

Printer's Devil Review



Spring 2015



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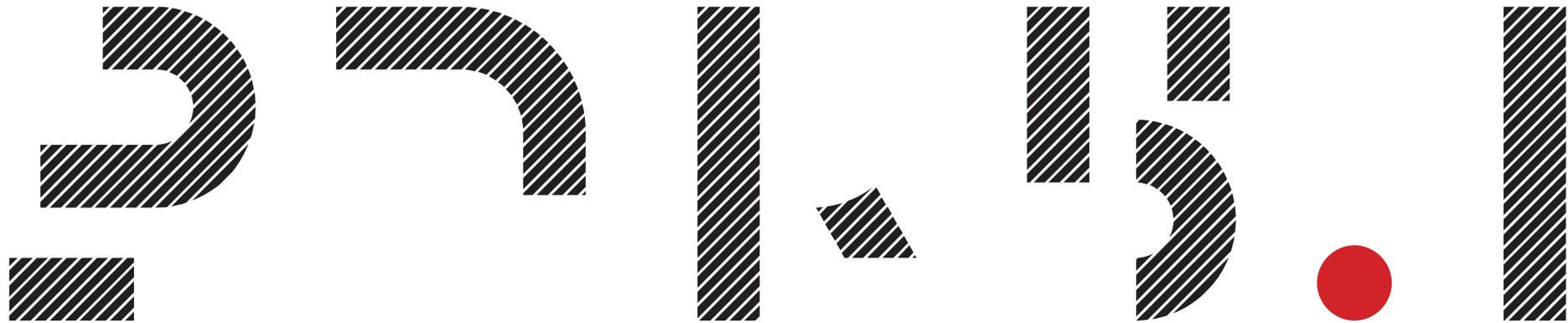
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Contributors

HEATHER ALTFELD's poetry appears or is forthcoming in *Narrative Magazine*, *ZYZZYVA*, *Pleiades*, *Copper Nickel*, *The Literary Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *Watershed*, and others. She has written essays for *North American Review*, *Superstition Review*, and *Poetry Northwest*. Her research and areas of interest include children's literature, anthropology, poetry, and things that have vanished. She has completed one manuscript of poems and is at work on a second as well as a book for children.

ELOISA AMEZCUA is Eloisa Amezcua is an Arizona native. She recently finished her MFA at Emerson College and works in Cambridge, MA. She's received scholarships from the New York State Summer Writers Institute, the Bread Loaf Translator's Conference and the Vermont College of Fine Arts Post-Graduate Workshop. You can find her at www.eloisaamezcua.com.

MARIE CHAMBERS is a Southerner by birth and an Angelino by choice. She recently received an MFA in poetry from the Professional Writing Seminars at Bennington College in Bennington, VT. Her work has appeared in numerous art publications as well as the *Quotable* and *Atlanta Review*. She's the 2014 winner of the Tallahassee Writers Association annual creative nonfiction prize, published in the *Seven Hills Literary Review* (March 2015). Chambers is also a winner of the 2015 ARTlines2 Ekphrastic Poetry Contest for work inspired by a piece of art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston.

ALEX GROSS was born in 1968 in Roslyn Heights, NY and is currently based in Los Angeles, CA. In 1990, he received a BFA with honors from the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. In 2007, Gross' work was the subject of a solo exhibition at the Grand Central Art Center in Santa Ana, CA. Gross is a recipient of the prestigious Artist's Fellowship from the Japan Foundation and several faculty grants from Art Center College of Design. In 2007, Chronicle Books published his first monograph, *The Art of Alex Gross*. Gingko published his second monograph, *Discrepancies*, in 2010 and a collection of his cabinet card series in 2012, called *Now and Then: The Cabinet Card Paintings of Alex Gross*.

DANIEL LALLEY is from Hewitt, TX, and currently living in San Francisco, CA, where he is completing his MFA in writing at the University of San Francisco. He has been previously published in *The North Texas Review*.

MARK LEYDORF worked as an actor for almost twenty years from the time he left school in 1990 (Yale, English BA), and has been writing theater for about a decade. His adaptation (with composer Michael Brennan) of *Citizen Ruth* was named Best Musical at the New York International Fringe Festival in 2009. Two other musicals are in the workshop stage. Seeing how freakishly long it takes to develop a musical, in 2014 Leydorf wrote a straight play, *Lifeboat*, which will have its first public reading in early 2015. Over the years, he's also written feature stories for *Poz*, the leading magazine for people living with HIV; his artwork and photographs have been featured in exhibits at the Leslie Lohman Gallery and Paradise Cafe in New York and the Lake Placid Center for the Arts.

L. E. MILLER's short stories have appeared in *The Missouri Review*, *Nimrod International Journal*, *The Drum*, *Scribner's Best of Fiction Workshops 1999*, *Ascent*, and *Cimarron Review*. Her story "Kind" was selected as a PEN/O. Henry Prize Story for 2009. L. E. Miller lives in Massachusetts with her family and has nearly completed a collection of short stories called *Other People's Beds*.

DEREK MONG is the author of *Other Romes* (Saturnalia Books, 2011); the poetry editor at *Mantis: A Journal of Poetry, Criticism, & Translation*; and a doctoral candidate at Stanford University where he's finishing a dissertation on marriage in the lives and afterlives of Whitman and Dickinson. He is the recipient of fellowships and awards from the University of Louisville, the University of Wisconsin, *The Missouri Review*, and the Hopwood Program. He lives in Portland, OR, with his wife and young son. His poems, translations, and prose have appeared in *The Cincinnati Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *The Southern Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Pleiades*, *Court Green*, and (most recently) the anthology *99 Poems for the 99 Percent*. Last summer, he and his wife – Anne O. Fisher – published the first

English language interview with Maxim Amelin, a Russian poet whom they're collaboratively translating. He can be reached at www.derekmong.com.

DAWIT L. PETROS studied art as a Fulbright Fellow at Tufts University/School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; photography at Concordia University, Montreal; and history at the University of Saskatchewan. Recent exhibition venues include the Studio Museum in Harlem, NYC; the National Museum of African Art in Washington, DC; the Museum of Contemporary Art in Detroit, MI; the Prince Claus Fund Gallery in Amsterdam, NL; the Durban Art Gallery in Durban, SA; Medina Galerie Mediatheque in Bamako, Mali; the Royal Ontario Museum of Art in Toronto, ON; and the Lianzhou International Photo Festival in Lianzhou, China.

His works have been recognized with awards including an Independent Study Fellowship at the Whitney Museum of American Art, an Art Matters Fellowship, Canada Council for the Arts Production Grants, and artist residencies at the Studio Museum in Harlem, the McColl Center for Visual Art, Addis Ababa Photo Fest, and Invisible Borders TransAfrican Photography Collective. His works are in institutional collections including the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Royal Ontario Museum of Art, the Saskatchewan Arts Board, and numerous private collections.

LEAH PIEPGRAS believes that the act of self-reflection is part of the primal urge to deeply understand our inner and outer surroundings. Through drawing, sculpture and installation, she supplies the viewer with tools to deconstruct and reassess the relationship to the self, while examining a connection to a greater physical experience. She holds a BFA in sculpture from the Kansas City Art Institute and an MFA from Carnegie Mellon. Piepgras has shown nationally and internationally. Select exhibitions include the Spring Break Art Fair in New York, Hallspace in Boston, Grin Gallery in Providence, the Sarah Doyle Gallery at Brown University, St. Botolph's Foundation Grant Recipient Show in Boston, the University of New Hampshire Museum, and the Cushing-Martin Gallery at Stonehill College.

DEREK MONG

The Rented House

Here they made love and there slept the children.
A dust ring demarcates a fruit bowl's long life.

We are tired. We set our bags down in these corners
where momentum gathers and is gone.

Shall we follow the sun's crawl across woodgrain?
Do we slough our boxed selves at the stairwell

and let air vents receive us, oily and sweet?
The basement's unwired light fixture glows

cool as a moonface. A shower rod, long since
abandoned, becomes our impromptu baton.

The water heater gurgles its tacit approval.
Wind lifts a curtain, helping us sweep.

I stop in a bedroom to imagine our end here:
voices dissolved in the songs of unnameable birds.

It is harder to see a beginning: these floorboards
like sunrays, a toddler tiptoeing high above grass.

A Slender Boat

EVER SINCE HIS WIFE LEFT, Eliot has been waking early to meditate. It is November, pitch black when he rises, but he has grown, unaccountably, superstitious. He has been trying, through discipline and virtuous deeds, to bring Sabina back.

This morning, Thanksgiving, he sits cross-legged on the floor. Eyes closed, breathing, he pictures a jade-colored light: the heart chakra, the seat of compassion. How does he even know this? Very likely, it's something Sabina's sister has opined about, or maybe he absorbed it from the millennial ether. He pictures Sabina: her graceful runner's body, which, after twelve years of marriage, has not lost one ounce of its power to stir him. His head pounds with sleeplessness and thirst, but he sits.

Some minutes later, Eliot knows this: he cannot face dinner at his brother's later, the courses of elaborate food, the showcasing of new gadgets, the showcasing of his brother's four children, each born within two years of the last. And so he calls David to beg off, claiming the sudden onset of a virus.

"Ouch! We'll miss you, too, bro!" David booms over the phone. "But who's going to stand up for the lumpen when talk turns to affairs of the day?"

"Maybe one of your lawn care guys can come in my place," Eliot says.

"Hate to say it, but my lawn care guys make more than you do."

Eliot doesn't doubt that this is true. Just the same, it's a relief to walk away from it: all the food, the bonhomie, David's baronial pride over his full-to-bursting family.

Once he hangs up, Eliot realizes his lie could come back to bite him. He is on shaky ground gastrointestinally, but all he has in the refrigerator is a half a carton of leftover Thai. He grabs his jacket and goes out to his car, a nine-year-old Civic, a teacher's ride straight out of central casting. But now that he's out in the air, well-being seems within reach. Driving, going anywhere, always steadies him. He waves as he passes the three Davis-Chen boys tossing a football around on their lawn. Calvin, the oldest, salutes in reply.

He drives through the small downtown, past the park with its gnarled, leafless trees and peeling bandstand. The park had once been one of the town's most winning features, but three consecutive years of budget cuts have left it looking like some dystopian British Midlands spot from a film by Tony Richardson. He drives along a residential stretch, turns onto the main commercial strip. He has made this trip so many times, with a householder's shopping list and sense of purpose, he could do it blindfolded. After he and Sabina bought the house, they debated passionately about where to shop: King Brothers – indifferently stocked and staffed, but, miraculously, holding on as one of the last locally owned supermarkets in the state – or the upscale national chain, which sells the image of virtue along with organic apples for three-fifty a pound. They decided on King's – a decision driven ultimately by economics – although during the brief weeks of Sabina's pregnancy, they defected to the other place for its superior produce. Today, he circles King's parking lot twice before he finds a space.

Inside, he feels furtive, out of step. Part of what Sabina's absence has brought is an excruciating, minute-by-minute awareness of his every psychic hiccup. He is tempted to grab a frozen meal and run, but he believes his intention to cook something real is the wire-thin line separating him from all the other schlubs who have veered so far off the tracks they now spend major holidays alone. Chicken piccata: he'll make that. It's something he used to make for Sabina in the early days of their courtship. Today, it seems a reasonable compromise between a Falstaffian joint of meat and a dinner on a cardboard tray.

In the produce section, he manages to score a decent lemon. He finds a bunch of fat-stalked asparagus, but at six dollars a pound, he returns it to the bin. As he combs through the beans for a decent handful, he

sees a curly-headed boy of two or so gazing at him from his perch in a shopping cart. Young children have always liked Eliot. "It's your roundness," Sabina has told him. "Your hair, your eyes, your . . . person-ality," she always concludes diplomatically, patting his belly. The twin embryos, implanted in the doctor's office last April, stopped growing after twenty-one weeks. Fetal demise is somewhat more prevalent in medically assisted conceptions, their doctor said afterwards. There was no reason not to try again.

Now, near the checkout line, Eliot thinks he spots their doctor, the hired gun specialist he and Sabina began seeing last year. It isn't Dr. Bertram, of course, just another sixtyish ectomorph beside whom Eliot feels sedentary and pudgy, but Dr. Bertram holds such sway over them that his likeness shows up everywhere. In her old life, Sabina took orders from no one, but under Dr. Bertram's direction, she gave up her half-marathons to preserve her body fat. At the *Globe*, she traded the strenuous investigative assignments she used to relish for coverage of city council meetings, stories that left her so bored she claimed she'd rather stick herself with pins. "Eyes on the prize," Dr. Bertram told them. "You can't lose hope."

Hope, Eliot thinks now. That elusive slender boat.

The express line cashier announces his total. As he fumbles for his wallet, he notices the skinny young man standing behind him. The patchy goatee is new, but Eliot recognizes the slouching hands-in-pockets stance, the Rangers cap he wore to class each day – a brave move in such die-hard Red Sox country – the apple cheeks no tough-guy pose can hide. This young man was a student in Eliot's French class two or three years ago. Not his Advanced Placement class, with its girls who fall in love with the poetry and legend of Rimbaud, but in level three, the incongruously named bottom track, where seniors struggle to conjugate regular verbs. Eliot waits near the bagger's station for the boy to finish checking out.

"Hello there! Happy Thanksgiving!" Eliot calls out after the boy has paid and moved down to collect his bag. Off duty and on, he is avuncular Monsieur Blum, hearty and generous. In class, he organizes poetry slams; he teaches his students the most off-color language he can get away with – anything, anything to keep them awake.

"Oh, hey, Monsieur Blum. Happy Thanksgiving to you."

The boy does not seem particularly bothered to be bumping into his former teacher. Eliot is touched by this, by the boy's "monsieur" mangled in his north-of-Boston accent. He sifts through the hundreds of student names that have collected in his memory. Matt? Brady? Brandon? Most level three kids are easy to recall, with their hallway fights, the endless detention slips to sign. But this boy drifted from one day to the next, on the brink of invisibility. Still, there was something about him, a nervous twitch in his left eye.

Ryan: the name leaps up like a frog from a murky pond. Ryan Dekay. He came to Eliot once about some missing homework – "I'm wicked sorry," he kept saying – and Eliot believed him. It might have been that twitch or it might have simply been Ryan's guilelessness, his inability to dissemble.

"Having dinner with your family today?" Eliot asks, although the two cans of ravioli he saw rolling down the conveyer belt said everything about Ryan's prospects for the holiday.

"Nah." Ryan gives a loose-limbed shrug. "I'm not a big Thanksgiving person. My girlfriend's working today, and my family, we're not, you know, that close."

In a strange trick of memory, Eliot recalls meeting Ryan's father. It was parents' night; Eliot probably held forth about the wit in Molière, the humanism in Voltaire, when, in truth, level three French is *je suis, tu es*, year after year after year. Afterwards, an unsmiling man, neither stocky nor thin, walked up to Eliot with a burly man's yawning stride and introduced himself as Mr. Dekay. His handshake was less a greeting than an assertion of power. He said: "I hope my son's not making any trouble." Then he said: "You're still teaching French? Our kids learn a dead language while the Chinese eat our lunch."

"Family, yeah . . . can be hard," Eliot tells Ryan now. The limitations of the setting prevent his saying anything of greater substance. He taps Ryan's shoulder with the coupon circular he picked up at the entrance, out of habit. "Well, it was great seeing you again."

Like nodding acquaintances trying to balance cordiality with privacy in a public place – an elevator, say, or Dr. Bertram's waiting room – they

walk together through the sliding doors and out into the parking lot. Because it would be poor form to say nothing, Eliot asks, “So, Ryan, what have you been up to these days?”

“Not much. I’ve been working for my buddy’s cleaning business, and my girlfriend and I have a place in the Scotch Arms. But that’s all ending pretty soon. I start basic next month. In Kentucky. It’ll be my first time down South, so that should be interesting.”

Eliot considers the elements that comprise Ryan’s life: the cleaning job; the apartment in the sprawling, unprosperous Scotch Arms complex at the edge of town; his enlistment for a war he very likely believes will make a man of him. The high school where Eliot teaches is in another town, much wealthier than the one where he, and now Ryan, live. Most students enroll in four-year colleges; few go on to military service.

“Do I know your girlfriend?”

“Nah.” A grudging, indecipherable smile flickers across Ryan’s face. On many levels, his smile says: why would *you* know her? “Her name’s Carmela. She’s Brazilian. The rest of her family’s still back there. In Minas Gerais?”

Ryan delivers this last fact as a question; he’s clearly uncertain of the pronunciation. It occurs to Eliot that Ryan, too, might be grabbing at conversational tidbits to guard against silence.

“Listen,” he says. “My plans today kind of . . . changed. If you want to come by for dinner, please feel free.”

Eliot can’t quite believe he has said this. He waits for a look of alarm to appear on Ryan’s face. His own high school French teacher wore corduroy slippers on his remarkably tiny feet and could always be distracted from popping a quiz with a strategic question about his glory days at the Sorbonne. If Monsieur Charpentier had invited him for Thanksgiving dinner, Eliot would have fled in horror. But Ryan’s face remains placid, good-humored. In class, he did the best he could.

“Come around three. We can catch the game on TV. It’ll just be the two of us. My wife’s out of town.” He feels it necessary to make this clarification. Ryan might find it a little creepy if he sees the framed wedding photo on his hall table but . . . surprise! No wife in evidence. “You eat chicken, I hope.”

Ryan’s left eyelid twitches, but he pockets the receipt on which Eliot has scribbled his address. “That’s awesome. Thanks a lot, Monsieur Blum. I’ll see you later.”

On his way home, Eliot calls Sabina to wish her a happy Thanksgiving. His call bounces to her voicemail, as his calls to her often do. He pictures the small, grim Thanksgiving at her sister’s, with its tofu turkey substitute and Janis’s doomsday prognostications about peak oil. Eliot has been practicing compassion; he harbors no ill will toward Janis or anyone. And having extended his invitation to Ryan, he believes his crabbed, ungenerous soul has expanded by a few more degrees. Very likely he is flouting what most people would consider to be appropriate boundaries, but he has finally ventured beyond the confines of his own chattering head.

It occurs to him he has nothing for dessert. He stops at the convenience store near his house, but the factory-made pies he normally sees piled near the snack foods are all sold out. He digs deep in the freezer chest for ice cream and pulls out what remains: two ice-rimed pints of Cherries Jubilee.

Back at the house, Eliot unpacks his groceries. He surveys the liquor situation and finds it good. There’s a decent selection of wine and plenty of beer: five bottles of a fashionable microbrew, four more of the cheap but drinkable domestic brand he and his brother used to drink in the woods during high school, when David was a skinny kid with bad skin, masking his shyness with abrasive humor. Eliot isn’t sure whether Ryan is, strictly speaking, legal to drink. He’s not about to card him. Better to put the alcohol on hold for now.

He loads the dirty dishes into the dishwasher. He throws out an empty merlot bottle and notes, with a twinge of dismay, the accumulation of bottles in the recycling bin. Where should he and Ryan eat? The dining room, with its walls painted melon, is the tidiest room in the house, but

they'd be marooned, just the two of them, at the long, polished table. Better to batch it up on TV trays in the den.

There, Eliot picks up his socks from the floor, clears away the glasses and plates. He looks through his stack of LPs, which he will never stoop to call his vinyl. He flips past Devo and The Boomtown Rats, past Kraftwerk—a relic from his brief, intense fling with techno—past Lou Reed, Leonard Cohen, Tom Waits, and Patti Smith. Lately he has lacked the emotional wherewithal to listen to any of them. He finds *Edith Piaf Live at Montreux*, which he slides from its jacket and wipes clean while it spins on the turntable. Sabina hates Piaf's nasal voice and what she calls her self-annihilating romanticism. But Eliot loves Piaf. He loves her scrappiness, her sly wit, her insistence on love. Every time he goes to Paris, he visits Père-Lachaise to lay roses at her stone. He always leaves a small pink flower for her daughter, too. When he travels there with his students — it's almost always the AP kids who sign up for the spring-vacation trip — they indulge him in this and pay homage to the god they worship on reputation, adding their charm bracelets and Gitanes wrappers to the pile of whiskey bottles and cigarette lighters at Jim Morrison's grave. Last time, he also stopped at the tomb of Victor Noir, a journalist and distant cousin of Napoleon. Nothing about Noir's stern likeness suggests any such power, but his burial spot has become a mecca for the infertile. Sabina was then eleven weeks pregnant. Nonetheless, at the foot of Noir's memorial statue, Eliot abandoned a lifetime of secular rationalism. With an eye out for his wandering students, he stepped forward to rub the boot. Countless hands had polished the bronze there and at the crotch to a golden shine.

He came home, and Sabina started to show. For ten more weeks, they lived in a state of cautious joy. Was it the caution or the joy that did them in? she wondered aloud afterwards, speaking in the dark.

The phone rings. He rushes to answer it, allowing himself a moment of hope that it's Sabina, returning his call.

"Eliot." This is his mother's signature greeting: his name uttered as a statement.

"Oh, hi, Ma. Happy Thanksgiving."

"David tells me you're not feeling well."

"Yeah. School's a petri dish this time of year."

"Do you need anything? We can easily stop by on our way to your brother's."

"I'm good, thanks. I ran out earlier for some ginger ale."

"Any word from Sabina?"

He thinks of Sabina's calls, which tend to come between his second and third periods at school. He thinks, despite his best efforts not to, of the pause before she says she misses him too.

"Sabina's fine. She's great."

Silence follows, freighted with all his mother's unasked questions.

"So, uh, I was actually going to go lie down."

"Go, go. Rest. But before you go, I just wanted to tell you one thing. I've clipped an article you might be interested in. Some doctors out at UCLA are doing some very promising research about your...situation. I was going to give it to you today, but now I'll just put it in the mail."

"Thanks, Ma, but save yourself a stamp. Every legitimate treatment is available right here in Boston."

"If it's a matter of money, your father and I are in a position to help."

Eliot now feels as he once did in Dr. Bertram's office when the nurse, all brisk discretion, showed him to the small, windowless room he still thinks of as the wankatorium. "Thanks, Ma. We're fine. I've really got to lie down. Please give my love to everyone."

In the den, "Le Petit Homme" plays on the turntable. Back when loneliness was a more speculative condition for him, the song was one of Eliot's favorites. Today, it's too much: the man's shabby sweater, his rented mistress, his invisible sorrow. Eliot goes to lift the needle off the disc. In the kitchen, he cuts open the plastic wrap covering the chicken and pounds each filet flat. Then, because it's still too early for anything red, he uncorks the Riesling. He figures his mother's call has earned him a glass, and he is rewarded by the wine's apple-tinged bite. It could be worse, he tells himself. He could have Sabina's mother, who has always reminded him of a hostile parrot, with her blurted judgments — so-and-so's getting fat, so-and-so's kids need a good whack on the butt, Eliot's getting a bit of a paunch himself. His own mother might have questionable boundaries, but at least the things she says are kind.

It is almost two o'clock. At his brother's, the doorbell is probably chiming; Chloe, the seven-year-old, has very likely glided to the door to charm the arriving guests. Eliot used to amuse her by pretending to pull quarters from her ears. The last time he tried that trick, she sighed with exquisite patience and told him she could see the coin in his hand.

The wine in his glass is getting low. He pours himself another. He takes the goblet up to the bedroom to sip from while he makes the bed. He and Sabina have laughed and fucked in this bed; they've played Scrabble for blood and held each other silently. Last month it became the place where everything finally went to hell, thanks to him, or perhaps Kermit Hotaling shares just a scrap of responsibility.

No, Eliot reminds himself. All Kermit Hotaling did was come to town to address a group of journalism students at Boston University. All Kermit did was call Sabina and invite her out to dinner, nothing he hasn't done many times in the past. Kermit Hotaling is just an old friend from J-school, no rival for her affection or esteem, Sabina has assured him more than once. (Will you stop saying his name like that? she once said to Eliot. *Like what?* Like you have to let everyone know you think it's a dorky name.) Yes, she and Kermit slept together a couple of times, before she and Eliot got together, she once confided, but it was weird, almost incestuous, so they stopped. Anyway, what did it matter now?

And now Kermit Hotaling, conversant in Pashto, reports from Afghanistan for *The New York Times*. His ironclad command of the region's political history, his monkish devotion to his work, turn Eliot back into the bike messenger, would-be actor, and full-time pothead he was when he first met Sabina, before her industriousness spurred him to make something more of himself. And so he leaves Sabina to her dinners with Kermit Hotaling whenever a speaking engagement or some other honor brings him to Boston.

Still. That night, nine o'clock became ten, and she called him: running late. Ten became eleven, and she called again: she'd be home soon. When eleven nudged up against twelve, and his call to her went to straight to her voicemail, he couldn't help imagining the two of them engaged in acrobatic sex in Kermit's hotel room. Did he really believe his wife would betray him like that? The truth was he didn't know. He and Sabina were becoming adversaries, strangers.

When she finally walked in, flushed and apologetic, he dodged her kiss. "You're back," he said.

"Of course I am. Where else would I go?" Her laugh was a sharp exhalation.

He watched her peel off the cashmere sweater he'd given her on her last birthday. Had Kermit Hotaling watched her strip earlier? Had he been the one to undress her? Despite everything, Eliot began to get hard.

Sabina pulled on her nightshirt and rubbed moisturizing lotion onto her legs. The sight of her, lean and smooth, even after all the hormone treatments, even after the pregnancy, filled him with irrepressible sorrow. He couldn't look her in the face, even as she slid into bed beside him.

"I don't know. I thought maybe you'd gone off with Kermit Hotaling. To go rake muck together." He'd come dangerously close to saying, "make fuck." But on he went. "Go play Martha Gelhorn to his ... Ernest Hemingway."

Sabina crossed her arms, and sharp creases appeared on her forehead. She looked thin and worn.

"Eliot. Have you been drinking?"

He had not, in fact, been drinking, but he was under the influence of something darker: the urge to go to the limit, seize what remained, tear it down.

"Is he still a better fuck than me?"

"Jesus, Eliot, no. We were *talking*. Last month, his driver was killed outside of Kandahar. He'd left Kermit off just half an hour before. Kermit saw him every day. They'd become good friends. He was pulled from his car and his throat was slit. Afterwards, he was left like a dog in a ditch."

"Shit." Eliot let out a long whistle.

"Yeah. Yeah, exactly." She squeezed his hand briefly then turned onto her left side, as if she were still pregnant and following doctor's orders. "I've got to sleep. It's really late."

He thought that would be the end of it – dumb, persistent hope! – but the next day, she announced her plans to move in with her sister for a month or two.

"With Janis? Great. She's the picture of mental stability."

"I need a break, Eliot. I need to think things over."

"What things?"

“What things?” he repeated when she turned to pull her suitcase from the closet. He nearly dropped to his knees and begged her to forgive him for his every thoughtless word. She set the suitcase on the bed and began packing her clothes. “You and me. The whole train wreck.”

It is now three-thirty. The graying sky resembles his mood at the end of a level three class: the sleepy, low-grade irritation; the nagging sense that, for all his preening and cajoling, his students have learned nothing. Did he excuse Ryan’s missing homework assignment or try to uphold standards? Could he have done anything to divert Ryan to college, toward middle-class notions of safety?

Downstairs, he refreshes the Riesling in his wineglass and slides his latest Netflix offering into the player. After Sabina left, he watched his share of tonic, uplifting cinema: his Truffaut, his Carné, his Renoir. But recently his standards have fallen off and now it’s *The Interesting Nights of Emilio Calderón*, with an opening scene of upright copulation – the worst possible position for conception – but then, there’s a long scene in which a man sits in a café and muses on the various kinds of love. The whole movie is ripped off from Buñuel, to reassure the viewer he is an intellectual, not some poor schlub trying to get his rocks off. As it is, Eliot is as flaccid as a soggy roll. He shuts the movie off.

He picks up a recent issue of the news magazine he gets virtually for free with his educator’s discount and peruses the greatest hits of the year soon to pass. Oil continues to wash up on Gulf Coast beaches. Earthquake survivors in Port-au-Prince are still crammed into cholera-breeding tent cities. The sea levels keep rising, and the war machine hums along; soldiers come home with metal plates in their skulls. This is the world that awaits any child of his. The young Marine in the accompanying photo smiles from his bed at Walter Reed. The sweetness of his smile is what haunts Eliot long after he puts the magazine away.

He goes back to the kitchen to check for Ryan’s car. When he sees nothing out the window but his own quiet street, he pours himself a fourth glass of wine – just a small one. He melts butter in a pan and drops in the flour-coated chicken breasts. He has let the butter go too

long, and it begins to crackle angrily in the pan. He grabs a dish towel and moves it off the burner.

It is past four, almost dark. Chances are slim at best that Ryan is coming, but Eliot lowers the pasta into the boiling water and begins steaming the beans. He takes out two of the good plates. When the beans are done, he arranges them and the chicken and pasta on the china.

On second viewing, the TV trays look flimsy and provisional, stationed as they are in the den. The dining room really is better, so he clears away the accumulated mail and begins laying out the silverware. When the salesman at Jordan’s showed them the burnished mahogany table, with its hidden extension leaves, Eliot and Sabina turned to each other and said, why not? Together they anticipated years of birthday parties and Passover Seders; they pictured their growing family, children and grandchildren, an abundance extending far into the future.

Just before Sabina left, she said, “I hate this table. I hate this whole house.”

Now, he wraps each dinner plate in foil and places them both in a plastic shopping bag. He slips in the ice cream and – what the hell? – adds an unopened bottle of Sauvignon Blanc.

Eliot isn’t drunk, but he knows he’s approaching sobriety’s distant border. Driving, he stares hard at the road and signals a good half-block before each turn. He passes clusters of parked cars, windows glowing in other people’s houses. Last year, driving home from Thanksgiving dinner at his brother’s, Sabina edged close to him, squeezed his leg, and murmured, “I’m so glad I’m married to *you*.”

He drives past King Brothers Market, which divides what is considered the good part of town from the more marginal. He passes the Jiffy Lube, the grassy strip outside the Dollar Store, where he once stood in a peace vigil with a handful of elderly Quakers. He passes the health clinic and its shopworn sign: Aceptamos MassHealth. Christmas lights twinkle in dark windows, and he recalls the exquisite whiteness of the two hearts pulsing on the ultrasound screen. Somewhere, in the depths of cryonic storage, their embryonic siblings wait for him and Sabina to make their next move.

At the Scotch Arms, Eliot brakes hard at the curb. The cold air shocks him when he steps out, but he left his jacket at the house. Never mind. He takes the shopping bag from the passenger seat and walks into the complex. He has no idea which of the squat brick buildings Ryan lives in. He tries to scan the names on the buzzers outside one of the units, but the light is poor and he can't make out the list. He is not about to press every buzzer – it troubles him that he would even consider doing this. He continues on, following the snaking walkway through the complex. He no longer knows which building is which, which he has already passed; still he hopes Ryan will materialize in the dark.

“Mister!”

A little boy has appeared in front of him, wheeling a bike. He is dressed for a warmer climate in a windbreaker and thin cotton pants. Small as the boy is, the banana bike he holds by its handlebars was made for a child even smaller.

“Hey, little man,” Eliot calls back.

“Mister!” the boy repeats.

This inky-haired boy wouldn't be out of place hawking Chiclets on a Mexican beach. Eliot and Sabina saw boys like him everywhere during their honeymoon in Cozumel. They bought everything those kids sold: stale gum, off-brand sunscreen.

Eliot kneels, eye-to-eye with the boy. “*Conoces a Ryan Dekay y Carmela?*”

Pulled as they are from buried memory, the words come smoothly. Even after he's had a few, Eliot is good with languages. Nonetheless, the little boy stares at him and pushes the bicycle back and forth between his spread legs.

“*Tienes hambre?*” Eliot asks.

The boy continues pushing his bike, but Eliot hands the shopping bag out to him nonetheless. “*Aquí. Dos comidas de Thanksgiving. Dos cenas! Dos cenas!*” he corrects himself, striking his hand against his forehead, hamming it up the way he does for his brother's kids, for his students every day in class. Silly Uncle Eliot! Goofy Monsieur Blum!

The little boy stares back, stolid as a kid much older. When he finally takes the bag, the bike's handlebars slip from his grasp. Eliot steadies the bicycle for him. It takes everything he has not to reach over and smooth the boy's hair.

“Wait. Wait. *Esperas.*” He takes the bag back from the boy and hangs it for him on the bike's handlebars. “*Bueno.*”

“Fandi? Fandi!”

A light has come on over the building in front of them, and a woman leans out, propping the storm door open with her hand. She scolds the boy, whose name might or might not be Fandi, in a language Eliot cannot place. Her speech is high-pitched, guttural and rapid. She wears a long, loose skirt and a scarf over her hair.

Eliot raises his hand to wave to her, but the little boy drops the bike and scurries across the dead grass. When he reaches his mother at the top of the stairs, she shakes her finger at him and unleashes a fresh burst of language. But Fandi doesn't cry. He disappears inside. The door closes and the light goes out.

Eliot walks the bike over to Fandi's unit. He props it against the concrete staircase, but what should he do with the food?

L'espérance est un bateau maigre. Meeting Sabina had inspired him to try his hand at poetry, and he'd scribbled these words on the back of a phone bill. Hope is a slender boat. In that instance, there seemed to be no better model for him than the symbolists: fearless, pyrotechnic in their love.

Now he removes the foil-wrapped plates from the shopping bag and lays them on the steps. He places the ice cream and the sauvignon blanc between them. Then he walks away, leaving his wedding china and a bottle of not-inexpensive wine on the Scotch Arms grounds. He remembers lying in bed with Sabina in Mexico, how the palm leaves rasped in the breeze. He tries to hold on to that sound, to the smells of salt and coconut on her skin, as he walks back to his car with the empty bag. 🌿

ELOISA AMEZCUA

Math Lesson

You know you don't love him anymore
because you're not jealous of the woman

he's been staring at. She's a disco ball,
sitting at the center of the restaurant

in her sequined blouse – polished and profound.
You bet she's good at tennis, or physics,

remembers the hypothesis of special relativity
like she remembers to wear perfume. You want

him to spin her around even though he's yours
and it's your one-year anniversary. You want anything

but for him to reach for your hand, so you
grip the stem of your wine glass, remembering

jealousy is a matter of geometry – it depends
on where you place yourself in relation to the other.

Two people: parallel lines. How long until
you touch him out of guilt or boredom?

ELOISA AMEZCUA

Long Distance

You know how hands can hurt

from not having touched someone

in weeks. How thinking of another

woman's face fitting between his

shoulder blades makes you feel hungover.

Sometimes when you drive around

this new town you see a man,

blonde and svelte, walking

on the other side of the highway,

but you know he isn't there. You press

your nails into your thumb, half-moons

distorting fingertips until you're cut off

by a black Honda Civic, vanity plate

SXYLIPS. One hand grasping the wheel,

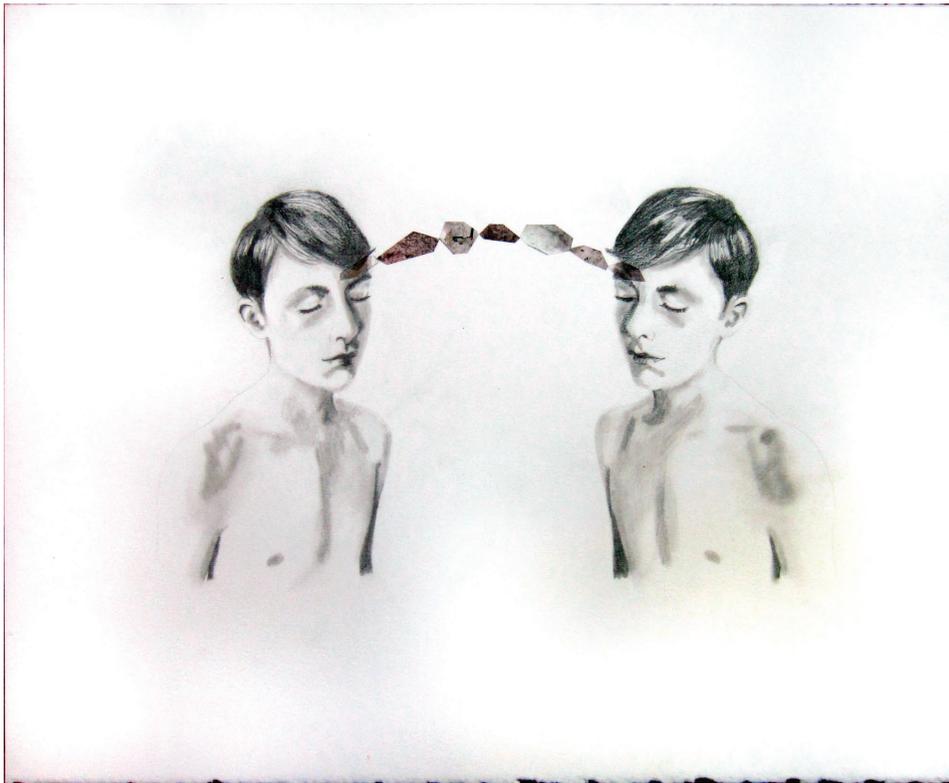
the other on the horn you don't push down on.

Embracing Infinity

Paintings and Sculpture by Leah Piegras
Text by Jess Blodgett



Thought Cloud III



George – The Truth Lies Somewhere in Between.

The work of multimedia artist Leah Piegras is anything but light and fluffy – in fact, she deals with such weighty themes as the human brain and its thought processes, sexuality, and infinity. However, her representation of at least one of these themes comes in traditionally lightweight imagery: clouds. “To me, thoughts aren’t necessarily transient,” says Piegras, a graduate of Carnegie Mellon’s rigorous art program and creator of over twenty-two solo exhibitions and performances.

In fact, in her work, which encompasses sculpture, painting, and installations, she strives to create her idea of what a thought looks like. “I think of thoughts

as clouds and how, before you can grasp a full idea, it floats away, and all you are left with is a feeling, an intention,” she writes in her artist statement. “I think of [these thoughts] in a constant state of visual change, with only the truth of the idea remaining as the actual, physical constant.” In many of her pieces, she uses this imagery in cloud as well as crystal form.

“The clouds are intangible and hard to hold onto, unrealized,” says Piegras in an interview in her colorful Swampscott kitchen. “The crystal form is exactly what it sounds like: thoughts crystalized, hardened, formed, clear, and defined.



Thought Cloud.

“I use the shape formally and symbolically. With collaged shapes or the sculptural forms of the crystals, the experience of making the crystal shapes is a physical and symbolic manifestation of the action which I imagine happening when our thoughts are pared down. Here’s an exercise as an example: Start with a brown potato, organically shaped and lumpy, and then through the act of paring it down, you refine the shape and distill it down to its clean, white core.”

In Piegras’s most recent exhibition, *Swoven*, at Hallspace Gallery in Dorchester, MA, paintings, objects, and installations reflected this theme. In

“Thought Cloud (I and II),” Piegras holds a bronzed cloud up to her head as if demonstrating how it works. Pieces such as “George – The Truth Lies Somewhere in Between” and “Cloud Mantle” continue this theme.

Piegras, who once wore a wedding dress for an entire week as part of her and her husband’s “Week of Wearing White” art performance, is not only interested in the brain in an abstract way – she counts as two major influences scientists with opposing messages.

The first, Jill Bolte Taylor, is a brain scientist who documented her own stroke and encouraged her audience



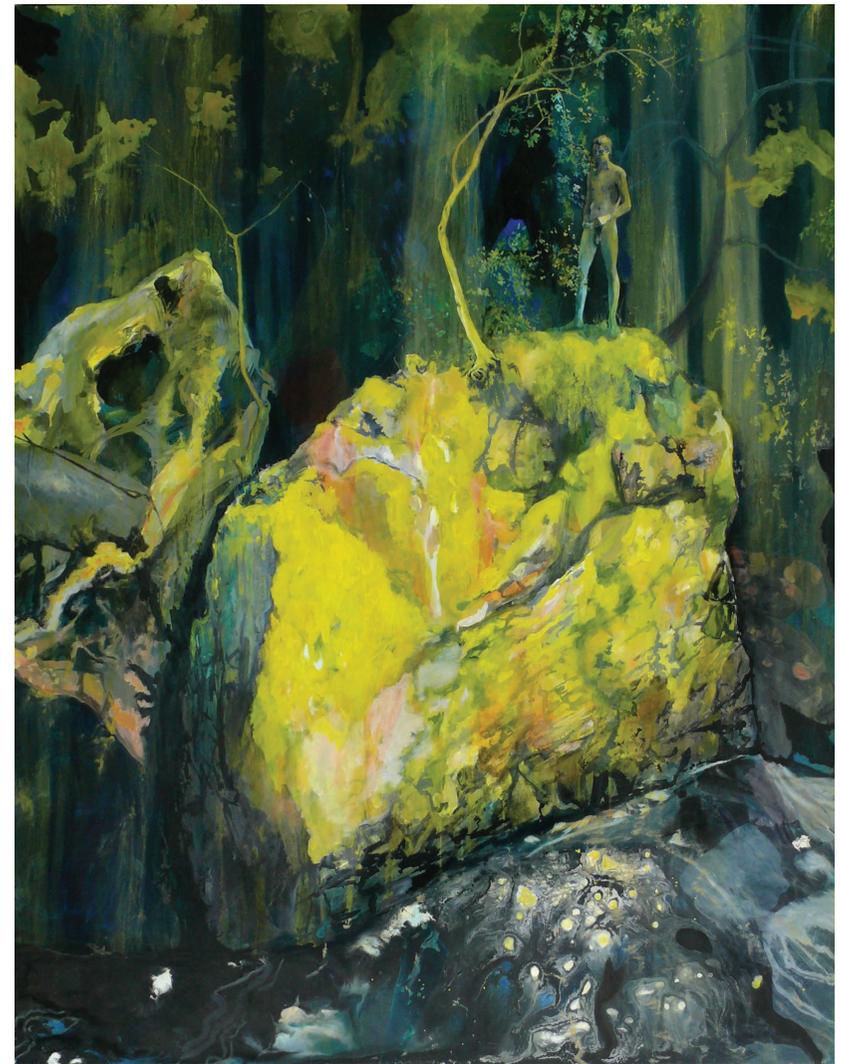
Cloud Mantle.

to focus more on the right brain (i.e., the here-now-bliss part of life) during her TED talk “My Stroke of Insight” and in her book of the same title. The second, scientist Stanley Koren, created experiments with what came to be known as his “God Helmet” in order to prove that spiritual and mystical experiences are merely the result of temporal lobe function.

When asked to which side she leans more, Piepgras responded, “For me, these two are not mutually exclusive. Obviously I am not a brain scientist, but I am inspired by them both because for me they prove that we all have access to this level of bliss and understanding within ourselves. That just can’t be a bad thing no matter where it is coming from. Although it might seem like I need scientific proof, I don’t. This is an example of that innate knowledge being validated externally.”

Another interest of Piepgras’s is the coastline paradox, which observes that any coastline (or, for that matter, body of land or human body) does not have a length that can be accurately or completely measured. To Piepgras this is an example of “infinity all around us,” and she mentions Bolte Taylor’s recollection of being unable to distinguish the lines of her body from the walls around her while she was having a stroke.

Piepgras’s fascination with infinity is reflected in her choice of media – which includes not just paintings,



Oblivion.

installations, and traditional sculpture, but also experimental objects. One from a previous exhibition is a white pillow with the parts and functions necessary for human intercourse imprinted on it. “I can’t find the sheets that go with it,”

she says with a shrug. It hardly seems necessary to view them – it’s clear that not only is Piepgras interested in the infinite, but also that she has an infinite amount of creativity to continue to document it.

Francis Bay

SHE WATCHED THE COUPLE drinking their fruity something-or-others and basking in the rosy sunset. The lights of ruined, overrun St. Thomas glittered on the water, and other lights, Christmas lights, twinkled in the manchineel trees along the beach. The lovers – maybe they were twenty-five, probably campers at Maho Bay, probably still students somewhere, studying something useless – were in deep accord. But tipsy: it was a loud accord. Phrases leapt out like “Yes, that’s exactly what I mean!” and “I just want to give them this moment.” As if a moment could be given, or even received. Was that the young man’s point? Possibly. But really, how stupid.

Frank had ordered a beer, as usual. Tecate – all the beers here were Mexican, not even Jamaican. He might as well order the Dutch or German beer he’d get at home, but why burst his bubble? Laura thought. She was having the first of her two margaritas, a system she’d adopted in college. The first weekend, her roommate, a rich New England girl, had told her, “Martinis are like breasts. One is not enough, but three is too many.” The second weekend there, she’d given up martinis. One was too many.

“How do you like the house?” Frank asked.

“Fine,” Laura said. “Buggy, but I guess we’re used to that.” This was their tenth or twentieth or millionth trip to St. John, yet the mosquitoes still amazed them. Ubiquitous, devious, ravenous things.

The young man was so excited, he seemed to hover over his chair. “Exactly! Exactly! Exactly!” Where does that enthusiasm come from? she wondered. At that age, every new friend is a soul mate. Every debate distills

the essence of being. Every evening the heart expands further, taking more in. And it’s all nonsense. All hormonal exuberance and misplaced allegiance and something totally impractical – faith, Laura thought, the most useless thing in our empty little heads.

By forty you learn to fear deep accord and to cling to superficiality in all encounters. You might get animated about the latest oil spill or some dry, distant war, or risk an opinion about the coming election. But after sixty that’s long gone, and you discuss mostly meals: Should we defrost that ham? Want to do your mother’s butterbean stew? What fish are you supposed to not order? By the time she was eighty, there probably wouldn’t be any fish left. What would they not talk about then?

Like a big sleeping baby, Frank was staring happily at the shimmering reflections on the water. If he was paying any attention to the young couple, it was only because the girl had a tight little body or gorgeous wavy hair. He probably wasn’t even aware they were talking. But it was all Laura could hear, the only thing she could feel, their faith and friendship and lust and cerebration. “We should only drink wine, all the time,” the girl said. Then she giggled. God, how exhausting.

Time would be her revenge. Their jabber sounded to her, tonight, like coming disappointment. The lovers were breathing it in deep, the disenchantment to come.

A turtle emerged from the green gloom beneath her, swam slowly left, then right, then settled in on the bottom. Laura was never lucky on the first snorkel, never saw more than a few clownfish or parrotfish. Some trips she spent the first day fussing with her mask, which usually leaked, or her fins, which pinched or slipped. She raised her head, looking about for Frank. He was twenty yards off, hard by the rocks, still following a barracuda. He and Billy were obsessed with barracudas. Must be some kind of phallic projection. To her they were dull: ugly, mean-looking things, just staring vacantly ahead.

Laura dipped her forehead back under. The turtle was calmly lurching in a patch of sea grass. His hard little head bobbed down, *bite-bite-bite*, then he looked up and chewed.

Bob-bob-bob, bite-bite, chew-chew-chew. Ho-dee-ho, he seemed to say. *Another dull, delicious day.*

She settled into her dead man's float and breathed through her mask slowly, noisily, and watched the fellow go at it. Maybe it wasn't a fellow. How the hell do they tell each other apart? she wondered. She and Frank were probably getting harder to tell apart, too. That happens when you get old. Your sex erodes. Whatever hormones used to work in your favor vanish. They'd been a gangly pair in their twenties, taller than average, he with broad shoulders and strong calves, she with a trim waist and pert breasts. She looked that up once: *pert*. "Bold, impudent, saucy," the dictionary said. Well, she and Frank had both become apples. Both of them now had breasts, and none of them were *pert*.

Was that why she'd lost her temper last night? Because they were old, and the couple at the next table was not? No. It was Kate. She would apologize. Again.

Bob-bob-bob, munch-munch, ho-dee-ho.

As she watched Mr. (Mrs.?) Turtle, the irritation Laura had felt all morning began to ebb. It hadn't been easy, she thought, since Kate had gone. Not just the death part, though obviously that was why she was angry all the time. She wasn't dumb; she'd taken "intro psych." Something protective had vanished for her and Frank. Kate had always been their buffer, especially when she was home, but even away at school or off in Columbus, after she got married. There was debating which boy to date, which college to pick, what major to choose, what to wear to her first job interview. And the wedding! Laura had gone six months without having to speak to Frank about anything else.

Billy was no buffer at all. He'd be down with Iván tomorrow. The two of them were always either quarreling or screwing. (That didn't embarrass her anymore.) Or lecturing her and Frank about this film director or that politician.

Munch-munch-munch, ho-dee-ho, munch-munch-munch.

There was a splash somewhere a ways off – the sound was percussive underwater, like a rifle shot, reaching her from she wasn't sure which direction. Laura looked up from the turtle, across the sweep of the beach, and out toward Mary's Head, where she spotted Frank still happily bobbing along, another twenty yards farther away down the reef. To the

west, slightly silhouetted against the afternoon sun, she saw a sailboat. A child – the child who had splashed, a boy, somewhere between six and eight, she guessed – was paddling about in the water, and a second child stood on the sailboat's bow. A girl, maybe nine, her brown hair bleached honey-gold, wearing a red one-piece. Quiet as can be, she watched the boy swimming beside the boat, then, wordlessly, she dropped over the side, too.

Laura watched them for a minute as they swam a slow lap around the boat, a beautiful burgundy thing with polished wooden decks and antique-looking rigging. *Enchantment*, it said in gold leaf. Even from here she could see the children's faces and shoulders were very freckled and a bit sunburned. They called out to Daddy, who must have been sitting on the other side of the boat. Wherever he was, he didn't call back.

"Daddy?" the girl called again. Daddy didn't answer again, and the children disappeared around the far side of the boat. Laura hoped they were paying attention, wherever their parents were. First the girl swam back into view, then the boy. He was now holding one of those foam floaty noodles, and he started slapping it against the water, sending splashing arcs into the air. "Don't," his sister said, calmly. But he kept splashing, in a slow, bored rhythm. *Slap. Slap. Slap.* Laura wondered what the turtle was making of all this noise and dipped her head back under the water.

It was gone. She looked left, then right, then swam in a circle from where she'd been floating. This always happened – you can't look away from magic. Finally she caught the animal's lumbering shadow, many yards off, out where the water got deeper. She kicked her way after it for a bit but soon gave up. When Laura raised her head, she was completely turned around. The exertion had fogged up her mask; she lifted it and wiped her forehead. South. She was facing the beach. Or was that east? She turned instinctively to find Frank. There he was, maybe sixty yards off now. He'd left her behind, no shock there, as he followed some squid or ray.

Where was the boat? It should have been out there in the bay, toward the open water – could it have gone away so fast? Laura hadn't heard a motor. Besides, wouldn't it be anchored there, with children swimming around? She certainly hadn't swum that far in two or three minutes. Odd. She was turned around...

The sun ducked behind a cloud, and she caught a momentary chill. It was December, even if they were south of Miami. Francis Bay was dead calm and eerily quiet, no voices from the beach, no waves rolling against the pebbles by the reef, just the roar of her own short breath in the snorkel and the burble of her lonely body moving through the water.

Billy and Iván had apparently been fighting all the way from New York to Cruz Bay. How anyone could manage to stay with Billy ten years was a mystery to her. From the time he was a small boy, he'd been so prickly. He was childishly competitive – Iván always let him win at Hearts or Scrabble, never seemed to want to punish him for behaving like an ass. When Billy went off to boarding school, Laura had hoped he'd get a taste of his own medicine. She could admit that now. And she'd been relieved when he'd showed up one Christmas and announced he was gay. At last, a chink in the armor, she'd thought. She could admit that now, too.

Iván was a decade younger than Billy. He came from Argentina and cooked wonderfully and had that decisive little accent over his name. She wished her name had an accent, that some part of her life could get a stress in an unexpected place, but her name and her world were flat, flat, flat. Sometimes she wished Iván would come down without Billy and cook just for her and let her win at Scrabble. Iván never had to wear sunblock like they did: when they went out, he looked like a zookeeper shepherding around a pack of dewy pink apes. She liked his tight-fitting pants and his crisp white T-shirts, snug around his biceps and chest. She was even prepared to admit this.

They piled their bags into the back of the Jeep, gave her hugs and kisses, told Frank they really didn't care where they ate, and settled into silence. Tough winter? Working hard? Seen any good movies? Each presented itself to her, but she opted to be silent, too. Frank started talking about their snorkel.

"Have you ever seen one of those giant spotted rays?" Nothing. "I followed one all the way from the point at Mary's Head into the middle of Francis Bay and almost back to the beach. He was bigger than me."

"That's the black and white one?" Iván asked. He knew which one it was.

"Yes. Really massive, and graceful, like a big plane swooping along."

"Yes," Iván said, "I think maybe I saw one when I went to Belize."

Silence. Must have been some fight. When they passed the Reef Bay Trail head, Frank said he might like to hike that again this year, and what did they think? Sure. Sure. Sure. More silence. He offered up Asolare, the only really fancy restaurant on the island. The tension in the backseat must have been bothering him, too. Sure. Okay. Sure.

"It's just four of us," he said. "Should be able to get a table." Indeed. Four is much easier than five.

Iván waited with her at the Jeep. Frank and Billy were still inside the house doing who knows what, finding light switches or deciphering the Wi-Fi or arguing about the weather forecast.

"You look very good with a little color in your cheeks," Iván told her.

"Do I? Am I burned?"

"No, no," he said. "Just a hint of pink." Frank had been dutiful about Laura's shoulders and back, emptying wads of sunscreen onto her pale skin before their snorkel. She hadn't thought to do her face. Secretly, she was glad.

They'd decided to save Asolare for later and come down east into Coral Bay instead. Shipwreck Landing was more casual and pretty enough in its own way, looking over the road at the still turquoise water of the bay. Two stray cats guarded the entrance to the patio, waiting to attach themselves to new arrivals and beg for their supper. The hostess, a terribly tan New Englander named Carol, recognized them, even gave Laura a hug. Laura was always scared that people like this – people she knew but didn't know – would ask, "Where is your daughter?" But Carol didn't say a word.

She sat them at a corner table overlooking the bay. Frank and Billy focused immediately on their menus. They were both programs, Laura sometimes thought, machines who greedily devoured handbooks and followed instructions and completed tasks in the assigned order. Iván tapped her shoulder and pointed at a donkey a little ways down the

road. Warily eyeing two teenage girls, it seemed just as pained as the natives who manned the gas station, the grocery store, the jerk-chicken stand. Yes, I'm cute, the donkey seemed to say. Are you going to give me anything, or can I get back to grazing?

Iván ordered the special, mahi mahi. He invariably got the special: cooking a lot himself, he said, he figured chefs put a little more care into something they didn't prepare day after day. She ordered it, too, then excused herself to go to the ladies'.

Out by the parking lot – the bathroom was in fact behind the open-air souvenir shop next door – she heard them. “Let go!” the boy was saying. Laura turned around, and there they were, the brother and sister from Francis Bay, balancing on the brick course that ran around the cactuses and palms.

Their parents were not around – probably parking the car. The girl wore a white sundress with lace sleeves that was brilliant against her tan little body. The boy had on stiff pleated shorts and a blue T-shirt. She was tugging him toward the restaurant entrance, but he was hanging back, transfixed by something, a lizard or another stray cat. God, they were cute.

“Well, hello, there,” Laura said. She couldn't help herself.

The girl turned, dropping her brother's hand. She flushed deeply.

“Hi,” the little boy said.

“Did you enjoy your swim? I saw you today, on your boat.”

“Yep,” the boy said. The girl looked down at her feet. Women today get more degrees, work more hours, do all the housework, Laura thought. How is it that girls are still so shy?

“Bye now,” she said. “Enjoy your dinner.”

The bathroom was appalling. They often were, down here. You aren't supposed to flush unless, well, you know. These were her most vivid memories of the Virgin Islands: the view at dusk of the deep green summits of Tortola and Jost Van Dyke across the channel, the gorgeous sleepy sway of purple and orange fan corals out beyond Waterlemon Cay, and the acrid smell of urine stewing in the sun.

By the time Laura took her seat at the table, their drinks had arrived. She sipped her margarita.

“Did those children find their parents?”

“What children?” Frank asked.

“The little boy and girl – they were just coming in –” She turned around and faced the restaurant. Three or four other parties were there. A boisterous group of tipsy, sunburned forty-year-olds, people who'd gone native here, probably friends of the owner, were hanging out at the bar. A foursome of church-quiet retirees mulled their menus on the far side of the terrace. Carol was passing out forks to a family with two teenagers who were splitting a piece of key lime pie.

No children anywhere. Maybe they'd just been leaving? Well, no matter. Laura was glad she'd said hello. They'd probably see them again; the island wasn't that big. She'd make a point of talking to the girl.

The next morning they drove down to Salt Pond Bay. The wind was out of the north, so snorkeling would be better on the south side of the island. As they walked the quarter mile to the beach, Laura wondered if she was up to it. Fussing with the mask, the long swim out to the reef, staring at a lot of sand and gray grass, the weird blisters and burns left by all that rubber gear. She'd feel a bit guilty if she didn't go – Frank was, after all, lugging her snorkel bag down to the water as he always did; it was one of his few chivalrous gestures – but she just didn't want to spend the morning facedown in the water. It felt nice to be in the sunshine. The trail dropped down to the beach and then continued on the far side of the bay for another mile to a point called Ram Head, where the open ocean crashed against high cliffs. It wasn't a hard hike; she'd done it a few times over the years, and the air was mild. Maybe she'd go for a rock scramble instead?

By the time they hit the beach, Laura had talked herself into snorkeling after all. If she sat it out, they'd worry. Since Kate died, they wouldn't let her do anything by herself. The weeks just after the funeral, she took to inventing jobs, raking or weeding the yard, running to Kroger for some forgotten item, but Frank or Billy had to tag along. The kitchen was usually safe, but there were only so many dishes to wash.

“Want me to do your back, Mom?” Billy asked. They were sitting on the silky white sand, spraying defogger into their masks, putting on water booties.

"Thanks, hon," she said. Billy glopped a cold dollop onto her shoulders and smoothed it on down to the small of her back. He lifted the straps of her one-piece and spread a bit underneath. He was a pill half the time, but he was a dutiful son. He loved her.

"Want me to rinse out your mask for you?" Frank asked.

"Sure, thanks," she said. He grabbed her snorkel and shuffled down to the water. Laura watched him bend down and shake her mask in the gentle lapping wavelets. So different, the water here, from the Atlantic in the Carolinas, where they'd spent their vacations twenty years ago. Myrtle Beach, Emerald Isle, Kitty Hawk – the ocean there was rough, cold. A punishment. This was a gentle bath, a shimmering teal caress.

"You know what?" She took a breath. "I'm not going today."

Frank, Billy, and Iván all stood up. "What?"

"Are you okay?"

"Do you feel all right?" Here it came. Anyway, in a small family there's no loitering behind; anyone's absence takes a wheel off the cart.

"I'm fine, really," Laura said. "Hiking down here I just thought I might like to spend the morning walking, or reading, or whatever. You boys will survive without me."

"Isn't this where we saw those turtles last year?" Frank asked. He knew her weakness.

"Is it? I don't know. I'm sure they're getting along fine on their own."

"Won't you get bored, Mom?" Billy was sweet, she thought. And he didn't want her to think he was letting her down somehow.

"I'm tempted to stay with you," Iván said. "It's such a beautiful day."

"Well, you're welcome to. I'll probably just read," she said.

"Iván. . ." Billy said. Poor fool. He probably dreaded the idea of swimming out there alone with his father.

"No. I'll come," Iván said. "You're such a baby."

"Want me to stay?" Frank asked.

"No, really, I'm just, I just want . . ."

"She wants to be alone," Iván said. "Let her have a morning alone." Yes. Why was this so difficult for her husband and her son?

Eventually the men made their way into the bay. She watched them slowly kick out to the reef, their snorkels poking along like a little family of neon plastic ducks. She picked up her book, but she couldn't read.

Now that she was alone, she was restless. She looked to the left, toward Ram Head. Should she?

Sure. Laura tossed a bottle of water and one of Billy's protein bars into Frank's backpack. She thought about leaving a note, but decided not to – the hike was an hour at most, and they'd be in the water twice that long. Walking to the end of the beach, she entered the pebbled path that looped through the mangroves. From there it climbed up through a rocky stretch, dropped back down to a long beach of blue cobblestones – that's what her old guidebook called them, and just what they looked like – and then rose again to the windy summit of the promontory. Frank and the boys always hiked this trail at least once while they were here and brought back hundreds of photos. The cliffs were dramatic and the views back over the island stunning, but really, wouldn't five or six photos be enough? How could they even walk, taking all those pictures?

After climbing for twenty minutes Laura stopped for water at a spot where the view opened up through a stand of organ pipe cactuses. It was breathtaking: the landward side of Ram Head, covered with sage-colored bushes and yellow grass, rose gently on the left; on the right, farther off across the bay, the island cut a sharp blue silhouette. In the center, silvery green tridents of cactus stood out against the glittering turquoise horizon. A sailboat was moored below; great billowing clouds swirled overhead.

Screw it, she thought, and pulled out Frank's point-and-shoot. Was this how the sickness starts? When you find yourself not looking at a composition but stepping into it? Snapping a photo is a timid defense against forgetting, she knew that, but . . . *Snap. Snap.* She zoomed in on the boat – if Frank were taking the picture, Laura would make fun of him. Didn't he have hundreds of photos already of other people's boats? What's so special about a boat? Yet here she was. *Snap.*

She lowered the camera and took a better look. Mostly, all boats looked the same to her, but – wasn't this the same one from yesterday? From Francis Bay? The keel (was that the word?) was the same deep burgundy, the decking had just that honey stain.

She started down to the cobblestones. Certainly she'd know up close if it was the same boat. It could be. Why not? If the wind was out of the north, sailors, especially sailors with restless children, might understandably prefer the south.

Down on the beach, walking was difficult. The citrus-sized stones wobbled under her feet. The rocks ranged from a pale powdery blue where they were dry, to a deeper periwinkle where they were still damp, to a dark slate at the water's edge. Laura remembered reading in her guidebook about how the stones had wound up here, some happy geological accident. The boat, moored off the far end of the beach, looked deserted, but as she picked her way toward it, she made out two figures sitting along one side, dangling their legs overboard. They might be her little friends – hard to say until she got nearer.

The stones rolled in and out with the surf – it was a bit higher out here – making the most fantastic gurgle and whisper. There was no breeze, and the stones underfoot radiated heat; she started to sweat. She focused on their whisper. *Gurgle, crash, crackle, whishhh... Gurgle, crash, crackle, whishhh... Gurgle, crash, crackle, whishhh...*

Reaching the end of the beach, where the trail picked up again to climb the cliff, she looked back. Yes, it was her boat, and the two figures sitting along the railing were indeed her young friends. The girl wore her red suit; the boy had on orange trunks. They sat silently, near the bow, dangling their feet over the gold-leaf lettering of *Enchantment*. They didn't move, simply stared at the water below. Laura waved her arms.

The girl looked up, held Laura's gaze for a moment, and then turned back to the water, resuming her somber meditation.

Something was amiss, Laura thought, as she climbed up the trail to the overlook. Where were their parents? Three times she'd seen the children, and Daddy – was there a Mommy? – was never to be found. It's not my concern, she said to herself. Frank accused her, at home, of fussing too much about other people's problems. He was right. It didn't help Mack, the kid who mowed their lawn, to ask why he'd flunked out sophomore year. It didn't help Laura's friend Pat to inquire after her quarrelsome stepdaughter. It didn't help Barb, Laura's sister, to ask about new Parkinson's treatments. "You think you're showing solicitude," Frank insisted, "but you're really just being a pain. People can manage their problems well enough on their own." *She* certainly did.

Laura put the children out of her mind and focused on the trail. After a few minutes she came to the narrow neck of the promontory. She peered down the eastern cliff. Below her feet the rocks formed almost a cave

where the waves smashed violently. The view from here was spectacular. To the north was the far east end of the island; straight ahead in the distance was Virgin Gorda (or was it Anegada?); some other, smaller Virgins dotted the horizon. Brilliant whitecaps spat up across the expanse of sea, teal below her feet, then sapphire, navy, and sapphire again out toward the horizon. She took another picture.

During the island's centuries as a sugar plantation, escaped slaves would come here to kill themselves. This was in her guidebook, too. How dreadful life must have been – month after month of toil in the hot sun, tormented by mosquitoes, scraped and bruised by the rocks and the obdurate plants. So awful you might prefer to smash yourself in that gyre below. Laura shuddered and moved on to the end of the trail.

When she reached the top, the actual Ram Head, she sat on a big rock, drank some more water, and ate Billy's protein bar. Peanut butter, delicious, the perfect food. Maybe Laura was just spent and needed the sugar that badly. The hike hadn't been hard, but it certainly beat any workout she managed at the rec center back home. The panorama of sea on every side was gorgeous, and the wind felt marvelous, but she didn't stay long. What if for some reason the boys cut their swim short? What if they cut it short for her sake? She needed to get back. She wondered, too, what those children were up to on the *Enchantment*.

Before Laura came around the last turn, it occurred to her that the boat might be gone, vanished as before, in Francis Bay. And it was. How on earth? Down on the cobblestones she could see not one but a few boats way out at sea; they were too far away to tell which one it might be. But how had the boat gone so far in twenty minutes? Wouldn't she have seen it sailing past below Ram Head?

The strange thought crossed her mind that the boat might – well, that it might not be. Laura stopped right where she was and pulled out Frank's camera. After a few seconds of pushing the wrong buttons, she found the playback switch and looked through a few shots.

There it was, anchoring her composition from forty minutes earlier, a little reddish boat with a beautiful old mast poking up just over the turquoise horizon, framed by her curving, slivery cactuses. It wasn't a bad photo. And she wasn't losing her mind.

Back at the villa, there was an email from Paul. He hoped they were enjoying their holiday; he was, of course, sad not to be there with them. Laura and Iván made cocktails, icy vodka tonics with extra wedges of lime, as Frank summarized the message for her. She'd established early on that she didn't want to read Paul's letters herself. It's not that she didn't like him – he was charming, bright, and athletically handsome. Laura loved him, because her daughter had loved him. He was to have been the father of her grandchildren.

She and Frank had even invited him down for this week. They sent the email, unsure whether it was appropriate, or whether they could bear it, his coming. And they were relieved a few days later when he declined. He'd thought it over and decided it would be too painful. Poor man. Would Laura ever see him again? Maybe not.

That night, Iván made dinner for them. They ate out on the terrace, watching the sun go down. The house faced north, toward Jost Van Dyke and Tortola, but the sunset was still glorious. The clouds here were always so dramatic, something about the trade winds, Frank said. But the sunsets were quick: twilight didn't linger, as it did in the States, but flew through its colors in a torrid rush.

They were very curious to hear about her adventure on Ram Head. When she'd returned to the beach around noon, they were waiting on their towels, not looking alarmed exactly, but not quite calm either. Laura told them all about it over dinner, even describing the boat and its sudden disappearance.

"You saw the same boat at Francis Bay?" Iván asked.

"Yes. And the same two children at dinner last night. Very cute. Lots of freckles."

"That must be a nightmare, crammed into a boat with two little kids," Frank said.

He was right, probably. When Kate and Billy were that age, they could barely take a two-hour car ride without murdering each other. These people were living belowdecks for God knows how long. Maybe they were French or Dutch or something. European children are so well behaved.

By the time they finished eating – a simple-enough-looking chicken thing, but in Iván's hands, quite lovely – it was night. The Milky Way

arched in a great spray over their heads, and the frogs and crickets and birds plunged into their tropical fury. The four of them went inside when the bugs got too bad and played dominoes. This had been Kate's favorite game; she wasn't cutthroat like Billy, didn't need bloodier pastimes like Scrabble. Frank found the set in the cabinet and held it up, as if making an offering.

"What do you think?" he asked. Billy and Iván didn't say anything. As with everything tinged with Kate's memory, Laura was expected to let them know what she could bear.

"I think that's a great idea," she said.

For a few days, Laura didn't see her young friends. The third day of their trip, Frank had chartered a boat, a sailboat of their own, to tour some more remote snorkeling spots. From Coral Bay into the mangrove swamps of Hurricane Hole and around the east end to Witch Island, they never ran into *Enchantment*. There were plenty of other distractions: all the beauty of the underwater world – the schools of blue tang, the elegant angel-fish and comic parrotfish, great banks of fan corals – the breeze and the sun and the balmy kiss of the Caribbean air on her skin; delicious, cool glasses of Iván's lemongrass sun tea, brewed on the terrace the day before.

The couple who owned the boat had spent a day with them every year for almost a decade. Nate, the skipper, had come down island in his late thirties; Diane, his lover and first mate, followed sometime later. Frank and Nate spent the day talking about stints in the military versus years in the corporate world, tours of Peru versus trips to Alaska, investing in stocks versus holding odd parcels of land. Men have to size everybody up; they're always swapping and comparing. It dismayed Laura, the last couple of years, to see Billy drifting into this dull orbit. Gay or straight, in the end, all men are boring.

A month ago, when he reserved the boat, Frank had let Nate and Diane know about Kate. This morning, when the little dinghy had puttered up to the dock to take them to the boat, Diane had hopped right out and given Laura a long, long hug. "I'm so sorry," she said. "I'm just so, so sorry. Now we don't need to say another word about it."

Laura started to cry at once, for the first time in at least a month, and her breath caught in her throat. “Thank you,” she said to Diane. Iván was at her side and gave her arm a light squeeze. And true to Diane’s word, they didn’t say another word about Kate all day.

As they sailed from spot to spot – in truth, they only sailed east; they motored back west, something about the northerly wind shifting – Laura had her own chat with Diane and Iván. Laura had friends at home. She had her sister, Barb, on the phone several times a week. She had the other ladies at the rec center and whatnot. But she treasured her annual talk with Diane, an aging hippie hiding from the world down here. In many ways, Diane’s life was small. She and Nate lived in the tiny cabin all year long. There was no mortgage, no lawn to keep up, no neighbors to invite over for bridge. But it seemed infinitely larger than Laura’s world. Just wind and sun and sea. Diane probably had her own problems – there was a son up in Michigan she didn’t see that often; there were the native islanders, who distrusted Yankees like her; there were probably different kinds of bills and other day-to-day antagonisms. Anyone’s life seems liberated if you don’t have to live it.

“Did you see if they know your friends?” Frank asked Laura. It was around four, and they were coming back into the bay.

“No, no,” she said. Actually, she hadn’t thought about it.

“Do you know a boat called *Enchantment*?” Frank asked Nate.

“*Enchantment*?” Nate looked at Diane, who shook her head. “Nope, nope. Haven’t heard about that one. Is it local?”

“Oh, I doubt it,” Frank said.

“I’ve seen it twice,” Laura said. “Once in Francis Bay, and once off the blue beach near Ram Head.” She described it for him, said how quickly it had vanished.

“*Enchantment*, eh? And it disappeared? You sure you didn’t see it at Jumbie Bay?” Nate asked, smiling mischievously. Was it a jumbie, a spirit? The slaves had brought their superstitions from West Africa to the island, and many of them had survived the Spaniards’ messiah.

“Well, there are two children on board, so I hope not!”

“Yes, let’s hope not,” Diane said, laughing. “A jumbie is an evil, evil demon.”

“I don’t know. Sounds like a pleasure boat from the Bahamas or the BVIS,” Nate said. “Probably some hedge fund trader. Pretty evil in my book.”

They wouldn’t see Diane and Nate again; they never did after their outings. Even after a decade, they were still, after all, simply people Frank and Laura hired. But Laura thought about Nate’s comment later that night as she read herself to sleep, and the next day, too, when they walked out to Waterlemon Key. Some rich guy, sailing around the Caribbean. The kids were certainly very, very privileged, even if they did seem sad. Maybe privilege makes you sad.

Everything made her sad. Laura hadn’t been happy since January, since Kate’s first biopsy, but her fear and then despair had become, for the most part, numbness. She was sleepwalking, she knew it. Occasionally the sadness rose up inside of her like an unexpected tide, washing the dullness away. Her mind was flooded with one memory or another, and for whatever reason, Laura couldn’t set them aside. It might have been Diane, yesterday, hugging her like that.

She didn’t need to be reminded of everything she’d lost. She was dyed in it. That’s what blue really meant. Every thread of her soul was altered, darker. But this morning, she woke up crying. Frank kissed her forehead, and Billy gave her hug, but no one said anything. She’d taught them well.

Waterlemon had been Kate’s favorite beach. That was probably the reason Laura was crying. Iván remembered; he asked her quietly if she’d rather go somewhere else.

“Not at all,” she said. “It’s a beautiful spot.”

The highlight of the day was an octopus. Iván found it under a rock in the grassy area between the point and the key and waved over Frank and Billy. Frank then gestured to her frantically. She couldn’t really make it out – something brown twitching in the shadows. She swam away to the little beach on the key and pulled her mask and snorkel off. Iván followed a few minutes later. Frank and Billy stayed with the octopus for another twenty minutes, taking dozens of dark, blurry photos with Frank’s underwater camera.

“This is my favorite spot, too,” Iván told her, once he was sitting beside her on the spit of sand. “The hike is nice, the swim is easy, and the water . . .” He cast his hand westward. The sea here was mottled Venetian glass, bright and shadowed bands of teal, green, blue, and indigo.

“The first time we came here, Kate was still in school,” Laura said. “She was taking an art class, and made us bring her back here four days

in a row. You know that pastel in my kitchen? The bands of blue color? She drew that on that first trip.”

“She knew a good thing when she saw it,” Iván said.

“Yes, she did.”

“I thought you took a picture of your sailboat,” Frank said. Laura was doing the dishes while Iván looked at a trail map and the other two downloaded photos.

“Yes – on my hike. At the blue cobblestone beach.”

“You must have meant to take one and forgotten. It’s not here.”

She put down her sponge, wiped her hands on the dish towel. “No, I took it – I scrolled back that day and saw it myself.”

“Maybe you deleted it by mistake?”

Laura stood behind him. He tabbed back to some photos he’d taken from the terrace at sunrise. Frank was always the first one up, and this is how he passed his time, behind the camera, one step removed from the beautiful dawn. There were at least twenty photos, all of them identical as far as she could tell, of a blue-gray cloud formation. Then suddenly they were at Ram Head. There were her cactuses: one shot, another angled a bit lower, then another. There was no boat. Next came the picture of the breach in the cliff, then a few she’d snapped at the end of the trail. Billy peered in.

“You could see St. Croix clearly, huh?”

“Yes,” Laura answered, barely hearing. “Scroll back?”

Frank did as he was told, saying nothing.

“I don’t understand it,” she said.

“I bet you deleted it,” Billy said.

“What happened?” Iván asked, up now from the couch, and looking at her photos, too. They were back to her cactuses, the view over the beach. “That’s beautiful.”

“Yes, it was a beautiful hike,” Laura said. Her son and her husband were looking at her solemnly. “Well. I’m obviously tired. Good night,” she said, putting down her dish towel and walking to her room. Their hushed voices murmured behind the door for a long time.

The next few days were a strain. For months now Frank had walked on eggshells around her, and the boys were always exceedingly careful on the phone. They avoided any mention of Kate, of course, but they also avoided questions as benign as “How are you?” and “What did you do today?” But now the rules had changed. *Now I’m crazy.*

The next morning, when she shuffled out onto the terrace with her coffee, Frank asked her immediately if she was taking her Zoloft.

“No, Frank. I’m grinding it up to sprinkle on my tomato plants next summer.”

He smiled weakly.

Of course she was taking the pills, Laura said. And no, she hadn’t brought any Xanax. She didn’t need Xanax.

Iván and Billy were up soon after, sharing a single concerned face.

“Did you sleep okay, Mom?” Billy asked.

“Yes, I slept okay,” she said.

When they were all seated around the table eating cereal, Laura decided to clear things up. “Listen. I did not make up the boat. I saw it, I saw the children, I did take a picture –” She stopped herself. “Can we just please drop it?”

But they didn’t drop it. They didn’t say anything else, of course, but her *Enchantment* was very much a part of the next few days. The children never appeared to vindicate her; they’d probably sailed on to St. Barth’s or Anguilla. That night at the burger place in Coral Bay, Laura thought she saw them. She stood up, even, and pointed.

“There they are!”

Frank and the boys turned to look, but she’d already realized it wasn’t them. Some other pair of children, some other unknown family. “I’m sorry,” she said, sitting down again.

The next day, their second-to-last on the island, Laura convinced the boys to go hiking without her. They went down the Reef Bay trail, trading theories about her neurosis the whole way, she was sure, while she sat on the terrace sipping Iván’s lemongrass tea. She had her book on her lap, but mostly she stared over the horizon.

Dinner was fine. They went to Morgan’s Mango in Cruz Bay. The boys must have decided at some point on their hike that they should act as if nothing had happened. Laura was grateful; all she really had was the appearance of a routine.

At breakfast the next morning, she didn't flinch when Frank suggested they go to Francis Bay for their last snorkel.

"It's our favorite spot, and the wind's calmer on the north side today," he said.

"Sounds great," she said.

Iván gave Laura just the shyest glance, as if perhaps he remembered her saying she'd seen the boat there, but then he quickly looked away. Off they went.

The day was fine – apart from the occasional sudden shower, every day in the Virgins is fine – and the water calm. They kicked off toward the reef and spent an hour immersed in the wonder that had drawn them back year after year. There were turtles, rays, and all manner of fish. There was an enormous barracuda, almost four feet long, that even she had to admit was pretty impressive. At the end of the reef, where the drop-off gets deeper, the boys went on ahead to see if they might find a nurse shark. Laura and Frank dawdled, watching some squirrel fishes, so shy and suspicious, with their staring orange eyes and spiky red fins. There were four of them under a rock, poking out and then darting away again. After five minutes with the squirrels, Frank led her to a little pebble beach about halfway along the reef to rest and rinse out their masks. They sat and looked across the bay and down the reef, toward the end of the point, where Billy and Iván were just joining some other snorkelers.

"Have you had any fun?" Frank asked her.

"Of course," Laura said. Had she? No. Not for almost a year. And before that, was life fun then? Hard to say. Of course she and Frank loved each other, needed each other. They could have fun. Five years ago, with Kate off in Columbus and Billy long since vanished to New York, he'd taught her how to play golf. Laura had hated it at first – she distrusted such linear pursuits in general; that she couldn't achieve a remotely linear swing reinforced the pointlessness of it – but eventually she started to enjoy herself. She'd always liked being outdoors, and the rituals were pleasing, the little cart zipping up and down the paths, the cold beers at the club house, the gentleman's nine, where he capped her score on every hole. She liked finding out new things about Frank after all these years. That he cheated, for example – he was constantly giving his ball a little kick to get it on better ground. And once or twice a round,

when she gave her ball a great solid smack and it sailed just about where it was supposed to, well, that was kind of satisfying. Yes, they had fun.

But they hadn't played golf since Kate died. Was this trip a good idea? Laura didn't know. Her anger was no less because the sun was shining, the water sparkling, and the air as soft as cashmere. Drifting over coral or staring out at the magical-looking chain of islands, they were still together-alone with their anger and grief.

Frank tried to move through this new world in his own way – his linear way – and tried to be gentle with her until ...when? That was the problem. Kate wasn't coming back, and there was no way for Laura through a world without her daughter. Still, Frank did try.

"I do love you," she told him. He leaned in to her, pudgy and bald and streaked with white sunblock, and gave her a peck.

Billy lifted his mask about then and called out to them. They couldn't hear him – they could barely make out his face – but his arm, waving them over, was plain enough. A nurse shark? More turtles? An eagle ray?

"You go ahead," Laura said. "I'll wait here for you." Frank put on his mask, waddled out into waist-high water, and plopped onto his belly to swim away.

When the boat came sweeping into the bay, only minutes after Frank had gone, she stood up and called his name. *Of course it's here.* When he didn't hear her – he couldn't, facedown and plowing away along the reef – she sat back down on the pebbles and watched.

Enchantment moved slowly, making a gentle curve toward her from the west. The two children sat, unattended as always, on the bow. They watched the water intently, every now and then kicking a toe into the wavelets below. When the boat was almost parallel to the beach, the girl looked up and straight at her. Laura waved, but the girl didn't wave back, only stared. "I know about you," she seemed to say.

The boy turned his head, mouthed something Laura couldn't make out, and stood up. Their parents must be behind the sail on the other side. The boy picked up the mooring lines and tied the boat down. *Six or seven, and such a good first mate.* He walked to the rear of the boat and disappeared belowdecks.

Eventually the girl stood up. She was wearing her usual red one-piece. She gave a brief look to the back of the boat – had she heard something? – and then looked to the beach. Shyly, ever so shyly, she gave a timid little wave and dove in.

Was she coming to visit? What would she say? Laura looked down the reef, to the boys, floating in a circle above some wonder. It would be nice to introduce this precocious little ghost to Frank and Billy. She looked back toward the boat. The girl hadn't surfaced. Seconds passed – where was she? No one was on the deck, not her brother, not her parents. They probably didn't even know she'd gone in. Alarm brought Laura to her feet.

"Hey!" she yelled. "Anybody? Hey!" No one stirred. And still the girl did not appear.

Panicking, Laura put her mask and flippers on and plunged noisily into the water. Her old-lady crawl was not elegant. Her breathing was spastic, and her kicking was all out of sync. But still she made a good pace out of the shallows toward the boat.

Her mind raced ahead of her: Would she make it? How long could she hold her breath? In her mind she saw herself leading Kate, four or five years old, on a kickboard across a swimming pool. Kate had hated the water at first, but soon figured out how to keep it out of her nose. She'd had a little red bathing suit, too, though hers had daisies sewn onto the straps. Laura remembered her goggles – Kate refused to take them off all the way home in the car. Soon she was on a swim team, and doing back dives, and asking to go night swimming with some boys at a quarry, and then they were down here, and she was telling them about Paul, and then it was all over.

Laura looked up. The boat was just ahead, only twenty feet. She stopped, raised her head, and spat her snorkel out of her mouth.

"Hello? Anybody?" She was terribly out of breath. No one answered. "Help! Somebody!"

Where was the girl? The water wasn't horribly deep, maybe twelve feet. She looked back under. Sea grass and sand, rays of golden sunlight fading into murky green as far as she could see. There – next to the black shadow of the boat, stretched out across the bottom like a great sleeping shark – was that something? Something moving? She dove.

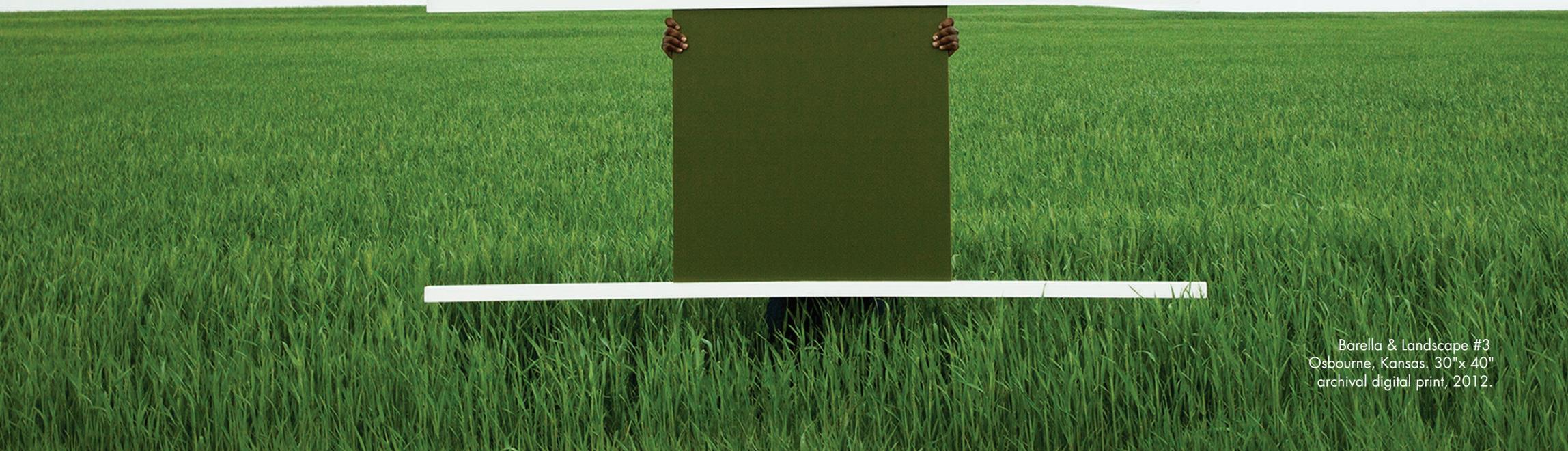
A turtle. It looked at her momentarily and then resumed eating. Laura peered right and left into the boat's shadow but saw nothing. She had to go back up – diving, she'd taken in some water. She kicked to the surface and gasped. She coughed and spat and tried to get her bearings.

Down there, on her right, there she was! A little patch of red, distorted by the ripples on the surface, bobbed gently along the bottom. Laura dove again.

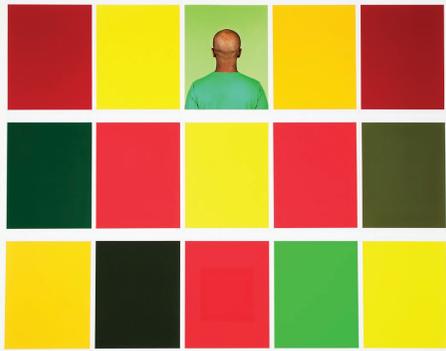
I'm coming! I'll get you! Don't be afraid! 🐢

The Choice of Mobility

Photos & Installations by Dawit Petros
Interviewed by Joshi Radin



Barella & Landscape #3
Osbourne, Kansas. 30"x 40"
archival digital print, 2012.



Colorscape, Coordinate #23, Ethiopia. Dptych, 40" x 50" each, archival digital prints, 2013.

DAWIT PETROS WAS BORN IN ERITREA and moved to Canada when he was twelve years old. He is currently in the midst of a six-month travel and research project in Italy, Germany, Spain, and Morocco. Patros's work examines issues of transnational migrancy and borders by engaging historical archives and communities of sub-Saharan migrants at the frontiers of Europe.

He recently completed a five-month Transcontinental Art Residency with The Invisible Borders Trans-African Photography Collective. Along with nine African artists from five countries (Egypt, Eritrea, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa) he traveled by road from Lagos, Nigeria to Sarajevo, Bosnia/Herzegovina. The projects will culminate in exhibitions of works in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States in 2015-2016.

In 2012 he participated in the Whitney Independent Study Program and had

a solo show at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, *Sense of Place*. Recently I interviewed him, first when he was in New York, and then again once he had arrived in Montréal.

Joshi Radin: I'm curious about your influences and curious about the writers, thinkers, theorists in addition to other artists that are relevant for you now. I'm also curious about your thoughts on the medium and whether the photographic tradition is important for you. The significance of place is really interesting in your work, particularly as people talk about contemporary art being a networked phenomenon of multiple modernisms and various historical threads. It's not one story, so how does geography speak in your work and what does it mean for you?

Dawit Petros: This question of the multiple nodes that operate through history and the ideological structures by which particular narratives become the

dominant universalist form is critical for me – this is the heart of it. My thinking and the logic of my work is driven by this Benjaminian logic of needing to find alternatives that exist in history, with the belief that we're always living in history.

These historical figures that I'm living with in my work are contemporary figures. This history is at stake right now because if we're unable to unearth or unable to recuperate and resuscitate these historical narratives, then it means that there are no alternatives for the future, and that is what is at stake.

JR: I'm also curious about how your graduate experience changed you, what you call home at this point, or where you feel home is, and how your practice, in the process of wandering or investigating migration, has changed you.

DP: The change in the work, I would say, actually precedes or includes my graduate school experience. Prior to graduate school, when I left Montréal, it was with a BFA in a very medium-specific, traditional education in photography. It was very much rooted in what is specific to photography, what is specific to the history of photography.

Notations for A New Pan Africanism. Video Installation, 3:34, 2013.





Barella deployed construction site Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Artist's Archive, 2010.

DR: It wasn't until I got to the Museum School in Boston that there was a new ethos, and the ethos of the program was "Try Everything. Do performance, do sculpture, do film, try screen printing," all of these things that I never considered before. This was the beginning of the shift for me, so that I was able to really expand how I was thinking in photography from "what is specific to photography" to "what are the spaces between photography and other mediums" and how can one inhabit and work within these spaces.

Secondly, when I arrived in Boston I was very much interested in portraiture so that the figure was central to a lot of the imagery I was making. In Boston

I began to gain more interest in the space(s) in the photograph more than the bodies in the photograph. So it made sense to begin to think about objects, sculpture and architecture.

All of this carried through, so that if you look at my thesis exhibition, *The Idea of North*, what you see is the presence of the different elements that I would then go to work with for the next four, five, six years. The questions I was asking photography, what I thought photography could do, shifted.

I was always aware of a certain discomfort within me in terms of how I was positioned within my Eritrean community and the broader Canadian

one. I think as artists we're sensitive to certain things and we consider aspects of our existence that some people just don't find significant. For the longest time I always described my sense of belonging as being a sense of not belonging. I found comfort in discomfort. Though in certain ways where my mother is physically, is home. There's a rootedness to there.

JR: Where is your mother?

DP: My mother is in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Her home represents something tangibly grounding. Where my brothers are is always home. Where my father is is always home. Where my immediate Eritrean community is is always home. When I return to Eritrea it is culturally and linguistically home. There are pockets of home.

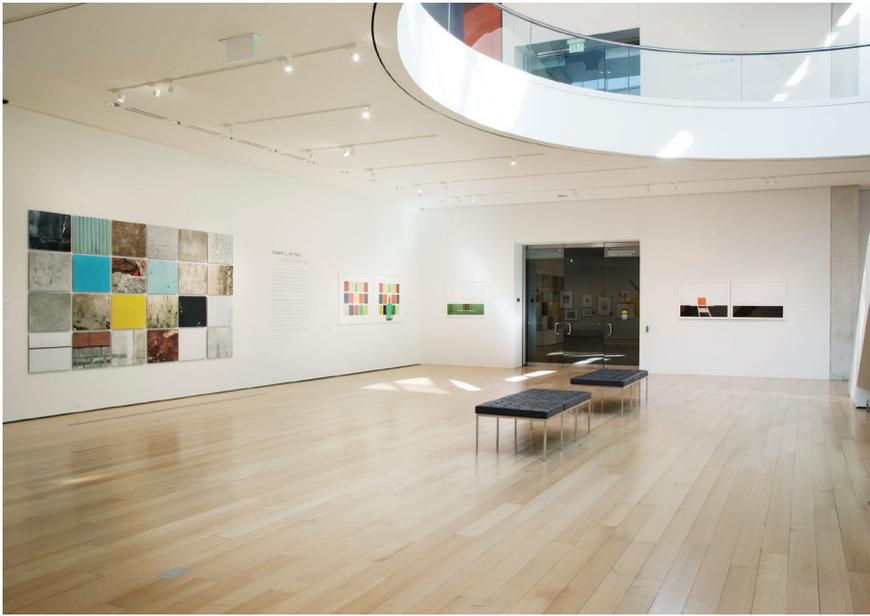
But I've moved and shifted around for so long the mobility is also a home. My body becomes the choreography that links all these spaces together and that also constitutes home. That is the place I'm located. This can fall easily into romanticizing this kind of existence, and that's not what I'm trying to do at all. It can be problematic. I'd be lying if I didn't tell you that in New York I began to feel comfortable, in a place that I least expected it. Brooklyn and my neighborhood became to feel like home.

JR: And now, how has this travel changed you? It feels related to this mobility as choreography, I think.

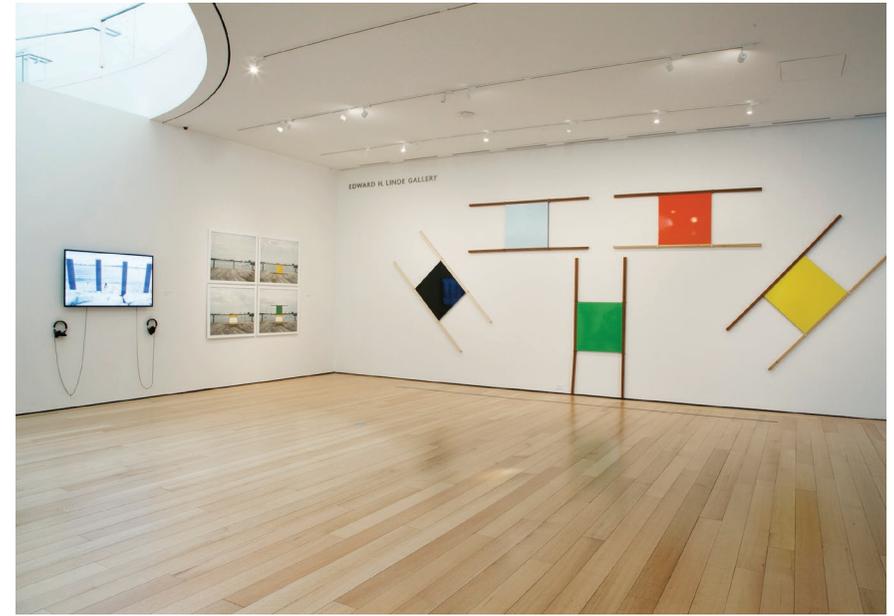
DP: First and foremost it's given me perspective on my life. We left Africa as refugees. We were exiled from our country. My father would have been

Untitled (Barellas #1, #2, #3, #4, #5, #6, Structures For A New Pan Africanism), Sapelle, Pine, Enamel on MDF, Variable Dimensions, Installation View Artist's Studio, 2012.





Sense of Place, Installation View, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2013.



Sense of Place, Installation View 2, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2013.

arrested, my mother was arrested and imprisoned for eight months while pregnant with my youngest brother—there was a real danger. We had to leave. We were forced to leave. The first part of my life consisted of this forced mobility. It's been through art that I can now begin to re-think some of these things, but now through voluntary mobility.

There's a way in which through my experience as an artist I can think about mobility as necessity, forced movement migration versus voluntary movement migration. There is a privilege in living the life I'm living and doing the work I'm doing. We spoke about modernism briefly the other day. I'm beginning

to understand the extent to which movement and mobility is not just my story. It's the story of human history. It's the story of modernism, of all of these multiple modernities. And I'm now beginning to think of migration as a right. It's this fundamental human need to move around. It's a very different place from which I'm now making work. Recognizing this human need to migrate changes the politics of what that action is.

In terms of the work, grappling with how to show this, not illustrate this, grappling with it has led me to think about museological practices. What does the image do? How does it organize space?

It's a more nuanced understanding that's developing over the years. What are the limitations to how we exhibit? There are questions of access: how can we show our work when the gallery is an incredibly privileged place that some people are never going to approach?

To Akhmatova

Yes, this age always seems worse
than the one before,
its inhabitants in exile,
its children discarded,
its gorges caulked with flood
or flaming in drought,
its villages burned by insurgents
who, no matter the age,
seem to have such aptitude
for insurgency and torture.
Still, we get up in the morning
to eat eggs and chew toast.
We look out the window
at the birds, we drive or bicycle,

we play music or Risk,
we dredge chicken parts in flour
and fry them in skilletts,
we make love, we sleep and dream
on straw or cotton or memory foam,
somewhat as before. We are tzars and saints.
We farm apples or websites, pretty much as before.
We could bend ourselves into a Breughel
with a little paint and a skein of wool.
Every age says this is the age

where the dreams have died;
but you knew men in the furthest corners
of winter, rooting through the rubbish

for prophecies. How do we each know
then, that *this* age is the worst,
as the coastline of Miami cedes to the rains
and the turtles wear hoodies of plastic,
how do we know when to gather the amulets
or when to build arks, when to drill the children
for code pink or code red or code black?

My daughters have been asking what I want
when I die, playing death's cheerful secretaries,
taking dictation, taking notes,
as though I were ordering a pizza or two –
cremation, check. Meadow-sprinkling, check.
Potluck, sans quinoa, check – so un-bleak, so casual,
that it is as though they have already moved on
from the wake. None of that frantic lunging
from the end that I did as a child,
sobbing to the point of expulsion
over the demise of a friend's friend's goldfish.
Perhaps death in this age is more subtle than ever;

perhaps the children killed in Gaza and Iraq
find dying easier now than ever before.
Our sense that this could be the worst of the worst
of the worst is one of humanities' sweetest flatteries
of humanity. *The world has no more miracles,*
you wrote, as you watched them take your son to the Gulag;
you knew, sweet sister, the dimmest of hours;
still, you managed to see death as a miracle,
grief as a kind of light.

MARIE CHAMBERS

Wind Turbines (soundtrack not available)

I drive across the bones
of Southern California
trace the arteries of Interstate 10

no sun no moon no radio
a flock of alabaster tri-peds
long-armed Rapunzels without hair

spin weather into power
slice through the horizon
mock the immobility of the dark

their ruby-lipped lights pulse in code
flying above conventional wisdom
is not for the faint of heart

their father must have been a hurricane
I think and also
every wind machine for herself

I chose the desert silence
as camouflage
a decade ago

hardened my face
to suit the knife
in the wind's tongue

learned the mating habits of lizards
the rhythms of the cacti
en route to new limbs

prayed the land
would be long-lived enough
to allow its strength

as partially mine
by virtue of my feet
carving shadows in its sand

The Registry

WHEN OSCAR BROUGHT THE REST OF IT, we had to clear a path to the bedroom. He was laid up on the couch in front of the television, the one I got for my birthday the year we celebrated at that ten-lane alley off Gaston. Sherry made a golf cake with little wax irons for candles, the frosting painted up like a par three. But that was then, and now we're here in this flat, the whole thing unmanageable with boxes of several different sizes, except where the path to my bedroom runs through the kitchen.

The twin cabinets over my sink are chock with two sets of china, crystal wrapped in newspaper stacked stem to lip, and two screen-printed coffee mugs – one featuring Oscar and Lilly in front of the New York City skyline, the other they're in the Caribbean. I had two feet of counter space on either side of the sink, which is now docked on both ends with the appliances we thought we might use. We set up the Oster 16-speed blender, Jack Lalanne stainless steel electric juicer, Cuisinart Touch-To-Toast 4-slice toaster, Bunn Phase Brew 8-cup coffee maker, and a cubic-foot Whirlpool microwave oven with build-in exhaust. The rest of it, the stuff that never stood a chance, sits in boxes like a cityscape across the floor. The linen closet adjacent to my bathroom is, for the first

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time in three years, exactly that. The shelves hang heavy with a shale-gray Ralph Lauren king bed set, a burgundy Tribeca Egyptian cotton duvet cover, and a ten-piece Nautica Turkish spa towel set.

This shit's been piling rapidly since Lilly had Oscar kick rocks, and when she served him with the papers last week he brought the rest of it. We stay away most of the time now, except to sleep or shower. Sherry hasn't been by in a couple weeks. Mostly, we keep busy at work, but when there isn't any overtime left or the station's having to cut hours, we take up at the track or else the Irish bar off 2nd Ave. I've tried discussing the whole thing with Oscar a few times, but he won't budge.

"You want me to move out, I can," he says to me the other night, scanning the rows of boxes from one wall to the other. He sinks into the couch, his back straight up against the wall like he's being edged out, which is how we feel when we look around now. "I can get a place right by the station if you'd just give me enough time to, you know, to find another unit for it all."

"Don't be such a martyr," I tell him. "I'm just saying you two got a little heavy handed with that registry is all. I mean, you guys made out like bandits."

"All I wanted was one of those cast-iron griddles, you know, for breakfast or whatever. The rest is all hers."

"Yet she won't take so much as a coaster."

"I guess she feels bad about it all."

He hangs his head, running his fingers back and fourth through his scalp like he's probing for a sore. In the last couple months, he's lost some weight, and now his clothes sort of hang on him like they aren't fastened up right. There's a Black & Decker steam iron and board around somewhere, but we haven't gotten into it yet, which I guess is fine since there'd be nowhere to set it up. Despite everything, he's still a rather handsome guy. His features are deep-cut and committed, his skin dark but in more of a healthy than an ethnic way. He isn't very tall, but still has a few inches on the average woman. He was the first guy in our high school class to get laid, or at least the first one to talk about it.

"I don't know," he says, wringing his hands, breathing heavy through inflated cheeks. "Maybe we could have a yard sale, then it'd be over for good."

“Then she comes around and you have to buy it all back.”

“Yeah. Maybe we can hold on to it just until it’s all said and done. I can find somewhere to go if you need the space, I just need long enough to get another unit and a truck. There’s a place I’m looking at by the station.”

Someone’s been burning up houses all summer. We’ve been chasing one-alarm arson tracks up and down the Eighth Ward since May and haven’t received so much as a long shot on a lead. Since there haven’t been any human casualties and the MO is constant, the police department has all but stalled the investigation. The houses going up in the pyre are vacant and mostly condemned. They’re all soaked through with turpentine and razed with no pattern; some nights we may see just one, other nights we can’t knock them down as fast as they’re lighting them up. There are no signs of looting or any indications of fraud. There have been no warnings, demands, or ransoms. The fires don’t appear to be concealing any other crimes besides a pure-form pyromania kick.

For me and Oscar they just spell extra hours. We have the routine down to a science, and since they’re all tract houses and shotgun shacks – fucking urban wigwams ready to catch and crumble like so many splinters – we’re pretty quick to flood them without really having to kick doors or search and rescue. Lately, we’ve been spending more time explaining why our breath is fevered and bourbon-charged or why our truck is slouched and sitting outside of regulation than what exactly happened during the blaze. They know these answers. The song’s remained the same for months, and with a shortage in new recruits as it is, they know best to just let us deal the way know how. Oscar’s been talking about putting in an application at a district uptown, but I could just as soon stay in the Eighth Ward until it’s all burned up.

“We’re chasing our fuckin’ shadows with this guy,” Oscar says. “It’s like I can feel myself atrophying, like every morning I wake up and it’s the same day. The same fire, colors and everything, as hot and dependable as the goddamn sun.”

He’s been talking like that a lot. He’s been hard on himself, but not the same way the rest of us are hard on ourselves. It’s every morning in

the weight room for him. He’s reading these don’t jump paperbacks. He bought a Venetian cookbook, so we’ve been choking back rabbit terrine, braised ox tongue, pigeon saltimbocca and other such squab dishes since June. We’re at the firehouse to eat and shower. We’re at my place to sleep. We’re at the bar after work, on our days off, and in between calls – helmets stale and salt-logged on the stools next to us. For lunch we drink beer and eat blue-plate burgers. At night we drink bourbon and smoke cigarettes. At the end of it all we come home to the boxes.

The other night I had to get up for a glass of water and got my toe caught in the beater bar of a Dirt Devil Featherlite. Even my path to the bathroom is no longer off limits. I’m beginning to find myself envious of the arson shacks; as charred, smoke and water damaged as they are, at least they’re empty.

“He’s gotta be running out of fuel by now,” Oscar says, busting the heads of a matchbook and watching them burn to the crease. “There can’t be much real-estate left down there if you think about it.”

We’re sitting around the bar and book waiting on our horses to run. The simulcast area is still packed from the biannual steeplechase, and now we’re watching Rosehill Gardens on the screen above the bar.

“If he’s been at it so long, I don’t see why they can’t just get the guy,” Sherry says, boxing the next race in her program.

“Maybe he’s getting good at it.”

“Like hell,” Oscar says, “I’m putting my notice in just as soon as I get everything settled with Lilly. There’s more going on here than what they’re letting on. I mean, they’re barely even logging them anymore.”

“Tell her what happened Thursday night.”

“The one off Palo Pinto? Where no one showed up? Yeah, it was just the two of us out there at a one-alarm, a little A-frame, and, uh, no one came. It was just us smoking cigarettes and waiting after we put it out. A stray dog was, you know, melted right into the rug pad.”

“Oh shit.”

“Oh shit is right.”

Sherry's shaking her head, mouth wrapped around her blue gel Uni-Ball. There's something vaguely irritating in the secondhand Kool cloud around us, and it's causing her eyes to well up and run pink to the irises. She's looking from her program to the screen and back to us.

"Does the chief know about it," she asks, tucking the gnawed, shatter-clouded pen back behind her ear. "I mean, what the fuck, you must've said something."

Oscar looks back at me steeple-browed, running his palm slow over the two-day's growth beneath his jaw.

"We're sort of on his short list," I say.

Oscar calls the bartender over and orders another round of Wild Turkey. The crowd is starting to deflate, most of them running out to the paddocks to get a look at the horses for the next live race. Sherry's hair is pinned behind her ears by a pair of dark, wire-framed shades, which she pulls down to shield her eyes from the smoke. She takes her drink, raises it to Oscar, then heads to the ITBs to box her lineup for Rosehill Gardens.

"You guys sitting this one out?" she asks, leaning in between us to set her glass on the bar.

"I don't know," I say. "Who do you like?"

She fans out her program; the pages marked up in artery blue, her picks all longshots in an impossible triple. She often assumes the "what if" attitude after a few drinks, which is a quality I've learned to find endearing in small doses.

I tell her to put me down for the same and hand her a ten.

"Yeah," Oscar says, reaching in his pocket for a handful of small bills. "I'll take it."

When she's gone, we sit quietly, tilting our glasses and softly bucking around the clear, gloss-bright ice so that it melts a bit into the bourbon. We're at home here with the yellow light, air thick with smoke and slack voices. Oscar's grinning as he looks up at the screen over the bar. We don't remember who our money is on, and by the time Sherry returns with the vouchers the gates are thrown and they're off. Oscar and I laugh, cheering with everyone whose horses stay in it, but Sherry's just standing there shaking her head. She's rolling her eyes and nearly takes a bite out of that blue pen.

"The thing is... Well, it's actually kind of funny how it happened."

"Is it?"

"I don't see how it's gonna be so goddamn funny when the paper runs it."

"I'm certainly not laughing."

Captain's pinching at the worm of muscle between his eyes, looking down at us, then back at the district chief. This morning we're having fish head-to-tail with wild mushrooms, capers, and grilled fennel. In the middle of the table where Oscar and I sit reclined, picking at the scales in our teeth, there's a large, milky-eyed snapper head staring just high enough to cross their glares as they shoot daggers between us. We're still in our bunker gear from the waist down, our turnout trousers and boots soot-raked and soaked to the liners. With us, at the tail end of the table, behind the needles of rib and vertebrae track, the house probies Sammy Hinojosa and Dale Baden sit broad and stooped, trying to avoid eyes.

"I for one want to know what the hell they were doing parked there in the first place," Oscar says, running a piece of michetta through the drippings on his plate.

"There's a goddamn arson investigation going on in the area, gentlemen."

"You could've fooled us."

Captain's face is starting to turn purple above the eyes, and he's still working that area on the forehead, but now he's all squinted up and breathing real hard through the nose.

"I think it's pretty goddamn self-evident that these are not times to be fucking with the police department," the chief says. "You two are on shit-thin ice as it stands, if what I've been hearing is true. If I ever see one of our rigs parked within a half mile of a bar, it's fucking on. And I'm not even talking about what's gonna happen to your jobs either. I mean I'm gonna serve you two your own personal shit back to you after I kick it out. See how you like that."

"He'll do it for Christ sake," Captain says, huffing to the cabinet for the bottle of Aspirin.

Oscar's chewing slow and absently, staring up at the chief through a furrowed brow. When Sammy and Dale make like they're about to leave, he cools them with a glare. The kitchen is still haze-draped and muggy from the cooking, and we're just sitting there in it, everyone sort of gauging one another and trying to determine what we have left to lose.

The night before was what Captain would call a first-class shit show, a straight arson drag from the first bell, and we were in it until dawn. Me, Oscar, and the probies responded to five all told, all of them within a radius of about four city blocks. Captain rode behind with PD and made the rounds after we snuffed them out.

When we arrived on the last one, a little cinder-shot town home drawing red and black through every orifice, we got the punch line. We had done a full lap around the Eighth ward and we were standing right across the street from our first call. It was still smoldering and coughing slow, black ash into the dull, ice-colored light of early morning. There were two hydrants on the block, but the one we needed to get into was blocked. On the road beside it, a patrol car sat hugging the curb, completely abandoned.

"I guess we'll go through the window," Oscar said, prying a wrecking bar from the truck. He stood broad and squared, bringing the fanged end of the bar down hard against the glass, but nothing gave. The panels were reinforced and rated against gunfire; even his most leveraged and dialed blows did little more than pock them up with nicks and dime-sized divots. He worked at them until his breathing was hard and lashing.

"You better call someone to come and get this car," he said, bringing the bar hard against the side mirror and watching it detonate like blown glitter.

"We'll run it over the hood," said one of the probies. "Or string it beneath the chassis. There's gotta be room one way or the other."

"No," Oscar said, ripping into a headlight. "We'll just have to shove the goddamn thing. Bring the utility truck over."

His eyes are still glassed over with the same abandon as he sits here staring up at the chief. And though his mouth is steady working the stale, crust-cased heel of michetta, it reverts to the same slack and slant grin with each contraction.

"So we're supposed to wait around for the whole block to catch," he says after swallowing the last of it. "Sounds like you should be having this conversation with whatever Barney at PD left his goddamn unit in front of the water. Or was that part of the plan?"

The chief knuckles the end of the table and leans in so we can see the rivulets and steam on his forehead. The fish carcass beneath him

is starting to sweat too and the scent of it all mixed together gives the kitchen a sweet wet-yeast musk.

"Now you listen to me," he says, eyes darting, the color of hard coal. "I don't know where you're going with that, but you better bite it off right there."

"Watch it, boys," Captain says, throwing back a handful of Bayer.

Oscar shrugs them off and just leans back, bringing his boots down on the empty steel chair in front of him so that they rain soot all over the floor. He isn't grinning now, but he's looking over at me with an unspoken urgency.

"Did you see the track he had us on?" I say, tapping a cigarette up through the pack. "You have anything to say about that?"

"Bite it off!"

"I swear to Christ you two are headed for a goddamn shit tilt!"

For our sins we're given some time to cool. We haven't had two days of the weekend since our district became a blast furnace, and I'm not sure that we're even weekend people anymore. There's a certain ease about it that I don't think we're up for. The people, the vibe, bars bathed in Saturday sunlight. Everyone's out, but none of them are trying to get away from anything.

For the first time in weeks we sit with the boxes. Oscar's got the divorce papers fanned across the coffee table and we're both cramped up on the couch – sweat-soiled Ralph Lauren bed linens, wadded and flaccid, dominating the entire left cushion. We're going through a twelve-pack and reading each clause of the decree. The sentences are all-business and unsympathetic, written in a language so spartan and engineered that we have to go through them slowly and out loud, humming like drones as we rattle out each line of boilerplate. "Wherein by," "as adhering to," and "in accordance with" seem to be the catch phrases of legalese. Oscar and Lilly are referred to as "parties."

"How much pull do I have with this?" he asks, tracing his finger slow over an alimony line item. "I mean, uh, what if I refuse to go forward?"

"I don't understand."

“Like, how far will they let me push on this thing?”

“Well, I think she’s pretty well determined to see it through, man. I mean, look around. I don’t know what your endgame is here, but I’d just sign by the arrows and let the chips fall where they’re gonna fall.”

He breathes hard though his nose, leafing around the thing like he’s missed something. The check marks beside the words “dissolution of marriage” and “irreconcilable differences” are there in black ink, computer-generated, permanent and sympathetic as stone. Lilly no longer takes his calls.

He drops the papers and slides his wedding band around his finger, twisting it like a screw cap. Since he’s lost weight, it rolls loose and easy, and in the last several weeks it’s become something of a tic. He fingers and plays with it like a numb scab, and checks it like a kid with his first wristwatch.

“I can’t believe she won’t take any of it,” he says, looking around. “She wanted all this shit not even six months ago.”

“She wanted you not even six months ago.”

“Jesus,” he says. “She left it all in boxes all those months. You think she knew the whole time?”

When we finally tear into the rest of it, we’re another twelve-pack deep in the evening. The apartment, tinged with phantom fumes of stored plastic and stripped adhesive, smells like Christmas morning. The miniature skyline of packaged cookware and unopened appliances lay in ruins at our knees as we ravage and collapse and cut and drink. The Hamilton Beach French press, sixteen-piece KitchenAid knife block, twenty-piece Martha Stewart flatware set, the Crate & Barrel brushed steel floor lamp: everything Lilly couldn’t accept, we slit, snap, and pop open. We discard instructions and manuals, crumple through sheets of cellophane, pile the deflated boxes in a corner and discharge every round on every pane of bubble wrap until we’re just clenching and twisting, each sheet going off like a string of Black Cats.

“If she wants to make like none of it ever happened and just give it all back, then that’s on her,” Oscar says, unzipping the top panel of a

Crock-Pot box with a pair of kitchen shears. “I’m not just giving all this back though; I’m not just gonna give up like that.”

In this moment, I understand that it isn’t just stuff to him. In every box is a piece of the future he wanted for himself. It’s all wide open, brand new and gleaming in heaps on the dust-caked carpet of my apartment. We sit amongst it, shedding the feature-stamped boxes, the twist ties, the Styrofoam packing that flakes like snow, piling up the scrap. We drink more and talk like brothers. When it’s all unpacked, we take the trash out to the street.

The torching dies down halfway through August, and there’s still no clue who’s behind it or if we can expect another round. Two weeks ago, a strung out, needle-gnawed homeless couple was caught setting fire to an abandoned corner stop off Knox. The papers caught on and ran with it, smearing their faces across the front page under a curt headline and a dodgy interview with the chief. Most people swallowed it and went on with life, but everyone around here knows it’s bullshit. Their MO doesn’t check; our guys never hit anything commercial and only used turpentine for an accelerant. The meth heads poured a gallon of unleaded across the floor and window boards then nearly passed out from the fumes. They were jig-jawed and cursing deities from different dimensions in the interview and admitted not only to the entire string of arsons, but also to a number of unsolved homicides, carjackings, and a fraud conspiracy involving key US intelligence agents and a few members of Congress. When we get the debriefing the next morning, Oscar walks out, shaking his head and laughing. We find him in the weight room later taking a ten-mile jog on the treadmill.

For now, we sit around the firehouse and wait. With every call, we head out like parents after a missing child. Every one-alarm grease fire or chemical blowout is another sliver of hope, another shot at an answer.

“It’s because we’re onto them now,” Oscar says, the other night. We’re at the bar winding down after twenty-four hours on, trying to avoid the apartment. Without the overtime, we’re strung between sleep and the places that will have us until then. At home, Oscar’s papers sit riffled

and smudged on the coffee table, every other page now branded with his signature in a palsied blue script. The rest of the apartment is webbed in extension cords and power cables. Appliances, accessories, and beer cans litter the carpet like perimeter mines, all of it taunting the limited space it lies in.

“Maybe they found a way out with the copycat couple,” I say. “Who knows whether or not they’ll ever hit again? A few weeks ago, we couldn’t wait for it to come to a head.”

“I don’t think it has,” he says, slamming his glass and leaning back against the stool. “But I hope I’m out of there before it does.”

We set up a card table with a fireproof cashbox and some aluminum folding chairs and hang a shingle on the front terrace. We take out an ad in the classifieds, tack cardboard flyers to telephone poles, and string it all out on the lawn, sunlight coning sharp and white as tractor beams off the brushed steel and high-gloss plastic. Beneath the table, we keep a cooler of Michelob and wait for the crowd.

The idea is complete liquidation. We price everything cheap, then hack percentages from there. The bedding, cutlery, even the Black & Decker steam iron that knows to shut itself off when it falls over; it all has to go.

“It’s shit like this why we can’t catch an honest-to-goodness fire anymore,” Oscar says, thumbing a ten-dollar tag on the iron.

We hadn’t kept any receipts, but when a customer arcs a brow, Oscar pulls out the divorce papers and a copy of the wedding invitation, which is drawn on cream, cotton stationary and raised at the text - the edges stained yellow and curling in. He waves them in the face of anyone who thinks the stuff was lifted.

“It’s all I have left of her,” he says to a wary-eyed yuppie thumbing through the knit of a boutique-embroidered bed skirt. “Our whole future fell apart and I’m passing the savings on to you.”

Some of them are just as rattled with that explanation, but in the end we get rid of most everything. What we have left, Oscar just gives away.

It takes some hard talk, but he’s finally come around since the night we ravaged through the pile. When it’s all out of sight, I can tell there’s

a certain ease about him. He loosens his grip a little on the papers and even says something about turning them in.

Later on, Sherry comes over to help spot-clean the apartment and Oscar makes John Dory with orange and prawn risotto. In a cabinet under the counter, we find an iron skillet and an old pot I used for ramen when I lived alone, and he makes do. We pour a bottle of cab into Dixie cups and eat off of Chinet.

The big one starts from the first floor of an old tenement building down by the cement factory off of Southside. Oscar and I are running late. We got held up checking out a new flat across town, and when we make it into the station everyone’s already bunkered up and piling into the ladder truck.

“Come up behind us in the UT,” Captain yells, as the engine lights out of the station, sirens on full rock and roll.

We’re still suiting up when we get the utility truck on the street. The building’s nearly out of our district, but we can see the plume, black and restless as a murder, from miles out. This is the one we’d been banking on. It’s both overdue and unexpected, like a virus no longer dormant, and we rush to meet it.

“You think our friend’s back in town?” Oscar asks, pulling his hood up over his hair and adjusting the strap on his goggles.

“I don’t know. You got a feeling?”

“Doesn’t seem right that he’d make his move without us.”

“I have the same feeling.”

By the time we pull up, the second floor’s caught and every frame’s running over with smoke and swarming with embers. The crowd huddling behind the ladder truck stands dazed and ash-blotched, all of them wrapped in grey wool. They hold ice packs above broken flesh and dried blood. Some drink from water bottles and gargle. They spray the curb milk-white with the foaming rinse. At the front end of the truck, surrounded by a team of EMTs, a rawboned teenager in a drenched tank top fights to remove his oxygen mask. One of the paramedics has him pinned against the back bumper as he writhes and chokes, the muscles

around his throat pulling tight as piano wire. The EMTs tell him to breathe deep and relax. One of them holds the glossy, spit-fogged mask to his face as he claws the back of the truck, struggling for purchase against the weight of them all.

“He pulled three people out from the goddamn second floor,” Sammy says, nodding over to where the kid’s almost made it to his knees. The medic trying to hold the mask in place attempts to cup the back of the kid’s head as he cuts welts into his face from the pressure.

“What’s wrong with him?” I ask.

“He lives in a family of five, so do the math.”

“Who’s left?” Oscar asks, his breathing stretched to an even hiss behind his mask.

Sammy looks past the truck and over at the kid. He has a medic wrapped around nearly every limb, but looks charged enough to snap free and bolt at the first inch of give.

“I think it’s the father.”

“Any of our guys in after him?” Oscar yells, looking up at the flames.

“The whole building’s incinerated. Chief’s put in the order; we’re fighting this one from outside.”

Oscar looks back at the kid. He’s gone limp, lying fetal and still on his side except for his rapid and staggered breathing, which rattles him in currents.

“Doesn’t look too hot to me,” he says, walking off toward the house.

I run after him and grab him by the collar of his jacket.

“Don’t be an idiot,” I yell, spinning him around. “There’s no one to save in there!”

Oscar pries my hand away and pulls the back of my head toward his mask.

“I can’t walk away from this,” he says, slapping me on the back and turning toward the building. He adjusts the valve on his tank and the mask hisses again. He says something else before he walks away but I can’t make it out. By the time I yell after him he’s framed in the open doorway, gazing high through the smoke, cast amber by firelight.

We don’t talk about the no-entry order or how he went in alone. They buried him to the crack and echo of gunfire, bagpipes and bugles, taps and tears. The chief filled out the paperwork and filed it. He closed the folder and no one’s said anything else.

It’s still hard to look back at it all; when we lived together there was so much of him, and even more before that. We spent the summer trying to piece it all to something and cope, and by the end of it he was gone – as vacant and fleeting as the buildings that burned before him.

He was still officially married to Lilly when they buried him, but everyone knew why she wasn’t at the funeral. He didn’t draw the type of gathering that crossed borders and generations to be there. He kept his circle reeled close so everyone pretty much knew what was going on.

The fire is still under investigation, and they’re taking their time with it. It’s quiet again, and I’ve been spending a lot of time at Sherry’s. I never thought I’d avoid my apartment because of the emptiness. The night after the funeral I sat down on the couch and had that same feeling, like I was being edged out. On the cushion beside me, his quilt sat balled up and matted beside the pillow he brought with him that first night when he needed a place to crash. It was still dressed in the same ivory-white pillowcase, going grey and dull at the center from a summer of sleep. On the end there’s an O stitched between two tracks of embroidered ivy and waxflower. I remember thinking that this was not something you buy for yourself. These things only come in pairs. They’re given as gifts. 🌸

DEREK MONG

Blason Wherein My Head Becomes a Mountain

after Joachim du Bellay

Although my dome's snow-capped

and holds the balance of my living –

although my yawn stretches these boot heels

into the New World – my flesh is still within reach

of my wife's imagination.

To her my tongue is a desert steppe which the simplest thoughts

only limp across. I can't slap

myself hard enough to jar one loose

and disprove her.

Seeking what's left of me she finds only epithets and insults:

my pulse is a lava flow –

however hot it's not quick

enough to please her.

This back's a jungle she can't cut through.

I once bought a hundred grains of rice

on which she could describe my decrepitude,

then boil her distaste into our dinner.

But my bad looks are vast as the land itself –

she can't sprinkle salt

without filling one of my pockmarks. And though consistently tread upon,

I can't bear this life alone:

I'm just not that kind of Atlas.