Volume 14, Number 2
our special Summer/Fall 2009 issue
“Color Wheel ~ Cultural Heritages in the 21st Century”

(return to Vol. 14, No. 2 web page)
“Hidden everywhere, a myriad leather seed-cases lie in wait . . .”
— “Crab Orchard Sanctuary: Late October”
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**A Note on Our Cover**

The photographs on the cover were taken in a variety of locations over the last three years by Allison Joseph and Jon Tribble. The locations include: San Francisco, California; Windsor, Ontario, Canada; Gallup, New Mexico; Belleville, Illinois; Keene, California; Evanston, Illinois; Cape Girardeau, Missouri; and West Helena, Arkansas.

**Announcements**

We would like to congratulate one of our recent contributors, Taemi Lim. Taemi Lim’s story “Eating an Elephant,” which appeared in *Crab Orchard Review, Volume 12, Number 1 (Winter/Spring 2007)*, was listed as an honorable mention in *The Pushcart Prize XXXIII: Best of the Small Presses.*
Color Wheel

~

Cultural Heritages

in

the 21st Century
Janice’s invitation called it a Family Reunion, but none of us were related. Really, it was just a potluck. All of the parents who showed up had adopted at least one child internationally from the same agency in Salem and, at least according to Janice, that made us family. She and her husband Dale lived with their eight children (seven adopted) on a wacky farm east of Oregon City. The drive out there killed the entire morning, the last hour on a gravel road so rugged we would have been better off walking. “Enjoy the scenery,” Dad told me, one hand on the steering wheel. April snowmelt cascaded down the hills, irrigating the forest. Finally, the road descended into a wide, neighborless valley, and if I was glad to arrive, it was only because we were one step closer to leaving.

The circular driveway was packed with cars, parents unloading kids and casseroles. Dale pulled open a gate and directed the latest wave of vehicles into a small pasture where miniature donkeys moped away from the traffic, not bothering to lift their heads from the grass. He and Janice kept dozens of animals that required special permits to own: potbellied pigs, llamas, emus, even a pair of mountain lions—not an ordinary chicken or cow on the premises. They hosted the potluck every year because the petting zoo atmosphere kept the kids occupied while the parents traded adoption war stories.

Of course, the most popular attractions were always the mountain lions, Abe and Sarah. Carrying our cooler to the backyard, I overheard Janice explaining to a cluster of parents that, this year, it would just be Sarah. In the months since our last reunion, Abe had somehow escaped. She assured the worried moms and dads that this was no cause for alarm—in all likelihood, Abe was D-E-A-D, she said, spelling it out in hopes of protecting the youngsters from this sad possibility. Now Sarah lived alone in a large pen shaded by fir trees. Janice accompanied Mom and me there for a look.

“Not so close,” Mom said. The hue of Sarah’s coat shifted brown
to gold as she slunk between shafts of light. I took a half-step away from the cage. She paced faster now, tail brushing the chain-link, near enough to touch.

“He’s fine,” Janice said, chewing ice from a cup of lemonade. Sarah and I were locked in a staring contest. When my gaze fell to her glowing whiskers, she pounced at the fence—teeth, tongue, yellow eyes—a long, low growl.

“Peter!” Mom said. “What’s gotten into you? She’s a wild animal!”

“He’s just had a long morning in the car,” Janice said.

Sarah paced the fence again. We let her be and walked the gravel trail back toward the house. Two peacocks waddled across our path. I scattered them into the brush. In the backyard, I found Dad in the crowd of other dads and checked his watch.

“You said noon,” I said.

“I said noon is when we’d get here.”

“So when can we leave?”

“Patience.”

It was like the opening ceremony of the Olympics, except without flags or athletes. We assembled in the backyard, probably a hundred people all together, kids outnumbering adults three to one. Janice stood on the deck, handkerchief and hair waving in the breeze. She tapped the nametag on her blouse to remind everyone not to forget theirs. On the verge of starting her speech, she paused to review the script. “I feel like I need a microphone,” she said, tearing the perforated edges from the paper.

“Get started already!” Dale called to her. “These folks are hungry!”

“Wow!” Janice began. “Look at this group!” As instructed, everyone took a good look around, as if to soak each other in. Biological relations in the crowd stuck out like marshmallows in a fruit salad. “We get bigger every year,” Janice continued, “so I thought we’d start the day with some introductions.”

The idea was, when she called out a country, kids from that country would step up to the deck with their parents. Brazil was up first. Mom gave me a nudge. Hands in my pockets, I joined the other two Brazilians—the only other Brazilians I knew in the world. Years later, there would be nights when I would stumble into dive bar payphones, desperate to call one of them, just to talk, to ask, how did we get here? But we’d never grown close enough for phone numbers. Back then, being Brazilian was like gravity—essential, but ultimately
forgettable—and just as most of us confront gravity only when falling or flying, I only considered my history when forced.

We stood on the deck beside our parents so that everyone could have a good look at us. There was Rogélio, sixteen, the oldest, very black, and never fond of wearing a shirt, although today he wore his baseball jersey. Then one of Janice and Dale’s daughters, caramel colored Ana Luiza, who had gotten her braces off and now had a thousand-kilowatt smile. Then me, the light one with the boring name. Since sixth grade started, I’d taken to buzzing off my curly hair, and without it I probably looked like an error on Janice’s roster.

“And we have a very special addition to our Brazilian family this year,” Janice said. “As some of you already know, Elizabeth finished her process six months ago.” A timid woman I’d never seen before joined us on the deck, holding the hand of a copper skinned girl around my age, hair so black it seemed to swallow the sun. “Everyone, this is Pamela.”

I stepped aside to make room for the newest member of the Brazilian contingent. Pamela kept her eyes on the ground. “Kids,” Janice said. “Pamela is still brand new to our country, and she’s trying very hard to learn English, so please do your best to help her out.”

Pamela’s mother reached to embrace her, but Pamela quivered, slipped away. Her mother mustered a smile and said, “Sometimes she doesn’t like to be touched.”

Brazil in the bag, we left the deck to make room for Colombia. It was a long time getting through the alphabet to Trinidad. There was a smorgasbord of kids. Some, like me, had been adopted shortly after birth. We had all the same memories as biological children, except we looked nothing like our parents. Even these days, whenever I see families so identical they seem like stacking dolls, I feel a pang of envy. I’ve never looked into someone else’s face and seen myself. But I was fortunate to be adopted so young, at least that’s what I was always told, and looking around the potluck, I was prone to believe it. Other kids had been adopted much later and spoke mysterious pidgins. Some had scars or blind eyes or gold teeth or brown and black bottle mouth teeth that made them look like baby alligators. The grand finale of the presentation was the Jeffrey family, prodigious Mormons with an appetite for diversity. They took the stage with their four children, each dressed in costumes from their native lands. The three youngest were from Guatemala and Peru and wore colorful Mayan and Andean garbs. The oldest, Malaki from French Samoa, was only nine or ten,
but already gigantic. He was dressed in what looked like tiny leather underwear, and stood shirtless, nipples hardening in the breeze.

Waiting offstage with a soccer ball was Janice and Dale’s one biological child, a freckled kid named Larry. Without warning, he pitched the ball at Malaki and it bounced off his bare belly and onto the grass. “Larry!” Janice said. “What have I told you?” The crowd mustered a last burst of applause, and as the clapping faded, a small plane buzzed overhead, as if on cue. Among the myriad entertainments at Janice and Dale’s property was a local skydiving outfit that used the nearby fields as a landing space. Several divers leapt from the hatch, seeds dotting the blue sky. Everyone on the lawn ooooed and aahhed. The parachutes bloomed like flower petals, drifting, and sank out of sight to the other side of the hills.

Now it was time for us to run along and play. Before the kids were allowed to disperse, the parents held an impromptu caucus to decide how best to deal with the slim possibility of a mountain lion loose on the premises. It was agreed that we should stay on this side of the fence, as if a few strands of barbed wire would be enough to keep a hungry Abe from pouncing.

I decided not to play with the other kids—if I looked like I was having fun, my parents would be less likely to leave early. The saving grace of the potluck was the most gigantic display of deviled eggs I had ever seen. I stood beside it, sipping a Pepsi, reaching for an egg every minute or so, selecting my prey from different regions of the tray so that I wouldn’t make a noticeable dent. I licked the mustardy insides from each egg, tucked the pale, gelatinous shells in the palm of my hand, and occasionally wandered over to the trash can to dispose of them. Meanwhile, the adults stood in circles of four or six, drinking cans of beer and plastic cups of pink, boxed wine. Dale donned his #1 Dad apron and fired up the grills, odor of lighter fluid drifting across the deck.

The parents told long stories, voices carefully measured, as if they were guests on a prestigious radio talk show. The listeners nodded frequently, nods that said, I admire your story, but I am waiting for my turn to go on the radio talk show. I wandered from group to group, parents pausing to read my nametag (PETER – BRAZIL) before going on with their stories. The Everetts told how, returning from Bogotá with their son Diego, they forgot their birth registry in the hotel safety box and were detained at the re-entry gate in Miami. The Simons told how, in South Korea, they waited nine hours in a hot courtroom
for the stenographer to receive a new ink ribbon, and that when the ribbon finally arrived the judge denied their request. The Clarks told how, eight months into their first Peruvian adoption process, the birth mother changed her mind.

These stories were the same snoozers from the last adoption party, and the one before that, and the one before that. I swallowed egg after egg, wondering how everyone could pretend they didn’t know the endings. The Everetts had the birth registry shipped overnight and were allowed back into the U.S. after a 36-hour wait. The Simons slipped the judge two hundred dollars to approve their request. The Clarks lost their son to his birth mother, but found a three-year-old girl, Lula, who had gone unwanted because of her cleft lip, so expensive to repair.

And so the stories dragged on. Delays at the airport. Delays at the hospital. Delays at the district court. Roaches, lizards, spiders and monkeys on the walls of the hotel. Roaches, lizards, spiders and monkeys on the walls of the orphanage. I’d heard enough already to last me my whole life.

Just as I reached for another egg, an elderly woman who I customarily avoided snuck up behind me. She had a cataract in one eye thick as a dollop of yogurt, and it seemed at any moment the thing would slip off. I set my latest egg back on the tray.

“Peter!” she said, embracing me, bracelets dangling from her bony wrists. “Now that you’re a little older, I have something special for you.” She carried with her a dark album, the sort I used to display my baseball cards.

I glanced around for my parents. Mom was in the middle of listening to a story. Dad minded one of the grills. “Okay,” I said.

She opened her album, set it beside the plate of eggs. Old, blanched photos of babies and mothers. The woman licked her finger and began to thumb through the plastic pages. Dad appeared, barbeque tongs in hand.

“Why don’t you go play?” he said.

Years later, I would read an obituary announcing that old woman’s death. The founder and principal operator of one of the largest orphanages in Brazil, she was responsible for more than six hundred and fifty adoptions, mine included. That old album was laid out at her wake, a chronicle of her life’s achievement. I went to the service, not because I knew her, but because I’d hoped to finally see a picture of my mother. Dad wasn’t too keen on that. As it turned out, none of those pictures were labeled. When that woman died, so too died the only person who
could identify my mother by sight. I remember flipping through the album near the casket, trying to find a baby who looked like me, afraid to call someone over to help, because really, it was anybody’s guess.

But by then I was old enough to understand why Dad never wanted me to see the photo, why he never liked these potlucks, either. Adoption parties, he called them. My father had convinced himself beyond all doubt that I was his blood. So what if he had red hair and I had black curls? Those were minor details, inconveniences. These parties, they ruined everything.

Nobody would let Malaki on the trampoline, for fear it would collapse, and so he joined us for a game of basketball. Pamela watched, which made me nervous. Dale had taken great care in painting a regulation NBA three-point line on the court. I thought that I would impress Pamela with a three-pointer. My shot sailed under the backboard, out of bounds, and rolled to her feet. She smiled and kicked the ball back to me with surprising accuracy.

“Thanks,” I said. She didn’t say anything, but kept watching, I supposed, to see what I might do next. It was a multilingual contest. Tony and Jack, twins from South Korea, used their native language to execute a devastating two-guard offense. My team—despite Malaki’s sweaty efforts, was nearly scoreless. Rogélio and Ana Luiza supervised us half-heartedly, and if we had a questionable foul, Rogélio decided one way or the other, as if he’d actually been watching the game.

Larry, well on his way to sunburn, interrupted the game by throwing pot-bellied pig turds onto the court. Rogélio dared him to eat one. We all stopped to watch, knowing Larry craved attention like a moth craved light, but Dale called us over for the barbeque. On the deck he served up a seemingly endless supply of dogs and burgers on Styrofoam plates. Afterward, Janice and Mom arranged groups of kids for photos in the garden. In the spirit of alphabetical order, Brazil went first. Rogélio explained to Pamela, in Portuguese, what we were doing. I walked over with Ana Luiza, captivated by her sundress. I didn’t know much about girls, but Rogélio was definitely getting somewhere with Ana Luiza. Maybe he could give me some advice about what to say to Pamela.

Janice posed the four of us under a fir tree.

“Come over here next to Pamela,” Mom said.

Rogélio put his arm around Ana Luiza and winked at me.

“Now we have all the colors of Brazil,” Janice said, placing us so the shadows weren’t on our faces.
It was Sarah’s turn to eat. Janice said we could all watch so long as we didn’t crowd too close. Dale thawed a cut of venison from the long freezer in their garage. Birds chirped from the trees as we walked down the path to the cage, library-quiet as Sarah came into view.

The cage had been designed so that it could be divided into two parts: One half, a large shelter with the names ABE and SARAH printed above the beds of hay, the other half a feeding area with a huge plastic water bowl, and a blood-stained, aluminum trash can lid. Dale used a pulley to draw a gate across this section, sealing it off so that he could safely deliver the food. Sarah paced, shoulder muscles flexing, eyes fixed on the thick red cut of meat. A little kid named Diego stood next to me, hands over his mouth, as if he expected Dale to be swallowed at any moment.

“He die?” Diego asked Janice. His English was better than Pamela’s, but nonetheless a blunt instrument.

“Oh no, honey. Don’t worry.”

Dale set the venison haphazardly on the trash can lid, then stepped out of the cage and locked it behind him. Yanking on the pulley, he opened the interior gate. Sarah stepped toward the meat and paused, eyeing the crowd. Mom gave me a look like I’d better not tease the cat again.

“She no hunger?” Diego asked.

“Not when we’re all watching,” Janice said. “She’s very protective of her lunch.”


“It’s her instinct, sweetie,” Mom said.

A plane zipped overhead, sending most of the kids scattering to watch the latest batch of skydivers. By the time Sarah finally began tearing into her meat, all of the kids except Pamela and me had gone back to the trampoline. Pamela held a garden hose through the chain-link, filling up Sarah’s water bowl. The cat didn’t even seem to notice. It was a wonder Pamela could get so close. Satisfied, Sarah licked her enormous paws, as if the meal had reduced her to an ordinary house cat.

“Pamela took it really hard when Abe escaped,” Janice told Mom. “She and her mom spend a lot of time out here. The animals really seem to calm her down.”

“Well, maybe Abe will come back,” Mom said.

“We figured he would, at least for the food,” Janice said. “He never learned how to fend for himself. I mean, he didn’t even have enough of a hunter’s instinct to go after the llamas or the pigs.”

“Did you call animal control?” Mom asked.
“Lord no,” Dale said, wiping his hands on a red-stained rag. “We’d have lost our permit over that. When he didn’t come back after a month we had to tell the kids he was probably dead.”

“It was hardest on Pamela,” Janice said. “We’re pretty sure she was the one who forgot to lock the gate.”

Back at the house the parents retreated from the sun to watch a slideshow of the Jeffreys’ trip to Peru. Out in the field I threw a Frisbee with Diego. When he tossed it over my head, I chased it behind the house. Rogério and Ana Luiza leaned against the wall, kissing. Rogério had one of his hands up her dress. Ana Luiza saw me and slapped Rogério’s hand away. I thought he would chase me down, but instead he said it was time for a game.

He and Ana Luiza called all of us over to the trampoline. Malaki had miraculously squeezed himself into a Power Wheel, and he drove over, engine straining under his weight. Tony and Jack arrived on the back of a miniature donkey and the donkey shook them off and walked back to his spot in the pasture. Pamela bounced over on a pogo stick.

“Hide and go seek!” Rogério said, his arm around Ana Luiza. “We count to one hundred and everyone go hide, but don’t go past that far fence. Does everyone understand?” Pamela listened, blank faced. Rogério explained it again in Portuguese.

“Okay, go!” Ana Luiza said. She and Rogério began counting, loud: “One! Two! Three!”

Everyone scattered except Pamela who still didn’t quite understand. I took her hand. To my surprise, she didn’t seem to resist my touch. We would find a hiding spot together. My strategy in hide-and-go-seek had always been to hide in the most obvious place, and so I led Pamela around the garage, her hand warm in mine. We leaned tight against the wall, kids dashing past us, looking for other, better places to hide. Pamela was out of breath, cheeks red, but she was smiling. Something about her smile told me that the entire reason I had suffered through all these years of reunions was for this moment, right here, with her. I held her shoulders and kissed her once, hard, on the mouth, my first ever kiss, expecting a spark, a sizzle, a transformation.

“Não me toque!” she said, wiping her lips with the back of her hand.

She ran. I ran the opposite way, across the field, squeezed through the barbed-wire fence, into the woods. I found a mossy patch behind a tree and sat, watching the other kids huddled in their hiding spots. But Rogério and Ana Luiza had stopped counting, and were nowhere
to be seen. After a while the kids came out of hiding and slouched back toward the house. I leaned against the tree trunk, waiting for Janice or Mom or Pamela’s mom to come wring my neck. I held the feeling of Pamela’s mouth, still moist on my lips. For a moment I thought it was all worth it, no matter how much trouble I got in, as long as I could remember that feeling, but before I could breathe it in completely, the sensation left me.

At that moment I was overcome with a sense of panic that I was on the wrong side of the fence. I imagined Abe roaming the forest, just waiting for someone to cross the barbed wire. Every snapped twig turned my head. But I told myself I was stupid for being afraid. It didn’t make sense to me that a mountain lion could forget how to hunt, but I had to face it—he was gone, starved, dead.

I gazed at the house through the barbed wire, kids standing on the deck like dolls. Ants crawled up my leg and I flicked them away. The blue of the sky faded. None of it made any sense. It didn’t make sense that nobody was looking for me. That Pamela didn’t want to kiss me. That I couldn’t speak Portuguese. That I had a stupid name like Peter and didn’t look like I was supposed to. I wanted to know what that old lady had in her photo album. Why we kept coming to these stupid potlucks instead of just forgetting about Brazil and Brazilians.

Near sunset, that tiny airplane sliced between the clouds one last time, sprinkling divers across the sky. I watched the parachutes drift over the hills and out of sight. At the house, a group of kids led by Malaki moved the trampoline in front of the basketball hoop. They handed Larry the ball and persuaded him to attempt a slam dunk. Larry mounted the trampoline and, bounce by bounce, gained altitude. Without warning he sprung toward the basket. From a distance, it looked like the dunk of a lifetime. Then he hit the backboard and dropped to the concrete.

I could hear him bawling all the way across the field. Adults swarmed the court. Dale carried Larry inside. I figured it was now or never and walked back toward the house. As I crossed the field, the miniature donkeys were making full grown hee-haws. A llama turned in circles and spat, kept turning as if it had no idea where it should go. On the deck, flies gathered around the last of the deviled eggs. I opened the sliding door. Dale, blood on his shoulder, held Larry over the kitchen sink, and wiped at his mouth with a washcloth. Mom and Dad and Janice and a dozen other kids and parents crowded the kitchen, watching. Pamela sat with her mom on the couch, looking like she’d been crying. Her mom
kept trying to comfort her, but Pamela kept squirming away. I wanted to tell her I was sorry, but my tongue hung dumb in my mouth.

“Ele!” Pamela said, pointing. “Ele me beijou!”

“What, sweetie?” her mom asked.

“Ele me beijou,” she said, gesturing like blowing a kiss. “Ele me beijou!”

“Pamela, sweetie, not right now,” Janice said. “Calm down.”

“Where’s Rogélio?” Mom asked me. “He was supposed to be watching you kids.”

“He’s with Ana Luiza,” I said.

“I haven’t seen her either, come to think of it,” Dale said.

Then instead of looking at Larry’s bloody mouth, the parents started looking for Rogélio and Ana Luiza. Janice pacified the kids with ice cream and cake. Soon the cake was finished, Larry had stopped crying, and everyone seemed to have forgotten what Pamela had said. Rogélio and Ana Luiza were still missing, but nonetheless, the families had a long drive ahead, and it was getting late. One by one they gathered their kids to leave, promising to keep a look out on their way up the long driveway. The donkeys made a racket each time a car left the pasture. On the deck, Larry sat on his soccer ball, reddened gauze over his lip, watching the sunset while Janice finished telling a story to my mom. When the story was finished, it was finally our time to leave.

Pulling out of the driveway, we saw Rogélio and Ana Luiza walking toward the house, holding hands. “Stop,” Mom said. Dad pulled up beside them and Mom cranked down her window. Rogélio peered inside, saw me in the back seat, and smiled. “You two better go inside,” Mom said.

“We know,” Rogélio said.

“I mean it,” Mom said. “We’ve been looking for you for an hour.”

“We’re sorry,” Ana Luiza said.

“Hurry up. We’ll see you next year. Good luck in baseball, Rogélio. Good night, Ana Luiza.”

I watched them shrink in the back window. We drove past the mountain lion cage. Sarah licked her paws, camouflaged in the dusk. Pamela leaned against the cage, fingers gripping the chain link, speaking something to the cat. Dad honked the horn. Pamela and Sarah turned and looked up at once. That was goodbye.

“How come Pamela can get so close?”
“Sarah knows Pamela,” Mom said.

“Oh,” I said, head bobbing with the bumps and dips of the driveway. “Well how long until Pamela speaks English?”

“That’s a good question,” she said, facing me. “It’s different for her, Peter.”

“How?” I needed to know how it could be so different, how Pamela could unlatch Abe’s gate, how the cat could brush right past her, dash away soundless.

“It’s hard to explain,” she said. I looked to Dad as if he might say something, but he kept his hands on the wheel. Mom continued: “Pamela spent a long time in an orphanage. Her baby brother was adopted, but his new family didn’t have any room for her.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know why not,” she said. “Not everybody’s as lucky as you.”

I wish I could have taken what Mom said right then, and believed it, and carried it home. I wish I would have done more, in the years to come, to prove to her that I remembered the fortune of having a mom and a dad and a bedroom and a dinner table and all of the other innumerable graces of my life in the United States. But I didn’t know what to believe. Turn by turn, we rose out of the valley, curving through shadows and trees. I wondered about Pamela’s brother, what his name was. About my own name, before it was Peter. Gazing at the thick forest, I wondered how those skydivers ever found a safe place to land. I imagined one of them tangled in branches, dangling from his parachute, caught. I imagined Abe, starving, yellow eyes glowing in the underbrush, trying to remember what he was supposed to do next.
Because I Was in Bondage

One year, I’m not sure which, Easter Sunday was celebrated in the middle of Passover week. What a coincidence: overlapping faiths, with overlapping devotional calendars, launched prayers in parallel lines that intersected somewhere in the outskirts of the curved universe such as in heaven. If prayer were restricted by $c$, the speed of light, there would be a significant wait before the prayers would meet or be answered. Especially if the universe were expanding at, say, $c$. But prayer traveled on faith, and faith constructed wormholes connecting distant galaxies and centuries and minds.

Every year, we dyed eggs at Christy’s place. Jutta must not have been there the year I’m thinking of because she asked about it over the phone. “Tell me everything,” she said.

“Same old, same old: our new rituals, the old joke. Only you weren’t there. And Steve.”

“I know, but tell me everything.”

“That’d take years.”

“I have a phone card.”

“Where do you want me to begin?” I asked because I never know how to begin.

“Begin with the egg,” she said.

The bright eggs sat soaking up colors in their shells, bathing in jars of diluted food coloring, and looking like specimens in day-glow pathology laboratories, like they were suspended in space-age pickle jars that would make an egg taste like a ride on a merry-go-round, another like the first steps of a newborn sea turtle on the shell-strewn beach, slightly salty perhaps. Or maybe that was another year?

I’m not sure if Jutta was homesick, or even if she still considered Saint Louis home. She was ambivalent about the life she had exchanged for success in the newly united Germany; she wanted to feel as though she were still of that life while being removed from it. Jutta may have wanted to keep tabs on Christy and on me because, or although, she had suggested that I match her affair with her German professor Kristian
by having one with Christy, whose given name was Christiann. I would
instead drink four cups of wine vinegar. We were still in a marriage,
or, as our friends called it, German-Jewish relations.

Jutta usually referred to Christy—after having misplaced the word
\textit{platinum} on the day we met her—as Platonic Blonde. Platonic Blonde
described what Christy would be to me if we were ever close. Jutta found
Christy too virginal, too goody-two-shoed for her taste, so Platonic
Blonde became an insult, as though she were all form and no content.

There was hope for Christy, I argued. She was no Platonist. Didn’t
German-Jewish relations reverse the comparison of person and state
that initiates the discussion of the Republic in Plato? We were the Platonists.
And our religious brethren of Saint Louis County would vouch that
a goody-two-shoes who experimented with fruit fly DNA within the
parameters of evolutionary theory was working for the devil of flux.

Not able to afford as much therapy as she would like, Jutta was
anxious to make confession, although, having grown up overexposed to
the Lenin-Stalin-Honiker trinity, she lacked my slight understanding
that she would have to confess not to any Catholic, but to a Catholic
priest, and that probably for the seal of confession to be binding, she
would have to be part of the same religion. Jutta was content to confess
to the Platonic Blonde.

\textbf{Christy announced the first interfaith seder I’d heard of.}
Suneetha, who was a medical student and Hindi, thought all ceremonies
could be improved with discussion and with citrus fruit, possibly some
cocoanuts. I was the only Jew who would be there so probably should
have known a bit more about seders. If not for Christy, I probably
would not have noticed the passing of what had been for me, in
another state, in another decade, the most important holiday buried
and tunneling within the year, peeking out in Gregorian time like an
eye from a potato.

“What about Hanukah?” Christy asked, the first letter bereft of its
throat like her creamy \textit{hummus}.

“Cchhanukah,” I offered.

“Hanukah, what about Hanukah?”

“Festival of lights. It’s just famous because it’s near Christmas.
Hanukah.”

“Like Diwali,” Suneetha explained, assuming, as she used to more
often, I needed her help to make a point.

“Chanookah,” Christy sneezed.
“There’s no vowels written in Hebrew?” Steve said at that seder, unable to refrain from knowing more than I did.

“Waiting for Rimbaud to assign them colors,” said Line from his lap.

All the Hebrew I knew, I admitted, came with vowel training wheels.

“Chinese doesn’t have written vowels or consonants,” Bei said another year. “Words have strokes that could be any color.”

“How do kids sing the alphabet song?” asked Kayesha.

Bei sang “The East is Red.” His tiny son, Chuck, stared without comprehension, which was a great relief to Bei. He switched to English: “The Easter is red, the Easter is red.”

“Pink, Baba,” Chuck explained with patience, “the Easter Bunny is pink.”

The year no children came, I was the youngest one at the seder, but didn’t explain why I called on myself to pose four questions about the ceremony that were one question with four answers. I sang from memory, no Hebrew words to point at, and when I went on too long, sped up at the end.

The plastic table cloth was spackled with food color the color of no food I’d ever seen, except perhaps in an Italian ice. Christy laid a layer of white on her already white egg. She filled a copper dropper with a scoop of wax, melted it in the candle flame, and tested it on a piece of paper.

One Easter it snowed as though two more-or-less classic Irving Berlin songs—“Easter Parade” (less) and “White Christmas” (more), secular appreciations of the most serious Christian holiday and the fun one—had been mixed.

The wax began as a glob before melting and straightening: within the thin line, a black thread of charcoal. Christy contemplated a white egg—inches from her face as she turned the shell beneath the wax applicator—and she painted what seemed, at first, to be a graph-paper pattern around the egg and, then, a draftsman’s grid. Gregorian chants played from a cassette box, and in the space between chants, when the monks inhaled, we heard her pet, Benji the rat, scratching at her bedroom door, though Christy didn’t lose concentration. My egg leaned into the glass, a light blue oval in a blue bluer than any sea I had seen, bluer than any sky, bluer than any balls or laws. The next glass held greens as green as the artificial-looking grass outside that burned and glowed between rainstorms. With a plastic spoon, I picked up the
egg, but it was still too sky and not enough sea. I missed the ocean, though I’d never gone to it all that often. I let the egg soak.

Christy’s family subscribed to a heterodox sect of Catholicism, I think, and they really did celebrate a kind of Passover seder. “Like Jesus did,” Christy explained with enthusiasm. This was a sect of feminist Catholics that all but welcomed the Reformation. Did the pope know about them? They knew that the erect postures of Da Vinci’s apostles were most unlikely reflections of the seating arrangements of The Last Supper; the Roman occupation would have made the feast more of a Saturnalia. People got hung up over realism. I was uneasy about other peoples celebrating a Jewish holiday because whenever someone on TV or the radio talked about the Judeo-Christian tradition, they were being bigoted about someone they excluded from that system, and were usually Christian, and so they were trying to spread the authority backward and the blame around. No longer a Christ-killer, I was a Christ countryman. Could be worse. I was a little nervous that I was to be used as an anthropological object to find out what people did while Jesus was performing miracles and leading an exemplary life. I was afraid of being busted for not having a clue.

Christy’s mother sent photocopies of a converted Haggadah, the how-to book for Passover seders, that is, once the food was cooked. I wasn’t bothered by the absence of Hebrew. The little I’d known of the language I had forgotten soon after my thirteenth birthday when my barmitzvahed goal of becoming a good Jew faded into wanting to get into Bronx Science or Brooklyn Tech or Stuyvesant, where no one would know the puny idiot I was in junior high and where, despite having skipped eighth grade on the SP express, I would not be a puny idiot. This Haggadah omitted references to spending the next year in Jerusalem—and I dreamed, anyway, of spending the next year in New York. But the qualities of the English bothered me, the contemporary whys for the good ol’ whereabouts I remembered, the lack of a second-person familiar address, the thous, and -th endings, a special case we only ever used to address G-d the unspellable, a separate conjugation like a grammatical Passover kitchen, and perhaps the only place where G-d still so vibrantly existed, for me anyway, along with the prohibition against spelling one of the minority words I was pretty sure I knew how to spell. I knew that these were just old-fashioned English forms, that the tribes of Israel spoke their own Aramaic languages, but despite Hebrew school, years of Tuesday and Thursday afternoons and
Sunday mornings away from the basketball court, probably why I still can’t dribble with my left hand, English was my language, and using some old form, like calling someone a Jewess, though I was the only Jew around, was a way of experiencing with the tongue the thickness of time.

I poked two holes in a new egg’s shell and easily blew out its yolk and albumen. I laid the egg in a red jar for five minutes for what would eventually be one spot. Then I chose one place near the equator where the red would remain and there dropped a dollop of wax. There were six of us at the egg table and another half-dozen people lounged in the living room with festive cookies, finger cakes, oval chocolates, juice, and wine. Kayesha and Michael and maybe Chuck needed help with the flame before they could make a psychedelic mess. Someone was using the yellow jar, but I carefully laid my empty egg atop the other, the yellow rising enough to cover my egg beneath its wobbling yellow meniscus.

“You’re becoming a real eggspert,” Christy said, a joke which seemed to have been imported all the way from Minnesota, all the way from her childhood. We laughed at its corniness, hers.

“I take eggception to that,” Ketsia said. “These aren’t eggrything they should be.”

“I begg to differed. It eggceeds our eggspectation of him,” Suneetha eggstemporized.

“It’s okay, but I wouldn’t want to eggshibit it.”

Christy decided it was up to me to bake the Pascal shank, a sacrifice for a vegetarian, while she and Kayesha took care of the other traditional foods: hirosis which sounds like a liver disease, but is much better; the mortar boards of boxed matzo, the bread of affliction; a bouquet of watercress; wine and grape juice from the ethnic aisle; an egg dyed with coffee to make us something of a sepia-toned Easter, though we kept the egg in plain sight and it was the disappearing affikomen of matzo we hid and children hunted. I got the shank into the toaster oven without touching it and cooked it till it was overcooked. I called my mom for advice, and recipes, but instead I was invited to take all my friends who were hungry back to Queens, which she insisted would be easier than an explanation. She had enough food to feed an army—though I suppose only the Israeli army would be up for Hillel sandwiches of brick and mortar, that is fruity and nutty paste
atop matzo, and the last thing we wanted was to get on the subject of Israel.

“Admit it,” Ketsia said. “It’s a piece of eggscrement.”

“When did you get all phlegmatic?”

“It’s Easter Sunday. You talk like that, they eggscomunicate you.”

“Eggscomunicate you? Are you kidding? They call in the eggsorcist.”

But Christy didn’t get eggcited, just continued her eggstravagant designs, eggnoring the eggspletives flying over her head like Halloween eggs.

“It’s a good thing young Benji doesn’t understand Egglish,” she said.

Benji the rat seemed to have heard his name, and scratched at the door between chants and rants from his temporary eggsile.

The egg joke went on for several years, one day a year, without ever becoming funny.

We called it a Hillel sandwich, though the Earl of Sandwich who invented the light bulb of sandwich lived the better part of two millennia after and all sandwiches should be called Sandwich Hillels.

Elsewhere Hillel was in a hurry as with his five-second version of Talmud, don’t do to others what is hateful to you, a version deliverable while standing on one foot.

“I would like to ask a wise rabbi,” my mother said on the phone, “why we celebrate the original eat and run—the quickest meal of antiquity—with a feast that takes four days to cook minimum?”

Steve moseyed in and said from the threshold with no door, “What’s all this racket in here?” so that must have been—duh—when he was alive and pretty well.

“Nothing,” Christy said.

“Eggrything.”

“We’re workshopping Beggjamin’s eggs,” Line said.

“More like my whole eggistence.”

“Why are you having fun at his eggspence?” Steve said. “You don’t have to eggstirpate the guy.”

“You do realize,” said Bei, “I had to study very hard to understand this language.”

“Tell me,” Jutta said, “about the new holidays that I wasn’t at. Eastover.”
Ketsia had gone out with a Jewish man in college and had attended several seders. He was now a millionaire who did something with software and proposed to her once a year on her birthday. Oh, and did she mention that he was terribly wealthy now and in occasional contact, because what was the point of money, but to get her to come back to him? This was her first seder, though, in the four years since they’d broken up and she’d moved to Saint Louis to be near her dance institute, and Ketsia was taking particular pleasure—empowerment, she called it—in having a seder without him. Otherwise, she probably never thought of Judaism or of Passover. By the flickering candles, Ketsia’s and Christy’s faces looked celestial in the light of prayers wrapping around their smooth cheeks.

An evolutionary biologist, Christy believed that science and religion were perhaps parallel, but separate categories. I’m not so good at keeping categories separate and would like to be able, if not to reconcile, at least to have the two types of thought inform each other, because I didn’t know enough about either. So even if I didn’t believe in the human-looking gods of the museum where I worked as an attendant, when Christy pointed out peaceful behavior amongst bonobos, DNAic history, animals fossilized to stone like those who got on Medusa’s bad side, although I knew this might just be the joy of learning something, nature seemed a little more holy than it had previously seemed.

I heard an early mosquito buzzing and tried to interpret before I smashed it.

Christy had wrapped a double helix design around an egg.
“I was egregious,” Ketsia said. “Can you eggscuse me?”
“No eggsplanation necessary.”
Steve looked at his watch.
“Eggsit Steve and Line,” Line said. “Y’all, it’s been eggstacy.”
“Why so eggscruciatingly early?”
“I have to prepare—”
“An eggsam?” several of us said at more or less the same time.
There’s no jokes like the old jokes.

That they were doing me a favor by having a seder didn’t make me less uncomfortable. The Haggadah insists we explain what each ritual bit of food means, as though food had a meaning. Though we’d decided on a rotating leader, it always seemed to be my turn to read aloud. I had to explain, and my explanations were unconvincing.
E. Shaskan Bumas

_Haggadah_ meant _tell_, but in the Show-me State, I pointed only to the signifier, while pointing out the signified. Bitter herbs for a bitter life sounded like literature when, as children, we were forced to read against our wills. I almost touched the bone. I picked up the egg, roasted brown (a modest color for a symbol that meant death to us, compared to the ones we’d be creating Easter Sunday that represented life, my modest religion, no pictures, no golden calves); a glass of wine; a sheet of matzo bread flecked like parchment the words of which have evaporated with time, forgotten like my Hebrew. The symbols came ready to interpret so I didn’t know why I felt like flaunting my improvised beliefs. I was only a museum attendant but occasionally I assisted in the Historical Society and while this involved, on my part, mostly standing up straight, I could reflect on the preservation and presentation of history. This holiday celebrated the freeing of slaves. Well perhaps the Jews did not leave Egyptland as we learned, perhaps Pharaoh did not airbrush them out of history, perhaps they did not wander in the desert for forty years to find one particular piece of desert, but after many thousands of years the lines of history and story converge. There’s one passage: _it was I who was brought forth from bondage, it was I who escaped Pharaoh_—another wormhole of imaginative desire.

“Oh no, not again,” Steve or somebody else may have or should have interrupted, “not the obliteration of space and time.”

Ketsia doesn’t raise her feet as she dances because the slaves brought to Haiti have their feet shackled to the deck. I eat this matzo for a week because that is what the slaves eat when they are freed, or at least because my mother and father do because their parents do because my grandparents’ grandparents might very well have. Sixteen great grandparents. How many great greats are involved, say, at the time of the expulsion from Spain?

“When’s that?” Christy asked.

“1492.”

“You’re thinking Columbus.”

“Leap year.”

“When did bondage become a good thing?” asked Ketsia.

“You mean like tie me up? B&D?” Line said. “Basically when it got a snappy abbreviation.”

“If that was seventeen generations ago,” I counted, “then figure two to the seventeenth power.”

“A hundred and thirty thousand? That can’t be right,” Christy said. “That’s like 130,000 people in Spain.”
“Yeah, that can’t be,” I said. “They’d have a lot more descendants than exist.”

“Like A&P.”

“I always do that,” I said. “I always start a problem with a wrong conceit: people overlap, people die. More likely one couple, that many descendents. Even that overlaps.”

“Attraktiv und Preiswert,” said Jutta.

“Sounds like B&D, too,” said Line.

Rituals are conforming mechanisms: because rituals are gravity that keep us from spinning off the earth; because structurally what was the difference between a Passover seder in Missouri and a mass rally by Germans who hadn’t moved to Missouri during and before the peasant rebellions (and who would not have come to power, Jutta argued in her book, had the liberal people not emigrated), the moral of which was to murder those who celebrated Passover seders?

I hope the cute little kids from downstairs, Michael and Kayesha, and Chuck from upstairs, weren’t there that year. A&P.

Because I was in bondage being just me in my itchy skin, I sought to become my friends trapped still in time, to know what they knew. I tried two holidays, but there was no get-out-of-bondage-free card.

All Passovers overlapped with each other, as did all holidays because time, when it came to holidays that repeated every year, had to be cyclical. But there was also linear time, and so at some point Jutta went to Germany, Suneetha was graduated from med school and took a position in Rochester (not New York), Kayesha and Michael went with their mom, Deborah, to East Saint Louis, Steve died, Line returned to Louisiana, although they had all eaten matzo. Once Christy moved, she would take the celebration with her.

“You’re math, Ben—and Christy, I don’t know why you go along with it—it’s like your models of time going backward when a river has its current reversed,” Suneetha said. “They’re really time going forward, but without memory.”

“Sentences arranged backward,” Steve said. “River was just a metaphor of time, but after the earthquake of 1812, I’m telling you, the Mississippi went backward.”

“Written in English, read in Hebrew,” said Christy.

“I can’t really read Hebrew.”

“And not really memory. More like memory that wants to forget. Maybe a little more respect for time? Sorry, it’s a holiday, I’ll try. Okay, rewind,” Suneetha continued, approximating the sound of a tape run
backward. “Back through time, we see always fewer people, except for jumps for wars and epidemics and genocides.”

I said, “How would that work. Let’s say for Jewish people. The S.S. Saint Louis steaming across the ocean, back to America. Trains packed with frightened people pulling out of Auschwitz. Jews getting off at the station for the ghettos. The ghetto walls shrinking brick by brick. Shop windows reglazed.”

“Napoleon rides west,” Jutta said. “Takes away pretty Jewish names, rights.”

“Black people board slave ships in America,” Deborah said.

“Sail back to Africa,” Steve’s friend Alberto said one of the only times he came to Christy’s interfaith seder, “while sick-looking people jump out of the ocean, into the waiting arms of sailors. Feel better.”

“Indians waving, ‘Goodbye, Columbus,’” Alberto’s friend Steve said. “America teems with Indians.”

“Jesus descends from the cross,” Christy said. “Drags it back through the stations. Returns it. Thanks, but no thanks. Preaches love.”

“Indians hike to India,” said Suneetha. “Merge into fewer people from South America to North, to Siberia, through China, maybe a dozen home to India.”

“Fiery sword waves Adam and Eve back to Eden. Over here, c’mon,” Line said. “Eve spits up a piece of fruit she should not have eaten. Angel goes, ‘Hungry for the fruit of knowledge of good and evil?’ Eve’s like, ‘No thanks, I’m stuffed with manna.’ Angel says, ‘Kidding!’”

“Adam loves Eve so much that he hugs her into his chest while he’s sleeping,” Deborah said, getting up. “They melt into clay.”

“The end,” said Christy.

“It’s a parlor game,” Suneetha said.

“Like religion,” seconded Steve.

“Could we get board pieces to go counterclockwise?” I suggested. “Whoever gets back to Eden first wins?”

“And nobody else gets in?” Christy asked. “How about the Tidal Pool Edition?”

“Sell that at Christmas,” Deborah said, “make a lot of money.”

“Yeah,” Jutta said, “there ought to be a big market for undoing history.”

Christy pulled her egg from the black and dropped it onto a paper napkin. It bore white lattice work fine as a spider web, if not as strong, glowing from the black egg. She slowly turned the egg to
check for blemishes and flinched when she found one, a stray piece of white, protected by a stray piece of wax, scratched the wax away with a fingernail, and put the egg back in the jar of black. Ever since she could remember, Christy had spent Easter coloring eggs, these past two years with her Saint Louis friends, in college with her roommates, before that with all her cousins, blurring back two decades now. And before that her mother coloring eggs in some Scandinavian country, Norway or Sweden, and, though she never asked, probably both her mother’s parents and their parents in previous centuries. She wished they had color photos from back then. She would replicate their designs.

Though it was my second or third year, I still didn’t have finesse with the eggs. I went conceptual. I covered all but a circle on my red-spotted, yellow egg, and put it into the white, realizing too late that I could have used the built-in white. I drew profiles with pointy noses that were sharp enough to puncture an egg and a globe that seemed to have undergone continental shift for a few million years beyond our own time. I scratched on the name of eggry person in the room, then on another egg eggryone who should have been there.

My glands ached from too much egg blowing. I pulled the forgotten egg from the yellow.

“What’s that supposed to look like?” Christy asked.

“It’s supposed to look like a fried egg.”

They flip through the photocopies of the converted Haggadah to catch up with me, but their version is read left to right and mine is backward in every way. Two thousand years ago, Jesus does what we do now, too, with the apostles because their parents do it and their parents’ parents. One life is too short, so much of it filled with bitter (me, the herb). I am miserable despite, or because of, the four cups of wine. The women are looking at me charitably, except Ketsia, who must know how poor an excuse this is in place of separating the Hebrew from the Aramaic, rehearsing rabbinical midrash of people who actually thought of these things before they opened their big mouths. This doesn’t count as a seder. But this part of me that eats unleavened bread all week connects with the part of them that did too, and they can join us in this way though I’ve only evidence through our senses and work, with language, with effort, that people really can join one another even in the same time. It must have seemed like magic to most people, thus the blood libel of sacrificing Christians, and to me too, it seemed like magic, magic or life. And they’re gone, many
of them for being of the people who ate unleavened bread for a week every year. I mean, you have a dominant religion whose holiday that expresses its central dogma falls around the time of a minority religion celebrating its founding and you have a disaster waiting to happen to the minority religion. I realize I am not explaining the symbols but trying to describe what religion feels like to me, how being alive feels so implausible. And we probably needn’t explain life so much as what to do to live life correctly, and Rabbi Hillel could do that while standing on one foot. Because Elijah the prophet of the end might walk through that door at any moment, Christy never locks her door anyway, might drink that half cup of the wine of affliction, nukes, ozone, meteorites, our only inheritance could very well be backward.

Oh, my, that was two different years. One without Steve.

The women, embarrassed, didn’t say anything.

“Christy,” I asked, “why don’t all Christians have a Passover seder?”

“Because it’s like the one Jesus had.”

The seder could live on without Jews. One day we would marry Germans and disappear like wolves passing into coyotes.

“He understands why you do it,” Suneetha explained for me. She had brought grapefruit-sized oranges, for old time’s sake. “But why not all other Christians?”

She couldn’t answer what the rest of us know, that they were less perfect than Christy, our platonic form. She takes my hand and Suneetha’s. She thinks we can wind up one stop shy of grace, that we might get into heaven anyway on some sort of affirmative action program for spiritually-challenged heathens.
i was born during the ripening season of atis fruits—heavy and whole, the size of a human heart. from the looks of their scaly, green skin, you would not believe sweetsop or custard apple—dragon balls, maybe, lizard globes for the proper. i looked forward to peeling them with my fingers, diving into the sticky flesh, just as i had hoped, at age seven, to receive another musical, pop-up birthday card from my mother who worked in saudi. doubtless, the card would be some disney-themed story, glitter and bright teeth to feature happiness over cleverness unlike the apologue of a native myth about a monkey who escapes being eaten by an eagle. a cassette tape would accompany the card, her voice gleeful, far. this i would play over and over until the next one came. upon her return, she would show us pictures—on vacation in bangkok, or at parties wearing matching overalls with her suitemates, cradling the children of her arab boss. i once thought i looked like them, their rising noses and thick, black hair. my brother would agree, often teasing how i don’t belong—my toes too far apart, my skin too pale. on my twentieth birthday, my father told me everything—
my english was not so beautiful then, in fifth grade when the white, male administrator walked me to my class. a wave of the hand: so-so, as he explained to the white, male teacher about the new foreign student. it had only been a few months since we arrived—first in los angeles where we lived with my mother’s sister and shared a bunk bed with our grandparents. there, i ate crackers for breakfast, then at lunch, gave away the three plums my father packed in a brown paper bag. we rode the bus for three and a half days until we reached missouri where we met my mother, wearing a black leather coat and red scarf, waiting inside a fuchsia two-door coupe she purchased for us, a family of five. at the new school, young eyes peered at the door where i stood with the men assessing my capabilities. boys smiled, girls whispered about my too-big clothes from a thrift store. for the rest of the year, they would have someone else to tease, especially about idioms: do you like to eat out? some would plead, say a curse word in your language. i gravitated to the other outcasts who said very little to each other. we sat around the monkey bars during recess, dragged our shoes along the mulch underneath the swings.
Carol Willette Bachofner

Unknown Algonquin Females, Circa 1800s

They dug up my grandmother, moved her to the museum. No one stopped them. I had no say. De-recognized by government, filed at the BIA under “I” (Indian, former), she’s been reduced to anthropology, curated by bureaucrats, her bones on display with the bones of a woman from an enemy tribe: (Unknown Algonquin Females, Circa 1800s). No one sang a travel song for her to ease her bones along the way; no giveaway, no mourning strings to soften the sorrow. I have watched their grandmas prayed and cried into the ground, names cut into marble, bodies preserved under stones safe behind iron gates. The governor’s announcement claims today: There are no Abenaki Indians left in Vermont.
The Grass

The grass waited for your departure.
Years it waited, Grandmother,
as you traveled
   From Lodz to Gdynia
   Gydnia to New York
   New York to Chicopee
   Chicopee to Somerset.

The grass waited for your daughter,
     left behind.
The grass waited as you buried
     your husband.
It waited as you left for Pennsylvania
     to raise your sons and daughters.
It waited for you to learn English,
     your coat wrapped around you,
     scarf knotted tight
     around your crown of braids.

It waited as the years
     unbuttoned themselves,

     the year of the broken necklace,
     year of the failed alfalfa,
     year of the one-eyed horse.

The grass waited for you to
     shoo the flies,
     gather the eggs,
     plant the cabbage,
free the cows from the barn.

It waited for your daughter who never arrived.
   It waited for your oldest son’s coffin.
It waited for your light footstep.

The arms of the grass beckoned.
Way to the Wedding

I am this young man but older—I was looking for him.

He was looking at a map
with reverence—place names, traceries,
the legend—though he did not love America, not as it now stood at attention.

In Elyria, Ohio, he telephoned his father.

At a motel in Elyria, I lost my glasses,
I was eighteen.

I’ll look for them.

He stopped at War Axe
in Nebraska, in the dead bison prairie,
saw no bones—in No Name, Colorado,
purchased water in a bottle for $1.98—and in Grand Junction, stole the Gideon,
and naked and unshaven read the Song of Songs
and read it as a red slash in the black field of the Tanakh.

Wed, he said to the motel wall.

He felt unsafe and hid the Gideon
between two black suits in his bag
and felt imperfect.

All night he drove to Campo Pesquero La Lobera,
where Jews stood under palm trees.
Rose of Shar’on. Tents of Kedar.

There was wind—she in her white.

He died at twenty-four and didn’t
tell me how.

Better than wine, I will run after you
and catch the foxes in the vineyards
on the day of the wedding,
a strand of scarlet,
henna with spikenard,
and the watchmen struck me,
took my veil away.
Doug Cox

The N-Word

Nueva York. California. Texas. Such vast space
Must accommodate, harbor illegal aliens,
Ex-wives, convicts, terrorists. Plus, countless
Herds of shortsighted councilmen hell-bent on

Passing well-meant ordinances against said word.
Read: bans, stiff fines, street busts administered
Via eyewitness accounts/anonymous tips
For quoting your favorite Richard Pryor bits,

Mass citizen’s arrests for aping gangsta rap
Con rich white friends, full hate-email sweeps
& raids on racist pricks caught cursing black folk
Reciting (in private) Mark Twain to Lit students.

How quick fed-up public servants will cross-dress
Nazi-esque censorship as progress, tolerance,
Blind justice served up cold as old-school pimps
Pandering Chitlin Circuits for more colored votes.

Still, I hold out hope, in some Plains State club,
Panhandle basement, our next protest poet,
Stand-up comic, classic hip-hop or graffiti artist
Armed with one mic, two used fists, that speak-

Easy penchant for puns, rhyme, yellow legal pads
& permanent black ink waits. Rapt, I listen close
For future redneck punk bands made up of members
Of mixed gender, race, dub acts who name their own
Doug Cox

Curtis L. Crisler

American Us

for those crazy Noodlers

He beats chest, a usually shy adolescent, sporting new Sean John b-ball cap, raising a catfish, his body length, to be on camera. No one could call him pusillanimous since his father taught him the hundred-year-old art, where a subculture of bare-handed badasses search the dirk-ridden cubby-holes of muddy waters, avoiding teeth, feeling for gums and whiskers of flatheads in a soupy darkened bank of Oklahoma’s sub-earth, where the two-toned black-and-silver fish hide and wait to bite arms of the men foolish enough to Catfist. This a place where all sons dream in watercolor. Men here are men—good ole boys with protruding cheeks full of snuff, wearing five gallon hats or NASCAR caps, jaw-yapping about copperhead bites, or letting a flathead loose to mar the forearm into a permanent tattoo of scar tissue. The brave ones have signed up at Bob’s Pig Shop for the huge contest, where the young boy sees his father as a warrior with water—loving every soaked fiber of his Dad’s favorite Wranglers, or Levi’s, letting the murky water lease him for an integer in time, until long black whiskers slap and wrap up his elbow like wet shoestrings. A father owns a smile, and his son extols his infection, and smiles new.
The Taste of Letters:

*teaching English as a Second Language*

The American *r* is thrown straight out
firm and decisive, like the first softball
of the season, when the players believe
in winning and the crowd, eager as horses
at the gate, perch on the edge of hard benches.

The Russian *r* bounces on the tongue,
salty, addictive as smoked almonds,
rolling back and forth like a wave
hesitant to hit shore and disperse.

*f* is for the wild fennel of Kosovo
prolific as bodies piled in muddy ditches
lining the gutted road my student walked
for three straight weeks, all the way
to Albania; her little brother
strapped to her back like a muslin bag
bursting with potatoes.

Most days the bitterness of memory
wears off, leaving only numbness in the cheeks,
the lingering smell of anise on her breath.

Sweet and acidic as Persian cranberries
drying on a windowsill, the letter *c*.
But why is it hard in a first syllable,
soft in a second?
For that there is no answer,
for in English, little is logical,
only rules, there for the breaking.
Alex Dimitrov

American Youth

That first summer my father spent more time driving to work than he did sleeping,

and my mother wrote postcards all day to everyone back home, people she never liked,

even they were needed, she said, to pass the time, to live through the hours we had to fill with

English lessons—every day a new word, then phrases, and finally sentences that spoke of nothing

no matter how many times they repeated in our ears. I’d leave the house sometime after lunch

to sit on the sidewalk and imagine that one of the cars driving by was my father’s.

And every day there I watched the neighborhood kids playing, watched them tirelessly until dark,

trading cards with each other, toy guns. I watched them live out my American youth.
In the aftermath of the empire’s death—
trains cross the border between Pakistan and India,
spilling bodies and severed hands of Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims.
Mother escapes with what she could carry
across the split world,
as Kashmir became Partition’s open sore.

In the aftermath of my birth,
my first days lit by bulbs
of white jasmine,
the world spread wide before my parents.
They take what is at hand—Father’s scientific journals,
Mother’s rose-strewn Kashmiri shawls.

They pack their bags,
read the guidebooks,
and follow the lines that lead us
from the warm palm of empire
to its furthest frostbitten fingertips.
Vigil for Resident Aliens

Thousands cross borders—
each late arrival a ceremony
to announce how far they’ve travelled. 
Language a bruise, roots in parcels,
the smell of miles on their clothes—
countless white nights of insomnia
that kept the roofs from falling.
Citizens become aliens—

women’s veils become partitions.
Turbaned men drive taxis,

English a raw tangle of verbs
in their thick accents—

not my parents’ Queen’s English.
Passports are fingered nervously

with every border crossing,
every honour killing

of some disobedient bride.
Imagine then,

a descant.
A glass of cool water,

quiet.
One at a time the children departed into the waiting arms of a parent, grandparent, or babysitter, until at last Lila sat at the low table of the Jefferson Park Second Methodist Church basement with only Mirabelle. Lila waited for the little girl to fuss in her baby Spanish for a different crayon, watching out the window high on the wall for the child’s mother, who was late, who was always late. The scraggly grass at the window and the long street of bungalows and three-flat brick buildings turned gray with the sky, and finally Lila stopped watching. These people, she thought. These people do not know how to raise their children.

Dorothy came back from washing up the snack plates and cups in the kitchen upstairs, wiping her hands on the hem of her shirt. She wore a brown linen pantsuit, matching top and bottom, except the blouse had a design of flowers up one side, the starbursts of blue and white buds exploding over her right breast. Lila had said earlier that she admired it, because the clothes seemed on purpose, something she was supposed to note. She didn’t really like them. They were old lady clothes, that certain kind of expensive you could smell. Lila sometimes forced her boyfriend, Tillman, and his son, Charles, into stores at the mall in the hopes of finding something besides jeans and hooded sweatshirts to wear, but if she caught a whiff of that moneyed perfume, she allowed them to lead her out. “Get us out of this crypt, kid,” one of them would say to Charles, loud enough for the saleswomen to hear, and Charles, who was fourteen and glad to do it, would turn on the heel of his sneaker, squeaking the rubber against the store’s shining floor, and lead them to the nearest exit.

Dorothy hadn’t worn a smock over her new clothes. She was wrinkled and spotted on the thighs with jelly and fingerpaint. Lila pretended not to notice.

“This is never going to come out,” Dorothy said, swiping at one leg. She stopped a few feet from Lila, noticing the little girl. “Again?”

“That’s what I’m saying. I think we need to fine the family.”
“They can’t afford to pay more than they do.”

Mirabelle screeched an unintelligible word. Lila cleared her throat. She really should be learning Spanish, but she’d grown up a pasty-white child of pasty-white parents in Indiana. Freckled mutt daughter of German/English/maybe-a-little-Irish parents, everyone for miles looking very much the same. No one spoke Spanish, not like here in Chicago. At her high school, the kids had taken Spanish, but not seriously. This was in the eighties, before anyone was really talking about the world as though it were one big ant farm and they, the ants, all had to be squished between the same two pieces of glass. Lila took business classes, typing, and home economics. One six-week period they studied childrearing, and her classmates brought in cousins or nephews and they took turns holding their hands and walking them around school. She hadn’t thought she was college material. But now she was stuck in a lifetime course of childrearing, and she never got the credit for it. Other people’s kids turned out well-behaved and social. Other people’s kids turned out to be worth having.

Mirabelle screamed again. Lila took the crayon from the girl’s hand and held out a pink one. With concentration on her face, the baby wrapped her chubby brown fingers around the crayon and put its blunt end to the sheet of butcher paper before her.

“Besides,” Dorothy said, watching Mirabelle fondly. “It’s not that much trouble.”

Not much trouble. Lila watched Mirabelle’s slow progress with the pink instead of looking at Dorothy. If she did, she’d give away too much—that the trouble was hers, not Dorothy’s. That most everything the older woman said made Lila feel as though she were being patted on the back. That she secretly hoped that the fingerpaint wouldn’t come out of Dorothy’s outfit and she would have to go get another. That’s what Dorothy would do. She would just go get another.

Lila didn’t want to imagine how many days of working in the church basement she’d have to set aside to pay for such a gaudy set of rags. She knew that the other woman didn’t think that way. She didn’t have to. Dorothy was a volunteer. She had retired years ago, but Lila thought she meant that her husband had retired. Dorothy’s retirement probably consisted of buying clothes for retirement activities. New clothes for sitting around. New clothes for visiting grandchildren.

“Still,” Lila said. “These people are using us. There should be some sort of consequences.”

Dorothy stood quietly for a moment, staring out the dark windows.
She brushed at her loose white curls as if looking into a mirror. “I’m sure she’ll be here in no time.”

“Once she made me wait until seven. Seven. A full hour late. If you were an hour late to work, they’d fire you. Well. They’d fire me.”

The time Mirabelle’s mother had taken an extra hour, the woman had arrived full of apologies and an excuse about an accident. She hadn’t been in it—it had just stopped the traffic up I-90 from where she worked in a bank. That hour had made Lila so late for home that the buses had switched to their slower evening schedules. She had waited at the corner in front of the stop for what seemed another hour, watching drivers rushing through the tail end of yellow lights. Tillman and Charles lived on their own farther north and weren’t waiting on her, but she still valued her time. It was hers anyway, not Mirabelle’s mother’s, to spend.

“An hour late?” Dorothy frowned. “When was this?”

“All the time.” Which was a lie. It was once, as she’d said. Two weeks ago, in fact. She remembered because Lila had been expecting a phone call from her sister that night, but she hadn’t called. Her older sister had three children and lived out in the far suburbs. She was always too busy to come into Chicago and go out like they used to, and when Lila complained that she always had to be the one to find a way out to see her, Melissa cut her short. “You don’t understand how hard it is.”

How hard it was to take care of children all day, is what she meant. Lila looked down at Mirabelle’s curly black hair. Yes, yes, she did. What Melissa didn’t understand was not being paid well enough to do it—to take care of twenty instead of three, to have to break up a dog pile of small rough boys the second the other day care specialist and the morning volunteer went to take their smoke breaks, to give up every ounce of energy she had each day and have it handed back to her in spare change. To have her life rented out so that there was nothing left for her.

It cost her $8.60 round-trip, one bus fare, and about two and three-quarters hours to get out to see Melissa, and then her sister put her feet up on the rungs of the stool Lila sat on and said that she was going crazy being cooped up in the house. Lila could only nod and try not to look too hard at her sister’s forty-dollar pedicure or the objects that she had collected around her. If she said what she really thought—that Melissa should try her life for one day or the life that generations of their family had led to produce this one single college graduate who
hadn’t used her degree for even a day—they would only fight. They saw each other so rarely as it was.

Mirabelle reached for Lila’s hand and placed the pink crayon in it. She babbled happily, then took the crayon back and returned to her project.

The real problem with Melissa was that she didn’t recognize what she’d been given. Lila and Tillman had had this conversation so many times, but they always ended in the same place. Tillman had Charles, and he didn’t need another kid. He didn’t want another kid. She did, but only with Tillman and not alone. She wanted a baby of her own so badly that she grew short-tempered with the women who had more than they should be allotted. Women at the grocery with four kids going every which way. The women trying to get on the bus with two sour-faced children and a babe in arms; the air on the bus constricting when the baby started up a wail. The news stories about children being killed or hurt by their own parents tore her to pieces. But then so did the sight of the family in the next building—seven kids, stair-stepped in height and age. Seven. With that many children, how could you care for them all?

Lila brushed Mirabelle’s hair back from her face. “Do you wonder if Family Services has ever been out to their house?”

Dorothy turned toward her sharply. “Why would you say that?”

“No reason.”

Dorothy came around the table and squatted next to Mirabelle. “Bonita,” she said, waving her palm over the drawing. The page was a series of scribbles in different colors. A pink scrawl serpentined across all of it. Mirabelle had found a signature color. “Are there bruises?” Dorothy pulled Mirabelle’s shirt away from her neck and peered down her back.

Lila swatted Dorothy’s hand away. “No. That’s not what I meant.”

Dorothy pressed her hands against her stained pants and heaved herself up. “What did you mean, then?”

This was one of the reasons Lila dreaded the afternoons. As tiring as the children were, Dorothy was worse. Dorothy was the sort of person who marched into a situation and saw herself as the leader. She went straight to solutions before the problems had even been sorted. The other volunteers wouldn’t work with her, so for the last hour of the day, when the population of the day care was down to less than six children, Lila and Dorothy were left alone to handle final pick-up.

Mirabelle reached for Lila’s hand again and patted it. Lila smiled
down at her. Mirabelle’s mother had kept them waiting so many times and for so long that she and the little girl had become a team. During the day when the other children were there, Mirabelle still stuck close to her, sharing her dolls and puzzle pieces, babbling at her in her lovely made-up language.

Dorothy picked up a toy truck lying at her feet, glanced around at the rest of the toys on the floor, and started gathering them.

“I just meant,” Lila said, but couldn’t finish it. She meant that she wondered what life at home was like for the children they cared for all day. The little boys with round tummies and dark Romeo eyes. The little girls in mismatched patterns and black braids, their ears pierced with small gems—pierced much too early, in Lila’s opinion. The babies, overfed and overcoddled, who cried for their mothers for two hours until they finally fell asleep mid-scream. “I guess I just meant. Are they loved?”

Dorothy was reconstructing a puzzle of colored rings that slid, in order of size, onto a plastic spool. She placed it onto a nearby shelf, along with a handful of board books. All the toys and books were donations from the church congregation or from a secondhand store a couple of miles away in a neighborhood that considered itself a small sovereign nation, every resident a kindly benefactor of someone less fortunate. A group of ladies with white hair curled precisely like Dorothy’s collected items for the store and brought whatever didn’t sell down to the church once a month. The toys they brought had a layer of use on them, a tacky feel that could not be scrubbed away.

Dorothy stopped. She held a ragged, dark-skinned doll with knotted hair. She smoothed the doll’s dress.

“Well, why wouldn’t they be loved?”

Lila turned back toward the child-sized table and watched Mirabelle work.

Dorothy continued without her. “I imagine they are. It’s the ones not in day care who maybe aren’t being looked after. If they were left alone, I mean. Isn’t that right?”

There went Dorothy again. She was trying to bring the conversation to a close before Lila had even decided what she was trying to say. Lila looked at her watch. “You can go on home, Dorth. It’s way past for you.”

Dorothy placed the doll lightly on top of the toy chest in the corner and rose with her back stiff. Dorothy didn’t like nicknames. She never answered to Dot or Dottie or Dort or anything else the other volunteers thought of. She always called the children by their full
names. “Esme is a lovely name,” she had scolded the other specialist, Tonya, yesterday. “But her mother named her Esmerelda.” She softened her s’s and trilled her r’s, attempting to sound like the toffee-skinned women who dropped their children off each morning. Dorothy could turn a child’s name into a melted lump of butter suitable for snack-time toast. The morning volunteers laughed at her behind her back.

Dorothy looked at her watch. “I’ll stay for a while.”

Lila sighed and offered a new crayon to Mirabella. The little girl took it, stared at the deep chocolate tip, and threw it back on the table. She continued with the pink.

“It might be late,” Lila said. “There’s no reason for her to come earlier, now that she knows she can get away with seven o’clock instead of six.”

Dorothy walked to the table and sat in one of the small chairs across from them. Dorothy fit rather well into the child’s chair. Lila sat up straighter, but her thighs still hung over the rounded edges of the chair. Dorothy said, “That’s OK. I’ll keep you company.”

It was no favor. If Dorothy were a specialist, Lila could leave Mirabelle with her and go home. But she was the one who needed to stay, according to the strict rules of the day care. Lila could imagine the director driving by on her way home from dinner with her husband and seeing the light still on. Dorothy, only a volunteer, left with a toddler? She could kiss this job and any other in childcare good-bye. What if this was a test? What if Mirabelle’s mother had been asked by the licensing board to push them past their limits to see what would happen? Would they break the rules or abuse the child or call the police or—Lila realized she wasn’t exactly sure what she was supposed to do in this situation. Say Mirabelle’s mother didn’t show up at seven or seven-thirty or eight. At what time would they have to go into the emergency plan? And what was the emergency plan, anyway?

“Do you know where that binder is? The one Tonya is always updating with phone numbers?”

Dorothy shook her head but stood up and headed for the back corner where the specialists had a desk and a filing cabinet with a phone tucked away in a drawer. If the phone were left out on the desk, the children would pick up the earpiece and start dialing. One day Lila had heard a boy named Muhjaref—one of the morning volunteers called him “Jeff,” hoping that it would get back to Dorothy—speaking in a rapid language into the phone. A few weeks later, the church had complained about a charge on the phone bill for a call to Pakistan. Lila
refused to believe that Muhjaref could have called someone he knew. He was three. She wasn’t even sure that he was from Pakistan.

Lila followed Dorothy to the desk and accepted the binder from her.

“Is it already late enough to call?”

Lila glanced at her over the top of the binder. Dorothy seemed to know the procedure. “I’m just checking the order of things.”

“We haven’t even tried the family’s emergency number yet—”

“Dorth.” Lila flicked to the right page and ran her finger down the bulleted list. “I just want to make sure we’re prepared.”

Mirabelle made an unhappy squawk. Dorothy went to the table and sat across from her, but the child was just getting started. She was trying to push her chair away from the table but couldn’t move her own weight. She fusssed and grunted until Dorothy got up and pulled her chair out. The little girl stood on uncertain legs and started across the room toward the toys. She stopped short of the toy chest to sit and remove her shoes.

Lila watched Mirabelle’s pudgy hands work at the buckles and remembered her sister’s children, one by one, growing out of this stage. They were miraculous; all children were miraculous at this age. They were untouched, real. In a few short years they would be trained monkeys with manners out of proportion for their age or, instead, egos as tall as the pile of their discarded toys. Lila had always thought that if she could have the total care of a baby, she could raise a pretty good kid. Tillman had done a decent job with Charles. Charles was prone to deep silences, though, and sometimes locked his door and wouldn’t answer when she called him for dinner. She and Tillman ate without him, and when she tried to ask, he cut her off. “He’s just that age.” As if he were the expert. As if, just like Melissa, he felt she had nothing to say on the topic.

Mirabelle wrenched off her shoes and socks and ran for the toy chest, Dorothy trailing. Lila turned her back on them and read the list in full. The first step was to call the family, then the secondary emergency number. Usually these were grandparents or aunts, but Lila had never seen anyone but Mirabelle’s mother pick her up. After this, each step involved a broader and broader range of clipboarded and uniformed professionals. Lila skipped to the end to find out what happened to the child if the family couldn’t be reached.

“Foster care.”

Lila turned to see Dorothy shaking her head. At her feet, Mirabelle had retrieved the brown-skinned baby doll and was raking her fingers
through its knotted hair. “No,” Dorothy said. “I would take her home before I would let that happen.”

Lila looked back at the binder. This was precisely what she had been thinking, but she was offended to hear Dorothy say it. Lila felt a keen sense of injustice rise inside her. She, not Dorothy, was the specialist. She, not Dorothy, had been working with Mirabelle to learn a few words in English, like milk and doll. Mirabelle followed her—no one else—around all day. If anyone was taking Mirabelle home, it was Lila.

She could imagine it clearly. One of the officials there to take the complaint of abandonment would offer them a ride. At her studio apartment she would call Tillman and tell him she couldn’t come over and not again for a while. This was so delicious to her that she stopped to let her imagined self argue with the imagined Tillman. “Till,” she would say, “this child needs me. She has no one else.” Mirabelle would be set up on a pallet of quilts in Lila’s bed while Lila retreated to the couch nearby, a lone pillow under her head. From there, she could just see the soft rise of Mirabelle’s chest as she slept. In the morning, she’d begin to teach the girl how to make pancakes, the thick, buttery kind her mother had taught her to make in that old farm kitchen with the cracked black-and-white checked tiles. That weekend, she’d borrow Tillman’s car and drive down to that same house to introduce Mirabelle to her new grandparents. On her parents’ two acres, they could climb around the woodpile and catch fuzzy caterpillars in Ball jars, just as she had done. In her mind, Mirabelle was suddenly older, a girl of eight or nine with two long black braids and a missing tooth, and there they still were at the woodpile, her parents’ house in the background. It was the only childhood she could imagine. Drops of flour on the black squares of the floor and jars full of willie worms—these were the gifts she had to pass along. A sense of humor. A sense of rightness. Within her lived an entire kingdom, built from who her parents had taught her to be and who she had become. These were no small gifts she had to give.

“That’s exactly what I’d do,” Dorothy said. She leaned down toward Mirabelle and put her hands on her hips. “I would take you home with me. Wouldn’t you like that?”

Lila put the binder down on the desk, open to the right pages, and looked at the clock over the door. At precisely 7:01, she decided.

“Maybe she would like to come home with me,” Lila said.

“Well, certainly,” Dorothy said. “Mirabelle, would you like to visit Lila?” The way she said it made the idea sound like a game, like a stop on the board of Candy Land.
Lila said, “I mean forever. I wish I could adopt her.”

Dorothy stood up. She glanced from the dark doorway, to the clock above, out the windows. “I don’t think you should go around saying things like that.”

“Why not?” Lila wished Mirabelle would come back to the table. At the table, she and Mirabelle were on one side, and Dorothy—poor sharp little Dorothy with her hopeful flower across her chest—on the other. “It’s the truth. And I would make a great mom.”

“Well, she already has a great mom.”

“We don’t know that.” Lila glanced at Mirabelle. “She might be beaten at home.”

Dorothy clucked her tongue. “We would have noticed that.”

“She’s probably practically forgotten in the crowd of the other children.”

“What?”

Dorothy shook her head.

“What? Dorothy, tell me.”

“I think you might have Mirabelle mixed up with someone else, that’s all.”

“No, I don’t. I just think—”

“That the way you were raised is the only way to live. That the girl you turned out to be is the only kind of girl there is.”

“I don’t think that. I think I was raised pretty well, but I—”

“You do?”

Lila crossed her arms. “I think so.”

“And then what is it about this baby that makes you believe she needs you adopting her?”

Mirabelle was rocking the doll in her arms. She yawned.

“I think I’d be a great mom?”

“She already has—”

They both heard the door. They waited, still, until a petite woman rushed in. She wore all black, her hair pulled back in a tight ponytail. Above her head, the clock’s minute hand ticked. Seven o’clock. The woman held her hand to her mouth and talked through her fingers, “I’m so so sorry. It won’t—”

“We need to have a talk,” Lila said.
The woman cast her eyes down, as if to agree. She saw Mirabelle playing with the doll. “Bella bebè.”

Mirabelle looked up and dropped the doll. Dorothy swept Mirabelle into her arms and walked her over to her mother. The little girl babbled, reaching her arms out. Her mother dropped her purse to the floor and took her as if her arms were hungry for her, cooing words Lila couldn’t make out. Dorothy backed a step from them, looking away. The mother hummed into Mirabelle’s neck. She held one of her daughter’s hands in her own, as though they were waltzing.

Lila saw again the black-and-white checks of her mother’s kitchen, saw herself swinging a small girl by the hand. These were no small gifts. She believed it. Who would she be if she didn’t?

“We need—”

“I am talking to the director,” the woman said, her face against Mirabelle’s dark hair. She rocked back and forth.

For a second Lila imagined that the woman had heard what she’d said to Dorothy, that she’d taken what Lila had said as some sort of threat.

“I will talk, I mean,” Mirabelle’s mother said. “About a new arrangement. The distance, you see—I am too far to use this day care. Mira, she love you all so much. It will break my heart, but she will have to go to another center. Closer. Closer to my work so I am not late.”

Lila reached for one of the small chairs and let herself fall into it.

“But where?”

Dorothy cleared her throat. “I’m sure Terry would let you work it out however you need to. We’ll miss Mira, though, you bet.” She brushed the back of Mirabelle’s shirt softly. “This new place near your work. You would commute from there? Together?”

Mirabelle’s mother smiled and nodded.

Dorothy nodded, too. “Won’t that be nice. When she grows up, that’s what she’ll remember.”

Mirabelle lay her head on her mother’s shoulder. Dorothy helped retrieve the shoulder bag from the floor and then went through the doorway with them to get the door and lock up. Lila watched them go, trying to think what to say. There was nothing to say.

In a few minutes, Dorothy was back. She paused under the clock, then strode past the table and knelt for something on the floor. The doll. Lila watched her smooth the doll’s dress and take it, again, to the toy chest in the corner.

“This is where this belongs,” she said brightly.

Lila swallowed the knot in her throat. She felt the loss of Mirabelle
as a physical pain. She’d never see her again. But—Mirabelle was where she was supposed to be. Lila thought perhaps she was the one out of place.

“Yes.”

Dorothy crossed the room to the desk and closed the procedures binder with a snap. She slid open a drawer in the filing cabinet and placed the binder inside. “This is where this belongs.”

Lila looked up. Dorothy was waiting. “Yes.”

Dorothy dusted her hands together as though she’d done terribly dirty work. “Home, then. That’s where I belong.”

“Yes.”

Lila raised her head to see the clock above the door. The minute hand clicked backward and then leapt forward.

“Are you coming?” Dorothy asked.

“Just behind you.”

Dorothy had her purse over her arm. She pulled at its zipper, back and forth. “OK, then. Tomorrow.”

“Yes.”

Lila waited until she heard the door close and lock again, then the steps up to ground level and the distant crunching of Dorothy’s shoes on gravel. An engine purred to life and a pair of headlights glared across the ceiling. Lila waited in the child-sized chair until the lights slid across the ceiling tiles and away into the night.

By now, Mirabelle would be asleep in her car seat. Her mother might be humming something soft to herself. Lila tried to imagine what it must feel like to sit in that car and drive toward that life. Inside the house, something spicy bubbling on the stove. After dinner, fresh pajamas and a thin afghan from the back of the couch to wrap around Mirabelle. A book, a doll, and then bed. Lila felt the warmth of it in her bones.

She stood slowly, stretching her legs back to adult length, and stood at the table. She picked up the scribbled drawing Mirabelle had been working on and folded it carefully, until the drawing was a small, tight square. She thought to put it in her purse and take it home. She thought to put it in the trash, right there, where the janitor would rid them of it by morning.

She stood with her knees against the chair Mirabelle had used and imagined what she would do. She imagined that she did the right thing, the very thing that was to be done, and then she hoped that her idea of right was right enough.
Everything Gets Mixed Together at the Pueblo

Everybody is supposed to be on the bus at 12:15.

This is everybody, most of them white. There are a lot of them, small and tall, fat and pale, but if you are looking down at them from the pueblo, they just look like golf tees lined up, brittle and wooden.

Kind of like this:  I  I I II I I III I I

The bus will take everybody up to the pueblo to see the Indians, who are already there now, holding sweaty McDonald’s drinks in their hands, staring out from behind screen doors. Waiting for everybody to come up.

Everybody meets outside the Visitor Center, by the stone wall, with access to some enterprising Indian vendors who have walked down from the pueblo to sell bowls, key chains, and miniature terra cotta animals. The vendors wear sunglasses and T-shirts with basketball team names on them, and sometimes caps turned to the side. They sit at their tables, not talking. They pant a little, as if being around everybody is like being out too long in the sun.

Everybody touches the pots and the terra cotta animals, murmuring admiration. Some of them won’t buy anything at the asking price for fear of being deceived, duped by the cunning Indians. Every dollar subtracted from the price is a small victory for them, like planting tiny flags in the fat of their hearts.

A voice announces the imminent bus departure over an intercom. “Please be ready,” it asks, without sounding like it is asking.

Everybody has to go to the bathroom before they board the bus. They take their children, whose cheeks are pink and whose mouths twist down into fussy sneers, into the stalls, where sounds of protest echo against the sandstone. The children are then taken by their hands to the sink, where water runs down artfully into a slit from a New Age faucet.

“No! Don’t want to wash our hands,” the children say.

“The bus is leaving, come on,” the pink parents snap.

Outside, there are brown Indian children, or “Native Americans,” as the pink people call them. They run in the heat and laugh. They do
not sweat. They do not wash their hands, nor are they made to wash their hands. They urinate in the outhouses on their own and without coercion, or else they squat and defecate in the street, where their feces will later be eaten by dogs.

The Pueblo parents love their children, but they allow them to run to the end of the cliffs, and they neither worry about nor keep track of their bowel movements. Occasionally, as a result, the children fall to their deaths, or their stomachs explode before they can be taken down to a doctor. Most of the time, though, they are happy, living with disparate things, long shorts and tennis shoes, poverty and worms that burrow into the soles of their feet. In a way, they resemble the pink children, but only superficially, with their buzzcuts and T-shirts that read “Patriots” and “Dontcha Wish Your Girl Was Hot Like Me.”

The brown children run to the edge of the mesa and look down at the pink children below, about to be taken up by the bus. They laugh and throw rocks down. Their parents do not say a word.

It’s 12:15. Everybody gets on the bus.

They file in and plop down in their seats, ignoring the Indian driver and the Indian guide, both women in long shorts and sandals, with straight black hair that streams over their rounded shoulders. The guide’s name is Jennifer. The driver, Kathy.

“Everybody please sit down. This bus will take you to the top of the pueblo,” Jennifer says, her voice flat and trained.

“Here we go,” the parents say, putting their arms around their children. “Are you ready to see some real live Native Americans?”

As the bus pulls away, the adults turn and watch the Visitor Center disappear in the dust behind them.

Everybody is shocked when they first see the Visitor Center, a massive structure constructed of the finest pale pink sandstone, according to the most refined architectural principles, with special museum wings jutting off to the side like spider legs. Some are unable to fathom that the building represents the Indians they think they know, the ones with drinking problems who live in the gutted hulls of dead cars. There is a fountain spouting precious water in a never-ending vomitous flow from the mouth of a bird. No wooden cigar store Indian chiefs. Music is piped outside, something with flutes and chanting. Everybody enters cautiously, meeting with the brightness of marble and the exhilaration of air conditioning.

On the bus, everybody misses the air conditioning.
“Could you please open another window? It’s pretty hot back here,” a middle-aged white woman immediately asks. They have only been on the bus for sixteen seconds, but they have already determined their maximum level of discomfort. They are not afraid to speak out when they want something, and what they want is comfort and air conditioning and possibly some pretzels. But they should not be judged for this, for the Indians have a level of comfort as well, even if their bodies function like sand or water or stone, taking millennia to adjust.

Jennifer and Kathy ignore the passengers. Some of the more sensitive people do their best to win them over. There is admiration for the female Native Americans, with their grave faces and horsetail-thick hair, but everybody is afraid to show too much of this admiration for fear of patronizing them.

“What a lovely visitor center that was,” a sensitive man finally says on the bus, patronizing the Indians, because he cannot help it, because it has welled up inside him and he truly was impressed by the tremendous wooden door that opens like a secret passage on an immensely expensive hydraulic system.

“Thank you,” Kathy answers, in a low tone, not because she has to, but because, in a way, she is proud of it, they are all proud of it, and of the casino money that built it. They enjoy the publicity the Visitor Center has been given by the U.S. government, in tour booklets and on maps, even if the guilt behind the publicity smells oily and leaves a slick residue.

“Come experience the Indian Pueblo. Step back into the past,” the government says in their advertising packet.

The Indians understand image. They spend their money on the slit sink and the magic door, but not on electricity or running water up at the pueblo.

The Indians also understand this slippery guilt. This is how they successfully manage to scare everybody into behaving, to keep them from wandering off, to make them pay ten dollars to take a photograph. They affix small ID cards to everybody’s cameras like toe tags and threaten to take the cameras away and destroy them in an Indian ceremony with public jeering if unauthorized pictures are taken. This has only happened twice, but both times, the Indians enjoyed themselves and ate hot dogs and beer.

At the Visitor Center, everybody lowers their heads and hands over the ten dollars. The Indians take the money and reserve their energy, hoarding it beneath their cheekbones.
Pink husbands say to their wives, “Ten bucks! This is outrageous. I could just snap a picture with my cell, and they wouldn’t even know.” The wives shush their husbands, imagining their bodies lying out in the sun, arrow-ridden.

They are on tribal lands, after all. Tribal lands with their own laws, and a small, roving group of tribal law officers with as much power as children playing dress-up.

Everybody knows this. They don’t say it, and they try not to think it, because the guilt is still there, rushing over them like soapy water, but they know it. When they think the Indians are not watching, they stand up straight, shedding all traces of mansuetude. They imagine the Indians’ bodies in a blood-stained, bullet-ridden heap, documented by their digital cameras.

The bus, bearing the weight of everybody, plus Jennifer and Kathy, crawls up to the pueblo.

Jennifer and Kathy look like sisters. Kathy is a little younger and seems a little happier, though neither of them ever really smiles. Kathy moves quickly, responding to the road with light, quick adjustments, and occasionally flipping her dark hair. Jennifer is thick in the middle, her nipples and stomach meeting roundly, and her steps are heavy, as if she were wading through something. Kathy and Jennifer do not have names of birds, or seasons, or words separated by hyphens, and this is mildly disappointing to everybody who resembles golf tees and chubby aliens.

But everybody can also be broken down into further sub-groups: There is the multi-culti couple, the hip Asian husband and his white-as-paint wife, who both wear shorts and hats and tank tops. This is a childless couple, as evidenced by their taut bodies and their continuous flirtation, the way the husband’s eyes pause at his wife’s neckline, embellished with a dirty French word, and the closeness that allows her to keep her hand on the curve of his waist. After this trip to the pueblo, they will go home and look at their digital photographs, and he will tell her how good she looks in her French tank top, and she will pull it off so he can play with her youthful, smallish breasts.

This couple is the counterpoint to another couple, a husband and wife team of archeologist and anthropologist, who have not made love in four years, but who have each published several university press books with glossy photographs and seventeen pages of footnotes. They are passionate, but not about each other. They talk of their work like
they would of a lover or a rapturous meal, and though they struggle not to show it, they both become sexually aroused at the thought of meeting a real Pueblo Indian. They come armed with questions about NAGPRA and Spanish colonization, such that their preconceived thoughts poke through their skin like barbs.

The remaining people are a hodgepodge: retired grandparents with thick mid-sections and perms who are vacationing with their grandchildren, teenage boys who walk with their limbs turned inward, every movement signaling their physical shame, and the fussy pink children with hair parted to the side, like news anchors. There is a middle-aged black couple, a tall man and a short wife, both of whom are aware of being the only black people present. They will think fleetingly that they should feel some sort of kinship to the Indians, because they are people of color, but they will not feel anything but the general strangeness of being around a people who live without electricity.

Finally, there is the sensitive man with an unplaceable accent who has read up on the Indians, who keeps calling them “Native Americans,” unaware that this particular group of Indians prefers the term “First Americans” and finds his term wholly offensive. He will ask thoughtful questions and take artful pictures, despite the fact that his ancestors once cut off chunks of the Indians’ feet as punishment for practicing their religion. But really he cannot be blamed for this, for he was only born, and has since tried to make up for it.

Jennifer, the guide, who is fifty and does not wear a bra, ignores the white woman when she asks again for the air conditioning to be turned on. She understands how to mute their voices in her head. She knows she has to, or else she will snap at them in a way they aren’t used to, and she will lose her job. She turns to Kathy.

“Did you see *The Bachelor* last night?”

“Nope. I missed it. Bill and I drove down to get pizza. What’d I miss?”

“It was the finale. Do you really want to know?”

Kathy nods and turns down the static on her walkie-talkie. “Yeah, tell me.”

“He picked that blond bimbo. Can you believe it?”

“Which bimbo? Nancy?”

“No. Kimberly, I think.”

“You’re joking,” Kathy says, steering the bus up the road to the mesa. “Nuh-uh,” Jennifer says. She tries to imagine herself on such a
show, what she would say to the cameras if some white guy put a rose in her hand. She laughs.


“Nothing,” Jennifer says. “That was pretty much it.”

The ride to the top takes less than seven minutes. The bus lurches with the weight of everybody. Turns out golf tees are heavier than they look. Seven minutes. Long enough for several Indians walking up to their houses to pass the bus on foot.

“You comin’ over later?” Kathy asks Jennifer.

“Maybe,” she says. “I’ve got at least two more of these.” Then Jennifer looks with something dangerously close to disgust, but more obviously boredom, toward everybody. “We’re here. Watch your step getting off.”

Jennifer waves goodbye to Kathy, who turns back the volume of her walkie-talkie. There is another freight of people waiting for her below, but she must time their pick-up perfectly, or else the two groups will see each other, and the illusion of aloneness and a simpler time will be destroyed.

Everybody gets off with effort, ignoring Kathy. They will not remember her.

The pink children go first, eager to see something, point at it, and announce to everyone what it is. After a few hours on the pueblo, they will whine and turn orange in the sun. They want things: dessert, toys, to push the button on educational placards. They watch a black puppy eating Indian feces and point to it with a skirl.

Jennifer glances at the screaming children out of the corner of her slit-eyes. She does not say anything, but her look conveys the certainty that these children will grow up to be white assholes who make a lot of money. It also communicates to the pink parents that they are solely responsible for their children’s welfare up on the pueblo. It says, I will continue with my educational tour even when your unsupervised toddler gets bit by a rattlesnake.

She puts on her space-age sunglasses, so there is less of her visible to them.

“Welcome to our pueblo,” Jennifer says, starting before everybody is completely out of the bus. “Please do not lag behind, because I will walk fast and talk fast, and I will not repeat myself. But I will repeat the rules that you heard down below: that you will only take a photograph
when I tell you it is appropriate to take a photograph, and if you do so when it is not the right time, I will take and destroy your camera. Also, do not stray from the group, because you are not allowed to explore the pueblo by yourself. This is because you are on land that is sacred to us, and you are required to treat it with respect. Respect means you stay with me at all times."

Everybody forms a group in front of Jennifer, a triangle with the black people and the sensitive man and the academics at the point, the rest fanning out behind.

They crane their heads to hear her, for she refuses to talk above a normal speaking volume.

Jennifer takes a deep breath, not because she is afraid, but because she has to build up her energy. Her instructions tumble over, one after the other, layered without affect. She has said these things a thousand times, and sometimes she dreams them, or wakes up her husband saying them. “I will take and destroy your camera,” she says, rolling over on the thin mattress, and Cliff jabs her in the side with his elbow. He looks at her face, the eyes open but half-lidded, illuminated by moonlight through the open square window. “Jesus Christ,” he says. “Wake up. You’re not at work.” But in the morning, she will brush out her hair and slide her shorts up her thick legs, and she will step outside the door again to say these things for money.

Cliff is lucky. He works on cars, and parts of cars, and he can go the whole day without ever saying a word to anybody.

Jennifer walks briskly toward the church, the main draw. Everybody tries to keep up with her, but they find it cumbersome to move their bodies in the heat. Their tender, house-conditioned lungs are assaulted by the dust blowing everywhere, unanchored by tree roots or grass.

“This is the Mission of San Felipe,” Jennifer says. “That window you can see up in the corner is where the first missionary who came to convert our people was stoned to death. The children of the village called out to him, and when he leaned out to give his blessings, they began throwing rocks at him because they did not appreciate his presence here. One large rock struck him in the center of his forehead, and he died, and then the children came and dragged his body through the street, where everybody celebrated with a parade and singing.”

Everybody listens to this story with a shudder, except for the academics who scribble it down in their notebooks, their mouths eagerly filling with saliva. For the black couple, there are disturbing historical echoes, mutilated bodies out on display. They lower their
heads solemnly, imagining a brotherhood with this dead priest that they haven’t yet felt with the Indians.

The pink husbands’ faces tighten. Animals, they think, their hearts leaping to patriotic action, pumping out an extra burst of blood, even though the priest was Spanish. What kind of people have children who throw rocks at priests? The wives nervously eye the wild Indian children occasionally running by behind the outhouses. They clutch their arms close to their bodies like dinosaurs.

The multi-culti couple smirks. They are enlightened. Modern. They are down with diversity and up for the legalization of marijuana. Good for you, they think. Score one for the Indians.

“Of course,” Jennifer says, “Once the Spanish heard about this, they sent a thousand soldiers and subdued our people. They re-established the church as Catholic, punished our people for their religious practice, raped our women, enslaved our men, and forced us to carry trees from that mountain”—Jennifer points to a tiny dot in the distance—“to build their houses and military forts.”

“How well has this been documented?” the academics wonder, licking the tips of their pens.

“It’s been documented,” Jennifer says, evasively. She continues her tour, gesturing to the graveyard in front of the church, with its layers of graves, one built on top of the next, bodies mixed into the foundation of bones, until, Jennifer says, they could no longer build up this wall of the dead.

“Where do you bury people now?” the black woman asks.

“Now we bury most people in a cemetery down below, just at the edge of our land,” she says. She does not mention the many Indians who leave this place completely, who get shit jobs out in the world, but better shit jobs, jobs good enough to keep them from coming back. They stay out in the world of electricity and football, running water and reality shows, and when they die, get scattered in white cemeteries with soft green grass and stone angels, in their own hole, where they don’t have to share.

Jennifer takes off her sunglasses and opens the tremendous door of the church.

Inside, everybody looks up at the architecture. She explains the circus carnival mix of Catholic saints and wooden crucifixes with the Indian rainbows painted on their walls, their rain clouds swelling against St. Stephen. “Over the years,” she tells them, “our people got tired of fighting against the Spanish, and the Spanish got tired of
telling us no. They started letting us bring in some of our religion, and we kept on baptizing our children and praying to Jesus Christ. That’s how everything gets mixed together at the pueblo.”

“What do you do now?” the academics ask. “Whom do you worship? Could you describe a typical service?” They lean forward in sexual frustration with each question, as if they might fall down upon Jennifer like a lover.

The pink children, bored by these questions, roam the church freely, staring up at the haunted, elongated faces of saints. They trace the rainbows with their fat, wet fingers. They clamber to the front of the church, in front of the altar, and plop down at Jennifer’s feet. She stares at them for a minute out of the ever thinner line of her eye, and imagines how much closer she will let them come before she kicks them with the rounded toe of her sandal.

“We just do whatever,” she answers. “We dance a little. We pray sometimes, like when we really need rain. Which is all the time. Or we just talk to each other, catch up.”

This is, of course, a terrible letdown for everybody, everybody who has come from Texas, South Carolina, and Florida to hear about Indians and religious fervor and goat sacrifice, not chitchat and hoedowns at the Church of San Felipe.

As they file out, the multi-culti couple in the rear notes the obnoxious children and smiles, re-affirming their vow never to procreate but to travel and screw as much as humanly possible while respecting and learning about Native peoples everywhere.

After the church, Jennifer pauses for a moment while the permed grandparents sample some fry bread from an Indian meth addict, but begins the tour before they are done eating it. “I told you, you have to keep up,” she says, stalking off. She won’t talk to the meth addict. Fucking meth, she thinks to herself. Makes you crazy. Makes you move like a lizard.

While everybody browses the wares on little tables near the houses, Jennifer talks to a chatty, middle-aged Indian woman named Beth, who smiles and is beautiful with her hair choppily cut and arranged zigzagged atop her head like raven feathers, and who wears a sexy black halter top. Everybody looks at, handles, but doesn’t buy Beth’s pots. A teenage girl, Beth’s daughter, stares at everybody from behind a screen door, but doesn’t smile and doesn’t say anything. The sensitive man ignores a postcard-ready photo-op of the valley surrounding the
mesa, and instead suddenly takes an artful photograph of the teenage
girl, who immediately disappears.

Jennifer swings around, her loose, flabby breasts coming with her
torso a second later. “You do not do that,” she says to the sensitive man.
“You do not take pictures of people like that.”

“I’m sorry,” he says, his face flaming. “I thought you said, I thought
we were in a spot where you said we could take photographs.”

“It doesn’t matter. This isn’t a zoo. You ask permission of people
before you photograph them.”

There is stillness at the top of the pueblo now. The people handling
Beth’s pots gently return them to the table. Dust whips around the one
small tree on the mesa, planted as a joke to see if anything could grow
here. In a declivity where just enough rainwater collected during the
wet season, it has managed to stay alive.

“I’m sorry,” the man says. “It won’t happen again.”

Everybody waits to see if Jennifer will take the camera. They
shield themselves with their arms and fanny packs.

But nothing happens. Jennifer takes a breath and moves on.
Talking, gesturing. At some point in the tour, an apple and a Twinkie
have materialized in her large hand. She holds on to them, even uses
them to point at specific structures. “We build up, not out,” she says,
the Twinkie sweating against its plastic wrapper. “This is why you see
all our houses are two and three stories, with small rooms.”

Everybody knows that Jennifer is holding her lunch. Her distinctly
un-Indian lunch. Everybody wonders if she is sending them a message.
I’m done with you people, the message says. Just two more houses,
and I dump you suckers with Kathy, and I’m on my lunch break. How
rude, they think.

Jennifer doesn’t think of her lunch. She thinks of her mouth
saying the meaningless words, and how each word stamps a second,
bringing her closer to the end of another hour.

“Where do yew live?” a pink woman asks. “Close to here?” At the
same moment, she looks away at her teenage son, leaning over the
edge of the mesa. “Evan, git away from theyere.” The boy ignores her,
and steps closer to the edge. “GIT. A-WAY. FROM. THEYERE.” The
mother has forgotten all about Jennifer and her house.

Jennifer lies and motions to Randall Hanson’s house. “There,” she
says. “That one’s mine.” Everybody turns to admire it.

She pictures her own house, with its cool, dark walls, and
imagines lying down for a quick nap after lunch and before the next
tour. She tries to guess if Cliff made the bed before he left for work.

Near the end of the tour, they stop and look at a kiva where the men hold their tribal meetings. A thick white ladder leans against it, pointing skyward.

“Men only,” Jennifer says, indicating the ladder the Indian men use to enter the building, and the small hole in the wall they use to communicate with the women outside. She thinks about the hole sometimes, and how much she hates talking to Cliff through it, the way it makes his voice sound nasal and distant. It seems dangerous to her somehow. As if their voices, so strong and thick together, were being strained through the narrow passage. Yet she also thinks how much easier it would be if she could communicate with these people through it. She could pretend she was talking to anybody. Brad Pitt. The guy from The Bachelor.

After explaining about the men in the kiva, Jennifer tells a mildly sexist joke she has been instructed to tell, but, without modulation and verbal cues, nobody laughs.

From below, Kathy’s bus starts up with a choke. In a few minutes, she will arrive with the next group of people, and to take this group back to their cars. She will have a Diet Dr. Pepper in her hand, and she will explain to this group their options.

They can: a) Tip Jennifer, watch her blow on her hands to ward off the evil money spirits, and ride back in the bus; b) Tip Jennifer, and then walk down the graveled road back to the Visitor Center, where they can purchase mementos of their visit and leave a tip for Kathy as well, who doesn’t feel the need to ward off spirits, but who is hoping to buy an iPod; or c) Tip Jennifer, and climb down an ancient stone stairway once used by the Indians to haul up water, though nobody uses it anymore now that they have trucks and a road. Beth’s other little daughter, Brittany, who is ten, will guide them, hold the women’s purses, tell them where to wedge their feet and hands. Brittany will bound down like an antelope, and watch while they cling to the sides of the cliffs in terror. Brittany, with bangs like sea kelp, will get help if they fall and break their spines. No one ever goes down this way.

Jennifer stands next to the kiva and wonders if any of these people will try the staircase. She hasn’t used it since she was a teenager, following Cliff on a dare. Maybe the professors will climb down, she thinks. For authenticity.

“We are almost done,” Jennifer says. “Just one more house.”
Next to the kiva, an old Indian couple is renovating their house, adding a mixture of mud and hay to the outer wall with the palms of their hands. They move like wind-up dolls, steadily reaching down into a wheelbarrow for the mud and smearing it clockwise into the wall. The Pueblo husband barely glances up to acknowledge everybody. His wife pointedly says, “Afternoon, Jennifer,” as if Jennifer is alone.

As Jennifer explains what they are doing, how everything is made by hand, the mud ovens, the pots, the heaven-pointing ladders, all with elements from the pueblo, one pink lady angles herself closer to the Indian couple.

She pulls out her camera. With a proud smile on her face, as if to announce her respect, her ability to remember the rules and instructions, the lady looks at the couple and interrupts Jennifer’s narration.

“Excuse me. Can I take your picture?”

The old man looks a little embarrassed, and wipes the mud from his hands. His wife ignores the woman and keeps working.

“Sure. I guess,” he says. He widens his stance a bit, as if he is posing as a football player.

“Oh, you don’t have to stop what you’re doing. Just keep building your house,” the woman says. She adjusts her camera lens and crouches.

Nearby, the sensitive man watches, waiting for a reprimand from Jennifer that never comes.

As the woman clicks away, the man and his wife resume their methodical work, aware of being watched. They are used to the presence of these observers on the pueblo; indeed they have seen them many times, buying key chains, leaving crumbs of fry bread that ravens later eat in the branches of the tree. They have been observed doing harder work, adding to their houses, maintaining them, the women giving them blue rags to hang in the highest windows, new rooms to sit awkwardly out to the side, to house more children. “Paint the doors blue or red,” the women tell them, and the men do it. All this time since the buses have run, they have been watched, but it is a still a strange feeling for this couple to be so close to these raw-faced people, when they don’t quite know what that proximity means.

The camera snaps and whirs.

“Could you try to smile?” the pink woman asks.
The stories have been gone for a long time now. Someone tore open my rucksack as I tried to climb aboard the train to take them to Papa. It was during the Great Patriotic War, and the train was packed, people pushing their way in, crawling through the windows. I was young and much stronger than today, of course, but I was also alone; I didn’t know his stories had been stolen until it was too late. The saddest part is that the notebooks they were in were probably burned for fuel, Uncle Vanya’s intelligence and wit consumed even before the war consumed his body.

I only remember one: “The River.” Uncle Vanya, in addition to being an artist, had traveled widely as a youth, to the far edges of the Soviet Union, the western deserts of the Turkmen SSR, the southern mountains of the Uzbek SSR, places where the chadra was still worn. Naturally, the authorities later corrected this, but the old Eastern ways persisted for a while. Uncle Vanya’s story was about a girl who, while trying to cross a river to reach her village, fell into the deep, rushing waters. She became entangled in her chadra and drowned.

I always felt sorry for that girl, so weighted down by her society and her beliefs that it killed her. Uncle Vanya described it all so vividly. The chadra was light but long, some so long they dragged on the ground or billowed behind the women while they walked, which, I will admit, sounded beautiful. The top of the veil was like a knitted cap, snugly fitting, and the front panel hung over the face and shoulders. To see clearly through the mesh over the eyes, the women had to pull it close to them. Can you imagine that? That was when the men were around. By themselves or at home they simply tossed it back or let the folds drape around their faces, framing them very prettily. Even in the small mountain villages, they took care of their looks—washing their hair in yogurt, coloring their eyebrows and lids with usma to accent their dark eyes.

I can almost see her now, that beautiful drowned girl. She was carrying a bundle of firewood. Except for being Muslim and wearing
the chadra, she was a lot like me. I was told I was quite beautiful when I was young, and I had to carry firewood, too. We were living in town then, and at night we had to steal fence posts, or the logs placed on the ground to walk on in winter. Had the authorities caught us, we would have been sent to prison. I didn’t like breaking the law, but we needed the wood to stay alive. And I’d crossed mountain rivers, many of them, back when we lived in a village. Sometimes the water moves so quickly it can be frightening, and it’s icy cold, even in summer, even far downstream from its source. How awful it would be to drown in such waters! I don’t know what made Uncle Vanya think of such a story. He was a good man, someone who always did what he was told, but he was an artist. We all understood that and were protective of him, because we didn’t want him to get into trouble. I understood his story, though it was strange and maybe even a little decadent. He captured so well the spirit of a bright old culture, one superstitious and backward compared to the modern state we were building—how she carried firewood on her head, not over the shoulder in a strapped-up bundle like we did, how the silver bracelets jangled around her ankles as she moved along the mountain path.

She came to the river and stepped into it. It was cold, but she had crossed it hundreds of times in her life, and the rocky bottom felt familiar under her sandals. The water was a little higher than usual because of the spring thaw, but it was the river’s narrowest and shallowest point for several kilometers, and, as Uncle Vanya wrote, she had done this hundreds of times. She moved slowly but surely. The sun blazed overhead. The water was up to her knees, but she was strong, not like the girls living in the city today. Do you think they could or would carry firewood for kilometers like we used to, that Muslim girl and I? She’s strong, and she moves steadily through the water, her chadra pulled downstream like a wildly wriggling snake that won’t let go. There’s the path again on the other shore, just two meters more.

Then she slips and falls. My heart always beats faster when I think of this. There’s no reason; accidents just happen in life. She falls, and the rocks are slippery, and when she tries to get up, she’s pushed downstream by the strong current. Today’s girls wouldn’t know what to do. They probably would try to call on their cell phones for their boyfriends to come and save them. But I was a strong swimmer, just like that Muslim girl. She begins swimming toward the shore. But the current has pushed her into a wider, deeper part of the river, and her chadra has become tightly curled around her body. Can you imagine how terrible that

Jeff Fearnside
feels? She tries to bring her arms in the broad arcs that will pull her to safety but instead finds herself in a tangle of cloth. The veil has wrapped itself about her neck; nearly everywhere she looks is darkness, only the faintest glimmering of sunlight through water through the small mesh opening. I was a strong swimmer, but what could I have done? The water is cold. The river is pulling everything downstream. Uncle Vanya, Papa, where are you? They say you’re enemies of the people, but I know that’s not true. I’m trying to swim, but my arms won’t move. I’m swept into a big pool and pulled by the undertow to the very bottom. I can’t see, so I pull the veil close, peer through the mesh. Nothing but white bubbles boiling all around. I don’t know which way is up or down. I try to swim in any direction, but the undertow keeps me at the bottom. My limbs are growing cold. I’ve swallowed a lot of water, and my insides are cold. The darkness doesn’t seem so scary now. I think I’ll rest here for a while. The current gently tugs at my body, pushing it this way and that, like an Eastern dancer. The veil slowly unwinds, and I can see the pebbly riverbed clearly now, the big boulders along the sides, everything bathed in a soft light. The current folds the cloth around my face, framing it very prettily.
Broken swing, iris curl, and doubt,
    autumn-sprung. Father’s crooked back
    shakes on its prayer mat as morning

beads on wet lawns, baffles the space
    between blue dawn and black hyacinth:
    silky, stunned. Chopped ginger, green

in its bowl, rests beside the pressed,
    stolen, rubbed-away page. O coral vine,
    foxglove, unwelcome barge of light,

what offerings should she bend before
    your weight? A daughter must rid herself
    of a father. Guilt must become a kettle,

a lover, a stargazer. She knows she must
    resist sleep, familiar, relentless. She knows
    she will not. She knows it all. Love. Success.
I.  *Things came too fast for her; she had not had enough preparation.*

Gray sky to gray
land, the plane noses
down—I am unchanged,

like the mural of brown
faces still trapped
in the concrete frame

bordering the runway.
The plane circles back,
keeps time with a blinking

screen—how, in a country
split from tip to tip by such
black mold, can each bright

eye locked inside the mural
still stare straight ahead,
sideways, or to the sky?

Each map I have seen
of this country obscures:
each blue line, each emerald

inch of land cannot claim
such cloudy veins, these
long porous roots between

us still irrepressible—
II. *Together they had lifted a lid, pulled out a drawer, and looked at something. They hid it away and never spoke of what they had seen; but neither of them forgot it.*

Each day, I begin

to disappear into yards

of silk or cotton—

the one that is me but not

begins to emerge,

coaxed out by each hand

pressed against me

with its desire to remember—

cousin, aunt, beggar,

vendor—then rain, slanting

like sheets flung out,

hung up—then rooftops, skin-thin,

lightbulbs beneath them

swaying like newspapers clipped

to clothesline after clothesline—

then smell after pungent smell

rising from gutter to rooftop:

fruit, rot, spice, body. It is the sea

itself. It belongs and does

not belong to me. At Grandmother’s,

I lift lids, pull out drawers,

measure time by objects left behind

each trip: string, sandal,

bead. I watch the servant sweeping
floors in wide, bamboo-bristled arcs, imagine her dressing

in a thatched hut before
dawn, grasping and tucking the long

veil around her acid-burnt
face, its countries of new skin. I do

not ask her how, only thank
her for the cup of tea. I am afraid

to look her in the eye, its dark
pupil the same shape and size of pearls

wrapped around my neck
as my hair is teased up and out—I startle

at glimpses of my throat,
my cheek in a mirrored tray—

each soft inch of skin
fractured by a white-bristled brush,

the leftover tracings
of pale powder smoothed over

my cumin-dark skin,
dotting the silver surface like snow.

III. ...there were again things which seemed destined for her.

I would give it up: this heaviness
built of neither silence nor snow. I am

there, but here, back in Virginia, walking
through shadows of leaves imprinted damp
on gray sidewalks. I would look toward
their soil-etched wings, and curl away
from dim corners where shadows must
be rubbed away from mirrors, where a TV
might flicker with the figure of a woman
dressed in a green sari reading aloud
from blue-inked pages. Daily, it is possible
to forget. I would give it up: the commotion
of wrought-iron windows looking out to fields
of tea and rice, the failed light pouring through.
I would turn from beggar hands pressed against
glass, their hungry and open mouths. I would
rather be here, pacing in a room papered with
shadows of bare oak limbs, than there, sitting
quietly in each dark room that holds its breath, waits
for the hum of a generator to light its cement walls.
Blas Falconer

The Annunciation

Whether she lifts a hand to her breast in protest or surprise, I can’t say, though we know how it ends.

He reaches out as if to keep her there, her fingers on the open book of prayer or song, the cloth draped

across her waist. Faith, he might have said, even as the cells of disbelief began to multiply: a son who’d face

great pain? Certain death? In one account, she fled. He chased her back into the house, not as the image of a man,

perhaps, but a relentless urge, a pull inside the ribs until she acquiesced, exchanging one loss for another.

Of the painting, experts doubt the dress, the wings. X-rays expose lead-based paint, a sign of someone

else’s brush. The sleeve is his, the buttoned cuff a triumph, young as the artist was, not having found

perspective: the vanishing point too high, one hand too large, the flaw in her face: a lack of fear or awe.
Melody S. Gee

Where We Are Gathered

My mother sprayed our yard with seeds
gathered in Hoi-Peng. Lai ah,
she urged them come up.

Their names I can’t remember now,
and could not say when I did remember.
Fingers of green onion, snow pea vines
fisted around wire, bittermelon
tight as a belly. She called and they offered
their tenderest parts.
She gathered.

But what do they, stretching from the hot
grip of loam toward decapitation,
know of names?
What do they know of daughter
being more a name than my own?
What of water for the dead come
too late and too much?

I cannot gather words like seeds, or drink
her voice like water to offer, in return,
myself. In loose folds of earth,

my mother’s words are sewn into new
squash blossoms, their white,
silent faces breaking open.
Each Crumbling House

Guangdong, China, 2001

Your mythology of memory
forgets and lies. Memory makes
ghosts grow shadows.

We stand where your brother,
in sleeves of blood,
slaughtered the oldest water buffalo.
Sweat stabs his eyes and he looks

as though he mourns the beast.
And where your mother shed
her jewelry for a small man by the sea
to take you both onto the boat.
She gives him everything, then touches
the jade sewn into her shirt.
The stone beats fast against her finger.

When you tell, you hold history
between your teeth, ready to swallow.

I knew every telling before we came
to Guangdong, have for so long braced them
in the scaffolding of my voice.

If you could see them now,
each crumbling house I have
already rebuilt.
Andrei Guruianu

Show of Force

The police in Bucharest are rounding up the gypsies selling pyramids of fruit and vegetables by the roadside, cheating here and there at the scales for an extra loaf of bread. The ones with badges wave their batons like magic wands, shake official-looking papers in the wind. They make themselves big in their tall leather boots, navy uniforms that hang on skinny arms and legs like rags on a scarecrow some farmer planted out of habit. They take the crates of peaches, apples, and cherries. They box up the cucumbers, the radishes, the onions. Street cleaning for a 21st century nation. Their long vans are full now to the ceiling. At city hall someone is greasing the big shots to look the other way while their second chins grow in proportion to their smiles, the country being sliced and sold by the kilo in back rooms where big men sip on holy water, wear gold chains with heavy crosses around their necks. Priorities, they say, priorities and progress.
Lipscani

A midsummer heat in the heart of Bucharest,
June biting into cobblestones on restoration row.

Wedding dresses like exotic birds behind glass curtains
are spreading jealousy among the brides
out searching for the ghost of happy endings past.

On either side, small dark stores with musty yellow postcards,
weather-bitten coins and memories of the war.

A clock with no feet and an obnoxious grin
tells me I am looking for dry blood in all the wrong places.

I keep walking until the night reminds me of hunger,
the dust how thirsty I have been for all these years.

Inside a moonlit bar, all of the regulars are lined up
like toy soldiers, keeping tabs they never mean to pay.

The crooked bartender slides a glass my way and leans
in confidence, “There is indeed a resurrection in the streets,
and you too, old friend, can buy redemption
at the court of thieves and well-mannered impostors.”

What could I do but toast the mirror on the wall?
Watch the likeness of myself stare back
as if he’d never seen me there before.
Lorraine Healy

Need and the Grocery List

for Molly Kelly Healy, 1900–1990

My grandmother wrote grocery lists in tinfoil paper saved from the inside of Via Appia menthol cigarette packs, and she wrote tiny and lovely, a few things so very needed so there would be room for much Catholic denial. Her father, a Famine child, his longevity carried like a heavy, undeserved cloak, who stopped singing sea shanties across the fields when his eldest son died of TB. One hundred and sixty acres of grief, and hunger still fresh, sown deep into the windrows. Short lists of needs for Molly, then. On ironed scraps of shine, an eternal inkpen fat on those fingers so inexplicably angled, that we asked about with the breathless cruelty of children— eluding Mother’s dismayed warning eyes. But Molly was a chuckler, and kind, and remote to us in her language of penance and distant home. A few, few things were needed, thought out, spread through the days. It was up to our souls to remember, to save squares of tinfoil paper,
the way Molly did,
at the foot of that cross, undistracted,
always choosing less, calling it enough.
We learned how tightly cramped it was
inside desire, how gorgeous
the braid of want and guilt we would wear
forevermore because there once
was a vastness of starving across the island
still lodged in our cells, that dry burr.
Las Vegas at the Millennium

Soon they will be able to see it from space—
the light shooting from the black pyramid
already blinds Kingman. Out in the desert
they’ve built another Great Wall, an unofficial
capital of fermenting skylines
where my family gathers each year
to pillage the buffets,
connoisseurs of the $1.99 steak.

As I sleep late in a quiet room,
the elevated hotel windows
present the vertigo of an emptiness
this city refuses. Standing there

the air seems to pass through
with the ringing of the phone, Father
calling me down to the casino
anxious to prove his medicine.

Before noon we’ve both cleared a thousand
and I have to admit he works
a kind of magic, making me believe
he can charm silver back into pockets.

The wheels go blank and spin
into large white spheres
floating through a forest, dowsing
beneath the mossy side of a tree.
Laura Johnson

I understand this is probably my father returning to Red Lake in dream, in the drunk sleep when he repeats feel the power between my hands—

the boy with a forked branch walking, as mamanan taught him, toward water. If I were enough like her, could I predict when this city will blister back under the sands?

As if it were possible these days to be the mule prophet, ecstatic with all the magnetic particles flying toward you out of ether.
A Revelation Beyond Skin

My grandmother described it
as meeting the spider
whose gift is secret, spinning
the world around us.

Her people, the Ojibwe,
obscure the origin of their name.
It might mean

the boiling skin on porridge
or the treatment of leather, or how,
before arrows and clubs,
the enemy was roasted in fire.

This could be a reason
to keep silence like a medicine
glowing on the tongue—
the peyote song

woven first in the praying heart,
then in the dead
and living languages
breaking against the desert scrub.
After the Massacre at Red Lake

This isn’t a distant past, it’s now, and though I shouldn’t wonder, I do, about the kid killer making news in a week predicting dark times ahead, the headlines clear.

The smell of gas is everywhere—
metallic and thick as blood
drying on the schoolroom floor, the halls
he planned to paint those bullies’ guts with
for over a year now, accomplished in a moment. Why did he become it?

I have to ask because the picture that I finally see is the cover of a tabloid magazine my father always reads. The boy looks exactly like him, a childhood spent on the same reservation worn like a faint halo, a psychic outline they grin against out of their photos, the resemblance of a small bloodline inevitable in the forced expression

of land and poverty—in this case, broken from with a grandfather’s gun holding accountable all the wrong suspects, a cruelly turned mirror that shatters if looked at too long.
Cold War Under Northern Lights

To the Inuit, the islands
of the Bering Straits are brothers
tethered by a gravel spit
lost to the rising tolls
of white polar waves.

Below the ice pack, pure water
radiates a nuclear blue
remnant of ancient snowfall
pinning a mapped $x$
to where we once directed

some particular measure of fear
in the held breath of cornfields
with silos growing under them.
Now rogue solar flares
kick the auroras up to autumn

and terror renews its locus,
threading a needle in air
across the green light of ancestors,
the northern display
almost no one left can interpret

because stories like these
are easily lost. It is a language
more coded than the messages
flashed backward over towers
by governments never at rest,
Laura Johnson

who, with a spyglass,
might watch their doubles
across the tenuous gap, across
the tow line of two children
becoming the islands of regret.
Carrie Messenger

Edgewater

Only Eastern Europeans stroll the promenade in winter. There we are, cheap fur hats and nylon parkas, arm and arm sliding over the ice. The fancy couples shepherd tiny yapping dogs, sometimes carrying them to keep them from getting lost in snowdrifts, shouting when the dogs’ pointy snouts root up something nasty in the snow. Lake Michigan looks like a sea, but it isn’t. There isn’t a salty air, just a fishy one, although in winter even that tang is long gone. You can’t use the lake to get anywhere you want to go.

Nastya Ciorici was one of us. You could spot that from down the beach: her skinny ass under her short coat, her gliding strides, the fact that she didn’t wear sneakers even on the warmer, slushy days, but always her black boots with one heel ungluing, flapping in the wind. Close up, there was no doubt of her origins: her limp, light hair framing her pumpkin head, her high, almost Asian cheekbones, her knob of a chin. The final proof: she never smiled at strangers. Indeed, none of us did.

But she was different from us because she was always alone. We went out two by two, as if we were lining up for Noah’s Ark to take us back to Constanța, Odessa, St. Petersburg, Split, Gdańsk, whatever port would have us. Even the recently arrived found somebody, someone who spoke their language or would pretend to.

Nastya walked alone, even when Diana and I invited her to join us. She smiled grimly, only on the right side of her face where her chicken pox scars were. She knew us from the Granville Arms where we all lived; she couldn’t treat us like strangers. She said she had things to think about. When we pressed, she said she simply wasn’t in the mood. She marched in the opposite direction, toward the city’s boxy towers splitting through the branches of the naked trees, her heel slapping the pavement.

Diana knew a good, cheap shoe repairman right here in Edgewater, a Chinese with a shop below the El, but for spite we decided not to tell Nastya about him. It wasn’t very satisfying, because she would never
know. Not unless we staged an elaborate scenario where we unraveled our own boots, made sure she saw us in the ruined pairs, and then appeared before her, everything a-okay. Diana wanted to try it, but how would I get the time? I worked seventy hours a week as nanny to Baby Madeline and studied English every chance I got.

The next Sunday, dreary and rainy, we invited ourselves over to Nastya Ciorici’s apartment in the Granville Arms. The elevator was down. We had to walk up to the tenth floor. No problem. It reminded us of home. Nastya didn’t smile when she let us in. We took off our shoes, but she didn’t have extra slippers to offer us. We slid to her kitchen in our stocking feet. “I was working on a paper,” she said. “That’s due tomorrow.”

Diana shrugged. She picked up a glass from the counter and watered Nastya’s shriveled philodendron. I sat down at the table and tried to read her paper, but it was in French. Nastya put the kettle on. It was battered, red with white polka dots.

Nastya’s apartment was a studio, same as mine, but she divided the kitchen from the bedroom with bookshelves stuffed with creamy Gallimard Editions. “You’ve read all these?” Diana asked, dragging her index finger across the spines. She showed off the dust to me, but Nastya didn’t see.

Nastya sighed loudly, a bit too theatrically for my tastes. So she was busy? I only had Sundays off. “The program is rigorous. It’s not like Bucharest. You don’t just show up for exams. You have to keep up with the readings. Also, I teach two classes of introductory French. The students are stupid.”

Nastya spooned out the tea leaves into cracked mugs that looked like they’d been stolen from a university cafeteria. A Romanian university cafeteria, too, not the fancy Northwestern up in Evanston where Nastya went, where they probably drank only espresso in miniature cups imported from Italy.

Diana asked, “You ever have time to read Romanian books? You’re a mademoiselle now?”

Nastya sighed again. “The Romanian books are on the other side. Some Russian, too. German. English, on the bottom shelf.” She cut up a mealy apple and the dried husk of days-old cake for us. “I’m sorry I’m out of sugar,” she told me.

I shrugged. I reached for my mug to warm my hands on it. The Granville Arms was somewhat lacking in heat.

Diana pulled out the folding chair and sat on it gingerly.
“Lemon?” asked Diana.
“No.”
“Honey?”
“No.”
“Milk?”

“Let me see,” Nastya replied. In the drawer next to the sink, she rustled up some dented plastic containers of half & half.

“Ah,” said Diana. She pulled the tab off with her perfectly-manicured crimson nails and poured, each movement as delicate as a princess. Lady Di, Diana’s husband Nicu called her. Not the American pronunciation, Lady Die, which of course is sadly what happened to Princess Di. No, the Romanian pronunciation is Lady Dee, delightful and delicious. We watched the cloud of cream sink down into her tea. She blew on it and took a sip. She said, “So your Russian’s that good? You read Chekhov in Russian?”

“I went to a Russian lycée in Chişinău. I write better in French and Russian than I do in Romanian.” Nastya tapped her fingers against her mug. Her laptop was closed shut on the table at my elbow, but her documents would be in Russian or French. Maybe even her email wasn’t in Romanian. Nastya gulped down her tea and stared at her ceiling. There was a watermark flowering above the stove.

Nastya was Moldovan, Bessarabian to be exact, from the other side of the Prut, the side that had been part of the Soviet Union. Some people, like Diana, might hold that against her, but I didn’t. I didn’t see any signs of Russian mafia in her, that nouveau riche chic, the brassy dyed hair, the short, tight skirts and stilettos of mistresses and whores. Nastya wasn’t pushy, like Bessarabians are. She was shy and lonely. She was waiting for us to come to her, instead of demanding our friendship. Her Romanian accent, instead of the usual garbled mess from over the Prut, was lovely. I could hear a hint of the French.

I took a slice of apple to be polite and chewed it leisurely. Diana pried apart the stale cake with the plastic fork Nastya handed her. Diana’s nostrils were furled. It was the look her husband Nicu had named “the Lady Di.”

“More tea?” asked Nastya.

“Yes, please,” responded Diana. She speared the cake bits with the fork tines.

Nastya put the kettle on again. She leaned back on the counter, folding her arms and crossing her legs as she watched us. “I’m sorry I don’t have anything else to offer you,” she said, taking a deep breath.
“When I’m writing, I don’t eat, just tea and toast. It helps me focus when I’m on a tight deadline, such as today.”

Really, Nastya sounded like Bucharest, like a news announcer, and in fact, that’s where she studied before she came to Chicago. Diana was herself from Bucharest, but I was from a village in Oltenia. We talk funny there. We use a past tense that has dropped out everywhere else. I was looking for somebody in Chicago from Oltenia, so that I could relax with someone in the language I dreamt in.

“Sundays, you’ll walk with us,” announced Diana.

Nastya nodded. She was staring at her laptop, bereft. She must be thinking that her laptop had been her only friend, cold computer comfort in Chicago, and now she could spend her time with these two kind girls from home. How quickly one’s fate changes.

“We’ll stop by at noon.” Diana stood up. She used the top page of the paper to scoop up the crumbs on the table.

“May I use the bathroom?” I asked Nastya.

Nastya nodded again, her eyes on Diana washing out the mugs at the sink.

I knew exactly where it was; my unit was a mirror image of Nastya’s. I passed the nest of her bed, a futon mattress with a tangle of blankets and pillows. A tabby cat should be sleeping there, a paw tucked over his nose, but the Granville Arms didn’t allow pets.

On the windowsill, above the mattress, Nastya had two framed photos and an icon arranged in a triptych. In the center was a color snapshot of a dwarfish baba with Nastya’s chin perched on a stool, a squinting Nastya looming behind her, another Nastya in ropy schoolgirl braids, a slight, pale boy-Nastya squeezing her hand. A grape arbor framed them, and the whole photo had an eerie green glow to it from the leaves shot through with light.

The picture on the left was a black and white headshot of Nastya on her first day of school, balancing a gigantic white bow on her hair, her hands folded and her head cocked at attention. She was not smiling. School was serious. Here was the attitude that carried her from the village of Vorniceni to Chişinău to Bucharest to Northwestern.

The icon was the Virgin Mary with the baby Jesus and baby John the Baptist on her lap. John and Jesus had none of the roundness of real infants, but were angry, flat, little men. A tear brushed the Virgin’s cheek.

The medicine cabinet was empty except for three lone aspirins in a bottle that had lost its label. On the bathtub’s edge, there was a thick brush.
full of Nastya’s thin gold hairs, as if she were trying to build a kitten. The towels on the rack were threadbare. I kicked against a pile of *New Yorker* magazines in the corner, warped by water. Had she been reading them in the bath? Ah, Nastya, an intellectual, an *American* intellectual.

As I washed my hands with her sliver of cheap, astringent soap, I could hear Diana calling, “Come on, Marina.” I ducked back into the entryway, tripping on Nastya’s boots lined up at the door.

Diana kissed Nastya goodbye on both cheeks while I pulled on my shoes. “I’m sure your paper will be an excellent one,” I whispered in Nastya’s ear.

Nastya didn’t kiss us back, only pecked at the air. She backed away into her apartment, pushing her boots back in place with her slippered foot. “Do come again,” she called after us.

We decided Diana’s cousin Marcel would be perfect for Nastya Ciorici. Didn’t he have a French name? Plus, he was Romanian-American, so if she married him, she could get a green card. He was a real estate agent. Diana was his receptionist, her husband Nicu his contractor. Marcel was over thirty, and on his own, drawn to flashy American girls with blonde hair and oversized purses they treated as pets. If Nastya married Marcel, she could quit teaching the stupid American students, send more money home. She could get a kitten. She could use his fluffy towels that puffed up when you pulled them out of the linen closet. She could eat whatever she wanted from his brushed steel refrigerator.

Diana had introduced me to Marcel immediately after I met her at Truman Community College’s free language classes. The first break, we’d smoked a cigarette together and Diana complained about how stupid the rest of the students were. Her English was already pretty good. She particularly disliked the Chinese and the Africans. “If they can’t get their fat tongues around English, why did they have to come here?” I was shivering. She lent me her gloves. When I tried to give them back, she insisted I keep them. She had Marcel pick us up from Truman in his BMW with the heated seats.

Because I was only free Sundays, I tagged along to Marcel’s open houses. I would run my hands along the marble counters and turn the jet faucets on and off. When I was growing up, we didn’t have running water, and when Marcel looked at me, no matter how smart Diana had managed to rig me up, I knew Marcel saw the village behind me: cows coming home, plums in the fruit press for next year’s brandy, the gossiping line at the well.
Marcel wanted me to go out Saturday nights, but I said I was too tired. After a week of Baby Madeline clinging to me with her sticky, chubby hands, Madeline’s mother upset when Madeline refused to let go of me while I got ready to go home, I needed to be somewhere that was mine. Saturday nights, I wanted to stay in, smoke the cigarettes I couldn’t have around Madeline, fall asleep watching something on TV if I could keep the rabbit ears steady.

But Nastya would say yes to dinner. She needed a good meal in her belly. Unfortunately, whenever we knocked on Nastya’s door at noon on Sunday, she didn’t answer. She must have been at the library, or attending a lecture, maybe tutoring some of the more stupid students.

Once I ran into her at the mailboxes. She smiled at me as she shuffled through her mail, digging for the purple Moldovan stamps. She asked me to join her for a coffee at Metropolis, but when I said I’d call Diana on her cell, Nastya remembered an appointment to meet with colleagues to discuss Flaubert.

On Easter Saturday, we knocked on Nastya Ciorici’s door. Sfinta Maria was difficult to reach by public transportation, so it was a real kindness of Diana to think of Nastya and me. We could see light streaming out from underneath Nastya’s door. Diana didn’t stop banging until Nastya opened it.

“Oh. It’s you,” said Nastya. She seemed tired, her eyes puffy, her hair disheveled.

Diana clicked a heel on the threshold. She said, “You’re coming to Easter vigil. To Sfinta Maria. But we’ve got to go quickly-quickly; Marcel is waiting for us downstairs.”

There was someone behind her sitting in the kitchen, paging through the creamy Gallimards. Nastya said, “We were planning to walk over to the Greek Orthodox church over on Bryn Mawr. St. Andrew’s? It’s such a beautiful night. Perhaps you would like to join us instead?”

I brushed past Nastya without taking my shoes off, tracking dust across her carpet. It didn’t look like she vacuumed regularly anyway. In the kitchen, I reached for a mug drying on the rack and filled it with tap water, turning to gaze upon Nastya’s guest, a courtly little brown gentleman with his nose in her French papers. He hurried to stand up once he saw me.

“This is Absalom,” Nastya said in English. “Absalom, these ladies are Marina and Diana. My neighbors in the Granville Arms.”
“Pleased to meet you,” said Absalom. He was wearing some sort of linen pajamas. The wrinkles had been ironed out. By Nastya? She was touching him, her hand resting on his shoulder. He smiled a tight little smile underneath his pencil mustache. He had the big, blinking round eyes of Ethiopians, eyes that seemed to rattle in his head.

Diana called out, in staccato Romanian, “But you’re not Greek. You’re Romanian. Or do you speak Greek, too?”

Nastya responded in English, “I guess, maybe because of going to Russian services in Chişinău, Orthodox is Orthodox for me. I don’t care what language the priest speaks.” She rubbed her hand across Absalom’s back.

Absalom took her pale hands in his. He said, “It’s good to be with people from home sometimes.”

I could see Diana wincing at the door. Bessarabia wasn’t her home. Diana taking up Nastya was a kind of charity.

Nastya hesitated, glancing at me and back at Absalom. “But the service at St. Andrew’s?”

“We’ll go some other time.”

“But it’s Easter!”

“There will be other Easters.” He walked Nastya to the door and helped her put her coat on, holding out the sleeves. She left the top button unbuttoned. He buttoned it, then rummaged through a drawer for a scarf. As Nastya buckled her boots, I waited for Absalom to find his coat, to cross the threshold with us, but once he wrapped the red silk scarf around Nastya’s slender neck, puffing out her fair hair to frame her face, he retreated back to the kitchen to settle into the folding chair and resume his reading.

“Come on, Marina,” said Diana, pulling me through the door. As the elevator’s cage closed, none of us said anything. We stared straight ahead. Diana kept hitting her heels on the floor.

“Did you get something stuck on them?” I asked her.

“No.”

We slid into the back seat, Diana first, me in the middle, then Nastya. Marcel flipped through the satellite radio channels, looking for jazz. Diana, arms folded, breathed heavily through her nose, staring angrily out the window at the storefronts and apartment buildings we passed, as if Chicago would never do, as if she’d like to buy it all up, raze it and build a better Bucharest. Nicu snored in the passenger seat.

Nastya asked me, “What was your favorite thing about Easter when you were little?”
“Oh, the food!” I blurted. “Helping my grandmother prepare it. Smelling it cooking while I slept. And eating until I fell asleep again. What about you?”

“Staying up late,” Nastya whispered. “Staying up late with my friends in front of the church, waiting for the bread to be blessed, even though we were too short to see anything. I thought maybe in cities, people stayed up late like that outside all the time, not just on Easter. That we were very cosmopolitan, for that one night.”

“What are you two gossiping about?” asked Marcel.

“Don’t even bother asking,” Diana told him. “It’s all too boring. If you miss Easter at home so much, why don’t you both go back?”

“Maybe I will,” Nastya said. She stared at Diana fiercely. “Maybe you will?” she asked me.

“I think about it,” I admitted. “But what would I do? They need the money I send.”

“Once Romania joins the European Union?” Nastya pressed.

“Ah. Well, then.”

“Moldova’s never going to join the European Union,” Nastya said. “Never.”

“How do you know that? You’re a political scientist, too?” Diana asked. She lit a cigarette, even though she knew Marcel had American ideas against smoking indoors.

Marcel said, “Diana. What’s with you today? Come on.” Diana rolled down the window to ash. Marcel told Nastya, “Try to be more optimistic. You’re in the States now. We know things get better here. All you have to do is drink a Coca Cola! Just kidding. How do you know that Moldova won’t join?”

“Marcel, have you ever been to Moldova?”

“No. Of course not.”

“I thought so.” Nastya folded her arms.

We pulled up to the church, surrounded by little pink houses with tiny yards, grills, birdbaths, statues of the Virgin, and other accessories. “Why, it looks like the suburbs!” said Nastya.

“What’s wrong with that?” said Nastya. “I’d love to have a house here. I’m not living in the Granville Arms forever.”

“Portage Park is still affordable,” added Marcel. “I could work some connections, Lady Di.”

We had to park six blocks away. We were too late to get a good position inside Sfinta Maria, even up in the balcony. Diana dragged Nicu alongside her. Nicu’s left foot had gone to sleep in the car, and
he was trying to stomp it out, but she wouldn’t wait. Marcel escorted Nastya and me, but there wasn’t room to walk three abreast. I kept track of them by watching Nastya’s red scarf catch on other people’s coats.

The priest’s voice was scratchy as if he had a permanent cold, but it wasn’t any worse than back home. The choir was better. In my village, anyone who knew the words made up the choir, which meant my grandmother’s friends singing loudly and off-key because they’d long since lost some of their hearing and any sense of pitch. Sfînta Maria was admirable in that they’d thrown up such a large church in such a short time, but there was something off about it. The walls were too white. Years of smoke and incense hadn’t yellowed them yet. It made the icons flat. They wouldn’t, the longer that you stared at them, rise off the walls and float around us, the way they did at home. But the biggest problem was that Sînta Maria didn’t smell old. It didn’t smell hallowed. It didn’t smell at all, and we didn’t, either; all of us, recently arrived or Romanian-Americans, were using copious amounts of deodorant underneath our best clothes.

Diana tugged my arm. “We’re not speaking,” she said, glaring at Nicu’s slouching form. “He’s always like this on holidays.”

“Like what?”
“A lump. A big, sleepy lump.”
“He works hard!”
“So do I, but I wake up for Easter. Or Valentine’s Day. Or New Year’s. Or…”
“What’s with you? Can’t you see you’re in a church?” hissed a tiny, angry baba grabbing at Diana’s elbow.

“Excuse us,” I said.

I refused to talk to Diana for the rest of the service, even when she whispered in my ear, “What do you think Marcel and Nastya are talking about? She’s not good enough for him. Clearly her standards are low indeed, after what we saw her up to tonight. Consider Marcel again, Marina? I know you said he was like a brother, but maybe it’s time to think of him as a very sexy brother. Who you aren’t related to. With money. And a car with heated seats!”

The lights dimmed slowly, plunging us into midnight darkness. The candles held by the congregation were lit one by one. I let the hot wax run down my hands and peeled it off slowly. Nicu offered Diana and me each an arm, and we joined the procession walking around the church. The first time around, I could see Marcel and Nastya ahead of us. The second time around, Marcel was walking with a school friend,
Nastya’s scarf bobbing up near the front of the crowd. The third time around, she was swallowed up completely.

The beefy Portage Park neighbors watched us from their screened-in porches. Marcel said they always complained to the city, but it was only once a year. What was wrong with the Catholics, that they wanted their Easter indoors when the whole point was that it was finally spring and that truly, Christ has risen, Christos a inviat? The crowd had grown so large that there was no possibility of us fitting back into the church. We stood near the steps, sheltering our candles with cupped palms.

Diana wanted to wait for the bread to be blessed, but Marcel had an early appointment the next morning. I volunteered to look for Nastya, but Diana pointed out that we’d just have to look for me, too. Nicu and I walked quietly to the car, Diana and Marcel ahead of us chattering about who was coming to Easter dinner.

When Nastya nonchalantly appeared, Diana greeted her, “Christos a inviat.”

Nastya answered, “Adeverat, a inviat,” truly, he has risen, but without any inflection.

We were silent on the way back to the Granville Arms. Marcel found Coltrane’s “A Love Supreme,” and that was the finale to our Easter. As we got out in front of our building, Marcel raced out of his seat to circle his car. He kissed Diana on both cheeks, shook Nicu’s hand, squeezed mine as I was already moving past him toward the door, Nastya ahead of me. She didn’t turn back to say goodbye to Marcel, not even when he called to her that she had dropped her scarf.

He handed it to Diana, who handed it to me. I passed it to Nastya when we stood together boxed into the caged elevator. Nastya murmured thanks and wrapped it through her fingers. We got off at the fifth floor, leaving Nastya to ascend alone.

Was Absalom waiting for her? Had he gone to the Greek Orthodox church alone? Or was he still in the Granville Arms, thumbing through her books, readying tea and toast for her return?

The next Saturday evening, I ran into Nastya Ciorici in line at Devon Market. “You,” she said, smiling warily, only on the right side with the chicken pox tracing their constellation across her profile. She did not say, “Christos a inviat,” which she should have for forty days after Easter. She shifted awkwardly against her basket.

We walked home together because we were going in the same direction, no point pretending we weren’t. The fruit trees were heavy with pink and white blossoms; the Americans wore sandals as they
passed us by, but Nastya was still wearing her boots with the loose heel. Nastya’s bags were cutting into her wrists, and I offered to carry one of hers. In that moment, as the plastic handle slid from her hand into mine, we became a kind of friend.

The petals from the trees caught in our hair and on the bags’ folds. It reminded me of home. “It’s spring,” I told her.

“Oh, I’m so tired of snow I could cry,” she said. “It whistles in my apartment when the wind is up. Does it do that in yours?”

It did. I’d wanted to hope it was my imagination. I nodded.

She asked, “Do you have any plans for the weekend?” Such an American question! Northwestern had taught her well.

Diana had asked me to join her and Nicu and Marcel, with some of their Romanian friends, at Moody’s Pub for a drink. I’d said no. But the appeal of Moody’s was its outdoor beer garden. It was like being in Europe, drinking out on a terrace and running into all the people you know. “Some people are going to Moody’s tonight,” I said softly. Nastya had to lean in to hear me. “Nothing special. Just a chance to talk Romanian.”

Nastya rested her bags on the curb. “Including Diana?” she asked shrewdly.

“Yes, but not just Diana.”

“Including Diana’s obnoxious yuppie cousin?”

“Yes. But it might be fun.”

“Fun,” said Nastya, twisting the word in her mouth. “Fun.” She wrapped her bags around her wrist and started to walk again. “Absalom has to work. He’s a waiter at the Ethiopian Diamond. Have you ever been there? The food is so interesting. I was going to read tonight.”

“Maybe some other time then.” I wasn’t sure I wanted to go myself. Marcel’s friends were all citizens or working on it, constantly calling their immigration lawyers with their cells to complain into voicemail. They were quite pleased with themselves, listing their most recent purchases of espresso machines and laptops and their elaborate travel plans to California and Arizona. The women glanced in their compact mirrors after each sip, pursing their lips to check their long-lasting make-up, and the men were always trying to look down the shirts of the women they hadn’t come with. In fact, spending time with them made me realize that Nicu, Diana and Marcel weren’t so bad at all.

We’d reached the door of the Granville Arms, but neither one of us went inside. We put the bags down, careful not to lean against the
limestone and terracotta tile façade. It left a chalky residue on clothes that was hard to get off if you were washing by hand. The building, a bulky Moorish fantasy masking the cramped apartments within, with spiraling columns like minarets and false balconies every other floor, made no sense in Chicago. I’d wondered if immigrants like us were drawn by its incongruity and not just the low rents.

Nastya pointed to Metropolis down the street and said, “That’s where Ab and I met. We were both reading French novels. I went over to talk to him. In French. At Northwestern, the students don’t like to talk in French unless they’re from France. Or Lebanon. I don’t know, they’re scared of mistakes or their accent or something. But I like to speak French.”

I told her, “I like to speak Romanian on the weekends.”

She didn’t react to it the way she would have if Diana said it. Instead, she calmly picked up her bags again. “Okay. I’ll come, for a little while. It’s too nice to stay indoors.”

Nastya met us later than she’d promised. Unfortunately, Marcel was already drunk, Diana tipsy, Nicu ready to pass out, Marcel’s friends frantic on their cells. The ashtray was jammed with butts. Our table was covered in a blue, smoky air. Hovering above us were the new leaves on the trees, shimmering in the moonlight and the artificial blaze of the street lamps. Beyond the trees were the bright tracks of planes wending their way to O’Hare. There was the scent of linden in the air, and I could almost forget where I was.

While Nastya leaned to kiss my cheek, Marcel stole a plastic chair from another table. It scratched at the cement as Nastya squeezed it in between me and Nicu, not me and Diana.

Diana said, “Christos a inviat.”

Nastya offered a jaunty little wave as she tried to duck underneath the cloud of smoke coming from Nicu.

“What? They don’t say adeverat, a inviat any more in Bessarabia? Or they don’t say it at Northwestern? Which is it, Nastya? Do tell us.” She gave Nastya the Lady Di.

“Oh, they say it at home. I just don’t. I guess I’m not as traditional as you are, Diana.”

Nicu beamed at Nastya, showing the silver-capped tooth Diana liked him to hide. “Might I buy you a drink?” he asked.

We ordered another pitcher of sangria. Nastya requested a Moody Blue Burger, rare. Blue cheese oozed over her paper plate, turning it translucent. She scooped the cheese up with her fries. She urged me to
have some fries, and Diana, too. Diana took one, pinching it between her fingers, examining it.

Marcel said, “I always think the Moody Blue sounds like a jazz tune.”

“Jazz,” said Diana. “If I have to hear about jazz tonight, I’ll scream.”

Nicu asked, “If the Germans founded this part of Chicago, why aren’t beer gardens on every corner?”

“There should be. Let’s build them,” said Marcel. “It will be our next real estate project.”

Diana said, “The Poles are everywhere, but they didn’t rebuild the cellar bars of Krakow.”

Marcel said sadly, shaking his head, “Everybody wants to drink American once they get here. All that crappy piss-water Budweiser. Watching sports on their big TVs.”

“But never football,” said Nicu. “Real football.” He stretched, drooping one arm around Nastya’s chair. She leaned forward.

While Marcel and Nicu argued about football, and Diana gossiped with the other wives, Nastya told me she’d never wanted to come to the States. “I wanted to be a bus ride away. A bus ride from hell, but a bus ride just the same. France would have been perfect, but the French know French. I should have chosen Germany, even if the funding wasn’t as good. I should have realized I’d be stranded here. Until my research year in France. After my preliminary exams. I’m counting the days. When was the last time you were home?”

“I haven’t been home. Every time I start pricing tickets, somebody needs a surgery. Or my grandmother’s goat dies. When I won the green-card lottery, I felt unlucky even though everyone envied me. I’d signed up with my ex-boyfriend on a dare. At home, I taught the second form. My parents are teachers, too. But my English will never be good enough to teach here. Diana says to try something I would have never gotten to do at home. Become some kind of businesswoman. But all I want to do was what I did before.”

I don’t know how much of our confessions Diana overheard, but she began to peal with bright and tinny laughter. “Everyone should have your problems, Marina. What I wouldn’t give to be free of Nicu and find a better match for myself here. I mean, look at him.” Nicu was flipping fries through Marcel’s salt-and-pepper-shaker goal, keeping score on a napkin with blobs of ketchup and mustard.

“And you? Nastya who wants her bus ride back home so badly? You’re getting a degree from a famous university, and they’re paying for it. All you have to do is show up. Instead of dating an American,
you pick yourself an immigrant, a black one at that. Would it be possible to more willfully dash your chances than you already have? Why can’t both of you spend more time thinking about what you could do?” Diana’s lips puckered up as she talked, revealing the crannies her lipstick hadn’t been able to reach. “You disgust me, both of you.”

Nastya protested, “I am thinking about what I can do. Ab is the best thing that’s happened to me since I came to Chicago.”

“Your best thing,” asked Diana, “is Ab? The little man in your apartment?”

I tugged at the shirtsleeve of Diana’s peasant blouse, newly fashionable, one she’d purchased at Marshall Field’s, decidedly not from home. “Diana!” I said. “Copts are practically Orthodox.” I could hear the whine in my voice, the same as when I asked my mother to explain to me why my grandmother needed a new goat when she could buy goat milk from her neighbors instead. As Baby Madeline’s voice did when she begged me to stay over.

Diana lit a cigarette from Nicu’s pack. Nastya’s attention was already elsewhere, her eyes on her watch. Absalom must be done with his shift by now. Diana uttered smoothly, “My goodness, Nastya. What would your mother say? Why didn’t you just stay in Chișinău and marry one of the Africans studying at the Agricultural Institute? You didn’t need to come all the way to Chicago to find a black.” She rubbed out her cigarette.

Nicu mumbled, “They can be your waiter, your taxi driver, but not your boyfriend.” He shook his head solemnly.

“Come on, guys,” said Marcel. “This is America. You go to school with all kinds, work with all kinds. You have to,” he switched to English midstream, “deal. Deal, Lady Di. Don’t you remember Princess Diana kissing and hugging all those people with AIDS? And without legs?”

“Look. Nobody’s very happy about him being with a white woman. Let alone from a country they’ve never heard of. He’s from a vast and ancient culture, and we’re just peasants,” said Nastya. “That’s right, Diana. I said peasants.”

“I’m from Bucharest!” she cried. Her eyes and nostrils narrowed. She wasn’t regal. She’d moved on to feral, like the Bucharest street dogs with their red eyes.

Nastya stood up to go. “He’s from Addis! He was studying to be a doctor. And he speaks French.”

“A monkey speaking French in his little monkey suit. You’re going to smell like one of them, Nastya, and your children will, too.”
“Like we’re some great prize!” I protested. Nastya stared at me, her eyes wrinkling behind the shelf of her high cheekbones.

“But you are,” said Nicu, bewildered. “Prizes. You’re lovely, all of you.”

In the corner of the garden near the gate, there was a gathering of Ethiopians. Absalom stood among them, greeting them one by one, but he kept looking back into the garden for Nastya. She waved and went off to him, her heel slapping, but he insisted on being led back to our table so he could greet us. He nodded to everyone and bowed slightly to Diana and me.

Marcel and Nicu froze their game, fries in gluey piles. Diana wouldn’t look at Ab, as if he were too short for her to ultimately make eye contact. Marcel’s friends shifted in their plastic chairs, worried about the black at their table. Was he panhandling? Would he say something horribly vile to them in his sophisticated slang? Would they be shamed in front of their wives if they didn’t take some kind of definitive, irretrievable action?

Absalom focused his huge eyes on me. “Hello, Marina, Nastya’s new friend,” said Absalom musingly, chewing a little on the tip of his mustache. “Marina. An old name meaning of the sea. The mermaid amongst us.”

I smiled wide at him, as if I were trying to stop Baby Madeline from crying. Nastya didn’t care. She was already tugging at his arm, dragging him away from Diana’s contempt, but from me, too. She stared Diana down, her chin jutted out, her cheekbones so sharp you could cut yourself on them.

“Nastya’s name,” Marcel said in English, “is just nasty.” He giggled, appraising her from the ancient boots to her blonde hair, real blonde hair without a hint of darkness at the roots, her red chicken pox scars. “I mean that in the best possible way. Like in a rap song.”

With that, Nastya and Absalom left our lives forever. Nastya was practically racing for the gate, but Absalom made them stop at the Ethiopian table, where I imagine they had to endure a similar set of reactions from people Absalom knew, because they didn’t stay at that table any longer than they had at ours, and Nastya banged the gate as they left so loudly we could hear it echo in our corner.

I didn’t run after them. I didn’t follow Nastya and Absalom out into Chicago and away from Moody’s Little Romania. I didn’t tell Diana off, but I didn’t make nice with her, either, ask her whether she’d gotten the peasant blouse on sale. I sat there sipping my sangria until
all that was left was the sad, drunken fruit hugging the bottom of the glass. I tried to imagine a sea breeze from the lake, but there wasn’t anything but the cloying lindens.

When Marcel offered me a ride home, I took it, even though he was drunk. When he wanted to come up, I let him. I didn’t feel like being alone. He was quick and efficient and fell asleep instantly. Afterwards, I didn’t like Marcel any better, although I didn’t like him less, either. In Romania, I might have known someone like him. A friend of my pushy cousins in the city, perhaps, someone I’d see on holidays and then forget again. Certainly no one I’d sleep with, or someone who would want to sleep with me.

I sat on the edge of my bathtub, wondering where Nastya and Absalom had gone. A party for people like them? An all-night café for French speakers? A walk on the beach, ducking into shadows to avoid the hovering cop cars?

I crawled back to bed, angling my spine and pulling in my feet to make sure not to touch Marcel. In the morning, he was gone. He’d left a note asking me to meet him at an open house in Uptown, that we needed to talk, but I didn’t go. I knew what Americans meant when they said they needed to talk. I’d twisted my rabbit ears enough to glean that kind of information from my television.

The promenade is crowded now that it’s warm. It’s not just the Eastern Europeans any more, but everyone. I don’t mind walking by myself. I don’t walk with Diana. I duck her calls. I don’t answer when she pounds on my door. It’s strange, but I miss Nicu more than her. Marcel, of course, never called, not that I cared much. Nastya was worth the bunch of them.

On the promenade, there are others walking alone, and I can pretend I belong to a clump of mothers pushing their jogging strollers with the triangular wheels, to the gossiping girls kicking their feet on the graffitied boulders at the water’s edge, to the magnificently muscled Labrador running past me on the path, his leash dragging behind him. If I had roller blades, or a bike, I’d be getting exercise. If I had sneakers, I could pretend to jog.

I keep thinking of what Absalom said to me, if I’m some kind of mermaid. Diana always could smell the fishiness on me, how much I wanted to go home. I might not get my land legs. I might stay here, at the edge of something instead of in it. At the edge of the water, you can fall off and be lost forever. When you can’t see the lake on foggy days,
it isn’t water but an abyss. You could walk out there and be nowhere, into a damp and peaceful cold.

Once in the crowd at the promenade, I saw Nastya Ciorici. She wore a sundress patterned in cherries, the kind you find in a secondhand shop but can never get its stains out, and plastic flip flops a size too big.

She stopped to admire the view of the city at the promontory. As she scanned the path ahead of her, shielding her eyes from the sun and frowning, I thought she was looking straight at me, but then I realized she hadn’t seen me at all.
I was working in New York when the recording studio back home burned down. I’d been in the city for two weeks on a temporary assignment, putting in fifteen-hour days. The heat was unbelievable. The streets smelled like hot dogs and piss. I was recording a junkyard band called The Hoochie Coos who took pride in their sloppy, foot-stomping sing-alongs. The lead singer wore a washboard around his neck and tin cans attached to his shoes that he banged together. The tuba player donned a pair of red suspenders and checkered high tops. My ears ached. My back ached. I joked about feeling like a junkyard dog. I got the first call from Gabe, my boss, while I was setting up a vintage microphone. The second call was from Muz, my mother. The third call was from my girlfriend, Mara.

“You’ve got to come home,” she said. “It’s been on the news all morning.”

“I know. I heard.”

“When are you coming?”

“I’m getting in the car right now.”

“No, you’re not, Steve. I hear a tuba in the background.”

“I won’t be able to get in the building anyway until the firemen are gone.”

“It’s such a mess,” she said. “There’s black smoke pouring out. You should see it. It’s really bad.”

I could tell she was frustrated with me about my lack of engagement. Over the years, I noticed that events that might normally cause alarm to the average person elicited nothing more from me than bored equanimity. Ever since my brother, Brett, had died as a child, I suspected that his death affected me in ways I could scarcely imagine. I hadn’t even told Mara about him. I liked to keep it tucked away in a small little pocket in a coat in the back of my closet.

“I really don’t want to think about it,” I said.

“What about all those tapes in the basement?”

“I don’t want to think about it.”
I’d been working as a recording engineer for sixteen years at an analog studio in downtown Richmond, Virginia, called Music In Your Ear. Everybody else was going digital. I was spending more and more time in New York. Bands no longer wanted to record on tape. Tape was expensive. It was also heavy, so reels could cost hundreds of dollars to ship. Digital had emerged as the faster, cheaper, and more portable choice. It also had the seductive, yet controversial, feature of background silence. As far as I could tell, there was only one problem with recording straight to digital, and that was the actual sound. Granted, the average person might not be able to tell the difference between a song recorded straight to tape versus digital, but the difference was huge. It was like listening to a song in mono instead of stereo. Digital sound tended to be tinny and squashed. Analog sound was rich, complex, nuanced. To put it simply, analog buttered my bread on both sides.

On the drive back to Richmond, I took a mental inventory of all the bands whose tapes had been stored in the basement—Noise Patrol, The Winston Brothers, The Elms, Hush—probably all gone. The most recent project was a husband and wife team called The Black Swans. They’d saved all their money for over a year waiting tables. She told me the song “I Walk By” was about men pinching her ass on the job. She was one who would take it especially hard, especially with a bun in the oven. All the bands had backup CDs, of course, but it wasn’t the same. The originals were probably gone. Ashes. Dust in the wind.

It took six hours, two pit stops, and several reprises of Dylan’s Blonde on Blonde to make it to Virginia. Mara called my cell phone and asked if I might be up for meeting her Uncle Ricky after I stopped by the studio. It was typical of her to arrange a first-time meeting with her crazy uncle in the midst of my career going up in flames. I agreed anyway. Apparently he wanted to visit while he was “having a good day.” I hadn’t met him yet. In fact, I hadn’t met any of Mara’s family, nor had she met mine. I had moved in with her after a three-week romance of hikes in the Blue Ridge and home-cooked dinners. I made her my famous tuna casserole and green beans with almonds and she was a gone pecan.

As I rolled down I-95 through the outskirts of the city, a charred scent hung in the air. I imagined I could hear sixteen years of voices scatter, fading into the hot wind: Darius with his dark red vocals that curled around a rusty saxophone; Lily and her breathy angelic
vibrato; Jesse and his scratchy, cigarette-lined vocals; and most recently, Amy of The Black Swans, her delicate restrained swoon. Pulling off the exit, I drove the familiar roads through the guts of the city. I stopped at a busy intersection where a crusty punk sat on the sidewalk holding a sign that read *I'm dying for a drink. Please help.* I gave him a dollar for good luck, then wound my way between tall brick buildings.

Music In Your Ear is on Broad Street, the main artery of Richmond, in a three-story brick building. Detour signs had been put up to redirect traffic. I caught glimpses of cop cars and fire trucks as I made my way around the spectacle. I found a parking spot a few streets over in an alley behind an art gallery I frequented on First Fridays every month. I parked beside an abandoned lounge chair, locked the door, kicked a bottle out of my way. My throat constricted. A wide pain radiated across my lower back.

Up until that point, I hadn’t been nervous, hadn’t considered the breadth of devastation. My entire life’s work was in that building. I’d moved to Richmond at twenty-two from North Carolina, where I’d gone to school for audio engineering. I was a young whippersnapper back then, full of bravado and self-importance. I used to wear thick black glasses so the girls would think I was smart. I played drums. I skateboarded. I let my hair grow long on one side, shaved the other. I was cool, all right, just what the doctor ordered. It wasn’t until I moved to Virginia and began working those fifteen-hour days six days a week that I realized not only was audio engineering a lot harder than I thought it was going to be, but my passion for it was a lot deeper than I had suspected.

When I rounded the corner, the first person I saw was Amy. Her long red hair hung down in loose curls. She wore a yellow dress with a giraffe stitched across the bottom. Her hands hugged the dome of her belly.

“Steve!” she yelled, walking toward me. Her eyes were red. “Can you believe it? I can’t believe it.”

Cops and firemen had cleared a large area around the entrance to the studio. I scanned the crowd for Gabe.

“I bet it was the crack house next door,” she said, sniffling. “What a waste.”

“Jesus,” I said, looking at the broken windows. There weren’t any flames, but the air was thick with a strong smoldering smell.

“What about our tapes? You think maybe our tapes are okay?” Her hands wrapped tighter around her belly.
“I don’t know.” Of course, I did know. Even if the fire hadn’t destroyed her tapes, the water damage had. The tapes were probably sitting, or floating, in a smoky bath in the basement, mold crouching on the sidelines.

“Does this mean we have to start all over again?”

I pored through my mental Rolodex of non-committal answers as Gabe put his hand on my shoulder.

“Well, buddy, how does it feel to see sixteen years of your life up in smoke?”

“How does it feel to see twenty-five years gone?”

Gabe had been in the business a lot longer than I had. He was wearing a wrinkled white T-shirt. Dark powdery marks smeared his face. Sweat beaded on his forehead and left giant rings around his armpits. Amy walked away in silence, head down.

“At least we’ve got insurance,” I offered.

“Well, actually, we don’t,” he said, shaking his head.

“What?”

“I called and they said they never got a check for the last payment. I guess I flaked that one.”

“Great. That’s fucking great. Anything else I should know about?”

“Your mom’s here somewhere.”

“Perfect.”

“I think she’s at Boom.”

I looked toward the coffee shop across the street. Through the window, I saw Muz talking with a stranger. Both stared at the burned building.

“So what are the firemen saying?” I asked.

“Not much, only that it’ll take a couple days to pump out the basement. They said there’s something like four feet of water down there.”

“Mold will ruin everything.”

Gabe ran his hand through the back of his long thin hair. “We had a good run.”

I wasn’t ready to reflect on what a good run we’d had; I was still grappling with the shock of the charred shell of my home-away-from-home.

“So, what does this mean?” I asked in all seriousness.

Gabe held my gaze with his wide green eyes. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s a sign, you know? Maybe we should move into the digital age, buy
new equipment, let tape go the way of horse-drawn buggies and land lines. We can get silence with digital.”

“There’s no such thing as pure silence.”

He hesitated a moment, then slapped my back. “You should go home. Get some rest. There’s nothing to do here anyway. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

We said goodbye and I willed myself to breathe deeply. It seemed as though the buildings had closed in, narrowing the sky to a smoky sliver. I headed across the street to Boom, where Muz was now alone, staring out the window. She looked like a lost child, twirling her gray-streaked hair, biting her lower lip. When she saw me, she came outside to meet me.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, kissing her on the cheek.

She blinked away tears. Her gray eyes held my gaze. “I guess I needed to see it for myself. I’m so glad you’re okay.”

“I was in New York, remember? We talked . . .”

“I know, sweetie. Don’t be mad. It’s just…after your brother died…I get so scared.”

I held her. She was a wisp of a woman. I imagined her bones clinking together like Mara’s seashell wind chimes. She was never really big, but after Brett died, the extra weight melted off and never came back. I worried about her health. A few extra pounds might fill out the hollows in her face and keep her warm in the cold winter months.

Mara called as I released Muz. She said Uncle Ricky was “doing good.” I told her about the insurance, the flooded basement, Gabe taking the fire as a sign, and meeting up with Muz. Mara insisted she meet my mother over dinner. Muz offered a few mild protests, but eventually relented, saying it might be nice to meet Mara on a day when we could all use the company.

On the way home, I picked up a bottle of red wine and a baguette. I briefed Muz about our house, told her about Mara’s eclectic tastes. Specifically, I told her about Mara’s art collection of naked women. Mara also liked found objects—animal skulls, feathers, rocks, teeth. I called it shaman chic.

I asked Muz not to mention Brett. In fact, I asked her to comply with the story that I was an only child. I was still trying to construct an image of myself that didn’t involve clutching a good luck elephant for dear life every night as a child. I had kept my silence so far. Mara didn’t need to know about any of that.
When Muz and I pulled up, the light was beginning to fade as the sun dipped behind the back of the house. Mara and a man I assumed was her uncle sat on the giant white porch in an old church pew that we had salvaged from a junkyard. Mara was braless in a red tank top and flowery skirt. She was barefoot and sat with her legs crossed. The older man beside her had a wild beard down to the middle of his chest and a black boom box near his feet. He wore a green sweater vest with his bare arms protruding and a pair of gray sweatpants with bulging pockets. The only thing I’d heard about her uncle was that he was slow.

As we slammed the car doors, Mara stood, flattening the folds in her skirt. She greeted me with a long hug, then introduced her Uncle Ricky. I introduced Muz, who held out her bird-like hand. I pulled out two extra seats from the kitchen and got comfortable.

“One of the cops told me that they’d been trying to get the homeless people out of the building next door for years,” said Muz, “but they kept coming back.”

“I hate going there. Those back alleys are terrifying,” said Mara. “Steve said he was held up a few years ago.”

“Really?” Muz said, stretching her eyes open. “I hadn’t heard.”

“It was nothing. They got my wallet.” I shrugged.

Ricky removed a white lozenge from a foil packet, stuck it in his mouth. He made loud slurping and sucking noises. His tongue flashed white.

“That’s a pretty fancy boom box you got there,” I said.

“What? Oh, this thing? Yes, thank you very much.” The lozenge popped out of his mouth and landed in the thick of his beard. He smacked his lips together, then removed another lozenge from his foil packet.

“He likes classical music,” said Mara. “Go on, show him.”

“Oh, okay. I’ll show him.” He lifted his boom box off the floor. It was covered in a chalky white dust. I imagined it was from the lozenge residue that, now that I looked closer, coated not only his lips, but the tips of his fingers as well. He rested it on his lap, then pressed a button that released the door to the tape player. “See, the tapes go right in there. Listen.” He pushed play.

A tremendous sound filled the air, the thin line of a violin underscored by a thundering, swelling piano. I loved the warm quality of tape. It made instruments sound as they did in reality, as though heard straight from the source. It was rich, complex, nuanced. At least
we had that in common. A bird flew from a nearby branch. Ricky clapped.

“You trying to make us deaf?” Mara yelled. “Lower that thing.”

Muz shifted in her seat, crossing her frail legs.

“Wine, anyone?” I asked. Inside, I poured Muz, Mara, and myself glasses of red. I poured Ricky a club soda. I was thankful for the small reprieve. I hadn’t realized until I was out of Ricky’s company how uncomfortable he made me. Watching him rock back and forth and curl his white lips reminded me of my brother. It wasn’t exactly the rocking, but it was the nervous energy that reminded me of Brett. Some days Brett’s mood was so high, he’d pretend he was a superhero, jumping out of trees and off rooftops, rolling to the ground to absorb the shock of the fall. Other days I might find him crying in the attic or stepping on ants in the back yard. Every day was a crapshoot; his mood was anybody’s guess. As a child, all I wished for was to be able to wake up knowing that there would be peace in the house and that Brett would be calm. Instead, I’d been caught in the crossfire of Brett’s bipolar disorder.

When I returned, Mara was talking about her dead grandmother.

“She lived off River Road. She had this insanely huge house. I drove Steve by one day, remember?”

“Yeah.” I handed the drinks out, then sat down.

“Uncle Ricky grew up there. He lived with her until she died.”

Ricky guzzled his drink, then abruptly stood up. Thick black chest hairs poked out of his V-neck. His large white egg of a body rocked back and forth in sandals with black socks. He seemed to struggle to say something, lips twisting in effort.

“I want to get the graves!” he finally yelled, staring at Mara.

“Man alive.” Mara sipped her wine. A slight breeze blew Mara’s long dark curls.

“I want to get the graves,” he said again. “You said we could get the graves.”

“We will, don’t worry. It’s not like they’re going anywhere.” Mara held his hand, pulled him to his seat. “We’ll do it this summer, I promise.” She turned to Muz and me to explain. “When he was little, he used to have two black labs, Happy and Hunter, that he took to the river every day. After the dogs died, his father, my grandfather, buried the dogs out back and made headstones for them. I don’t know why, but lately he’s had it in his head to go back to the property and take the headstones. He probably saw Lassie or something. But the problem is
the house is no longer in the family, so to get them we’d essentially have to steal them.”

“Can we go now?” asked Ricky.

Muz leaned in close to him. “That must have been terribly hard on you, huh dear?”

Mara answered for him. “It was. You’d think he’d lost his children or something.”

A squirrel scurried across a power line. Another lozenge sprang from Ricky’s mouth and landed in his lap. Muz turned to me with watery eyes, her face a shining undisguised plea.

“Why don’t you go,” she said. I knew she was thinking about Brett. Her loss was so deep and total, it had become the spirit behind every gesture, every look, every sway of hand and twitch of mouth. “He can’t possibly do it alone,” she said. “Remember how much you and Brett loved your first dog? You guys used to fight over who would sleep with her. What was her name…”

Mara leveled a cool gaze on me. “Who’s Brett?”

“Oh, yes! Can we go?” said Ricky, clapping. “It’s close. It’s near the river. It’s ten minutes from here, maybe twenty. I know where it is. It’s easy.”

The day was turning out to be a colossal disaster. Not only had I lost my job, but I now faced the ugly choice of spinning more lies to cover up the one I’d already told about Brett, or stealing headstones.

“The tools are out back,” I said, excusing myself. I cut Muz my best punishing look.

As I walked to the shed, I felt like I did whenever I watched a tape reel rewind: lightheaded and slightly nauseous. The heat spread its thick wings around me. A clammy sweat broke across my palms.

“I’d never seen that look on Mara’s face before, the steely resolve of her jaw, the way her eyebrows collapsed together into a flat line. Part of me wanted to run back to the porch, tell her about the nights I woke with Brett crouched beside me, whispering in my ear how he wanted to kill me. I wanted to tell her how shadows stretched their wicked arms across the floor while Brett paced the room, scribbling on walls with crayons or occasionally ripping the heads off stuffed animals. The darkness filled him with a mad energy; it was as though every night the child quietly slipped away and was replaced by a husk of unrepentant, insatiable anger. I prayed to God to give me what he had, so that Brett could be normal. The day he died, I hid in Muz’s closet with a tape recorder and microphone. I recorded her crying...
because I couldn’t. Seeing his lifeless body on the street, I felt the twin emotions of fear and joy, while guilt lodged its hairy knot in my throat and refused to loosen.

In the shed, I dug through a messy drawer, grabbing two pairs of gloves. I also took a crowbar, a garden spade, and two flashlights. The light was going; I was certain we’d be fumbling around in the dark. I loaded the trunk with the tools, then walked back to the porch where Mara and Muz were talking quietly.

“Are you the navigator?” I asked Ricky. My voice cracked.

“Oh, yes. Certainly, yes.” He held his boom box close to his chest with both hands.

“You know where we’re going?”

“Yes, sure I do.”

“Are you going to wait for us to eat?” I asked Mara. She pulled her hair into a ponytail, revealing the thick dark nests of her underarms.

“We’re going to eat, and then we’re going to talk,” she said.

I led Ricky to my beat-up station wagon. I didn’t know what we had to talk about. What would we do once we got there? I didn’t know Ricky’s moods, his behavioral problems. Sure, I’d heard from Mara that he was “harmless.” What if he had a different reaction to being with other people—with me, for example? What if we got caught?

I turned toward Mara. “What if we just ask for the headstones?” I yelled.

“Ask, don’t ask…go for it, tiger.”

I’d have to deal with her anger later. It was nearing six o’clock. The air seemed to be getting warmer. Pinks, oranges, reds, and yellows stratified the sky in long thin ribbons of color. The lemony scent of magnolias perfumed the air. Thankfully, there was still enough light for the job. On the other hand, it meant a better chance of being seen. I wondered how far away the graves were from the house. I rolled down the window as far as it would go.

Ricky cradled the boom box in his lap. He found his foil packet of lozenges and threw one in his mouth. I wondered where, exactly, the lozenge that had landed in his beard earlier had gone. Everything about him looked scratchy, his bare chest under what appeared to be a wool vest, his thicket of a beard, his heavy dark socks. He even sported a carpet of hair on his arms. I turned the key in the ignition.

“Ready, navigator?” I asked.

He nodded quickly, white liquid oozing from the corners of his mouth.
“Alrighty! We’re off. Where to?” I clutched the wheel with both hands, my fists touching.

“River Road.”

I took the highway. Normally, when alone, I turned the radio up and drove the back roads, but I didn’t want to upset Ricky. I didn’t want to disturb the delicate silence. The wind sawed through the car. I remembered the time my family took a vacation to Horsetooth Mountain, before Dad ran off with the dental hygienist. I stood on top of the giant rock near the edge, wind blowing my hair into a whorled mess. A bird floated so close, I could almost touch it. There was the sharp smell of pine. Just as I closed my eyes to better hear the sounds of the mountain, Brett’s low snorting laugh pitched through the air. I turned as he ran toward me with outstretched arms. I heard Muz scream. Brett shoved me hard toward the edge, laughing the whole time, but I grabbed his arm in a fierce grip. I pulled him to the ground. Muz yelled at both of us to stop the horseplay, but she looked right at me. It was the first time I knew that she blamed me for his behavior.

“You want to hear a tape?” asked Ricky.

“Sure. Let’s hear it.”

He pushed the play button on his boom box. A series of notes poured out, booming, orchestral, pounding like a white crash of waves. He hummed along with the music, rocking harder and faster than ever.

“Listen to those drums,” I said. “You’ve got good taste, my man.”

He paused for a quick moment, then continued to rock.

River Road hugged the curves of the James River. Kudzu grew wild, stretching its strangling vines along the side of the road. Lavender wisteria hung like grape clusters, dangling off fences and trees. The shining river reflected the rainbow colors in the sky. Everything looked soft, muted. It would have been perfect had I been alone.

After driving a few miles along the river, Ricky said, “The house is at that mailbox.” He turned off the tape.

I realized I might actually have to go through with this. I drove past the driveway, found a small clearing on the side of the road, and pulled off. I came to a creeping stop, put the car in park, turned off the ignition. Ricky just sat there, staring straight ahead down the darkening road, pulling hard with his mouth. I grew increasingly irritated, uncertain how I had come to be there at all. Somehow, back at the house, the idea had seemed almost laughable. Now I faced not only the prospect of hard manual labor, but the responsibility of
taking care of Ricky as well. What if he saw the graves and went completely ballistic, hurling himself into the river? Then what?

The driveway was as I remembered it from my drive with Mara: long and paved. I prayed these people had a dog. If I heard any barking, the mission was off. If there was any time for an intervention, it was now. I listened hard, but no bark.

“You ready to get this over with?” I asked.

“Yes, I’m ready.”

I opened the trunk. The gloves were stiff, but I pulled them on anyway. I stuffed the other pair in my pocket. I grabbed the crowbar and the spade. We’d have to carry the damn headstones all the way back to the car. Muz had been right; Ricky couldn’t have managed alone. As we started walking, I noticed Ricky carried his boom box.

“Aren’t you leaving that here?” I asked.

“No.”

“We have to carry headstones.”

“I know.”

“They’re going to be heavy.”

“I know.”

“Perfect.”

I saw who was going to be the muscle on this team, thinking maybe it was for the best. I didn’t want anything potentially dangerous in Ricky’s hands anyway, especially the spade with its sharp point.

The driveway stretched in front of us with a canopy of quivering leaves above. To the right, water from the James River shimmered through a field of dark trunks. Up ahead, the trees parted to reveal a Tudor-inspired white brick mansion with black strips of wood on its face arranged in a herringbone pattern. Three chimneys sprung from the steeply pitched gabled roof. Tall narrow windows with crisscrossed leaded glass lined the bottom of the house. A yellow light came from one of the lower windows.

I led the way. The air turned pale lavender. The sun dipped below the field of trees. A lightning bug lit up in front of my face. Shadows stretched in narrow columns over the ground. The earthy scent of grass stung my nose.

When we reached the front door, I knocked three times. Nothing. I tried one more time. Again, nothing.

“Looks like we’re on our own,” I said. “Are they down by the river?”

“I think so.”

“What do you mean, ‘I think so’?”
“I think so.”
“This is the right house?” I asked sarcastically.
“Oh, yes.”

We walked around the house and down toward the edge of trees through which the banks of the river sparkled. I stepped softly, picking my way around bushes and under low-slung branches. I used the spade to push underbrush out of my way. I stopped for a moment. Ricky was still behind me, plodding along like a trapeze artist with one foot carefully in front of the other. His arms stuck out like Jesus on the cross, the boom box dangling from one hand.

I kept walking, searching. I noticed a path of spent grass that led to the water. I followed it. A gentle breeze swept my face. The running water made a kind of soft music. To the left, as I walked down a sloping hill, I spotted them nestled in the ground: two wide, flat rectangles of granite, both the size of a child’s shoebox. They were surrounded by moss. I stepped over a group of tangled vines and saw that they were carved with the names Happy and Hunter.

“Guess this is it,” I said.

Ricky had a strange look on his face, concentrated, resolved. His lips were pressed into a thin line. He stood there, staring at the headstones, chest moving up and down.

“All right. Let’s do this,” I said, leaning the crowbar against a tree. With both hands, I held the spade, shoved it into the ground just below the hard edge of one of the rocks. The ground was soft, making the digging easy. I was able to find the bottom of the granite quickly, and forced the blade underneath. It loosened as my foot pushed on the spade. As I was about to bend over and rip it out of the earth, I heard a car pull into the driveway. I froze, listening to a car door slam shut. It was too late, I decided, to ask about the headstones. I’d practically stolen one already. Better to keep going and get the hell out of there as soon as possible.

I resumed digging, but heard a muffled sniffling noise. Ricky was on his knees, squatting on his heels. Tears streamed down his face through dripping snot, then disappeared into his beard. That, more than anything, frightened me. I thought of the way Brett used to cry in the attic, how I tried to help, only to be bitten or scratched or jabbed at with whatever sharp object was within reach. I slowly backed away, took a seat on a large rock. I let the moment settle itself.

“I have a tape,” Ricky managed to say. “I want to play it for them.”

The light was fading. We couldn’t lose any more time. “Listen,
I totally understand,” I lied, making my voice as soft and patient as possible. “You made a special tape for them. I’m sure they’d appreciate it, but we’re losing light, and now the owner’s home. We need to hurry.”

Ricky’s white crusty mouth pulled down into a deep pout. The wrinkles on his forehead set into a rigid relief. It was clear he didn’t care about anything but playing that tape. Staring at his red-rimmed eyes, I understood how I’d underestimated the significance of the journey.

“All right,” I said. “Whatever you want, but make it quick.”

Ricky steadied the boom box on the ground. He dug in his pockets until he found the tape. He leaned forward, pushed play. A full stretch of trilling frenetic notes exploded from the speakers at full volume. It sounded like a mix between the grinding legs of cicadas and the vibrating whistles of warbling birds. The symphony reverberated through the woods. I could practically hear the notes roll through the owner’s windows and straight into his unsuspecting ears. I lunged for the boom box, but it slipped from my hands. I fumbled with it until I pounded the stop button.

“Christ a’mighty!” I said in a harsh whisper.

“Hello?” I heard a man yell in the distance. “Hello? Is somebody there?”

I shut my eyes and took a deep breath. “Perfect.”

“Hello?” he yelled again.

Ricky shifted his weight on his knees. I heard twigs snapping and the brushing sounds of a body pushing against branches as a short man in a white button-down shirt approached from the top of the slope.

“I’m so sorry,” I said. “I know what this must look like.”

He paused, staring. “What’s going on here?” He had the sad, bloated, red-faced look of an alcoholic. “I was in my office and I heard music!”

I walked up the slope, holding out my hand. “I’m Steve. That’s Ricky.”

“I’m Gerry. You okay there, buddy?”

Ricky twirled his beard faster.

“Hey, you okay?”
Ricky stared straight ahead.

“All right. You don’t have to talk. Listen, you take those headstones, you hear me, buddy? I know what it’s like to lose something you love. Yes, I do. I know very well.” Gerry squatted beside him. He got real close to Ricky, leaned into his side. He wrapped his arm around Ricky’s back. “It’s like moving out of a house, and you stand there with one hand on the doorknob, knowing it’s the last time you ever set eyes on the room where so much living was done. You understand what I’m saying?”

“But they were my friends!” Ricky yelled, face glistening.

“I know.” Gerry nodded.

There was something about witnessing grief that made me feel like a cold-hearted voyeur, always standing just outside the ring. The day Brett died, we’d been pretending we were superheroes. I was Robin Hood because I wanted to give toys to my friends. Brett chose Superman because he thought he could fly. It was sunny, late autumn. Crisp orange, red, and yellow leaves clung to maple and oak trees. Someone had built a fire; I remembered the faint scent of smoke on the air. Later, we were walking back from the store on the long two-lane road that led to our house when I heard the low roar of a truck in the distance. We backed up, as our father had taught us to do. We saw it coming, the wide silver grill thundering toward us, leaving a trail of leaves in its wake. A sudden and dark impulse moved through me, pushed my lips to speak. I said, *If you’re really Superman, you could fly over the truck.* Brett turned toward me, smiled briefly, then dashed out into the road with arms spread open like wings. I heard a horn blare its useless, throaty moan and brakes squealing to a stop. Brett was dead, at eight. The last thing I remember was the truck’s driver sitting in the middle of the road as Ricky sat now.

I felt the cool sting of tears in the corners of my eyes. Sitting there in the calm twilight, I realized that I’d never surrendered to the raw and devastating hold of grief. It was as though guilt had been a floodwall keeping the deep and treacherous waters of grief at bay. I’d been so caught up in surviving, so conditioned to react to Brett’s moods and behaviors, that, even after his death, I wasn’t able to take down the scaffolding of self-preservation I’d so carefully constructed. Instead, I poured my energy into recording. I listened to others sing about lost loves, broken hearts, obsessions. I felt dependent on their ability to express emotion so that I wouldn’t have to.

I envied Ricky. I envied the singers I recorded.

On the way home, Ricky played another tape, sucked on more lozenges. The heavy granite stones sat in the back seat. I decided to
drive past the studio. I hoped there might be something I could take with me, too—some piece of my past that I could put to rest, but never forget. I looked out along the river’s shining edge, the low-slung moon. I knew tomorrow I’d have that talk with Mara. It was my turn to make a sound and have someone hear it.
Hill of Crosses

I awoke to the hard crunch of a graveled lot. Through the bus window, three hills. No, not hills—mounds—each a hundred feet high. A tangle of crucifixes; folk art made of wood, iron, plastic, and brass. One in fine detail: Christ in agony; others slapdashed, heaped, draped, bare or adorned with photos; unreadable foreign symbols. Then, Becky, thirteen. We miss you. Mom and Dad.

There was a life-sized painted relic of the Virgin, carried across Lithuanian farmlands and flats of denuded forests. In near silence, except for the delicate tinkling of a metallic cross,

I climbed scaffolding that uncoiled like a serpent’s tail. Soviets had bulldozed the field again and again, yet pilgrims returned night after night to replace the crosses until they outlasted Gorbachev,

who finally let them have their hill. Alone on the top platform, as votives sputtered in the heavy mist, I leaned out above the chaos and kitsch, spread my arms and opened my chest as if I could shed my body and soar over the bowed heads below. Amid all the crosses left and lost, so many they could not be counted, I realized myself soaked as if I had been suspended in the rain my entire life.
Meredith Kunsa

All I have ever known of belonging and not-belonging, of faith and disbelief, courage and cowardice, I felt, for a moment, embraced by a will greater than my own—unreachable, unstoppable.

Rummaging in my coat pockets for something to leave, I tore a piece of paper and hastily wrote a note, spiking it onto a wrought-iron cross: keep searching, until you find me.
Dead Weight of the Dead

At the White City
Guayaquil, Ecuador

In mausoleums and marble sepulchers, in crypts six storeys high laid out in city blocks divided by footpaths, patrolled by feral cats, over a million histories reduced to commonality:

presidents of the republic, heroes of the revolution, children, foreigners, religious sects carefully segregated to keep from mixing their souls.
The entire necropolis whitewashed every year

by families from cities and villagers who carry their dead on litters from the highlands. Flower carts crowd most of the sixteen gates. Within chalk walls, plastic flowers, fuchsia and coral roses, violet

and orange buds peek from chinks and crevices. On Mondays, hundreds of worshipers climb above and behind the site to the Hill of Carmen, winding up a single stairway to unknown and unmarked graves.

They come to pray and light black candles at the Skull of Forgotten Souls where the witch Antonio lies. A guard claims devotees smuggle soil from the cemetery to do their black magic,

leaving photos perforated with pins, hens’ eggs with names written on the shells. A few prostitutes leave used needles or soiled underwear. Each brings their distinct story, their allegiance to the dead.
Manuel Vicente comes every week to clean three rented crypts, one vacant. First, to the whitest inscribed, *Rosa*—tender, peaceable daughter; then on to *Luciana*, his wife, who has waited for the past twenty years.
Haunting

(Tyger, tyger, burning bright)

Ghosts are not what you imagine,
they don’t take forms, inhabit their dispossessed,
aren’t recognizable, nor loved.

Not the naked girl burning burning bones,
concave skin running running sweating Napalm glory
screaming in your memory
(Do I look like her? She’s still alive, you know);

not the grass and wire and skeletal piles,
Tuol Sleng, clumps of dirt, weeds, night forests, bright fires;
not the small teeth, high cheekbones

black gun blasting VC—

none of these things.

The afterlife
of trauma, the image’s aura: stereotypical, stereoscopic,
grainy black and white—atomic, indelible, spectral.

I have been looking for the uncanny
in daylight, afraid of the dark’s secrets (the night

Mother was raped on the way to Thailand,
years before my birth; she never told me,
I always knew). Marrow guided, I have been searching
for glimpses, hunting for my parents’ ghosts
in imaginary countries.
Haunting is mute, barely perceptible, your breath’s heave and sigh.

It comes as this: small coincidences, signs, a candle flaring at noon, obscure headlines, blood in water, slight chills.
A–1 Food Market

I wander aimless on encrusted linoleum through rows of dried squid, ruốc, banana leaves like open palms, red curry powder (color of dried blood) in plastic bags, dusty tins in another tongue: (barricade of labels like small flags).

Clutching a rusted shopping cart like a walker, an Indian grandmother smells naan bread, a young Hispanic couple in workout gear at the checkout, a boy turns a plastic bag into a balloon. As a boy I shopped here with Mother, bored

by the catfish, lettuce, sauces—sedimentary accumulation in her cart, teased by the promise of a sweet snack.

I don’t remember how to conjure the meals she translated from the mundane: buồn chả giò, lá lốt, tôm hấp.

I traipse through aisles trying to remember home.
To Juana, on the Floor of Bachman Lake

They say bodies make up half the depth.  
You, five foot tall, could only reduce
the shore a fraction. Though I heard numbers—

seventeen, with a two-thirds child—
I taught you words. You remain ten for me,  
struggling to see how whole letters stay quiet

in doubt, and wreck, and ghost.  
I still cannot tell you. Such small things:
You read aloud to me in empty classrooms.

You told a joke in Spanish, and I understood
everything but the punchline.  
Back then, I had another name. You had voice. 

Perhaps on the algaed bed you have found cousins,  
teachers, friends—an entire city held in thrall
beneath the broken bottle of the water’s surface.

A new world, where falling is impossible  
and fish become your dogs. Where language
is all movement and no sound, and you will name

your daughter something I could never say.  
Where memory has no address. Safe from all danger
but the errant fishhook, safe in the capital of victims.
The Pure Products of Parenting

At Safeway, that little old lady inquires of her provenance, this infant you’ve adopted from Taizhou, who so resembles you, the father, sprouted roots of sleek black, thickening, nut-brown skin, (though you felt grayed and rougher). “Who is her mother?” she poses. Your wife standing by—olive tones, sharp-ridged nose, ash-blond betray her.

Her mother? What other? you consider, embarrassed for your spouse, watch her shrink into an awful elf, felt alien, a ‘foreign ghost,’ and not belonging. You’ve readied for this query, braced for it, in the twenty-five lines, the I-600A of claim and proof, a myriad of insinuations, boxes a social worker ticks for Abandonment, Abuse, or Cruelty.

All those checks for children who refuse a ripeness unto rot, a loss you want unmarked from a girl’s past. What child, still raw, could have originally sinned (no lustful reach, windfallen)? You two didn’t exactly steal her away, but in fact you did, plucked from vacant air. Both of you, now, charged with fraud, pressed for authenticity, brands like Chiquita bananas and genuine Best Food’s mayo. What agency endorses this? A babe laid down by a village gate, her birth date unknown, or the bureaucrat who lists her to the international scrum of parents? What’s pure in the DNA of giving and getting?
You two, twice divorced. No, not a 2 x 2, 
but distinctly, then married Mendelian into a reverse 
split, coiled into admirable bliss, with an 
unexpected bless to add a third, a kind of mitosis, 
a parsing which multiplies in layers: two, four, 
then eight, to replicate a whole in 
the form of a babe. 
This braided ancestry, though unbiologic, produces 
a new old form: family, familiar and famished. 
Hunger steels in this gird of grocery cart, 
must now speak: There is no other mother.
At the Festival of Native Peoples

He explains, while shredding leather into strips in the oak’s shade upon these fairgrounds, the shrill flute of Kaua’i and gourd drums beating beyond, how these names were not his own. Not “Indian,” as if Bangalore or New Delhi were a station of his competence, nor “Native American,” foreign Italian explorer who knelt to kiss a virgin’s soil, nor even “Cherokee,” though this small parcel his, his Eastern Band Nation’s, where a people’s very name must always be The People, a claim not to expel others but to draw all in as kin, one to another. That dark skin, then, the win of “Ah-ni-yv-wi-ya,” though, he adds, he’s ever Living in Two Worlds.

Then, in a crowd of white tourists, one always interjects (though here on the Rez, a bit tentatively) “But how can I live in your two worlds?”—a kind of impulse, a want to wear down strange gutturals or consonant, like in Indian boarding schools, where shade is seen as shadow, these blanks of blues still stare through.

“Come visit,” he replies, “that’s best!” could implore: Learn the etymology of bark houses, almost.
Karen Llagas

Crossing

Will you try to find some better expression for death?
—Suzuki Roshi

What will you do once you reach the border, parched and sickened by the heat? The moment you close the door you will start inventing your father’s country and this task will remain unfinished in your lifetime. When they command you to keep only one evening from the last fifty years—memory, after all, is heavy—will you choose the one with the sound of the coyotes contouring the desert dark? The smell of sage and dust, the smell of the beginning, its dialect crowding out the stories of your tongue? Let the river drag your journals along with the snakes, all their spines unbroken. Your wife will leave your place at the table unoccupied. She will leave the mangoes and the sweetened agave, the chipped bowl.

But you will not want the same food: your hunger will deepen, the rolling consonants will soften, the prayer books will be dropped. What will remain is the call, an echo, the sound of the earth’s core in a conch recalling the history of saltwater. You will invent new reasons for loneliness.
Descent

My mother’s name means end in Tagalog and my father’s name means wound in Spanish.

The prepositions I must supply—in, until, of, despite—or perhaps a clause—and?

Asked to explain my melancholy, I utter my full name and continue to reside in English.

To be a daughter is to have a duty to grammar, to exact the relationship between words that otherwise disappear into vision—super, then lack of, and much later, di—

In the family albums, everyone is always held by someone else, in siesta or in fiesta.

My mother’s young legs looked miraculous and the caption said so—legs!

A man in bell-bottoms turned up in a portrait with a look that means defiance,
or father. Back turned
on the house, his shadow
formed the perfect I on the ground.
Amit Majmudar

Self-Portait in a Subway Window

On weekends I have the museums downtown
and my map of the Washington area Metro’s
angled anthill burrows

in which our traffic is anything but ant-like.
When the Red Line arrives, we cluster
approximately at its doors, nowhere single file,

ensconced in iPods, in the cells
of cellphones solitarily confined, no one’s
antennae so much as brushing in the rush.

Our social contract is never to make eye contact
with any face but the one in the window when
a tunnel shows us that ghostly fellow traveler.

They are all here, the races, the classes,
tinyFeatured white low-level corporate men
turning their briefcase-carapaced knees into the aisle

or else refusing to sit at all, Somali immigrants
who have the saddest eyes in the world,
six college-age Germans I eavesdrop on,

thinking first That’s what Goethe sounded like
and then That’s what the Gestapo sounded like
chatting on break at a train station,

bales of hair wheelbarrowed past.
My imagination makes their voices
the soundtracks of two very different movies.
Maybe it’s because I still have the Holocaust Museum in my head—though it has been a week, and tame Monets and airbrushed Titians have intervened—

but I think back to Zyklon B pellets, those chalk stubs phrenologists might use to tap the equation that governs a Jewish nose.

They would alka-seltzer into the chamber, the waters agitated, frothing mouths, body-level somehow rising higher as the people clambered on each other gasping for higher, purer, Alpine air. Drop a pellet, drop a quarter, squint through the glass peephole: College-age soldiers shoving, giggly to glimpse the show.

I hear those plaster figurines, each one’s death-throe individualized. Their sculptor’s penknife stabbed each eye and mouth into silent life.

All those families, split: setting off a chain reaction whose fallout we may follow from Treblinka toward Tel Aviv, from Dachau east to Haifa, victims displacing victims; in this confused barfight, one man shoved into another man who bumps still a third, beer spilling, blood spilling, each injured party with his own set of outraged friends, Palestine off its sacred barstool, Jordan, Syria, Egypt up and glowering till here we are, in the twenty-first century, when a backpack on a bench grounds air traffic for an afternoon and unseen hands are slapping this nation blindfolded and bound on the throne of the world, infinitely powerful, infinitely vulnerable,
Amit Majmudar

crowned with the barbed wire ringing its own bases. We seem never so weak as when we rage and empty handguns into the sandstorm.

How much trust there is among us on the Metro even though we do not meet each other’s eyes, much less meet each other face to expressionless face from Silver Spring to Union Station, closely opposed, like the flaps of a wound, rather than close:

never intimate, except with the people we already know. The black student in dreads. The Latin—Middle Eastern?—couple tilting their luggage into motion….

All it would take is one, and here in this train car, an enclosed space, a crowd—that plaster model with the wall cut away, those pale arched figurines—

all it would take are a few canisters, a valve twisted at the text message Allahu akbar, something scentless hissing from a tote bag….

I imagine all this just as the train sleeves underground, letting me see my own face dark and unsmiling under my goatee,

for all you know the Other, the fanatic, the enemy.
Peter Marcus

Travel Apologia

There is nowhere unexplored on our planet anymore, thanks to Peary, Shackleton, and Hudson. Every miniscule tribe from Papua to Upper Volta, holed up in some Godforsaken bog have cast off their penis gourds and put on Western underwear in exchange for plastic stools on which to squat and read the Bible. The question, why go anywhere,
especially when home is well-equipped with La-Z-Boys, plush sofas, and plasma screens which bring the world’s abundance closer. I can surf the networks instead of risking passage. Orville Redenbacher is a much safer companion. His pop, pop, pop, benign and sprite, not worrisome like potential bombs brought aboard an aircraft disguised as pricey fragrance from Ralph Lauren or Estée Lauder. I can watch the Discovery Channel, Animal Planet, a G-rated pubescent circumcision on the National Geographic Channel,
find cocoa, saffron, nutmeg, curry paste, and jasmine tea on the shelves at Citarella. Since boyhood, I’ve remained in awe of great explorers: Magellan, Cook, Columbus, and da Gama.

Men with starved and scurvy crews—half infected, half insane—who discovered mesmerizing lands when absolutely lost. In chlorinated swimming pools, I learned to play Marco Polo
without sharks or piranhas. *Close your eyes and launch yourself toward their chiding voices.* I’ve tried mantras, yoga, wheatgrass juice, Pilates, and colonics—nothing helped me locate/detect universal truth.

Pills to halt the serotonin left me impotent and fat. It’s time now I renounce this couch-potato self, quit the self-analysis and see what happens next—astray, half-blind and crossing borders.
My Shanghai Dictionary

It’s safe to say I would have been completely lost without it. I noticed how others glanced at me—suspect in this Caucasian epidermis, as I pulled a thick bi-lingual/bi-directional dictionary from the pocket of my daypack to plot my next move along the Bund. There was demolition everywhere. Wrecking balls pounded like church bells. Towering construction cranes—the latest symbol of resurrection. Paralyzed without a word of functional Mandarin, I could hail a taxi, but where would I end up? I couldn’t shape my mouth to form a plausible sound. The unused muscles straining and quivering around my jaw and throat. Pound kept several Chinese dictionaries in his cell at St. Elizabeths. And I carried his Confucian volume, The Great Digest & Unwobbling Pivot (1951) in my suitcase to present myself to myself as literate, though I barely read more than a few pages the entire journey. This dictionary, a now-frayed paperback, enabled me to find the railway station and board the right train for the Suzhou Gardens, to order crab sautéed in ginger, minced pork and jalapeños, to ask a college student majoring in English to walk with me onto the dance floor then perch at the edge of my hotel bed and open her mouth slightly and press her lips to my lips till our dialects dissolved in muffled vowels, to assist the uniformed guards who led me through the cavernous museum to the suits of Tang Dynasty armor layered densely as the scales of giant reptiles and to the room of the Ming Dynasty vases with their blue and yellow variations that the emperors equated with heaven and I equated with the taste inside her small, pink mouth. Nonetheless, I often lost my way, standing inside a transsexual massage parlor or served a plateful of cold, translucent jellyfish. How does the saying go, make no mistake—make no mistake about it… I smiled and I paid or I smiled and ran for my life. Next time in Shanghai,
Peter Marcus

I will carry a dictionary powered by double-A batteries that speaks correctly, but robotic. Paper usurped by electric current or as Pound translated, the link between obsolescence and beauty. O fan of white silk/clear as frost on the grass-blade,/You also are laid aside.
Adela Najarro

Dear Parrot:

Even though you sit in a cage at the zoo and have not replaced the nightingale, beauty rests still in the city where creation rises from a botanist’s soiled thumb, where purple pansies float in cement boxes, and honeysuckle or perhaps gardenia scent the sidewalk past powder-blue mums. I have kissed a lipless mouth and made love with three serrated knives. We are vulnerable to the swollen body. In Fontana, California, St. Joe’s, Michigan, among those crowded on New York streets, we have too much and too little. My Tío’s eyes open and his mouth frozen wide on crisp hospital sheets. The dying do not let go. Their melodious song runs through a lavender sky folded over a county road. Mistakes accomplished, a hand held not long enough. Love goes too quickly, and nothing more may come. Birds do not remember nor witness our longing under a ball of helium gas, through the millions of continuous miles of empty expanse. Light fixtures fall out from the walls, and dust accumulates upon panes of broken glass. And you, dear bird, you too
were born for death, among toucans, parakeets, and the sunken eye of one crocodile in the murk of a river, a river impossible to tame, where parrots screech instead of sing.
Iain Haley Pollock

Où l’amour sera roi

With a six-pack, I drop
 by Rachel’s studio, where Marvin
 & Lamar sit for photos.

On the stereo, Nina Simone,
 Live in Paris. I don’t have
 French and can’t remember

what ne me quitte pas should mean
 to me, but Simone’s tired voice
 makes the phrase sound indelibly sad,

the chains of an empty swing
 winding around themselves. Lamar sits
 on a stool. Marvin stands behind Lamar

and wraps the dark crook of his arm
 around Lamar’s sand-colored neck,
 locking them together like the clasp

on a safety strap. While Rachel climbs
 a stepladder and starts to shoot,
 I think of all the faggots I’ve pretended

I didn’t hear, that I didn’t stand against;
 all the faggots in jokes that made me snicker,
 or belly laugh; the at-least-I’m-not-a-faggot

after Vaughn Curran called me a half-nigger;
 all the faggots I thought were harmless
 because they stayed in my head.
There must be some desire between these men,
but Marvin’s eyes waver with tears,
and the two are so vulnerable and boyish

with each other, they bring back the time
a teammate held my hand
while we walked onto the football field.

I blame the pang in my throat on the Simone
and Red Stripe and with each pop of flash,
I blink, hoping my ducts will swallow back

their saline. Marvin takes the stool and Lamar stands
behind him, Lamar’s arm now around
Marvin’s neck, clinching them together still.

A first tear rolls down Marvin’s right cheekbone—
Rachel wonders if she should stop,
but Marvin insists, the tear in slick relief

against his ebony skin, a stranded tear,
a permissive tear that teaches the tribe
to open. And I open:
Voices

I want you to know, the people I am going to tell you about are no longer there. They are all dead or their whereabouts are unknown to me. But they were there on that day. That day that I write about. It was a hot day, hot the way it is in Mosul, like the inside of an oven, an oven of baking bread, the samn bread baking fresh inside an oven, blasted by fire. Hot like the cracking of watermelons, juicy and sticky and cool to a thirsty tongue. It was the day my mother was having a baby, her second, my baby sister. She was surrounded by women inside the house, while she lay flat on the cool floor, and we children were banished outside.

Yusra was our leader, tall, her skin soft like rose petals, and her two sisters were my age. They had all come over with their mother, and we had been together since the night before, since my mother’s labor pains started. We had been sent outside the house to get ice from the next-door neighbors. We called to them from across the wall, the family of Mal Allah. At last, the eldest of the nine children of Mal Allah appeared with a large block of ice wrapped in cloth. He was standing on top of a chair held steady by one of his brothers while he passed the block of ice over the low brick wall to Yusra, who passed it to her sister Warda, who passed it to Najwa, who passed it to me. Cold like a sting it was, an unbearable, impossible cold that made me want to drop my burden immediately.

“Oof!” I cried. “Ouch!” And we fell over laughing, as we were wont to do, too often. We carried the block among the four of us, Yusra yelling directions at us, under the vine-arched driveway, cutting across the lawn, brushing the rose bushes, and up the steps to the house, into the kitchen, past the cries coming from the closed living room door. They weren’t really cries, just a low moaning, but still, I wanted to stay as far away from that sound as possible.

“What shall we do next?” I asked Yusra. Warda and Najwa looked at her also, for she was in charge.

“We shall sit on lawn chairs and eat rose hips,” she announced.
We followed her outside again. “It is my job to keep you away from adult affairs,” she said importantly as we plopped onto the metal lawn chairs with the crisscrossing plastic straps, all three of us on blue chairs, Yusra on a red one. Sometimes I felt sorry for Yusra. Even as a child, I sensed I should feel sorry for her because she was alone. She was older than everybody else, including her two sisters, whom she could box and tug and punish to stand still with their faces to the wall, and if she left them standing like that, holding their ears, eyes turned to the wall, locked inside a room, they would still be there when she opened the door an hour later. But she could never be their friend. She could never be a part of their whispering intimacy, their quiet joint mischiefs soaking their dolls in colored water or painting clown lips around each other’s mouths with their mother’s lipstick.

It was a green day. The grass was impossibly green, and the roses were the roses of Mosul, red, orange, pink, and all the other impossible shades of a packet of crayons. And we achieved a degree of intimacy, sitting quietly on chairs, biting on rose hips, Yusra’s new hobby. One of the Mal Allah children popped his head over the wall again and asked if we wanted to share their watermelon. I shook my head quickly because that combination of images, watermelon and Mal Allah, made me nervous. Mal Allah was an old man, nearing fifty. He was our landlord, and often he would come over and sit with my father in the cooler night air on our lawn chairs and complain sadly how his nine children ate up all the food in the house and never left any for him. In particular, he was very sad about watermelon. He would buy the biggest, fattest, juiciest melon in the shops, and yet, there would never be any left for him to eat because his family was so numerous, and his children so ravenous and selfish.

“It is hot,” Najwa and Warda complained irritably now in one voice. We were wearing those cotton Chinese frocks, with the thin straps that fell off our shoulders, in different colors of the same basic pattern, the material gauzy and open to the air. Yusra’s mother used to buy a trunk full of them in different sizes, knowing that at least one of her daughters would be able to fit or grow into any size she bought.

“Such are the advantages of a large family,” she would say with a toothy laugh. And that’s when my mother would prod her with one fat elbow and say, “You should have more then!” Then the two of them would fall over laughing in their caftans. They talked like this sitting by the water cooler, waxing their arms and legs with lemon and sugar.
“I am going to die, it is so hot,” I said now, adding my voice to the complaint.

“That is because there are so many of us,” Yusra said. “We should pull our chairs apart a little. That way there will be more air for everyone.”

“In that case,” I declared, “I want to be the only person in Mosul, in all of the world, who is alive, so I can have all the cool shade to myself!” I kicked my chair away from the circle. A series of screams escaped from the house, much louder than before. We sat immobile in the heat, listening.

“I know,” said Yusra. “I have an idea. We shall have ice cream. I have some money in my purse.”

Yusra always carried her purse on her, like a lady. The purse, red with sequins, matched the red buckles of her wooden clogs. She pulled the chain of the purse and started to take out the assortment of dinars and filis. She placed them on her cool palm and started to count them methodically. We watched her count, my eyes locked on the thin bracelet that beaded around her white wrist. She was beautiful, in the thinness of her wrists and the plumpness of her pink arms bursting out of her perfect white dress. She was impossibly beautiful, and yet she made me feel that I never wanted to be thirteen, ever. She made me so anxious about this uncertain age that I watched my every move for signs of the Yusra-disease. I felt this way because of my father, who would take me on his lap every time after Yusra’s family left our house and say to me, “Now, Fatma, I never ever want you to speak in that nasal tone like her,” or, “Did you see how she kicks her legs in the air as she sits? I never want you to sit like that.” There was no end to Yusra’s vulgarities. She wore high heels or blew air through her mouth, and interrupted the grown-ups in their conversation to ask her father for a driving lesson or his car keys. She would grab the keys and go sit in his Volkswagen, slamming the horn. The reason Yusra made me nervous was that I had only five years to grow into her, experience what it would be like to be Yusra, thirteen and vulgar, unfit and alone.

“Hey!” she said. “How come I am two dinar short? Who stole my money?”

“Not I!” Najwa said quickly. “It was Warda’s idea!” She sprang from her chair and ran barefoot into the grass. It always surprised me how scared Najwa was of Yusra.

“Warda?” Yusra frowned in a grown-up way, waiting in the kind of silence that only our mothers could create. She had a problem with
her nose that made her speak in a grainy voice, as if being pumped out of narrow tubes, and this made her more ominous.

“We both did it!” Warda cried. “Don’t hit me,” she pleaded and twisted her face to cry. She was the youngest, and pretty with her bobbed hair, the baby of the family. When she twisted her face like that, I knew she would get away with it, the way she got away with everything. The crisis passed. Yusra’s face became normal again, like a child’s face.

“At least tell me what you did with the money,” she said.

“We washed them in the water and they fell to pieces,” Najwa said from her distance.

“All right,” Yusra said resignedly. “So we have one dinar then, we have to make do. How much does each ice cream cost?” We went over the prices for cones and chocolate bars, trying to do the math. Finally, we decided we had enough for four ice cream cones, and so we got up and rushed out the door.

Yusra told us to make a neat line behind her and we walked gracefully behind her along the street, past Mal Allah’s house and Ali’s house, past the Palestinian’s house, turning the corner, then across the street, to the little shop that I ran to at all times of the day.

“Ashkadh hadha?” we asked the shopkeeper greedily, pointing to the cups and cones and bars. We whispered among ourselves and counted on our fingers. The shopkeeper slapped his cheeks with his hands and waited. Now I think perhaps he had just shaved on that day, and his face still tingled from the fresh sharp feeling of the razor.

“We shall have four cones,” Yusra said to the shopkeeper. The shopkeeper rubbed his hands on the white shirt that stretched across his belly, and then picked up a scoop.

“I want the chocolate!” I cried.

“Me too,” said Warda.

“I want chocolate,” said Najwa. Yusra got vanilla. We each accepted our unwieldy prizes, which wobbled in the air and already melted a little, dropping stickiness in between our fingers. I started to lick quickly, darting out my tongue. Licking and balancing, we made our way back, walking by the gutters, kicking stones on our path, past the gypsy girl who rode on her donkey, her gold necklace glinting in the sun. The sun was still hot, but the ice cream was just right, soft and cold, matching every stroke of the sun’s rays, lick by lick.

When we were inside our driveway again and standing in the cool of the grapevines, keeping out of sight of the grown-ups, lest they
had some unexpected objection to our pleasure, Yusra said suddenly, “That’s not the way to eat ice cream. You don’t dart your tongue out like that. That’s not dainty.”

She showed us how instead, and we practiced opening our mouths ever so slightly to bring away dainty portions, neither showing our tongues nor making any sound. Then we stood there and ate and ate and ate. This pleasure of eating, in the scant shade of the driveway, in the heat of June, the constant source of milky sweetness cooling off the tongue, the mouth, the throat, was endless—it stretched and stretched and stretched, occupying the entire afternoon. The entire time we ate, I did not utter a single word.

The afternoon sun began to subside, and still we sat outside. Nobody had asked us inside to eat, although the ice cream rumbled nicely inside each of us. We had pulled out a Syrian mat and were lying flat on it on the grass, tickling one another’s toes. The faint cries of my mother made me start nervously now and then, as if some impending danger was at hand, and I shifted sides often. I longed for another ice cream, but there was no money. Then we heard shouting next door and sat up. The shouting reached ugly heights and there was the sound of scuffling, a woman’s screams.

“Quickly,” Yusra cried. “Grab your chairs.”

We each grabbed a lawn chair from the verandah by the rose bushes and dragged it across the lawn to the wall. We climbed up on our unsteady chairs and peered over the wall. The two eldest Mal Allah children, nine and ten, were choking each other with their fat hands. Their mother was between them wailing and trying to pull them apart. The sons were both large, and it was a monstrous sight to see the two brothers at each other’s throats. Then the eldest Mal Allah boy picked up a sickle lying by the flowers and raised it in the air. We gasped collectively, following Yusra’s example, our hands on our hearts.

The boy’s mother grabbed him around his thick waist and whispered now, so softly that we strained to hear, “He is your brother.” She was hoarse from all that wailing.

“I shall kill you! I shall kill you!” the elder boy cried in a desperate voice to his brother, until at last he broke down and started to cry. He dropped the sickle on the ground. His crying was even more disturbing than the fighting. “He is my enemy, he is, Mother,” he continued. “He hates me. He took my kite that I made for so many days and broke it, Mother.” The boy wept and wept and we watched, fascinated. Then
somehow the quarrel ended and the elder brother retired inside with Mal Allah’s wife. We climbed down from our chairs.

“See?” Yusra turned to me meaningfully. “That’s a lesson for you. When you have a brother or a sister, you have to share everything, sacrifice all your belongings and desires. You can’t be a spoiled baby anymore.”

“I am not a spoiled baby,” I protested, dusting my hands.

“My mother says all only children are spoiled,” Yusra said smugly. She took off her white ribbon and tied her hair again in a ponytail with the ribbon. Her earlobes were bare and white.

“I don’t think I want a brother or a sister then,” I said.

I thought of the elaborate dresses my father bought me from Baghdad or Kuwait, and the dresses that my mother sewed for me on the Brother sewing machine, copying German patterns from Burda magazine, and the surprises that my father brought me in his pocket every day when he came home from work, a balloon, an energy bar, a stamp from Sharza, just for me. And the large parties my parents threw me on my birthday, guests filling up the lawn, Coca-Cola bottles nestling in the grass as I tore the wrappings off my presents amidst laughter and voices all around.

“You will never have peace again when you are the elder sister,” Yusra said. “Look at how much trouble these monkeys give me.”

“Hey, let’s get some juice!” I said brightly. I held up my palms and twinkled my eyes, offering up the idea. I just wanted to stop the flow of those words.

We went into the kitchen and got out the ice from the freezer and a hammer from a drawer, and began to break the ice. Yusra hammered while Warda, Najwa, and I collected chunks in glasses and poured tomato juice over the ice. I tipped my glass and let the salty coolness gather around my mouth and climb over my tongue. When we put down our glasses, we each had a red grainy moustache. We pointed at one another and laughed. That’s when we heard the scream. The full-throated scream of lungs with no bottoms, a cry of supreme command that commanded the air that blew through the house, and stopped us all.

“Run! It’s here!” said Yusra. We ran after her with our tomato juices, our wooden clogs clunking on the floor. The door of the living room was open at last. There my mother lay, and…where were the cries coming from? Yusra’s mother was cleaning blood with a bucket and a mop, her fat behind poking the air. Where was the baby? Was it mixed up in the blood, being swept away? Had there been an accident?
My mother lay moaning, and someone covered her with our checkered woolen blanket in the overheated room. We used that blanket only in the winter, when my parents and I huddled together in the bedroom upstairs, with a kerosene heater on and all the gaps in the windows filled with putty. My father would have to turn the heater up in the morning and make the room toasty like the crust of samn bread before I ventured out of my mother’s embrace and the blanket’s warmth. Then I would run directly to the cylindrical warmth of the kerosene heater and stand over it with my father, toasting my hands, my face, my behind.

“Look,” said Yusra, pulling me to where a few of the women, my mother’s friends, squatted on the floor. At the center of the circle they created was a shockingly large baby, larger than my talking dolls, being bandaged in swathes of white cloth. It was bandaged from its shoulders to its ankles, its arms taped inside also. And all the while it cried imperiously, its mouth so wide that you could look inside its throat.

“Your sister,” one of my mother’s friends said to me. “Isn’t she beautiful? Aren’t you the lucky one?” I stared at her.

“You’re going to be a big sister now,” she said. “Big sister,” she repeated.

I tore away from the circle. I felt the need to find my mother and have her see me. So I ran to her and knelt by her on the floor. She had her eyes closed, trying to sleep.

“Ooh, ooh.” She made these soft sounds as she lay there with her eyes closed, her face twisted like a crying baby.

“Mama, it’s me, Fatma,” I said. I wanted her to put her hand on my head, pull me to her chest, and claim me as hers.

“Fatma!” Yusra’s mother called me sharply. “Get off your mother.” But I threw myself on top of my mother and hugged her neck. “Fatma! Yusra, pull her off. Take her outside! All of you! Go play a game.”

I was pulled off my mother, and I went outside again with my friends. Except now I just wanted to be alone. When I was being pulled away, I had landed at the foot of the mat where my mother lay. All I could see were my mother’s parted legs, and the big gaping hairy hole between them, like a bloody wound. Around her were the women gathered in a circle, shaking their fat arms at me. I stood frozen, staring at that hole, until Yusra led me away. I couldn’t shake that memory from my head. I shook a little every now and then. I was sad in the way that you can’t share with anyone. I didn’t know why I was sad,
but I didn’t want all these people in my house anymore. The house felt too crowded to me, and I wished that all the people would leave and I could wait alone for my father to come back in the evening from the university. Then the three of us, my father, my mother, and I, could sit together outside on the lawn and eat tomato soup and khubz, roasted chicken, and the dolma with the tomatoey rice and meat inside.

“Why are you sad?” Warda asked. “Don’t be sad.” Warda was beautiful. She had a round face and straight teeth. She was the baby of her family. My mother said Warda was more loved than her sister Najwa because she was prettier. I wondered now if my mother would love me less than my sister, comparing our faces to see who was prettier, the baby or me.

“Don’t be sad,” Najwa said. “Your father will be home soon.”

“Are you a little jealous?” Yusra prodded me. She turned her ankles this way and that. She was going to be a famous dancer so she had to exercise them constantly. “Are you worried about your travails now that you are no longer the only child?”

“What rubbish,” I cried. “Nothing is going to change. My father will love me just the same. Wait till he comes home. Only a few more minutes, and you’ll see.”

My behind was beginning to hurt from sitting on the heated plastic straps. My dress stuck to the chair, and my arms burned where they touched the metal. A morning of interminable waiting stretched and sheared, as we waited now for my father to get home. I wanted to have more ice cream. My tongue was dry. If only I could get money enough even just for one, I would run to the shop and eat it all by myself, in secret. Surely, my father would give me some money when he came home. The women began to leave, one by one, shaking their burkhas free of wrinkles, Ali’s mother pulling out a packet of cigarettes from the inside pocket of hers.

Then, when the sun had smeared and bled into the sky, my father at last arrived in his Volkswagen and parked under the grapevine. He emerged tall and cool, a smile wrinkling his eyes.

“Baba!” I ran to him and barreled into him and was whisked into the air. “Baba! It’s here. The baby.” He put me down and went inside, and my chest felt very heavy. I leaned against the car and concentrated on ice cream flavors: which flavor would I like if I could have one more ice cream?

While the sky was still colorful, my father came outside to sit with us on the lawn. Somehow we had moved from the verandah to the lawn, and he brought out a box of chocolates for me.
“For you, Fatma,” he said. “Because today is a very special day for you. Today you have the gift of a sister who shall be close to you for all your life.”

“Baba, you brought it on your way home from the office, for me?”

“Share,” he said. I carried it back to my chair and lifted the cover. By this time, other children from the neighborhood had collected on our lawn. They had come to see the baby, and now they were all sitting on the lawn, and I was having to open my box of chocolates, my special gift from my father, in front of them. I chose one, white milk chocolate, my favorite, and put it in my mouth. Milk sweetened my teeth and tongue. The other children, including all nine of the Mal Allah children, from the ten-year-old to the one-year-old, and Yusra, Warda, and Najwa, all stared at me.

“Fatma,” said a faraway voice, “share, ya habibi.” I chewed and kneaded the sweetness between the roof of my mouth and the buds of my tongue. I dug out the remnants from inside my teeth. I opened the box again.

“Fatma! Share with your friends.” I didn’t look up. My eyes floated over the blurring chocolates. That which was waiting inside me all day, a taut string that stretched from my chest to my stomach, now began to break, and I felt tired and unable. In all of these hours of waiting, I was not aware until now of this tight cord inside me. But now it pushed its way out, and I began to cry.

“No, Baba, no,” I said. “This chocolate is only for me.”

“Fatma,” my father said in a warning voice, all the love gone out of his voice. I cried even more. I dived to the grass and lay there with my face down, screaming.

My father pulled my head up and said, “Last time I am saying this, share.”

In response, I screamed and shook my hair until it fell over my face. I didn’t want to share.

“You are a big sister now,” said my father. “You have to grow up and be a big girl.”

“No!” I said. I was crying with my hair hiding my face. I didn’t feel the slap or my hair being pulled as I was dragged across the grass and left to lie somewhere, still, on the lawn, far away from the other children’s voices. The voices rose and fell, echoes in the distance.

The heat of the day gave way to cooler air. The grass felt wet and almost cold beneath my cotton dress. Then slowly, thankfully, the Mal Allah children left with their mother, promising to come back later.
at night. Even Yusra and her sisters must have gone inside, because I couldn’t hear their voices. I rolled over so that I was facing upward again and opened my eyes slowly. My father’s face was bent over mine.

“Fatma, I’m sorry,” he said. “My sweet. Forgive me. Come, I shall give you anything you want.”

He put his hand on my head and tried to smooth out the tangles of angry hair on my head. The frown was gone from his forehead and his mouth made a sad smile.

“Baba, I want some ice cream,” I said. “I will share with the other kids.”

“Yes, my love,” said my father. Since only Yusra, Najwa, and Warda were left in the house, he gave me enough money, one dinar, for four ice creams, and sent me off to buy four cups.

The sky was dull now, and I skipped and ran most of the way. I could think of nothing else but the ice cream. I could still remember that sensation of milky coolness on my tongue from my earlier treat, the perfection of that pleasure, and I felt consoled by the thought that I could recall that pleasure at will at any time, every day, for all my life, simply by eating another ice cream. The night smelled of a breeze, and there was also the slight smell of burning paper, and I worried as I half ran, half walked, about what kind of ice cream to get. I had had a cone earlier, and part of me really wanted to buy another cone. But I also wanted to try something different, perhaps a scoop of vanilla in a cup, a chocolate bar.

When I reached the shop, the fat shopkeeper was still waiting, his arms folded across his still stretched shirt. I could not make up my mind. I had money only for four cups. But if I bought a cone and a cup for myself, then there would be money for only…two more cups. If I got a chocolate bar and a cup? Okay, I would just get a cup. I felt more and more resentful about the constraint on my desire, the fact that I had to buy for four, that there were three other children waiting back in the house.

“Girl,” said the shopkeeper, “You could try the new combination, a scoop each of orange, vanilla, and chocolate, three scoops, on a cone.”

“Okay,” I said. “Okay. May I see it?” I studied the flavors and the names again carefully, my tongue filling up with hot saliva. “Okay,” I said at last, after a long tormented moment, “I shall get three scoops on a cone and three scoops in a cup.”

I had given up the math, and it was too hard for me to think, so I
Gemini Wahhaj

bought the cone and the cup and walked home with my possessions. Perhaps there was still a way for four people to share two ice creams. I enjoyed my walk in solitude in the quiet night air. There was no moon out, and sometimes I stole a lick from the cone or the cup.

But when I reached home and slipped in through the metal gates, there was the buzz of hundreds of voices, and then, the lawn was just full of people. It was dark enough that I could stand by my father’s Volkswagen and survey the scene without being seen. My ice cream melted slightly and I licked the scoops in each hand. Then there was a figure beside me.

“Where were you? What took you so long?” It was Yusra, her face ghostly and grown-up in the dark. “Look, we can’t eat these now. There are guests here to see your baby sister. You can’t eat in front of the other kids and not share. What will you do?”

I stared at her stupidly, wanting to explain why I had bought two ice creams instead of four, but she didn’t even ask. She pulled me by the left elbow and dragged me to the space between the car and the wall.

“Listen,” she said. “Stand here and finish these, then come out, not before that, okay?”

I nodded, not having any words to use, and watched her as she faded into the lawn, teetering on the edge of virginity. For a moment, I felt as if she were my big sister. Then, hiding in the corner, I licked my ice creams in haste, trying to finish. My hair was plastered to my forehead, and my dress itched. The scoops dripped on my fingers and milky sweetness filled every space inside me, from my throat to deep inside my stomach. It coated my fingers, and trickled down my wrists. I gulped and swallowed and bit while voices swarmed around me, floated headless and bodiless across the lawn, rising slowly in the air.

That night, there was laughter and cheering as the new baby was held up in the air. There were many guests, all come to welcome my sister into the world. The rose bushes were hidden by a multitude of lawn chairs. I took my time coming out of my shadow. I heard voices rise and fall on the lawn, the clinking of water glasses, the baby’s intermittent wails, singing, the Mal Allah children fighting about something, Mal Allah shouting to them, Yusra serving water on a tray. Just as I could not share, the Mal Allah children could not help fighting, and Yusra could not help being Yusra, bossy and irritating, nasal and lonely. Had we known about the future, perhaps still none of us could have changed a thing about the way we were.

A long time had passed. What seemed to me like an hour, perhaps
two. I kept thinking, just a little more time, the people will still be there. By now the chunks I bit off were too cold. Even the dainty ladylike bites assaulted my teeth, my gums, and my throat. The straps of my dress clung sweatily to my skin, the back welded to my back. I felt no pleasure. The lights went out, and the voices became quieter, and still I did not come out. By the time I finished the last bite of my childish pleasure, swallowing the cold shock between my teeth, and emerged on the lawn, the people were gone. There were no more voices on the lawn.

Today I sit alone in Amman, eating boiled beetroot in my living room. Sometimes in Amman, they show the streets of Mosul on TV on the news, and I watch eagerly, but I can never make out any street that looks like mine. The streets I see all look the same, shell-shocked and explosively barren, with the American soldiers, covered bodies of children, and wailing mothers. I have heard of the Mal Allah boys going off one after another to the different wars. Some were killed, some captured now by Americans. And true to my father’s belief, Yusra now walks the streets, and I hear distant rumors of her rape by the American soldiers. Watching the ruins of my country on television, I ache to turn to her and share my loneliness.
Erika Williams

Pageant

Havva Unsal had shining teeth and glossy hair the color of tea but her nose was too big and she held her head too far forward when she walked and talked, like a pigeon pecking for bread. She was eighteen years old and she felt these flaws strongly as she walked in the grass beside her friend. Yasmin Arici, aged twenty-two, was both beautiful and brave. Yasmin had appeared once on TV and twice in the newspaper. Yasmin demonstrated, she protested, she argued, she organized. Havva rarely even questioned.

The two girls were walking in Schiller Park. It was as lovely—and as orderly—as every other German park: full of tall trees and bright, blooming flowers all restrained into good German rows. The grass on which the girls trod was well-mown and edged with a strand of white chain-link fencing. Inside the fencing, carefully posted, were small white signs that commanded park visitors to stay off the grass.

These ubiquitous signs were obeyed by all Germans: the elderly and the middle-aged; small children and their watchful parents. It was true that university students sometimes ignored the prohibition, but they soon grew out of such rebellions. Only tourists, ignorant of the German language, continued making paths in the grass. Havva and Yasmin, however, were neither German nor tourists; the signs did not apply to them.

Yasmin strode through the grass with a box in her hands and a dress bag over one arm. Havva carried both girls’ purses and walked self-consciously beside her. Keeping pace with them, on the proper side of the fence, was Havva’s father, Ahmet. He was short and carried a belly, but his legs were trim and his steps on the sidewalk were firm. He carried a shopping bag from which his newspaper poked out—he had not had time to read it that morning.

“You didn’t have to come, Baba,” Havva said across the fence. “You can see that we really are just going to be at the park.”

“It’s a nice day. I can sit and read and wait for you,” Ahmet answered. “When you are finished I will give you a ride home.”
The girls had come on the bus, but Ahmet had driven his green Opel, only three years old, the fruit of his labors at the laundry service he owned. He had left his wife working there today. This summer Havva would take her place; Ahmet thought the customers would like her.

The three walked past magnolia and chestnut trees and barrels topped with red geraniums until they reached the plaza at the center of the park. The plaza contained tables and chairs, a large fountain of Poseidon supported by water-spitting fish, some wooden benches, a set of bathrooms, and an *Imbiss*—a kiosk which sold food and magazines. Here at last the two girls stepped over the fence and put their bundles down at a table. Ahmet sat at another table and spread out his newspaper.

Yasmin scanned the plaza and frowned at its emptiness.

“I don’t see anyone else here, yet,” she said. Not her friends, not a news crew, not even a photographer.

“I don’t mind waiting,” Havva said.

“Well, we can’t let them think ignoring us will stop us,” Yasmin said. “Come on, let’s go to the bathroom and get you ready.”

“If you’re sure,” Havva said.

“It will be no trouble for me to watch your things,” Ahmet said. “Your purse, your box...I will be right here.”

Yasmin held up the dress bag with one arm and took hold of Havva with the other.

“Come on,” she said, linking elbows with the girl. “Let’s make you beautiful.”

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After the girls had gone into the bathroom, Ahmet arranged their belongings beside his own sack underneath the table. Then he adjusted his clothing, smoothing the crease from his lap. Ahmet was wearing his Turkish military uniform, though it meant nothing in Germany. He wore it because it was his best suit of clothes and because on Saturday afternoons in this particular park there were those who would recognize it and show deference to his rank. He might play checkers with those people or he might share their cigarettes or he might purchase some candies from the *Imbiss* to pass around. But as today was Sunday, Ahmet saw no one he knew, apart from Zeki manning the *Imbiss*.

Ahmet knew Zeki only slightly, enough to say hello and send greetings to his family. In truth, Ahmet found Zeki distasteful—the smell and the oil that clung to him, the dirty apron at his waist and...
the way his arm was always rubbing across his forehead, leaving a path of grease. There was something of the dog about Zeki: his servile manner; his matted appearance; and above all his eyes, small and dark and hungry in a way that did not seem civilized. But as Ahmet’s friends were absent, he took special notice of Zeki today, watching him at his work of selling fried bratwurst, cups of yellow beer, newspapers, and magazines covered with naked women.

After a few minutes Ahmet crossed over to the *Imbiss* window and asked Zeki for an orange Fanta and two Euros worth of red cherry candies. Zeki handed a can and a straw through the window and twisted the candies in a paper cone for him.

“Thank you,” Ahmet said.

Zeki gave a small half-bow through the window.

“This is not your usual day, sir,” Zeki said.

“No. But I see you are here, too. You must work every day.”

“Yes, almost,” Zeki said, waving a cloth to dispel the smoke gathering above the grill.

“Tell me, Zeki—do you mind if I ask you something?”

“Please.”

“Tell me then, how do you do this? The smell of beer all day, the smoke and oil from this meat all around you?”

Zeki shrugged. “I don’t pay it any attention. This is my job, only. When I go home, I take off these clothes I’m wearing and I leave them in the garage so that the smell does not go into my house. On Tuesdays and Fridays my daughter comes and picks up the clothes and washes them.”

“Ah, you have a good daughter,” Ahmet said. “Though of course it means I will never see you at my laundromat.”

It was a pleasant thing to say. Ahmet always found pleasant things to say to almost-strangers. It was how he made customers feel like friends and *Imbiss*-men feel like equals. Zeki smiled.

“Yes. She is a good daughter. And yours?”

“Havva is a good girl.”

“But her friend?” Zeki asked, looking toward the restroom. “Not so good, right?”

“Too fashionable, maybe,” Ahmet said, thinking about Yasmin’s loose hair and high heels.

“That one—I don’t care about her. Her family is nothing. Maybe they can’t feel any shame. That’s what I think. But you, you are a man of importance. Your daughter should not be with such a girl.”
“Ah, Havva is still young,” Ahmet said, acknowledging the compliment with a smile of his own. “She has to have her idol.”

Zeki shrugged again and Ahmet made his goodbyes. Then he sat back down at his table, rummaging through his sack. He was getting nervous, waiting for the girls. He was worried that it might rain. It was spring and this was Germany after all. But he had forgotten his umbrella.

The bathroom into which Yasmin had pulled Havva was a small building of concrete and metal. There were two sinks and a row of stalls whose door had locks that opened only for money. Yasmin rested the dress bag across one sink and sat her purse on the other.

“Get undressed, goose,” she ordered Havva.

Havva stood between the sinks and took off her scarf, shirt, and long skirt. At first she kept her back to her friend but then, feeling foolish, she turned around and faced Yasmin in just her underwear and sandals. Yasmin had opened the dress bag and held out a gown of pale purple, long and straight and shiny.

“Arms up,” Yasmin said.

Havva raised her arms and Yasmin lifted the gown over her head, holding the fabric first at Havva’s waist, waiting for the girl to get her arms in, and then letting it fall all the way to the floor. The dress went up to Havva’s neck and down to her ankles but left her arms bare and golden.

“It’s a little long,” Yasmin said. “I suppose I’m taller than you. At least it covers your sandals.”

“I didn’t think to bring any other shoes,” Havva said.

“I wore this dress to a wedding,” Yasmin said. “I didn’t much like it—I shouldn’t wear purple. But it’s perfect for you.”

“Thank you.”

“We need to do something with your hair, though. And make-up, too.”

“Whatever you like.”

Twenty minutes later Havva was as beautiful as she was ever going to be. Both girls could see it even though the mirror in the restroom was hazy and the lights fluorescent. Havva raised her hand to touch an eyelash, thick and dark with mascara.

“Don’t,” Yasmin said. “It’ll smear. You have to wait until after you’re crowned. Then you get to cry and ruin your make-up with happiness.”
“All right,” Havva said, content to follow Yasmin’s instructions. Yasmin packed up the make-up and brushes, tucking them into her purse. Havva stood in front of the mirror again, not touching herself anywhere, but looking at each change.

“Are you nervous?” Yasmin asked.

“No. Or maybe just a little.”

“It’s going to be all right, you know.”

“I know.”

“Really, though. Maybe next week I might get some death threats in the mail. But nobody’s here today.”

“Who sends death threats?”

“Neo-Nazis, radical-right Muslims, housewives who think I should be grateful just to be here. I got three last semester, when I was hanging the posters.”

Havva remembered the posters: photos of immigrant kids, their faces everywhere and underneath them Yasmin had written ‘Why no citizenship for us?’ Yasmin herself was second-generation German-born, but first- or third- or even fourth-generation, it didn’t matter. They would never be Germans.

“It’s terrible,” Havva said.

“At least the posters got press coverage,” Yasmin said. “More in the UK than here, I think. Here they were mostly just torn down. Or covered with graffiti. I got a box of them in the mail covered in shit. Oh, well.”

“Will I get death threats, too?” Havva asked. “Because of today?”

“Do you want to? I can forward some of mine.” Yasmin laughed.

“I wouldn’t mind them. I mean I wouldn’t be afraid. But my mother…and my father…”

Yasmin came behind Havva and wrapped her arms around the girl’s waist, resting her chin on Havva’s shoulder.

“You look so lovely, Havva. But you can stay in here, if you want to.”

Havva parted her mouth, teeth so white against the mulberry color of the lipstick. She made herself smile, watching each rouged cheek lift up.

“It’s just a pageant,” she said. “Everything will be fine.”

“Of course it will.”

Havva picked up her old clothes, laid the scarf and shirt on top of the skirt, and rolled them all up.

“Do you want me to give those to your father?” Yasmin asked.
“No. I’ll just leave them here,” Havva said.
Perhaps they would be stolen.

WHEN THE TWO GIRLS CAME OUT OF THE BATHROOM, AHMET WAS AT
his table, drinking Fanta slowly through a straw. The bubbles of the
soda were small and sour on his tongue but sweet on the back of his
throat. The girls had their arms around each other’s waists, heads bare.
They looked very young. Yasmin scanned the plaza again for interested
faces but saw none. She drew Havva out onto the forbidden grass to
pose her, one hand on her hip, the other draped down along her leg.
“A woman eligible for the pageants of no
country, but beautiful all the same. I present her to you now—not Miss
Germany and not Miss Turkey—but Miss Foreign Guest Worker!”

Yasmin clapped and cheered and then draped the sash over
Havva’s shoulders. The sash was inscribed in Yasmin’s handwriting—
Turkish on the front and German on the back.
“I meant to embroider it,” Yasmin said. “But I ran out of time.”
“It’s very pretty,” Havva said. “Should I cry now?”
“Wait for your crown. I left it out here in a box.”
“Here it is,” Ahmet said, standing.
He reached across the fence and handed the box to Yasmin, who
took it from him with light, strong fingers. The hair on her arms was as
gold as the hair on her head, Ahmet noted. No wonder Havva admired
her.

Yasmin put the box down on the ground to open it; Havva bent
over to watch her. Inside the box was a crystal tiara, peaked in the
front and tapered on the sides. But Yasmin was frozen, hands inside
the box.
“Don’t move, Havva,” she said.
“Why not? What’s wrong?”
“There’s something else in the box, wrapped in plastic. Something
I didn’t put there.”
“What?” Havva asked.
“I don’t know. Hold still.”
“A bomb?” Havva asked.
Havva’s skin, already cold from the strangeness of a breeze on it, turned vaporous and tingling. She felt as if she were a ghost already. Yasmin did not reach out to comfort her but simply waited, hands inside the box, counting breaths until she reached seven.
“It can’t be a bomb,” Yasmin said. “It should have exploded by now. Still, it might be something unpleasant.”
Something to warn them, scare them, humiliate them. A pig’s heart or a dead kitten or their own photographs defaced, bundled up in that crinkly plastic. Yasmin emptied the box onto the grass and slowly unrolled the bundle.
“It’s a hat,” she said. “Just a hat.”
It was a cheap plastic rain hat, the sort old ladies tucked into their bags when they went out shopping. This one was wide-brimmed and hand-decorated. The top and sides were covered in beads and glitter, from the back hung a lacy white scarf, long enough to hang halfway down a woman’s back.
Both girls sat on the grass, bodies dizzy with rushing blood.
“I don’t understand,” Havva said. “What does it mean?”
“I don’t know. It must say something, somewhere.”
Yasmin searched the hat but could find no insults on it. No “whore” or “daughter of Satan.” Nothing.
“Wait. Maybe on the inside. Yes, there’s something written here. In Turkish. ‘Yavrum,’ I think.”
“Let me see,” said Havva.
Havva took the hat and there inside, as if marked against loss, was that one word: Yavrum—“Little Animal.” It was written in the same tight script that Ahmet had used for years on packages and inside Havva’s shoes and on the letters he’d sent her from Germany when she was still a small child back in Ankara.
“Baba?” Havva said, turning. “You did this?”
Ahmet sat at his table, hands folded in front of him, his uniform showing the wrinkles of spring humidity. He was looking up at the sky and how the clouds moved in the smallest of ways, even without wind.
“Perhaps,” he said.
“But you frightened us, Baba.”
Ahmet drew himself away from the clouds, faced his daughter directly.
“I thought,” he said, “if you wanted something pretty for your hair…”

And then Havva recognized the hat for what it was. Another crown, another choice—one her father had tried to make pretty, to package as glamorously as he knew how.

Havva knew what her father would do if she accepted his hat. Ahmet was a demonstrative man and when he was happy with her he did not hide it. There were hugs and small presents and wide grins.

But when he was unhappy, he simply pretended that Havva did not exist. “What daughter?” he would say. “If I had a daughter she would not…” and then put in whatever sin Havva had committed: “…wear such shoes,” or “…eat chocolates at noon during Ramadan,” or “…hide romance novels in her school bag.” Though only for a day or two, of course.

But what about Yasmin? If Havva were to leave the park with her father now, Yasmin would watch her go and click her tongue once or twice and then put the tiara on her own head. And that would be the last Havva would see of Yasmin.

Havva stood up, dress held carefully, and stepped across the fence to where her father sat.

“I’m sorry, Baba,” she said, holding his hat out to him.

Ahmet kept his hands folded in his lap and when Havva set the hat in front of him on the table, he used his elbow to push it off. He returned his gaze back to the clouds, so that he did not have to see the girls. Or Zeki.

Havva had already returned to Yasmin.

“I’m sorry,” Havva told her. “He doesn’t understand.”

Yasmin squeezed Havva’s arm.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “A few more minutes and we’ll be done. Stand close so that I can crown you.”

Yasmin picked up the tiara and set it on Havva’s head, digging the combs deep into Havva’s hair and adjusting the peak so that it gleamed in the sunlight.

“Perfect,” Yasmin said. “Now go and pose so that I can take your picture.”

Havva crossed the grass and leaned against a giant linden tree, one hand on the trunk, the other swaying the dress out in front of her. She was tingling again, but this time with warmth. She felt every sensation on her body: the air on her skin, the dress on her legs, the tree pressing rough lines of bark into her hand. She smiled for Yasmin, who snapped pictures with her cell phone.

“That will have to be good enough,” Yasmin said.
Havva twirled beneath the tree but her friend was no longer looking at her, was looking instead at the images in the phone. Yasmin thought there was one she could send to the newspapers. Perhaps they would publish it.

Ahmet watched the crowning and the subsequent parading of his daughter through the park—German picnickers and schoolchildren and grown men all gawking at the two girls. Havva waved at them all, her elbow high and her wrist turning semi-circles in the air. When he grew tired of watching, he moved his chair close to the Imbiss.

“What do you think of forgiveness?” he asked Zeki. “Can everything be forgiven? In children, especially?”

Zeki was bent over his bratwurst, turning them in the oil with a pair of tongs. “It’s not important what I think,” he said.

“But I would like your opinion. I would like it very much.”

“Then I will say that no, not everything can be forgiven. Most things, yes, but that is the risk. One thing might be forgivable and the very next thing, the next step on a path, might not be. Better I think to keep children completely off of such paths.”

Ahmet considered this. “You see that I tried to show Havva the right way. To scare her a little. What else can I do?”

Zeki took a handful of napkins and placed them one by one on the bottom of little red-checked paper baskets. On top of these he put sliced rolls. He would add the bratwurst last. “Havva may still be teachable,” he said. “If the lesson were to be stronger.”

Ahmet pursed his mouth. He was too soft with women. “She has outgrown my lessons, I fear. But perhaps she will find the right path on her own. There is still time, after all. Perhaps I will be lucky.”

Zeki did not believe in luck. Havva was a girl now, playing, but Zeki could see the path she had started down and it was not one that she would not turn from. He saw her womanhood looming.

“Not many can put faith in luck,” Zeki said. “But perhaps luck will find you. Perhaps you deserve it.”

Ahmet smiled a bit.

“Yes, I think so. One more thing, Zeki, and then I will stop troubling you. What has happened here today, I would like to ask for your discretion. It might not be good for me—for my business—if this were known.”

“Of course,” Zeki said.
“Thank you.” Ahmet gave a bigger smile. “I am very grateful. And of course, you should come and join us here sometime in our Saturday checker games.”

Zeki accepted the offer, giving his small bow through the Imbiss window and looking for all the world like a dog who’d received a bone.

“I would be honored,” he said.

Havva was still smiling when she returned to the plaza with Yasmin. She was conscious of each small breeze on her shoulders and the fine mist of the fountain on her neck.

“Well, I suppose that’s it,” Yasmin said. “You might as well go change, Havva.”

“Oh, I don’t want to,” Havva said. “I’ll change at home.”

“And wear that dress on the bus?”

“I can ride back with Baba,” Havva said. “And I can get the dress cleaned for you.”

Havva was thinking how next week she could visit Yasmin to return the dress and they would have a few more smiles together, remembering their pageant, before planning something new.

“All right,” Yasmin said.

Ahmet coughed.

“It’s enough now, Havva,” he said. “It’s time to go home. Please say good-bye to your friend.”

Havva turned to embrace Yasmin, pressing her shoulders into the other girl’s.

“Thank you,” she said. “Thank you for choosing me for this.”

“Keep the crown, Havva, why don’t you,” Yasmin said, pulling away. “It was only a few Euros at a toy shop.”

“Don’t forget your clothes,” Ahmet called out. “We will have to wash them.”

“All right, Baba.”

Havva gave a sweeping curtsy in the direction of Yasmin and went into the bathroom. She stood at the mirror, gazing. Then she drew her hand to her lips and kissed the back of it slowly, eyes closed and lips pressing against her own warm skin, still full of sunlight.

Outside Yasmin gathered up her things—her purse, the dress bag and the empty box. Beside the table she picked up the discarded hat, the makeshift crown.

“Here,” she said to Ahmet, who stood waiting at the plaza’s edge. “You should keep this.”
Yasmin tossed the hat but it went beyond Ahmet, twirling into the grass. “Sorry. I’ll get it,” she said.

Ahmet looked at the hat, perched on the clipped green blades. Before Yasmin could reach him he stepped over the fence, reached down, and picked up the hat, tucking it under his arms. Perhaps if it rained it would still be useful to Havva. Yasmin soon stood beside him. Ahmet was careful not to touch her shoulders or brush against the blond hairs of her arms.

“She was beautiful today, you know,” Yasmin said.

Ahmet did not answer. He wished Yasmin to know that Havva was beautiful before the purple dress, before the naked arms, before all of this playacting directed by her worldly friend. But he could not summon up any anger. In truth, he was content enough with the day. He turned his thoughts to the grass, which was deep and green beneath him. He imagined that he could feel it brushing his feet, despite his shoes, such was its softness. He saw Havva coming out of the bathroom and was glad she would be riding home with him. He would be silent and stern with her for a bit. But before bed he would give her some of the cherry candies he had purchased at the Imbiss. If indeed she could still be pacified by such things.

Havva was calling across the plaza for them to wait when Ahmet saw Zeki say something to her. Havva paused in her walk and stooped down beside the Imbiss, one hand holding the tiara on her head, the other on the ground as if searching for a button, a ribbon, a hairpin. Zeki was leaning out of the window, a pan of bratwurst in his hands, very close to Havva.

Then the pan slipped. That’s what Zeki would say, of course. That it was an accident—the oil spilling, raining down on Havva’s head and spattering her face, her neck, and the soft skin of her arms, still bare in the sunlight.

Havva screamed.

For a moment Yasmin clutched at Ahmet. Then she was gone, leaping the white fence, running to Havva. Ahmet stayed immobile, staring at Zeki.

Zeki stood somberly above Havva with the slippery pan in his arms. There was grief across his mouth but in his eyes there was something else: the wink of a conspirator or else the leer of the dog—Ahmet could not tell which. If I had a daughter... Ahmet thought, if I had a daughter, she would not be splayed on the ground like that. She would not make such sounds.

He could smell flesh cooking—Zeki’s bratwurst and something
more acrid. He did not want to go to Havva; he did not want to begin his grief, which he knew would be long and wide and deep. Already he could feel it starting, building up through his knees and into his chest, a dark river that would carry all sensibility away. He stood in the grass with his face upturned, waiting for the sky to go black, for rain to fall. But there was nothing. Just the soft floating of white clouds across a distant, sparkling sun.
Mary Quade

Amish Boy with Remote Control Car

His back to me, woolen legs moving down the gravel shoulder, the boy shuffles, following something small in the road—maybe a puppy or a runaway ball. It’s turning toward spring around here; the vegetable gardens sprout mounds of manure. The boy tails this small thing. It’s not getting away, veering into the pasture, bouncing further and further among the wads of sheep. No, he’ll catch it sooner or later. But as I gain on him, I see what it is—a steroidal jeep, miniaturized, donut-sized wheels, wire antenna flicking as he grips the control box. He steers it straight, no 360s, no wheelies, no off-roading in the grass flecked with litter, just a steady cruise along the white line, his plain concentration. The irony isn’t lost; it follows the path of the road. If I weren’t driving, I’d like to go for a walk. If I weren’t working, I’d like to shovel manure. I’d like to grab a sheep and sink my hand in fleece, touch hot skin. The boy and I will each reach where we’re going. And when I arrive I’ll flip a switch, set the meter spinning. And later, could I make it stop? There are lots of dos and don’ts to both our ways. I’m never clear on his, but I know mine. Do not speed. Pass with care. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s life.
when you’re playing in the streets, parents inside drinking tea, when
the girl you’re playing with says, you look Jewish, doesn’t she look
Jewish, with envy and hate in her voice, before she shows you how to
make jam from the purple folded flower buds that grow on the streets,
one of the small tokens given to Brooklyn,

the both of you don’t know each other, but your parents used to, so
you’re forced to play and spend hours in her backyard, in the street,
inside the parents are happy, it is a gorgeous day in Brooklyn and they
are visiting old friends, they say remember when these children were
just babies,

stop it, not like that, you’re doing it all wrong, she grabs the pounding
rock from your hand, you bite your tongue, you don’t turn to her and
say, one day, years from now, your baby is going to fall out the window
when you are shopping at the store, she doesn’t turn to you and say,
well, you will grow old and never have babies,

no, instead she says, let’s get more flowers over there in the neighbor’s
yard, and together you pick up more swollen buds, and pound them
and pound them into her own special recipe, flower jelly.
Thomas Reiter

Looking at a Fifteenth-Century Canoe in the Grenada National Museum

His face daubed with slashes and loops of red sap from the roucou tree, a boy pushes off through storm-wrack of broken coral, shells, seabed grasses and begins paddling. He kneels on char, remembering how he tended the fires his father taught him will make the sides of a hollowed-out silk cotton tree expand. Today he’s fishing alone for the first time. He caught and tamed a remora, carries it in a calabash gourd in the bow adorned with the wings of a frigate bird. Sighting a turtle, he pours his remora into the sea and pays out the line tied to its tail. When that fish holds to the shell by the suckers atop its skull, he waits, lets it feed on sea lice, then hand over hand draws in the catch. Under glass beside his canoe, a display of phrases from the lost language of the Arawaks tells you “the soul of the hand” is its pulse. Soon his people will cry out, “Come, come, see the men from the sky,” when sails follow the trade winds for faith and gold. In Independence Square it’s market day, with stalls
offering produce, crafts, woven goods.
And here’s a boy selling T-shirts.
On the front of the one he wears
for display is a smiling condom,
in its balloon the words *No Problem.*
He carries that in seven languages.
José Edmundo Ocampo Reyes

“How Many Islands Does Your Country Have?”

a question sometimes asked of Filipinos by foreigners

It depends, so goes the joke,
on whether the tide is high or low.

The tide, then, must be high now,
for when you surmise
in our direction, all you see
is a mere patch of ocean
southeast of China.

Should typhoons rage over
our region, they’ll find
no denuded mountains to devour.
We have neither copper nor coral,
no pineapples or coconut wine—
nothing conquistadors
could ever have stolen.

No sinuous verses have ever
been spoken. No volcanoes
erupt, burying nameless towns
in layers of lava and ash. No corrupt
mayors reside in plantations
guarded by armalite-bearing
phantoms.

Only imaginary numbers
scavenge reeking objects
orphaned from their nouns.

The tide never turns,
even as every ghost drowns.
Allusion

Words are linked to other worlds of words, as when the poet writes: the bird Adarna, transforming adventurers to stone with its droppings, or Padre Florentino, who hurls a chest full of jewels into the sea. For some it is enough that the mind perceive the silhouette of the diamond tree in which the capricious bird perches and sings, perceive the priest’s repudiation is at once the embracing of poverty; but when these readers depart, like a flock returning north, for Ilium, Paradiso, Denmark, the Mississippi—will such newfound glimpses fade forever, dead stars?

But others, those for whom a star burns brighter when given a name, take the strange syllables in their hands: each footnote becomes a thread leading into the labyrinth instead of out, and negotiating each dim passageway they may discover that the prince who cuts his hand seven times, squeezing a lime over each wound so the bird’s seven songs won’t charm him to sleep, and the filibuster, broken, who ingests poison before he leaves his jewels and his secret with the priest; are both really a country that yearns for its own borders, that waits for those who would echo its words, as when signals ignite along an island chain to announce a hero’s return or a burial; that hopes its songs will reach any destination before whether these are heard no longer matters: the streets’ occupation by legions of dust, the body having forsaken both its flesh and its name.
Graveside Voyeurism

Kapan, Armenia

City of our last two years valleys wide
and this, the longest I’ve lived anywhere
with you. Otherwise, it is not home.

Concise rows of gravestones stitch
the hill’s skirt in uniform grey. Sketched
faces assign dead eyes to follow us

with their last memories of a war we know only
by name. Fake flowers, wind-whipped and
topped, deplete the stones. The sky widens

blue and deserted, among unflinching eyes,
we stand. There is nothing holding us here
or holding us back. This pain is not ours.
From the Same Fruit

Summer of stone fruit. It’s late July. Grandmother cans Armenian plums for winter jam to sweeten tea, russet-tinted. I eat apricot kernels, the final center. Yes, the wood pit encloses a bitter almond.

We threw them out too quickly, lost this fact a few generations back.

And this, the apricot almond will save a life or lose it.

She traipses behind me, cracks open seed to ground, take and eat, but not so many, pull gold skin back under sun leaves to suck clean the wood pit, what opens to cyanide and latent salves.
Little Men with Quick Hands

The sweat flicks from your elbows
when you deliver the sweet no-look
to the big man on the wing. You’ve been running
whole crews since noon. It’s a hard country,
ninety feet long and fifty feet wide, and
everyone on the borders wants to get in,
though no one belongs for more than
forty-eight minutes at a time. You know
most all the players’ names, because some you named
yourself. You know, in a half-court set,
how to pick a crossover from a point guard’s hip
and when to talk shit to the seven-footer
who last week dunked on you—hard.
They know you’ll chase down
the lead man on a fast break
and eat gravel just to make sure
the young gun with the swift first-step
is the only one not smiling when the two of you
next time square off. You know how to box out
a stocky forward on the inside with a slick
hip-pull so the ref can’t see. You are
a little man with fast hands,
come from a long line of stealth
and flash like the Filipino scout who scaled
solo the sheer face of a mountain
with nothing but a bolo blade in his teeth
to reach a small squad of slumbering Japanese soldiers
in a cave camped out. The scout slit the necks
of fourteen without waking them. He let the fifteenth
sleep. This is just ball, but you knows what’s up.
Our hands are quick. The history’s deep.
Effort at Flight

For twenty-five years, my father worked in a small city of Slavs and Puerto Ricans. As it is with men who loathe themselves,

he knew many people who thanked him,

and for my brothers and me, there was no better way to scorn him than to remind ourselves we could pay him back in secret, with all the curses we learned

late at night, in the company of loved ones, drunk off their asses or pleading to a god someone else has named for them.

I promised never to do such things,

and then someone told me a story about eleven children who went their separate ways: this one consumptive, this one stillborn, this one infant, dead, this one rebel, these two stabbed with military daggers in the back, flood muck, cripple, one my father, another a nun, and the youngest, whose laugh I remember second best, a plastic mist twisted into his lungs at a long and vile job. For generations,

they hadn’t tilled or harvested their own land, so they forgot how many things can ruin us and, without warning or elegy, move on.
When my dad was a child, he set thirty
of his neighbor’s prize-fighting cocks
loose on one another. Not one
survived. How is it he never told us
how the winters humiliated him
and so did the several journeys
between this sky and that,
and so simply did the American streets?

He thought maybe he was through with dignity.

I don’t mean to talk about my father
as if he were dead, but he and I haven’t exchanged
a few kind words in months. I’m in Texas,
working, and yesterday, thousands gathered at the banks
and along the bridges of the dammed-up Colorado
to watch man-made objects with shoddy wings
launch from a temporary ramp above the river
in mock competition. Every contestant crashed.
The crowds and I cheered without outrage
at all the things that failed to fly.
Sankar Roy

Inheritance

His fever is returning again. When it does he shakes like a mail train passing through a sleepy town.

He mutters incoherent things—
*Who ate my goat in God’s name?*
*I was wrong until I got to the bottom.*

Everyone knows he may not last the night.
Three physicians sit by his side.
Not doing much. Just watching him die.

They appear more like jurors than doctors.
Our three aunts have already arrived.
My uncles are somewhere in the house,
discussing funeral plans, their potential inheritance.
A man sitting on the porch prepares a list.
And we rehearse a drama

based on *Mahābhārata* in which Pandavas and Kouravas, cousins, wage a war over the right to the throne. We plan
to perform the drama after our grandpa’s funeral.
That is when I get the call. Grandpa wants to see me, only me, in private. After everyone leaves,

he waves to me to come closer.
He gives me my inheritance—
*The Ramayana*, an old book,
Sankar Roy

in which Rama, a king,
gives up the crown
to honor his father’s promise.
Ancestors

In the night of our leaving, ancestors are worried.
Anxious, pacing back and forth
through the heaven’s hallway.

I hear the clicking of their wooden sandals.
Of course we are in a hurry. The war already on,
close to our home. We hear gunshots, blasts.

Wishing us well, ancestors are lighting oil lamps,
each of them, and waving through the sky’s window.
The night is unusually starry. Also abnormally windy.

Our cattle and dogs follow up to the farm’s periphery—
as our bullock buggy rolls out through the mud roads.
But the ancestors trail us all the way through,

until we go beyond harm’s way.
Their silhouettes, bare-chested, emaciated
like the map of our nation.
Zohra Saed

Lime Trees at Dusk

Jalalabad

My father is a handsome man,
a regular Hindi movie star, they call him in Kabul.
But better looking, everyone agrees,
in his karakul hat and rectangular sunglasses.
The city girls chase him,
so shameless these bare-legged girls!
Not even the threat of spraying acid at their bared parts
prevents the latest fashion rage:

the mini skirt.

My father is a handsome man.
Girls sneak into his orchard,
tie love letters tucked in silk scarves to branches,
and scatter chocolates by his doorstep.
He rides his bicycle and notices even the veiled girls

quivering.

My father married a regular Hindi *filmi* girl,
so they say as she passes by swinging her arms
in rhythm to her swishing bellbottoms…
After the sweet-eating ceremony,
under the shade of his lime trees,
she faints from the Jalalabad heat.
He lifts her, a bundle of bright silks and chiffon

and blushes.
In the Cloud Forest

The innkeeper phones in: *ellos son las Negras*; tells us, *the driver will be here shortly; he’ll know how to find you*. We wait on the porch. At the coffee plantation, we pay to witness a man perform his daily ritual. It is low season, & the berries seem erudite as they lean, red, away from our brown & gold curiosities. The seasoned man straps a wicker basket across his torso, a crocus sack around his back, & ties these taut with heavy twine. He demonstrates how he would walk through the field, pick reddened berries, sort, then dry, then roast, then dry again; an eternal rhythm. He processes seeds & beans to make coffee palatable to people like me. He tells us a history of a boy who wandered into the woods, picked berries when they were stubbornly green; he could feel the earth swallow his tongue; he licked the stem & swallowed the berry whole. In that heat, we sway, look at the photographs scotch-taped to the wall. He warns us of eating against nature, says the boy almost died, & before almost death, saw visions, & was less than content. Says there were people before us who died for us & their curiosity & hunger. We sway in the shed, in the heat, look at the metal machines, the keys on the wood table.

Equipment waits to be useful. The man makes coffee-picking a theatrical expression. We lean against the walls, against the solidity of heat, against the temptation to pause green between two fingers, press the hard flesh. His stories become ours, & soon, we see
Metta Sáma

hands on brown seeds, white gauze. Against heat, blink. He asks if I will try to carry the basket, so I put it atop my head and stroll into the field, my back aligned with a banana tree, my neck angled, like red berries, away. The sun burns even my dark back. In this country, too, I walk I walk & I walk into temperamental heat.
At the restaurant the bus boys
who smell like Pine-Sol and burnt tortillas
call me la reina de Durango,
even though they say my teeth are much too pretty,
not stained brown or silver-capped.
They call me this even though
I am sure Durango would not claim me.
I explain: estoy muy norteada.

At lunch in the storage closet that smells like mop,
we share cactus, beans boiled in clay pots.

At Fiesta Mexicana, a red chile on my black polo
burns over my left breast. Once in summer heat
I danced in front of the Sears Tower
dressed as this same red pepper.
The pepper’s name was Sancho.

The coffee I brew here tastes like boiled napkins
and the beans I serve are tin.

That table of cops is leaving
change in a coffee cup,
and this woman, frowning in English
and asking Pedro for agua is all pink skin,
a hair in a glass of water.

The round-headed hostess says to her,
He don’t even speak English.
Erika L. Sánchez

The dishwasher, Miguel, the meek one with the missing teeth, it’s his birthday today and Federico has bought him a new pair of work shoes. They slap each other’s backs and say *paisa, carnal, camarada*.

After closing and singing happy birthday, Librado, the one with the barren wife and a laugh like syrup, takes my hand and we dance to *norteñas* in the kitchen, our feet slipping on the red and green tiles. Everyone watching us, clapping.
Everyone is always very interested when I speak about my Cubanicity, even though I was not born there and have never been there; but growing up in Miami is close enough for them.

I play records for them sometimes: my CDs of Benny Moré’s son and Pérez Prado’s mambo. And vinyl records, too, but those are really exile things, things from the post-Cuba years: my parents’ old El Gran Combo records and albums by their favorite band, El Conjunto Universal. Mostly, though, I cook for friends to show them what it’s like to be Cuban: moro or congroí, maybe some pork chops done up in mojo, or a nice, fat meatloaf Cuban-style,—fried—with an egg in the middle. Everything’s fried,

and everything has a lot of garlic, and yellow onions, and green peppers and cumin, and if you’re not careful, I would probably try to throw some lard in, if you’re not looking, because
pork should be in almost everything, if you’re Cuban. I do this all the time for friends, and they love it, it seems, so I always pack my royal blue volume, *Cocina al Minuto* by Nitza Villapol,

(Complete with nutritional instructions—like how every dinner should include, as a last and indispensable course, a shot of Cuban coffee, the world’s sweetest little cup of espresso—

for new Cuban wives planning meals for the first time. I own it, though I am not and will never be a Cuban wife. Sorry about this, but Cubans love digressions.) My friends eat it up, all of it, and who can resist feeding so many, who would avoid the reassuring quiet of friends, full and sated, imparting a sense of belonging and of home? So, I always pack this cookbook so I have my recipes ready to cook *ropa vieja*, and *vaca frita*, and *camarones enchilados*, which is an especial treat. Growing up in Miami is good enough for me,

to call myself Cuban, though I think I should get extra credit for playing ambassador of culture, although maybe that’s just me. I mean, I try to share it all,
from the sayings to the gestures
to the bawdiness, everything
from food to music and back again.
I’m saving one recipe, however,
for the right moment, though

I’m not sure when that will be,
but someday I will show up somewhere
and everyone will know I’m cooking,
but not know what and out of this
paper sack I’ll produce langostas,

_ y cangrejos, y camarones, y todo_
tipo de marisco and make the Queen
Mother of all Seafood Dishes: _Paella a la Criolla_, Cuban-style, and once
and for all explain myself to them.
Lauren K. Alleyne

What Women Wear

One night, a bouncer at a club refused me entry because my head was covered.

“No covering allowed,” he said.

At first, I thought he was kidding, but as I moved to go in he did his bouncer thing and blocked the door. For about ten seconds, I stood there with my mouth hanging open, and then, gathering my wits about me, tried to call out to my friends who had disappeared into the smoky darkness.

“Can I at least go tell my friends I’m not allowed in?” I asked.

Bouncer number two, feeling sorry for me, whispered to his colleague, and after a lot of nodding and back and forth, bouncer number one says, “Go ahead, but next time…”

My friends had missed me by then and had come back in time to hear the reprimand. “What was that all about?” they asked.

“You wouldn’t believe it,” I said.

The irony here, of course, is that said club was in the State of Qatar, a Muslim country, where in the day-to-day events of their lives, women are either partially masked (i.e., only their eyes are exposed) or fully veiled (a fine black material covers the entire face). When I moved there in the summer of 2006, I was given a welcome packet that encouraged me as a western female to practice cultural sensitivity; I was advised to wear shirts that covered at least my elbows and collarbone, and skirts that went past the knee (this in spite of temperatures that frequently go up to fifty degrees Celsius). So the last thing I expected was to be hassled because I was too covered!

Shortly before the night in question, I had recently returned from a holiday in Israel, where it is not uncommon to see women in a variety of headgear, from wigs to fancy hats to simple cloth wraps. My mother, who was with me, fell in love with one of these types of coverings; her head would swivel (often to my embarrassment) each
time another woman walked past wearing one, and she wondered over and over what they were called and where she could get one. (I later discovered that they’re called *snoods.*) We were in a small shopping mall in Jerusalem when my mother spotted an old woman wearing a rich, purple snood. Before I could restrain her, she strode up to the bench where the old woman sat, and from my mortified distance, I could see the old woman’s shock at my mother’s crisp “excuse me,” and her confusion at my mother’s gesticulations (she was circling her index finger around her head). I hurried over when I heard the volume of my mother’s voice increase as she asked, “What are they called?” The woman, her imperfect English capturing only a part of my mother’s query, launched into a bilingual treatise on the difference between women who know God and others who didn’t *really*; the difference of course, was that those who truly “know God” covered their heads. Although frustrated that she still hadn’t gotten a word for the hat out of the old lady, my mother was intrigued by what little she’d understood of her explanations. Later, when we reconnected with our secular Israeli guide, she asked about the tradition of covering, and Laila informed us that it was the custom among more conservative Jewish sects for married ladies to hide their hair as a sign of respect for their husbands, and because it’s believed to be instructed in the Old Testament. Mom turned to me, “So it’s basically kind of like a hijab,” she said.

“Shh!” I whispered, poking her in the ribs, “wrong country. That’s Muslim, remember!”

The idea of covering is not odd in my cultural background. I am from the small twin island nation of Trinidad and Tobago, where like many other Caribbean islands, the biggest legacy of colonialism is the variety of ethnic groups. The two major groups in T&T, however, are the descendents of East Indian indentured workers and African slaves. The connotation of the headdress is often a combination of religious observance and socio-cultural identification. Elderly Hindu women, for example, in their day-to-day lives often wear saris and drape a shayla, a matching separate piece of the thin, embroidered silk, loosely over their heads. At weddings, pujas, or other religious events, everyone dons the variety of full ceremonial garb, which for the women—young and old alike—often involve more intricate headgear. Practicing orthodox Muslim women, too, both East Indian and African, sport varying degrees of cover, from the hijab, which is a piece of cloth draped around the face that covers the hair, to the (rare) covering that only shows the
eyes. Women of the Spiritual Baptist faith—a heavily Africanized Christian practice common in the Caribbean—also cover as a part of their religious observance, their turban-like wraps often a sparkling white to match their white clothes. The African headdress, however, is by no means limited to the religious, as women who simply wish to identify with their African roots adorn themselves with elaborately tied headpieces to match flowing, vibrantly-coloured dashikis or wear simple wraps for ordinary daily dress.

For me though, wearing a headscarf began simply as a way to not engage with my often difficult-to-handle head of hair. Even as a child, having my hair combed was a terrible ordeal, especially after it had been washed, when the various oils and pomades my mother applied daily to keep it soft had been shampooed away, leaving a clean but unruly mass. I remember sitting between my mother’s legs, head bent low as she greased and combed and braided the strands into submission; more often than not, tears streamed down my face. I was a notorious “tender-head,” which is to say the constant tug of fingers and the comb’s sharp teeth irritated my sensitive scalp and made me howl when I was younger or grit my teeth as I grew older. Even after I began chemically treating my hair when I was thirteen, I hated the nightly routine of curlers and wrapping. I would often yank the offending rollers and hairpins out in my sleep and wake up in the morning with a liberated nest of hair. I hated the sting of the relaxers and the heavy hum of the dryer, and dreaded the monthly trips to the hairdresser.

When I left home for college, away from my mother’s vigilant eye, and unable to afford the monthly maintenance of my relaxer, necessity brought me back to the handy solution of the headscarf. With it, I could stretch out the visits to the hairdresser and let my roots grow out as wildly as they desired. I tenderly braided my hair into loose cornrows, and left them in for as long as I pleased. For me, wearing my head wrap was an exercise in liberation from the tyranny of the comb.

But, no one lets it be that simple.

When I was a junior in college, my sociology professor attempted to forbid me to come to class with a wrapped head. In the face of my consistent refusal, she threatened to kick me out of the class. Still, I
refused, and went to the Dean of Student Affairs, who concurred that she had no basis to make such a request. She was, however, equally persistent. She changed her strategy to cajoling. After class one day, she called me back and regaled me with a list of negative social connotations.

“It’s a symbol of slavery,” she said. “Your people have worked so hard to get rid of the Mammy image. You don’t have to be Aunt Jemima anymore!”

“I am nobody’s Mammy,” I retorted indignantly, and before the smug smile could settle on her face, I continued, “and that means nobody tells me what I can and cannot wear.”

She didn’t have an answer for that and for the rest of the semester she only glared disapprovingly whenever I donned my scarf.

When I moved on to graduate school in Iowa, I experienced quite a bit of culture shock; I was a raisin in a pool of milk, and wearing my head wrap made me stick out even more. I would walk into a room and people felt they had to comment on it: “elegant,” “colourful,” “exotic,” they declared; how trendy and fashionable it made me look! I’d smile and nod and wonder what they would say if they knew that, mostly, my family thought it either odd or disgusting. My sister would constantly tut-tut and lecture me—it was just laziness, she declared, I couldn’t go through life avoiding trips to the hairdresser; my aunt in New York would look at me and say, “Are you still wearing that rag?”

I don’t remember how I came to my particular style of wrapping. There were two layers: the first, a purplish cotton sarong that was about two meters long and tasselled, and that I twisted and wrapped around and around into a bun at the back of my head; the second, a two-foot scrap of stretchy black material that pulled everything together—I tied it over the first by the short end, securing it under the bun and then covered the bun, finally wrapping and tying the loose ends. Sometimes, there might be a third layer of a more colourful fabric that I might use to complement an outfit. Often, people would ask me how I did it, and I would launch into an explanation or demo that would leave them shaking their heads—but I could do it in my sleep. Once, my mother asked how I could carry all that weight around on my head all day, and I told her, only half joking, that I felt as though it held my brain together; without my many-layered headscarf I felt exposed, vulnerable. It had become a part of me; wearing it, I felt most natural, most myself.
The morning I was due to fly out to start my new job in Qatar, my mother, who had come to see me off, hauled me to 125th Street in Harlem to get my hair braided. It was my first real, grown-up job. “You are not starting off with that thing on your head,” she insisted.

I’d been living in the States for about nine years, and for about eight of them, I’d been wearing my head wrap fairly consistently—the same two base pieces. When I left it in New York it was with a pang—the sarong was thin and holey in places; the black stretchy piece was fraying, white bits of elastic dancing at its edges. It was time to put it to pasture, I knew, but I felt as though I was leaving an old friend behind.

A few weeks later, in Doha, as my braids grew out, I began to panic. I couldn’t find black hair products anywhere, nor had I observed any place I could get braids redone. The clock was ticking on the current braids and I knew it would only be a matter of time before I would have to find a solution—I knew of only one. I made a trip to the fabric souq, going from store to store fingering bolts of material in search of the perfect texture. Nothing seemed quite right; everything was too stiff, too silky, not plain enough or not stretchy enough. In the end, though, despite the fact that nothing perfectly matched my old faithful, I gratefully settled for a decent substitute—a rayon blend under-piece and a black jersey-cotton top. I also discovered an array of options for a colourful outer layer, as shaylas were the perfect size and were sold cheaply everywhere.

When I showed up to work all wrapped up, a colleague joked, “Gee, you only just got here, you converted already?” Another liked the “cool new look.” I was just happy to be home.

Over Eid break in October of ’06, I travelled to Turkey, where women’s headdress has become a symbol of the clash between secular and religio-cultural principles. I’d found someone to braid my hair again, and was wandering the streets of Istanbul uncovered. The city was crowded; the Eid holiday meant that the Turks, too, were on vacation, and people from the country swarmed to the city. There were a lot of headscarves around and as many bare heads.

Women who cover are considered backward and anti-progress by secularists who want to make “progressive” movements—like become full members of the EU—and join the ranks of the “civilized West.” On
the other hand, traditionalists and conservatives insist that covering is essential to the proper practice of Islam and differentiates “good” women from the other kind. The term bandied about in national debate is officially “the headscarf issue.”

Over raki in a bar in Sultanahmet, my Turkish friend, Iraz, explained that for some women, it had become “cool” to wear a scarf, that it had become a way to make a statement, a symbol of Turkish pride; but, she notes, the ban also gave many women a good reason to abandon covering altogether. The “headscarf issue” has even been a point of discussion in fiction: Recent Nobel prize winner Orhan Parmuk’s novel *Snow* is set in the border town of Kars, where the issue is far from a distant political debate but is ripping the town apart, and worse, inciting what appear to be protest suicides by young women on both sides of the issue.

In the novel, as in real life, women who wear headscarves are banned from campuses. I have three degrees and teach at a university; as I fell in love with Istanbul, I couldn’t help but wonder what the situation would be if I were to apply for a job at a university there. If the question arose, as undoubtedly it would have, what choice would I make? And yet, I had to wonder at the absurdity: Why on earth should the way I do my hair (or don’t) affect how and where I can live in the world?

The answer, of course, is that even now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century—a time that is arguably the pinnacle of human achievement—in too many ways, women remain socially symbolic. What a woman wears determines the perception of her nation/society/culture/community. The covered women of the Middle and Far Eastern tradition remain for the West the symbol of restrictive, undemocratic and fundamentalist systems, while the images of celebrities of the ilk of Britney Spears or Pamela Anderson are held up in those regions as clear indications of the degeneracy of the West. The tragedy here, of course, is that while the battles are being fought over these perceptions, somewhere along the line, women lose the ability to determine what they wear, for whom, and why. In the worst of cases, we become the enforcers of our own lack of choice.

In the best of cases, we are able to recognize and remove the filters, and, if only for a moment, unburden each other (and ourselves) of the weight of this symbolic representation—unveil, if you will.

As I was going through security at the gate in Amman, Jordan, on my way back to Qatar from Israel, the female security officer frisking
me in the booth addressed me in Arabic. I gave her an apologetic look and said that I only speak English. She was surprised.

“You are not Arab?” she asked. “Not Muslim?”

I shook my head each time in response, and she became increasingly perplexed.

“So, what is this?” she asked, and began to feel about my head, poking at the material wrapped around it with some suspicion.

Tired, I offered her the obvious.

“It’s just a headscarf.”

This stopped her in her tracks.

“Oh,” she said, her hands paused above my head. She stepped back and studied me intently; I stood silently under her scrutiny. “Why, it looks beautiful,” she said, breaking into a radiant smile.

I smiled back. “Thank you,” I responded, and passed on.
The Other Side

The word “fierce” does not do justice to the Cyprus sun’s violent heat. Everywhere rays bounce off in blinding white glares, and the landscape looks like a parched yellow expanse that will never again foster life. Come April, green carob trees turn grey and olive trees turn greyer as dust settles on the leaves until October, when it rains. In between, there come days every two weeks or so when a cloud makes a hole in the blue canopy above. This was not one of those days. It was a day for the beach, for sunscreen and a good umbrella. At least not too many cars were on the highway. In August, most Cypriots take a week or two off for a vacation on one of the Greek islands. I’d already been to Crete, Corfu, Tinos and Paros. The summer of 2004, though, Christine had come to visit from England and she’d be staying in my house in Asgata, just outside Limassol on the south coast. Instead of visiting other islands, this year we’d be driving over the Green Line to ta katehomena, the part of Cyprus occupied, for thirty years, by Turkish troops.

Christine and I got into the car as early as we could. We’d gone out the night before and it was well after nine by the time we were up and dressed and packed—a big mistake. The car was a furnace. The steering wheel singed my hands. After a minute on the road I was blinded, and fished for my sunglasses among the junk I keep in the little receptacles between the two front seats. Christine handed them to me and they relieved what they could.

Since the 1974 invasion, almost no one had crossed the dividing line without being jailed or killed—until April 2003, when Rauf Denktaş, the Turkish Cypriot leader, surprised everyone by opening a checkpoint to allow Greek Cypriots to visit the north, and Turkish Cypriots the south. After twenty-nine years confined to the southern half of the island, Greeks who’d fled during the war and left everything behind would be allowed to tour the occupied north, get a glimpse of their homes if they were still standing, and return before the checkpoint closed at midnight (it’s a breach of Cypriot law to stay there overnight). Many were scared, others excited by the change. No one could believe it was happening—politically, we’d still
be a nation with half its land but in terms of human rights, an essential, basic freedom, that of freedom of movement, was suddenly restored. The words of some of our protest songs and the wording of our petitions would need to get changed.

In spite of everyone’s misgivings about Denktaş’s motives, thousands queued up at the border and by sundown on the first day, 14,000 people had gone across. By the seventh day, 25,000 Turkish Cypriots had come from the north to see homes and friends they’d left in the south, and obtain a legal passport of the Republic of Cyprus, while 100,000 Greek Cypriots had made the trip to the north. That’s more than one in every eight Cypriots. On television, I watched cars form a line twelve kilometers long. The cameras caught people stretching awake after spending the night in their cars to be sure they were among those who got across. No one knew when Denktaş would decide to close the checkpoint again.

I figured it couldn’t turn out well because nothing had ever been well on this island as long as I was alive. In 1996, a motorcyclist had stormed the fence and had his skull shattered by a Turkish nationalist with a club; a week later, his cousin was shot down from the pole he’d climbed in an attempt to tear down the flag of the “republic” that was made of captured land.

Like most of us born after 1974, I felt frustrated that I had never seen the other half of my island, my father’s island, our island, but I didn’t know if I wanted to be among those who actually went and visited ta katehomena. Without actively choosing not to go, I never went.

Then Christine called from England to say she was coming to visit me in Cyprus again. I met her during my university years while on a study abroad in the English Midlands. When she finished her Master’s in medieval history and I got my Bachelor’s degree, we rewarded ourselves with a trip “from London to Istanbul by boat and train.” That entailed thirty days of campsites and hostels: Paris, Frankfurt, Prague, Budapest, Vienna, Rome, Athens—then, exhausted, we parted. We never made it to Turkey. I was secretly relieved when she asked if I’d like to truncate the adventure both because I missed my own comfy bed and because I was, I admit, scared by the idea of being in Turkey—if I was brought up to perceive them as the eternal enemy, how would I explain myself entering their country as a guest? When you’re taught to despise the neighbors, do you pay them a visit?

When Christine had visited me in 2002, we’d toured almost all of “free” Cyprus—the Troodos mountain range, the nature reserve at Akamas, and the Nicosia museums. Now, I could take her to see something
new if we went to the occupied territory. It was a way to be a better host—for a Cypriot, an act of hospitality is as an act of patriotism. I was glad I was going to go at last, and even gladder the decision had been made for me. Many Greek Cypriots said it was wrong to go across, that crossing was betrayal. Don’t make the occupying forces look good for letting the refugees back in, they said. Ignore the bait and stay your ground—it’s our thirst to see the North that keeps the anti-occupation movement alive: the more comfortably we get settled in the prosperous piece of land we have left, visiting the lost land whenever we like, the dimmer the hope of ever seeing Cyprus united again.

Most of my friends didn’t talk so seriously about pros and cons, right and wrong, but they said they’d go and then put it off, just not interested in taking such a long trip (from Limassol, you can get to any of the three other cities in forty-five minutes, so an hour’s drive seems very long). There are good beaches in Pafos and Polis, great times in Limassol, and a cosmopolitan clubbing scene in our side of Nicosia. So why go to the trouble? The Turkish troops had by no means pulled out, and peace was unlikely to come just because a few checkpoints opened. We could continue longing for justice as normal.

My father’s generation, the Refugee Generation, taught us, the youth who never saw the land, that we must love the beauty of that “stolen” part of our homeland, and wait restlessly for the moment of return. Between each television show and the next, they show pictures of occupied landmarks with the caption I Don’t Forget. Throughout elementary school, children receive free notebooks for every subject with the same I Don’t Forget motto and a picture of an occupied town on the cover. Along the road that runs parallel to the southern coast in Limassol, the city council put up signs that read ←WAY BACK with the arrow pointing north. Christine always thought they were the oddest things. The way back where? For Cypriots, to read the word “back” is to remember the north.

And to remember the north is to remember our people’s suffering. I don’t know if it is just the way of the Greek since the old tragedies, Antigone and The Trojan Women, or if it is the work of the refugee generations, but to mourn our people’s suffering is a noble thing. To mourn the injustice and the lost land is a noble thing.

Until my trip, I felt a strange sort of yearning for ta katehomena that didn’t come from my own mind or experiences, but from somewhere deeper than me. It came from elementary school when I recited poems about our nation’s suffering and our aching loss. From my father who taught me to love what’s right, I learned to denounce the wrongs my
country suffered and to wait for justice in patient but not passive resistance. He taught me to love my country and lament our Greek nation’s fall from its old glory.

And yet, for all he had taught me of the beauty of northern Cyprus, and for all his sighs over its loss, my father simply would not, and will not go, not “until there’s a just political solution.” Every New Year’s, all my relatives would raise their glasses in a toast to “Freedom for Cyprus.” The “freedom” always beckoned, imminent in the fury of peace talks and negotiations that have dominated the headlines as long as I have watched Cypriot news. Every year, there has been a “critical week” when the reporters assure you a solution will be “found” in the next month.

For as long as I can remember, my dad has been telling me about the beauties of Kyrenia and Famagusta. “They took the best parts of Cyprus. The most beautiful. The most developed—a huge luxury hotel complex had just been built in Famagusta when they invaded. They took Apostolos Andreas.” That’s a monastery built on the tip of the long cape that juts northeast into the Mediterranean. It was dedicated to the Apostle Andrew who stopped there after leaving Jerusalem, and since then it has always been an important place of pilgrimage. When we need help from God we ask a saint to intercede, and we make a promise, or tama, that if the need (usually for healing) is fulfilled, we’ll bring an offering to the place where the saint is venerated. A tama to Mary the Mother of God usually brings pilgrims to the island of Tinos, where an ancient icon of her was found. A tama to the apostle Andrew brings pilgrims to Cyprus.

“Of all the peoples you could have as a neighbor, the Greeks got stuck with the Turks,” my father used to say. Having a father who’s a history teacher, a romantic idealist and a patriot, you never have to ask about historical events or current politics. You get told, annoyingly and endlessly, until you’re used to understanding what happened before you were born, and you start looking for sources of your own, for information about people and places of the past. During adolescence, I pieced together the story of Cyprus from Cypriot literature and music, and from long television programs which analyzed just how insidious and wrong the invasion had been. I became passionate about the injustice of the occupation. I shouted and marched in protests and cried to resistance songs. It took me a while, however, to start asking what was missing from the puzzle, what the stories that I heard were leaving out, and to think about what had really brought the troops that morning in July. And what had brought Turks to a Greek island centuries before that?

Although my father left Cyprus in 1959, and was in New York
during the invasion, he has described the events as if he had been there. Over Kyrenia and Morfou, Turkish paratroopers darkened the early morning sky that 20th July 1974. Tanks advanced, bombs fell, and people jumped out of bed and into their cars with blankets and food to ride out the storm—but when the gunfire died down and they headed home, they were stopped by soldiers in the centre of Nicosia. After two days of fighting, the miniscule and traitor-ridden Cypriot National Guard was crushed. All the Turkish Cypriots were obliged to leave the South to go to the North for what would become, in 1983, a separate state which only the Republic of Turkey has recognized. Those who stayed were given the houses that had belonged to the Greek Cypriots who’d fled; some of them were given homes of Turkish Cypriots. Most were put up in tents until new homes could be built for them.

There have been few physical casualties since that short war—wounds of memory and pain in the heart have replaced war-wounds and real death. Grenades go off in our minds when we discuss it.

To Christine it sounded a lot like the issue of Northern Ireland, only our equivalent of the IRA only talks and shakes fists. Once, our EOKA (National Organization of Cypriot Liberation Fighters) did more than that—they kicked the English imperialists out in 1959, and the Republic of Cyprus came into being as an officially bilingual, bi-communal state with a Greek president and Turkish vice-president. After they’d won the fight for independence, the guerilla front mutated into EOKA-B, an underground Greek nationalist group who wanted to make Cyprus part of Greece. EOKA-B was funded and supported by the military junta that had seized power in Greece in a 1967 coup d’état. EOKA-B tried to seize power in Cyprus by force on July 15th 1974, giving Turkey its excuse to “intervene” and take thirty-six percent of Cypriot territory. I learned that if any Greek is to blame at all, it’s the EOKA-B (who were funded by the Greek junta who were installed by the Americans).

In 1960, the leaders of the new state drafted a constitution which provided for the Turkish minority to hold positions in the government. The fourteen years between British colonial occupation and the present Turkish occupation, when Turkish and Greek politicians shared power in a single government, are referred to on our side as the only time Cyprus has been free. Read a Turkish version of history and you’ll learn more about the tensions, endless haggling among politicians and the senseless murders on the streets. According to the 1960 Constitution, the president always had to be Greek and the vice-president Turkish. This paralyzed the state and made it impossible to pass new laws to allow
the infant state to function. To this day, the eighty-member Parliament has a block of twenty-four empty seats waiting for the Turkish Cypriot Members of Parliament to come back.

As we thumbed through guidebooks to make a travel plan, Christine agreed it was a shame this country had lost its mélange of languages and religions, with Turks and Greeks living side by side, and felt it an even worse shame that when she came to visit the first time, we could only hike in one of Cyprus’ mountain ranges, and see the ruins in just three of the cities. I didn’t tell her that I was still skeptical. I wasn’t sure why, or to what extent even, I was nervous about making a trip to the north. I wouldn’t be the first Greek to go. But for the year since the border opened, debate had been rife over whether it’s “right” to go, and I was still half-convinced by the arguments against going. Besides the danger of complacency—of the Greek Cypriot people giving up and just accepting that Cyprus has been permanently divided into two states—they say it’s betrayal to go across because you leave money there and thus finance the illegal regime. You buy things from them, and make your enemies rich. I figured we’d avoid this problem by bringing sandwiches.

“Ok, Jo, where shall we go?” Christine asked me, unfolding a map. To answer her, I thought about what I missed most, about what seemed most urgent to take the “way back” to. My mind a blur of inherited memory, I asked what interested her.

“I’d like to see this old abbey of Bellapais. I don’t know, lots of things look interesting.” She went on with the possibilities like we were tourists talking about islands.

“Kyrenia!” I said. “Let’s visit Kyrenia.” The Pentadaktylos mountain range that shoots into the sky and then rolls down to the sea with Kyrenia in its lap—I repeated the tale of its beauty to Christine. “The most beautiful little port…and not too far after Nicosia,” I went on. A strange collage had formed in my mind out of all the pictures clipped from television and books. I planned that trip like I was planning a journey back in time, like it could never happen. I had never felt it was a real place the way New York, London, Athens, a remote province in Poland even, are go-to-able.

The night before our trip, as we drank at a pub with one of my friends, who had said several times that when I took Christine to ta katehomena, she’d like to come. She’d shown us some beautiful non-touristy beaches north of Pafos the year before. Her mother had been born in a village outside Kyrenia, but the family hadn’t yet made their trip back. We arranged that she’d drive to my house, and then we’d all go together in my car. In the
morning, she called to say she had changed her mind, giving no reason or excuse. “We’ll go another time,” she said. But we haven’t.

Getting to the checkpoint took longer than we had expected. I had heard so many news reports and seen so many people on TV waiting in their cars to get past the checkpoint, I never realized I didn’t know exactly where the open checkpoint was. At first they’d opened Ledra Street in the centre of Nicosia but due to the traffic jams, they made Ledra a pedestrians-only checkpoint. I had to stop at a kiosk, where I bought a “map of the occupied territory with both Greek and Turkish place names” and asked the shop owner how you get across to the other side. He told me about the new checkpoint for cars in the suburb of Ayios Dometios. Finally, barrels painted blue and white signaled UN forces were coming up, so we were there. A couple of soldiers with blue berets were sitting in the shade. I experienced the depressed anticipation you might feel at a police station, waiting to identify goods that were stolen from your house while you were asleep.

We joined the line of cars just before lunchtime. It moved slowly, and at times I turned the motor off. After half an hour or so, we had inched close enough to the makeshift offices for me to leave Christine in the car and see what I needed to do. Greek Cypriots were waiting on various lines in front of windows where Turkish officials with stacks of forms were visible. It was hard to get them to show me which forms I had to fill out and where I should stand. Most people seemed edgy, excited, or tired and I said nothing to the few who cut in front of me in line. First off we had to buy car insurance, as the regime in northern Cyprus doesn’t recognize insurance from the state of Cyprus. Nor would my Greek Cypriot insurance agency be willing to pay damages were I to get into an accident on the other side. Legally, neither state exists for the other.

As I waited for my turn I could smell gyro—I guess the girl chewing that delicious smell of lamb and spices would call it döner kebab. Greeks and Turks eat the same foods by different names—our souvlaki is their kebab. Sometimes we even have the same word: dolma—stuffed grape leaves, kiafte—meatball, karpuz—watermelon. Anyway the clerk was courteous and quick. I handed her ten pounds, my passport, driver’s license and car registration and a few kebab bites later I had my insurance. Good for three consecutive days if anyone had the nerve for that much traveling back and forth. I prayed I wouldn’t have to use the insurance though. I shuddered at the thought of getting into an accident in a part of the world where Greeks are more or less the enemy, little English and no Greek was spoken, and where emergency health care is subject to the limitations of an
international trade embargo. Trading with a state that was created through a military invasion would contravene international law.

I continued to drive north. The bars of signal on my mobile phone display dropped off quickly (I kept checking as I drove) and in just a few minutes I was cut off from everyone. This unnerves me even when I’m at home with the alternative landline, so it’s easy to imagine that out here, it was all I could do not to think about the dead line.

The colors and landscape, of course, changed little since with respect to geography, the Green Line’s position is geographically arbitrary. Everything might have felt less eerie if there had been some visible shift. Now, the surrounding tall and dry rocky hills dotted with drought-shrunken pines all sang this is Cyprus to me—yet Cyprus is the Greek place where I live among friends.

It was the signs, in Turkish and English, that first made me feel I was in a different place. License plates had a red stripe, too, signaling that this was Cyprus but not Greek. Those signs were all the communication I’d get, too—suddenly as I drove deeper into the occupied territory, I knew I wouldn’t have the heart to speak to a Turk. I had intended to satisfy my curiosity and prove how progressive I was by initiating an open-minded dialogue with a Turk. But now that I had reached the other side, I knew I would not speak.

Maybe I thought talking would make it harder to pretend I never visited ta katehomena, violated my people’s mourning for their lost land. But right then, I thought none of this. I just couldn’t believe I was allowed to keep driving. It had always been off limits, impossible to proceed once you got halfway through Nicosia and confront barrels, sandbags, barbed wire and a guard holding a machine gun in his watchtower. Yet today the rest of my nation, lost and longed for, spread before me. It just didn’t feel real that the land should now spread and spread. It was the border, the Buffer Zone, the Green Line, that were real to my mind, not this. Not the physical presence of my own self on this piece of the country: imagined and desired, but never ever touched. I drove on and emotions rose up. Tears welled up. At the privilege—to see that land at last—and at the pain: this country’s wound has begun to heal, the violence cooled and refugees’ lives re-started. But the division of Cyprus is a wound like a bone that was badly broken but that no doctor ever set, so that the bone healed crooked, and we limp into our future to make ourselves a crippled history.

Christine looked out the window so calm and interested she made me uncomfortable about my tender feelings. She was impressed and fascinated by the scenery. Granted, she opposes the Turkish occupation
vehemently but she didn’t have impassioned songs of love and betrayal in her head and she didn’t share my sense of personal loss of this land that I was at last laying eyes on. We didn’t speak as I drove further northwards. I was almost angry because her placidity made me question how authentic my feelings could be.

And then the sign appeared: ridiculous, pathetic. We read it out loud in unison, having noticed it at the same time, and we laughed long and loud. “HOW HAPPY TO SAY I AM A TURK.” Enormous letters: the phrase spanned both lanes of the highway above us. When I looked it up a year later and found it was actually a quote from Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of the Turkish Republic, it appeared not half as ludicrous, put into historical perspective. Apparently, schoolchildren have to recite daily: “I am a Turk, I am honest, I am hard-working, how happy I am to say I am a Turk.” The words etched on Mount Ararat, \textit{HAPPY IS HE WHO SAYS “I AM A TURK,”} are visible five miles away. The entire mountain has become happy to be Turkish.

We’d approached a roundabout before we finished laughing. The map didn’t show that kind of detail. “Oh no! Which way? How do you say Kyrenia in Turkish?” Girne sounded the closest, and it was the straight-ahead exit, which made sense. So we took the second exit, and kept on going north, on a long highway toward the coast. On either side, flat land sprawled, empty. Just some warehouses or silos dotted the dead fields. And I remember a lot of fences that neither Christine nor I could think of a purpose for. I tried to ignore the real-estate signs, all in English, advertising villas and apartments that are going up, to be sold to European holiday-makers and pensioners along with the land that was taken.

Everyone was driving along the open highway at 100 kilometers per hour: a line of well-spaced vehicles proceeded in safety, and I felt safer than I had on any road in all of Cyprus before. Christine agreed as she too, a veteran passenger on our roads, had witnessed the tail-gating, speed-devil Greek Cypriot narrow asphalt war zone that I learned to drive in. I’d never felt so safe. I guessed the Turkish police must be so vicious no driver would risk going at 101.

We were driving over the Pentadaktylos, named for its five peaks that legend says were formed by the fingers of Digenis Akritas when he grabbed hold of the mountain to give him leverage as he leapt across the sea from Cyprus into Asia Minor. The tale takes place at a time when the Byzantines had lost Cyprus to Saracen-Arab conquerors. Digenis’ father was an Arab emir who carried off the daughter of a Byzantine general, fell in love with her and converted from Islam to Christianity, raised their son
Joanna Eleftheriou

to be the greatest protector the Byzantine Christian Empire ever knew. The name Digenis means born of two races; his story, in the Legends of the Two-Blood Border Lord, implies that mixed blood makes the strongest men. Having defeated countless dragons, bandits and other enemies of the Empire, Digenis built a palace by the Euphrates where he died peacefully.

Here, driving across Digenis’ cliffs with heroes’ stories dying in my head, the whole excursion began to feel stupid and banal. You go to a place decked in legends and stories of yearning to return, and then you just drive. You look and observe; you are a tourist. I started to think that maybe this was the reason the border was opened. Having traveled there, I became able to reconcile myself with the notion of the north as a new, other country. All the place names have been meticulously made to sound originally Turkish while I felt the big red flags were yelling at me, “Leave, you Greek, this land is ours now and you’d better get out and go home and cry on your side.” I felt like an unintentional and helpless spy. I thought I would always feel proud of being Greek but up there, it was totally irrelevant. Christine was lucky. She was, simply and truly, a tourist.

Before long, a sign for Ayios Ilarionas appeared. There were all sorts of warnings about the road being slippery in winter, and “do not take pictures” signs that implied some kind of military unit was nearby. The road curled round and round the mountain, we passed the army base (soldiers stood outside, but ignored us) and then the road got very steep and narrow and the view got better until we could see all of Nicosia and Kyrenia and the northern coast. The sense of Cyprus as an island first struck me, really, there—having seen only the southern coast until then, I could have been living on the edge of any continent. And then the castle towered above us.

We squeezed the Mirage into a parking spot not far from the gate and began to explore, picking up a brochure in English at the entrance (there were none in Greek; anyone else would think it obvious, but I was a little shocked). There were stables from the time it was a fort, and the ruins of a much older Byzantine church. Saint Ilarionas himself chose the spot. After an ascetic life in Palestine teaching the monastic way and working many miracles, he left and sought to hide from the “praise of men”—stopping in Cyprus on his way back to the Egyptian desert, he ended up choosing the rugged and remote terrain of the Pentadaktylos cliffs to pray alone with God till the end of his life. A church was built near his cave during Byzantine rule. When Richard the Lionheart conquered Cyprus in 1191 and the Byzantines lost Cyprus once and for all, successive waves of conquerors used the spot at times as a fort and at others as a nobleman’s summer retreat.
An overview of the island’s history turns into a catalogue of successive foreign conquerors (Assyrian, Egyptian, Persian, Roman, French, Venetian, Ottoman, British), who set up administrations but most never quite penetrated the Greek cultural milieu. Achaean traders seem to have settled on Cyprus first, around 1400 BC and Mycenaean merchants followed a century later. Each of the modern cities was then a separate kingdom whose laws and literature indicate that a distinctly Greek culture developed on the island. Western invaders left words in our dialect and a recognizably medieval European architecture, but only the Ottomans, who stayed the longest from 1570 to 1878, and whose policy of Empire demanded relocation of whole families to the new possession, left behind a community. When the Ottomans took control of Cyprus from the Venetians in 1571, they transferred 5,720 families from many parts of Asia Minor (Beyşehir, Ankara, Konya and others) to Greek villages in Rizokarpaso, Larnaca, and Pafos, where earlier wars had diminished a large proportion of the inhabitants. Such population transfer continued for the first two centuries of Ottoman rule. Studies by independent sociologists indicate that Turkish Cypriots feel a “distinct sense of Cypriotness,” which could help a lot if we ever achieve reunification. They have a different accent and cultural identity from the Turks who are sent over from mainland Turkey. The growing number of these uprooted and impoverished settlers from eastern Turkey has become an immense stumbling block in negotiating a solution. You can’t just send them back. The horror of the twentieth-century “population exchanges”—Greece-Turkey: 1922, 2.5 million people; India-Pakistan: 1947, 14.5 million people—is raw in the memories of even the most callous politicians.

My eyes strained toward the Turkish mainland that had sent over the settlers that might unknowingly have been keeping Cyprus divided even as they suffered, uprooted and poor. I was disappointed that there was such haze rising over the sea, since my dad had told me that across the water, you can see mountains on the southern Turkish coast from the Pentadaktylos.

Christine and I separated and I explored the castle alone with my confusion and the sound of Turkish pricking my eardrums like the soundtrack of a banned film. I met her in the cafeteria where we bought lemonade. There was no problem using our Greek money. Good thing, because what would we have done with leftover Turkish lira? I felt odd handing the cashier my Greek Cypriot pound—apologetic and proud, I’m sorry I’ve been deriding your people all my life, but you did oppress us first.

I didn’t try out my teşekkür, the Turkish thank you I had practiced
from Christine’s handbook. I said thank you in English, and I tried to find something else to say but I faltered and sat down on an old plastic chair in the shade. A soft, sweet breeze blew.

We headed down the mountain again, this time for the beach. Our picnic was long overdue. If I’d asked someone, maybe we would have found a tourist beach, but instead I drove around and we both looked for a road that looked like it led to the shore. When we’d found one, I parked and spread our blanket close to the sea among lots of other bathers, none of whom looked like tourists. There was a run-down looking restaurant open. The pointy Turkish ü sounds poked at my ears again; I felt invisible, and again like a spy. None of the Turks that surrounded me could hear the angry words yelling in my memory.

Awfully tired of living without mobile phone service, I started really missing home. I wanted to tell my Greek friends what it was like going to the north. Was it right, was it wrong, and why did I feel like this? I didn’t want to see any more sights that used to be Greek and aren’t anymore. Or that sound Greek but actually had builders of all sorts of races building an extra room, knocking down a wing, or adding a garden. I wanted to call my friends and talk out my mounting sense of the Cyprus problem’s crushing, infinite complexity.

Christine agreed that we leave Kyrenia district without ever seeing the city or its marina. We just headed for our next landmark, Bellapais. I had always thought it was an Italian name meaning pretty country but it turns out the name was originally Abbaye de la Paix. The Abbey of Peace was built by Augustinian monks who fled Jerusalem when the Crusaders lost the city to the Muslim warriors led by Saladin in 1187. Like a lot of Cyprus’ medieval architecture, the building looks strikingly Western, with its Gothic-style pointed arches, and contrasts sharply with the older characteristically Greek column, pillar and statue bits that litter the excavations of earlier periods. By that point I was awfully tired of exploring history, so I stayed outside while Christine went in. I climbed a carob tree to get good shade and relief from the boiling heat of the parking lot. I felt kind of at home up there.

A group of Greek Cypriots sat down under the tree without noticing me, and I listened to their plans to travel all the way along the northern shore to Apostolos Andreas without leaving behind a penny, in protest against the illegal and unjust occupation. When Christine came back, I climbed down, and before we left they offered us some of the water and cake they had brought with them. “Don’t be tempted to buy anything!” they warned. I didn’t mention the lemonade.
By the time we headed back to the car, it was late afternoon and I was even more ready to go home. Driving back, my anger dried up. The trip was done and over. My heart beat only a little faster while we passed the police officers who sometimes check cars for drugs and cheap cigarettes being smuggled from "ta katehomena." Christine and I laughed at the Happy Turk sign with less heart this time around.

I was too tired for scorn. Too worn out from driving and wondering what hope there is for Cyprus, after all. I smuggled back jaded hopes, impatience and the ashes of an anger that used to make so much sense. They oppressed us first. They conquered this bit of land and that, and then we fought back and then they fought back.

Perhaps what makes me angriest is that I cannot do a thing about it. I can question why I felt no reason to talk to a Turk during my time in "ta katehomena." I can question the defeatist attitudes into which my polemical ones have degenerated. But I can’t fight anymore.

I guess I can understand now, after going, why it would feel so wrong and impossible for my father to go. I’d never bothered to talk about it when I went since my feelings were drained, emptied, and not worth discussing. I just told him it was as beautiful and as sad as he had described. But this year my aunts had come to Cyprus to stay with us for two weeks. My dad’s youngest sister asked him to take her up to Apostolos Andreas, as she had made a "tama" to Saint Andrew asking him to help her daughter who wasn’t responding to doctors’ treatments. She’s always been my father’s closest family, and a friend, too. They’ve helped each other out since they were kids and I was taken aback when I heard that not even she could get him to go. She had to take a taxi with their oldest sister instead.

“I went there when it was ours,” my dad explained when I asked. “And it’s no longer ours. They put their flags everywhere, and so on.” I smiled at the “and so on” historian’s diction while my heart throbbed at the real pain and frustration in his voice, realer than mine because he had lived in a Cyprus that was whole. He even hates going to Nicosia because for the last ten minutes of the drive, you can see the enormous flag etched or painted (the reports conflict) on the Pentadaktylos. Though only a teenager, he was involved in the first EOKA’s fight for independence, and his youth was consumed with the dream of freedom for his island home. Not in his wildest nightmares did he see that island cracking in two, one side crushed under a foreign army and the other left as a tiny so-called-sovereign state, flung onto the international scene with missing limbs.

“You see the hostility everywhere,” my dad explained. Though I had told him the facts of my journey but never mentioned how I felt, he put
his finger on what had made me so uncomfortable that day: the Greek’s wariness of Turkish hostility, our centuries-old collective memory. Love Cyprus as he does, he prefers I live somewhere else. To remind me, he reiterated, “And I don’t see the situation getting any better. Talks, talks, and nothing changes. After all, _after a while_. These are animals.

You can see how all efforts of rapprochement between the Greek and Turkish sides have led to impasse upon impasse. The _I Don’t Forget_ campaign has succeeded in preserving the collective memory of our own suffering. With _not forgetting_ as our goal, though, we haven’t learned to act, to forgive or to compromise. We have been fighting over small but strategic bits of earth for one thousand years. In school, we each learn details of the massacres and oppressions our respective sides have suffered. Having suffered an invasion seems to make it the Greeks’ right to “retrieve” the island on our own terms, Turkless. I wonder if we want to go back to 1571.

The Turkish Cypriots only made up eighteen percent of the Cypriot population before they invaded, but culturally we were the same. Now, since the separation, Turkish Cypriots have left for the UK, and have been replaced by Turks from eastern Turkey. If we go back where will the Turks go? Not just the Turkish Cypriots that had left the south, but the eastern Turks, where would they go?

One of the most moving resistance songs calls the Pentadaktylos mountain range to “rise up and shrug off the conquerors who have subjugated you.” I still wouldn’t mind seeing the mountain “rise up” and tear off that mile-long flag etched in its side, preaching its Turkishness to the Greeks and flaunting the victory of guns. Because if we hope to unite this place ever again, we cannot be defacing the land we share and shoving ethnic triumphs in each other’s face.

Digenis’ Pentadaktylos receded in the rearview mirror as I drove south and home, and I felt relieved at the fading of that enormous stone flag. The flag may represent a state that does not exist, but it represents people who exist and suffer as much as we do and more in the abjection of their illegal regime—I learned that much in my trip over to the other side. And I need to learn more. For when we gain the understanding that a new, _two-blooded_ flag might represent, and our only borders are our shores, then we will have a country that’s as strong as Digenis Akritas.
M.E. Silverman

Passover in Middle Georgia

This soup recipe is being made for me:
two dozen eggs, carrots,
pain from her back,
turnips, parsnips, three leeks,
the grief she gets from gossip,
pepper, seltzer for lightness,
a blue box of coarse sea salt,
and her heart that cares too much
to see me single. I try to
sneak an orange or two, olives
for the plate. She refuses to budge.
This is her day, her Seder,
her secret matzah ball soup—
cooks it every time she visits
from Florida. “A full belly
will get you a nice Jewish doc-
tor. Make me a Bubbie.”

I cannot explain why I live here
where the weight of heaven
waits in every corner church,
a town where no synagogue stands,
how I’d rather watch outside
my bedroom window for the cardinal
nesting with bits of branches.
Later, she tidies up the kitchen I cleaned yesterday. After an afternoon of boiling to make the perfect schmaltz, she slices and measures every thing into precise pieces. On this night, it is possible to pretend

the ancient ingredients of her life are mine as well. Tonight, I try to compliment her: how the rising of these dumplings is so seamless, it continues to be a classic.

But I turn away, forget on this night, we can change our history.
Learning a History

Father loves matzah balls more than me, more than anyone. He doesn’t pause for them to cool, a child with his prize.

I wait for the four glasses of wine, the bitter herbs, the tightening of his eyes and cheeks,

his shoulders and arms, as he tells the same stories every year: how he sacrificed so much to be a Dad after his own deserted them with the rabbi’s most buxom daughter,

how he spent his monthly ten-cent treat on sci-fi books, the buses it took to get out of Sheepshead Bay,

how his mother threw away issue one of Action—now worth a quarter of a million—because he once asked where his Dad had gone.

He shouts out the open door about her refusal to learn to drive, to move from the tired bricks of Brooklyn,

to breach her routine that lasted for forty years, how she sufficed to do her best with this “boy-burden,” this firstborn,
who peddled up Fifth like a commandment
and down Park delivering silk for tips,
for college, his way to escape—

until I begin to believe
he will never be
free from his own pharaoh.
Matthew Thorburn

Disappears in the Rain

Japan

shoes for outside
slippers in the hall, socks or bare feet
get you to bed

however far you’ve traveled
everyone sleeps on the floor

breakfast each day: steamed rice
and tofu soup, a pink wedge
of salmon, miscellaneous pickles

but first the slip-slap of Lily’s flip-flops
outside the sliding paper door

the monks bring us (watch your head) through the temple’s back door
for six A.M. prayers

morning mist—
the trees take two steps back

what I’m doing here is honest
to God soul-searching
though who wants to call it that

in the public bath, I shower
very quickly

on the afternoon train
too foggy—
can’t see Fuji
now hiking up Mount Misen
it’s too foggy to see the train

Petrarch (I read) was the first person
to climb a high hill
to look back at where he’d been

we’ve had to keep doing it
ever since

old ladies (were they
ever young) sell bags of oranges
outside the cemetery

the temple gate’s painted orange
to scare away spirits

a pair of slippers
outside the bathroom door—
come back later

the frogs in the bamboo forest
hum and groan all night

school kids on the street
shout hello hello hello
to this morning’s first white face

pulled up at a red light
two cabbies gab car to car

on tiptoe, I can see clear across
the crush and buzz of commuters—
next stop, Takadanobaba,

and the day unrolls like a paper scroll
spooling out birds trees rivers flowers you
Angela Narciso Torres

Flight

Beside me, a woman knits
aquamarine yarn that shades
to lavender, colors repeated below
where shallows meet the open sea.
Needles click, her fingers twirl soft wool, filling the seat between us.
A prayer shawl, she tells me
when I pause from reading,
for a greeter in her church
dying of cancer. Her lips move
noiselessly, counting stitches
the way my mother murmured
nightly to rosewood beads
worn smooth by thumb
and forefinger, our Santo Niño
stoic behind candles and glass.
Outside, the horizon deepens
to plum. Faint rays splinter
into chinks on the pane.
Through seamless weave, her gold points rise and dip, pulling in
the fading light. Lulled to sleep
by the engine’s blue whirr,
I let the book slide
from my lap,
let tethered devotions
bear me weightless across the sky.
Sandy Tseng

From the First Generation

The name I gave myself was altered by my parents’ accent. The neighbors showed us how to spell it on a yellow notepad.

Our first Thanksgiving we cringed at the stuffed bird open and gaping on the table.

We drank large glasses of milk every day. Our bones grew slender and long, the height of a people increasing as our feet touched the land.

I have heard my mother come home late in the evening. Some days I could not wear the $40 sweater I begged her to buy.

There was a boy whose family hid in caves during the war, a man who can still taste the C-rations he ate with a soldier.

We can never go back. I’ve wanted to pack everything into a box, ship it back overseas with a note explaining.
Songs of Barnacles

In between languages
our voices gathered in the skies;

we are tendered
from the island in vessels
that fare poorly in high wind.

Night becomes day and day becomes night.
We are separated by opposite ends of the day.

For each new word, we lose one from the past.
Our past rings in our ears.

We discover the context in which
certain authors are referenced.

At the end of the novel,
we expect to hear the hum
of a sunken plane.

We expect that a heavy book answers everything—
its scent of leather and binding,
its whisper of thin pages.

It’s not about what happens but what we want to happen. Secretly
we’ve been envying the author for her story:

how our parents become strangers
and we lose the brother who doesn’t follow tradition.
We try to make sense of it all.
Sandy Tseng

We begin with paper cranes
and move on to the modular,
color layered over color.
The Merchants Have Said It

In the courtyard, laundry dries in the aroma of fried fish with a bit of garlic from someone’s fingers. I hear the voices from the alley. The merchants have said it. I am too tall. Because somewhere I drank fresh milk as a child. And somewhere my face was not weathered by Mongolian dust blowing from the north. I hear the whispers through the bedsheet curtains. The way I hold my head gives me away. Although I cut my hair and buy clothes off the street, still I walk like a foreigner. My stride is too long, too quick. But if I hide my fingernails and slouch, if I look no one in the eye, someone will take the offered coins without a word.
Shabbat, Buenos Aires

Alenu lulls me into thinking I might be at home, but ‘Salida’ above the door reminds me I am not. January, a summer Shabbat, Congregación Israelita de la Republica Argentina, half a block from Teatro Colón. High above, hands in priestly blessing bless us from rainbows of stained glass. In other windows the seas part, a cloud leads, a bolt of lightning cuts through white and bright blue. Names sparkle on wall plaques—Cohen, Seidman, Schwarz—all recognizable, along with Estaban, Julio, Teresa. On the marble bimah, the aron hakodesh is closed after the Torah reading and a pidyon ha-ben. “No pictures,” the guard says on the way out, not because of Shabbat, but “securidad,” he whispers. I do not have to go to AMIA to remember the hundreds dead and wounded in the bombing, or the sad days of Galtieri, Galeano, the ignoring of Hezbollah’s fingerprints. I know how ratlines of the past welcomed Nazis like Eichmann to live out their lives without worry. I am only a few blocks from Plaza de Mayo where mothers of the “disappeared” still stand in silence. Another country of Jewish suffering, Jewish survival. I gaze at the shining bronze gates about to be locked—whisper a shehechiyanu for a new life just blessed, and drop a little more in the pushkeh.
Some Revisions

for Raleigh Lee

My friend Raleigh always jokes
You must know every black guy
in Bloomington, Indiana,
because I break my neck to nod
when one crosses our path, as if
to say: It’s good to see myself
for the first time again. As if
to say: It’s good to see you.

Let me start over.

Riding the campus bus with Raleigh
one day, my head lifted from its ledge
and landed at the feet of a mannequin
who peered straight through me.
And that’s just what I thought, too:
He’s a mannequin black man; sitting there
all stiff in his cowboy boots and straight leg
Levi’s. He’s a mannequin black man.
Too stilted to acknowledge himself
when he sees me. And by that I meant:
Too stilted to acknowledge me.

One more time.

So I’m in transit when I see this brotha
across the aisle with his near-brown,
green-eyed son. And just as he looks
at me. No, just as he turns away,
a twang or drawl betrays his lips.
He is not speaking to me.
He’s talking, smiling at an old white
moth of a woman, well, wasp
if you consider her dilated pupils.
And all of a sudden, I pretend
his affliction is not my own.
This isn’t working, is it?
Raleigh. Brother. When you asked
Is it difficult to write about race?
I meant to say Hell yes. Yes.
Especially if you’re stilted. Like me.
I find it much safer to sit at home
and feign an understanding. But
to write race is to excavate. I suppose
you knew that.
You meant Push me
to write about race. To re-see.
And I didn’t know enough then
to advise you. Well,
I may have learned something
one keystroke ago.

Race is a triangular maze
of lush green hedges that stretch
beyond the eye’s reach.
Black as I am. Yellow as you are.
As neither as this town is,
it has taken a poem: a bus,
tearing through that maze,
full speed in my direction
for me to look at you and nod.
Yes. I meant to say
Write it. And please,
Don’t stop.
John Willson

Pilothouse, the *Hoy Lass*

*Inner Hebrides, Scotland*

You slow the engines upon entering
Loch Tuath—*Toó-uh*—pronounce
your native Gaelic in the passage
between the isles of Mull and Ulva,
the Gaelic for which you received
abuse as a schoolboy.

Earlier, puffins by the hundreds
flew from the sea to their cliffside burrows
and cameras clicked their daily return.
An inquisitive melancholy

streaked from two corners
of the birds’ triangular eye markings,
black across their white faces.
The tour nearing its end, you gesture south
to Ulva, a wide beach, a row of stone
cottages in ruins. *Starvation Point,*
you tell me, off the public address.

*People forced from their homes
during the Clearances—tenants evicted,*
*settlements razed—lived there until boats*

carried them and their Gaelic to America
or Nova Scotia or elsewhere. Elsewhere—
somewhere other than home—a place
for which no speakable word
exists, in Gaelic or in English,
when home is your thatched roof torched,
your fields given over to sheep.
You ease the boat alongside the dock,
landing us, returning us to Mull,
your home and nowhere else.
Hourglass

Sullivan’s Island, South Carolina

On this beach where they landed—grains
of sand from Africa’s west coast
in one historian’s view, funneling
through Charleston, the pinched
neck of an hourglass—

sun burns the left
side of my face. Buckrah
from a state where Douglas firs
rise through rain that has one hundred
names, I fail to find
a sign marking this as the place,

and currents diverted by a modern jetty
washed away the exact
location of the brick Pest House,
quarantine for human cargo.
Whelks and loggerhead turtles live
above bones of the spoiled
ones thrown overboard.

Each footstep takes on gravity.
As the historian puts it, African
Americans have an Ellis Island
on these dunes. Does battered Fort Sumter,
yonder, stand for the Statue of Liberty?
If I could grasp that, I could measure
the peculiar silence of the Atlantic
this morning. I could count the grains
of sand flowing into my palm
from this whelk shell, whose points
sharpen as they spiral outward.

> Note: Buckrah is Gullah for “white person.”
We Do Not Know Her Name

We do not know her name, but without her,
we do not have a name. No name, no face,

no place with your people, my people. You
have forgotten us, the tawny ones like my great-

grandmother, like Osceola’s Morning Dew, the drops
of your blood mixed with ours, how Seminoles fought

for her honor & ours, because we
were wronged, together. My hero,

your Osceola, loved his Morning Dew,
got his wife’s black brothers—my ancestors

& yours—to soak the Florida soil, the Georgia clay,
with a richer red. Her seeds, your seeds, legion.

Don’t remember that now. How we wandered
with you along the deep rivers they reduced to a trail,

made new homes in Florida swamps, Oklahoma
& Mexican deserts. Learned Cherokee, French & Spanish.

Contigo. History’s dead now. My grandfather’s mother—
she’s dead, too. No name, no face, no place

with my people: you. Only a figment
of her daughter-in-law’s fading memory now,
L. Lamar Wilson

the glaucoma & Alzheimer’s clouding visions of hair
that crowned breasts and hips like a halo. You

have forgotten us: your people. You have
voted us away from the land our blood bought. We
don’t remember that now, either.
We do not know her name.
Lost & Found

_Eres uno de nosotros_, the old women chant
as they circle me at the center table. Their molasses
hands smooth my pimply cheeks. Their pattering
feet still my quaking knees. They have journeyed
from the Mexican border to thank locals who have
found them. _Eres un Mascogo_, one, who could be

...my grandmother’s sister, declares, tracing
the railroad of scars on the hand I try to hide, guiding

me to a home I never knew I knew. What to say?
_Soy un americano negro del Florida_, I mumble.

_Esto es nuestro hogar, también_, she hums. I am here
to tell the story I memorized. I am here
to report sewers and streetlights that will soon flush
out her isolation and illumine her shameful existence.

¿Qué se les gustaría decir a los estudiantes? I probe again. Just
need a soundbite, a gravelling that fits the news I must print.

I do not tell her she is mocked across this city’s
tracks with a _Hey-ya-hoo!_ & fake war paint.
I do not have to. My pen is running out of ink. My rehearsed accent fails me.

Her eyes wrinkle into smiles. *Eres uno de nosotros!* *Eres uno de nosotros!* *Eres uno de nosotros!* 

**Notes:**
*Eres uno de nosotros:* “You are one of us.”
*Eres un Mascogo:* “You are black Seminole.”
*Soy un americano negro del Florida:* “I am a black American from Florida.”
*Esto es nuestro hogar, también:* “This is our home, too.”
*¿Qué se les gustaría decir a los estudiantes?:* “What would you like to say to the students?”
Yim Tan Wong

Lunch Break

In starched kitchen whites, men sit on upturned red milk crates by the back door and the big green dumpster. On their fly-buzzed heads, capsized paper boats trimmed blue, a uniform watermark.

With a jab and tuck, in goes the soy-brown skin, chicken toe. Next, a warble of jaws, like rearranging mouthfuls of marbles. Teeth scrape, dissect, crack and maneuver. Out comes a small bone, justice’s wee mallet. They eat on plates, stab with forks, but Ah-Ming sticks to mouth on bowl-rim, chopsticks, slurping.

The little girl watches these men, sinewy uncles, grandfathers—some by blood and some by land. How they sweat, their shirts smeared crimson.
I am driving south on Halsted Street, passing the university that has granted me my doctorate, passing the former Maxwell Street Market, recently demolished to make way for university parking. A hundred years ago Eastern European Jews set up their carts here, peddling buttons and goat’s milk and herring and coal. As late as the 1990s, African-American merchants sold used tires, portraits of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, gold-plated pendants, and the best french fries in Chicago.

I drive past the Amber House: Ladie’s [sic] and Men’s Clothes, the East Breeze Cafe, the Ramova movie theater. I stop, briefly, at the old International Amphitheater, which formed part of the eastern border of what used to be the Stockyards, and roll down my windows to sniff for smells I associate with the Lithuanian Dance Festivals held there every four years in the Fifties and Sixties—decaying meat mingled with human perspiration. Dressed in a heavy woolen skirt and a long-sleeved linen blouse, my hair in chunky braids, I would wait impatiently with the rest of the Saturday school contingent from St. Anthony’s to dance the Gyvataras. I remember the sky as yellow, the dancers from exotic far-away cities—Toronto, Detroit—piling out of yellow buses.

The Stockyards have been closed for more than four decades. The air smells of gasoline and cheap wine. I turn west on 55th, or Garfield Boulevard, a boulevard of solid gray-stones that in another neighborhood would fetch half a million each. I make a right on Ashland, and pass the O.K. Shoes and Street Life Clothes, the Golly Box Company and the ghost of the building that used to be a Goldblatt’s—only the sign remains. I turn left onto an unnamed street.

This is not the most efficient route to my mother’s condominium in Oak Lawn. I am meandering, a habit of mine when I don’t want to confront unpleasant realities. I turn right and keep going for several blocks. I make a left onto an unnamed street; a group of boys enthusiastically points to a No Left Turn sign. By the time I make another left, I am lost in the Back of the Yards, a neighborhood without
a real name. The “back” suggests that we are not even “in” something, but on its margins. In Upton Sinclair’s 1906 novel *The Jungle*, the area is Packingtown, a designation no less symbolic; the laborers not only pack meat into containers for eventual sale, but are packed themselves into living spaces too small for human habitation. In the 1900s, many of the boardinghouse owners were Lithuanian, as were most of the tavern-keepers. According to one historical source, saloons would sprout up in the Back of the Yards “like mushrooms after rain.”

In the surrounding neighborhood, a placard advertises Back of the Yards Cool Heat—“Everything for Your Air-conditioning Needs,” one of the few signs in English. One rarely sees “Se Habla Español” on storefronts or restaurants—it is clear that everybody speaks Spanish here. The Contreras Lounge and a Lava Rapido and the many carniceras and fruterias and mercados are evidence of this. A billboard of Snoopy, that most American of dogs, proclaims “Seguro de Vida.” It is an advertisement for Metropolitan Life Insurance, and shows Snoopy smartly dressed in a business suit, carrying a briefcase. The bold black lettering of the sign contrasts with the graffiti found on the surrounding streets. You see it everywhere, on mailboxes and stop signs, on steel garage doors and brick walls: The Almighty Saints Rule.

How long have the buildings been standing? Were they here ninety years ago? Ninety years ago the signs advertising clothing stores, grocery shops, and saloons would have been in Lithuanian. Today, one remaining relic is carved in granite—Eudeikis Funeral Home; another is printed on aluminum—the words “Baltic Bakery” spelled in black against a mustard yellow background. The funeral home has been transformed into a residence, but the bakery shows signs of life—a delivery man carries trays of freshly baked bread into a truck pulled into the driveway.

I drive a few more blocks north and west and then I see it, Holy Cross Church, Švento Kryžiaus Bažnyčia, an orange brick baroque building with a white concrete rim of frosting. I’ve been to mass here once, on an earlier quest to visit every Lithuanian church in the Chicagoland area. This one was built in the 1910’s by immigrants who barely had money for daily bread but for whom a church with bell towers and domes and stained-glass windows was a spiritual and emotional necessity. I understand their priorities; as a girl I used to marvel at the painted ceiling and marble columns of St. Anthony’s. The nuns told us we could talk to God anywhere, but, surely, I thought, He listens more intently in a place like this than in some messy bedroom or rat-infested alley.
There was a time when prayer came easily; decades ago, another life. I used to pray that my mother’s migraines would stop, that my dad would quit drinking, that my sister would mysteriously disappear. In high school I asked God for a boyfriend who looked like Bob Dylan. I pray now only when I’m flying on airplanes or rushing to buy the last pair of size ten-and-a-half pumps in red before the store closes. Perhaps it is time to try again. I walk in quietly, surprised the church is open on a Friday afternoon.

Towards the front, two young attractive women, one Mexican, one Lithuanian, gaze at each other from opposite walls. Our Lady of Guadalupe, somber in stark blues and orangey yellows, shares holy space with the sweetly smiling Aušros Vartų Marija, Our Lady of the Gates of Dawn. The face of the original Marija, in Vilnius, is dark, almost black. The model, historians believe, was Barbora Radvilaitė, the sixteenth-century aristocrat known for her dusky beauty. Every year Lithuanians and Poles by the thousands climb the stairs inside the Gates of Dawn up to the top, some on their knees in supplication, to worship the icon, to marvel at her golden dress, her golden crown, her halo of golden spikes interspersed with tiny golden stars.

This particular virgin version seems ghostly in comparison, her complexion as pasty as flour.

An important choice awaits me: in front of which Lady to kneel? The two or three other people in the church, older women with tired faces, have put their money on the Guadalupe.

I decide on a pew where I can see both and begin with the first prayer I learned—the Hail Mary in Lithuanian:

Sveika, Marija, malonės pilnoji!
Viešpats su Tavimi!
Tu pagirta tarp moteryų.

Back in grade school during May devotions, Raimundas Mičiulis, whose father owned a tavern, said *girta* instead of *pagirta*, drunk instead of blessed. *You are drunk among women.* Row upon row of second graders stifled titters. The nun, as watchful as a prison guard, understood the magnitude of our misdoing. She seethed—we could sense her seething behind our backs—waiting until the relative privacy of the classroom to administer punishment.

“Prayers said in laughter bounce back and bring disaster,” said the nun.

I stop laughing.
I begin again in English—*Hail Mary, full of grace*—shifting my gaze from one Madonna to the other, back and forth, until they blur into one dizzying vision.

Perhaps the two Marias are not so different after all. Lithuania and Mexico share aspects of a similar Roman Catholicism, one emerging out of the social and economic backgrounds of agrarian life. Lithuania dragged its pagan roots well into the past century; vestiges of the rich Indian culture permeate everyday Mexican life. In both traditions, religious customs predating Christianity fuse with more modern manifestations of Catholic belief, resulting in such practices as the bringing of food to the graves of deceased loved ones on the Feast of All Souls. My Mexican-American students, many with crosses around their necks, write papers on complex Mayan belief systems: “My ancestors were descendents of the gods,” one essay begins. A girl I knew would tell me stories of the feathered serpent Kukulcan as if he were a family pet.

By the same token, devout Lithuanian churchgoers boast that Lithuania was the last country in Europe to be baptized. Articles about the pre-Christian past appear regularly not only in scholarly journals but in the mainstream press. In the thirteenth century, when the Magna Carta had been signed in England and Aquinas had published his *Summa contra Gentiles* and international trade was flourishing in Venice, my illiterate ancestors were praying to Perkūnas, the god of Thunder—every Lithuanian schoolchild knows this. They prayed to the sun as well. They worshipped two-trunked trees and kept a holy fire named Gabija burning through the night.

My ancestors believed there were people with special powers; their spells were particularly effective in casting out evil spirits. One way to do this was to guess the name and characteristics of the offending demon and to speculate whether it had lodged in a snake, or in a fire, or in the writhing body of a dying man or woman.

*I know your name*, the shaman might say. *You are large and gray;* or, *you are brown and striped,* or, *you burn through the night.*

**Outside, a light winter rain is falling. The pale afternoon sun has disappeared. I find my way back to Garfield Avenue, which my sister and I would call Garfield Goose Avenue, after our favorite television puppet, the constantly clacking King of the United States on *Garfield Goose and Friends*. I pass the Lithuanian Youth Center on Western Avenue. Now a little island of white ethnicity, surrounded by parking lots and car dealerships and pawn shops, the Center once**
formed the cornerstone of Lithuanian immigrant social life. The large yellow brick structure is as familiar to me as my childhood home; the stained-glass mosaic that graces the lobby remains a symbol of enchantment—I was always running up to touch the blood red, deep purple, and golden yellow triangles and squares that miraculously formed a picture, of whom I don’t remember, St. Casimir, perhaps, or maybe Vytautas the Great?

It was at the Center that I attended my first art exhibit, paintings by Lithuanian artists. Impressed, my sister and I demanded a show of our own. My mother obliged, turning our home into a makeshift gallery of watercolors and crayon pictures: houses with black curls of smoke spiraling out of crooked chimneys, butterflies as big as hawks, little girls with bows like butterflies in their golden hair.

I make a left on Pulaski, passing the large wooden Indian standing atop the Pearle Vision Center. “How,” I whisper and raise my hand, remembering my childhood greeting to the statue. I drive and drive. Pulaski is home to numerous discount tire shops, dentists’ offices, and McDonald’s, whose arches are the color of ancient french fries, an affront to the name of golden. I drive past the Wolniak Funeral Home, Richard J. Daley College, and the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture. Pulaski—named after the American Revolutionary War hero from Poland. I don’t even know whether it’s an avenue or a boulevard or a street. It’s always and everywhere just Pulaski.

She is lying in her bed, a pale blue afghan thrown over her, napping.

My Black Marija.

In the portrait by Petravičius that hangs in the bedroom, my mother’s hair is straight and black, her neck long, her nose pronounced. She looks Egyptian. My mother, the Lithuanian Cleopatra.

Marija is her baptismal name. She would have been just Aldona if her grandmother, a God-fearing country woman, hadn’t pushed for baptism. Her mother, an educator with socialist politics, had objected, but in this battle of two strong-willed women, my great-grandmother had won out. To this day, my mother’s friends from Lithuania call her Maryte, a diminutive of Marija, an endearment. Since stepping off the boat in New York, however, she has gone by her middle name, Aldona.

She wakes up. I help her to the kitchen, where her caretaker, Irute, is making tea. A bowl of lemons and a plastic container of honey in the
shape of a bear stand on the wooden table. Ever since my father died my mother buys only the bear-shaped bottles, with whom she sometimes holds brief conversations—my father’s nickname was Big Bear, Meškis in Lithuanian.

“Meškis,” my mother says, and kisses the plastic bear on its snout. She never called my father “honey”—medus is too sacred a food to ever be a term of endearment. My mother used to serve honey on pieces of cucumber—a special treat. She’d slice the peeled cucumbers in half, scoop out the seeds, then fill the “boats” with honey.

As a little girl I used to think that honey turned into amber after a few weeks. I’d sneak a cup or two into my room and wait and wait. Once my mother found the honey, as hard as concrete, in my closet. I explained the situation.

“Amber comes from tree resin,” she told me. “It takes fifty million years for tree resin to become amber.”

I look at my mother and think how slowly things change, yet how often the changes seem external. Tree sap and amber emit the same translucent gold-tinged light. The new immigrant neighborhood is like the old immigrant neighborhood. Religion transforms itself again and again, keeping alive the same underlying need for magic and belief. And my mother’s wrinkled face, her balding head contradict the essence of the spirited young woman inside; she can’t get up from her chair but stomps her feet when Ellen DeGeneres dances; she loves political jokes—“We Lithuanians have more parties than the Playboy Mansion”; she recites snippets from favorite poems, such as Henrikas Radauskas’s “The Birth of Song,” with the lucid force of a prophet: “I don’t construct buildings, nor lead the nation/I sit beneath the branches of a white acacia tree.”

I put my hands around her stomach, hold her from behind while I rub her swollen belly. “I know your name,” I say. “You are small and you multiply and you burn through the night.”

“What are you doing?” my mother asks.

“Casting out evil spirits.”

“Oh,” she says, as casually as if I were taking her temperature. “I prayed for you today, Mom. In Lithuanian and in English.”

“Good,” she smiles. “I need all the help I can get.”
What Are You, Anyway?

What are you?
I was six or seven years old the first time I heard that question. I think it was Danny Wilson or Jimmy Heinlein—one of the blond, crew-cut boys in my class at Pleasant View Elementary School—who asked it: What are you, anyway?

I knew, even at that tender age, that the question had something to do with something called nationality, and with race. Even when posed by another child—even in the ethnic neighborhoods of inner-city Pittsburgh where I’d spent the first five years of my life, and, certainly in the neater, whiter suburbs where I was then going to elementary school—it meant: Where did your grandparents come from?

And I knew that, in my case, it also meant, Why are you so dark? Why are your eyes so slanted? Why do you look so foreign, so strange?

When I got a bit older, and my wavy hair turned curly and frizzy and wild—“The Kusnyir hair,” my father would say, when I sat on the floor in front of his chair and he brushed and braided my hair—the question other kids asked became more specific and blunt: You have chink eyes and nigger hair. What are you, anyway?

And I didn’t know what to say.

We were Polish on my mother’s side. That seemed simple and clear enough. I could even pronounce my mother’s maiden name, Wisniewski: Vee-shnev-skee. Although where exactly my mother’s father had come from, and how he’d gotten to America, and who his father had been, remained (and remains) a mystery. Poland, to an American child in the 1960s, was a shadowy place, a country sealed off behind a curtain I’d heard was made of iron. I imagined that place as half-erased, as gray as an old movie.

If I couldn’t precisely envision the shape of “Poland,” that was maybe because its shape had shifted so many times. I would learn, much later, that at the time my “Polish” grandfather had emigrated, “Poland” didn’t, in fact, correspond to any place on the map. Didn’t,
in fact, exist: having been carved up into territories of the Austro-Hungarian and Prussian and Russian empires. Still, it had existed once, and had come into existence again. Still, at least it had a name.

And what was the name of the country from which my father’s family had come? What was my nationality on that other, darker side? I didn’t have a name for that. It seemed as if no one did.

_The Carpathians_, my father would say, with his finger on a place on the map—east of Poland, but not Poland; west of the Ukraine, but not Ukraine—that had no borders, no shape; that seemed to me never to have been a real place at all.

_When I was in my early twenties and living in Los Angeles_, I had a boyfriend who liked to joke, _You’re multi-purpose ethnic. I can take you anywhere_—by “anywhere” he meant restaurants: Chinese, Italian, Indian, Mexican—and everyone thinks you’re one of them. I remember a young African-American man who leaned over the counter at an all-night copy shop and whispered conspiratorially, _You’re mixed, aren’t you?_ “Oh, I hope so,” I whispered back.

But that was later, after I’d grown into my face and the strangeness of my name: _Woloch_. The name came from my father’s father, who’d been killed before my father was born. Shot in the back by a cop on the street on the south side of Pittsburgh, and then erased from both “official” and family history. Almost never spoken of.

_Woloch_. Someone told me it came from Wallachia. Someone told me it came from the Polish word for Italian. Someone told me it came from the word for stranger.

_What are you?_

_When I was in my forties and living what must have seemed to my mother like a “glamorous” life—writing and teaching poetry, traveling the world—I tried to talk to her about the kind of teasing I’d been subjected to as a child. She was furious. “That’s outrageous,” she said. “You were beautiful. You were just like a little doll.” I realize now it must have hurt her to hear those names I’d been called—_Woolhead; Chink-eyes_—that it must have pained her that she hadn’t known and rushed to my defense. But how could she have known what was happening to me at school? The report cards I brought home were always good; and when they weren’t, she sent my father in to school to find out _what was wrong with the teacher_. (“She’s not average,” my
mother wailed.) Which didn’t make me any more popular. Besides, my mother had six other kids to keep up with, and she believed we were all beautiful and remarkable, and maybe she was right. “They’re just jealous,” she’d say, whenever she heard about anyone picking on us.

But I understand now that I was strange—strange to the other kids in school and in our neighborhood, even strange to myself. It wasn’t just the way I looked; I was also solitary and moody and anxious. Though maybe being taunted for the strange way I looked made me strange, made me moody and anxious and solitary?

In elementary school, I was prone to disfiguring outbreaks of eczema, which runs in my father’s family. Sometimes I scratched, until I bled, my hands and neck and the tender skin inside my elbows and behind my knees. The most effective treatment—though there were ointments and pills, and expensive trips to the dermatologist—was for me to spend the long summer days in chlorinated swimming pools and in the sun. The eczema would clear up and my skin would get darker and darker as summer wore on. “Czaryne,” my father would laugh. Little black one.

As I’ve gotten older, I’ve come to look more and more like my Polish-American mother, which is to say more and more “white;” but as a child I more closely resembled my father, and most closely resembled certain of my cousins on my father’s side: too dark to not be “foreign;” but what kind of foreigners were we? With our slanted eyes and heavy eyebrows, kinky hair and olive skin, we looked neither Slavic nor “Asian,” exactly, and not exactly “black,” but not “white,” either, and not “American”—not by the standards of the day.

Sometimes I think, too, of how my family must have looked among our neighbors, how out of place in that neat, suburban neighborhood where we lived when I was in elementary school. My parents had wanted good schools for us, and a safe neighborhood, so we’d left the south side of Pittsburgh and our extended family for a house on a dead-end street in Moon Township. “Those snobs in Moon Township,” my cousins would say.

I don’t think we ever fit in there, or ever felt quite at home. We certainly didn’t look as if we belonged: my parents with their brood of raucous children, half of us fair and half of us dark; the relatives who showed up on Sundays or holidays or when there was work to be done—all those wild-ass uncles pouring (probably stolen) cement for our driveway, or raising the roof of the house with car jacks; my
dad’s half-brother, Uncle Chuck—with his brown skin and blue, blue eyes—cruising down our street in the middle of the night, on the run, again, in his black convertible Cadillac, another blonde “aunt” riding shotgun in a leopard print dress beside him, a wad of cash in his pocket, his gold tooth flashing when he smiled.

I suppose we must have seemed dangerous, somehow, to our neighbors, and maybe we were. I suppose it’s in some way natural for human beings to fear other human beings who seem different from them, not of their tribe. Not of any tribe that can be easily identified. And that we were a tribe unto ourselves, I think—a noisy, chaotic tribe set down in that neighborhood of split-level houses and quietly seething “nuclear” families—might have angered our neighbors, too. They gossiped, my parents said; and, “Let them gossip.” When our mother and father noticed the old bag across the street spying on my teenaged sister and I and our friends through a crack in her living room drapes—with binoculars, no less—they encouraged us to behave as outrageously as we could, to put on a kind of show. When my little brothers and sisters climbed all over the new car, and one of the neighbors yelled across the lawn to my father, “Hey, they’re climbing on the car,” my father fixed him with a piercing stare and said, “It’s their car.” And my mother had no use for the coffee klatsch, the housewives who fluttered from kitchen to kitchen on weekday mornings in their “peignors.”

But this also seems ungenerous of me. Our neighbors weren’t all, or always, unkind. There was even one family with almost as many kids as there were in our family. Some of those families must have had dramas and tragedies and terrible secrets of their own. Most of those other parents were, if not first-generation Americans like my parents, second- or third-generation Americans, mostly also working class, trying to fit in as best they could. Trying to be as “American” as they could be. Maybe it was just that we didn’t seem to be trying hard enough, weren’t trying as hard as they were trying to fit in, to belong. Maybe because the American dream didn’t seem so innocent to my mother and my father and my father’s kin, who had some experience of what lay under that thin crust of sweetness and light, the darkness and bitterness there.

My father and his half-brother, my Uncle Chuck, had a way of speaking to each other, sometimes, in a kind of southern drawl that I understood as “talking Black.” Where had they picked that up? In
the projects where they’d been boys? In the prisons where—though I didn’t know this yet—both of them had spent time?

I’d learn, when I was a teenager, that my father had been taunted by a prison warden who called him “Russkie,” “Commie.” My father was shot trying to escape. He died and came back to life. He was taken under the wing of a prison doctor, who made my father his assistant and then took my father with him when he was appointed warden of the state prison farm. Where all the other inmates were African-American.

And all of this before I was even born.


My godson, my nephew Jimmy, was born when his mother, my older sister Mary, was seventeen. According to Mary, Jimmy was conceived on her seventeenth birthday, the first time she had sex with her first real boyfriend, Jim, a handsome Italian-American who turned nineteen the day his son was born. I was thirteen that year; I understood for the first time, looking at the perfect, olive-skinned infant wrapped in a pale blue blanket, how it felt to love someone more than I loved myself; how it felt to be willing to die for another human being.

My sister’s marriage to Jim didn’t last long, and Jimmy grew up, mostly, in my parents’ house. He and his mother moved with the rest of our family, in 1970, to rural Kentucky. His silky black “baby” hair fell out and came back light brown and wildly curly. As an adolescent, he grew darker again. He grew up to look a lot like his Italian father, and also, somehow, a lot like his maternal grandfather, my father.

I found out, after Jimmy was an adult, that he’d been teased in school, as a kid, and called things like “half-breed.” His classmates thought he was “mixed”—meaning part “Black”—because of his kinky hair and dark skin. Later, people in Shepherdsville started mistaking his Italian last name, Alberico, for a “Mexican” name. Jimmy mostly shrugs it off. But of course, especially in rural Kentucky, “half-breed” and “mixed” and “Mexican” are meant as slurs.

I think of my father’s cousin Donald, who was the handsomest man I’d ever seen—with thick, curly black hair and slanting blue eyes and dark skin—and how I heard from his daughter, when we were grown, that he’d been called “half-breed,” too, as a child, had been asked, “What are you, anyway?”

And Donald told me himself how his grandfather, Gido—my father’s grandfather, too, my great-grandfather; a fierce, tiny man,
by all accounts, also dark-skinned and blue-eyed, maybe part Gypsy, who always carried a blade, a long sharp knife—elicited jeers of “nigger” when he walked the streets of the south side of Pittsburgh. Though Gido also inspired fear. My father had once told me that when the other neighborhood kids saw Gido coming they screamed, “Here comes Gido! Run!” When I asked Donald about this, he shrugged. He didn’t know why everyone was so afraid of his grandfather. My sister Mary thinks Gido might have been a hit man. But maybe it was just the knife.

When I’m with my cousins and I look around and see those faces, almost my own face looking back at me, I understand the familiarity of blood, the comfort of seeing myself reflected in others; then I can think perhaps a little more kindly of the human tendency to look with suspicion and fear on those who look different from ourselves. But still. How do people draw these lines? How do “nationality” and “ethnicity” and “race” and identity become conflated? How does one become the “other” and the other become lesser, dehumanized?

My nephew Jimmy has a daughter from a failed first marriage. Paige is a beautiful little girl; her high cheekbones and almond-shaped eyes show traces of her Native American heritage, on her mother’s side, and perhaps also of Mongolian/Tatar ancestry that came down through my father’s side. It seems both ironic and fitting to me that migration and marriage “outside of the tribe” would lead to this: a child’s face in which the features of her ancestors are blended so well that, in her face, we all seem to meet ourselves coming back.

Paige is fair-skinned and fair-haired, like her father’s mother, my sister Mary, her grandmother. She reminds me a lot of Mary when Mary was a little girl. And when Paige was born, I swore I could see my father’s mother, my grandmother Mary, in her face, too; though I’d only ever seen my grandmother’s face in photographs. My father was dying those first years of Paige’s life—a long, slow death—and he was suffering from dementia. He sometimes believed he saw his own mother, already dead fifty years—dead before I was born; before any of her grandchildren were born—in the house.

Part of me believes that my grandmother did come back to us then—or back to my father, at least, perhaps to lead him more gently toward his own death. Part of me believes that, on her way into this world, Paige’s spirit and my grandmother’s spirit crossed. I remember, when she was eight or nine months old, holding Paige in my arms as I’d
once held her father, and feeling that I was holding Jimmy, again, in my arms, and also, somehow, my sister Mary, as a baby—though Mary was already four years old when I was born—and also my own father, as an infant, and his mother, before him. One inside the other inside the other all at once. Like a matryoshka doll, like those Russian nested dolls.

When Paige was a toddler, she’d climb up the metal bars of my father’s hospital bed, say, “Hi!” and kiss him right on the lips. She was the only one of the grandchildren running wild through my parents’ house in those days who wasn’t afraid of the way my father looked, then, mute and wasting away. He laughed whenever he saw her, and wept. Who did he recognize?

Another irony—or not an irony: my nephew Jimmy’s paternal grandparents emigrated from a place now identified, on the map, as Italy—though there was no such place as “Italy” until 1861—and thus he can trace his lineage, on that side, to “Italians:” dark-skinned Mediterranean people, identified by anthropologists as “Latin European” people. Also identified as “Latin European” were the “Spaniards,” who came to the new world and mixed with the indigenous people there to create the people we now call “Mexican.” So maybe it’s not so inaccurate, after all, for Jimmy to be accused of—yes, it’s an accusation, in this context—being “Mexican.” Though, of course, to try to disentangle the bloodlines, to identify any person according to national borders, when borders are constantly drawn and re-drawn and humans are constantly migrating and mating, willingly or not, seems futile, at best and maybe—I’m beginning to think—immoral; an excuse for inhuman behavior, a way to call someone “other.”

The nation-state is a fairly new creation, after all. The rise of the modern state system in the seventeenth century culminated in the rise of the nation-state, in which the presumptive boundaries of the nation coincided—or ideally coincided—with state boundaries. In some cases, national identities were created almost from whole cloth—national heroes, national languages, national cultural traditions—to inspire allegiance to the state. Prior to that, most loyalties had been local.

In simpler terms, the lines on maps are imaginary lines, not visible on the ground or from the air. Lines drawn by kings and politicians and generals. So why do we so fiercely identify ourselves in terms of them?
The nineteenth century saw the development of the political ideology of *ethnic nationalism*, when the concept of race was tied to nationalism—the notion of “blood and soil”; the idea that specific nationalities, by dint of bloodline, had rights to specific places on the earth—first by German theorists. Instances of societies focusing on ethnic ties to the exclusion of history or historical context have resulted in the justification of nationalist goals. Two periods frequently cited as examples of this are the nineteenth century consolidation and expansion of the German Empire and the Third Reich, each promoted on the pan-ethnic idea that these governments were only acquiring lands that had always been ethnically German. *Blood and soil.*

Is it then one of our collective myths that we’ve rejected the Nazi ideology of “blood and soil,” and of racial-ethnic-national “purity?” Yet one American child in the 1960s would ask another child, “What are you, anyway?”

What box do I fit into? Which box do I check?

These days, I refuse to check the box that says “Caucasian” under race. What does “Caucasian” mean, anyway? The designation is left over from a long-discredited proto-Nazi theory that postulated all “white” people originated in the Caucasus, a mountainous region of what has sometimes been southeastern Russia.

And though my people—Tatar, Gypsy, Mongol, Slav—may, indeed, have roots in the Caucasus—or, more likely, may have passed that way in their travels—I doubt that my people are the kind of people Nazi pseudo-scientists would have called “white.”

From the *New Oxford American Dictionary*:

Although the classification is outdated and the categories are now not generally accepted as scientific, the term *Caucasian* has acquired a more restricted meaning. It is now used, esp. in the U.S., as a synonym for ‘white or of European origin,’ as in the following citation: *the police are looking for a Caucasian male in his forties.*

It’s not just that these classifications are *outdated*—because we’ve intermarried, overcome racial prejudice, blurred the lines—or that they *no longer apply*; it’s that they’ve never applied. So why do the terms persist?

So that the police know who they’re looking for?
Ariela Gross, author of *What Blood Won’t Tell: A History of Race on Trial in America*, reminds us that, while we think of race as a fact of nature, it’s in fact an ideology based on discredited science, but that it persists because it’s fundamental to a hierarchy of power—“enslaving some people to free others; taking land from some to give to others; robbing some people of their dignity to give others a sense of supremacy.”

*Imaginary* things—lines on maps, national and ethnic identities, categories of race—but because we treat them as though they’re *real*—as though they’re *facts of nature*—they have very real consequences. Often devastating consequences.

**What are you, anyway?**

When I was a teenager, my father pointed to that region on the map where his mother had been born and tried to explain to me how the borders in that part of the world had shifted and shifted again. I think he was trying to make me understand that those borders had nothing to do with who I was. Those borders were only lines drawn on the map, after all; lines invisible from the air or on the ground. So why did it matter to me so much to know where we’d come from, to be able to identify that place, somehow, and identify myself in terms of that place?

Another irony, or a puzzle: if I believe that the very ideas of ethnic identity and national identity are suspect, and possibly immoral, why have I been so obsessed with finding out where my ancestors came from—particularly my mysterious grandmother Mary, who I grew up hearing I was so much like? Is it because those ancestors of mine refused, bewilderingly, to identify themselves by nationality or ethnicity? Is it because their history has been so mysterious to me? Because that history has been erased? Is it only that I want to be able to locate myself, my story, within some larger human story? To somehow put myself on the map?

Not long after the fall of communism, I began to travel through central and eastern Europe—travels that have taken me, at last and repeatedly, into those wild Carpathians of my dreams. I learned that the place my father’s family had come from had never been a country, had never been a nation, really; that it was an untamed borderland that had been settled by outlaws and nomads—according
to the historian Norman Davies, a magnet for the dispossessed, impoverished and adventurous from all over Poland and beyond—that it had somehow resisted ever being neatly labeled, ever being identified as a nation-state. Though one Polish friend insisted, “It has always been part of the kingdom of Poland.” Though it had been claimed, at various times, by various kingdoms and empires and nation-states.

Under the Austro-Hungarian Empire, that region in the corner of what is now, once again, southeastern Poland, near the borders of present-day Ukraine and Slovakia, was known as Galicia. Galicia, where tens of thousands starved to death every year, during the years my grandmother would have been a girl; also a hotbed of political unrest and rebellion and underground movements and banditry.

According to the priest I met when I first visited my grandmother’s village, Wislok Wielki, it had been populated by people who identified themselves as Lemko (a once-nomadic Ruthenian tribe, later categorized as “Ukrainian”) and by Roma (“gypsies”) and Jews, with each of these groups playing an important role in the life of the village. And yes, they would have intermarried. Poland itself, according to Norman Davies, was, “[F]or much of its history… a border region of more or less peacefully co-existing peoples and cultures….Poland’s current homogeneity is very much an enforced product of the Second World War and its immediate aftermath.” In other words, what Hitler began, in terms of “ethnic cleansing” in Galicia, Stalin’s communist puppets finished up with the forced “removals” of Operation Wisla in the late 1940s.

When I was growing up, my father’s aunts and uncles—his mother’s brothers and sisters, my tetas and oikos—were as adamant in refusing to identify themselves as “Ukrainian” as they were in refusing to identify themselves as “Polish.” And yet they spoke a language, among themselves, that they identified as “Ukrainian.” The village priest in Wislok Wielki told me that was more an indication of their political leanings than their ethnic origins. Again, according to Norman Davies: “The Populists were the first group in Galicia to call themselves Ukrainians; but soon the name was to be applied to all sorts of groups and communities, from the intellectual activists in the towns to the peasant Hutsuls and Lemkos of the Carpathians, who had little prior sense of their common identity.” The language my older relatives were speaking was, most likely, actually Lemko.

In my travels in southeastern Poland, I met a man who spoke that
almost-forgotten, almost-lost language, who identified himself as Lemko. I was still trying to make a connection between that identity and a place on the map, and wanted to know where the Lemko had come from, where their country was? The man looked at me kindly and shook his head, saying, “But, Cecilia, we don’t need a nation to be a people; we don’t need a border to know who we are.”

Not long after that, another man, interviewing me for a Polish radio station after a poetry reading, would ask, “How does it feel to live in America, to write in English, when you have a Polish soul?” I felt stunned. Was my soul Polish? I answered that my soul didn’t have a nationality, that I certainly hoped my soul didn’t have a nationality, or anyone’s. And I wondered how anyone could identify something like the soul with lines drawn on a map, with a nation-state. The room went quiet. The man switched off the microphone. “Thank you,” he said.

Who was she, anyway?

In the old family photographs, the few photographs of my grandmother that survive, she’s just a round-faced girl, fair as my third-from-the-youngest sister, the prettiest one, with those same slightly tilted eyes. (My eyes, as well; though mine are dark.) She wears an apron over her dress, a kerchief tied around her head; there’s a look of grim stubbornness around her mouth. Something, I think, has just happened to make her angry or make her afraid.

A poor peasant girl who couldn’t—or could she?—read or write. An immigrant from “the old country,” where she’d been mid-wife and barber and mortician and, at thirteen, some old man’s bartered bride. Or so the story goes. Then a widow. Once, twice? My father’s father—where had she met him? where had he come from?—dead in a pool of blood at her feet with my father just days or hours in her womb. So she married, “for convenience”—for survival—a miner, a widower; became a coal miner’s half-starved wife. The mother of how many children who died? Dumb and tragic and innocent.

But, no: in other photographs, later photographs, she wears a hint of a lipsticked smile. Her hair is darker, smoothed into place under a cloche—the same saucy little hat with a black veil that’s come down to me.

During those years, the last years of her life—but who knew they would be her last? She was only forty-nine years old—she would
vanish for weeks, even months, at a time. No one ever knew where she went. “Maybe to Atlantic City to gamble,” her sisters, my tetas, would laugh. Her own mother, I’ve been told, begged her, “Maria, when are you going to stop?”

A gypsy who traveled alone, with that gypsy blood. Who read the cards. A worker, I would come to suspect, in the underground labor movement that flourished in America in the 1920s and ’30s and ’40s. A Red. A witch. A femme fatale. “A very selfish person,” my father’s cousin said, handing me the hat. Giving me a slightly tilted look from those same slightly tilted eyes. What could I read in that?

A suicide? A spy? Or murdered and buried by the last of her husbands, a man known only as “the Russian” and maybe KGB? Hushed up. Erased. Not just because she was female and poor—as I’d thought for so long, in my own innocence—but because she was dangerous?

My great-uncle, her youngest brother, fifty years after the fact, saying, “Oh, I thought she died of a heart attack?” As if he hadn’t been there, and I had.

Who was she, anyway? Where had she come from? To where had she disappeared?

They didn’t want you to know the past. They were hoping in this way you could escape it.
—Carolyn Forché, from The Angel Of History

To want to know what we come from, where we come from, who made us, what we are—is such a longing simply a part of being human, and the same for everyone? Is it only, really, the desire to know how we fit, not within the box of any ethnicity or race or nationality, but within the human story? To know our own stories, how they fit within the larger story, and how to move forward in them? Are our truest maps written in stories, as the songlines of the Aborigines are maps written in songs, whose singing recreates the oneness of past and present and future, and keeps the land alive, and the dreams of the ancestors?

What are you, anyway? Where do you come from? Who?

I wonder if it’s only when our stories have been taken from us, or lost, those maps erased, our place in the larger story made obscure by fear or shame or silence, or because we can’t be fit into—our stories
can’t be fit into—the official boxes, the official version of history, that the longing grows so fierce?
And is it sometimes better—or ever—not to know?

Altadena, California, 1997

I’m standing in front of a classroom of nine-year-olds, a fourth grade class in Altadena, California, a run-down part of town, talking about poetry and something I call “personal history.” The children are mostly African-American children or the children of immigrants from Central America; children whose personal histories have been erased or are being erased directly behind them. Children who speak, for the most part, “non-standard” English, who struggle to read and write.

I’m forty years old and my first book of poems has just come out. On the cover of my book, in the lower right hand corner of an image made by an artist friend before the poems in the book were ever written, is an X; a black X that I’ve come to think of as my grandmother’s mark, the mark she made when asked to sign her name—though I chose this image for the book before I even noticed that X, and I’m only making sense of it now, if there’s sense to be made.

My lesson has been going well. I’ve been teaching these kinds of lessons for years already, and I’m good at it. I’ve been talking to the children about personal history, about our stories, our families’ stories, what we “come from”—language and landscape and traditions and food and all those things that make up “heritage,” the things we carry out of the past and hope to pass along. They’ve seemed excited, but now they’re quiet; to a child, they’re having trouble reaching back into the past any further than their immediate families, and trouble finding, even there, things of which they can feel proud. Things they would want to write down. I want them to shout out ideas for their poems that I can scrawl across the chalkboard but the room has gone very still. I’ve written on the board only the words, “I come from,” and left a blank space I want them to fill.

One tiny, dark-eyed boy timidly raises his hand. His name is Emilio; he comes from El Salvador. “I come from a country that has been destroyed by war,” he says. Then another boy offers, “I come from a mother who never learned to ride a bicycle.” It’s almost a whisper. And then one of the children says, “I come from an uncle who can’t read or write.”
And, without having planned to, I’m holding up a copy of my book. I’m pointing to the X on the cover and telling them that this was how my grandmother signed her name; that she couldn’t read or write; that her history was never written down, or was erased; that I’m trying to tell her story now, and mine. I’m making a confession I’ve never made in front of a classroom before, and the children recognize it as a confession. I stand there and feel something like shame wash over me and then wash over me again, and then I’m still standing there and something unpronounceable has changed. I ask them to pick up their pencils and write, to begin with the words “I come from” and make a list of everything they know and can imagine about the history that’s brought them here, to where they are now, this place on the map. All thirty children bow over their sheets of blue lined paper, struggling to find the words, struggling even to spell them, to shape the letters, but they’re getting something down.

I circulate among the students, leaning over desks, reading over shoulders, urging them to go on. An African-American girl named Ashley is concentrating so hard that she seems to be in a kind of trance, bent close to the poem she’s writing, half-hiding the words with her body, rocking gently in her seat. I lean over her desk and put one of my hands next to each of her hands, which are small and thick and already scarred. She’s making a list:

I come from people who were slaves
I come from people who worked on the land
I come from people who fight with each other
I come from people who love to dance…

I lean closer, making a tent of my body over hers, and I find myself rocking in her rhythm, entering her trance. I can feel her breath on my arm. “Go on, go on,” I tell her. “I come from people who never give up,” she writes, and at that moment I swear I can feel the dark ship list, I can smell the slave ship on her skin—a scent of milk and blood and rotting wood and human waste and sweat. And what might she smell on mine—coal dust and ash, cabbage and tin? She looks up at me and we both nod our heads. “Keep going,” I say, “don’t stop.”
Contributors’ Notes

Lauren K. Alleyne is a Cave Canem graduate whose work has been awarded in The Atlantic Monthly Student Writing Contest (Poetry) in 2003, the Robert Chasen Graduate Poetry Prize at Cornell University, an International Publication Prize from Atlanta Review, and honorable mention in the 2003 Gival Press Tri-Language Poetry Contest. Her poetry and essays have appeared in Black Arts Quarterly, The Caribbean Writer, Bellevue Literary Review, and Women’s Studies Quarterly, among others. Her chapbook, Dawn in the Kaatskills, was published in April 2008 by Longshore Press.

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**Rishma Dunlop** is a Canadian poet, playwright, essayist, and translator. Her books of poetry include *White Album, Metropolis, Reading Like a Girl,* and *The Body of My Garden*. She is a professor at York University,
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**Blas Falconer** is the author of *A Question of Gravity and Light* (University of Arizona Press). His most recent awards include a Tennessee Individual Artist Grant and the Maureen Egan Writers Exchange Award. He is an editor for *Zone 3: A Literary Journal* / *Zone 3 Press* as well as the co-editor of two anthologies: *Mentor and Muse: Essays from Poets to Poets* (forthcoming, Southern Illinois University Press, 2010) and a collection of essays on contemporary Latino literature (forthcoming, University of Arizona Press, 2011). He teaches at Austin Peay State University and lives in Nashville, Tennessee.

**Jeff Fearnside** lived and worked in Central Asia for four years, first as a university instructor through the U.S. Peace Corps and later as manager of the Muskie Graduate Fellowship Program in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. His fiction has appeared in a number of literary journals, most recently *Rosebud, Isotope, Lake Effect, Eureka Literary Magazine*, and *Arroyo Literary Review*. His website is www.Jeff-Fearnside.com.
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Lorraine Healy, an Argentinean of Irish descent, is the first poet to have received a green card solely on the merits of her work. Nominated for a Pushcart in 2004, she received her MFA from New England College and a post-MFA from Antioch University Los Angeles. Her full-length manuscript is forthcoming from Tebot Bach and is the most recent winner of the Patricia Libby First Book Award.

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Việt Lê’s work has appeared in Amerasia Journal, West Coast Line, Asia Pacific American Journal, and the anthologies Blue Arc West (Tebot Bach), Love, West Hollywood (Alyson Books), and So Luminous the Wildflowers (Tebot Bach). He is the recipient of fellowships from the Fine Arts Work Center, PEN Center USA, Civitelli Ranieri, and Fulbright-Hays. Lê received his MFA from the University of California, Irvine (where he also taught studio art and visual culture courses), and is a doctoral candidate at the University of Southern California currently residing in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.
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Bethany Tyler Lee’s work has appeared or is forthcoming in 32 Poems, Puerto del Sol, Hayden’s Ferry Review, Cream City Review, Gulf Stream, and other journals. She is the recipient of a 2009 Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Poetry Prize, and she recently completed her Ph.D. in English from University of North Texas.

Jeffrey Thomas Leong’s poems have appeared in Crab Orchard Review, Flyway: A Literary Review, Manzanita Quarterly, Asian Pacific American Journal, and other publications. He has new work forthcoming in Bamboo Ridge. In 2003, he and his wife adopted a baby girl from Jiangsu, China, and he has since explored the themes of a multicultural, diverse American family. He lives in the San Francisco Bay area.

Karen Llagas’s poems have appeared in Broadsided Press, Crab Orchard Review, Wompherence 2008, and in Field of Mirrors, an anthology of Philippine-American writers. Some of her poems received a Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Poetry Prize in 2007. She lives in San Francisco where she works as a Tagalog interpreter and instructor, and as a poet-teacher with the California Poets in the Schools (CPITS).

Amit Majmudar lives with his wife and twin sons in Columbus, Ohio. His first poetry collection, 0’,0’, is available from Northwestern University Press. By profession, he is a diagnostic radiologist specializing in nuclear medicine.

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Daiva Markelis is a city girl, Chicago-born, who has found unexpected contentment amidst the cornfields of central Illinois. Her short stories and personal essays have appeared (or will appear) in the Chicago Tribune Sunday Magazine, American Literary Review, Writing on the Edge, Cream City Review, Other Voices, Women and Language, Talking River, Chicago Reader, Mattood, and The Fourth River. She has just completed a memoir entitled “White Field, Black Sheep: My Lithuanian-American Life.”
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Michele Poulos’s poems and prose have appeared in Copper Nickel, Blackbird, Waccamaw, and storySouth. She was a finalist for the 2008 Charles Johnson Student Fiction Award. She is a two-time nominee for inclusion in the anthology Best New American Voices (Harvest Books, 2008 and 2009). She teaches at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Mary Quade’s collection Guide to Native Beasts won the 2003 Cleveland State University Poetry Center First Book Prize. In 2006, she was awarded an Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Award. She teaches at Hiram College.

Bushra Rehman’s poetry has been collected in the chapbook Marianna’s Beauty Salon (Vagabond Press), and she is co-editor of Colonize This! Young Women of Color on Today’s Feminism (Seal Press). She has been featured on BBC Radio 4, on WNYC’s The Brian Lehrer Show, and in the New York Times, India Currents, and NY Newsday. To read her latest work, visit www.bushrarehman.com.

Thomas Reiter’s most recent book of poems, Catchment, was published in 2009 by Louisiana State University Press. He has received an Academy of American Poets Prize as well as fellowships from the NEA and the New Jersey State Council on the Arts.

José Edmundo Ocampo Reyes was born and raised in the Philippines. His poems have appeared in various Philippine and U.S. journals,
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Patrick Rosal is the author of Uprock Headspin Scramble and Dive, which won the Members’ Choice Award from the Asian American Writers’ Workshop, and most recently My American Kundiman, which won the Association of Asian American Studies 2006 Book Award in Poetry. He was awarded a Fulbright grant as a U.S. Scholar to the Philippines in 2009. His poems and essays have been published widely in journals and anthologies including American Poetry Review, Harvard Review, The Literary Review, Brevity: A Journal of Concise Literary Non-Fiction, The Beacon Best, and Language for a New Century.

Sankar Roy’s poems have appeared or are forthcoming in over eighty journals and anthologies. Tebot Bach is publishing his first book of poetry, Moon Country, in 2009. He has also authored three poetry chapbooks and co-edited an anthology, Only the Sea Keeps: Poetry of the Tsunami (with Judith R. Robinson and Joan E. Bauer).

Zohra Saed is a Brooklyn-based Afghan poet. Her poems have most recently appeared in Internationale Gallerie Journal of Art & Ideas (Mumbai, India); Speaking for Herself: Asian Women’s Writings (Penguin Books: India); Indian Horizons, published by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (Delhi, India); Cheers to Muses: Asian American Women Artists (The Asian American Women’s Artists’ Association: California); among numerous other journals and anthologies. She is co-editing an anthology of Afghan American writings with Sahar Muradi and Lida Abdul.

Metta Sáma’s work has appeared in Blackbird, The Drunken Boat, Kestrel, and Proud Flesh, among others. She currently serves as a faculty advisor at Goddard College and lives in Brooklyn, New York.

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**Jorge Sánchez** received his MFA from the University of Michigan and is currently a student at the MA program in Divinity at the University of Chicago Divinity School. His poems have been published most recently in *Poetry, Prism Review, Iron Horse Literary Review*, and *Southern Review*. He lives in Chicago, Illinois, with his wife, fiction writer Elizabeth Wetmore, and their son.

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**Angela Narciso Torres** was born in Brooklyn, New York, and grew up in Manila, Philippines. Her poems have appeared in *Crab Orchard Review, North American Review, Asian Pacific American Journal, Rattle, Her Mark 2009*, and the anthology *Going Home to a Landscape: Writings by Filipinas*. She holds an MFA from the Warren Wilson Program for Writers and edits *RHINO*, an annual poetry journal based in Evanston, Illinois.

**Sandy Tseng**’s collection of poems, *Sediment*, will be published by Four Way Books in October 2009. Her poems have appeared in *Crazyhorse, Fugue, Hunger Mountain, The Nation, and Third Coast*, among other journals, and have been anthologized in *Yellow as Turmeric, Fragrant as Cloves* (Deep Bowl Press). Among her awards are the “Discovery”/*The Nation Prize* and scholarships from the Vira I. Heinz Endowment and the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference.

**Gemini Wahhaj** has a Ph.D. in creative writing from the University of Houston, where she won the Inprint/Michener Fellowship in Honor of Donald Barthelme for 2004–05. Her fiction has been published
in *Granta, Cimarron Review, Northwest Review, Night Train*, and other magazines. She won an honorable mention in *The Atlantic Monthly’s* Student Writing Contest in 2005, was a finalist in *Glimmer Train’s* short-story award for new writers in Spring 2005, and won an honorable mention in the *India Currents* 2004 Katha contest for South Asian American fiction.

**Davi Walders** has published poetry and prose in more than two hundred anthologies and journals. Her awards include a National Endowment for the Humanities Grant, a Puffin Foundation Grant, a Maryland State Artist Grant in Poetry, a Luce Foundation Grant, and a three-year grant from The Witter-Bynner Foundation for Poetry for the Vital Signs Writing Project which she developed at NIH in Bethesda, Maryland. Her work has been choreographed and performed in New York City and elsewhere, and read by Garrison Keillor on *The Writer’s Almanac*.

**Marcus Wicker**’s poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *jubliat, Hayden’s Ferry Review, Ninth Letter, Rattle, the Los Angeles Review*, and elsewhere. Originally from Ann Arbor, Michigan, he holds fellowships from Indiana University’s MFA Program and Cave Canem, and he is the current poetry editor of *Indiana Review*.

**Erika Williams** grew up in both Germany and the midwest. Her fiction has appeared in the *Massachusetts Review, New England Review*, and *Zoetrope: All-Story Extra*.

**John Willson** is a recipient of the Pushcart Prize and awards from the Academy of American Poets, the Pacific Northwest Writers Conference, the Artist Trust of Washington, and the King County Arts Commission. His poems have appeared in anthologies such as *Spreading the Word: Editors on Poetry* and *Under Our Skin: Literature of Breast Cancer*, and in journals including *Bellevue Literary Review, Cold Mountain Review, Kyoto Journal, Many Mountains Moving, Northwest Review, Poet Lore, Roanoke Review*, and *Sycamore Review*. A two-time finalist for the National Poetry Series, he lives on Bainbridge Island, Washington, where he is employed as a poetry workshop instructor and as a bookseller at an independent bookstore.

**L. Lamar Wilson** is an MFA student at Virginia Tech and a freelance copy editor. His poems appear or are forthcoming in *Rattle* and
Reverie, and he has reviews and essays in other publications, including the Washington Post, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, and Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

Cecilia Woloch is the author of four award-winning collections of poems, most recently Narcissus, winner of the Tupelo Press Snowbound Prize for the chapbook in 2006. A fifth collection, entitled Carpathia, is slated for publication by BOA Editions in 2009. She teaches in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Southern California.

Yim Tan Wong graduated from the MFA program at Hollins University and has had the great pleasure of being a Fellow at the 2005 and 2006 Kundiman Emerging Asian American Poets Retreat. Her poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in Freshwater Review, Santa Clara Review, and Michigan Quarterly Review.
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Lee Ann Roripaugh, an associate professor of English at the University of South Dakota, is the author of Year of the Snake and Beyond Heart Mountain.

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The submission period for this issue is August 1, 2009 through October 31, 2009. We will be reading submissions throughout this period and hope to complete the editorial work on the issue by the end of February 2010. Writers whose work is selected will receive $25 (US) per magazine page ($50 minimum for poetry; $100 minimum for prose) and two copies of the issue.

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