Printer's Devil Review



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Duly Noted

The nonfiction section of this issue features two essays that reconsider Charles Olson's "Projective Verse," a classic manifesto on (post-) modern poetic practice. Our request to publish the text of the original essay was denied by Olson's estate. The full text of the essay, however, can be found at the Poetry Foundation website at: http://bit.ly/GZhvpL.

We have the pleasure of welcoming three new editors to our staff: Zach Buscher, Emily O'Neill, and David Taber.

ZACH BUSCHER hails from the wild west of Massachusetts. He recently received his MFA from the University of Arizona, where he was a Beverly Rogers Fellow and poetry editor for *Sonora Review*. Now he works in academia, teaching at Quinsigamond Community college in Worcester, MA and tutoring at Pine Manor College in Chestnut Hill, MA. Recent-ish work appears in *Back Room Live, Spork, La Petite Zine, Pank,* and *Best New Poets 2011*. He sporadically blogs and tweets at www.zachbuscher.com and @PoetryTwit, respectively.

EMILY O'NEILL is an artist, writer, and proud Jersey girl. Her work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *FRiGG Magazine*, *Paper Darts, Word Riot*, and *Sugar House Review*. She enjoys instant film and lives in Somerville, MA with a shark named Grossby.

DAVID TABER, after years of doing the ink-stained-wretch thing with lackluster results for various publications in the greater Boston area, has recently transitioned to teaching English as a second language to adults. He blogs intermittently at thundrboom.wordpress.com.

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JENNIFER R. A. CAMPBELL is a Canadian artist currently based in Boston, MA. She studied drawing, painting, and printmaking at the Ottawa School of Art and has been working primarily with oil paint for twenty years. Her last solo exhibition, *Random Harvest*, was at the Sarah Doyle Gallery at Brown University, Providence, RI. Her work has been shown in Canada, the United States, and Australia.

ADAM CLAY is the author of *A Hotel Lobby at the Edge of the World* (Milkweed Editions, 2012) and *The Wash* (Parlor Press, 2006). A third book of poems, *Stranger*, is forthcoming from Milkweed Editions. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Boston Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Iowa Review*, *New Orleans Review*, and elsewhere. He co-edits *TYPO Magazine* and lives in Kentucky.

SAM CHA is an MFA candidate in poetry at the University of Massachussetts, Boston, about to enter his third and final year. Before he was an MFA candidate, he studied at Williams, UVA, and Rutgers. He's been published (poems, essays, translations) in *apt, anderbo, Opium Online, decomP, Radius, ASLA*, and *Amethyst Arsenic*, among others. And his favorite kind of pie's a mud pie with a rope ladder baked into it – lockpicks and chisels on the side, hold the tin plates.

MADISON CYR is recent graduate of Indiana University Southeast with a BA in English. As a writer who doesn't like cats, other writers consider her an anomaly. She has no idea what she wants to do with her life and plans to spend the next few months finding out. This is her first publication.

THOMAS A. DODSON is the founding editor of *Printer's Devil Review* and the executive editor of the *Best Indie Lit New England* anthology. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Conium Review* and *Beloit Fiction Journal*.

OLGA M. FELICIANO is a New York City native whose heart still resides in the Lower East Side neighborhood she grew up in. She is a graduate of the University of Houston's Creative Writing MFA program in fiction and has lived in Houston, TX for the last eight years where she teaches writing to a wide range of students from middle school to college. She is currently at work on a collection of linked short stories about the sometimes ambivalent relationship between women and motherhood. JENNY HAYES lives in Seattle. Her fiction has appeared in *The Northville Review*, *Unshod Quills, Penduline Press*, and the anthology *A Six Pack of Stories*. She also co-authors the blog Yard Sale Bloodbath (http://www.yardsalebloodbath.com). More about her and her writing can be found at http://www.jennyhayes.com.

JORDAN KESSLER has worked for the past decade at the Palm Press Photographic Atelier in Concord, MA as a fine art printer. He has a bachelor's degree in filmmaking from the Massachusetts College of Art where he is currently in the process of completing his master's in photography. He is represented by Gallery Kayafas in Boston.

JESSE MACK lives in Somerville, MA and attends the creative writing MFA program at the University of New Hampshire. He teaches writing to adults and high school students in Boston and southern Maine. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Marco Polo, Columbia Poetry Review, the Inman Review,* and elsewhere.

BRENDA SERPICK is a graduate of New School's MFA Writing Program in Poetry (2000), with two chapbooks: *No Sequence But Luck* (3 Sad Tigers Press, 2010) and *The Female Skeleton Makes Her Debut* (Hophophop Press, 2002). Poems are forthcoming in *Eccolinguistics*, and previous poems have appeared in *Spiral Orb*, *LIT*, *Lungfull! Magazine*, *Torch*, *The Germ*, *Boog City*, *Magazine Cypress*, *Chinquapin*, and *The Red Wheelbarrow*.

PETER JAY SHIPPY's fourth book will be *A Spell of Songs* (Saturnalia, fall 2013). He appeared in *Best American Poetry 2012* and will have a poem in *BAP* 2013.

JOSH SWILLER is the author of *The Unheard, A Memoir of Deafness and Africa*, a *New York Times* bestseller, and is a dedicated advocate for the deaf and disabled. Currently, he is a hospice worker and Zen monk in Ithaca. www.joshswiller.com.

CHRIS WAY was born in Florida in 1977. He received his BA from the University of Florida in 1999. He works and makes various things (paintings, poetry, music) in New York City, where he lives with his partner, Michelle, and their daughter, Cyrni.

CANDICE WUEHLE is an MFA poet at the Iowa Writers' Workshop and a recent graduate from the MA program in literature at the University of Minnesota. Her work has most recently appeared in *Ghost Ocean* and *Gigantic Sequins*.

Morning Sickness

H ector stands at his stoop. One hand shades the sun; the other arm hugs his coatless body. His eyes are small as raisins behind his glasses. He kisses my forehead and pulls me close. His sweater smells of lemon soap. I turn away. "Your face is cold," I say.

"Well I've been out here a while. You know, you just missed Mami by like fifteen minutes."

"What luck," I say.

Hector smirks like an embarrassed child. He jangles his keys and shoves the front door open with his foot. An old supermarket circular he'd used to catch the lock slides out, comes apart at the seam and whips with the wind, depositing its Veteran's Day specials all over the sidewalk.

I follow Hector to his place, five familiar flights up and always too hot. The radiators hiss. Steam sweats out the stink of last night's dinner – some sort of scorched meat, *chuletas* or chicken, with too much powdered garlic. Coupled with the lemon soap smell from Hector's sweater, it's too much. I break for the toilet, coat and all. Three months pregnant and three months queasy, and never once have I been able to throw up. Is this the day? Not even a bulimia-style forced finger down the throat helps. I gag. I spit. I give up. I rinse my mouth. My skin has become pale in the wrong way, thick and porous, like masking tape. Darkness has crept up under my eyes and settled around my nostrils. My chin and cheeks are discolored like I have a disease. I can't decide what's worse, the nagging nausea, or the feeling that my body has been invaded without my permission.

I rotate bottles and jars in the medicine cabinet so their labels face me: an expired bottle of aspirin, wadded cotton still inside; a rolled, nearly empty tube of hydrocortisone cream; iodine tincture in a brown glass bottle with a broken cap. The fade cream smells like racks of dead peoples' clothes at the Salvation Army. I dab some under my eyes, let it sink in. My face stares back at me, defiant, unchanged.

Hector knocks. "Everything okay?"

I roll my eyes. I put the cream back and unlock the door. Hector stands in the narrow hallway.

"Were you able to this time?"

"No," I say, "but I'm fine." I sidestep him. I rest my coat on the couch, a plastic-covered floral colossus that whistles at the seams when you sit on it. I am so used to Hector's room that the living room is an alien place. On the mantle over the sealed fireplace, a white pillar candle, a glass of water on a plate, and a heap of rosaries surround a wood-framed picture of Hector's dead brother Jimy. Jimy smiles like a child. The picture is three years old, from before the sickness took hold. In a few hours, people, mostly women, will gather in the apartment to pray for him, to help his waiting soul ascend into heaven. They'll eat *queso blanco* and *pasta de guava* on soda crackers and talk about how tragic it all still is. They'll cry and hug Hector and his mother, and they'll wash it all down with extra sweet *café con leche*. A deathiversary party is what Hector calls it, his attempt to make light of something still so dark.

Prayer cards sit on the coffee table in two stacks. Both are in Spanish. One has prayers printed on them – Ave Maria and Padre Nuestro. The second, a resurrected open-armed Jesus Christ on the front, Jimy's full name (his real name was Jaime) and life story on the back. He was twentythree. He liked to act and write poems. He wanted to be a photographer and a teacher. I turn the laminated card over in my hand several times before placing it back down. Nowhere on it does it say that he was gay or that he died of AIDS.

Even Hector kept these things from me at first. He had insisted, though not strongly, that it was cancer that killed his brother. And then one day, while we were waiting for the F to Queens, I told him about my junkie uncle Frankie, how he got sick and died when I was thirteen, how my family insisted we never talk about it with anyone. Then Hector's truth came out. AIDS. A disease so pregnant, so unlike cancer, so filled with judgment against its victims, that I knew there had to be more to the story. There always was. Sure, it was possible Jimy was an unfortunate hemophiliac, but let's be real, Hector and I were poor and Puerto Rican. That deadly combination meant only two things: *pato o tecato*. I figured Jimy was gay by the way Hector's expression had rearranged, the way his smile had come apart with the slip of his tongue, by the fact that he never made any mention of Jimy messing with drugs. After I thought enough time had passed, I asked how he felt about his brother's gayness. He was close-mouthed about it.

There had been a tape. Jimy performed about a year before he died, at the gay youth shelter he lived in after he came out. The shelter mailed the tape to his mother, along with his personal things after they'd learned of his death. Hector translated the note that came with the package. When his mother found out what the tape contained, she cried and cradled this last remnant of her oldest son. It took months before they could watch. The quality was poor. Jimy, dressed as a woman, with a wig and full makeup, danced alone on a darkened stage. It ran for just a minute or two before Hector's mother ejected it, opened the flap at the top, pulled the tape guts out, and balled the film in her hands.

"What happened to it," I asked, "the tape, I mean?"

Hector pressed his lips together before answering. "Couldn't be fixed," he said.

I let him drop the subject.

Once, when Hector left to get us some pizza and I was alone in his bedroom, I looked through his drawers and found the tangled mess. A single label, JIMMY R.'S DANCE, was handwritten in bold capital letters on the case. The tape was tangled, much of it folded and bent out of shape, a knot about the size of a tennis ball. I worked my fingers through in places, careful not to stretch or rip the film, before giving up and returning it to its hiding place in the very back of Hector's underwear drawer.

Hector sits beside me now. "What time is the appointment again?" he asks.

"You'll get back in time," I say. I cross my legs and fold my arms. Hector moves closer, pulls my head to his chest and rakes his fingers through my hair.

"You nervous?" he asks.

He holds me against him. I feel impatient, restless; being pregnant when you don't want to be is like having hiccups that don't end. It's all I can focus on, this stutter in my life. Nervous? Nervous was months ago. Held hostage, claustrophobic is more like it. Stupid Hector. I hate him touching me.

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I knew I was pregnant early, within a month of missing my period, within four months of meeting Hector, but I didn't want to believe. Abortion was for those girls in high school who never made guys wear condoms. I used to be more careful. Now I had to choke on my words.

It had to be the day I practiced my Cyrillic pronunciation, my conjugations, when Hector pulled at my pants and then at my panties. I pushed him away at first, but he loved when I did my Russian homework face down on his bed. And I was too tired to stop him. He entered me from behind. I faked my way through it, hoping he'd finish quickly. When he saw me still reading, he fondled, grabbed, thrusted until I could no longer see the writing in the chapter. I remember his stale breath, as if he hadn't eaten a thing all day. "Don't come in me," I said. I closed my textbook. But Hector wasn't skilled enough.

It took two and a half months of bloating and swelling, moodiness and nausea before I accepted reality. And then I didn't panic, not really – that would've been too TV. Instead I went to the bookstore and read pregnancy books on the floor of the mostly empty occult section. The images were all the same pastel palettes and delicate rattles and baby bottles and cherubic bears in diapers and bows, the same smiling pregnant models, wedding-banded hands hugging rounded bellies. I scanned through the index. Four whole pages devoted to morning sickness. I kept seeing the words "natural" and "normal" in conjunction with all the changes taking place in the pregnant body, even though they felt anything but natural or normal in *my* pregnant body. It's natural to feel nauseous and queasy. It's

normal to feel moody and tired. I wondered if it was natural and normal to feel angry at my body, angry at this virus, this parasite, this unwanted thing feeding off of me, making me sick, making me ugly, making my jeans' button not want to stay closed.

I thought of throwing myself down the long flight of stairs in Hector's building. The tumble would be spectacular. I imagined my womb and crotch, a pulpy mess at the landing, a victorious smirk on my face, as I'm strapped onto a gurney. Every time I approached the staircase, I considered my first step carefully. But I wasn't brave enough. I took to sleeping on my stomach instead, in the off chance I could suffocate it, in the off chance I could smother it away. I thought of my mother and the baby boy she lost before I was born. I thought of her pact with God to raise me Catholic if He'd let me live. She had done as promised. I am perpetually guilty – even now I feel guilt, not for wanting to get rid of my baby, but because I *don't* feel guilty for wanting it dead.

Hector knows nothing of these urges. All he knows is that my period never came.

After I found out, I was too anxious to sit so I blurted it. "I'm pretty sure I'm pregnant."

Hector let his textbook fall to his lap. He grabbed thick wads of pages and flicked them. The gush of air ruffled his hair. He did this for about five minutes.

"So what's gonna happen?" he finally asked.

I didn't answer right away. But it was understood there would be an abortion. What else was there? Too-young college-dropout-parenthood, the inevitable break up after we grow up, lapsed child support payments, court dates, custody disputes, a resented child in the middle of it all?

"I called the clinic, they have an opening on the twenty-first," I said. "The twenty-first? That's the day of Jimy's thing."

I knew this when I'd called. They had one other date available before I would slip into the second trimester and would need the more expensive, more invasive procedure. But I was angry with Hector. I convinced myself it was his fault I was pregnant. I wanted to test him to see if he would sacrifice this day for me. If he would put me before Jimy, before his mother. So I pretended to forget the deathiversary until it was too late to do anything about it.

Hector caresses me slower now, his breathing calm. I smell him in the fabric of his T-shirt, a mixture of deodorant, that lemon soap, and skin. I feel sick again.

"It's time," I say, pushing myself away.

Hector smoothes the wrinkles from his sweatshirt before putting it on. He buttons his coat, loops his arms through both straps of his backpack, and pulls them so his bag lays flat, his fists tightly wrapped around them. He looks like a ten-year-old.

"You ready?" he asks, reaching his long arms out to me. Hector is nearly six foot four and thin with just the slightest hint of a spare tire left over from his fat-boy days. He is broad-shouldered but narrow-chested, with pointy elbows and knees, pencil calves. Not the boy I thought I'd end up with.

I nod. And in his fussy annoying way, Hector helps me off the couch. Ever since I told him, he treats me like something delicate and breakable, a form of worship I am not comfortable with. He holds my bag under his arm and opens my coat for me. When he goes to button it, I stop him. "I'm not broken, you know," I say.

He pulls a white envelope, thick with twenties, from his back pocket and counts the bills. He insists on paying the entire clinic fee. He had to cash his second financial aid check to do so. It looks like drug money, the way he folds the envelope and stuffs it into an inner pocket.

Hector walks slowly in front of me down the narrow hall that leads to the door. Just then his mother appears, arms filled with grocery bags, keys in the air, ready to unlock it. She dumps the bags in his arms and pushes past him into the kitchen. She looks at me. I say "hi." She mumbles the same, gives Hector the look, the devastating look only mothers can give, that one that reduces a grown child to a pile of rubble in a matter of seconds. "We have school but I'll come right home after," Hector promises. He sets the groceries on the counter. "Okay?" he says. But she moves around him and clears the table without acknowledging him any further.

I'd first met her two months ago. I was getting dressed after spending most of the day at his place when he insisted I stay for dinner. I didn't want to. Meeting her would mean we were a couple, and I didn't want to acknowledge the possibility that we were more than just sex. I protested and made a motion to leave. Then Hector, in what I thought was a final act of desperation, went and told me he was in love with me. I didn't know if I loved him back, but because sometimes love can be wielded like a weapon, I felt bullied into saying I did. Then I felt obligated to his love for me, responsible for it. It was up to me to care for that love, and for him – after all, I'd forced his most vulnerable secret out, the shame he felt surrounding his brother's death.

Her handshake was quick and rough. She looked me in the eye. She knew me already. She knew me for the midnight calls Hector had been receiving, a single shrill telephone ring, Hector's hushed "hello." She knew me as the reason Hector came home late from school every night and went straight to bed without so much as a hug for his mother. She knew me as the reason Hector was never hungry for the massive meals she prepared. (She never quite figured out how to cook for just the two of them.) She knew me as the reason she threw out so many leftovers, the reason her son was no longer a virgin, the reason his semen-crusted socks stopped appearing in the laundry. She smirked when I tried to say "nice to meet you" in my broken Spanish.

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"We'll make it," he tells me. "Don't worry." He leads the way down the stairs.

We don't speak on the short train ride to the clinic. I stare at Hector who stares out the window. He looks tired. His eyes crease at the sides. He looks, at this moment, a little more like the man that waits behind the eighteen-year-old face.

I remember our first date. We had public speaking together. We bonded over our shared love of the back seats of the lecture hall, whispered jokes about our bucktoothed, balding professor, and counted the minutes together, terrified of being called on. One day our class was cancelled, so we walked to the Chinese place on Grand Concourse and split a shrimp lo mein. Hector insisted he knew how to eat with chopsticks. He struggled with the oily noodles, winding them around the sticks with his fingers, trimming the longer noodles with his teeth and letting the excess drizzle back down on to the plate.

He talked a lot between bites, like it had been years since someone showed interest in him. He told bad jokes and laughed too loudly at them. I was put off by him but flattered that he liked me. I asked him if he had any siblings.

"Well I guess I should say no," he said. He stopped laughing.

"What do you mean you guess?"

"Well, I had an older brother," Hector said, "but he died. So technically, no, I don't have any siblings anymore."

I swirled my fork in my side of the lo mein.

"He just died, like, six months ago," Hector continued. He played with the chopsticks in his fingers while he told about his brother, who called himself Jimy to disassociate from their long-gone father, also named Jaime. Jimy ran away for a few years, and when he returned he was very sick. Hector never visited him in the hospital. He choked up when he said that part but he didn't cry. Instead he removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose like he had a headache. His eyes without his glasses were freakishly large. I noticed the creases, the way his mouth was permanently down-turned, even when he smiled. His shoulders slumped so much I thought he might cave in on himself. It was the hospital thing. The guilt he felt about that, about Jimy's death, tinged every aspect of his personality, made him a thousand times more interesting. I slept with him that very day.

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At the clinic, I wear nothing but a paper gown and a pair of paper slippers. I am ushered through a series of progressively smaller waiting rooms, then finally a rectangular office with an exam table in the center. My gown splits as I sit. The tissue paper barrier between the cold table and my body is thin as a communion wafer. One of the slippers nearly slides off my foot. I clench it between my toes. I hear music, faint and far away, an instrumental version of an old song I wish I knew the lyrics to now. I hum along in my head while I wait.

After a moment, a nurse returns with a doctor, a thin-lipped, pointy nosed man. He seems fused to his spinning stool, rotating left and right, thumbing through pages on a clipboard and speaking to me about the procedure through my parted thighs. His expression is as smug and unsympathetic as a math teacher's.

I feel a kind of freeze come over me. At first I think it's the anesthesia. But this is a dull, deep kind of freeze. I feel it in my fingers, my toes, the tip of my nose. I can feel my nakedness, this strange man tinkering around between my legs, this exposure of my body, this humiliation. I think of my mother who must know how pregnant I am but who is probably too shocked or too disappointed to say anything about it. It is easy enough to avoid conversation and confrontation. We don't have the kind of relationship where I can confess things. My mother works forty-hour weeks. She comes home distracted and tired. Between school and Hector's house, which I pass off as an after school study group, she hardly even sees me. I wonder what she would think if she saw me now. I wonder if she would feel like she had failed me as well as God.

The nurse takes my hand. I want her to keep her hand in mine, but she pulls away, tucks a stress-relief ball in its place. I clamp my entire hand around it. I feel sorry for myself. I want to cry. But the sadness, like the cold, is too far away to reach. I imagine myself floating above the table, watching my helpless body, the sounds of the tools clanging against the tray like utensils at a cafeteria. *This will end soon... This will end soon...* I chant to myself as the dilation rods invade my uterus. It's more pressure than pain, uncomfortable and annoying, like a thumb jammed into my navel. And then, a low hum. The vacuum. The virus gone, I look up at the ceiling panels, I imagine tiny people in the patterns.

"Okay," the doctor says. "We're done here." He closes my thighs as if shutting the hood of a car. In the recovery room, I am given a cup of instant chicken soup and a packet of saltines, and am sat in a reclining chair. At the edge of the chair, on a small table with a bucket on it, I throw up the neon yellow soup with little effort. I ball up on the chair and cover myself with the blanket the nurse gives me. I sleep deeply for an hour before they wake me. The anesthesia has worn off, and though my cramps are sharp and intensely painful, I am relieved.

I stumble towards Hector who waits, half asleep with pamphlets rolled in his fists. I wake him as I reach for my coat. "It's done," I say.

"How're you feeling?" he asks as we walk toward the train. He stutters the way he did that first day of public speaking, when he asked to borrow a pen he never returned. I don't respond. I wish I could get rid of him too.

The train back to the Bronx is delayed. It finally arrives, stuffed with people. My stomach feels gutted, empty, as if my pregnancy had been replaced with a black hole. It takes everything to stop myself from imploding. I want to fall to the ground, but Hector leans against a pole, locks me safely in his arms and I fall asleep standing up.

We get back later than promised. His mother has prepared the party alone. She cleared the couch and set out metal folding chairs. She dyed the gray out of her short hair, held it back with jeweled pins, and changed into a sleeveless black dress, stockings and fuzzy pink slippers. She looks at Hector, then at me, then back at him. She shakes her head. The blackness swirls inside me again. I want to vanish inside of it. Hector begins to say something but only manages a puff of air. He stands out of her way, flaccid-faced.

"People will be here soon. I couldn't wait any longer," she says, changing out of her slippers and into her shoes.

I want to explain to her that it's not Hector's fault, that I had set him up. "I felt sick," I say – whisper really. I want to be in my own home. I want my own mother.

She turns her back on us and continues to arrange the room. She holds a package of foam cups. It swings in her hand as she walks to the kitchen. Hector is close behind her. I lift one of the rosary necklaces from the mantle. The hollow plastic cross is lighter than it looks. I finger the little Jesus figure, jam him sharply into my thumb until it hurts. When the pain fades, I do it again and again and again, until Hector returns to my side.

We slip like ghosts into the bedroom. I fall to the bed. Hector lies beside me. He presses his body against mine. He kisses the back of my neck and plays with my hair. I clutch at the emptiness in me, as if I could hold it and cradle it. The sky dulls to a November blue. I don't feel myself fall asleep, so I am shocked awake when the chanting in the living room begins. A woman's voice leads Spanish prayers, pauses for Spanish "Amens." The deathiversary.

Hector, still in the bed with me, stares up at the ceiling. His eyes, large without his glasses, are so dark that the whites glow in the light of the street lamps.

"They've started," I say.

"I know."

Cramps push through the emptiness in my stomach. I can't help but feel broken. I look to Hector, but he continues to stare into the dark nothingness above him.

"I saw him in the hospital, you know," he says. "Once, I went once. It was a month before he died. Mami got on me the whole time he was in there, you know. She spent her nights in a chair by his bed, every night. *Your brother is sick*, she would say. *You have to see him*. I said I would go but then I always made up all kinds of excuses. Homework or school or something. I just wanted her to get out of my face about it. *Miss a day of school*, she said. *Go see your brother*. I don't do hospitals, Ma. That's what I said to her.

"Months passed and I still hadn't gone. Mami, she got tired of fighting with me. One day she came home, didn't say hello, didn't make dinner. *Jimy is going to die*, that was all she said, then she locked herself in her room.

"I went the next day. Mami was so certain, you know. I signed in at the desk and I went to his floor and I stood outside his room. But I couldn't move. There was a small window looking in. I could see his legs, his arms. His skin looked tight and brown. It wrapped his bones – no meat, no muscle, just bones. Plastic bags filled with liquids and tubes taped onto his face and arms. All this shit, just exploded out of him like it was a part of him that was waiting to be tucked back inside, if only they would just fix him.

"He had a remote control in his hand. Someone had set the TV on one of those religious channels. Some preacher guy, far away from Jimy, far away from us, begging for our money, going on and on about our sins. That pissed me off. All I could think about was the fact that Jimy had to listen to that shit as he lay there, that it could be the last thing he would hear. And still I didn't move. Then he turned his head towards the door. I swore he saw me. I swore he knew I was watching him suffer. I got scared. I left him there.

"Mami didn't say anything about it. Maybe he couldn't tell her how I never came in, how I walked away from him. I hated him for seeing me. I told myself it wasn't him in that bed. But every time someone said his name, every time I remembered us as kids, it was *that* Jimy I saw. *That* sick skinny Jimy, his insides out for all to see. And the next time I saw him, he was gone, my big brother in a casket wearing a suit three times too big."

I clutch at my stomach. The chanting outside the room beats like a pulse. "Maybe you should go out there," I say.

"It wouldn't be right."

"Why not?" I ask, but he doesn't answer me.

He turns his body to face mine. He reaches for me in the dark, traces my body with his hand. He stops at my pelvis, and then rubs gently.

"Our baby would've been born in June," he says.

Even in the pitch blackness I can see he is crying. A tear splashes hot against my arm before turning cold and seeping onto the bed. He removes his hand from my stomach and wipes at his cheeks. I had never given thought to when it would've been born, not even when they gave me my pregnancy test results and due date. For me it was just a date that loomed, a deadline for a life I had no desire to live. I had never seen it as a real live baby; it never once occurred to me that Hector had.

"I think it would've been a boy. I would've wanted to name him Jimy, for my brother. He would've liked that."

"You miss him," I say. It just slips. Of course he misses him. It's a stupid thing to say but I don't know what else there is.

Hector turns over onto his stomach and after a moment, falls asleep. I watch the rising and collapsing of his body, the kind of breathing one can only breathe in deep sleep, and maybe, just before death. I sit on the floor and attempt to control my own breathing, my own pain, my own empty guilt; the cramps now cause my limbs to quiver. I dig through Hector's drawer, pull out the broken Jimy tape and, in the city's faint glowing light, begin to untangle and re-spool the film. At first it seems impossible, but the repetition, the spool's ability to take everything back in as if it were never damaged, the ease with which it recoils, coupled with the women's Spanish praying, the calling, the responding, the ascending, it soothes me, brings me my own sense of peace.

ADAM CLAY

Shouldered Agreement of Beginnings

As though we are not alone, even our syntax would seem to suggest an urging towards

an elsewhere, like being handed our lives in a way best described as accordingly. Alone,

the news sends a panic through the blood though the silence could be much worse if we would only allow a moment

or two of silence and its ability to know us better than we are able to know ourselves. Yesterday the mirror appeared

unrecognizable and today the mirror refuses to appear: the joke goes that its standard isn't a standard at all. Its existence

isn't a way of existing. During the day even without the news on, the sun alone can be enough to twitch the brain

towards a scenario that's only the worst possible one, callous and brand new. Of course there's a backyard fit for a drink or two in the overcast afternoon that we've been promised will open up into the bud of a flower or the shouldered agreement

of beginning. A few hours later and we're talking about what to do with the body when the mind is gone, where to bury

or burn or salvage even a single part of it. It's likely we'll be around for a while longer but the ice melting in the glass suggests

something else altogether, though your sense of togetherness changed and changes like even a commitment to the birds

that land in the yard: to feed them is to accept them; to disregard nature is to disregard a small part of yourself, whether that thought

is a fleeting one or a thought old enough for a thousand years of unrest. Enough. It's warm along this season –

so much time outside and so much shuffling of the feet and the body at night: I wake up, don't know where I am, realize where I am, still don't know where I am. It was funny for a while – I dredged up and wallowed in even the brief thought

of disorientation, but now I find myself desiring something less obvious or more passive. Someone once said we are the product

of our own thoughts, but what if those thoughts diverge or dissolve because of the thoughts of those around us? I like thinking we have some

sort of control over anything, especially when the world resists definition as on a day like this one: a streetlight in the backyard next door buzzes on,

the first mosquito of the year lands on my ankle in time for me to kill it. To be proud of a beginning is to coldly embrace an ending, though I'd prefer

to look elsewhere: a housefly. Empty fields which will soon be filled with tobacco. A careless highway and a future no one wishes to be hurled

toward. To be scattered is different from being dismantled. Here, the sky reminds me of sap: it seeps into every pore of our days, unseen but unavoidable when touched. I'm too certain of a situation and then the situation becomes a blue that puts the sky to shame,

puts the best moments we've had to bed, though the sleep they have is not like mine: a moment is normal enough to cease being momentary.

ADAM CLAY

JESSE MACK

The End

Of the things we're distant to, the sun isn't the first thing that comes to mind.

No matter, some matter. Light forgives inaction with such ease

that we could learn a little something by sitting still and staring into it.

In most faces I see a caesura without even trying. I keep missing buttons to the point

of not bothering anymore. The news is better off, and the way we view the end of the world is too compact and simple, it turns out.

I'm glad to compartmentalize in a sudden sort of way because this world is a place where a truck backfires

and a bullet casing rolls around in the street like a lopsided marble headed somewhere.

Song

Indifference of construction workers boiled the evening to its pulp.

Over the curbside bounded the trash barrel, kicked over & still smoking.

Sun's last glint off truck ladders minted itself on our skulls.

We were passersby, on our routes home from darkness into darkness.

It confounds me, still, how much else was going down everywhere around us.

From the rooftop swimming pool: the quick squeal, then dive.



Jordan**Kessler**

Old-Fashioned Target. 2013



Violet. 2012 Jordan Kessler

Hi Power. 2012. Jordan Kessler



I first became familiar with Jordan Kessler through Palm Press. His pronounced perfectionist tendencies toward his craft were clear, as was his genuine love for photography. His work on *The Gun Project* signaled a departure from his previous work, primarily in landscapes, and (long before Aurora and Newtown) addressed a subject that is frequently layered and burdened with meaning and weight beyond the objects themselves.

Joshi Radin: What is your personal relationship to the subject matter like? What is your history with guns?

Jordan Kessler: I've thought about that a lot. I do not fear the culture or them as objects for sure.

JR: I have seen samples of this work as it has evolved, and it seemed like you honed in once you started working on the gun cases. Is this accurate? How has your approach to photographing this series changed over the course of the project?

JK: It started off as photographing the curios and relics of a gun range. I then procured some artifacts to construct images outside of this environment. I was putting more of my own hand into the image-making by placing and lighting the objects the way I wanted. It was the first time I really thought about making photographs in that way.

JR: You previously worked on images in areas affected by the destruction of the hurricane in western Massachusetts. Are you ever accused of being smitten with destruction or power? Does that reflection hold any validity for you? JK: It was an investigation of the sheer power of nature on an environment that seldom feels this aspect of weather. Hills of trees don't much exist where tornadoes mostly touch down. It was something so different from what I had ever seen in real life. Many people from out of town went there to just to get a live visual of what this tornado did. It's a humbling experience to see a habitat so altered by nature. I had almost solely photographed landscapes prior to recently, so photographing a landscape altered by a tornado locally wasn't really a stretch.

JR: You previously worked primarily in black and white, and recently it seems you're integrating color. Is this a new development for you? How did you decide to have both in the series?

JK: I spent ten years practicing and really getting down to the nuances of black and white photography. It was time to consider that some photographs would simply be better as color.

JR: Do you feel you have a responsibility to a public, as far as the art you make? Are you purposely making "political" art? Or not? Do you think this is a useful way to think about art generally?



JK: I feel it is the responsibility of an artist to do things seriously. That doesn't mean that a piece of art can't just be pure humor, but even that joke you're trying to tell should have some thought behind it. Contemplation is essential to good work, but making a political statement is not. You can analyze something without coming to a conclusive stance. There is so much grey area that needs to be considered and evaluated.

JR: How do you feel about contemporary photographic practice overall? Who are the artists you are paying attention to, and who is doing work that moves you?

JK: Sometimes I find it a bit sterile. I really like Robert Adams, Frank Golhke, Garry Winogrand, Stephen Shore, etc. That is still the work that I really respond to.

JR: Do you feel affected by the digital age in photography, or sense its impact as a fine artist?



JK: Yeah, I wish I had a digital camera that could reproduce what I see in the way that eight by ten film does. I used to be a real purist about photography and actually could see myself getting back to that. The process doesn't mean a lot if the final product is mediocre though, and I realized that. If you know your materials then you want what is best for the job.

from series, Curios and Relics. 2013 JORDAN KESSLER



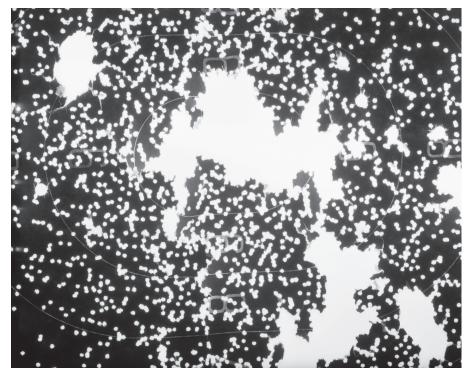
Paper Target. 2012 JORDAN KESSLER



Skeet Field. 2012 JORDAN KESSLER



Dark Foam. 2012 Jordan Kessler



Ballistic Mapping. 2012 Jordan Kessler

Revolver. 2012 Jordan Kessler

CANDICE WUEHLE

Pedagogy

Which is the difference between valley and prairie? Far as you can see, Find your way home. Will we ever smell pine again? I do dream of wheat – kid from the plain Embodied arrow, in any situation devoid Distraction, I do return. Never traveled far

I.)

I am wishing well. The little girl with the lisp says: the tomato is coming. Wind flirts well. Do you suppose hot breezes ever weary of tossing Into frigid gusts? Ever wish they'd just stayed West? Me either – natural phenomena: one nights usually stand. Well! Did you hear the one about the three holes in the ground? So did the drought.

Without a map

I am wishing

well.

I'll ask Ask me

(Wind & Farm & Field)

anything.

II.)

You know

some people

You know some people

will tell you all prairie looks like all other prairie.

(air air air air dirt dust air animal dirt dust shine)

(You know in the way/we learn where to land/ by what falls from the skies) (You know/in the way/ we learn to speak/by what falls/ from the airs) (You know/ in the way/ we learn) (You know)

III.)

As if if I carved a heart about your initial s, as if that would be

occurs.

As if I would not have first to learn your name

as if I would not have first to learn to speak

as if I would not have first to learn the locus and lines of

phenomena: a thing that

the origin.

As if blood comes from bone. As if sap has no home.

As if the prairie remembers its own name in the long history as the field which is best for the long call, best for that which is taught over time.

CANDICE WUEHLE

Lost to Space

Lost to Space, Earth Is Not Composed Of Its Original Atmosphere, But Rather Of A Composition Of Gasses From The Impact Of Comets And Planetesimals Full In Volatile Materials; Notably The Earth's Original Atmosphere Did Not Contain Oxygen

> The day I realized there's no one day to realize anything - you keep realizing, see? and saying: the day I - there was a storm hovering on the town's edge. A neighbor boy in a tree said he could smell it, and it smelled bad. Three days later, the clouds had not moved. I could smell it too. By then. The block received notices to retain their own waste. The day I realize the landfill is on fire is the same day I realize I am not going to stop hating him.

Everything aligned: I could have seen this world would happen.

I

In the future, I will wish the landlines functioned. I will wish the necromancer's number was in the telefax. Wish is a word with no interior modification. Wish is a word with no synonym. I was wishing this were not happening and then I wished it, this does not change. I know you see, just like my ex-husband saw what I did not see yet, but would soon. Oh, gravity. It is you we have come up here for.

The boy in the tree says we need to see what he is seeing. He says: it's a hell of a view. 2

Bring it down. 1...2...

1...2...3...on purpose we burn out the prairie, call out the ghosts. They listen if we cant, they speak if we offer. One warm winter my body went Ouija dial

and scraped across the spirit states to settle on a swampsoil south of a blood slaked city

appellate for a God.

You explain the graves here append above the earth because the land will not take the bodies.

I understood: it is full enough already.

Bring it down. That much clear the atmosphere itself gets light gets low

79% nitrogen, 20% oxygen, 1% sundry but slow. Because names like layers of strata are unstable bounty, I tender *dear* –

After all that breathing fire, how easy breathing air

After all I fell In [a common expression]

Projective

In this issue of *Printer's Devil Review*, we are proud to present two critical works on poet Charles Olson's 1950 manifesto "Projective Verse" – a seminal modernist essay that champions the primacy of speech in poetic composition and argues that written verse should, instead of following received rhythmic, metrical, and rhyming patterns, attempt to transcribe the poet's pattern of speech.

The first essay, poet Sam Cha's "Projective Verse' and the 'Open Text' Considered as Practices of Body," is a celebration of and personal reflection on Olson's ideas, as well as those of language poet Lyn Hejinian. The second essay, by *PDR* editor Thomas Dodson, mounts a compelling postmodernist critique of Olson's suggestion that written and spoken language are in contention.

Olson deserves recognition and consideration for the influence he has had on modern poetry and, for us at *PDR*, he is also something of a local hero. Born in 1910, Olson was raised in Worcester, Massachusetts and summered in Gloucester – a locale that would later become a major focus of his poetic work.

Following stints in academia as a Herman Melville scholar, in the military during ww11, and in politics as a Democratic Party operative, Olson turned his attention to poetry when he was in his mid-thirties.

He wrote "Projective Verse" in the midst of an eight-year period as an off-and-on professor at Black Mountain College in North Carolina that lasted from 1948 until the school closed in 1956.

"Projective Verse" exerted a major influence on Olson's contemporaries at Black Mountain, who included Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Ed Dorn, Denise Levertov, and Jonathan Williams. His work is also recognized as having provided a link between early modernist poets like William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound and later poetic movements such as the Beat Generation and the New York School. As Cha points out in his essay, Olson's influence has also been cited by postmodern groups like the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poets.

We hope these two essays will provide new insights for those already familiar with Olson's work and an intriguing introduction for those new to his thought and poetic practice.

Read the full text of "Projective Verse" at the Poetry Foundation website: http://bit.ly/GZhvpL

Verse

Sam Cha

« Projective Verse » and the « Open Text » Considered as Practices of Body

I. Introduction

I want to talk about two different modes of embodiment in two historical strands of non-mainstream American poetry: the Black Mountain Poets, as represented by Charles Olson and his poem "The Kingfishers," and the Language Poets, as represented by Lyn Hejinian and her book My Life. Because I am talking about embodiment, I am going to be talking about voice and breath and movement; because I am talking about voice and breath, I am going to be talking about the ways in which these two poets relate to "natural" speech. Because bodies move in time and space, I am going to be talking about these poems as spaces; I am going to be talking about how they are structured, what it is like to navigate through them, what paths one can take. And because the structures of the poems are artificial designed spaces that act on the body, I am going to talk about them as *machines*; machines for acting on the body of the reader.

Finally, because these designs are both aesthetic and ideological choices, I am going to be focusing on Olson and Hejinian's most representative statements on poetics (respectively, "Projective Verse," and "The Rejection of Closure"). I'll be focusing on their accounts of the reasoning *behind* their

choices, just as much as (or maybe even more than) I am going to be focusing on the poems themselves.

Here I am taking my cues (whether they be positive or negative) from four main sources. First, from William Carlos Williams, who once defined the poem as a "small (or large) machine made of words."1 Second, from Lyn Hejinian, who writes in "The Rejection of Closure" that "for the moment, for the writer, the poem *is* a mind."² Third, from Brian McHale, who, in his essay on "Poetry as Prosthesis," has argued that "all poetry, indeed all language use whatsoever, appears to be what Donna Haraway terms a *cyborg phenomenon* – a human being coupled to a machine - or what David Wills characterizes as a prosthesis."3

In talking about these things, I am also going to be talking specifically about my own voice, my own breath, my own speech patterns, my own sense of embodiment, my own movements, and how they change when I read these two poets. I realize that in a paper of this sort, one is expected to maintain a certain stance of objectivity. The "I" of literary criticism, when it appears at all, is - or has been, at least for the past century and a half or so – typically a distant figure, a figure of authority, someone very much like a stern father.† And the apparatus of the critical essay - the works cited, the footnotes, the endnotes, the elision of the first person - reinforces this impression. It is meant to give the reader the sense that this is authoritative, that this is science, that these are reproducible results. That is a useful fiction - a productive constraint and I am, by and large, going to adhere to it.

But I also have other stories to tell you, in other ways.

II. "The Kingfishers": Trajectory, Svringe, Parasite

In his poems, Charles Olson wanted to tie the world together in a "field" generated by breath. His project was nothing less than the liberation and salvaging of modern man: "man is once more to possess intent in his life, and to take up the responsibility implicit in his life ... to comprehend his own process as intact."⁴ And for this, he saw the renewal of poetry, and the continuation and expansion of the project of modernism (Pound's and Williams's, mainly) as crucial. Poetry was to fill, among other things, a didactic role.

Guy Davenport has written of "The Kingfishers" as a Poundian ideogram, an imagistic structuring and juxtaposing, all of its elements working in "synergy."5 I'd expand on that. For Olson, poetry had to work not only as microcosm but as organism, since what it is supposed to teach man is how to experience his own body - how to experience experience, in fact, since for Olson all experience was "SENSIBILITY WITHIN THE ORGANISM / BY MOVEMENT OF ITS OWN TISSUES."6 But whose organism, whose experience is an Olson poem?

First, fact: between the writing of "The Kingfishers" (February to June of 1949), and the writing of "Projective Verse" (written in 1950), Charles Olson was thinking about theatre. In a letter to a Japanese poet and editor, Kitue Kitasono, on April 14, 1949, Olson writes that the way to continue the project of modernism was by learning from "THEATRE ... the union of SPEECH and sound."7

[†] There have been notable exceptions. Woolf, Cixous, Irigaray, Acker, for instance. It's no accident that these are not the names of fathers. Of course Olson is another one who uses an "I" in his criticism that is not the expected "I."

Concurrently, Olson was also thinking about physics – Rosemarie Waldrop, among others, has pointed out that the "field" of "Composition by Field" is, implicitly, an electromagnetic field.⁸ Projective verse itself is characterized as being "kinetic," both in the essay itself, and also in Olson's correspondence (for instance in a letter in 1951 to W. H. Ferry).⁹

The idea of something being "kinetic" implies movement. This was a fundamental component of Olson's worldview, one of the main things he learned from the physics of the twentieth century – the idea that "the minute particles of substances (including any one of us) is in vigorous & continual motion."¹⁰ The idea of movement, in turn, implies something - a body (maybe even *somebody*) - that moves, and a space in which it moves. Theatre is not only the "union of SPEECH and SOUND," but is also the marking-off of space, the differentiation of boundaries, and the placement of locations (in, for instance, the assigning of the space of the stage, separate from the audience, and the careful "blocking" of the actor's movements and positions, their relationships in space). The fact that Olson was thinking about theatre means, then, that we should consider how he thought movement should be *controlled* – *what* movement should be controlled: whose movement should be controlled; *how* it should be controlled; who controls.

And control is above all what is necessary for Olson. It is necessary because for Olson control is something "outside" of the poem that is the object of the poem. It is what the poem strives to be equal to. In a letter to John Finch, written in 1935, Olson writes that the "red question mark called life" must be molded by "control and restraint" if it is to be shaped into "dignity ... beauty ... good."¹¹ He goes on to say, however:

When the best America's got comes out, it bursts and spatters like black oil struck in the Oklahoma fields. By the time it's harnessed and piped, controlled, the terrible fire, the lovely power, somehow, is gone.¹²

So the wrong kind of control is a neutralizing or a neutering, is a deadening of energy - of "fire," of "power" – a loss of essence. The wrong kind of control is the kind that restricts movement with the bond of the "harness," compresses and redirects it in "pipes," converting the kinetic "burst" and "spatter" of oil and the percussive "struck" into static, lazy "sprawl." It is no accident that the first of the eponymous "Kingfishers" that Olson shows us in the poem are caged, one of them with a bad leg, and the other sexless, his virility in doubt: "they had hoped [it] was a male" (my italics).¹³ Later on in the poem, we read:

in the animal and / or the machine the factors are communication and / or control, both involve the message. And what is the message? The message is

a discrete or continuous sequence of measurable events distributed in time

is the birth of air, is the birth of water, is a state between the origin and the end, between

birth and the beginning of another fetid nest

is change, presents no more than itself

And the too strong grasping of it, when it is pressed together and condensed, loses it

This very thing you are 14

The thing itself – what happens – is continual change, continual motion, change that goes from air to water, that brings life where "excrement and decayed fish becomes / a dripping, fetid mass."¹⁵ This thing, this "message" is "a discrete or continuous sequence of measurable events distributed in time" (the linear, historical time of a "machine"). But it is at the same time a mythic "birth of air ... of water...between...origin and ...end" that takes place in the cyclical time of the kingfisher's lifecycle. And when this "thing" is grasped "too strong," "pressed," "condensed," closed in, the motion that constitutes it (and gives it its thing-ness) stops. Any possible hope for renewal is then stillborn.

This is why, in "Projective Verse," Olson's enemy, he says, is "closed" verse, "that verse which print bred."¹⁶ Against this – "inherited line, stanza, over-all form" – he pits what he calls "FIELD COMPOSITION."¹⁷ To compose by field, he says in "Projective Verse," is to go by the "musical phrase" rather than the metronome's "push" (quoting Pound), and to, above all, let the poem move according to the rhythms of speech.¹⁸ In other words, the control that is rejected is the external control of traditional meter – for which the metronome is the metonym – the marking off of time in iambs. Instead, Olson is saying, the poem must move in varying lengths, line by line, according to the intensity of the moment, of the individual line, so that the oil can still burst and spatter. In this way, with the ebb and flow of speech, with the movement of the air and water of his breath, he hopes to record - or conduct, as with electricity – the change at the heart of reality, the "terrible fire" and the "lovely power." Only then can the poem be equal to lived experience, or (perhaps) surpass it in intensity. "The Trojan Women," Olson writes, "is able to stand...beside the Aegean – and neither Andromache or the sea suffer diminution."¹⁹ This is possible, according to Olson, only when the poet reaches "down through the workings of his own throat to that place where breath comes from, where breath has its beginnings, where drama has to come from, where, the coincidence is, all act springs."20

What we have "suffered," according to Olson, is an estrangement from the impulse that generates the poem: "manuscript, press, the removal of verse from its producer and its reproducer, the voice, a removal by one, by two removes from its place of origin and its destination."²¹ The antidote is the composing of the textual field in such a way as to transfer the "energy" of the poet's breath and speech more directly to the reader. This is the figuring of the poem as bullet ("projectile," as the subtitle of the essay would have it), the poem as electric spark ("energydischarge") bridging the gap between the poet and the reader.²² The poem is a machine so simple and so efficient that it only has one moving part, and

that made of the most insubstantial material: lightning, breath. The only control on it is the aim, the intensity, the spin. This would suggest (in line with Olson's project) that "projective verse" is a liberation, a freeness, a minimizing of control, capable of bringing its readers into the very heart of the experience of the world, into the unmediated "terrible fire," "lovely power."

The poem is a machine so simple and so efficient that it only has one moving part, and that made of the most insubstantial material: lightning and breath.

But then here's the question: if the antidote is directness, if the emphasis is on speech, is on the "personal and instantaneous" recording of the poet's work, if the work the poem does is the work of liberation, why does Olson valorize the typewriter?²³ Why is the typewriter, of all things, the machine that "record[s] the listening [the poet] has done to his own speech and by that one act indicate how he would want any reader...to voice his work"?²⁴ A typewriter does not "record" sound, after all.

Why not a machine already available to Olson and his contemporaries and immediate predecessors – a machine that would actually record speech and sound and breath? Audio recording was a technology that was already in widespread use by 1950. So why not the phonautograph (patented 1857)? The tin foil cylinder (1877), the wax cylinder (1885), the steel wire (1898), the magnetic tape (1928)? Why, in a letter written to Chad Walsh in 1967, do we have Olson writing: "(I shld of course warn you - or urge you to abjure(!) tape or dictaphone if, as 'tis claimed – & therefore he claimed it as 'projective'(!) – you take Ginzy's [Allen Ginsberg's] latest, or later work (example, Wichita Vortex Sutra) as any evidence of what you are there talking about!"25

This is a question much less trivial than it might, on the face of it, seem. The emphasis on speech and on sound – said emphasis coming both from Olson himself and from many of his readers – is misleading when applied too hastily to interpreting the text. The question of speech focuses on the method of control used by the poet to control composition, to give shape to the poem. It shifts focus away from the ways in which the already-composed poem then controls its reading – and controls the reader.

"Speech," in Olson, of course isn't, not in any literal sense, actual speech, and announces itself as (not being speech) such in a variety of ways. There is the fact that the poem is made visible: the fact of the typography, the layout, which constantly draws attention to itself, declares itself as written, not voiced. As of course it must. Even if (*especially* if) we take Olson's claim that the typescript, with its regular spaces and uniformly sized letters, functions as a musical score for the reading of the poem at face value, it follows that the reader must pay particular visual attention to the ways in which the text is organized on the page.

For instance, the first line of "The Kingfishers": "What does not change / is the will to change."²⁶ Of this line, in "Projective Verse," Olson writes that he "wishes a pause so light it hardly separates the words, yet does not want a comma – which is an interruption of the meaning rather than the sounding of the line [and so] uses a symbol the typewriter has ready to hand."27 The shorter lines of "The Kingfishers" take on the feeling of percussion; they give the eye time to dwell on each word, and so the words are voiced slowly, distinctly, but with resonance. Conversely, the longer lines of the poem – for instance, "in some crack of the ruins. That it should have been he who said, 'The kingfishers!" seem to be longer so as to make the eye hasten to scan them, and make the voice speed up in sympathy, knowing that there is a long way to go, and only limited breath.²⁸

But think about what's happening here. Isn't the verse acting as a kind of steering mechanism? Isn't it, in fact, the driver of the voice? I once walked to Trader Joe's with Charles Olson. I mean that figuratively, of course, but not entirely so. It was early afternoon, in fall. The morning had been cloudy, but now the sky was drying out, cracking around the edges, peeling back to show blue. In my hand I held my copy of The New American Poetry open to page two, and I read "The Kingfishers" out loud as I walked. "What does not change / is the will to change," I read, recognizing the Heraclitus as I listened to myself. And as I read, the syllables began to

synchronize with my footsteps – or was it, I wondered, the other way around, were my footsteps starting to take on the rhythm of my reading?

When you start learning boxing (for instance), one of the first things they tell you is to synchronize your breathing with your movements. When you throw a punch, you exhale as you step and twist your hips, and then you inhale as you retract your arm, and vour feet bounce back. Your whole body is mobilized, an orchestra of fast twitch fibers, and your breathing is the conductor, controls the pace. And something very much like that was happening to me: "He [step] WOKE [step], [inhale] FULL[step]-ly[skip] CLOTHED [step] [inhale], in his BED [stepstep skip]. HE [inhale]," I read as I walked, my footsteps syncopated, varied, controlled by the breathing. But also the walking itself was now starting to have an effect on my breathing, so that the vowels were starting to come from a place deeper in my chest.

The breathing and the movement together meshed like gear wheels. Each long "O" grew longer, deeper, more resonant, and my strides grew longer to match. Soon I found that I was reading in a voice that wasn't my own – it was slower, deeper. It had an accent, of sorts - clipped, crisp consonants, slightly nasal, vaguely British in that way that recordings of American voices from the first few decades of the twentieth century can often sound to the modern ear - nothing like my own featureless Midwest. And I was walking as if I were trying to keep pace with some unseen companion, somebody taller than me, and faster.

What I think Olson means is that he wants to live in your vocal cords. He wants to ride the text into your body and pull on the tendons. "

Our path was straight, direct, fast. Under the influence of what I was now beginning to think of as the Olson-voice I found myself constantly cutting across curves in the sidewalk, moving over or through obstacles (benches, bushes, piles of leaves, puddles) rather than around, trying to keep my momentum going, as if the first reading had been a long plunge down a fixed track, and I were trying to reach the end before I ran out of speed or breath, which was mimetic of the way in which I was reading the longer lines of "The Kingfishers." The space through which I was moving was thus structured like a ballistic trajectory, structured by the rhythm of my walking, which was structured by the Olsonvoice, which was structured by the feedback-loop between my breathing/ reading and my movement, which, ultimately, was structured by the text.

I am, of course, embellishing my experience. We do such embroidery constantly, without meaning to. When we dream, our brains fashion characters and stories from the accidental discharging of neural potentials, from the whispers of stray ions, from the long chain molecules that diffuse in the interstices of our nerves. And so out of "I walked to the supermarket to get some greek yogurt and cheap clementines, and as I walked I read, and as I read the rhythms of what I read found their way into the way I walked, the way I breathed, and that change in my walking and my breathing triggered a corresponding change in the way I read, and I felt that I'd arrived at a new and visceral understanding of how and why what I was reading had been written," I have fashioned this ghost story, in which the narrator is ridden by the spirit of a dead poet, in which a dead man's breath changes a quick man's body to reconstitute the remembered lungs.

I have fashioned it so, most of all, because it is true in spirit, if not wholly in substance. Olson says that what he wants is for the reader to see how a poem should sound, but what I think Olson *means* is that he wants to live in your vocal cords. He wants to ride the text into your body and pull on the tendons. Here, he says, where in the typewritten text there is "a space as long as the phrase before it," you must hold your "breath, an equal length of time."29 Here, where there is a dash, pause in your reading, where I indicate "a pause so light it hardly separates the words."³⁰ These are not mere instructions. These are disciplines for the body of the reader – instructions for mimicking the actions of the body of the poet - and Olson writes as if he wants them to be universally recognized conventions that all readers of "contemporary poet[s]" should follow.³¹

We can think of "Projective Verse" as a tablet of commandments, the recorded, imperative voice. The reader of the "contemporary poet," in this reading, acts like a prophet, who speaks with a voice that is simultaneously his own (i.e., generated by his body), and not: a voice that has taken possession of his body. And his body moves along the tracks carved for it by that voice. Or we can think of the rigidity of the conventions of the visualization of "speech" as a delivery device, like a needle, like the ovipositors of parasitic wasps, pushing through the membrane of vision, to deposit the controlling mechanism – pathogen, drug, egg – in the reader's flesh.

Olson's project of "projective verse," ultimately depends on the substitution of the poet's own body for the reader's. Olson once wrote (in "Human Universe") that "Art does not seek to describe but to enact."³² He also wrote that in the confrontation between man and the world, it is:

the body that is his answer, his body intact and fought for, the absolute of his organism in its simplest terms, this structure evolved by nature, repeated in each act of birth, the animal man; the house he is, this house that moves, breathes, acts, this house where his life is, where he dwells against the enemy, against the beast.³³

He wrote that:

the soul is proprioceptive ... the "body" itself as, by movement of its own tissues, giving the data of, depth ... that one's life is informed from and by one's own literal body ... that this mid-thing between ... that this is "central," that is – in this ½ of the picture – what they call the sOUL, the intermediary, the intervening thing, the interrupter, the resistor. The self.³⁴

But none of these bodies are the reader's body. The body that is answer, that is house, that is refuge, that calls up and constitutes soul by its own perception of its own self – none of these belong to the reader. It is the work of the Olson poem to remake the body of the reader in the image of the poet's voice. What passes for "speech," but is really a carefully coded sequence of commands, in Olson, acts as a coercive, colonizing, parasitic force, invading the host organism and remapping it. For the moment, for the Olson poem, the reader is the poet's body.

3. *My Life:* Maze/Map, Loom, Simulator

Near the end of the first section of M_V *Life*, there is a sentence (-fragment) that reads, in full: "An 'oral history' on paper."³⁷ On the surface level of meaning alone, this sounds ridiculous – how does one go about putting an "oral" anything on paper? Once it's on paper, isn't the oral already written? Then you recognize the reference. The "Oral History of the World" was the grand, modernist (in the sense that its author purported to be attempting, through solitary heroic, artistic labor, a monumental synthesis and re-configuring of earlier narratives), and almost completely fictional project of a Harvard-educated East Village vagabond, a contemporary of E. E. Cummings named Joe Gould, who achieved a certain amount of fame when a profile of him appeared in *The* New Yorker. In that context, it becomes hard to read the sentence as anything other than a comment on Williams and Olson's perceived emphasis on speech and sound.

"They claim to value orality but then project it onto paper, flattened and emptied, and it's ridiculous anyway, to claim to say that something on paper is still somehow 'speech," is, in essence, what I take Hejinian to be saying. Elsewhere in *My Life*, she writes: "In every country is a word which attempts the sound of cats, to match an inisolable portrait in the clouds to a din in the air."³⁵ But, she writes later, it is "impossible to spell these sounds," impossible to pin down their essence with words.³⁶ The sound of cats is a cloud shape, fleeting, existing only in relation (it is "inisolable") to a specific configuration of clouds that exists for one specific moment. To attempt transcription is to remove the cat-sound from the context (without which it wouldn't exist) and to remove what is changeable about it, what is alive; to make of a "portrait" a "din." Signal become noise.

Elsewhere in the book, Hejinian compares the "desire for accurate representation" with the "mania for panorama" of the sort that one can acquire from days spent "cataloguing the travel library."38 "Mania" suggests that the desire for accurate representation is pathological; "panorama," "catalogue," and especially travel "library" suggests that what gives birth to this pathology is the condition of being constantly surrounded by nothing *but* representations, and that, by implication, representation can only aspire to be "accurate" when it is representing other representations. The referential function of the word has begun to break down.

This is how Hejinian announces her break with the project of modernism – which is for her also a break with the idea of the written word as being tied to voiced sound.

Hejinian's statement is in line with something that Robert Grenier once said, in his essay "On Speech." I'm going to quote him at length, because I think the context of his statement is important. The particular statement I have in mind, however, comes at the very end:

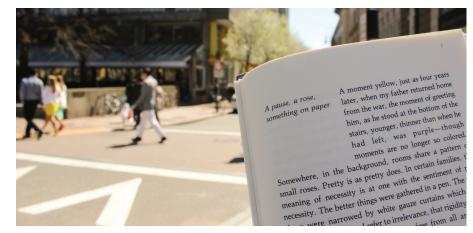
It isn't the spoken any more than the written, now, that's the progression from Williams, what now I want, at least, is the word way back in the head that is the thought or feeling forming out of the 'vast' silence/noise of consciousness experiencing world *all the time*, as waking/dreaming, words occurring

...

...

Why imitate "speech"? Various vehicle that American speech is in the different mouth of any of us, possessed of particular powers of colloquial usage, rhythmic pressure, etc., it is only such. To me, all speeches say the same thing, or: why not exaggerate, as Williams did, for our time proclaim an abhorrence of 'speech'... to rid us, as creators of the world, from reiteration of the past dragged on in formal habit. I HATE SPEECH.

I want writing what *is* thought/where *feeling* is/*words are born.*³⁹



My Life, Page One. Photo by Thomas Dodson, 2013.

"What is thought/where feeling is/ words are born" is the statement to which I refer, of course, and it is a deliberate echo of Olson's "where breath comes from, where breath has its beginnings, where drama, has to come from, where, the coincidence is, all acts spring."40 Crucially, however, Grenier's formulation leaves out breath, leaves out the physical presence of the poet in the act of composition, leaves out the body in which consciousness experiences, figures experience not as fleshy texture or movement but as the on/off of awareness ("waking/dreaming") and the "occurring" of words.

The words themselves, then, and the awareness of the words, are to be the objects to which the poem refers. And it appears that, for Grenier at least, the *form* of what he wants to write is something that precedes both the "spoken" (by which I take him to mean, essentially, "projective verse"), and the written (by which I take him to mean, essentially, what Olson calls "closed verse"). What he wants to write, in fact, "is thought."⁴¹ And yet poets are

"creators of the world," which I take to mean that, for Grenier (and for others of his generation, like Hejinian), a poem – even though it is merely the occurrence of words, "thought or feeling forming out of...silence/noise of consciousness" – is somehow at least a world or at least congruent to the world. What is the shape of this world? Is it made of anything other than words or "thought"? Who gets to live there? Will we be able to do anything there, other than wake/ dream or occur as words? Isn't this a curiously disconnected, schizophrenic, solipsistic world?

Whether it is or not, it makes it difficult to talk about embodiment and space in Hejinian when what she and Grenier seem to be suggesting is that they are deliberately leaving the body out. So here's another story, about the first time I read *My Life*. I think it might help us think across this aporia. The edition of *My Life* that I own is the third edition, from Green Integer. It is a tiny book, perhaps four inches wide and six inches tall and half an inch thick; it fits easily into the pockets of my jeans, and can be (mostly) covered from view by my right hand. As for the text itself, I knew something of what to expect – I'd read other poems by Hejinian, and I'm fairly familiar with the work of other poets associated with L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E.

Nevertheless, it came as something of a shock to open the book to see a neat rectangle of text nearly filling the entire page, its expanse only broken up by a square-shaped blank space in the upper left corner (and that blank space in turn only marked by the two lines of the italicized section-heading "A pause, a rose, / something on paper"). Turning the page didn't really help. Here, text filled everything that wasn't margin. There were no paragraph breaks to indicate the structure of the text. There were no indentations. The top, left, and right margins were identical in width and the bottom margin was twice as wide - that, too, seemed strange. Most of all, I saw the very regularity of the textual field, the sheer geometrical precision of it, as a clear visual signal that I was looking at something new, something foreign.

In "After Free Verse: The New Non-Linear Poetries," Marjorie Perloff writes of the American free verse anthologized in *Naked Poetry* (1969) that they all look more or less similar on the page – they are "columns of verse centered on the page, with justified left margins, and ...jagged right margins."⁴² That the very layout of Hejinian's book has the power to shock is a measure of how ubiquitous and natural-seeming (even considered solely as a visual – a *spatial* – convention) such "free verse" has become. It's also a measure of something else. We read (and write) with our bodies, though we have managed to forget that we do so. My stepson Henry is a fine and confident reader for his age (he will be nine in two weeks). But when he's asked to read an unfamiliar word or sequence of words to us in the living room, he (consciously or not) tenses up – a shoulder will move up or down, his neck will hunch or bend ever so slightly – and his arm will move out towards the paper or screen. His index finger extends, traces the writing, almost as if it were Braille; his eyes open just a little bit wider. His nostrils flare and his pupils might dilate (I'm not prepared to swear to it). His lips start to move before any sound comes out. When he sounds the word out you can see him listening to the sounds, trying to piece them together into something more familiar, and his lips will move again, as he varies the speed or the vowel sounds. And you can see him listening to these new sounds. And if it still sounds unfamiliar, he might repeat the process again and again or (especially if he's hungry or tired or sick), you might see his eyebrows start to scrunch together and his lower lip begin to push out.

Our adult faces and limbs are not so eloquent; the novelty – both of being a body, and of the written word – has receded into the background. Nevertheless, when one pays attention to what one's body is doing when one reads or writes – when we attend to *proprioception*, to use Olson's pet term – one begins to have an idea of the degree of purely physical coordination involved in text-reading and text-making. For instance, right now I am typing this with my eyes closed. In part, this is because my eyes are tired, and I want to give them a rest. It is also because, when I type with my eyes open (I have just opened my eyes again, to remind myself of what it feels like), they tend to dart and wander, fixate on objects both textual and not, which makes me pause in my writing to evaluate those objects, to catalogue them, assign to each a place.

This in turn has an effect on the quality of my prose. It makes me digressive and expansive. It makes my clauses proliferate and my parentheses nest. My sentences begin to mimic the structure of my looking – the complex shapes that my visual attention and comprehension trace in space and time, moving from, for instance, this sentence that I am writing now, to the contrasting features of sentences I wrote earlier with my eyes open, to the books strewn over the couch where I'm sitting – until the entire structure of my thought starts feeling to me as if it were something fronded and subdivided and involuted and weed-wild, a fractal structure from which I must zoom outwards, losing entire levels of detail if I am to keep it whole in my sight. I don't want that right now. I want to stay focused.

So I close my eyes again, and this lets me listen more closely to myself as I compose the sentence. The sentences start echoing each other. They become more uniform in length. Their syntactical structures become parallel. They begin to group together by sound and by meaning, which is inseparable from the sound. As I type I listen both to the inner voice that sounds out the words one by one and also to the sound of my own typing. The fluidity of it when I know what I am about to type before-hand (literally, before my hands move) encourages me to go faster, faster, hurry the sentence onwards and the logic to its conclusion. My fingers know where to go almost before I know what word I am typing. The slow, deliberate tap-tap-ing I hear from my fingers when I am unsure sounds like a blind man's cane scouting out the lay of the land for obstacles and bumps, or like a sculptor's chisel, chipping slowly away at the stubborn and unnecessary rock.

And this makes my thought in turn slow down, turn inward and under, working away at a metaphor until I've either gotten it hopelessly mixed up or wrung dry or some combination of both. But whether my eyes are open or closed, whether I am looking or listening, what is happening is that I am using my body, my senses. I am using the movements of my body, and these movements are what shape my thought, are the shape of my thoughts.

And these same processes are at work when I read, though they are less available to me to be aware of, because they have a less obvious external effect. When I read I am moving, just like Henry is. My eyes move, and perhaps certain muscles in my throat and lips, and my hands turn the pages. When we read things that look substantially the same – for instance, the conventional left-justified columns with ragged right margins of "free verse" – our eyes move in similar ways, trace similar, well-worn paths, paths that they have traced a hundred times before, saccade after familiar saccade. Our hands, too, move in roughly the same rhythm, turn the pages at more or less the same

rate of speed, whether we are reading Lowell or Olson or Ginsberg or Spicer or Berryman or Berrigan. And because our movements are similar, because they resemble movements that we have performed before, our thoughts also grow to be roughly the same shape.

This is one of the things that genre and intertextuality means to me: it means that, on many levels, my perception (and therefore interpretation) of the text is being shaped by muscle memory, by memories of moving through other textual spaces very much like whichever one happens to be lying in front of me at the moment. It means that I am comfortable, at home. The town may be unfamiliar, the street names foreign, but the walk I take through them is not. The navigation is automatic – I know where east is; I am always oriented.

My point is that the text of *My Life* is, for these very reasons, *dis*orienting, physically uncomfortable, spatially uncanny (unheimlich; it makes me not-at-home). When, on the first page of the book, I see the sentence "Pretty is as pretty does" followed immediately by the sentence "In certain families, the meaning of necessity is at one with the sentiment of pre-necessity," I feel it, not only as a disjunction in meaning and thought, but also as a *physical* stopping. My eyes stutter; they skitter around the page looking for something they have missed, something that will act as a bridge for those two sentences; they look in between them just to make sure that the gap between those two sentences is really there. My hand, which by the time I have gotten to the middle of a page, is usually moving down towards the lower right hand



Lyn Hejinian. Photo by Gloria Graham, 2005.

corner, preparing for the turn, stops, and because it has stopped in the middle of a well-worn and automatic routine, there are muscles in my arm and shoulder that experience a tensing that they seldom do when I'm reading. When Hejinian writes that

[w]riting's forms are not merely shapes but forces; formal questions are about dynamics – they ask how, where, and why the writing moves, what are the types, directions, number, and velocities of a work's motion. The material aporia objectifies the poem in the context of ideas and of language itself.⁴³

I'm not certain that this kind of physical reaction was, precisely, what she meant. (She seems to be thinking, in fact, along lines similar to Olson's, when he talks about "kinetics.") But that is the way my body understands it, and therefore that is the way I must understand it. My orbital muscles take it at face value. What *My Life* does, then, is force the reader's body into a new and unexpected routine in relation to the space of the text. At every sentence's end the eve cannot continue without taking a quite literal leap of faith – *this* time, the eye always expects (because it has been right so many times before in so many different texts), this time there will be a connection. This time I (the eye) can move from the end of this sentence to the beginning of the next and ignore the space in between; won't have to check to see whether there's another sentence that I've unknowingly skipped. But the eye is always disappointed until it fastens on a new element of the text, one that seems oddly familiar. After a while the eye recognizes it, figures out why it is familiar – it's a repetition in the text; a phrase that appeared earlier on in the text as an italicized section heading is here "recontextualized [...] with new emphasis."44 Again, muscle memory plays its part; the hand reaches out and flips through the book, riffling through the pages, while the eye skims through the blur, looking for other section headings, other repetitions, stopping at the repetitions and then flipping back to compare them to the "original," flipping forward again to compare them with each other. It's as if a new dimension had been added to the usual practice of reading, a new motion. In addition to left to right, moving from one end of a line to the other and back and so on till the end of the page and then moving forward – the horizontal axis of reading - we now have this accelerated back and forth, these threads of inquiry that pierce and suture pages together: many vertical axes. A shuttle carrying the weft where before there was only warp.

Words cannot "unite an ardent intellect with the external material world," Hejinian suggests.⁴⁵ To attempt to do so, to attempt to make things cohere, is to fall into the trap that Olson fell into – to colonize and control in the attempt to liberate. It is a "Faustian longing."46 Where Olson attempts to carry us through the text, sweep us along the prepared path with a single push, Hejinian invites us (by repeatedly blocking the path) to explore it, take different routes through it, map it, rather than block it (that is, "block," in the theatrical sense). The repetitions are the landmarks by which we navigate, by which we map the "vast and overwhelming" world.⁴⁷ What language can do is make "tracks" whereby the vast undifferentiated expanse of the past – the "immense and distant bay of blue, gray, green" - can be navigated, traversed, by creating an "incoherent border which will later separate events from experience."48 By breaking the "Faustian longings" with "uncounted continuous and voluminous digressions," Hejinian hopes to "jump lines, hop cracks."49 In doing so, she provides us with new ways of configuring our bodies, new routines that can supplement the old – and therefore both new shapes of thought, new ways of navigation in the "external material world" and new ways of reading and writing in the world of words. After all, the two are one.

NOTES

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10. Ibid., 162.

11. Ibid., 12.

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13. Charles Olson, "The Kingfishers," in *The Collected Poems of Charles Olson: Excluding the Maximus Poems*, 86–97.

14. Ibid., 86–97.

15. Ibid., 86–97.

16. Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," in A Charles Olson Reader, 39.

17. Ibid., 39, 40.

18. Ibid., 40.

19. Ibid., 48.

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The Poetics of Presence

The poet Charles Olson and the philosopher Jacques Derrida are both provocative thinkers, notorious for the difficulty of their styles. Each can also lay claim to significant legacies: Olson's work continues to exert influence as a predecessor to language poetry and, though Derrida's ideas received a cool reception from analytic philosophers, his critical practice (deconstruction) has been generative in other areas, especially literary theory and postcolonial studies.

Despite also sharing the label "postmodern," Olson and Derrida have very different ideas about the nature of being and its relationship to speech and writing. Olson insists that everything in the world possesses its own, self-sustaining existence outside of any relation to other things. Derrida, by contrast, considers being and meaning to be the result of relations between differing elements in a system, each element containing within it traces of the others. Olson privileges speech as closer to being than writing, and he inveighs against a "print-bred" poetry that threatens to exile the poet from speech's life-giving energy. Derrida rejects this view, arguing that Western thought has long placed writing in a subordinate position in order to secure for speech the illusion of a fullness which it does not and can never possess.

I could say that I set out to write an essay about "Projective Verse" that would put Olson's ideas in conversation with those of Derrida, but that would be a lie. The kind of conversation I have in mind here is less that of an evenhanded comparison of positions, and more like one of Plato's dialogues. In the dialogues, the character of Socrates encounters a fellow Athenian citizen and engages him in a conversation about some philosophical concept - about Virtue, or Justice, or Piety. At the beginning, Socrates's interlocutor holds what he believes to be sensible and coherent convictions. Through a series of questions and answers, however, Socrates leads his partner to question these commonly held positions and to recognize that the concept in question is

more complex and contradictory than it first appeared. "Projective Verse" is full of confident

declarations about the nature of being and its relationship to speech and the voice. Drawing on Derrida's account of the role of speech in Western metaphysics, I aim to undertake a critical reading of "Projective Verse" that undermines Olson's certainties and re-opens a set of questions about the relation of being to presence and speech to text that the essay appears to regard as settled forever.

The central claim of "Projective Verse" is that a new and truly modern poetry must transcend the ordinary functioning of language. The poem should not be a fossilized representation of thought, but "an energy discharge," one that transmits the poet's vital essence directly: "A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it ... to the reader."1 For Olson, the shimmering of the poet's being at the moment of composition is embodied and expressed by means of his voice and breath. Only that verse which faithfully transcribes the poet's living voice and delivers it intact to the reader can truly be called "projective." Olson contrasts this kind of poem with the non-projective, "that verse which is print bred and which is pretty much what we have had, and have still got ... "² Olson presents projective composition (or "composition by field") as a break from what has gone before, a liberation of poetry's energy from both the constraints of logical argument and the petrifying effect exercised by writing on authentic human speech.

In earlier essays, Olson laments the persistence of prejudices first articulated in classical philosophy – "the whole Greek system" from "Old Stink Sock [Socrates] on down" – in favor of discourse and logic over what he terms "live speech."³ Despite his stated hostility to classical metaphysics, the statements Olson makes in "Projective Verse" about the unbreakable bonds between being, breath, and speech – and which form the basis for his prescriptions for poetic composition – correspond exactly to a set of ideas about speech and writing that have characterized Western thought since the Platonic Socrates.

In his discussion of "thingness" in "Human Universe," Olson asserts: "A thing, any thing, impinges on us by a more important fact, its self-existence, without reference to any other thing"4 Key to Olson's metaphysics is the notion that a thing must exist by itself, without referring to any other thing. A thing that depends for its existence on some additional, exterior thing is not unified, not truly and at all times itself; part of it is always elsewhere. A dependent thing is a divided thing, part of it occupying one place and time and another part occupying the place and time of the other thing on which it depends. According to this way of thinking about being, something that doesn't exist entirely on its own doesn't really exist at all - or, at best, has a diminished or degraded share of being in comparison to those things thought to exist independently.

The historical development of Western thought and language has been dominated by just this conception of being as equivalent to presence. Our traditional formulations of being as "self-existence," "the now," "Truth," and "consciousness" all refer to the idea of something unified, undifferentiated, constant, proximate, and present.

Each of these terms seeks to designate something that is really *here now*, without any difference from itself in nature, any distance from itself in space, or any deferment of its presence in time.

Of course, this conception of the nature of being (Olson's "thingness") has implications for how we understand the status of concepts and language. Let's assume for a moment that the function of language is to represent things in reality, and that those things have the kind of inherent self-existence that Olson attributes to them. We end up in that case with a hierarchy of being, with "things" placed at the top. Below things we have concepts, which depend for their existence on their reference to actual things. On the next rung down we have spoken words which, according to this model, represent (and thus owe their existence to) concepts. Finally, at the very bottom, we have written words which are, supposedly, imperfect representations of speech.

Olson clearly regards textual representations as inferior substitutes for spoken words, stating:

What we have suffered from, is manuscript, press, the removal of verse from its producer and reproducer, the voice, a removal by one, by two removes from its place of origin and its destination.⁵

In the great chain of being, the printed text finds itself at the furthest remove from the poet's being. To begin composition from textual forms rather than with attention to one's own breath and voice is, for Olson, to give the poem over at the start to suffocation and death.

Olson's commitment to the classical conception of the relation between being and speech is clear in his discussion of the syllable. The spoken syllable, what he calls "the minimum

and source of speech," is the basic formal element of projective verse.⁶ He instructs the projective poet to regard the syllable as well as "every [other] element in an open poem" as "objects," possessing as much inherent existence "as we are accustomed to take what we call the objects of reality."7 The projective poet listens so intently to the voice and the breath and transcribes these so precisely that the ordinary distance between spoken words, concepts, and things collapses. Syllables cease to function as parts of a system of representation and, instead, announce their own intrinsic existence to the listener. It is "speech," Olson tells us, "the 'solid' of verse" that authorizes the poet to regard "everything in...[the poem] as solids, objects, things."8 As we have seen, in Olson's system "things" are always constituted as singular and primordial presences.

By means of the "living voice," Olson seeks to provide language with a shortcut to the reader, to spare it the tedious detour through references to things outside of itself. Language in a projective poem is no longer a means of representation, but a transparent medium for the communication of being. Despite the tone of Olson's rhetoric, this does not constitute a rejection of the traditional metaphysical conception of representational language. It is, instead, an attempt to realize that metaphysics' ideal of total transparency.

Olson's claim that "living speech" must finally be liberated from its subordinate position seems to me to profoundly misread the history of Western thought - to get things exactly backwards. The valorization of speech as the herald of

The historical development of Western thought and language has been dominated by just this conception of being as equivalent to presence. 🔊

being, and the denigration of writing as its exterior and imperfect supplement is nothing new. It is, to borrow Olson's phrase, "pretty much what we have had" since Plato.

But simply exposing Olson's explicit rejection of classical metaphysics as either confused or disingenuous doesn't get us very far. In order to truly re-read "Projective Verse," we have to challenge its claims for the self-sufficiency of being and the primacy of the voice. We must discover the traces of difference and dependence in categories that it regards as whole and complete in themselves. We must pursue meanings that, though they are unauthorized and disowned, continue to spill out from the aperture of Olson's text.

II.

There are, of course, other ways to think about language and its relation to being and presence. The structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure provides a useful starting point. De Saussure rejected the notion that language is simply a system for naming things in the world. He famously described meaningful signs not in terms of their reference to things, but instead according to their structure.

A sign, de Saussure argued, does not consist of "a thing and a name,"

but rather of "a concept and a sound pattern."9 De Saussure called the concept "a signified" and the sound pattern "a signifier." In examining the English word "pear," de Saussure would likely make the following points. First, the sound ['per] has no identity outside of a particular system of differences (the English language) in which it is distinguished from other meaningful sounds such as ['der] and ['ber]. He would also observe that the same is true of concepts, which don't derive their meaning from things in reality or from timeless ideals, but from relations with one another. The concept of "a sweet and juicy greenish fruit" relies for its meaning on a whole set of other concepts related to the classification of plants, colors, and taste sensations. These concepts do not arise spontaneously from a physical pear or from some set of universal ideas about colors or tastes held by everyone at all times – we know very well that different cultures have different systems for classifying such things.

These two elements, signifiers (sound patterns) and signifieds (concepts), occupy separate, but parallel places in an overall structure; they are two faces of a single coin. The relationship between a given signified and its signifier is arbitrary. The signified "pear" is linked to the signifier ['per] in English and to the signifier [pwar] in French. So long as it

is used consistently within a particular system (English or French), one sound will serve just as well as the other to indicate the concept. Thus, structural linguistics dispenses with the notion that spoken words and concepts derive their significance through reference to independently existing things.

Poststructuralists like Jacques Derrida argue that this approach does not go far enough. Derrida's work offers a trenchant critique of the traditional Western conception of being and voice, what he refers to as "the metaphysics of presence." Derrida observes that the desire for the ideal of an independent and inherent self-existence has been so powerful and pervasive in Western thought that any term associated with it tends to be elevated to the status of an original and transcendent value. Such an ideal must be protected from anything that might show that it is not, in fact, whole and complete in itself.

This sleight of hand is accomplished by pairing the privileged term with a forsaken one, a scapegoat. The scapegoat term is said to contain within itself everything that pure presence must (in order to maintain its integrity) exclude, namely: lack, difference, dispersion, deferment, absence, and death. He sees this prejudice at work even in the structuralist approach to language.

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida argues that de Saussure ultimately fails to leave classical metaphysics behind. By partitioning the sign into parallel parts, structuralism privileges the signified in favor of the signifier, the pure idea over its expression in a sound pattern. This division reflects a desire for "a signified able to 'take place' in its intelligibility, before its 'fall,' before any expulsion into the exteriority of the sensible here below."¹⁰

In structuralism, Derrida argues, signifieds still retain their special place. By placing a structural barrier between them, signifieds are walled off from the promiscuous play of signifiers, the tendency of words to get mixed up in metaphors, to swap positions, to take time unfolding their meaning, to run ahead and then circle back, to never arrive at their destination at all. One might say that the classical ideal of the intelligible is that it be allowed to sport with the sensible, yet never find itself sullied by the encounter. In this relationship, the signifier is clearly the scapegoat term.

The signifier is imagined to be an exterior (and ultimately unnecessary) supplement to a conceptual meaning that comes before it. All of the undesirable characteristics of language impermanence, difference, materiality, and misunderstanding - can be handed off onto the signifier to bear alone. This allows the signified to be constituted as pure meaning, a self-sustaining presence that does not rely for its existence on anything so coarse as a spoken word or a graphic mark. Don't we refer to just this privileged relationship of concepts to spoken words when we suggest that some words that we have uttered were "not what me *meant* to say"?

In place of such a rehashing of the metaphysics of presence, Derrida proposes a true departure: the logic of the trace. He denies that there is any such thing as a "transcendental signified," any concept that can exist independent of its expression in language.¹¹ Essentially, all elements in a signifying system – concepts, spoken words, graphic marks, gestures, objects – function as signifiers. They all produce meaning in relation to one another, never through a reference to some element higher up on a chain of meaning and being. Meaning is a product of the constant shifting, or "play," of these elements in a signifying system:

the play of differences ... forbid at any moment, or in any sense, that a simple element be present in and of itself, referring only to itself...no element can function as a sign without reference to another element which itself is not simply present. Each "element"... is constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system.¹²

In Derrida's system, there is no place set aside for pure meaning or self-sufficient being; there is only the trace.

Returning to Olson's notion of the syllable, we can see how far we've come from classical metaphysics. Olson seeks to treat the syllable as a substantial minimal unit of projective composition, an undifferentiated and independent "thing." A syllable however, is nothing other than an element in a signifying system.

To take up our earlier example, the syllable ['per] has no inherent significance; it's meaning is an index of its relative difference from other syllables in the English language. A syllable is always different from itself, constituted as it is by the traces of other syllables, none of which are "every simply absent or present."¹³ Contrary to Olson's claims and the principles of classical metaphysics, there are never any pure presences or absences within signifying chains, but rather "only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces."¹⁴

III.

The principal scene in Olson's essay, the one that serves as the foundation for all of his prescriptions, is that of the poet listening to his own voice. The projective poet is one who records "the acquisitions of his ears and the pressures of his breath," one who provides a faithful account of "the listening he has done to his own speech."¹⁵ Because it is the organ that registers the poet's speech, the ear is granted a special proximity to his conscious being; it is "so close to the mind that it is the mind's."¹⁶ Olson also praises the breath, "voice in its largest sense," because it "allows all the speechforce of language back in" to the work.¹⁷

This scene – of the solitary individual listening to his own speech and gaining thereby a direct and unmediated access to the fullness his own conscious existence – is not original to Olson. It has, in fact, been the chief way in which the notion of being as self-presence has been staged since at least the seventeenth century. In the act of vocalizing her own speech, the speaker experiences the illusion of a self-sufficient existence. Derrida describes the structure of this experience of self-presence:

From this point of view, the voice is consciousness itself. When I speak, not only am I conscious of being present for what I think, but I am conscious also of keeping as close as possible to my thought, or the "concept," a signifier that does not fall into the world, a signifier that I hear as soon as I emit it, that seems to depend upon my pure and free spontaneity, requiring the use of no instrument, no accessory ... Not only do the signifier [the spoken word] and the signified [the concept] seem to unite, but also, in this confusion, the signifier seems to erase itself or to become transparent, in order to allow the concept to present itself as what it is, referring to nothing other than its presence.¹⁸

Listening to our own spoken (or mental) discourse, we can easily deceive ourselves into believing that our consciousness is a self-existing entity. It is certainly tempting to imagine, as René Descartes did, that by virtue of thinking – and at the same time being aware of my thinking – I have proof of my independent present existence.

Derrida argues, however, that this experience is a ruse. The entire phenomenon of auto-affection is founded on language, a signifying system which operates according to the logic of the trace – a logic in which elements don't exist independently but only by their relation to one another, a logic in which there is never simply full presence or complete absence.

In auto-affection, however, the apparent unity of the signified, the signifier, and the voice (what Olson calls "living speech") presents itself as self-presence. To maintain this illusion of completeness, any trace of distance, difference, or absence must be made exterior, shunted off onto a scapegoat term. "Writing" has long been the name given in Western metaphysics to that which lies outside the boundary of this Edenic plenitude.

The crime of the non-projective poet is that he places writing in the position of origin reserved for the voice.

In the opening line of Olson's manifesto, the projective and the non-projective are separated by the confrontational "vs.," marking from the start their absolute difference. As the antithesis of a projective verse united with being and the voice, the non-projective takes as its origin that which should be secondary and supplemental to living speech, namely writing. The non-projective poem is "print-bred," the product of a compositional process grounded in "closed" literary forms. A poet who takes "inherited line, stanza, [and] over-all form" is starting at the end of the chain of being rather than its origin.¹⁹ His is an artificial, fallen language, cut off from the experience of the voice as the poet's self-present existence.

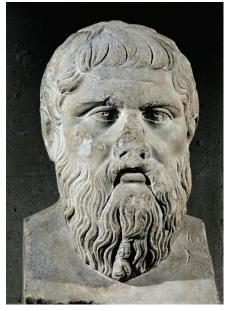
The projective poet, we are told, "stays inside himself," while the non-projective poet is guided by "artificial forms outside himself."²⁰ The crime of the non-projective poet is that he places writing in the position of origin reserved for the voice. Writing for Olson is an exterior and dangerous addition to living speech; it is threatening because it reveals that living speech does, in fact, require a supplement, that the voice was never whole and complete in itself. Further, writing is treacherous because it seeks not just to supplement speech but to substitute itself as the origin for poetic composition.

Western metaphysics has long sought to neutralize the subversive power of writing, its potential to overthrow the myth of living speech. As Derrida argues, it has done so by ascribing to writing a purely "secondary and instrumental function: translator of a full speech that was fully present."²¹ Writing has been figured as phonetic transcription, a method for transparently representing a speech to which it is nonetheless exterior and on which it depends.

Graphic writing, however, has always marked it difference from speech, if only "by reason of the necessary spacing of signs, punctuation, intervals, the differences indispensable for the functioning of graphemes [e.g., written characters], etc."²² It is precisely these visible differences that Olson seeks to erase by his introduction of the typewriter as a kind of magical speechtranscription machine. Olson suggests:

It is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space positions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtaposition even of parts of phrases, which he intends.²³

The poet can use the typewriter "as a scoring to his composition ... [and] a transcript to its vocalization."²⁴ As a tool of projective practice, the



Portrait of Plato. Second Century BCE.

typewriter serves to efface the presence of non-phonetic elements (such as spacing) and bind them to the sole task of transcribing speech.

In this way, the typewriter is presented as a technological totem, capable of containing the danger writing poses to living speech. This humble machine is introduced as a kind of rhetorical *deux ex machina* that will finally guarantee the text's unfailing services as a mere scribe to speech. This device alone is to stand between the poet's being and a fallen writing representing the threat of absence, suffocation, and death. Perhaps it is not unfair to such an argument, such a ribbon-thin barrier, to warn that some specters are not so easily gotten rid of.

In the concluding section of Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates discusses rhetoric

and writing with the young aristocratic friend for whom this late dialogue is named. Plato's protagonist describes writing as an orphan child, forced to go about in the world without the protection of its father. Unlike the living speaker who brought it into being, a written text cannot respond to critiques leveled against it:

It continues to signify just the very same thing forever ... and when it is faulted and attacked unfairly, it always needs its father's support; alone, it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support.²⁵

For Olson, the non-projective poem is just such an orphan, cut off from the voice and breath of the poet-father.

Were it not for the threat it represented to the father and his rightful heir, living speech, this illegitimate and abandoned offspring would be merely an object of pity. But the threat of writing for Olson, as for Plato, is that it seeks to usurp the place reserved for speech in Western metaphysics. As Derrida argues in his critique of the *Phaedrus*, "from the position of the holder of the scepter [the father], the desire for writing is indicated, designated and denounced as a desire for orphanhood and patricidal subversion."²⁶

From the perspective of those who consider Charles Olson to be the natural origin of his thought and speech, deconstructing his text is equivalent to denying his paternity. It is to give him over to patricide and theft, to the crime of writing. Yet what is it that makes a father in the first place, if not a kinship system? The term "father" only has meaning in relation to the traces of simultaneously present and absent elements ("son," "maternal uncle," etc.) within a structure of kinship.

In a supplementary note to "Human Universe," Olson remarks that "the etymology of 'discourse' has its surprises. It means, to run to and fro."²⁷ By re-reading "Projective Verse" in this way, I have not sought to deny Olson a place in his own text. Rather, I've tried to re-open that text to just some of this "to" and "fro," to the playful tension between presence and absence, speech and writing.

NOTES

1. Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," in *A Charles Olson Reader*, ed. Ralph Maud (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005), 40.

2. Ibid., 39.

3. Charles Olson, "Human Universe," in *A Charles Olson Reader*, 114; Charles Olson, "The Gate & the Center," in *A Charles Olson Reader*, 80.

4. Charles Olson, "Human Universe," in A Charles Olson Reader, 114.

5. Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," in A Charles Olson Reader, 45.

6. Ibid., 42.

7. Ibid., 44.

8. Ibid., 44.

9. Saussure, Ferdinand de, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Charles Bally (Chicago: Open Court, 2007), 66.

10. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Corrected Edition (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 13.

11. Ibid., 20.

12. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981), 26.

13. Ibid., 26.

14. Ibid., 26.

15. Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," in A Charles Olson Reader, 41.

16. Ibid., 42.

17. Ibid, 47.

18. Jacques Derrida, Positions, 22.

19. Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," in A Charles Olson Reader, 39, 40.

20. Ibid., 48.

21. Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, 8.

22. Jacques Derrida, Positions. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981), 26.

23. Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," in A Charles Olson Reader, 46.

24. Ibid., 46.

25. Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis/ Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1995), 81 (275E).

26. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Jones (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 77.

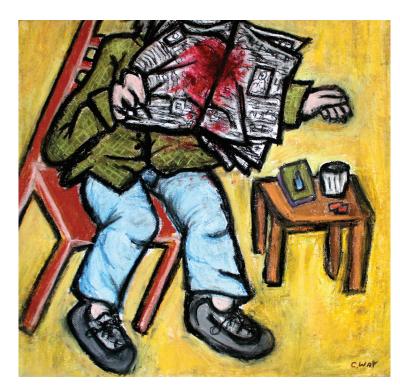
27. Charles Olson. "Footnote to HU (lost in the shuffle)," in *Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 167.

Chris **Way**



Extrudor. 2012 Pastels and chalk on charcoal paper 12 × 18 in.

nteview by Jess BARNETT



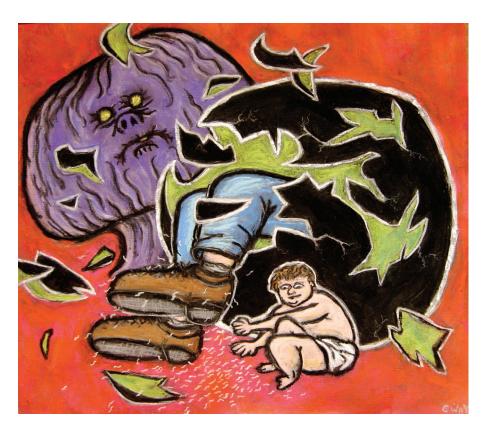
Manor Care Rec Room, Sunday Feb. 20, 2011 2012 Pastels and colored pencil on charcoal paper 12 × 12.5 in. CHRIS WAY

Chris Way and I became pen pals sometime in 2008, exchanging mostly music and thoughts about our lives. Although we've never met in person, we have stayed in touch since, and Chris has participated in several mail art projects that I initiated. His excitement for art and music is apparent in this interview, as is his willingness to experiment with different genres and subject matter.

Jess Barnett: Tell me about your thought processes and how you began these pieces. Did you have something in mind beforehand, or did you just start sketching and flesh out the pieces from there?

Chris Way: Most of my visual work comes about from a blend of I) a very specific scene or vision I'm trying to capture; 2) several rounds of sketchwork and improvisation; and 3) whatever ideas, feelings, obsessions I have at the time about myself, others, and the world. For example, *Extrudor* came from waking up one morning with a dream image in my mind of a figure very close to what I ended up representing. Most of what I'm doing right now is in the *Extrudor* mold – me just trying to depict scenes and visions that, in the moment they hit me, make me feel "as if the top of my head were taken off," to quote Emily Dickinson.

JB: *Chac Mool* and *Trinity with Maggots* share a family theme, although the ideas of family seem to oppose each other. Is either piece autobiographical?



Trinity with Maggots. 2012 Pastels, Wite-Out, chalk on charcoal paper 12 × 10.5 in. CHRIS WAY

CW: All five pieces have to do with my upbringing and family and therefore belong together. Some pieces deal with my recent history, like *Manor Care*, in which the figure in the chair is my father, who died last year. Others deal with my earlier childhood history, like *Chac Mool*. They belong together because of the way in which they deal with family: tensely. All five could be said to carry menace. The two you bring up are good examples. *Chac Mool* presents a child and ducklings near an open well, as well as a slaughtered pig and glass shards lining the top of a decaying wall. In *Trinity* there's a child again, drawn to decay and disease. An alien purple presence presides over the scene – blank, maybe approving, maybe judging.

JB: *Extrudor* is an interesting piece. What purpose would the being serve if he/she/it were really alive and out in the world today?

CW: With *Extrudor*, I got him like I saw him: that sieve/grill that one limb ended in, the orb of the other, the colors. The key thing is the dream



At Buck Key. 2012 Pastels and chalk on charcoal paper 18 × 12 in. CHRIS WAY

being was able to press matter – flesh, mineral, plant, whatever – into his grill appendage and thereby absorb the pressed-through substance. But there was no implied threat in this. It was simply how he was built and what he did, like a Venus flytrap. His aura was mild, kind, almost meek.

JB: Do you consider yourself an outsider artist?

CW: No. This will unavoidably sound severe and imperial, but I reject the category, just as I reject "outsider music." To me it seems that the construct of "outsider" art encourages gawker/ rubbernecker culture by highlighting

not so much the art but the often sensationalized narratives of the sadly, sometimes tragically, dysfunctional, suffering human beings (e.g., Henry Darger, Martin Ramirez) who make it. If you're an artist, you make art, and either it's good or it's not, whether you're self-taught, fucked up, obsessive, or what-have-you. I think sometimes the "outsider" community of critics and aesthetes who uphold the construct have good, humanitarian, compassionate intentions. But often there's an ironic element to the way the drama, bizarreness, and dysfunction becomes the story, not the artistic output.



Chac Mool, El Pozo and Ana. 2012 Pastels, chalk, and ink brush pen on charcoal paper 13.25 × 12 in. CHRIS WAY

JB: What do you currently have in the works?

CW: Right now I'm on a bit of a making hiatus as I focus time and energy on my family and new sevenmonth-old, but I'm very eager to return to visual arts as soon as possible. My plans include a series of improvisational pieces in ink brush pen, as well as more chalk and pastels work in the same vein as *Extrudor* and *Trinity with Maggots*. I also have a mini record of folk music for children brewing.

The Girl under the Mango Tree

She told me our heads looked like beat-in melons – the stage after a Gallagher routine – all strings and seeds and juicy bits. I remembered my father chopping wood, his wax face and his stationary body, only his thick muscled arms moving. They reached back and fell forward in a perfect arc. It was identical every time; a replayed movie clip. When my mother had a vision of our gutted heads, I imagined watching my father chop wood. All I saw were his small hard eyes as he halved my face with the iron axe.

That was Christmas, 2006. I was fifteen. My mother packed me up along with her dog, cat, and bird, leaving our other five pets behind to whatever fate awaited them with my father, the wood splitter. We drove with no plan and no destination, leaving behind the Indiana homestead where I'd grown up. My mother shut off our cell phones and threw away her credit cards so my father couldn't track us. She didn't allow music. She needed silence so she could maintain a strong mental connection with her spirit guide whom she believed would guide us to some promised land, or into the arms of her soul-mate/savior. We drove aimlessly. We stayed with friends in Indianapolis and family in Denver. We slid off the road in South Dakota, where the snow came down so wet and thick that the Black Hills looked like soft, slumbering bodies. We drove for hours, days, weeks. I don't know why we ended up where we did, what invisible thread my mother followed, but we came, dusty and ragged, through the Beartooth Mountains, landing in a glum gully of a town: Red Lodge, Montana.

The Northwest treated us with more tenderness than the dense snow and abandoned mines suggested. The sun was fuzzy warm and the pines looked soft, like great, roosting birds. The Northwest was a place of crystal heights and low black prairie. And I was tired, so tired and bored with my mother's magic. My mother is a sorceress.

A few years before we left my father, she had started reading. Of course, she'd always read, but this was different. An insatiable hunger burned in her gut, a hunger to know. She would wake up around ten or eleven every morning, meditate, and then read for five or six hours. She told me, "I've gone back to school." I didn't know what she meant, but she stopped minding me, and I did what I wanted. One day she called me into her room. I'd grown so used to my solitude – to the cacophony of silence – that it took her calling several times before I heard. I went to her – creeping into the smoggy den of the exalted shaman. I didn't remember her being so tall. Even sitting in bed she seemed straighter and longer than usual – her dark hair, so soft and heavy, poured down her body. Her eyes were closed.

"Come here, love."

I hesitated. I must have been thirteen. I remember carrying a stuffed animal and holding it firm against my chest, but this memory can't be correct. I sat down lightly on the lip of her bed. She must have seen the fear – transparent as a bird realizing the futility of attempting escape. My mother looked at me with pity.

"It's okay, sweetheart," she hushed but didn't touch me. She tried to explain something to me, something about a shift in her. Mother had voices, beings, a presence in her mind connecting her to the great umbilical cord of the universe. She said she was a fetus, being fed sacred knowledge by her "guides." Mother gave me history. She wove warm folktales about Native American tribes directed by spirit guides.

I couldn't understand. I left. She didn't call me back. I walked out into the dry November field, I lay down under a sepia sky and let the cloud tide ebb and flow over my mind. Gradually, the popping wires of my brain dulled. I sank deeper into the ground and thought, "We all have our god." That's how it started, how my mother became the woman making her slow and silent ascent up the mountain. She drove around another sharp bend. There our progress stopped. A metal barricade stood in relief against a three-foot wall of snow; a sign bolted to the barrier read PASS CLOSED FOR SEASON. The gas gauge slid closer to E as my mother turned around. She put the car in park and let her head droop, her forehead resting on the hard, cool plastic of the steering wheel.

"Fuck." The word issued out with quiet defeat. It was the first time she'd exposed any fear, any vulnerability, in a long time. I didn't know whether to be frightened or relieved.

"We'll go to that gas station we saw on the way up. Okay?" I nodded.

"That can't be the only way in."

"Maybe it's a sign we shouldn't go there."

"Don't try that shit with me. Pretending you believe in me when it's convenient for you. This town is where we're meant to go."

I stayed quiet.

She was right. It wasn't the only way in. The man at the gas station hooked his thumbs under the shoulder straps of his overalls and snapped them as he gave us directions.

"A hop, skip, an' a jump," he'd said. We drove for an hour. It was near midnight when we finally entered Red Lodge. My mother saw the Super 8 hotel and didn't bother to find an alternative. A pimpled kid sat on the front desk watching a Scrubs rerun on the lobby TV.

"We need a room," my mother said, rousing him from his television trance.

The hotel looked like a ski lodge. The walls were painted in muted earth tones and all the furniture was made from those sandy cedar logs that are supposed to look rustic and untreated. There was a line of thick pegs made from these logs in our room for hanging coats and jackets. The last occupant had stretched a condom over one of the pegs. The bulbous white tip sagged with fluid. My mother pinched it off and dropped it in the trash.

"We'll find someplace better tomorrow."

The next day we ate breakfast in a diner with greasy plastic table cloths. We left smelling like burnt hash browns. We walked Main Street. The sun shone, but a thick white coating of snow held out and patches of sidewalk were still slick with gray ice. For the most part it looked like a stereotypical Western town, wood clapboard storefronts and hanging signs that creaked on their metal chains. There was only one building that broke the aesthetic: a small stucco shotgun house set up off the street and painted an ugly mint green with a matching sign. BOOMERANG BEADS.

A slight girl in a thick black coat mounted the stairs to the shop. Her long, straight brown hair shone with reflected sunlight. She unlocked the door and went in without noticing us watching her. Or at least she didn't let on. I had the feeling she was used to people watching her. Beauty can alienate people that way.

"We have to go there." My mother said, still staring at the mint green house.

"Let's go." I wanted to meet the girl in the black coat.

"Not now. I'll know when it's the right time."

As we walked, Mother ran her long fingers across brick siding, light posts, feeling the place. She found a sign she liked, thick and wooden, MAGGIE's painted in a pink Western font. We went in. I don't think my mother was looking for a job. She was looking for a connection, someone to house her, feed her, and direct her to the right trail. Maggie liked my mother's height, her hair, her smile. Like many before and after her, Maggie's curiosity got the better of her.

There, on our second day in town, surrounded by cowgirl boots sparkling with rhinestones and cheap silver, Norah Jones buzzing low through the speakers, Maggie asked, "So, ya'll here on vacation," even though she knew we weren't.

Maggie's pudgy face barely hid a glow, a blush, the subdued light some women get when they're presented with new gossip. My mother smiled in a subtle, dim way, a sad, almost self-righteous smile. She looked at me as if to say, "Should I tell her, this woman we've only just met, of the terror of our past?" I looked down at the worn hardwood floor. That look of dejection, the shame of the victim, served my mother well, so I stuck to it.

"We're actually sort of on the run."

Maggie's big eyes widened, eyes the color of dark silver creek stones.

"Not from the law or anything. My husband, actually. He's an alcoholic. This past Christmas we were afraid for our lives, so we left. It took me a long time to get up the courage to leave. Now we're looking for a place to settle down. Somewhere he won't find us."

Maggie's face turned soft. Her smooth, dark eyes clouded. "Is he looking for you?"

My mother stilled, let her face fill with silence. "Yes." It was a low, long sound. I smelled the mortal danger it suggested – metallic and warm like blood.

Maggie nodded. I've noticed that when my mother tells other women this story they get this look of understanding, as if abuse is something every woman deals with, like their period. It was bullshit. I felt nauseous.

"God," Maggie sighed, her voice soaked in saccharine sympathy, "you poor little souls."

Just like that we were saved. Maggie put us in a hotel for a few days, gave my mother a job, and let her wear anything from the shop she wanted.

That first night in the new hotel room, I came down with a fever. My skin felt prickly and sore to the touch. I couldn't eat. My mother put a heap of blankets over me and turned the thermostat up to eighty. Drowning in my own sweat, with the radiator humming by my head and snow padding at the tiny window, I had a dream.

I was in a flat copper desert. The sky, a pulsating electric blue, pressed down from above. I sat cross-legged on the cracked earth as the red sand sea and blue ceiling pressed me between them – a cosmic vise. I watched myself from above. My eyes were closed. I, the camera, zoomed in on myself until only my eyes were visible. The lids opened and white slime gazed back the color of a frog's belly or a body at the bottom of a creek, rubbed smooth and alien from the current. Deep terror seized me.

I woke up. Already, the dream was fading. I had trouble recalling what had terrified me. I remembered desert, my dead jelly eyes. They were my mother's eyes. Dense, shallow color. Illusion of insight, centered calm masking the degeneration of a warm flawed humanity. Someone had better fetch my grizzled heart soon, I thought, before time and sorrow dry it completely, as they had my mother's.

I got up. Outside, a denser darkness held the earth. A diaphanous veil of snow covered the window. The furnace clicked, prickled. I was drenched

everywhere with sweat. My hair, twisted and damp, strangled my head like some awful black ivy – it felt heavy, constraining. My mother wasn't back from work. That was fine. I wanted solitude, bleakness, oppression. I stepped out the door. The room was at ground level and opened onto a raised deck leading down into a cedar-fringed parking lot. Snow hushed the earth – a lullaby sent by God that purred so soft I didn't feel when it invaded me. My sweat crystallized, my breath thickened, forming a dense cumulous cloud. This whiteness was different from the whiteness I'd just seen in my dream eyes. This whiteness contained time, dimension, grace.

I went back inside knowing what I had to fight for. My fever was gone.

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I met a boy with soft white hair. Olyver didn't do much. He walked from school to home and from home to school. He played basketball. He listened to The Red Hot Chili Peppers. He thought often about abstract things. Eventually, he thought about me. I saw him my third day in Red Lodge.

My sickness gone and my mother at work, I went out to put my tracks in the new snow. That's how I spent days. I trudged through snow, through books, through hours of silence. I noticed him right away because there weren't many boys my age in town. I liked how he walked, as if he thought through every step. His handsome face had the same look of awareness, his small blue eyes darted everywhere, struggling to take it all in, eyes that inflated as they absorbed the newness of the world. As I watched him disappear into the brick high school, I thought he saw me...thought he looked through me. For the first time, I wished my parents had sent me to school. Then I could enroll here. See him every day. Now it was too late. At the same time I saw Olyver, my mother saw the girl in the black coat.

The third day was right; my mother went into the bead shop on her lunch break. The girl in the black coat was there. Her name was Brenna, "dark-haired beauty." She'd chosen the name herself when she was fourteen. Nicole didn't suit her, she'd said. It was too common, too demure. To this day I don't know what initial phrases, what hushes or peals of mirth, formed their connection, but that night, Mother came home and Brenna was there with her. I fell in love so quickly it surprised me. Brenna wore glitter in her hair. She wore green crochet sweater dresses and applied Egyptian musk behind her tiny pixie ears. She had cats named "Tybalt," "Fern," and, "Garden Yew." She subscribed to *Vogue* and painted ethereal oil paintings of lanky fairies languishing in hibiscus patches or stretched out, supine, on mossy logs. I felt for Brenna the same pregnant emotions I felt for the woods and fields. I wanted to feel her, smell her, discern the intonations of her sultry voice. I wanted to inhabit her.

Brenna wanted to inhabit my mother. Many people do. I can't say what draws them, what draws me. My whole life I've loved her and hated her for the power she exerts over people.

Her honey spells coax werewolves into civilization. So Brenna came in from the night. A drinker and chain smoker repairing from a recent break-up, Brenna was a cat looking for a puddle to lap from. My mother is the Tigris – her current nourishes the husks of men, reinvigorating the entire race. I watched as Brenna came back to life, a little more each day, as her friendship with my mother grew stronger. Soon we were spending every evening with Brenna. We'd cook chicken korma in her tiny basement apartment, or we would indulge in coffee and crème brûlée in the restaurant of the Pollard Hotel. Brenna gave me clothes. She had suitcases, closets full. She shrouded me in bolts of muslin the color of dried blood, in seashell necklaces and ruby crowns. She led me into hibiscus groves and bathed naked with me in creeks cold and edged with fleshy moss. It went on this way for weeks.

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Around Easter the three of us went for breakfast at the same diner we'd gone to the second day. That's where I met her. I felt as though I must have seen her before, known her before. Her name tag read ANNABELLE.

She sat behind the counter balancing a plate of mangoes on her knees, slicing them, laughing at something I'd missed. Her teeth, so big and round, trapped all the light and reflected it back, a beacon sent over miles of empty sea. I ordered the mango pancakes. I wanted something she had touched. When I went up to pay, she stood, rubbing her mangojuice-covered fingers on her thigh.

"Did you like them?"

"The best mangoes I've ever tasted."

Annabelle smiled without showing any teeth and tallied up our bill.

"Mmmhmm, when I was little my family would go to Mexico for a few weeks in summer. Not far from the sea there was a little rocky hill with a mango tree. Every year my brother and I looked forward to that tree." Annabelle fidgeted with the corner of her apron, her eyes on her hands. "We'd sleep under it and it was never quiet, from the bugs," she continued. "It was always so heavy with the sweet fruit the bugs never left it. It seemed like they were always swarming on it. I ate so many mangoes back then that I'm tired of them now." She laughed and met my eyes. "I dunno why I told you that."

When she handed me the bill there was mango juice on the bottom-left corner.

After breakfast, Brenna, my mother, and I went for a drive out of town. We climbed the Beartooth Highway for a few miles and then pulled into the Palisades – a trailhead leading into the Custer National Forest. The snow was thick, bright, and wet. Brenna's Ford Focus managed the even gravel drive, but once she turned onto the decline leading to the trail her tires spun out. My mother and I got out to push. It was fortyfive minutes, maybe an hour, before we were in the clear. We gave up on the hike since my mother and Brenna had to be at work. On the drive back, I had the fleeting thought: *if dad were here it wouldn't have taken so long. We could've hiked.* It was the first time I'd thought about my father since we had left, over two months before.

I remembered watching him out the kitchen window as he crossed the yard, midday Christmas Eve. I'd been washing dishes. He looked small in the distance, just outside the horse stalls in that yellow sweatshirt he'd had as long as I could remember, frayed around the hood, splattered and stained with oil. How long I stared, I don't know. Then we were gone. I forgot him as one forgets a stranger. That's how my mother wanted it. Together we forgot Christmases, soccer games, movies, sledding. We remembered beatings, the sour odor in the morning, the sweet pungent smell of alcohol. Even now, his identity eludes me. Beginning with my father, men became demi-gods to me, full of mystery and intrigue, but ultimately unknowable.

The next time I saw Olyver he was playing basketball. He played for the Red Lodge Redskins and the game was against the Braves, the reservation team. We were there because Maggie invited us. Maggie said games against the reservation were unmatched in grit. The boys came out and lined up facing each other on opposite sides of the court. The National Anthem played. The Braves stood motionless, hands at their sides. The Redskins cupped their hearts, mouths turned up in expressions of smug pride. Except Olyver; his arms were lank and his face was red and his heart was uncovered. When the anthem finished, the Braves' cheerleaders danced to tribal drums. I tried to listen through the din of innumerable voices, but it was useless. Instead, I hunted through the red and yellow jerseys for Olyver, number seven. He was pressed against a wall, intently watching the Braves' dancers. Olyver looked smaller. Not because I was at a distance, but because he had diminished himself. His broad shoulders hung, his baggy clothes consumed him – only his curls maintained their brilliance.

The game began. The Redskins were vicious. They were big, wan boys of Norwegian descent, raised on grass-fed bison and mother's milk. They made the waxy floor tremble. The Braves, stringy and brown, played with sharp agility and terrifying silence; even when they ran, fell, collided with a Redskin, their mouths remained closed. There was only the animal squeal of rubber soles, the wind of loose yellow clothes. The Redskins were winning. A palpable rage propelled them. Olyver, in a struggle to catch the ball, was knocked down by a teammate. A Brave stopped and lifted him to his feet in one swift movement. Their hands lingered in a small embrace, eyes met. I hope in that moment they realized the absurdity of all of it. The competition, the generations of culture war, all that wasted time.

After the game, on the drive back to the cabin we were renting from Maggie, I leaned my head against the cool window and imagined Olyver's strong arm slung around me. I thought I'd seen his reflection in the rearview mirror. I didn't sleep that night. I wrapped twine around nails, creating a great pentagram – forming connections, creating destiny where none existed. The next time we met we were both wandering the empty football field. We spoke. I stood still as his shadowed form grew larger as he neared. The familiar white curls hid under a knit hat.

"Hi. I'm Olyver. I've noticed you around and thought I'd introduce myself."

"I'm Madison."

He shook my hand with a level of formality that seemed comical, like we were kids playing grown-ups.

"You just moved here, right? Your mom works at Maggie's?" "Yeah."

"Everyone's talking about you. And your mom."

"Oh yeah? What are they saying?"

"That you guys are different. Because you like, don't go to school and stuff." Olyver thrust his fists into the pockets of his jeans. His voice came out nervous, full of stutters and fumbles. I knew he was filtering out what bits of truth were least likely to hurt my feelings.

"I bet they say a lot worse than that." He let out a nervous laugh and looked at his sneakers. "It's fine. I like being a freak."

"Yeah? It's cool. I'm weird too."

We stood there, nudging the grass with our shoes. His eyes outlined my contours – pausing on certain features, adding me up. We walked out of town, up a gravely trail to the top of a knoll where the snow held out in stubborn patches. Yellow flowers bobbed and rubbed together. He maintained communication with the rough fields and sea above through his silence, his stillness which belied a spirit separate from all the meaningless things that keep us too busy to see.

Evening pooled in the quiet town as we sat on the hill – a sudden chill wind found the soft, vulnerable spots of flesh. I led him back to the cabin. The lights were on. My mother and Brenna sat with tomes and mugs of cold tea. Danger was immediately evident in the full blossom of my mother's face, in the warm cheeks and the watery eyes, all priestess. I knew Olyver was lost to me.

By the end of the night, his fair skull lay nestled in Brenna's velvet skirt. My mother's long, manly hands became claws. Their faces were all superimposed, a kaleidoscope of eyes and snarling mouths. Brenna ran her fingers through Olyver's hair and looked at me. I saw a flicker in her eyes, a winner's pompous flame. She smiled. Olyver didn't see me anymore. He stared into nothing, transfixed. His cheeks turned pink in the lush warmth of Brenna's lap. I thought we could escape it all together, but he was just another lost boy finding something in someone who wasn't me. I thought we'd be alone to make love on the rough crocheted throw that covered my bed. And then, waking after a deep sleep, we'd wander out into the moonglow, the sticky coating of our love growing cool. Instead, Brenna laughed loudly, smoked her pink, imported cigarettes, and ran her nails through his soft hair. My mother too, seemed pleased. He was an easy sell.

He sat at their feet and my mother predicted for him. She predicted a future full of music and a woman that wasn't me. A woman with green eyes. He didn't know, but I saw when his eyes darted quickly to Brenna's, reassuring himself of their shade. I had to leave.

Buckled over and clasping my gut, I ran into the fuzzy woods, into the glassy water, into the rock bed, into the clay flesh, into the center, the gurgling heart of my broken mother. There, numbed by the cold, I knew they wouldn't look for me. Eventually everyone is taken in by my mother. How long they remain differs by soul. But they all want it, need the pipeline to the black gold of universal truth – they need the map, the clean words leading them from the tarnished wasteland.

I don't know what happened that night while I stumbled over rocks, through tributaries, but afterward, Brenna avoided us, stopped returning my mother's phone calls. Olyver seemed to pass into another dimension – back into the bog. Somehow, after that night, he dimmed, became distant, detached. He reminded me of that small man alone in the field in his yellow sweatshirt. I saw them in my head as fat protozoans, bumping along, floating. My mother and I were alone. Around this time I met Annabelle again.

It was at the library. I held *Madame Bovary*. I had her white spine cupped in my thick, moist palms. I knew Annabelle was watching me. Eventually she thrust a small piece of paper at me.

"If you ever want to hang out, call me. You seem nice." Days passed. I read Flaubert. For her, life was as cold as an attic with a window looking to the north, and ennui, like a spider, was silently spinning its shadowy web in every cranny of her heart...

I never finished the novel. I left Emma Bovary with Leon in their shy intimacy – a better fate. I called Annabelle.

She answered on the first ring. Her voice sounded thick and musky through tinny background noises of dishes, dogs yipping, babies crying, and the general scrape and clang of life.

"Madison?"

My throat stuck – wax paper. I somehow managed a sentence or two. We agreed on a date, a time, a meeting place. When I hung up, my hands were sweating. In the days leading up to our meeting, I recalled her voice – it's heavy richness. Everything about her seemed made of earth, of dirt, of goodness, a papery bulb pregnant with anxious life.

The morning we met was sunny, balmy; a sense of good fortune pervaded me, which is why the trail of police cars coming down the driveway was a shock. The sun glinting off the lumbering Escalades and smooth patrol car was not a munificent light – it would not titillate the aching thighs of spring into stirring.

I don't know who made the call to Child Protective Services, but I can imagine Brenna's smooth lacquered fingers pressing the buttons, her cool mossy voice carrying the conversation with political concern. They didn't explain why they were taking me. I couldn't understand what I had done wrong, what my mother had done. We had told the same story so many times. "Came home to kill us ...," "history of violence, substance abuse ...," "pain ...," "anger ...," "pain." *Pain, pain, pain.* I'd even begun to feel the pain.

Back in Indiana and faced with a very real pain, my father had done everything he could to get the hounds on my mother. He'd reported the car stolen, only to be informed that it couldn't be stolen if it was in her name, too. He'd tried again and again to get her charged with kidnapping, a difficult crime to prove if you've taken your own child. Eventually, he found his lead. The year before my mother and I left, my parents had decided to divorce. They'd drawn up an agreement mapping out how the custody and finances would be split up; however, before the documentation was finalized, my parents decided they would try once more to make this life together work. Though I don't understand how it was possible from a legal perspective, based on this divorce my father was able to schedule a court hearing regarding the custody agreement. When my mother failed to show up for that hearing and for subsequent ones, a federal warrant was placed for her arrest for contempt of court. Even with the facts against her, my mother played her part to the end; she stayed true to the drama that was our life. It took three men to force the silver hoops on to her bony wrists while she buckled and wailed.

"He'll kill her! He'll kill her!"

I kept my face angled to the dirt. I knew that this time my performance wouldn't work. They saw us, saw through it all. What was the cauldron of universal lore my mother possessed compared to metal and the law? Nothing. Less than nothing. Dust, insanity scattered and dissolved in a piney patch of earth.

I climbed quietly into the patrol car. I could tell the officer climbing into the driver's seat was relieved at having to deal with me instead of my mother. Once we were on the highway, safely out of Red Lodge, he called in on his radio with the message "minor in transit." So that's what I was. I knew I was going back. Down the mountains, across wide plains, into the kitchen with the man in the stained yellow sweatshirt. Those people thought they knew the truth. But I didn't know this man they called "father." My mother erased him long ago. My mother erased so much.

It was half an hour past my scheduled coffee date with Annabelle. I knew she would still be there, waiting. Her tea would be cold now. She would peer out the window, not really looking. Her face would remain beautifully serene – the bulb's oniony paper all peeled away to reveal a glistening pearl...

Perhaps she knows I won't come. I hope so. I hope she can forgive me. I hope she knows how beautiful she is to me, how much I wanted to hear more about those mangoes, about anything sweet or honest or real. I hope I mean something to her. I like to think that even if she tried, she wouldn't remember the first time she saw me. I will seem always that light that edges the periphery of her vision. If she knows me as I have known her – whole, human, and alive – then some part of me is elemental, pure and separate from the forces that formed me. And without those it doesn't matter what happens. I'm free. Free like the girl under the mango tree.

Sounds Like This

The first headache, the first real bad one, was sometime in March, I don't remember the date. I know I was hanging a cabinet in some blonde's kitchen when it dropped me to my knees. She wasn't there, was at her job at the software complex in town so I went into her medicine cabinet and swallowed four Advil as well as one of everything on the second shelf.

I felt pretty good after twenty minutes, too good to go back to work actually.

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The second headache was about a week later. I was watching some porn with Julia, my wife, and drinking white wine. I don't usually drink wine but it was left over from a party. Then all of a sudden it felt like someone was spraying a fire hose in the space between my brain and my skull.

I tried to shake it off because we were going to have sex, but it wouldn't go. I tend to view doctors as over-paid pill pushers who can't see people – just symptoms – and see symptoms per their potential dollar value and I avoid them at all costs, but Julia took one look at my face and said we were going to the hospital.

The doc in the emergency room was pretty cool actually, if much too chipper for eleven p.m. on a Friday. He was about fifty, trim, with an eighteen-hole tan. When he talked to us I felt like he was overly focused on my wife. But she looked good and had that scent of near-sex on her. He did a CAT scan and there was the tumor, looking a little like a large peanut, somewhere between my left eye and ear.

"Is that what I think it is?" I said.

"I'm afraid so," he said.

"It looks exactly like a peanut."

"We've got to keep you here for some more tests."

"What tests?"

"Whether it's benign or not. Or maybe it's an aneurysm, or just something that will take care of itself on its own."

"That's a long shot, isn't it? This is it, isn't it?"

"Hey." The doctor held up his hands. "Whoa. Whoa. I can't say. Way too early."

I turned to my wife. She was crying in a sweet silent way. I wanted to brush her tears away with the soft part of my thumb but I was lying on the gurney and thought I might poke her in the eye.

"Julia. Hey, Julia," I said, like the song.

"Did you ever get the health insurance like I asked?"

"The paperwork's in the mail."

"You're lying."

"Yeah, I am," I admitted. "I love you."

"We're going to lose the house," she said.

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I stayed in the hospital for three days, and it came to a little over thirty thousand dollars. And at the end of all that time and money, all they could say was: yes it was cancer and they couldn't take it out without turning me into a vegetable, most likely a blind and spastic one. I had four to six months to live. I remember feeling that they should be able to figure that out in a way that didn't cost so much or that at least, considering the diagnosis, I deserved a discount.

Julia cries a lot, which takes the pressure off me. The ride home from the hospital was no exception. I felt reasonably alright about the situation because they had given me some Demerol pills. Demerol makes any ex-

perience seem like the best experience ever. Every turn we made on the drive felt as good as sex outside in a thunderstorm. I don't think I could have made it as a doctor because I would be too tempted by all the drugs.

"What are we going to do now?" Julia said, when we pulled into the driveway.

"We'll make the most of it."

"How?"

"We could take that trip we've been talking about. To the D.R." "How?"

"We'll put it all on my credit card. I bet I won't have to pay it off if I'm dead."

She nodded and her cheeks shone and, seeing that from this angle I could wipe her tears without mishap, I wiped her tears.

"Are you going to call your parents?" she asked.

"No."

"I think you should."

"No." I hadn't spoken to my parents in three years. I wanted nothing to do with them. They drank too much and fought like big stupid idiots and had spent my childhood explaining to me the important role I played in their unhappiness. I had only just begun to understand that I had nothing to do with it. And then this.

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In the Dominican Republic it was hot as balls and there were a lot less Americans and more Europeans than I anticipated. There are two different classes of vacationers: those who think a vacation is something you do, and must be done with as much intensity as possible, and those who think doing gets in the way of vacationing. I fall in the second group, Julia in the first. Nevertheless, I let her convince me to hike into the mountains and visit a coffee plantation. The land and ocean were beautiful, all lush green and deep blue, like the end zone at Giants Stadium, the new one. During happy hour at the resort, I looked at palm trees and tried to feel more appreciative for the glorious bounty that is this world. Palm trees. Palm trees. Glorious palm trees, I thought to myself. It felt a little forced.

"What are you thinking?" Julia asked.

"I'm looking at the palm trees."

She patted my hand.

I thought she might say wise things, or maybe the other tourists would say wise things or even the coffee growers would or at least someone would say things that my brain would transform into a soft wisdom, because now it was dying, getting smushed flat by a peanut. But everyone said the same things pretty much. They asked each other what they did back where they came from or they talked about that one time they passed through the other's city and liked it very much. Great museums there. Then they got drunk and angled to get each other into bed or went looking in the streets for prostitutes.

"Let's go home," I said to Julia.

"Don't you want to be with me?"

"I want to be with you at home."

At home it was better. It is a medium-sized town Julia and I live in and people whose names I could not remember but whose faces I knew pretty well would come up to me in the store and help me bag my groceries. I could have bagged them just fine. Older women would grab my wrists and, nodding slowly, stare into my eyes. I enjoyed the perverse silences when I sat around with my friends Doug and Debois watching the Mets blow another one. They didn't know what to say about my peanut but were too worn out from their own lives – hard work, loud wives, and young kids – to let that inability interfere with their evening.

Doug actually started bringing over peanuts every time he visited. Salted, unsalted, covered in chocolate, yogurt, or exotic substances made from beets and Amazonian sweeteners in the backroom of the health food store – a different type each time. I think he was trying to open a conversation though he might just have been hungry.

"Cut it out," I said.

"They're therapeutic."

"You don't even know what that word means."

"They're organic."

"Organic? You eat six Slim Jims a day."

I got to wondering if I could feel the tumor grow and laying in bed in the mornings was certain I'd gotten the knack of it but the doctor explained that couldn't be possible because the brain doesn't have any pain nerves. But I disagreed. I thought the entire brain was basically a pain nerve, and all of life and thought was a struggle to minimize its agony as much as possible. Why else would people do stupid shit like get bombed, bomb other people, hunt and kill happy animals in single-digit temperatures and listen to rap music at high volumes except to find a way to override their pain?

The benefit of this viewpoint is it made the idea of dying much more welcoming.

I had just turned thirty, which is pretty young to be getting ready to die, but I felt that, other than spending too much time watching sports and porn, I had lived my life pretty honestly and loved my wife pretty well.

I sold Doug the pickup, and made plans to give Pecker, my horny Shepherd-Lab mutt, to Debois, who had a bigger yard and (though I didn't say it) nicer kids. Julia agreed with this arrangement – her and Pecker's relationship had never fully recovered from her decision to buy a white couch. The headaches were getting worse. They usually only improved if I piled six pillows on my head and wept softly. During the daytime, I lay in the grass beneath the willow out front with Pecker and we watched cars pass. People seemed in such a rush to get places and very lost in their thoughts. One man pulled over to ask me what kind of dog Pecker was. "Unbright," I said. He rolled up his window and drove off.

The clouds looked very friendly and sympathetic. I decided that puffy white clouds are one of the more underrated miracles of nature. Big loud waterfalls are overrated. They're too violent to really settle into. A beautiful woman is always on the top of the list, which is why I am grateful to be married to Julia. Not always, but quite often, I will look at her and my breath will catch.

Pecker lay next to me licking his nuts and scratching as much as always but he could tell something was up.

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Then the strangest thing happened. I felt better. I lay under the tree with Pecker and started feeling antsy. At first I thought I was just bored or maybe getting dizzy, but then no, really, I wanted to get up and walk around. So I did, back and forth across the lawn. I threw tennis balls for Pecker and lay down and wrestled with him. The energy was quite surprising. It went away but two days later it came back. I went to see the doctor, and he took some more CAT scans and came back with a strange look on his face and said, "Well, this is a little interesting." The peanut had stabilized. It was the size of a golf ball and holding. It wasn't gone, but it hadn't grown as fast as they'd anticipated and I might have a couple months more than previously thought. I might have a couple years conceivably. Or, conversely, he admitted, just a few days. He had no idea when you really got down to it, but couldn't bring himself to put it that way.

Doctors do not know so much as they would like. In the end, they fail every single patient.

"This is quite a blessing," he said. "You may have some time yet."

"But I'm still going to die?"

"Yes."

"I mean soon."

"I know what you mean. You could take a trip."

"We did that."

We were silent. I looked at the peanut on the viewer, dark surrounded by my lit-up mind.

"Still. Amazing," I said. "What do you think, Julia?"

She shrugged her shoulders. She seemed down.

"We could go miniature golfing later," I said.

"Call me if you have any questions, Julia," said the tan doctor.

In the car driving home, I was very tired and the world was tilting sideways. Each pothole made me belch. It seemed a great percentage of clouds in the sky were peanut shaped.

"We could plant a garden," I said. "We could build that new mudroom with Debois' help. We could camp out at the blues festival."

"Do you really feel better?"

"Yes. I think so. Drive slower over the bumps."

Julia kept looking at me and shaking her head.

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The next day, she came home from her job at Big Lots and said Dan's wife Lenore had heard of a really wise man living up in the hills southwest of town and we should see him. I asked her what was so wise about him. She said she didn't know, graduate school maybe, or maybe he'd written a book, but what did we have to lose. He turned out to look pretty normal, kind of short and bald. He had a big presence though and a kind, relaxed energy. He looked me straight in the eye and talked about death like he was talking about the weather. Didn't see dying as a big deal at all, just something you made some preparations for and eased through to the next destination, sort of like closing the car windows before driving through a rainstorm. This was a new viewpoint, but I could see myself coming around to it. I confessed to him though that my generally low self-esteem looked at death as an easy way out of an additional forty or fifty years or so of finding myself lacking.

"It's hard to have a peacefully accepted death without a fully accepted life," he said.

"I accept my life," I said. "I just find the protagonist aggravating."

"Will you give yourself a hard time about dying?"

"Most likely," I admitted.

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In the car on the way back, we passed a three-legged deer limping by the side of the road. It looked up and into my eyes for two seconds straight. I broke down and cried. Julia pulled over and held me. I couldn't have said what I was crying for. I had never felt that interested in my life

before I was sick, so why should it be such a big deal now? The only thing that is true in life is that it ends, so if you come to that point and feel unprepared, do you have anyone to blame but yourself? Still, I wept and wept. I saw the three-legged deer foraging in the coming winter snows and wept. I remembered the palm trees in the Dominican and wept. Julia lifted up her shirt so I could rest my face on her soft skin. I reached up and held her boob.

"I'm sorry to leave you, darling," I said.

"I'm sorry too."

"You'll be alright, won't you? Promise me."

"I'll miss you," she said. But she would be alright.

"And stay away from the doctor. He's been checking you out pretty hard."

"Okay."

"Promise."

"Honey, I promise."



I stayed up that night after Julia had gone to sleep and watched her, touched her long black hair and rued the 10,000 small and mean things I had done to her. I once mocked her nationality, culture, and gender for backing the car into the front porch. I made her cry from lack of physical affection when feeling grumpy over our debts. It took three months of her asking before I fixed the closet door.



I decided I would concentrate on fully accepting my life. I solicited suggestions on how to do it. Doug offered to sell me back my pickup for what he'd paid for it. But then I recalled how hard it was to stay grateful when I was mortaring bricks at eight a.m. on a cold morning and my intestines were stopped up like glue and declined. Julia thought I should sit through a class or two on comparative religion or mythology or even Shakespeare at the community college. I tried that but it didn't work either. But that wasn't a surprise – I've rarely, in my life, felt grateful while sitting in big airless rooms with linoleum floors. One day, I bought lots of scented candles and set them around the bedroom for when Julia and I made love. That put us both in a good mood. Late one night my pride finally broke down and I called my parents, told them where I was at, and thanked them for introducing me to this world.

"Sorry," they said.

"That's okay," I said. "I have a good doctor. I've had a good run."

"No, I meant, sorry for not being a better parent."

"That's okay," I said, and I saw that I meant it. They'd done the best they knew. It felt like letting down an armful of groceries.

*

People seemed to want to talk to me, so I decided to do that for a while, sit under the willow and talk to people. They'd come over and we'd drink iced tea and they'd clear their throat to start talking about how God had brought them out of darkness or out of a terrible habit like morning drinking or midnight eating. God, son, he grabbed the cigarette right out of my mouth. I would tell them about the clouds and palm trees and driving a car through a car wash and how this particular willow sighed if the wind blew from the southeast, all these things I was noticing. Some left upset over this. Some clasped their hands over their hearts and blinked back tears. More people stopped by, women mostly, with stagefour cancers in their breasts and ovaries and other, less gender-specific, places. Some seemed to think I might give them the key to beating their disease - they left pretty quickly. But most of them didn't want to be saved. They were beaten by the fighting, beaten by the medicines that were supposed to win the war. They had gotten tired of puke buckets and Ensure shakes and that tightrope feeling as they waited in doctors' offices while the doctor opened their file and hmmed. They were tired of hope. I agreed with them. We do indeed turn the natural process of things into an enemy, I said.

I felt like I was just repeating back to them what they were saying to me, but they were very thankful. We form a strange clique, we dying; we terrify people or we invoke their pity. There is no middle ground.

Meanwhile: this tree. The wind is blowing from the southeast – hear that?

Guruji, Dan took to calling me, after watching the Gandhi movie on cable. He bowed deeply whenever passing me.

"Ha, ha, you're a dick." I said.

"That's not very holy," he pointed out.

-

Summer's ending. The Mets are fourteen games out of first and have emptied the bench. My legs are like pipe cleaners and I am quite pale. Often my brain feels like it is being squeezed by a warm giant's hand. Sometimes I feel limitless, and then when I catch sight of my body in the mirror or in the windows at night, it doesn't seem possible that all my life I assumed that it was me. Such a small, pitiable thing.

In the evenings, Julia and I lay in the dark on the white couch that Pecker desecrated and sip chicken broth together. With the TV and radio off and the windows open, the crickets are thunderously loud. We don't talk much, but it feels good to show her that I understand what she has done for me. I am usually not scared.

A nurse comes from time to time. I got a good two and a half months over what the tan doctor predicted and I've decided not to bother with the hospital this time. Pecker and I sit under the tree and watch cars. He is good about not chasing them. Chasing cars has to be the most aggravating trait of all the dogs I owned before Pecker. I have not yet figured out the purpose of my life. But I think about that a lot less and try to remember, at least once a day, the beauty of clouds. Rainbows are easy to stop and admire, but have you ever been stopped cold by the sound of a car crunching slowly away on a gravelly driveway? Beautiful, I tell you. There are many such jewels waiting for your attention. Ripples on a pond. The moment when your wife's breath catches before a sneeze. Cranking down a car window. Rain falling on leaves. The sounds of kids on a playground. I have come to believe that just one of these moments contains everything you need for a lasting type of happiness, the kind that takes into account death and sadness. I am glad I have not made too much a success of my life or then it might be harder to give up. As it is, I can very easily put aside my thoughts to admire the cries of the loons in the pines. They sound like this:

BRENDA SERPICK

How To Make Something Out of Nothing

I.

I am significant and do not make other wishes a slack tune never grows a child sits at home knows her child-like room the sewing machine upside down a doll's crib turns into a table to survive a week in verity vulnerable as unwanted objects

II.

We are two statuettes in a cradle a desk when she wants desk a big upside down edges into permanence

What happens when one child never grows? there are many words for these sorts of events

having no expletives is an honorable quest in a house of rejection

my question is ignored as all else in a house of regression

III.

There was a funny story of pushing a giraffe to its limit having to grapple, a giraffe bleats onto your things do you think they could have shoved her down its neck? do you think a giraffe can take a bus to school? and bake?

What would happen if she grew to be forty years old and never sat next to a tree?

a thick tongue hangs out to answer

IV.

There is no answer to your repeating queries perhaps this is why you call me several times from the underworld no consonants in your messages

> I run through our fires but several morticians stand in their places

every corner of a misused past smoking in the bellows

The nothing that I was while sitting breathless in the hamper has become a king-sized book mark your life's experience bandaged in time and space

a pit without fruit the nothing that our mother thinks

dear hideaway, you can grow old with a shelter but no surround

VI.

People pursue vast and raucous together a rope holds our necks in the secret blustery nothing

household to household I try to make things from the trash that exists in our hearts

like the scent of soap on the bedside of someone

a house may have sheets and sinks but returns nothing

VII.

The desire to make something is an all absorbing interest Throw caution overboard!

exactly how it happened to us, frenetically one cannot bear to throw it away

a doll's crib is a natural oddity recalling the original nothing then chuckling over its transformation from a decoy to a desk

Do you have any old thunderings that are collecting dust?

Words in Black Marker

I don't know why I didn't just leave this party with Erika. Like I'm not still hoping that Jason will show up. That the fairy tale of going home together will come true. But it's after midnight, and even the most misguidedly optimistic side of me has to admit he isn't coming. I should get realistic and call it a night.

I grab a beer from the fridge and use a rusty opener to pry off the cap.

I don't know anyone here. I just met the party's hosts tonight – friends of Erika's, two girls and a guy sharing the top half of this decrepit house. All in their early twenties, like Jason.

He's twenty-two, an age that feels like a lifetime ago, even if it's only been nine years. I was living with Andrew, my college boyfriend, thinking it was only a matter of time before we'd get married. Now, it's obvious how wrong we were for each other. But I was naïve back then.

And at thirty-one? I'm hanging around a party on the off-chance that a boy might show up. It's possible not that much has changed.

Jason. I met him one night at Erika's apartment. She was bitching about her job, and I was bitching about how long it had been since I'd had sex, and both of us were on our second margarita. There was shouting in the hallway, and when we went to investigate, we found her neighbor Charles playing drunken tag with a shaggy-haired stranger. He had a devious smile and smelled delicious, like some witch-brew aphrodisiac made of sugar and fireworks and meat. By the time Charles introduced us, something had burned a place for his name to lodge inside me. *Jason*. The two boys came over and helped us finish the tequila and then it was late and Charles said he had to get to bed. Jason moaned about being hungry, so I walked with him to the corner market. Together we went straight past the door, as if we'd discussed it. In the back alley I ran my hands under his shirt and over his shoulders, and it was more than I could stand. I pulled him down on top of me and felt gravel mash into my back. Afterward, he walked me to my apartment. We kissed good night while the sky lightened around us.

We slept together a few times after that, and I never stopped being hungry for him. Like a pang. Like I was starving.

Someone enters the kitchen, and for a wild split second I think it could be him. But it's just three girls, all looking fashionably disheveled in a way that clearly took effort. One of them brushes past me to get to the refrigerator. I notice a word on her hand, written in black marker:

FEISTY. I read it out loud. "You're feisty?" She shrugs, reaching into the fridge.

"I'm tasty," one of the other girls says. She shows me her hand, with TASTY scrawled across it.

I look at the third girl. "What about you?"

She sighs and holds her hand up. OBLONG.

"Oblong?"

"Fuck if I know," she says. "Stupid Rob."

Tasty giggles. "The deal is, there's pens out there." She jerks her head toward the living room. "And everyone's getting words on their hands. But you can't do it yourself. Someone has to write what they think describes you."

"So, you're tasty," I say.

"Damon thinks so," says Oblong.

Tasty laughs. "Yeah, well, he's never gonna find out."

Feisty passes beers to the other girls. "We should have just written on each other."

"You're right," Tasty says. But I can tell she's pleased with her word. "You should get one!" she tells me. I give her a noncommittal smile.

What would Jason write on my hand? I'd want it to be so good it's embarrassing: SEXY, BEAUTIFUL, HOT. But I worry it'd be something like CRAZY OF NEEDY OF OLD. Probably he'd just write some random thing that came to mind. TURNIP. BISON. HORIZONTAL. I guess that last one would actually make sense.

About a month ago, he said he didn't think we should keep fooling around. Neither of us had ever implied that it was anything more than sex, so I didn't see what the problem was. But he said it just didn't feel right anymore. I got the feeling there was somebody he was interested in, or maybe already seeing. I nodded and said I understood.

I ran into him at Erika's a couple of times. It seemed important to prove that we could still hang around each other. Acting casual was hard, but it was better than staying away completely. Then I saw him out at a bar and we drank with a bunch of people until last call. When everyone started to scatter I reminded him how my place was on the way to his place. *Walk that way with me. Come up for a quick beer.* I saw doubt in his eyes, but he said okay, and I knew I had a chance. In my apartment we sat on separate ends of the sofa, drinking and talking about nothing much. Finally I slid over and climbed on top of him. I kissed his neck and his chest. I pushed up his T-shirt and licked the spaces between his ribs. I reached down and unsnapped his jeans.

"What are you doing?" he muttered as my tongue danced closer to his waist.

"What do you think I'm doing," I said, and then my mouth was too busy to talk.

"I hate you," he murmured between sighs. I rose and kissed him hard on the mouth.

"You hate me?"

"Yes," he said, standing up, lifting me with him. I felt myself beam as he carried me to my bedroom. He was powerless to resist me. I was the powerful one.

I don't feel powerful now, here at this party, walking alone into the living room where a dozen or so people are lounging around. On the coffee table are a couple of black Sharpies, waiting.

The guy who lives here looks at me. "Hey," he says. DANGER'S on his hand. "You got your word yet?"

I sit down and wave my unmarked hands at him.

"I could give you one," he says. "But, I mean, I don't really know you." I shrug. "I don't know any of you." "Then just pick someone," says a skinny girl with long hair. There's a meanness in her eye, like she's waiting for the chance to brand someone NASTY OF SKANK. So I scan the room. The only other girl is hunched in the lap of a red-haired boy. It's hard not to roll my eyes as I read their clasped-together hands: PRETTY and SPECIAL. The guys all look the same – dark hair, pale skin, band T-shirts, ragged jeans. My eyes land on the one who looks a bit like Jason. He seems like he could be sweet under that scowl, and his skin is smooth and glowing. I think about what my hand might feel beneath his shirt. "You," I say, pointing.

He laughs and staggers over, squeezing in next to me. I look into his eyes and immediately know I've chosen wrong. His pupils are tiny and he smells like sour milk. He scrawls big letters on my right hand, then drops the pen and walks away. The long-haired girl snickers and claps her hands.

I don't want to look down, but I do. My hand reads SHREW.

"Shoulda chose me," Danger Boy says. I give him a smile like it's no big deal, and try to convince myself I mean it. Who cares if someone I don't even know calls me a shrew? I tell myself this whole thing is just stupid. That nothing that a boy can do will hurt me.

Like that would make it true.

Maybe I should've just married Andrew after college. We wouldn't have been happy, but at least I would've been done. Settled. Something.

People laugh and talk while I sit and drink my beer. After a while, when no one's looking, I grab a marker off the table. I go in the bathroom and unscrew the cap, thinking I'll black my word out. Then I have another idea. The pen's a little shaky in my left hand, but I manage to add a D.

SHREWD.

I walk out of the bathroom with a swagger, looking around for that little smarmy fucker. I feel like I've bested him, won the game of wits. But he's not around.

I felt like I won a game with Jason, that night in my apartment. It turned out that didn't matter either.

In the kitchen, I open another beer. No one says a thing about my word. A lot of people don't even have one. When I go back to the living room, the pens aren't there, and none of the same people are either. I wonder where they went – the pack of boys, the long-haired girl, the PRETTY SPECIAL couple. Maybe they're outside smoking. Maybe they went home. Maybe they're having some kind of fun you can only have in your early twenties when you don't know any better. When that's basically the point.

It's time to leave. Really, it's been time to leave since I got here, even if I'm just now figuring that out. So I abandon my beer and start down the carpeted staircase. The stairs bend at a landing, and I stop there, looking at a folded poster taped onto the wall: a photo of the statue of David, with words in some language I don't know. David stands there proudly in all his naked white perfection, like he can't even help being that beautiful. But I have the pen in my pocket and I draw it like a sword. I scribble a thick mustache, eager to deface him, but I have to admit he still looks good. He's burly now, like a leather daddy. I give him shades and bondage gear, straps and chaps and a forest of chest hair. I cap the pen and lean back to admire my work.

Then I crumple. Giving David a marker makeover hasn't changed anything. If Jason were here, it wouldn't change anything. Nothing is ever going to change anything. I stare at the ceiling and press my palms against the wall with the pen loose in my hand. It's a ridiculous posture, an overblown caricature of despair. But there's a small comfort in being so dramatic.

The front door opens. A girl calls loudly to people outside and bounds up the stairs. I straighten myself out before she gets to the landing. She's tiny, with hair cropped short in a pixie cut. When she sees me, she stops and gives me an enormous smile.

"Hello!" She blinks her long-lashed eyes, like a cartoon newborn deer. I smile back half-assedly and start to move past her.

"Check you out!" She points to my hand and nods. "You're *shrewd!*"

I bite off a sarcastic laugh. "Not really," I say. She tilts her head and looks at me. I lean against the wall – no dramatic pose this time, just tired. And I see what's on her hand: BRIGHT.

"It fits you," I say.

She tilts her head down like she's blushing. "Thanks!"Then she looks up. "Well, if you're not shrewd," she says, "what are you?"

I shake my head. I'm nothing. Stupid. Tired. Lonely.

By the time I realize I'm saying it out loud – "I'm lonely" – it's too late to take it back.

I wait for the pixie girl to laugh at me, or put on a pity face and say she's sorry. Instead, she picks up my left hand and takes the marker. I close my eyes, feeling its cold wet tip slide on my skin.

"There," she says. I open my eyes. Her short red nails surround the loopy, pretty swirls: Longly.

Her big eyes search my face for a reaction. "Better?"

It is better. Shrewd was wishful thinking. At least this feels true.

I look at my hand in hers again, and this time I read the writing differently. I can't tell for sure what she meant to put there, but now I think it says *Lovely*.

I add my other hand to our hands clasped together, and she brings her other hand on top of that. And we stand there for what feels like a really long time with all our hands clasped together, beneath Bondage David and the party upstairs, until a group of people stumbles through the door. The pixie girl lets herself get caught up in the swarm of them. Our hands and words break apart as she's swept upstairs.

"Have a good night," she calls out to me. Like it's a blessing. I smile and wave my lovely, lonely hand.

PETER JAY SHIPPY

The Devil, Probably

What kind of story is it, watching? Listening? Faces downcast, hands walking, feet turning doorknobs,

men riding tricycles, car horns, hair moving like seaweed stirred by currents, a stoop tossed

with lemon peels, a box of free books, yellowed paperbacks, classics, pizza crusts, a coat hanger

bent to catch waves, the roots of an oak breaking through the sidewalk, a cart of glass bottles,

a man, his wheelchair, his guide dog, his child riding on his lap reading about what is snow,

an ice cream truck playing *Cabaret*, a small garden blossoming with plastic

dinosaurs, a woman in headphones singing like a deaf woman singing about love gone to hay,

windblown Kleenex, pink, like wet blossoms stuck to a chain-link fence, crab apple stains

on the sidewalk, hello, grey hoodies hung from a clothesline stretched between car aerials,

two bulldogs, a semi backing up, a tuxedo cat in the parlor window of a red Victorian where apparently, I took lessons, dried flowers, piano, lavender, a woman with a baby laced

to her chest, a tree limb, its chainsaw, sunshine on gorse, two girls, one phone, cherry floorboards

neatly stacked in the middle of the road, a truck backing up, a peeling oriole painted on a wall

selling juice, a clothesline stretched between two bulldogs, a dry laugh, two smokers holding hands

leaning against the window of the laundromat, aerials bent to catch hair stirred by currents,

a heavy dresser at the curb full of linen, a woman with dried flowers laced to her chest,

yellowed paperback, a tree limb, cherry, windblown ice cream, pink, like wet blossoms, *come hear*

the band, come blow your horn, people riding lavender bottles, hello, a yellow bus,

a child's face squashed into the back window of a lemon Victorian where apparently,

I pocketed a mechanical pencil, shh said the hard lead as it pressed hummingbirds

PETER JAY SHIPPY

into my father's graph paper, listening, hands downcast, faces walking, feet turning doorknobs,

whose story it is, watching, the devil, probably, a coathanger, grey hoodies, apple stains, a chainsaw

at the bottom of a pond cutting seaweed, two girls in your piano's middle C, hear

the wheelchair's man, a yellowed dog on his lap, sunshine in his hair, in his eyes, like gorse,

plastic dinosaurs break through the sidewalk. What is snow? What is snow? What is snow? Long Gone Daddy

The dinosaur awoke to find that you had vanished.

PETER JAY SHIPPY

The Engineer of Moonlight

he scar on her left breast was Utica, her lips were Dar es Salaam, cold springs

in Duluth caused that cough, like a cat hawking songbirds, babblers and warblers, the crow's feet

under her eyes were a walk-up in Iowa City where we heard Schumann's "Child Falling Asleep"

on a baby monitor, it struck us as sunken music, the orchestra going down with the ship,

women and children first, the bruise on her hip was bottle green from her bedroom wall, well,

who hasn't pursued the slow disco, the keen scar on her right knee was skating rinks in July,

her hair, her mother's and her mother's hair was New Bedford, Lisbon, chestnut, planted near

her mosaic in the tea garden because they say hair keeps haints away, her strong legs were nights

swimming the ancient inland sea, from Appalachia to Laramidia, her smile was *très* nice,

was Nice, where a plummet from a bicycle left her with a gap between her front teeth, between the genuine and the acrylic, her wooden leg was Sears Roebuck, 1867, was kept

on the mantle next to a picture of her four greats grandmother who lost her limb on a battlefield

in Morocco, it's a long story, she said, one she never told me, too bad, as it might explain

her skull's camber, which was definitely Fez, so unlike Assam's liaison with the curl

of her neck, her neck so unlike giraffes or swans, thank god, outside of a poem who wants to be

inside a simile equation with a zoo, her shrink ray was Dr. No, her broken toe

was the door hitting my sour ass on the way out, her desk was apple, barnwood, the family farm

where hers picked sugar beets for years after they arrived from Beets, thus her purple hands,

her records were from 1963, Memphis and Seoul, her voice was Little Łódź in South Buffalo,

listening to her sing "Blue Monday" made me nostalgic for the distant future, her tears were products of the Argentine, her tears were Cedar Rapids General, the NICU,

where we heard Schumann's "Child Falling Asleep" on a baby monitor, it struck us as sunken

music, the orchestra going down with the ship, women and children first, the bruise on her hip,

her skin was quick, wolf moonlight on a locomotive driven by a sleeping engineer.