in a row I visited with Grandma as bone cancer took her from us.

Once I'm home, it dawns on me that 45 East 66th Street rises from Madison Avenue like Grandma Gloria's tombstone.

Grandma Gloria's actual cremains are in a niche in a columbarium at Ferncliff Cemetery in Westchester. Columbariums are repositories for ashes. I had never heard of one before my mother told me that's where Grandma was going. When we got there, I found it cold and sterile. It was like being with a collection of remains, not spirits. I couldn't help but feel like we were putting her urn in a safety deposit box that we would lose the key to. Unlike a graveyard, there are no trees for me to look at in her indoor resting place. It isn't vulnerable to the elements, so it doesn't need much tending. I know some people don't like cemeteries, but I do. They are places for the living to remember the dead.

There's not enough life in the columbarium to feel like it's a suitable place to connect to Grandma Gloria's memory. She is on the Upper East Side. She is in Central Park, in modern art, and in some of my collections of things. I also found her in a shop in the East Village and brought her home with me.

I understand now that visiting 45 East 66th Street is the closest I get to visiting Grandma Gloria by her grave. It's where I knew her to be alive and where I sat with her as she died.


NOT AGAIN...

Doozyville

Robert Grant Price

We had a good life in Rolling Meadows, so I don't understand why Monica and her girlfriends wanted to build a homeless shelter in our town.

I learned about it through Facebook. On a sweltering Saturday afternoon, after mowing the lawn, I slipped back inside our air-conditioned house and dropped myself on the couch with my phone.

Monica's Facebook essay came midway through a flame war between our neighbours. They were fighting over whether the city council should renovate a plaza or build our first homeless shelter.

Rory Birch, the mayor of Rolling Meadows, had proposed to spend a little more than four million dollars renovating the plaza in front of city hall. The fountain—a heron, wings spread—no longer worked. Four million dollars would get the heron spitting water again and lush up our sunblasted town square.

I thought it was a good idea. Monica did not.

She sided with Sue Carrell, who used to lead one of the women's organizations back before she and her husband divorced. I don't know much about her, but I did vote for her the one time she ran as a school board trustee. Monica vouched for her.

Sue had written an open letter to Mayor Birch saying the city's priorities were misplaced. Rather than spending all that money on the town square, Sue said the council should build a homeless shelter down by the lake. Dozens of my neighbours, some of whose names I recognized from Facebook, agreed. So did Monica. Sue's letter went like this:

> We have it so good in Rolling Meadows that I don't even think we know how good we have it. Our town is peaceful and well-kept, and it's a credit to Mayor Birch for all that he's done. I don't want to take that away from him. But I also think that we should be more open. When you read how crowded some of the homeless shelters are in cities RIGHT NEXT TO OURS, you have to wonder what it will take for us to pitch in. Others don't have it as good as we have it. Is it fair? Spending four million dollars (!) on a garden and a fountain seems so wasteful. Can't we give a little more of what we have?

The Rolling Meadows Messenger, a weekly packed with flyers, ran a story about the dispute. They quoted Monica's essay. She printed the story from the internet and put it on the fridge.

She even started talking about running for a seat on town council.

Like most people in Rolling Meadows, I never paid attention to local politics. I voted, paid my taxes, and sometimes read the *Messenger*. I also worked from home and took care of the kids after school. Outside of coaching hockey for ten years—and the half-acre we owned outright—I had no real connection to our tidy little town on the lake. If it wasn't for the signs I saw on a few lawns on my drive to the grocery store (CHANGE STARTS WITH US!) and Monica, of course, I wouldn't have known about the lobbying efforts to bring a homeless shelter to Rolling Meadows.

The only event about the shelter I attended happened on a Tuesday night. Monica, along with other proponents, cheered as Sue Carrell, the Caesar of the moment, delivered a fiery speech at the four-hour-long council meeting. I phased in and out of consciousness for most of the speeches, but Sue's resonated. After she spoke, for a moment, a brief moment, I had the sense that the people collected in the half-empty council chambers might rise up and kill Mayor Birch if he didn't agree to fund the homeless shelter. How else could "we grow as a community" if we didn't, Sue asked. (Didn't fund the shelter, I mean.)

Mayor Birch sensed it too. Before the council took a vote on whether to fund the homeless shelter, he stood up, dropped his glasses on his desk, and sighed into the microphone.

"I love this town, it's been my home my entire life, but I quit," he said. "Do whatever you like."

Council voted. The motion to fund the homeless shelter passed. The crowd cheered. I got swept up in the applause, energized by the feeling that something big had happened.

We fought for what was right. And this time, the good guys won.

I was probably the most famous person living in Rolling Meadows, although nobody who passed me on the street would have recognized me as anything other than the guy who took a monstrous sheepdog for a walk twice a day. Fifteen years ago, I landed a syndication deal for *Grooster*, a daily comic strip featuring a rooster who wins the lottery and finds himself living among the nouveau riche. The running joke was that Grooster struggled more with being rich than with living as a rooster in a human world.

I made good money. Not enough to build my own studio or buy a cattle ranch, but enough to pay off a mortgage on a century home in Rolling Meadows. My problem, as a man in his middle years, was that I had grown

tired of Grooster. I had run out of good ideas about a decade before. I felt trapped inside the tiny boxes of Grooster's existence, and I didn't think the joke was funny anymore. So, to save myself from boredom, I came up with a new strip called *Doozyville*, about a town where everybody is crazy. It had an ensemble of characters and plenty of space for me to trudge through the absurdities I seemed to encounter in my real life.

I sent Len, my agent, a complete proposal for *Doozyville*, something that should have been unnecessary since I was a productive, reliable cartoonist. The funniest comic was a single-panel cartoon. The camera looks through the bars of a prison window. On the single mattress lies a prisoner dressed in stripes. A big, satisfied smile lifts the corners of his mouth. Inside the thought balloon hanging over his head read the words: "Me time."

I thought it was a riot. This was what people wanted with their morning coffee. Not Grooster asking his waiter which spoon he's supposed to use to eat his soft-boiled egg.

Len tried to sell *Doozyville*. Nobody wanted it. The newspaper market was dying, and free comics existed in abundance on the internet.

"Unless something big happens, *Grooster* is your only real chance in this industry," Len told me over the phone on a Monday night. "You're making a good living. I suggest you ride it to the end."

I said I would, and I did, but *Doozyville* stuck in my mind. I promised myself I'd keep drawing it. Maybe there was a book there. A movie. Maybe something more.

Rory Birch retired, sold his investment business, and relocated to a gated community in Florida. Sue Carrell was elected mayor in a landslide.

A year later, the town published the plans for the homeless shelter. After "consultations with the community" (when did they do that?), the town had decided to locate the homeless shelter downtown, right on Hartford Avenue—a five-minute walk across the rolling hills of Meadows Park to our home. So far as I could tell from the article, the decision was final. As one of his last acts as mayor, the departing Mayor Birch had made it so.

I tried Monica at work. No answer. I didn't bother leaving a message. It was the end of the quarter, and she wouldn't have had time to call me back anyway. The kids came home from school. We played catch in the backyard and went to the park. I heated a frozen lasagna, fed and bathed the kids, and put them to bed. Monica tumbled through the door at close to ten.

"I'm so tired," she began. "I wouldn't have been so late if Frank hadn't—"

"Did you see where they are putting the homeless shelter?" I said. "Why are they putting it there?"

Monica dumped her jacket on the chair by the door. It slumped to the floor.

"Sue thought it was a good location," she said.

"Sue!"

"What's the problem?"

"It was supposed to be by the lake!"

"There is plenty of space around here."

"They should build it over at the railyards. Nobody likes it there."

She let out a long sigh and went upstairs to change. She didn't come down. I found her in bed, her makeup smearing the pillowcase.

I had a studio in the third bedroom of our home. From there, the morning light fell just right, and in the afternoon, I could see clear across Meadows Park to the lake. I worked in the mornings, usually finishing the day's strip by lunch. I dedicated my afternoons to answering emails, keeping house, and watching the kids.

Over the next two years, I watched the homeless shelter rise among the lacy clusters of willow trees ringing Meadows Park. The shelter stood five stories tall. The original plans called for a modest two-story building, something like a cross between a hospital and a Motel 6, but when the story about a feisty band of suburbanites wanting to open their community to homeless people hit the national news, the federal government pitched in a few million more to add a rehab facility. The morning sunlight glistened off the silver sheets of glass.

I walked around the construction site as it went up. I saw other guys from around the neighbourhood surveying the same corner, one eye locked on the monstrosity lifting from the pavement behind a banner that read FUTURE HOME OF THE ROLLING MEADOWS WELCOME CENTER: "YOU'RE HOME NOW."

Enough politicians to fill a prison attended the opening. Mayor Carrell held giant golden scissors. Her smile stretched as long as the ribbon she was cutting.

I sipped orange-ade and toured the inside of The Welcome Center. I have to say I was impressed. The space looked built for superstar college football players: a sleek locker room with semi-private showers; a sizeable lounge with a ping pong table; a decent-sized study area where the men (this facility was for men only) could learn to read and write with volunteers from the Y; several floors of bachelor apartments neatly appointed with a bed, a desk, and a chair; an industrial sized kitchen; and other wonders, like a Japanese maple, a patio with interlocking stones, two gas barbecues, and a fountain.

The brochure that went around featured Ted, the first resident, and his story. I liked Ted. I met him on the tour. He had grown up middle class, worked a sales job, and fell into drugs after seeing his infant son and wife die in a car accident. His salt-and-pepper jaw and wise, sad eyes made him look

older than he was.

The Welcome Center existed for people like Ted. I listened to him give a short speech at the opening and thought, "I'd like to help him." On the way out, I shook Ted's hand and wished him well. I really did.

As I stripped to my underwear for bed that night, I said to Monica, "This is going to help guys like Ted."

"That's what it's all about," she said.

For a while, it was easy to forget about The Welcome Center. A cold winter landed. School was cancelled ten times because of snow. When it wasn't snowing, the air was an ice cube. You couldn't move.

But spring—spring blushed rosily. I drew my pages in the morning and walked all afternoon. In late April, while walking through Meadows Park, right at the little stone bridge, a guy I'd never seen before told me to eat myself. I actually stopped, unsure if I had heard him correctly.

"You want me to what?" I asked.

Then I got a good look at him. His pupils were dilated wide enough to swallow the moon.

In the following weeks, I saw more men wandering the park. They shambled along, their brains eaten by whatever they were shooting into their arms. Over the weeks, the corner of Lewis and Hartford, where The Welcome Center stood, decayed like a tooth. It started with a bit of graffiti, some trash barfing out the mouth of a garbage can, and men—all zombies—standing around the corner and staggering up and down Hartford. They weren't doing anything wrong. They weren't criminals. But they were… there.

Elton Li, a guy who used to coach hockey with me, crashed into my cart at the grocery store. After exchanging apologies, we stood in line together.

"You know," Elton said, "I sometimes can't decide if the world around me is changing or if I'm just getting old."

I followed his gaze. A resident of The Welcome Center was circulating the checkout lines asking for change.

Elton smiled at me, wondering if I might talk about what he really wanted to talk about.

"I'm pretty sure you're just getting old," I said. We both laughed, paid for our groceries, and waved goodbye.

By midsummer, the first tent sprang up in Meadows Park—a baby blue pup tent under a willow tree. Almost cute. Others followed. By September, the park looked like a campsite at the end of the world. Garbage piled up around the cans. A tattered couch appeared at the center of the park, out of nowhere, followed by a busted flatscreen TV. Whenever I passed through the

park—which by this point I hardly ever did—I'd see three or four men on the couch staring at the TV. What were they watching?

One evening, somebody called the police. A fight had broken out. I read about it on Facebook. The police, I read, had roughed up the men in the park. I don't know what happened, but the loudmouths on Facebook said the cops brutalized them.

The town council replied through a press release. I read about it on Twitter. "In light of recent events and the increasing dangers posed to the growing population now residing in Meadows Park, Council has hired several Community Safety Patrollers who will patrol the park and surrounding areas to ensure that all people concerned feel safe, secure, and welcome in their environs."

I was sitting in the kitchen while Monica flipped stringy strips of bacon in the frying pan.

"Council wants to hire a bunch of kids to patrol the park," I said. "Isn't that what the police are for?"

She opened her phone and showed me a photo of a Rolling Meadows cop. Somebody on the neighbourhood Facebook page had shared it with the neighbours. The photo showed the cop at the gym. Cords of muscle ran up and down his tattooed arms.

"He seethes with violence," Monica said.

From where I sat, I could see the shelter through the kitchen window, see clear across the park, now shimmering bronze and gold, and the tents spreading like flood waters.

I couldn't work one day. The *Grooster* deadline loomed, but nothing clever or even idiotic came to me. Which was unusual. Even if I couldn't write a funny comic strip, I could usually pump out a couple panels of existential angst or cute silliness. This particular morning, I needed a walk, so I put the leash on Dixon and headed out. We got halfway across Meadows Park when I spotted what appeared to be a condom with pills inside it.

I couldn't be sure because as soon as I saw the little bundle, Dixon had swallowed it. I tried to get him to throw it up, but he just smiled at me under his doggy beard, not sorry and not willing to puke.

At the vet's office, I sat in the waiting room and texted obscenities to Monica while Dr. Hamish evacuated Dixon's stomach. What if a kid had found whatever Dixon had swallowed? What are we supposed to tell the kids if our dog dies of an overdose?

She told me in all caps—she only texts in all caps—to CALM DOWN. I tried. I counted my breaths, like a YouTube meditation guide taught me, stared into an enormous fish tank, the centerpiece of Dr. Hamish's office, and watched an aspirator send bubbles out the smokestack of a sunken battleship.

Which one of those zombies tried to poison my dog?

I opened the idea book that I carry with me and began a foul-mouthed letter to my town councillor. I lost steam, and by the time Dr. Hamish trotted Dixon out to me, smiling stupidly, I broke my creative impasse for the day.

The scene: Grooster in a tuxedo eating dinner in a haughty dining room. At the table over, a man of old money (monocle, mutton chops) asks his wife, dressed in her finest pearls, a question he has been mulling for many, many years: "Darling, how would you feel if I reinvented myself as a blues man?"

A grey day. I packed a commission drawing I'd completed in a padded envelope and left the house on foot. Rain fell before I got to the end of my street. I popped my umbrella and held the envelope to my chest.

Commissions are hard work—I only do them for the money, so I procrastinate and then have to rush—and so I needed a walk to clear my head. Rain pounded on my umbrella and on all the tents lining the park.

I headed for the pharmacy on Hartford. Two zombies stood under the awning of the butcher shop, smoking what smelled like a shoelace. I discovered that Kasper's, the butcher shop, was out of business. I didn't go there often, but the Polish couple that ran it always said hello and smiled. I liked to putter and sample the meats and cheeses.

Next door to the butcher shop was From Far Away, an import store. An old hippie ran it. She wore beads and kept her windows stocked with African sculptures—stuff that had been in the windows for as long as I'd lived in Rolling Meadows, stuff as old as the porcelain Elvises and Dalmatian fire hydrant statues that sat in the window of the dusty Smoke & Gift. As I passed the store, I saw the old hippie had hung a poster in her window:

> I STAND WITH MY NEIGHBOURS WHO LIVE IN TENTS.
> NO EVICTIONS! HUMANS ARE NOT COCKROACHES!

At the pharmacy, I mailed my commission and picked up a refill on my blood pressure medication. Outside, the rain really came down.

As I stepped through exploding puddles, I thought about my work. I was struggling like I had never struggled before. I was spent. Every strip I drew felt dumb, and the prospect of being dropped from syndication felt more real than at any other point in my life.

I wondered if other artists came to the same moment that I was entering—the moment when you realize your creative potential, a nut hanging tight and firm, has loosened to the point where even letting a raw idea onto the page seemed tired and pointless. I had unconsciously made a hobby of reading biographies of the great and even mediocre artists, and most of them—most of us—start their lives as ignoramuses, sure they will set fire to the world with

their art like a god hurtling a thunderbolt on a dry prairie, and stupid to the eternal power of inertia. I was dawning on the realization that I no longer cared for my work. I could not be sure if this tied directly to what I felt was a loss of my powers or if my powers were retreating because I no longer cared to compete with the greats of my field—knowing that I could not compete with them, especially now when nothing was funny, and I was comfortable enough from what I'd already earned to not have to make an attempt.

Nobody said anything about the mess our downtown had become. Instead, over time, everybody simply avoided going there. Rolling Meadows is a small town, a quiet town, but still big enough to disappear in. Rather than shopping for groceries downtown, I took to driving to the superstore off the highway. Like others, I skipped my afternoon coffee at Haskell's on Hartford and bought myself a home espresso machine.

When needles appeared in the playgrounds around the downtown area, a few concerned parents took to Facebook.

"Warning: Watch where your kids step at Marcel Park. My little one almost stepped on this. So gross."

Under the mother's warning was a photo of a needle.

The first reply appeared instantly. "You can't even begin to imagine what it is like to have needle-related problems. Think before you post."

Another woman chirped: "Ah, sorry, but any good parent should be more concerned about the drug users dumping their needles that are all over the f-ing place. YOU think before YOU post."

The chorus buried her. "You're exaggerating," they said. "Stop the dehumanization!"

After that, I didn't see much said about needle-related problems on our Facebook group. And nothing about the hookers.

That did not mean the town wasn't listening. Somehow, at some point, somewhere—I don't know how, or when, or where—the town council acted on the needles cropping up in the gutters, parks, and parking lots by opening a safe injection site. The site opened in the spring—surprisingly quickly—in the parking lot beside the farmer's market.

"It's better than them shooting up and dying," I read in a Facebook post that Monica had liked, "and it is a good way to collect needles. Two birds, one awesome stone."

Our safe injection site garnered national media attention. Stuart Rattray, the shrink who ran the site, insisted that by offering a safe place for the increasing number of drug addicts settling in Rolling Meadows, counsellors (like him) could steer them to a better path.

"What we need to understand is that it isn't our job, as a community, to judge these people for what they are doing to themselves," he, a man with a grey beard and grey ponytail, said to a gorgeous young reporter. "That isn't going to help them."

I showed the video to Monica.

"Does this guy really think drug addicts want to hang out with him and get high?" I asked.

"So?"

"Cool dad is creepy."

"We need to do something," she admitted. "We can't have these people dying all over the place."

Die they did. Addicts overdosed. We had a murder. Murders were not unknown in Rolling Meadows, but they were rare. Once every couple of years, somebody shot his girlfriend or poisoned her father. It happened.

This murder, and the fact that the person bled out on the stoop of the now defunct Kiddie Cuts Hair Salon, upset many. So many, in fact, that the silent anger of the town finally penetrated city hall.

Council loved it. Now they had a problem to fix—a real problem, one we could all rally behind. Mayor Sue built her re-election platform around revitalizing the downtown. Consultation followed consultation, and a plan unfolded. First, they'd revitalize the town plaza and get that fountain working—for everybody. And after that, the town would rezone Meadows Park as a mixed-use public housing development.

That brought about the worst fight of my marriage—the only one when I actually considered leaving my wife.

I thought she'd understand. Wasn't it clear? A housing project in the beautiful park across from our house? I didn't need a property assessment to tell me the value of my home had plummeted. But Monica had convinced herself—or been convinced by the chorus—that with a little more compassion, a smidge more space and time, just a little more mindfulness, the invisible wall standing between our new neighbours and the luxuries we said we had would fall—come crashing down, in fact—like a burst dam and flood Rolling Meadows with that very special something everybody seemed to want but couldn't name.

A bunch of us in the neighbourhood sued the town. Our lawyers advised us to take the settlement and get the hell out of there. Not many people wanted to fight, as it turned out. We took our losses and ran.

I loved that home of ours. Our lives were in that home. We were the first to leave Rolling Meadows, the head of the exodus, and bought a home in

Valley Springs, the next town over, a little deeper into the country. It was the same town where Sue Carroll had moved to after she quit politics. I put my workspace in the sunroom off the back and dithered at my desk.

Len called on a Tuesday morning. "It's not good, but it's not as bad as it could be," he said. The syndicate planned on dropping *Grooster* at the end of the week. Not good. But Len knew a guy who bought the rights to dead and forgotten cartoon characters—a kind of gravedigger in a cartoon cemetery. Another cartoonist might have clung to his creation, but I figured I could make more from the gravedigger in the short-term than I would in the long-term. Ten years before, at the height of *Grooster*'s popularity, we'd exhausted all licensing avenues, and it didn't amount to much. Now, without a daily strip, the chances of somebody wanting to license *Grooster* for a TV show or as the spokeschicken at a fast-food restaurant seemed non-existent. Plus, I didn't care to drag around the corpse of my once-popular comic creation. I drew my last strip without any sentimentality (from me, anyways—Monica was in tears).

A few days later, I signed away the rights, also without sentimentality. No matter how hard I tried to explode the absurdity of Grooster's world, everything I drew felt redundant.

Now retired, I spent my days much like I used to. I dithered at my desk, sometimes completing commissions but often surfing aimlessly across the web. I tried drawing *Doozyville*, but I found good ideas hard to come up with. (Although there is this one that I like. A mother and father sit at a filthy, cluttered kitchen table while their three kids scream and cry. The father says to the mother, "I'm in love with the idea of a clean tablecloth." Monica thought it was too weird for anyone to get.)

When I needed to stretch my legs, I climbed into the station wagon and took Dixon for a drive. I often toured Rolling Meadows. Had I not spent much of my adult life there, I might not have recognized it. Public housing sprouted in what had been Meadows Park. One tower invited another, taller tower. An award-winning architect had connected the houses on our old street to become what is now rudely called an asylum. The fountain in the plaza flowed again, and as I stood at its edge on my last trip to Rolling Meadows, I saw, scattered in its waters, dimes, pennies, and needles.

Over the next ten years later, Rolling Meadows, in a never-ending rush to outpace bankruptcy, sold off parcels of land to condo developers. Old St. Stephen's was resurrected as a nightclub.

The coup came a year before I had my heart attack. In a push to revitalize the city (to "fulfill our DESTINY as a world-class city," as the city's advertising put it), the council allowed a consortium of Las Vegas casino operators to

build an "entertainment hub," complete with haunted houses, a wax museum, the world's largest Dairy Queen, and a ten-story hotel-slash-casino, on the carcass of the mid-century suburbs that had been given over to squatters when the housing market in Rolling Meadows crashed.

I read posts from the people who couldn't escape. Some said they liked it. With all the changes, and with all the new people (a million had descended on that gorgeous but tiny stitch of land), the city finally had a decent Thai restaurant. Others went mad. "Does anybody else remember when you could take an evening walk downtown without a hooker asking for the time?" lamented one resident.

A neighbour replied: "Can I ask why you need to be out so late? And, seriously, if you don't like sex workers asking for the time, don't wear a watch."

I couldn't stop laughing. I laughed until my heart stopped.

We're old now, our kids are married off, and we, the ones who fled to Valley Springs those many years ago, are starting to die off. Cancer. Old age. Contented boredom.

Monica keeps in touch with old neighbourhood friends through Facebook. Sue Carroll is one of them. They still talk about Rolling Meadows, and when they do, a feeling hangs in the air, heavy and sharp, like the scent of a torched forest. It is a feeling that, regardless of what residents have been through, the town did the right thing. Even though we had moved away, even if we could not see each day what we had done to Rolling Meadows, we had made Rolling Meadows more real. We had made it better.

Savouring Forgetfulness

Philip Waxler

Clearing my mind
on the quay
as gulls swoop and dive
and ships unload.

There I divest myself
of my cargo
of memories,
offering them freely

to all takers
not already invested
in heartache,
but curious

to learn how much
one can bear, to serve
for them as a warning,
a precaution.

I have no interest
in finding my way
back to my native land,
would rather roam

the seas as a ghost
vessel, taking on
no more, and pulling in
to a compassionate harbor

when my fuel is spent,
there to bob and float,
a touchstone for the afflicted
longing to forget.


CAUTION
CAUTION CAUTION CAUTION
CAUTION CAUTION CAUTION CAUTION CAUTION

Even in the Summertime

JR Boudreau

Driving to the job three abreast in the front of the van, "Painted Ladies" is on the radio. We pass a field of black cows mechanically chewing cud and Mitch makes obnoxious smooching noises at them through the open window while he steers. His nose is ever scrunched up as if he's permanently sniffing fertilizer. He told me chunks of cartilage had just dribbled out of his nostrils in the shower one morning.

"Look at those pretty girls," he says.

"That's good beef cattle," I say.

"Angus!" yells Dennis, all six-feet and sixty years of him squished between us.

"Square ass on that one."

Winding him up, Mitch repeats some data he's no doubt heard from Dennis: "A square animal is a meat animal."

Where you've got an upper lip, Dennis has a moustache of steel wool. He squints and lifts the bill of his red baseball cap to sun his balding head while his remaining blond hairs blow out the back like tassels.

"Holsteins that go for sale after they've been milked dry," he says. "Ninety-nine percent of 'em go into hamburger 'cause there's more bone in 'em than there is beef. The squarer the ass, the better."

"Dennis," Mitch says, "enough about your sex life."

"Would you quit!"

Cutting through town on Main Street now, we slow for the light and then stop beside the boarded-up diner on the corner. That quiets the talk while we wait for a green. The radio fades.

"Your stepdad's spot," Mitch says finally.

I nod without looking. "They've still got it up for sale."

"The franchise up the road'll inhale the location."

"That man could befriend the Devil, but converse with the Lord," says Dennis.

The light changes, and I think of my stepdad's eyes, the meat of them yellow as morning piss. He'd raised me after my dad lit out, and kept raising me after my mom ran off to Alberta with Bev's old man, our literal neighbour.

I brought a slim envelope along last time I visited. Already on bad red wine, he invited me to stay for dinner, and we ate steaks on the covered back

porch while we watched the storm come on like in the good days, the dark clouds lording over the fields, the rain pulverizing the dirt outdoors—though there were none of Bev's family cattle out there bedding down any longer. Afterward, he put on an old VHS tape of *The Searchers*, which he knew every word to. Then he told me he was going to take a nap before we cooked up those steaks. I didn't know if he was joking or loaded, but once he started snoring, I left him curled up on the couch.

I drove off wondering how much time and labour he'd put in to earn that spread, that view. To be able to watch the stampeding rain without being stuck out in it. But it's gone now, the house sold off for debt, the property plowed over. All returned to seed.

Dennis yawns, "What're you boys doin' for the long weekend?"

"I'm gonna get some coke and go to the casino," says Mitch. "Payday's lucky."

"I'm headin' to the lake with the family," Dennis answers his own question. "How about you, Ward? First summer back, you must be racin' 'round."

"Just trying to get a girl to go out on the town with me. No dice so far."

"No dice?" he says incredulously. "Son, you already smell like red wine and pussy."

"You never had much luck getting girls back to the house," Mitch joshes.

"If she shoots me down," I tell him, "I'll give her your address."

"Woman shoots you down, it's probably because she already has it."

"I'd kick your nose in, Mitchell, if there were any left to kick."

Outside of town, we blow by another ranch. A little driveway beside it leads into the oilfields where the pumps are pulling up dinosaur blood that's fermented in the earth for a hundred million years. The same blood that ran through the shaky veins of Bev's car.

Even after graduation, and for two lucky summers of concrete until the boss informed me I'd be surplus come autumn, Bev and I would park down that very driveway and listen to Meat Loaf once she got off her late shift at the diner. She'd had first dates with faster guys, but she could still turn me on easy as playing around with the thermostat. Half-naked and unashamed in her beige work uniform, she'd tie her long brown hair back and tease that we were siblings now. I remember that rose tattoo surfing her hipbone, the stars gleaming off an array of syringes on the dashboard as she mounted me, those foot-long sewing needles with which her mother repaired the cows after birth. You could smell the petroleum from the fields. We were young, and that was romance.

The van weaves down the dirt road. Occasional beams of sunlight cut through the ash trees and warm the path. We rock side to side in the cab while the tires negotiate the deeply potholed laneway leading to a farmhouse. Its back half has

been ripped away. There's a massive rectangular pit where it used to be. Dunk McLaughlin and Mike the Breath staked and poured the footings yesterday so they could pin out another job this morning. You can tell they did the footings because they're unholy, though they claimed to be within a celery-cunt hair of plumb, square, and level. At the end of the day, Mitch would shrug it off.

"What's the difference if they're level?" he'd say. "We've got the world's best wall crew!"

Mitch leaves the windows down, the doors open, the radio on for entertainment. He strips his light blue shirt from his body and hangs it on the side mirror. I buckle my tool pouch around my hips. The hammer swings from its silver loop like a sidearm.

I unload the scaffolding from the back of the van, leaning a twenty-footer against my shoulder. Its frayed edge grinds against my wiry forearm as I balance it and descend the tricky, crumbling sand, and then pile the scaffolding beside the cages of wall forms. These were dropped into the pit via boom last night by the boss himself. Over the hours, we'll use them to outline the foundation-to-be. I rest the base of one form on the chalky top of the footing and kick it into place while Mitch mirrors it with another, working with me. I lace those two together with metal ties, which slice my knuckles, then latch each of them to their neighbour and hammer them to hold. I proceed in this fashion.

In Mitch's case, I proceed also by asking, "If you had to put Mike down, how would you do it?"

"Just shoot him," offers Dennis from across the pit.

"Shotgun or rifle?"

"Rifle. A three-hundred right in the heart, right in the head, it don't matter. What're you shakin' yer head at? You've never had to destroy an animal, have you?"

I go, "We're talking about a human. I thought you told me you'd never had to destroy a dog before."

"Not a dog."

"Oh. Sorry."

"I've had to shoot a llama, a calf, a sheep—"

"A *llama*?" I ask.

"The wolves got in with the sheep, scared the llama and it ran into the fence. Broke its leg. You can't do anythin' for 'em, eh. You can't let it run 'round with three legs."

"So you shot it in the face," says Mitch.

"No, I shot it in the *head*. My son wanted to see what a shotgun slug would do. Then after that, he never wanted to see what a slug would do again."

Mitch goes, "What looked better, the headless llama or the boxed sheep?"

"Oh, you'd have liked the headless llama. The eyeball was down here."

Mitch insists, "No, I still like the boxed—"

"No, you wouldn't like the boxed lamb!" Dennis tells him.

"He's my favourite."

"We had a deformed lamb born last winter," Dennis enlightens me. "He was like a shoebox. The vet had to do a C-section. He pulls this thing out—no head, no legs, just a hole to breathe, and he goes, 'Don't worry, it'll die in a minute.' Half an hour goes by, its little nostril is still doin' this." He constricts and releases his fist a few times. "But newborns, even if they're gonna die, take forever to die. The will to live is way stronger in animals than in humans."

"We think too much about it," I say. "Did it have a brain in there somewhere?"

"I wish I saw that thing so bad," mumbles Mitch.

"No, you don't," says Dennis. "It was just a big blob."

"You gotta sketch it one day."

Like the merciful will of God, "Paradise by the Dashboard Light" comes on the van radio to drown them out.

I remember dancing one evening at a beachside barbeque that last summer, diamonds of sweat on her upper lip and suspiciously sober. Bev joked that this could've been our song. Then she said it could be ours: that morning's piss test had shown two pink lines, and had I worn a safe? I only recall confessing that I had doubts, that neither of us had a proper model, that we might mould a disaster. Later, in the pit of the night, I came to, still drunk and puking on the shoreline, wondering if I could lay any claim after all.

I go, "What's your favourite song, Dennis?"

"Don't have one."

"Not big into music?"

"I like music."

"Well, like what?"

"All music."

Hours of this, until we've got the walls formed, though they're hollow. Lumbered with two pails of brackets from the van, I march back into the pit. I mount the brackets along the interior face and then lay the scaffolding across them, something to stand on at half-height later, when we guide the wet cement inside. It will be literal tons of concrete pushing against the one wall that's now covering the rear of the farmhouse. We'll have to barricade it with two-by-fours and two-by-sixes and then brace them with rebar stakes, drilled into the ground.

I grab and start the small chainsaw to shave quick angles into the ends of a few braces so they'll go flush against the ground and walls. The exhaust nearly smokes me out of the hole, and the smell reminds me of my stepdad's crappy outboard motor. I wish to sweep away the smell and time by zooming out on that fresh lake—the same lake we spread his ashes on like fish food—scooping bait from the minnow pail, hauling in perch until the stringer is as an anchor off the red tin boat. He would offer me beer from his cooler all day and get offended at my ungratefulness if I declined: *No beer? You sure I can't get ya*

anything else now? Pop? Water? Swift kick in the bag with a frozen boot?

From the van, Dennis yells furiously, "We got the maggot gear! The good drill must be in the other van. Drained batteries, no extension cord... I *am* gonna put Mike down!"

The old guy who owns the farm, whose job this is, comes to the edge of the pit and looks down at me and Mitch. He says, "Are ya winnin'?"

"Undefeated," Mitch tells him.

Dennis strolls over.

"You got a farm, too, right?" the old guy asks him. "You got a cat you could give me? A weasel got in, killed nineteen chickens. Ripped their heads off, sucked the blood!"

"I had one last year," says Dennis.

"A weasel or a mink?"

"A weasel."

"Not a mink?"

"No, a weasel. I know a weasel."

"Didn't get yer chickens?"

"No, I had a cat. You gotta get a cat, it'll take care of it."

"Well, I had one! Weasel killed it, too!"

"A weasel couldn't kill a cat. Mine used to bring 'em to the front door."

"They got along okay?"

"No, the cat killed 'em!"

"A mink?"

"A *weasel!*"

I close the van's backdoor. Mitch unrolls his clean shirt over his shoulders and then drives us into town for lunch. Even the breeze is heavy and humid as he asks Dennis, "Can you give me four or five cigarettes 'til the end of the day? I'll buy you a pack."

"Why don't you just keep havin' one," Dennis tells him.

We stop at a pizza chain where Angie's Restaurant used to be. They sold the best Greek salads in town. Mitch orders a slice and a Coke. Dennis orders one, too, but with a diet soda.

At this, Mitch goes, "I'm ashamed to be your son."

"You ain't!" Dennis shouts.

"*What?*" says Mitch, feigning panic.

The server laughs as she gets me a slice and a root beer. I look down at the cement dust on my jeans, the sweat like coffee rings on my dirty T-shirt, and I remember Bev's grey eyes fighting back angry tears before I left. I think of the three hacked up years I spent unshared, plowing snow for *Ribux* on endless northern roads, shielded from heartbreak at least, and earning. The boredom multiplied my vices. All I did was drink warm whiskey, smoke harsh dope, blare "Read 'Em and Weep," and struggle to discern cowardice from desperation.

It took my stepdad two years to drink himself clear through to the other side once my mom left. I tell myself whatever happened would've happened sooner if he'd never known her at all. But it got him this past winter in the end. He'd forget our phone calls, where I was working, plans for Christmas, which I chalked up to lack of interest or the booze finally washing away his frontal lobe. When I heard he'd gone to the hospital, I called up, but he told me not to visit. Said there was no need. He spoke of work to be done, of beans to grind, of greasing the hitch on the boat trailer, slurring words like he'd had a stroke.

"I'm jus' chewing'um," he mumbled in explanation.

But he wasn't. His kidneys had already calfed, I didn't know. I told him foolish things like "get better," "see you soon," "we'll listen to music round the bonfire this summer."

It was Bev who tracked me down by phone at a bar up north. By then I'd heard that her and Mitch had shacked up in some act of hollow pageantry. She told me she'd been sorry to hear the old man had done it, and I told her thanks for calling, because she was the only one who had. Then I walked out into the field under that winter sun, the tears hot in my eyes, and cursed him for being such a dumb bastard to die at fifty, twice my age at the time, as old as he was when I first met him. But people can't do a thing except stay out of each other's way, I suppose. We're all just an audience to the eternal afflictions. So I went back inside and took one shot of whiskey in his name, like a bullet burning at the back of the throat. There were still roads to clear.

We have a smoke and eat our meals off the hood of the van. Unprompted, Dennis tells of how he met his wife at Beerfest twenty years ago. He didn't have her home until two-thirty in the morning, he says. Her parents didn't like that, their good Catholic girl.

"If I *did* end up looking exactly like you," Mitch interrupts, "would you have a problem with it?"

"You need help."

"Dennis, come on."

"Yeah, I would!" Dennis replies. "It's called stealin' my identity!"

By the time we return to the job, the pink cement truck is idling behind the pumper and loudly churning gravel in its metal belly. The young guy driving the pump unfolds a metal arm by remote control. He's wearing overalls and an oil-stained shirt. He flips a cigarette into one of the empty walls.

"Nice hard hat, you wimp," Mitch greets him. "Hey, loan me a smoke."

The pump guy obeys as he yells over the engine, "Let's get this done, boys. Me and a buddy are headin' up to Muskoka for the long weekend."

"Just you and him?"

"No, we're bringin' our girlfriends. There's no ass up there!"

While he and Mitch bullshit, I walk across the ladder from the ground to

the wall, step down onto the scaffolding, and then drop inside. Dennis takes his time. He crawls over the ladder and squats at the top of the wall, then scoots to the edge and drops the last few feet.

I grab the circular saw and set to angling the tips of a four-by-four beam. The finishing brace, we'll stake it to the ground and nail it to the centremost seam of the biggest wall. Dennis inhales a cigarette and watches me work.

"You're probably the best wall stripper we ever had," he estimates. "Could leave you alone to take down a huge wall all day, and you didn't complain. You'd get lots done. And then this summer, you show up at the yard again, ready to work. Mostly that means endurin' this degenerate, I guess."

He shrugs toward Mitch, who's humping the air dramatically in front of the pump driver. I can hardly make out his words. Something about tuning a woman in the laneway by the barn. I don't say anything. I'm paid to build basements, not tear men down.

"Probably hasn't kissed anyone on the mouth since him and Beverley got divorced," Dennis mutters. "She wanted him to spend last Christmas with the boy, though. Said, 'We ain't doing anything for Christmas. We should get together.'"

"Wow," I say, doing my best to disguise my disgust.

"Nobody wanted to be the one to break yer heart about her and him runnin' 'round."

"Well, I found out, Dennis."

"Yeah," he sighs. "You know, Ward, they used to strap goggles on chickens to keep 'em from peckin' each other to death. The lenses made everything look the same so they couldn't spot a speck of blood, because if a chicken sees even a *blotch*, they'll shred every damn thing, includin' themselves. Could lose an entire flock if they got at it. So if you're lookin' through rose-coloured glasses, guess what? You're *chicken*!"

He laughs to himself. Then his eyes scale the wall to review the wheatfield rising up beside it. Dennis says, "My tomatoes need some rain."

"There's supposed to be a storm on tonight."

"Shit. I'm goin' to the lake today. Forgot all about that."

"Work all day in the sun," I say. "I don't want to go to the beach."

"Water's nice and cool, though."

"You've got to get out eventually."

Suddenly, Mitch leaps into the pit. "You boys got no jam!" he declares.

The pump guy fixes an extension sleeve to the metal arm and uses his control board to aim the soft hose inside the wall.

"You couldn't push a dick in a woman!" he informs Dennis, who stands on the scaffolding and directs the wet concrete with a shovel to the bottoms of the forms and especially into the corners. Below him, Mitch and I scramble

under and between the thick braces up against the base of the wall, hammering along the seams and latches to encourage the cement to fill even the tiniest crevices. As the wall is loaded with weight, several supports begin to squeak and shiver and threaten to blow out.

"Call out if anything breaks!" yells Mitch over the crushing noise of the concrete and the continuous revving of the pump truck.

Dennis looks down at him, then shouts, "Where's yer shirt, you pervert? It's not the Seventies, Mitch. There's labour laws now. You ain't been caught, but it's gonna happen sooner or later. We're supposed to have hard hats on, too!"

"What's gonna fall on a *basement* guy? There's nothing above us yet!"

Dennis starts a list: "A form, a cage, a corner, a two-by-four—"

At that moment, an unused form, nudged out by a trembling brace or by fate, falls from its holding cage and carves a twenty-foot angle downwards through the hot air.

"Heads up!" I shout.

Ignorant and annoyed, Mitch turns to me. The corner of the form strikes him on the shoulder, scratches his chest, and then lodges in the dirt before his steel-toed boots. A thin slice of blood bubbles from his skin. The pump guy pauses the incoming load and we all look at Mitch. He's humbled, but uninjured.

"You shit a little bit?" says Dennis. "Need me to drop you off at Bev's?"

"What the hell would you drop me off at Bev's for?" Mitch says angrily. "We're closer to my place."

"You know. You know why."

"Oh, whatever. I think Ward just tried to murder me."

Afterward, the cement truck takes off early for the weekend while the pump driver rinses the sleeve with a garden hose. The old guy whose job this is comes over to inspect the product. The walls are full and their tops have been trowelled smooth. Plumb, square, and level. I suppose he'll build something beautiful upon our ugly labour.

"How'd you make out?" he says.

"We're still here and the wall's still here," Mitch says as he dons his pristine blue t-shirt. "It's a good day."

The van pokes weightless through a crossroads. It's just after four-o'clock, but the sun's still boiling like morning. Next week, we'll revisit the basement, strip the forms from those solid walls, load up, and move on to whatever job Dunk McLaughlin and Mike the Breath set up earlier today. Their van is already back at the yard. For now, we clean ours out and toss the day's trash in the burn barrel—empty cigarette packs, coffee cups, paper bags—and leave our pouches hanging on hooks in the van. The wind is now a cool relief.

I grab our paycheques from the plastic shelf mounted beside the punch-clock in the garage and snag a string of four light beers from the fridge. I divide the cans and the appropriate cheques between the three of us. Dennis tears the bottom off his and eyes the envelope's contents.

"I'm goin' to the lake," he reminds us.

"Hell, gentlemen, let's all of us go," says Mitch.

"Just stay at the other end, you hooligans. I'm takin' my grandkids."

"Do you still swim, Ward?"

"I don't have any trunks." I chug my beer, then unsheathe and greedily crack the extra can, flicking foam from my fingers.

"What's the diff? You don't go commando, do you?"

"I'll have to meet you guys there."

"The usual bullshit," Mitch sighs. "See you Monday."

"See you *Tuesday*," says Dennis. He volunteers to drop Mitch off on his way home.

The beaded seat in my car is covered in work dust, but it beats the sticky plastic of the plow truck, and the wind clears it out some as I drive. The engine light flashes orange all the way to the bank. It's my turn to provide the booze, so I pop into the liquor store attached to the one-pump gas station next door for a bottle of Ontario white.

I stop at my trailer resting on a knuckle of land they let me carve out at the rear of my stepdad's property, back by the cedars. In the shower, the soap mixes with the grit to wash away the scent of chalk, and the hot water unravels my achy muscles. I scrape off the day's stubble, dry, and put on Levi's and a green tennis shirt. I'm all cologned up. With my towel still damp, I go to the car and wipe down the beaded seat so I don't dirty my jeans again, then spread the towel over the laundry basket.

Stuffing half my pay under my mattress in an envelope for the bank, I slip part of what remains into my wallet, and the leftovers I drop into a jar on the counter for gas and groceries. The brief glint from the shifting jar reminds me of the ring buried somewhere at the bottom, the ring I'd borrowed from my stepdad to afford at all and had only half-paid back, the ring I never offered her in the end.

———

They sold the farm not long after her dad took off to Alberta. Now hers is a small place behind the hockey arena, where the high school kids still go at lunchtime to get the good french fries. The air smells like grease and newly cut grass. She's working at the plant these days but gets awful bored on the shutdowns, especially with Mitch sucking up all the fun around town.

When I pull up behind her turquoise van, Bev is standing on the lawn and tossing chopped celery stalks to rabbits. They scamper off into the ravine as I slam the car door. Her brown hair is in a ponytail and her underbite is slight

and she's wearing one of Mitch's old Thin Lizzy t-shirts loosely. She takes my hand and leads me to the screened-in porch again, where her calico cat is plopped on the floor. It rolls over to the edge of the porch and begins slurping up cobwebs until the meal looks like spilled milkshake in its whiskers.

"What a slug," I tell her.

"I rescued him from the Society," she says as we relax in lawn chairs. "Had a botfly in his neck when they found him, like cattle usually get. It'd sapped him down to his bones, poor thing. You could hold him like this." She holds out her cupped palm. "But I do think he's simple. Still follows me around like an obedient little puppy."

"He knows you saved him."

We pop the bottle of sweating wine and scorch a half-pack of cigarettes while the night heat seeps in and the streetlights come over uninvited. Dark clouds are rolling toward us.

"I love a thunderstorm," Bev tells me.

I picture Dennis hip-deep in the lake, cursing what's coming. Through the open window and in the other room, Meat Loaf is singing "For Crying Out Loud" on the stereo like a lullaby for her son, who's out cold, I assume. Dressed in cut-off jean shorts, Bev plucks stray threads from her thighs. She is bony and she is strong, and she has seen many things.

"So did you decide," she asks, "if you're back for good or just for the summer?"

"For the summer at least," I say.

"You used to say that about us every summer."

"It was true then, too."

"You're a bastard," she laughs, then sighs. "You know you didn't have to leave, Ward," she says. "Back then, I mean. Do you ever think about that, if you hadn't left?"

I remember the revel and the fear of the magic we'd made, the promises spoken and revoked, those things that can never now be said. But I'd had little to offer at the time—a rented house that I shared with Mitch in town, a car that'd soaked up an entire salary in repairs and parking tickets, an income that rose and fell depending on the grace or plague of the season. To settle down, you've got to earn first, or else borrow. Something must be sacrificed.

"Be a different person if I'd stayed," I tell her.

"Different person," she repeats. "A different life."

She smiles, but doesn't say anything more about that. I watch her pretty toes draw lines in the green carpet and then watch her pave over the designs with her soles. She drains a clear plastic cup and refills it, but she just shakes her head. She lifts her baggy t-shirt to me. The rose tattoo below her left hip has faded slightly, and her fingernail imitates a scalpel along the caesarian scar between a thistle and her navel.

"Look what that asshole did to me," she says finally. "When I found out

Mitch cheated, everyone tried to talk me out of keeping the kid. I guess your mom had one once, too, right? Though you wouldn't have even known it."

"You don't want to end up like my mother, Beverley."

"You are *such* a bastard," she laughs again, her smiling teeth combing tight words.

"When're you gonna let me take you out?"

She just sips her wine as she stares over the lawn, at the small streets and the houses. Her grin is distant, her eyes grey and still. She sucks her teeth briefly and then reaches out and rakes her bare nails softly down my tanned forearm.

"You remember that time we went to the drive-in over in Grand Bend? I wore those short boots and we saw *Ladyhawke* and you ate popcorn off my collarbone. You were so shy around my mom when you dropped me off. I think that's the only real date we ever had."

Then she goes quiet again, leans back, and straightens her shoulders to push her chest forward. Cheeks blushing, she stretches her pale calves. So, both of us lonely, I kiss her, strong but gentle. We fit together wisely, like it's three summers ago even. You could see the cows from the porch then, their ears twitching and their heads slowly nodding up and down at sunset. We still wondered how things might turn out.

And sometimes it's raining when I leave her place, and sometimes it's morning. But it's always too late to start over, even in the summertime.

How Shakespeare's Sonnets Taught Me to Stop Fearing Sex and Love Plants

Sara Aster

As the decade of the virus plods on, I have been seeking refuge from the fear and monotony of daily living in houseplants. It's trendy now—to own plants. People have tried to pathologize my generation to explain this trend. They say millennials are too poor or flighty for pets or children, and plants are the low-pressure alternative. Others speculate that urban settings are cutting us off from nature, and without the option of nurturing a backyard, we flock to houseplants as a last resort. Maybe plants force us to slow down amid our (once) hectic, cosmopolitan lives.

I think the plant thing is about sex. At the very least, I think it's about sex for me.

There are many ways in which plants function as metaphors for sex. The language of plants is everywhere in our discussions of human sexuality: we say "seed" for semen, and "flower" and "bush" for the vulva and its hair. Breasts "bud," women "blossom," and men "sow their wild oats." Wombs can be "fertile" like soil. You can't escape plants when you think about sex.

This is not a new thing in our language. Thirty out of Shakespeare's one hundred fifty-four sonnets—still some of the most popular love poems of all time—mention plants. Thirty-nine if you include the references to nature. That's twenty-five percent of Shakespeare's total sonnetic output. It's interesting that references to plants are mostly absent in the latter twenty-eight sonnets, which are about a dark-haired mistress (possibly Shakespeare's wife), while the first one hundred twenty-six, about an unknown male lover, are positively verdant. You can almost imagine Shakespeare sitting around under a tree in the full bloom of spring, moonily daydreaming about whatever young aristocrat had captured his heart. Everything is green; everything is sex. The Bard's muse is beautiful enough to generate over a hundred poems, all superlative in their invocations of the man's appearance:

> How would, I say, mine eyes be blessed made
> By looking on thee in the living day, […]
> All days are nights to see till I see thee,
> And nights bright days when dreams do show thee me.
>
> (Sonnet 43)

"When I accepted this, I faced my fundamental conundrum: sex, I believed, belonged to beautiful people... But if I was ugly and sex belonged to the beautiful, how could I ever have this experience I desperately wanted?"

When I was younger, the thought of sex made me miserable because I was convinced I was too ugly for anyone to want to have sex with me. I felt a perversely pleasant melancholy at this idea. I had a unique cross to bear: everyone else would have sex, but not me. This singled me out and made me a tragic figure—which, in itself, was sort of sexy. I clung to this as my consolation prize for lifelong virginity.

I did not look too closely at the fact that most of my conviction that I would never have sex came from the fact that I couldn't imagine myself having sex with men. I had been imagining myself with women for years.

It felt embarrassing, after styling myself as a contemporary Vestal virgin for twenty years (i.e., committed to an as-yet-undiscovered noble task, possibly writing bad poetry, and therefore unable to indulge in earthly pleasures), to finally admit that yes, I was interested in having sex. When I accepted this, I faced my fundamental conundrum: sex, I believed, belonged to beautiful people. The very first couplet of Shakespeare's Sonnet 1 reads: "From fairest creatures we desire increase,/ That thereby beauty's rose might never die." That's what I thought about sex, in a nutshell. Why propagate an ugly flower? But if I was ugly and sex belonged to the beautiful, how could I ever have this experience I desperately wanted?

Eventually, like many other ugly people, I started having sex. Around the same time, I started becoming interested in houseplants. I don't think that was a coincidence.

I used to be terrified of owning plants for one, big reason: I was afraid of their deaths. As a kid, I had a recurring nightmare that included, in a series of disjointed scenes, a vista of brown leaves all curling in on themselves. The unstoppable process of death in plants was deeply unsettling to me.

Shakespeare's first thirty or so sonnets are obsessed with death. He wrestles with how to prevent the death of his love and preserve his beauty forever. He is able to come up with two solutions to this problem: his love could have a son to carry on his beautiful genes, or Shakespeare could immortalize him in his writing—preferably both. Shakespeare is insistent about his prescriptions. After suggesting that people might not believe how beautiful his love was after he's passed, Shakespeare cautions (nags?) that "were some child of yours alive that time,/ You should live twice, in it and in my rhyme" (Sonnet

17). Shakespeare's most famous sonnet, Sonnet 18, can also be found in this section. It too, is about plants, sex, and death. It reads:

> Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
> Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
> Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
> And summer's lease hath all too short a date [...]

Beautiful people die, and Shakespeare saw that in every plant around him. As far as he was concerned, it was one of the greatest tragedies of living:

> When I do count the clock that tells the time, [...]
> When I behold the violet past the prime, […]
> Then of thy beauty do I question make,
> That thou among the wastes of time must go [...]
> (Sonnet 12)

I acquired my first houseplant, a *Haworthiopsis fasciata*, when a friend moved away and voluntold his friends to adopt his plants. I could not allow mine to die, for fear of disappointing my friend. I took great pains to keep the little plant alive. To my astonishment, the plant began to grow. Still, I was afraid of its death. Like in my childhood nightmare, I feared decay and demise, even when it wasn't actively happening:

> Or, if [birds] sing, 'tis with so dull a cheer
> That leaves look pale, dreading the winter's near.
> (Sonnet 97)

I began collecting more plants following my success with my friend's succulent. Despite all my best efforts, some of these plants died. Plants that flowered spectacularly one season died the next. Plants grew shoots that withered. I poured love and devotion into relationships, and still they ended.

> For never-resting time leads summer on
> To hideous winter and confounds him there,
> Sap checked with frost and lusty leaves quite gone,
> Beauty o'er-snowed and bareness everywhere.
> (Sonnet 5)

I always thought sex would transform me, Beauty and the Beast-style, into someone worth having sex with. When I began having sex, exactly as I was, without experiencing a Miss Congeniality-style transformation first, it was heartbreaking. I realized I did not have to be beautiful to have sex.

Consequently, I realized that sex did not have the capacity to stave off death or pain or heartbreak, all properly the domain of ugly people. This is something I really believed as a kid, even if just subconsciously: being beautiful enough to have a sexual partner guaranteed a person infinite generative power, essentially, a kind of immortality. Beautiful people, like Shakespeare's love, lived on forever in the adoring words of others.

It took me a while to realize that the sex I was experiencing wasn't bad. Eventually, it felt like a revelation to engage in an act that was pleasurable and blatantly, unapologetically ugly. Like my bumpy, fleshy, hairy plants, sex was fun because it was natural for it to be all of those things. It was a mortal pleasure, not a saintly one. I have a pet theory that millennials buy cacti and succulents because they look strange, and because we are starved of things that look strange. To be strange, to be ugly, is to be expelled from the garden of Eden—to be sentenced to mortality, and ultimately, death. Without beauty, we cannot transcend. Only beauty is called upon to replicate in Shakespeare's sonnets. But to be able to revel in the ugliness of sex is to participate in the delight of an earthly garden. It is full of imperfections. It is not eternal, but everyone is allowed in. And for that reason, there are some weird, interesting plants there.

Despite his hang-ups, I think Shakespeare, too, was trying to make peace with his temporary garden:

> But flowers distilled, though they with winter meet,
> Leese but their show; their substance still lives sweet.
> (Sonnet 5)

In French, they call the post-orgasm feeling *le petit mort*, the "little death." All yearning, all progress forward, all narrative thrust, ends in sex. I am not the first person to point this out, but it has taken me a long time to accept all of the implications of this fact. Sex is ugly—and when I accepted that, I finally realized that it was beautiful. And I stopped being afraid of dying houseplants.


35A
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DRIVE THRU
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Parallel Lines: The Artistic Life of Dennis Hopper

Stephen Lee Naish

This is a re-edited excerpt from* Create or Die: Essays on the Artistry of Dennis Hopper*, first published by Amsterdam University Press (2016).

One of Dennis Hopper's last film appearances was in Belgian artist Nicolas Provost's 22-minute short film Stardust (2010). The film featured Las Vegas cityscapes, busy street scenes, members of the public, and celebrities being filmed unawares using a high-resolution digital camera. Provost then edited the footage to create a loose narrative using snippets of dialogue from old Hollywood films. Provost filmed Hopper from a distance innocently talking in a McDonald's restaurant with fellow actor Danny Trejo. Their unheard dialogue is replaced with cliché gangster talk. Provost also captured Jack Nicholson leering at some girls as they passed by a Las Vegas nightclub. It is fitting that one of Hopper's last appearances committed to film would be in an artistic context. Running parallel to his late-career exile from mainstream film and reliance on straight-to-DVD movies, Hopper faced a resurgence of interest in his output as a painter, conceptual artist, and photographer.

It is a fascinating paradox, in that Hopper's artistic expression in photography, painting, and sculpture is acknowledged as uncompromisingly passionate and raw, yet much of his later film work would appear, at least on the surface, to be the complete opposite. The films from Hopper's last decade as an actor such as *10th & Wolf*, *The Crow: Wicked Prayer*, *Hoboken Hollow*, *Held for Ransom*, and *House of 9* might have held interesting concepts, but fell below the standards and have ultimately been forgotten.

The resurgence of interest in Hopper as an artist accumulated in a 2009 touring exhibition of his collected artworks entitled *Dennis Hopper and the New Hollywood* that went on display at The Cinémathèque Française in Paris. The exhibition featured photographs, abstract paintings, conceptual art, sculptures, found pieces, and screenings of his more revered film work. The exhibition moved on to the Australian Centre for the Moving Image in Melbourne. A coffee table book of the same name highlighting Hopper's own artwork, art collection, interviews, and musings on art and film was produced in conjunction with the exhibitions. After his death in 2010, rediscovered photos filled numerous expensive tomes. Most notably *Dennis Hopper: Photographs 1961-1967* and *Dennis Hopper: The Lost Album*, which again coincided with a touring exhibition of photos and prints found tucked away in a drawer. The more recently released monograph *Dennis Hopper: Drugstore Camera* was a

collection of improvised shots using cheap store-bought Instamatic cameras that clearly illustrated Hopper's eye for candid photography. A collection of Polaroids unearthed from his directing gig on the 1988 gang film *Colors* was collected and issued as *Dennis Hopper: Colors. The Polaroids*. More is said to be on the way. Hopper presented the 2007 British Turner Prize to artist Mark Wallinger for his exhibition *State Britain*, a sincere recognition of his status as an art connoisseur.

Hopper was first introduced to contemporary art by frequenting newly established galleries and art studios that were popping up in Los Angeles and New York in the late 1950s and early 1960s. At that time, Hopper was soaking up the creativity around him, taking photographs of the artists and gallery shows with his trusty Nikon camera. He was also producing expressionist-style art. Hopper took inspiration from everywhere: he observed art in everything and soaked up influence and inspiration. His work covered almost every movement and genre, from abstract painting, pop art, installation, and found pieces to sculpture. As with his film work, where Hopper would adapt his own style and manner to suit the type of film or character he was playing, in art, he also shifted his approach to create a personalized concept of any given artistic genre.

"Hopper's films should be seen as an expression of artistic intent. He saw the two mediums as being able to achieve the same thing. Film directing or film acting, in Hopper's mind, were equal to painting, taking photographs, or creating a sculpture."

If, indeed, we know of this hidden facet of Hopper's life, we tend to perceive his film and artwork as two separate entities. For us, the line that divides film and canvas never blurs. Even his directorial work in *Easy Rider* and *The Last Movie* can be viewed as having artistic intent, but as a whole, an audience will always observe it as a form of media designed to entertain, not necessarily to educate or inform us. This is not how Hopper perceived his own art or film work. Art historian Rudi Fuchs suggests that Hopper's acting and directing "activities are inextricably linked with that same artistry at the actual center of his existence."

Hopper's films should be seen as an expression of artistic intent. He saw the two mediums as being able to achieve the same thing. Film directing or film acting, in Hopper's mind, were equal to painting, taking photographs, or creating a sculpture. Even collecting artistic works was a creative act and a

way for the piece to continue its journey to thrive and redefine itself under his brief ownership. In a short documentary produced by EarDog Productions, in which Hopper guides the filmmakers around his studio space, he explains that at "best, what you can do with collecting is to make sure you take care of the pieces, because you are really just a custodian of them, and hopefully, they will live on beyond your lifetime." He goes on to explain his philosophy toward collecting as "not buying bankable names, but buying people who I believe are contributing something to my artistic life."

The young Hopper considered himself an empty paint can, his influences from film, art, and literature filling him until his own creativity inevitably spilled out. He considered art his lifeblood. Much like his influences in acting and directing, Hopper took inspiration for his own art from the many forms of art he saw as a gallery bum in the early 1960s.

Hopper's involvement with the emerging gallery scene in Los Angeles and his friendships with exciting artists of the day, such as Andy Warhol, Marcel Duchamp, and the numerous contributing artists of the L.A. Ferus Gallery, saw Hopper inundated with influences when it came to creating himself. Writer Howard Hampton best describes Dennis Hopper's photographic works as an "unfolding narrative of the 1960s at the intersection of Pop Art and Hollywood" and as "virtual stills from the greatest unmade film of the 1960s."

Hopper's photographic work from the 1960s is a document of the era, an exposé of the lives of American people living in a turbulent yet hopeful decade. Hopper documented youth with photos of his fresh-faced New Hollywood clique, illustrating a vibrant American society. His work takes in the glitz and glamour of the people who populated the movement with improvisational portraits of his contemporaries in film and art: Paul Newman, Dean Stockwell, and Jane Fonda, as well as his artistic acquaintances Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and David Hockney. He also took photos of the musicians and bands important to the decade's cultural upheaval: The Byrds, Brain Jones from The Rolling Stones, Ike, and Tina Turner.

Hopper documented a revolution in the civil rights marches that brought a new era of political participation by marginalized groups. For example, his photographs of Martin Luther King Jr. addressing an audience of civil rights activists in 1963 has become an iconic image of the movement. Talking into a tangle of microphones, King appears sidelined into the edge of the photograph's frame. Hopper centers the microphones within the frame of the picture, which could be a signifier that the message delivered is more important than the person delivering the words. The ideals and expectations of those King addressed were a shared concern. King fluently communicated these ideas to the people, but the movement began before Martin Luther King Jr. and continued to gain momentum after his death. Much like his fast and vibrant directorial work, his photographs—though predominantly black and white

in this medium—capture movement, emotion, and an expression that some important momentum is gathering unseen and outside the frame. Hopper was always attempting to make socially conscious comments.

Hopper's documenting of the Civil Rights Movement gave an important and honest portrayal of the hopes and dreams of a socially underprivileged part of the American population. One-piece entitled *Selma, Alabama (Full Employment)* (1965) illustrates the determination of the young African-American community to gain equal rights and opportunities in the future of America. The young man standing center frame shoots the camera a glare of determination and a belief in what he wishes to achieve for himself and others. Behind the young man, a young woman casually hoists an American flag over her shoulder, a symbol of patriotism, belief, and pride in a country that still had a lot to achieve in terms of equality and fairness.

Considering the social and political context of his work, it should come as no surprise that Hopper documented one of the most seismic events in American history: the assassination of John F. Kennedy. A piece entitled *Kennedy Funeral on Television* (1963) shows eight grainy still-frame close-up shots from the state procession of President Kennedy that was televised to the nation. The piece conjures up the grief of the national conscience, yet it also points toward hope and courage in the face of despair, an act of bringing a nation together under the banner of loss and anguish. Frames six and eight, when the American flag is draped over the coffin that carries the dead president, instantly evoke pride and audacity within the viewer and remind us that a hero to the American people lies under the flag, potentially a martyr of the American Dream. However, a certain distance is suggested within the piece. By witnessing the event on television (as many would have done), Hopper is perhaps commenting on the detachment and coldness of television and modern culture. The first photo shows the television at a distance. Kennedy's iconic image, taken from archival footage of when he was alive, lights up on the screen. In the next shot, we are up close to the television screen, as if the funeral was just something that happened to be on or something stumbled upon while aimlessly flicking channels in a motel room. Hopper also used the same technique of photographing images for the televised moon landing, another national event witnessed by many via television.

Double Standard (1964) is one of Hopper's more famous photographic works. *Double Standard* emerges as an unsentimental comment on post-war American society. Situated in the middle of the frame is a Standard Oil gas station with two signs side by side reading "Standard." A billboard above the station reads, "Smart Women cook with gas in balanced power homes," a materialistic advertisement aimed at the domesticated woman of America. This image was taken prior to the full escalation of America's involvement in the Vietnam War and at a time when people still believed the war was a reasonably just cause. America was excelling in terms of business, capitalism, and materialism, and

socially, the country was addressing the issue of civil rights with the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. A sense of optimism prevailed, which can be witnessed in *Double Standard*. The photo is framed by a cemented road and a dark foreboding sky that almost matches in colour, lighting up the scene ahead and framing the image within. In the rear-view mirror, we see a line of cars, which on closer inspection, appear to have no drivers at the wheel. There is an absence of people in the shot, although they are present in terms of being there (in cars, inside the gas station), apart from a sole figure who stands alone on the sidewalk in between the two roads, looking like he's waiting for someone or is just lost. It is an exceptional, seemingly impromptu photograph that conjures up a defining image of early 1960s America. It is also, in retrospect, recognizably a Dennis Hopper photograph. With an added dash of colour, it resembles the last few moments of *Easy Rider* in which Billy and Wyatt ramble through an industrialized landscape, the first time in the film that we see a truly modern environment.

"What Hopper appears to be letting the spectator understand is that even though he recovered, darkness and a sense of guilt still lingered."

However, what is most apparent in this photo are the two roads heading off in opposite directions and into an unknown distance, two very different directions to be taken. In his own career, Hopper also walked two very different roads. One is the creative, passionate, and independent artist, the person responsible for creating such work as *Double Standard*, *Easy Rider*, *The Last Movie*, and *Out of the Blue*—works of artistic integrity. The other road Hopper took led to compromise and to movies such as *Super Mario Bros*. With a few exceptions, a distinct lack of integrity was persistent in the last decade of his film career. With the onset of his directorial career in 1969, Hopper abandoned photography for the next twenty years. For us, the audience, this represents a huge gap in his artistic life, and an unfortunate lack, at least for the spectator, of documentation for the escalating madness that would befall him (and America) from the 1970s to the mid-1980s. When he finally returned to the medium in the late 1980s, his principles, approach, and technique had changed, and so had the technology. In the 1960s, Hopper documented his surroundings, the people, the changing landscape of popular culture, and public life in spontaneous, bold, black-and-white photographic film. His new method seemed to drop the social and political commentary and focused more on the personal.

"The act of filmmaking is a creation of illusion and spectacle, and Hopper playfully confuses the audience into what they should comprehend."

A self-portrait from 1997 titled *Within a man of light, there is only light, within a man of darkness, there is only darkness* shows two dark images of Hopper silhouetted against a bright white background. In the first portrait, the interior of Hopper's silhouette is a bright lens flare that emerges from the head and trails down the front of the figure. In the second portrait, the interior of the figure is completely black. This is a compelling work of experimental photography, and given Hopper's own personal history, it could be a comment on his own past and internal demons. The "man of light," which we assume is the clean, sober, and sane Hopper, attracts the eye of the observer, whilst the "man of darkness" lingers to the side, evoking a sinister presence or an echo of a darker interior self or past. Although Hopper had survived a great deal of personal trauma, including drug and alcohol addiction, career disintegration, several failed marriages, and broken friendships, he had come out the other side stronger and more determined. What Hopper appears to be letting the spectator understand is that even though he recovered, darkness and a sense of guilt still lingered.

Whereas in the 1960s, Hopper would use his camera as a tool to capture a spontaneous moment, his later photographic works rely on set-up and composition. Comparing his spur-of-the-moment photograph of 1960s stars Andy Warhol, James Brown, and Jane Fonda with his 2006 portraits of Robert Downey Jr, Michael Madsen, Charlie Sheen, and Jon Voight, there is an impression of composure from the subjects, the knowledge that they are having their picture taken. After a twenty-year hiatus, Hopper's use of this medium perhaps became something more akin to a leisure pursuit. This certainly seems likely in his decision to photograph a porn shoot for the American pornographic magazine *Hustler* in the late 1980s for a series called "Celebrity Porn." During the production of the straight-to-DVD noir thriller *Out of Season* (2004), Hopper used the unique shooting location of Romania to experiment with digital photography. The outcome of this was the slim monograph *Bucharest Nights*. The digital stills collected in *Bucharest Nights* capture ethereal spontaneity, but the focus here is on experimentation and even voyeurism.

The theme of reality and illusion has become regarded as a staple of Hopper's work, not only in art but also in film. *The Last Movie* (1971), for example, is a testament to what we perceive as a reality or an illusion.

The act of filmmaking is a creation of illusion and spectacle, and Hopper playfully confuses the audience into what they should comprehend. In his artwork, Hopper mixed mediums in a chaotic fashion, a fusion of styles and abstract forms often gathering in one piece. Hopper's earliest pieces resemble the abstract expressionism that was infiltrating the art scene of the time. Unfortunately, most of Hopper's earliest pieces were lost when a fire ripped through his Los Angeles home, destroying most of his work. Only one piece survives from that time, an untitled abstract oil painting, which was on display in an LA gallery at the time. Although a brilliantly textured piece, it is clear that Hopper was experimenting with form and would go on to produce more daring work in the years ahead. The Pop Art movement, the mixed media collage, as well as the found piece heavily influenced Hopper's artwork in the early to mid-1960s. Two examples of the found piece are his *Mobil Man* and *Salsa Man*. Originally used as roadside advertisements for a Mobil garage and a Spanish Mexican restaurant, the 26-foot-tall fiberglass statues have been taken out of their original context to become something more profound: a comment on consumerism and overindulgent advertising culture. Another found piece which echoes Andy Warhol's own pop artwork is *Coca Cola Sign* (1961), a tin sign possibly used as a store window display, with four cola bottles and thermometers showing the suggested serving temperature. It is interesting to see that Hopper seems to find his found art in product advertising. It could be argued that this was Hopper's intention with these found pieces, a comment on puerile marketing tactics that were being used by every industry in America at the time, including the film industry that Hopper was working within. In 1963, Hopper collaborated with his artistic mentor Marcel Duchamp (the influential artist who produced the found piece *Fountain*, a men's urinal taken out of the bathroom and placed in a gallery setting) to create the found piece *Hotel Green (Entrance)*, a door sign to a hotel entrance that points guests toward the entrance. The hand pointing toward the right perhaps illustrates Duchamp's theory that "the artist of the future will merely point his finger and say it's art—and it will be art." In this case, Hopper takes the finger-pointing literally.

Hopper entered something of a dry spell during the 1970s; the disappointment with being shunned from Hollywood a second time after *The Last Movie* and his drink and drug misuse kept him somewhat preoccupied. He "collaborated" with Andy Warhol on one of his Chairman Mao pieces, although the joint effort was prompted by an act of paranoia and violence as opposed to an artistic endeavour. The screen-print image of Chinese communist leader Chairman Mao, with Warhol's distinctive high contrast colouring was shot at twice by a spooked, and one might assume, intoxicated Hopper in 1972. Warhol circled the bullet holes and labelled them "Warning Shot" to the bullet that hit just above Mao's shoulder and "Bullet Hole" for the shot that hit the eye. Afterward, he proclaimed the piece an artistic

collaboration between the two of them.

By the end of the 1970s and early 1980s, Hopper's excessive use of drugs and drink had reached a critical point. Unable to command a reputable career in film, his roles were mostly embodiments of his own outrageous persona seen in *Mad Dog Morgan* (1976) and *White Star* (1984). This persona was caught on camera during a career retrospective at the Rice Media Centre in Houston, Texas, in 1984. An inebriated Hopper readies the audience for what will be an art happening, a death-defying stunt called The Russian Suicide Chair. Spectators were bussed to a nearby speedway and watched with bated breath as Hopper surrounded himself with live dynamite and simultaneously ignited the sticks to create a vortex that shielded him from the violent explosion. One misplaced stick would have blown him to pieces. This moment was, in turn, an artistic resurrection (possibly triggered by the near-death experience). After a decade of producing little to no artistic works, Hopper began experimenting with paint again. The untitled works produced between 1982 and 1983 are darker in tone and expel many pop art influences to concentrate on the expressionist. In terms of Hopper's state of mind, the abstracts speak volumes. An acrylic entitled *X-Xerox* (1982) exposes a statement of depression, like a damaged and cracking film reel. The paintings produced in 1982 to 1983 show a private expression of creativity, a testing of the waters, and a regaining of confidence in the field. When his film comeback occurred in 1986, Hopper's state of mind and his artwork were revived with a sense of positivity and freedom.

The Morocco series of paintings, which date from 1994, are bold and colourful. Reds, oranges, and blues with dashes of white and black reflect a very different mood from anything Hopper had produced previously. They also suitably reflect Hopper's ease with a paintbrush. The works appear effortless, composed and full of life. In comparison, the series of works produced later, entitled *Florence* (1996) and *Amsterdam* (1998-1999), are more subdued, paler, and seem less vital. Nevertheless, these works still show Hopper to be an inspired artist, working within an abstract medium he clearly felt comfortable with.

In Hopper's earlier directorial film work, he was often perceived as uncompromising. The looseness and even the content of *Easy Rider* were at odds with the current film market of the time, while *The Last Movie* was so far removed from the mainstream that it was barely understood by critics and audiences. *Out of the Blue* was as disturbing and nihilistic as any of the post-punk films of the early 1980s. *Colors* towed the mainstream line, but the film's downbeat tone, drug referencing, violent gang warfare, and use of hip-hop on the soundtrack meant that the film maintained a strong critical voice, again at odds with mainstream cinema at the time. When compromises began to occur in his later film work, he withdrew his name from the product, as witnessed in his film *Catchfire*. Hopper attempted to bridge the gap between mainstream

film and his dedication to art and artists by incorporating artistic elements within the movies he directed. On some level, they were mostly successful, certainly visually, as witnessed in *Easy Rider* and *The Last Movie*'s editing techniques influenced by European arthouse cinema and experimental film.

Hopper produced impressive art, photographs, and sculptures, and for this, he is effectively faultless and universally recognized in artistic circles for his output. However, his film work is a different matter altogether. The faults appear on a regular basis, especially as his career progressed—or dwindled—into the 2000s. What Hopper's film work shows is that, unlike other art forms, a film can be considered abysmal and still find a small and somewhat appreciative audience. Bad photographs, bad art, and bad sculpture are seldom tolerated in art circles; they simply become a novelty or are reduced to ridicule. Of course, art is down to personal preference and interpretation.

When a spectator observes a form of art, they garner pleasure and appreciation from it. The audience recognizes it as being a superior, important piece of art or, depending on our interpretation, we reject it altogether. This is not the case with film. An audience can view a bad film and still find redeeming qualities or, most often, some moments of hilarity. This is something that rarely happens in other artistic mediums. It is certainly something that Dennis Hopper never chose to explore in his artworks and photography. Dennis Hopper made great art, but he did not always make great movies. It is a shame that the aspect of Dennis Hopper's career that he is most known for is where he is least appreciated. His artistic works have rarely, if ever, received the same critical mauling, or praise, that his film work has.

Lambing Season

Katie Strubel

They come into the world
red-streaked and steaming.
Blind and not worth much,
roughed-up between worn hands
and mother's tongue.

Coyotes maraud at dusk,
gums raw with want. Gunfire
invites them, signaling
new life worth killing for.

Tonight, the lambs will sleep
on kitchen linoleum and drink
stove-warmed colostrum. Dreaming
beneath the sound of starving pups
on the horizon. No one is dying
tonight.

Watery Bodies

Jennifer Thompson

> *"I was worried slightly that anyone who saw me wading into the Scottish sea that misty morning might think I was killing myself when in fact it was the opposite; I was aliving myself."*
> – Amy Liptrot, *The Outrun*

There are three reasons I am scared of dying.

1. When investigating the circumstances of my tragic and early demise, I do not want police to discover the teddy I still sleep with or that my last Google searches were "Anthony Armstrong-Jones" and "how to write about depression."
2. All attempts at poetry written between 2001 and 2019 must never be found.
3. I love my family, and I could not bear to hurt them. Ghostly imaginings of their grief are enough to anchor me to earth. Even in death, I know that I could not help but feed on my family's sadness.

We forget, don't we, that when we die, we are dead. The pulse fades, our muscles relax, and the mind drifts into undisturbed rest. In life, we haunt ourselves. We've all done it. In bed at night, imagining life after our deaths. Images you didn't know you had committed to memory. The sound of your parents crying in the wee hours when they thought you were sleeping. The white-eyed look of fear and rage when you are hurting and your parents know you cannot be fixed. The terror of knowing your parents will fall apart. Those people who, as you grew up, turned from superhero, to human, to superhuman. A blueprint of what form grief will take when we are gone. Nightmares of our own making.

This is what I thought of when a therapist asked me if I had considered ending my life. I told her "no." I thought about walking into oncoming traffic, but I didn't tell her that.

I had been working in a pharmacy. Under sterile white lights, I sold makeup, incontinence pads, and nipple guards and waited for the hiss of the automatic doors. Each time they swished open, I heard the cars, the lorries, the trains on the track. Swish of doors. Hush of traffic. Swish of doors. Din of shop. Over and over and over. I waited for customers to enter and customers

to leave. I listened to the traffic. Stood at the front of the shop, behind the tills. *If it gets too much, the road is just there. You can go. Do it.*

I listened to the traffic. I thought about my parents. Somewhere, in the hospital on the other side of town, Mum was feeding tubes and wires into tiny bodies. On another floor, Dad was lying on a table as radiation was beamed into his body. I thought of them twenty-two years ago, in the hospital waiting to meet me after months of IVF. I listened to the traffic.

The previous winter, I worried my parents by not going to university after all. Six months later, I had a job that I hated, and Dad's cancer treatment was making him ill. Shame welled up from my core. As Mum helped Dad navigate a world of radiotherapy and hormone injections, my mind grew foggier. Someone was dimming the lights. On top of her high-stress job, she now had a sick husband and a depressed daughter. There is only so much we can ask our mothers to do, so I took myself away to get help. Antidepressants and beta blockers. One in the evening, one before breakfast.

Depression settles in your bones like damp. What at first you thought was fixable seeps into cracks you didn't know existed. Layers peel away from the core of you and tarnish what was there before. Rotting from the inside out—images of yourself before the sadness is lost. Soon, you feel it best to tear down the life you'd made and start again. I don't know about you, but I don't believe we start again.

My parents had an old Jack Russell. He liked toast and long grass, and he hated fireworks. After years of watching him fret over the autumnal artillery, they bought tablets that promised to keep him calm. No longer would we need the television to be ear-bleedingly high, nor cover his ears with cotton towels.

Tablets administered in a block of cheddar; he settled slowly into a stupor. When the fireworks began, there were no signs of his usual anxiety. The barking and whining had gone.

I watched as his head lolled to one side, and his legs quivered uncontrollably against his pink belly. His eyebrows rose at every bang, and still, his brown eyes widened in terror. Guilt bloomed in all of us.

Far from easing our little dog's fear, the tablets had simply stopped his ability to respond to it.

I listened to the traffic. After months of circulating through my body, the tablets stopped the swelling sadness. They stopped me from feeling anything at all. Rising to work, listening to the traffic, coming home to sleep. Never moving forward, I froze like a clock hand repeating the same second. I listened to the traffic. I thought of my parents' wide eyes and of myself rising from the ground to wipe away their tears. I didn't want to die. Instead, I needed something to

shock me into living. My boyfriend said I was a zombie. As I was on the verge of a breakdown, my doctor signed me off work.

My sadness breached its hideout on my best friend's birthday. I drank enough Prosecco to fuel a hangover that lasted from Good Friday to Easter Monday. When a stranger in a bar called me "the epitome of depression," I punched him. I came off the drugs and stopped the wild nights out. The next day, I quit my job at the pharmacy. It was time to get help. Sally, Rosie, Pauline, Jackson, Sarah. I began seeing a therapist and have done so, intermittently, ever since.

In my undergraduate counsellor's office, I sat watching men ascend the scaffolding beyond the window. University came calling in the end.

"What do you do for fun?" she asked.

"Wild swimming."

Growing up, swimming by default meant rivers and oceans. The notion of it being "wild" never occurred to us as children. We have added the word to distinguish chlorine from cold water. To me, wild swimming always seemed like something reserved for adrenaline junkies and triathletes. I am more of a wild bobber.

Over the following weeks, the counsellor asked how my swimming was going. She spoke of documentaries watched, the benefits of cold water, and the wetsuited women she had seen at the beach. "Is that you?" she once asked. I told her that I only use a wetsuit in the winter but was trying to build up resistance.

I can't remember when I first began to crave the thrill of cold water. I hated swimming lessons and detested the galas that my school forced me to participate in. But cold water is innate to me and one that other people recognize. Years ago, I convinced a flatmate that my connection to water was down to Mum insisting I was born on the seashore. A barefaced lie. As a child on holiday in Majorca, I had stayed in the water so long I turned blue. The manic in me likes the thrill of the pain.

I phoned Dad and asked him where my love for wild water came from.

"I think you started in rivers and streams in the New Forest," he said.

A photograph of me and my best friend, around six or seven, swimming by a bridge in one of the forest rivers. Our bodies spectral under the orange water. Other children sit on the bank, watching.

Mum disagrees with him. She claims it was open water pools in France that did it. Pools I stayed in all day until forcibly removed at bedtime. Talk to anyone claiming to be a "wild swimmer," and you'll get a myriad of reasons to do it. For one's well-being, the challenge, the rush. When people stop me on the shoreline and ask why I do it, I find myself repeating the words of author Alexandra Heminsley: it is a "hangover in reverse."

I told my therapist this. She looked impressed. I felt depressed. I thought about walking into the sea.

In one of my final sessions, the hour ended with a waterfall of tears and words. I left the office to face my depression alone.

"You like the sea, so think of it like a wave." She told me of her husband, who bought a boat though she detested sailing. On each voyage, she sat in the cabin, waiting to return to the marina.

"He taught me that I have to stand and face the waves. Watch each beast as it comes in. There is nothing that will stop it, but I know it is there and prepare myself for it."

These days, when I feel the damp creeping back into my bones, I think about walking into the sea.

I stood on the shoreline of my childhood beach. A skirr of air whipped at my ear. Looking up, I saw it was a gull, either black-headed or Mediterranean. For a while, it bobbed in the air, floating in one spot. It looked haughtily over its wing and, with no discernible effort, darted left to right in an imaginary slalom. Then it shat in the water before me.

One of the lighter hazards of swimming in the sea, I suppose.

I came back to my hometown after calling Mum from the darkness of my flat, in tears and homesick. Bundled into my parents' Honda Civic, I was brought home to Dorset.

The drive home from Devon had been a wet one, our car encased by the kind of mizzle that I've only known from living in the West Country. Dark leaves I couldn't identify whizzed past the window, and my heart leapt when I saw the *Welcome to Dorset* sign. A weasel darted in front of the car, its russet coat fixed in the headlights. It bounded fluidly onto the verge, and in my mind, it looked like a child. A toddler chasing butterflies. Buzzards turned on the wind high above us, and at the center of a field overgrown with grass, I saw a lone doe, plain and unmoving.

I usually start to settle by the hills around Bridport. I twisted my neck to look at the sea between the farmland as we drove east. My view of the grey water was obscured by trees. A rift of sea mist clung to the hills, and I watched the old manors that served as my landmarks slip in and out of view, straining my neck to see each of them. The familiarity was fading. Only glimpses remained. Inside Dorset's borders, I thought I would be able to see my homeland clearly. Perhaps we only come to understand these places once we have left.

"I expect you'll want to go swimming while you're back," Mum had said from the passenger seat.

Now it's my final day in Dorset, and here I stand on the shoreline of my favourite place to swim, watching guano disappear beneath the sea's surface like yogurt down a drain. Time to get in.

People have different techniques for entering cold water. Some people edge in, waiting for each limb to acclimatize. Mum walks up to her waist and then dives into breaststroke, head held high above the surface. I creep in. Waves lick at my toes, so cold it burns. The bottom half is easy; feet and legs are forgotten as they go numb. I walk in steadily until the water line cuts my head from my shoulders. Easier said than done when the cold forces your shoulders up to your ears. Sometimes, as I walk in, I imagine Virginia and Ophelia at my side. Then I remember that they walked into lakes and leave these melancholy ruminations with my towel and knickers.

I crave cold water because it makes me feel. After the slow stagnation of monotonous everyday life, cold water injects vitality. It forces me into living. To feel the prickle of water on the skin is intensely physical, an act of simply stepping from our terrestrial world into one made of water.

Roger Deakin, a writer and environmentalist, called it "the frog's eye view." Perhaps for me, it is the gull's eye view, sitting on top of the water, neither in nor out. For a while, we can be as they are. Slip on our swimming costumes and cut through the water as it loops and slides around us. Slipping into wild water, we see a world not quite ours. An in-between.

There is something about our two watery bodies, the sea and me, wrapped around each other. On the shore, Dad is looking through his binoculars at ships moored on the horizon. Mum is eating an orange. Now, when the damp creeps in, I'll think of them and imagine walking into oncoming waves.

Brief Glimpses of Life

Jérémi Doucet

The bookshelves in my parents' home are filled with self-help literature. Titles like *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari*, *The Power of Now*, and *How to Be A Badass* always seemed commonplace to me growing up. As though everyone had those same books and was on a similar quest: to find their *authentic* selves—whatever that meant. When I first picked up Robin Sharma's book (the one about the monk), an entire world seemed to open up. A world where one could become an inspiration to millions, a spiritual deity, and the envy of *unwoken* people far and wide.

Since that first glimpse into the matrix of self-elevation, I've travelled through many wormholes of YouTube inspiration videos with ambient music and comments like: "To the person reading this, just know that you are blessed and perfect." And when I came out, I *did* decide to cash in on those blessings by running off, writing poems about freedom, and hitchhiking to Panama.

The problem is, now that my wanderings are over and I've crawled back home, I'm still not sure *who I am*, in spiritual parlance. After walking barefoot through many forests and refusing to buy deodorant for years, what I do know is that the path toward understanding oneself is not as clear-cut as those books first made it seem.

A few nights ago, I spoke to my friend Cameron on the phone. I wanted to ask him what it means to "know thyself." He likes mushrooms and Eckart Tolle. One of his nicknames is *Moose Legs*, and he likes to say he has a big ego. He's of the opinion that—at least where the creative process is concerned—there is no self. There is only a oneness that individuals tap into that transcends self, and *that* is the universal root of authentic expression. He got that from Eckart.

His theory called to mind my old roommate in Ottawa. He was a New Yorker wrapping up his Ph.D. in Philosophy. He spent hours telling me about Neoplatonism and the Trial of Socrates as I washed our dishes. One day, he came home from Kingston with a vial of DMT, and after watching Tarkovsky's *Stalker* together, we tried it. A typical DMT trip lasts no more than ten minutes.

I figured I didn't hold in the smoke long enough. When the ten minutes were up, Ben dashed out of my room in search of a pencil. He soon explained that he'd received a divine revelation: He was taken out of his body and into

an ethereal sphere of what he described as "the divine brain," where he merged and melted into exactly that oneness that Cameron was talking about. I only saw an eye set against a twirling red background and then something that resembled a vulva beckoning.

I asked what we ought to do with this new and seemingly important discovery. He spoke more about Plato and Egyptian mythology until I could no longer make sense of anything. I'm still not sure how much of the trip—any trip—was purely personal and how much of it was in conversation with a transcendent intelligence, or else the refraction of some Jungian archetype. I went to bed dizzy.

I guess what I'm trying to say is: What does it even mean to be "authentic"? I have friends left and right who are on a quest—a grand existential adventure of finding meaning and passion and (above all) their true selves. I tend to think that we're just the result of upbringing and culture and love, or lack thereof.

Lately, I've been so confused about the shape of my own identity that I've gotten to a point where I don't know how I feel about most things. I thought *Spirited Away* was "meh," even though the correct opinion is that it's one of the best animated films of all time.

I didn't *get* Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*, either. Instead of falling into this same trap after I read the Tao Te Ching, I forced myself to think, "Well, that was deep." I even posted a picture of an old wooden bench on my Instagram with the quote, "Straightforward truths seem paradoxical." I found the bench along a quiet trail in a forest near my parents' suburban home. My friends hearted the post and said I was well on my way to writing *The Next Great Canadian Philosophy Treaty*. The truth is, I didn't glean any real insight from the sacred book. And that didn't feel right.

As a result of my confusion, a part of me now hates seeing my twenty-something friends make posts on social media about self-growth and meaning. I can't stand reading status updates from Antoine, a New Age hippie from Montréal that I met while planting trees. He started his own page called *The Wise Apprentices* (in reference to himself and his nineteen-year-old friend), where he talks about his journey toward authenticity in a tone of palpable authority. He talks about the wisdom of fire and wind and writes lazy poems about self-knowledge.

It's no secret why I dislike the posts so much. They mirror my own lack of certainty, my fear of coming off as pretentious, and all the cheap poems I wrote about freedom. They also mirror my unspoken desire to cultivate a closeness with spirituality, to fill a void.

The other day, my girlfriend asked, "Why do you still follow these people if they annoy you so much?" There was a pause. "Ah. I get it," she said. "I have

those too. Sometimes it's nice to hate people." She gave me a kiss and went for a run. I scrolled on.

Thomas is similar, in a way. His Facebook bio reads: "I believe you're limitless." I've yet to meet him in real life. He's a cyberfriend from Denmark who added me via a mutual friend, and now, over time, I've become familiar with his posts—as though we really are friends.

I saw the picture of Thomas—mid-air and smiling—with his certification in hand when he became a legitimate "Life Coach." He shares quotes by Ralph Waldo Emerson and posts short, inspiring words like "Perspective / Persistence / Patience / Are what I practice." I arranged a video call with him to see what he had to say—he who made a living off of guiding people in their lives—about what authenticity meant.

"Very good question," he kindly answered. Sunlight beamed into his room like rays of divine inspiration. I sat in a stone basement with no window, fresh out of bed. He answered, "The more connected you are with your youngest self, the more coherent and authentic your life will become." I didn't get it. Not really. I saw a young me crying after my brother struck me with a water balloon when I was ten. Thomas and I went on a tangent about the inadequacy of language before he told me about a woman who broke down at the end of a Vipassana meditation retreat in Thailand. She had sobbed and said, "I've been piling layers and layers of dirty clothes over my inner voice for years." I imagined a pile of sweaty undershirts and bras and a little whisper peeping through that said something along the lines of: "Your life sucks." She listened for the first time and quit her job.

Thomas, drawing from this anecdote, defined authenticity as a state in which we find a convergence of our adult (rational) sense of responsibility and the voice of our inner (intuitive) child. When I asked him what a journey toward self would actually look like, he answered, "being vulnerable." It struck me, parenthetically, that most self-help books conveniently tiptoed around that part in the same way that I avoided emotions out of a fear of vulnerability. Rationality is easier—a list of transformative habits instead of a confrontation with our anxieties. Emotions linger and twist and echo. No one wants to be vulnerable, but everyone wants to grow. Perhaps I was stuck.

When I travelled in Thailand, a lot of people—sort of like that sobbing woman—told me about their "quest toward self." As though there was a final destination, and it was eerily close to Bangkok. I couldn't get enough of these *deep* conversations. Before heading out to drink, Australians would tell me: "The problem is, I don't know how to find my passion." They envied me and my poems and asked for my trick.

I was convinced, and perhaps still am, that Bob Ross was correct when he stated, "Talent is pursued interest." I always swapped the word *talent* for *passion*. I argued that I didn't figure anyone was born to be a pianist any more than someone was born to become a snowplow driver. I told them, "You just choose, and you stick with it, and you reinforce the illusion that it's the right thing. The point is, it doesn't matter what you choose."

Cameron and I had talked about his inability to figure out his *passion* once. He said that even though he'd graduated with a degree in Engineering, he never really did anything that he couldn't equate to simply following along. His life so far had been one prolonged feat of endurance. When his dad congratulated him on his degree, he said, "I didn't create anything new. I didn't pour myself into what I did. I just did." He was comfortable, but depressed.

I said, "You have a big ego. You like to make people laugh. Be a comedian." He's still sitting in Montréal and thinking about it. I guess it's not that easy, either. Then again, I don't know Cameron all that well.

The last song I fell in love with was Céline Dion's "*On ne change pas*." I listened to it on repeat for a few days and then got tired of listening to it on repeat for a few days. It's about how Céline is still the same little girl who once walked through the snow of Charlemagne—skinny, worried, trembling—only buried beneath makeup and the costumes of others.

That resonated with me. Most of the time, my own trajectory feels more like a circle, like a mockery of the very notion of self-development. It's a strange irony that the further I get from home, the closer I feel to the child from my water balloon memories—as though the distance only accentuates the familiarity of my own inner world. As Carl Jung wrote in his autobiography, "There is no linear evolution, there is only a circumambulation of the self." In other words, we can't stray very far from where we began. So, where are all those self-help books leading us?

I don't know the full story about Luna. I know she taught yoga, lit hula-hoops on fire, walked across India, and that now she likes living in "a functional capitalist society." We don't chat often. When she gets the chance, Luna enjoys telling people that they are not special. She goes into a "that's the biggest joke of all" spiel that doesn't really lead anywhere. Ironically, she loves Richard Linklater's *Before Sunrise* and how magically it captures love. As though being in love is to live in limbo, in one's very own universe. In other words, to be special.

I know Luna got high and partied to psytrance in Bali and Goa, but I've only ever heard her talk about those trips with cynical self-derision. When I

last spoke to her, she said that before her travels, she believed that her true self was like a buried treasure—that she just had to dig deep enough to find it. I'd come across a lot of people who felt the same way. The problem, she told me, was that the treasure kept changing.

Not long after I first met Luna, I attended a Rainbow Gathering in Ontario. If I was there at all, it was because I was in a process of discovering myself—in this case, my affinity to anarchy—and wanted to step out of my *comfort zone*. At a glance, imagine nudity, singing circles, crystal healing, and a lot of psychedelics. Rainbow Gatherings are outlandish and cult-like. They try to emulate a better society—outside of "Babylon." People meet deep in the forest and dance and call one another *brother* and *sister* and talk about love and Mother Earth.

One day, during a talking circle around a bonfire, Philippe—who had the talking stick in hand—stated that in his dream, he had received a revelation. He discovered that his life's true and ultimate goal was to be a guru to those who had not yet awoken. He was sixteen, short, and white. "Also," he said, "I discovered that my real name is Tree. I won't be using my slave-name anymore. If you could all call me Tree from now on, I would appreciate it. Much love." He said all of this in a thick French-Canadian accent before he passed on the talking stick.

I wondered why the deity that had visited him hadn't given him the name *Arbre*, considering his mother tongue very obviously was not English. I was also in the uniquely uncomfortable position of having my birth name being called a slave-name. I realized that the woman sitting next to me was called Arrow, and the guy across, Two Shoes (though he did everything barefoot). One man, who had conceived his children at a Rainbow Gathering some decades ago, gave them the names Sativa and Indica.

The gathering's overabundance of love quickly turned into hate, and the *energy* got very weird very fast. I won't go into it. What I do recall, however, is one forty-year-old guy who was able to sit with his legs crossed like Siddartha amid the chaos. His skin shone because he never ate flour, or sugar, or processed food and practiced yoga and meditation every waking hour. He was the embodiment of all those self-help books—*The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari* in the flesh. *He won*, I thought. *He won the game*. And that left me feeling insufficient.

I remember two things he told me. He said, "You are what you do every day," and "Everything is love." Though I'd heard both aphorisms many times before, they had never landed in a meaningful way. It later occurred to me that perhaps Nietzsche was right when he wrote, "Ultimately, nobody can get more out of things, including books, than he already knows. For what one lacks access to from experience one will have no ear." It seemed to me as though most

attempts at spiritual guidance relied on the usage of symbolic structures (like language or art) to communicate intangible experiences. On that day, something about what he said resonated, as though the symbol refracted light into a part of myself that already knew what I was being told. I'd been wandering for a long time, alone. I'd slept under many bridges and wrote about *the system* on the broken mattress of a Bangladeshi brothel. I'd duped myself into thinking that freedom meant movement. That freedom was selfish. That misanthropy and nonconformity were the same as authenticity. At the Rainbow, though, I found a cast of kooky characters who had followed that same path only to end up in a sort of fairyland of confused yet homogenous identities. I didn't want to be like them. I didn't feel like I fit in, either. I wanted to be that yogi, both different and perfect. I promised myself not to eat bread anymore. I wanted to leave, but I couldn't. I wouldn't have known where to go.

In most cases, I've realized, finding our *true* selves means some variation of drinking kombucha, doing *tai chi*, and quitting corporate jobs for the sake of art or travel or guru-ship or some other *pure* pursuit described in self-help literature. It was no coincidence that most of the people to whom I spoke at the Rainbow Gathering carried a lot of darkness and trauma within them. Many were alienated from their families and communities. It struck me then that the whole *unleashing* and *liberation* of oneself seemed to be disguised rhetoric for running away from a harmful environment. Yoga retreats and motivational speaking probably won't open a person's third eye, but that's not the point. The point is that they are fire escapes and landing pads for discontent. They are *somewhere else* one feels called toward—as though one's "youngest self" suddenly released a Barbaric Yawp™ that could no longer be ignored. Much like the mountains of British Columbia and the deserts of Mexico called to me in my own moments of vulnerability and frustration with society and myself.

In *The Monk Who Stole a Ferrari*, Sharma proposes a range of habits that will lead one to self-mastery. A condensed list might look like this: see the sunrise every morning, practice yoga, eat raw broccoli, read Rumi, and recite a mantra. No one does that long enough for it to matter, but they don't have to, either, because the list can also be read as: one ought *not* to rush to work, eat fast food, watch reality TV, scroll on Facebook, and order stuff on Amazon daily. *That's* the premise that sells millions because it reveals what we already know. We all know we have unhealthy habits. It's the idea of self-elevation—of an ideal form and of an answer—that appeals to people like my parents and me. The problem is the circle of perpetual dissatisfaction that the ideal creates. A pattern emerges that can only be overcome (briefly) by buying the next book, and the next, and the next. Until entire bookshelves are filled, *New York Times* bestsellers are born, and little progress is made.

Amid the maze of Ottawa's suburbs, the old bench that I posted on my Instagram lies tangled in a quiet and equally maze-like forest not two kilometers away from my childhood home. It was the starting point of my spiritual path. It was where I first read Thoreau and dreamt of tall mountains. When I sat on that bench as a teenager, I felt no different than when I later listened to Céline Dion, or watched *Before Sunrise*, or connected with a shiny yogi. My emotions, timid then forceful, would bubble up and cause a tingling warmth to settle in. Other times, like at the Rainbow, an intensely isolating or humiliating situation would seize me in the same way, prompting something darker to churn within me. In each case, time felt both suspended and fragile.

I can never predict when these sudden eclipses will arise or what circumstances might trigger them, but when they come, they often refract a piece of myself I haven't recognized before. Like the insecurity hidden in my poems about freedom or my sincere faith in platitudes about love. When I look back at my travels, I'm inevitably drawn to these snapshots of vulnerability because these are the moments that impacted me. I believe that these are what Virginia Woolf meant when she spoke of "moments of being."

Ever since the pandemic hit, I haven't traveled. My quest has had to come to an abrupt end, giving me plenty of time to consider what I've gained from these past years. In a sense, I've checked all of the prescribed boxes: I read Rumi, completed a hundred-hour meditation retreat, adopted a vegan diet, and backpacked through over fifty countries. Unfortunately, none of these approaches resulted in enlightenment.

Instead, I'm left with the conviction that Woolf's whimsical "moments of being" are the best hints I'll ever have at understanding who I am. Even though, after all, they provide little more than short-lived opportunities to look in a mirror. And as for the rest—the books, the quests, the meditation retreats—they'll always be there for those who, like my family, find comfort in a linear approach to something as peripheral, evasive, and unconscious as the source and substance of self. Even if they ultimately lead us back to where we started, again and again and again.


wait...

Miracle Supply Company

Gillian Parrish

Though they would all be dead in a few weeks, the campus oaks were healthy—root, limb, and leaf. Minh always parked in a neighbourhood north of campus so she could take the path under their canopy to listen to the summer leaves or watch the winter branches crack the sky. Jeff, her supervisor, was declaring that they had oak blight. She knew that wasn't true because she knew the oaks in the rundown park by her house.

Every other tree there was stricken, leaves gone brown, big limbs rotted, riddled with white mushrooms, downed in the windstorms that blew in wilder each year. That summer, the hottest on record, an odd fungus had appeared in the oaks in her park, strange stuff seeping in their roots, red and shiny, blackening to scabs the size of her hands. No, the campus oaks were thriving; they were just clearing the trees for more buildings.

In the office, Minh continued to hear whispers of the tree clearing. In the next cubicle, Alison was saying that the campus would feel weird without them. Susan responded in the same Teflon tone she used for layoffs, saying it was so sad. Minh bit her lips and thought of the emails celebrating the architect's sketches and big donors' names on big buildings. She kept her eyes on her screen, sorting the names of the living and the dead.

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The fall light was still enough to tend her garden after work. Mark hadn't liked her to grow flowers, only a few tomato plants. He said it was stupid to spend money on seeds. Now, she spent her money as she pleased. And her garden grew taller and wilder each year, sunflowers towering over the house, ferns curling below, vines spiked with flowers climbing the iron railings and the brick walls, a thick curtain over the front windows. She pulled some crabgrass, cut a fistful of marigolds for the kitchen, leaned in to look at the morning glories flooding the back of the flower bed, climbing the front wall.

She remembered shaking her head at the grand name of the seed seller: Miracle Supply Company. Though the morning glories were certainly a marvel this year, deep purple, almost black, their star-shaped throats lit with pollen.

Minh sat on the porch as the sun went orange and red over the old Jewish graveyard at the top of the street. Her mother, gone sixteen years now, was not

much older than she was now. More and more, pausing at the stop sign in the morning, waking in a panic in the dark, she felt time pressing down on her, like the pressure in her brainstem before a storm. Sixteen years on this street, watching the houses fall apart slowly. Her own among them, needing a new roof after the spring's bad hailstorms. She felt the weight of it, the linoleum cracking in the kitchen, the windows rimed on the inside with ice during last winter's polar vortex. Some people, she'd heard, exchanged their houses for vans; her car, with its low ceiling, was only a place to lay down. That's how it felt, these sixteen years, so little room to move, time like a tunnel she was rushing through, pushing paycheck to paycheck.

She pulled a juniper berry from the tree that grew beside the house. Dusty blue in her palm. Crushed it between her fingernails and inhaled the smell of its sap, that sharp heart of pine. The misty blue of its skin, and the sweet keen scent of it, brought her back to the lake, to the summer she cleaned lodges up north. It was the summer before she finished college. Her mother let her go because her older cousin Cai was with her. Cai soon found a boyfriend, leaving Minh alone with her books and walks by the lake. How free she felt on her days off, never again so free, waking up on a Wednesday with nowhere to be. Her life like wide water blurring boundless into sky.

Her supervisor, Jeff, had the soul of a proofreader. Last year, at the holiday lunch, he'd taken twenty minutes to lecture at the whiteboard on how to better format emails. "Been writing them since 1994," Alison had muttered when Jeff turned his back to remind them, with a broad red stroke of his marker, to not forget to link any hyperlinks. Jeff was brought on as another director of alumni gifts, but it was unclear what he did besides make phone calls and prowl the office.

He would suddenly appear at people's backs, peering into their screens, checking that they were not reading articles on insomnia as Joe sometimes did, or watching capybara videos as Alison sometimes did, or staring out the window as Minh did more and more, watching the gingkos go yellow.

Six months ago, Jeff had reorganized everyone's duties. He booked fifteen-minute meetings for each of them in his corner office. Pressing his palms together for emphasis, he told Minh that he had determined that her mentoring program for student workers was "not important anymore" and that she would now focus on "getting our numbers in order." He seemed to not see the loud shout of her eyebrows or hear the six clear reasons she gave against it. The seventh reason, which she didn't say, was that the Thursday meetings with the students had been the best part of her work.

It was becoming hard to bear her days deep in the spreadsheets. Sleep was harder too. She would lay in the dark, seeing screen light, the grid of boxes, the blinking cursor—all seared in her brain. Sometimes, she'd give up, sit up, scroll

through the news. Tent cities out west. And the fires. In the north, farmers wait for rain, the corn stunted, seared in the fields. Floods in the south, and too much rain here too, seeping into basements, sinkholes swallowing streets in the older parts of the city down along the river. When sleep came, her dreams were cluttered. And she started to dream of the war again. So many years have passed since the trees turned to torches, but she was still running from the fire, the ground exploding around her. There was always a child clutched to her chest, someone's toddler, a young cousin, a neighbor's baby, and, later in life, her own small daughter. Her grandmother was always calling her name from the yard. That warm, low voice suddenly pulled razor thin. Minh would wake, sweating, not thinking, more like waiting in the dark.

She knew that dreams could change things. A few months after Mark left, she dreamt he was standing over her, shouting. As she scissored away, he kicked her between her legs. She felt her bones break and woke cramping to her monthly blood. The worst part of the dream was the way he looked at her. He'd never laid a hand on her in waking life, but his eyes had often looked at her that way toward the end. She thought the dream was all, but then she fell and broke her hip two days later on the icy stairs. She was young then, in her thirties, and this was an old woman's injury. She was more embarrassed by the fall than about Mark's betrayal. She had pushed him away for years. She had never wanted to marry him, never wanted to marry anyone. But they'd been going out a while, and she was 28, and her mother was pressing her to settle down. Right after Bian was born, it was clear they weren't in love, just locked in some struggle. She never blamed him for leaving in the daylight world. Crazy though it seemed, she blamed him for the dream assault: her broken bones, the years of painful work it took to mend them.

The war dream that dogged her for decades was different. No change came from it.

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"When sleep came, her dreams were cluttered. And she started to dream of the war again. So many years have passed since the trees turned to torches, but she was still running from the fire, the ground exploding around her."

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When he narrowed her job to numbers, Jeff had joked, "Nobody wants *this* part of the job," followed by, "But you are just so good at it." Since then, he would pop by and stand behind her to peer at her spreadsheets. He liked to say to everyone, "What matters is the numbers." And, for her, he would add, "And

that is what you do now." She would arch an eyebrow, but he was already onto the next thing.

And so, her day was a grid of boxes in the box of her cubicle with its grey walls, grey desk, grey pen dish with its paperclips lined up like fish on a dock. Her eyes craved curves, sought sinuous lines of roots, crooked branches, curls of fern. She savored the oak path to her car. Found solace in her garden. On Saturdays, she'd drive to the garden shop to wander among the fruit trees and flowers. During the week, she'd think of those sunlit rows of shaggy plants as she worked. How there were people her age working there, teaching customers about seeds and soil, and sunlight, and water.

"At the porch stairs, she paused, grabbed a spade, cleared away some of the mass of morning glory, and dug a wide, deep hole, gently pulling up the delicate roots of one part of the vine. She would bring it inside the house to winter with her."

In the evenings now, she had started bundling the Russian sage to dry inside and cutting back the bee balm and phlox ahead of the frost. Her eye caught on the stone Bian had painted for her in grade school, round and red, a ladybug. "Ladybug, ladybug, fly away home," she sang as she pressed it into the earth with her light-up sneaker. She remembered Bian's face falling when she didn't join in the song. She had been a tough mother, she knew. Worn down from work and worry after Mark left. How to make the mortgage on the little bungalow. How to pay for childcare. Clothes. College. She tended to shut down into silence, though Bian's bright attempts at chatter didn't fade until her teen years.

Still, Minh knew she fed the girl well, with books and music and vegetables from the garden. And when Bian was young, among the asters and the dahlias, she drew her daughter closer, bent over ferns and roses together, seeding and weeding and tending, teaching themselves the names and ways of the flowers.

And now this splendid yellow chrysanthemum, last of the season. She'd text it to her fiery child, far away in LA, a teacher by day and drummer by night. It was how they talked now, in photos of flowers.

HR had emailed her a contract. Had given her unit ten days to sign it at one of their busiest times of the year. It said that if they left in the next twelve months, they would have to pay a fine, a thousand dollars "to offset recruiting

and onboarding." "Indentured servitude," muttered Alison. Joe said Jeff had boasted it was his idea, picked up from his old job at Magnus Bank. *Petty*, Minh thought. She'd been there for twelve years; she planned to retire there. She thought of her roof, her bad hip, the tent cities. The cubicle felt smaller the rest of the day.

That night, she wanted soup that would burn her throat. She cut some of the last lemongrass from the garden. Cut another hunk at the root to plant in her kitchen pots before the frost. At the porch stairs, she paused, grabbed a spade, cleared away some of the mass of morning glory, and dug a wide, deep hole, gently pulling up the delicate roots of one part of the vine. She would bring it inside the house to winter with her. She potted the plants on the porch, then tucked the morning glory under the window where she could see it from the kitchen table. The night-dark petals shimmered with hints of violet, crimped in like cat claws. As the flowers registered the low light in the kitchen, they swelled into the shape of a chrysalis, shut up tight in the dark.

They were cutting down the oaks, piece by piece. She went to watch on her lunch break. Men in white hardhats dangled from cranes, loud saws shearing away the treetops, the lush green canopy she loved. She watched the limbs go next, then the trunks bit by bit. Nothing but a concrete path now under the suddenly stark sun. She felt like she'd been skinned.

Jeff was strict about the lunch hour. You had exactly one hour, or he'd call you into his office. It was time to go back. And today was the last day to sign the contract. Somehow, she'd let the week pass without signing it. She had opened the document a few times, felt her jaw tighten, then turned to other tasks.

At 12:57 p.m., she pushed open the office door. Stood a moment taking in the little flotilla of cubicles. Joe eating his sandwich in his little box, Alison whispering to Ruby over the tops of theirs, Susan hunkered over a report. Minh smelled the stale coffee-pot air of the place and realized in a rush that she was not going to sign the contract. Then she was back in her box with the paperclips lined up like freshly caught trout. She turned back to her work of sorting names.

"*This* is why we proofread things," Jeff said at her back, dropping a hundred-page donor report on her desk, rows and rows of names, dates, and dollar amounts. It was binder-clipped to page forty-two, "Janson, not Jansson" scrawled in red pen.

She felt a spark of white heat in her brain, felt it surge down her shoulders, spread to her skin, as if it was seeping from her pores, surrounding her body in a chemical mist of pure fury. She could feel Jeff standing over her as he always did when he made his rounds. Waves of rage churned in her chest, fanning out

from her shoulders, making the air dangerous, clear, and alive as if seething with gasoline. She knew there was power in silence, but the fire rising in her throat exploded into a long sigh. She pushed her keyboard back slowly. Rested her hands for a moment on the cool of her desk. When she turned her chair to look at him, he stepped back, two fast steps back, to the flimsy threshold of her cubicle. She took in his flushed face and locked eyes with his suddenly nervous stare. "*You* fix it," she said.

The walk home felt wrong without the oaks. And it was the wrong time to be going home, the sun still so high, almost blinding. But the sky was such a bright October blue. She felt like swinging her arms as she would when she was a child walking with her grandmother, singing together little songs of catfish and butterflies. But she carried her bag carefully, Bian's framed grade-school photo peeking out and pothos plants curled in the crooks of her arms.

That night, she dreamed the old dream of the war. She's running from the blaze of the trees on fire, the ground rising, a rain of dirt around her, the child pressed to her chest. But this time, she wasn't afraid. She could feel her strong legs carrying them both, and some part of her told her that she had carried them both for years. She saw the gunshots sparking the woodline and marveled at her nimble limbs and luck. And then the gunshot sparks and crack of bullets turned into bees, wings glinting in the light, flying beside her like protectors, and her heart glowed brightly as pollen in the dark.

The next morning, she rose late and made bánh tét as if it were a new year. There would be time for worry and new work, but not yet; now, the morning glories were open, soaking up sun pouring through the kitchen window. She took her coffee out to the porch to watch the autumn sky. Cloudless, endless. Day like a lake before her.

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Shannon Bernhardt is an emerging Canadian writer residing in Toronto, Ontario. She hopes to one day publish a children's book.

JR Boudreau is the best damn delivery driver that particular Shoppers Drug Mart location ever had. His stories have appeared in *The Fiddlehead, New Millennium Writings, The Dalhousie Review, The Puritan*, and *On the Run*.

Jérémi Doucet is an emerging fiction writer and poet. His writing has appeared in *CV2, Gone Lawn, Paddler Press*, and several anthologies. He currently lives in Vancouver.

DK Eve is grateful to live, work and play in traditional territory of T'Sou-ke people. She's been a journalist, public servant, hockey mom, graduate of Simon Fraser University's Writers Studio and Carleton University's School of Journalism. She lived in Victoria, Regina, Ottawa, and Montreal before returning home to Sooke and is a member of Sooke Writers' Collective and Federation of BC Writers. She draws on Vancouver Island's characters and settings in award-winning poetry and short prose. Recent work appears in Reflex Press (UK 2022), Subjectiv journal (Oregon, Spring 2021), Poem in Your Pocket (Vancouver Island Regional Library 2021), and Dreams & Mementoes (BC, Askew's Word on the Lake anthology 2021).

Jillian A. Fantin (@jilly_stardust on Twitter) is a poet currently based in Texas. They are the co-founder and editor-in-chief of *RENESME LITERARY* (@RenesmeLiterary), recipient of a 2021 Poet Fellowship from the Martha's Vineyard Institute of Creative Writing, and a regular collaborator with mixed media artist Kate Luther. Jillian's work is published in or forthcoming from *The American Journal of Poetry, Barrelhouse, TIMBER, The Daily Drunk, Harpur Palate, Selcouth Station, Homology Lit*, and elsewhere.

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Stephen Lee Naish is the author of six books of non-fiction, notably, *Create or Die: Essays on the Artistry of Dennis Hopper* (AUP), *Riffs and Meaning* (HeadPress), and *Screen Captures: Film in the Age of Emergency* (Newstar Books). His work has appeared in *Aquarium Drunkard, Film International, Sublation Magazine, The Quietus, Empty Mirror, Dirty Movies, Albumism*, and *Merion West*. He lives in Kingston, Ontario.

Selen Ozturk is a San Francisco-based arts writer. Her work takes a critical and dedicated interest in environmental architecture, 60's-70's film, and contemporary art and design. She was educated in philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley. Her recent publications include *Bayou Magazine, Senses of Cinema, Bright Lights Film Journal, Cinema Retro, Whitewall Magazine, PopMatters, Spring Journal*, and the *Penn Review of Philosophy*.

Gillian Parrish is the author of two books of poems, of *rain and nettles wove* and *supermoon*, as well as a chapbook, *cold spell*. Her stories, poems, and essays appeared or are forthcoming in journals such as *Gulf Coast, Cimarron Review, Hayden's Ferry Review, The Sycamore Review*, and elsewhere, as well as in anthologies out from Black Lawrence Press and Wesleyan University Press. A graduate of the MFA writing program at Washington University in St. Louis, she now serves nearby as assistant professor in the MFA program at Lindenwood University. From time to time, on odd days like solstice, equinox, and May Day, she launches issues of spacecraftproject.com, a journal of poems and stories that also features interviews with artists working with words, sound, movement, paint and pixel, light and land.

Robert Grant Price lives in Burlington, Ontario, with his wife and son.

Patty Somlo's most recent book, *Hairway to Heaven Stories*, was published by Cherry Castle Publishing, a Black-owned press committed to literary activism. *Hairway* was a finalist in the American Fiction Awards and Best Book Awards. Two of Somlo's previous books, *The First to Disappear* (Spuyten Duyvil) and *Even When Trapped Behind Clouds: A Memoir of Quiet Grace* (WiDo Publishing), were finalists in several book contests. Her work has appeared in *Guernica, Gravel, Sheepshead Review, Under the Sun*, the *Los Angeles Review*, and *The Nassau Review*, among others, and in over thirty anthologies.

Katie Strubel (she/her) is a twenty-four year old queer writer from Idaho, U.S. Her words have appeared in *The Southern Quill, FEED, Warning Lines, Agapanthus Collective*, and others. She is a recent creative writing grad, a middle school librarian, and a scorpio. You can find her on Twitter @lemonsorbay.

Jennifer Thompson is a writer and ecologist living on the southwest coast of England. Her writing has appeared in numerous publications, most recently *Intrinsic*, an anthology of place writing by women. In both 2021 and 2022 she was nominated for *Bradt*'s New Travel Writer of the Year, and was the inaugural Emerging Writer in Residence with the Charles Causley Trust.

Philip Wexler lives in Bethesda, Maryland. He has had over 180 poems published in magazines. His collections, *The Sad Parade* (prose poems), and *The Burning Moustache* were published by Adelaide Books. Two more books are scheduled for 2022: *The Lesser Light by Finishing Line Press* and *I Would be the Purple* by Kelsay Books. He also organizes Words out Loud, a monthly spoken word series, at Glen Echo Park in Maryland, lately presented remotely via Zoom.

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