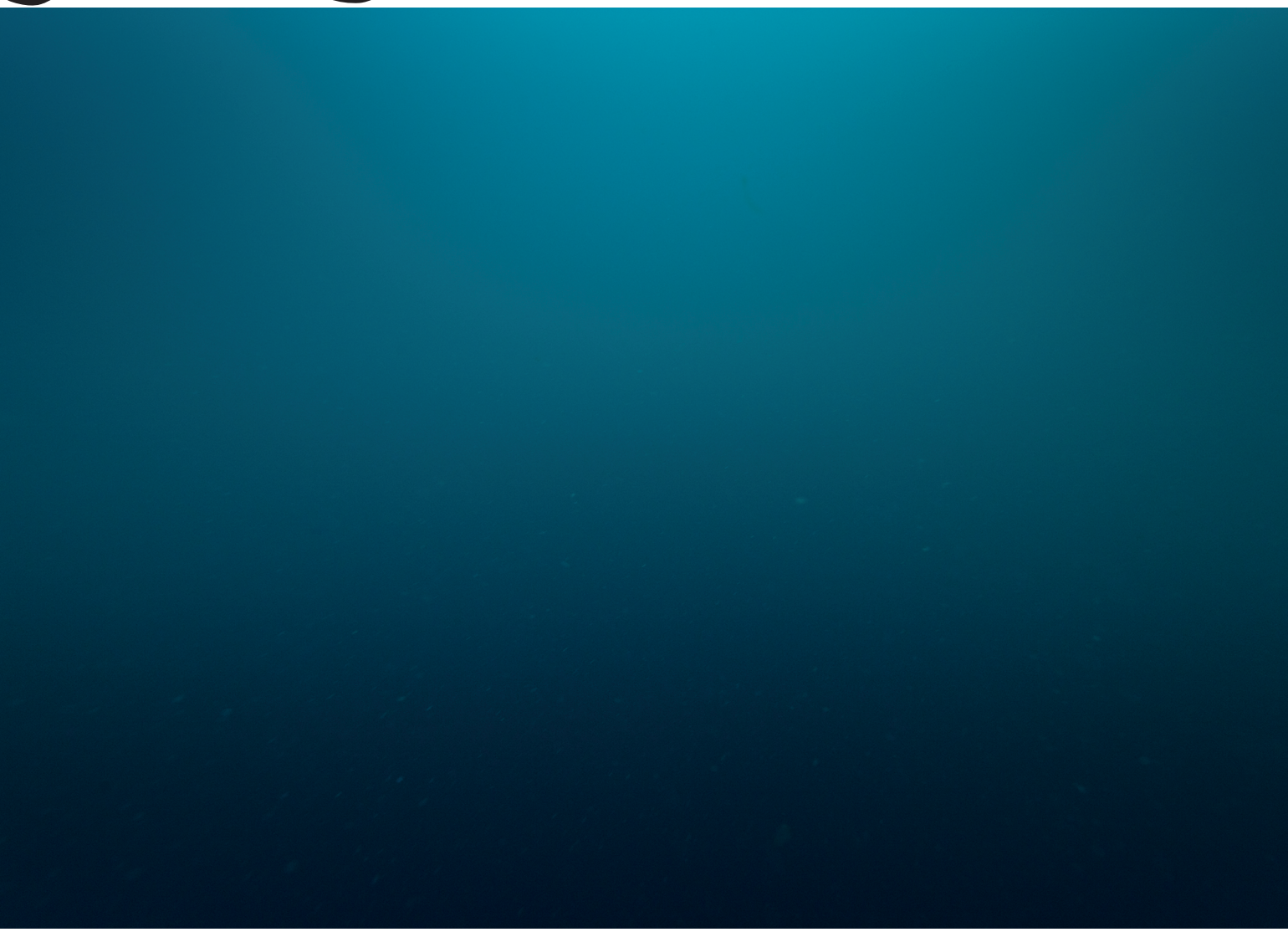
RUMINATE



AT SEA / 60

Fall 2021 *$15*

ruminate:

RUMINATE IS A COMMUNITY OF CREATORS CULTIVATING AUTHENTIC SELVES, NOURISHING CONVERSATIONS, AND SPIRITUALLY SUSTAINING LIFE TOGETHER THROUGH ACTION AND ART.

Ruminate Magazine is Ruminate's quarterly print journal that invites slowing down and paying attention. We delight in laughter, deep reading, contemplative activism, telling stories, asking questions, and *doing small things with great love*, as Mother Teresa said. We are particularly excited about sharing stories, poems, and art from voices that aren't often heard.

PLEASE JOIN US.

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contents

editor's note

I didn't grow up near the sea. My closest experience of such vastness would have been watching the way the wind rippled the wheat fields. Recently I learned that the nearby ridge of rock that runs along the edge of the Rockies, the Dakota hogback, marks the edge of a prehistoric sea, and the dinosaur footprints my sons trace along the hillsides were pressed there, into its sandy floor. On my desk, I have a shark tooth that a friend sent me from rockhouding in Indiana. No matter where we walk, there is an infinite sea beneath us.

The writers and artists whose work makes up Ruminate issue 60 probe the imagery and metaphor of being *at sea*. Whether it is being at sea in the waiting to find out if a beloved will survive, as in Devon Miller-Duggan's poem, "Perhaps a Prayer for Surviving the Night," in which "All my landscapes end... only the blood of those I love / and an unstarred endlessness." Or as in Peggy Shumaker's "Gifts We Cannot Keep," when speaking of a friend who "ran beyond where I could see. / I faced vast waters. / One moment calm, then / the ocean explodes—". George Choundas's engrossing story, "Katingo Carried 15,980 Tons and a Gentleman," transports us to the insular and particular world of those who live and work on cargo ships. And O-Jeremiah Agbaakin's poem, "landscape with broken ekphrasis," wrestles with the image of the last ship that brought enslaved people to the United States. "I want my God so dark & undisturbed. / no ocean roaring like firmaments cleaving," his speaker says, "next time we do not discern, we'll keep / mounting the sky like a ship."

To be at sea is to be unmoored, to be moving through, to be uncertain, and it is in these uncertainties that our creative endeavors—Nicholas Floc'h's evocative underwater portraits, Walter Robinson's essay on becoming a doctor and seeking the monastic path—can provide, if not an anchor, then a raft on which we can navigate our transitory place in time and history.

Time is the deepest sea. For a bit, we are the silver-skinned creatures buoyed up by it, before we return to the mystery beneath us. The way land emerges as water recedes, for just a short time. As Nicholas Samaras's poem, "Human Condition," reminds, "Time fades us and / vanishes, even this thinking, / the image lived, gone, grasped after."

We hope the words and images gathered in these pages can offer a map to navigate the doldrums or the storms you might find yourself in, knowing that others are traveling beside you, sharing these brief days.

Gratefully,

JEN

readers' notes

AT SEA

I rode to work and back on a public bus for eighteen years. In the early mornings, I'd close my eyes and imagine being tossed in blue-green rolling waves, floating on some makeshift, leaky raft at sea. If I was feeling optimistic, I'd have thoughts of catching flying fish with my hands. I'd lie on my back in the imagined rain, cup my hands on my belly to collect the water, and remove my shirt to carefully wring water into my dry mouth, tasting the ocean. When I was feeling low or sorry for myself, I'd accept my fate, and eventually slip off the raft to be eaten by sharks.

It's the first stop of the morning and raining. I walk from the back of the bus toward dueling metronomes. The wet beat of the city turns thoughts to work. I know that the voyage is half the battle.

WILLIAM R. STODDART, MONROEVILLE, PA

The tiny dove drops from the sky and grips the line of a passing sailboat, spreads its damp wings to dry, and rests tiny muscles that twitch nonstop—a reprieve, an unexpected yet welcome respite, an oasis in the blue vastness, which was beautiful but without mercy until the sloop appeared heading south with a single sailor who smiled at the unexpected company, a hitchhiker who dropped in, hung on, then lifted off. Both bird and sailor go it alone.

GUY BIEDERMAN, SAUSALITO, CA

The night before my late father's birthday I studied the map on the wall. All those countries in earth tones, like flattened shards of ancient pottery. The eastern shores of the Americas curving distantly around Europe and Africa, as if they'd been spooning until the Atlantic swelled and forced them apart. The archipelagos, distorted by the projection, reaching like desperate fingertips across the expanse.

My son doesn't hug me in front of the school anymore. And my mother—it's getting harder for her to climb the stairs.

I slipped into bed. My husband sleepily stretched an arm across the mattress's mid-ocean ridge, hooked a heavy wrist under my knee, and placed a warm hand on my thigh. Throwing an anchor, against all odds, against the relentless rifting. When I closed my eyes, I saw Asia. Across the Pacific, watching the West Coast draw nearer. A few centimeters each year, though volcanoes erupt and the ground shakes, those lands converge. You can see how their curves will eventually collide, fold into each other, make new shapes. *Novopangea*. A new world, whole again.

In the morning, a soft rain fell. The end of water's atmospheric time. Water returning to its resting place in the sea, which tastes like grief. Above the bay, a full moon tugged the tide back to the shore.

ALI TARBOX SAPERSTEIN, SEATTLE, WA

1980. My little sister and I spend rainy afternoons on our bed pretending it's a raft. We are alone, our parents tragically lost with the ship we'd been sailing on to France. There, we planned to drink champagne and wear red lipstick—forbidden things in our Pentecostal world.

We evade predators on our raft, take cover from the sun under the pilly polyester bedspread.

We divide up one packet of peanuts and a bottle of Pepsi, read facts out loud from the outdated encyclopedias people have donated to us. We don't pass the edge of that mattress.

1989. I squeeze in next to her in the hospital bed, kiss her fuzzy chemo head. I'm aphasic with grief but these moments demand words. "Rest," I whisper. "I'll watch for sharks." But I hadn't, had I? Consumed with my own teenage concerns, I had looked away and something got to her. I watch her go under.

2021, vaccine #1. My post-vax febrile state tranquilizes the guards at the gate of memory long enough for me to dream her—wild blond hair soft on my face like our childhood mornings. My arms wrapped around her shoulders as she sits in front of me. A movie theater. An attendant shines a flashlight on us.

"Keep your distance," he warns.

My sister turns.

"The pandemic," I say.

She is confused. I squeeze her tighter, like when she had bad dreams. "Two meters. Think: A bottlenose dolphin. A bald eagle's wingspan. A grand piano."

I do not say the depth of a grave, but the thought snatches me awake, grief and love each revived. Only then do I realize the obvious: a queen-size raft floating out on the sea.

GINGER PHARAND, KINGSTON, ONTARIO

Florida's Treasure Coast shoreline is named after historical events and legends, like the shipwrecked Spanish conquistadors who searched for riches buried somewhere in the nearby swampland. Or the rumor that Al Capone sent his men there to bury his riches in the vacant beaches. These days, old men walk the water's edge with their trusty metal detectors, praying to find forgotten fortunes.

For the "snowbirds," this part of Florida is a permanent vacation; their personal safe haven away from brutal winters up north. For the born-and-raised Floridians, like me, it was merely a departure gate to some ultimate destination.

It's funny, how much you miss the ocean once you move to a landlocked state. For over thirty years, I had the entire east coast shoreline within my

grasp whenever I wanted it. So many Saturday nights spent running around the moonlit beach during my senior year of high school. Underage drinking and small bonfires and declarations that, one day soon, we would all get out. That any other place in the country would be perfect simply because it wasn't Florida.

Some of us eventually got out. Now, we tell everyone we meet how awesome it was to grow up alongside the Atlantic Sea. Now, we long for the beaches and those nights. I close my eyes and picture myself standing before the tide, feeling the waves splash at my calves, as I stare up at the glow of the moon.

BETHANY BRUNO, HUNTSVILLE, AL

When the turn of the century ship bell sounds, everyone comes to breakfast barefoot. We are not on a ship, but the walls, ceilings, and floors are made of wood—the narrow halls and quaint bedrooms all suggestive of a berth on board an old ocean liner, only brighter—with long spans of windows that overlook the Atlantic on one side, a tidal creek on the other.

My granddaughter, Hannah, and I are staying in room number seven in a twelve-room inn built in the 1930s, just steps away from the South Carolina ocean. All week, we've fallen asleep to the sound of deep breaths—the waves moving in and out.

Hannah says the whitecaps look like bunches of bunnies running to shore.

People have been coming to this place since they were children. Now, they bring their grown children and grandchildren. Often, they come the same week of the year to reconnect with friends they made in this timeless place, decades ago.

All of us are in need of rest. A sense of community.

On our last night, we play charades in the living room, with its rattan furniture and shelves heavy with books. Over a dozen of us, ranging in age from nine to eighty-two, try to guess movies, books, or plays: *Jane Eyre*, *Wizard of Oz*, a story by Edgar Allan Poe. We eat candy from Malaysia, a gift from a guest who is studying Mandarin.

There is no television. There is no air conditioning. At breakfast, each table is anchored by a bowl of grits. Outside, the sand is the color of coffee bleached by rich cream.

Today, while Hurricane Cindy batters the Gulf, we are socked in by clouds. From my rocking chair on the front porch, it is hard to tell where the sky ends and the sea begins. What light I see is magnified. I am at home in my bones. More forgiving of the rain.

JESSICA THOMPSON, EVANSVILLE, IN

When I woke up in a sleepy fog in the middle of the Gulf of Alaska on the "M/V Kennicott," I was sliding back and forth on my mattress, bracing my feet against the bottom rail of the metal bunk, then protecting my head with my hands as I slid up. I peeked out the oval window into the inky blackness, and with help from the boat's lights, I could see white foam sloshing against the ship. With each swell, I reminded myself that this was normal, especially as the ship shuddered and groaned. It was all part of being at sea, part of my new life in the Last Frontier.

I grasped my bunk and shimmied down the metal ladder, trying to match my movements with the rolling vessel. My older brother and I lunged and slammed against the hallway walls, venturing toward the bathroom. Finally, we burst through the door, only to find other travelers already using the head for sea sickness. I gagged and made for the exit.

Hours later, after I'd somehow drifted off to sleep, I woke up to pounding on the door. "You guys need to see this," my dad said.

We made our way up to the main viewing room with ease this time—the seas had settled and we were gliding through a strait. Rocky beaches rose to craggy cliffs filled with Sitka Spruce—the higher elevations shrouded in a blanket of fog. Porpoises danced at the bow, leaping and diving elegantly as the boat plowed through the placid water; sea otters bobbed nearby clinging to rafts of olive green kelp.

Soon the ferry docked in Kodiak Island, and we drove off to begin our new life. Every so often, my body would sway with the ocean swells of that night, and I could still feel the roll and pitch of the boat, my body still out at sea.

MARK PUTNEY, NEWBERG, OR

Grandfather says sea water and the plasma in our blood have the same concentrations of salt and other ions. The moving ocean inside our bodies and the salinity of the water holding us, the sea upon which we float, have much in common.

We both know I'm restless and unpredictable.

"And yet!" Grandfather says with his finger pointed up. "You have tides and we can calculate them. Just study the movements of the Moon."

In his way, he encourages me to surrender to whomever or whatever is holding me.

A theater seat, as I watch live actors on the stage.

A book that I wish would last forever.

A dish of pasta, created by another, that will never be recreated.

A brilliant sunset at my father's gravesite.

Swell. On the surface. Emotions rise, fall, swirl, atomize, vaporize, condense, and get blown out of proportion. With time, emotions ferment in the Moon's light, the Sun's heat, the salty air. They transform, becoming easier to digest. I take a breath with me and dive into the depths where compassion lives. It's

quieter down here. In order to surrender to love, I have to give up my desire to be in control.

"Live each moment as if you had waves inside of you. Ride them, and respond to the world in ways that are most called for. Come from a devotional space, deep down in the dark quiet waters. Bring that to the surface."

Grandfather knows how to hold my attention.

DIANA MULLINS, IRVINE, CA

I'm on a boat in the Everglades National Forest, enveloped in blue. For once, there are no distractions, nowhere else to be, no reason to take out my phone—not even for a picture. A photo rarely captures an experience anyhow.

First time I saw the ocean, I was thirteen. I have no pictures of that trip; I don't know why. My sister and I were poor kids, but our weekly allowance often went toward film and photo developing. An overflowing box of snapshots sits in the closet as proof. Most likely, the expanse of water and its endless rhythm were so captivating, I knew I'd never forget.

Remembering is easier when you're young. Just last month, I hurried through a Saturday, my mind tossed by tasks and worry. Preoccupation drowned out muscle memory—a very hard thing to do—and I realized later that evening I'd forgotten to rinse the shampoo from my hair. It had dried like matted straw.

I Googled "symptoms of burnout" because it was easier to read than "remedies for burnout."

I'm on a boat in the Everglades National Forest, sea and sky like diamonds, and I'm thinking about burnout. The boat skips along like a pebble and I see the ripples. I smell the salt. I hear the engine, feel the slapping of water beneath me, but my compass is wild, pulling me everywhere, nowhere. I need a narrator, someone to pull me into the frame, anchor me to the setting, remind me to relax. The motor hums in my chest and I remember—*I* am the narrator.

"You are on a boat in the Everglades National Forest," I say.

MICHELLE STIFFLER, MESA, AZ

2021 William Van Dyke Short Story Prize

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FIRST PLACE
ALEX COTHREN
The Florist

SECOND PLACE
AMBER BLAESER-WARDZALA
A Guide to Removal

HONORABLE MENTION
GEORGE CHOUNDAS
Katingo Carried 15,980 Tons and a Gentleman

FINALISTS

NINA GABY
Patricia's Friends and Family React to Her Unusual Behavior After the Funeral

ELIZABETH PALEY
Beethoven's Rhythm

LAUREN LOFTIS
Glass Bloom

SKYE ANICCA
What She Didn't Say

CATHERINE MILLER
Sunday School

ALBERTO DANIELS
Jaguar

SUPHIL LEE PARK
Seance

"THE FLORIST" BY ALEX COTHREN

Kelli Jo Ford says: "The Florist" is a story I won't soon forget. Here, the writer has created a disturbing world of wonders that's both familiar and entirely fresh and has done so with little in the way of explanation. Instead, they've trusted the depth of the characters and their relationships on the page. They've trusted a precision of language, sentences, and structure. This is a story that pulled at me long after I put it down."

"A GUIDE TO REMOVAL" BY AMBER BLAESER-WARDZALA

Kelli Jo Ford says: "At turns hilarious and heartbreaking, 'A Guide to Removal' makes some kind of literary magic. I found more to love each time I read this story."

"KATINGO CARRIED 15,980 TONS AND A GENTLEMAN" BY GEORGE CHOUNDAS

Kelli Jo Ford says: "I feel sure that I could pick a paragraph at random in 'Katingo Carried 15,980 Tons and a Gentleman' and be swept away by the careful rhythm of the language, by the boldness of the story. A whole world is rendered in just fifteen pages."

Judge Kelli Jo Ford's debut novel in stories, *Crooked Hallelujah* (Grove Press), was longlisted for The Center for Fiction's 2020 First Novel Prize. She is the recipient of awards and fellowships, such as *The Paris Review's* 2019 Plimpton Prize, the Everett Southwest Literary Award, a Native Arts & Cultures Foundation National Artist Fellowship, and a Dobie Paisano Fellowship. She teaches writing at Santa Fe's Institute of American Indian Arts and lives in Richmond, Virginia, with her husband and daughter. She is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation.

NAN COHEN

Canyon Hike

If you'd come with me
I'd show you
the rain last night
has laid the dust
and washed the trees.
Each leaf is clean.

We'd pause to imagine
this all under water,
as it once was—

hidden fossils
whispering around us.
Imagined ocean rising,
so near, so near.

NICHOLAS SAMARAS

Human Condition

Already, my thought enters the past
where everything is gone, blinking
into finitude. Even this thinking,
already fog and waver, verb become
tensed, as time evaporates. The present
is air and the past is vapour. I think
of you entering the past tense of you,
the wave of your hand as time goes
transparent and the photograph fades.
Everything ages to transparency,
leaving a warm feeling we struggle
to hold. Time fades us and
vanishes, even this thinking,
the image lived, gone, grasped after.

O-JEREMIAH AGBAAKIN

landscape with broken ekphrasis

Schooner Clotilda was the last ship to bring slaves to the United States

1.

a bamboo flutes out water in the wall
  mural. a heap of stones packed somewhere

& smudge of dawn. in the offing, a fog
  smokes out a boat. a wake of vultures rise

from the snout. the bamboo drips: arterial,
  broken & so alive there's no matter now,

only motion; the stones so close they know
  their inner lives. a shadow, dark as ore

leaches inside a rain of light: not the color
  of crushed glass or gunpowder snorted by

a firearm. i want it to stay that way. no
  thunderclaps from God's quiver of clouds,

shooting hails from the sky curved as a bow

2.

no rain at all for all your sea sickness

3.

i'll look for the dew cooled in the calyx
    of buttercup & morning glory, furled

as a flute, a trumpet still shivering from
  an angel's cold lips. i lie belly down

for my hunger is ruminant & the cud
  divine. forgive me lord, i cannot speak

of you without the dead. forgive me,
  for digging a moat around my thirst

4.

the stones are dark as obsidian. black bodies
cooling. a lava of clay pressed against God's

breath. i want my God so dark & undisturbed.
no ocean roaring like firmaments cleaving. no

keg pissing as it brims unto the mouth of a tap.
no seepage. no sound save my late aunt's lungs

before they failed from a generator's groan. no
fossil fuel burning. no proof of a past or passing.

just raw heart thumping as wings. or the fossil
of a wing pressed upon the visible wind. i flick

the lever & turn off the hissing rod of water

5.

i study the mural again as they jump
offboard, except they don't. i motion

to lead them away from the hardened
walls. even as their fetters pull them

back from the painter's unseen hands

6.

if there was no caption, i'd miss the stalk
of maple leaves. hidden in plain sight like

the serpent on a vine of the forbidden tree

7.

next time we do not discern, we'll keep
mounting the sky like a ship. aleph: never

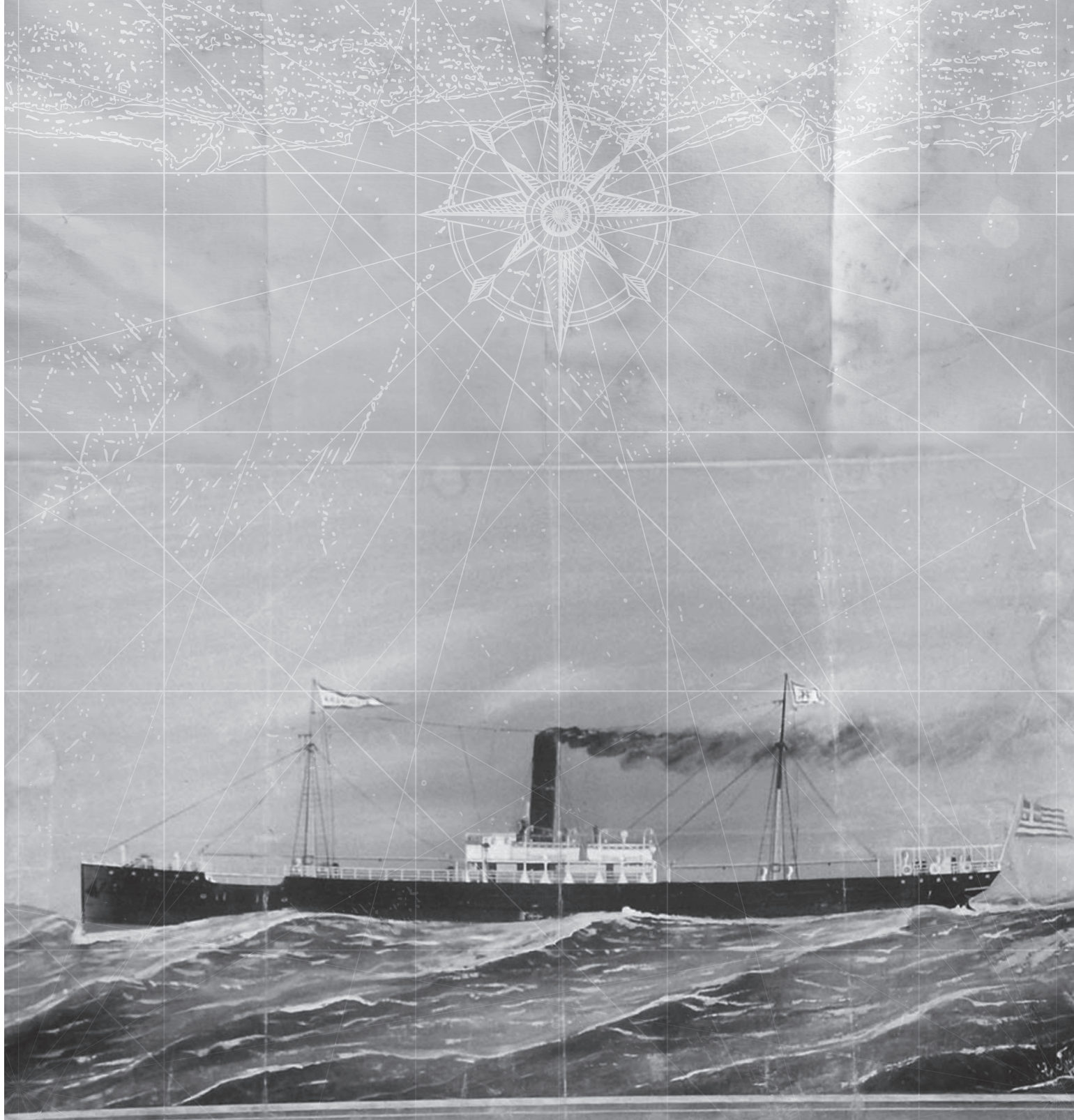
cares. always comes first. beth: shall be
the second if not the best. & by its sound

m stays in the middle of the periodic table
of speech. except in my language, Yoruba

even if you split the baby in half. here, no
letter is stable or silent, complicit. vowels

are flower buds. a gash. & where there is
a flow, the whiteman shall see a wound

to be dredged, a ground for this searing.



KATINGO CARRIED 15,980 TONS AND A GENTLEMAN

GEORGE CHOUNDAS

HE WAS SIX or seven when he swam in sea that came up to his lips. It was a pocket cut off by rocks. All the boys swam there. But none were around. He felt like God. The ocean was desperate to kiss him. The world hung from his mouth.

He was swimming for urchin. *Achinous*. Like an oyster, but sweeter and gamier. An oyster that has drunk buttermilk, then gotten a little sick.

Instead he found an octopus. The thing he saw was its *katchoula*, the main body like a quivering heart. The arms he didn't see. Then one grasped his wrist. He might have pulled away. But he submerged. Youth chooses something over nothing.

With other arms it locked onto a rock at the sea bottom. A rock that was the sea bottom. Around and under the pointed end of an outcrop. He pulled away. The cinch on his wrist only tightened. Now his lungs were burning. He'd been underwater a good half-minute. He pulled harder. His lungs were burning.

He didn't think before doing it. In one hinging motion he ducked down and bit the octopus in the eye and clenched. It startled, released, darted away. It managed several inches before it stopped and drifted, bent over a little. Like it was trying to remember something.

The octopus wasn't heavy over his shoulder. The *katchoula* rolled back and forth across his back. It stopped smelling like waves before he got home.

The taste was still in his mouth from the eye. This, even further removed from ocean. Sere and brineless. High up. Careless of small things and busy things. He'd never been to the mountains. But it is possible to know things without having reason to know them, and he knew the taste was mountain air.

NOW HE IS sixty. This is old for a farmer, a grocer. For a merchant seaman, who moves even when standing still, who is softer than everything around him, it is ancient. He has served on thirty-seven ships before *Katingo*. He remembers the names of all thirty-seven, their tonnage, their cargo. He remembers thirty-seven pairs of ports: where he first came aboard, where he last disembarked. Matronyms and patronyms.

He remembers things about his crewmates he didn't know he remembered. Once, wearing a face mask while chipping rust, he smelled the breath of a boatswain he'd worked for two decades earlier—pears and milk gone slightly sour, unmistakable—and turned so quickly the *matsakoni* he was holding left a dent in the bulkhead. Nobody there. The boatswain had been dead for decades. The breath he was smelling was his own.

He was boatswain himself once, on a ship so small it was rated strictly for coastal routes. It went as far as London and lost an anchor in Beaufort 7 seas. Otherwise he

has served as an able-bodied. He is an able-bodied on the tanker *Katingo*, with a fat keel that laughs at Beaufort 7.

He is oldest of the crew by nearly three decades. He is older even than the Kontropontis brothers, who own the ship. This discrepancy for Greeks is awkward, even untoward. Like fourth marriages. Or holding hands at a funeral.

Nobody needs thirty-seven ships to know a new crew's first night aboard a vessel is singular. Quiet, first of all. The men are cowed, bent by novelty and strangeness to an earnest frame of mind. They have not yet grouped off. Ignorance nurtures acceptance. They still have, or affect, a desire to learn something.

Katingo's crew, however, is not new. Only three are new, having joined at Genoa: captain, first officer, the Gentleman himself. The rest of them have been sailing together for months. The Gentleman forgets this. Somehow he has in mind this is a fresh venture for all of them. Maybe this is not an error. Maybe this is the very long view. If anything can happen, it can happen again.

A few crew gather round: Stamati, Spiro, Ianni, Tasso. A couple more from the twelve- to-four. The Gentleman is saying something about molasses ships. No one recalls how or why he arrived at the subject. They listen anyway.

There was the *Vestalasket*, a Swedish freighter. It went from Itajaí to Brest in France. Carried molasses. Molasses must be kept warm in the ship's hold. Through *Vestalasket's* cargo seethed enormous heating coils, glowing and gurgling at the bottom of that brown deaf ocean. The heating method was customary. Not customary was the weather in that equatorial swath of the Atlantic across which *Vestalaske*t made its way. Autumn, and still it stayed unseasonably warm that year. Air temperatures rose so high that shippering experts still debate whether the even higher temperatures in the ship's hold may have obviated entirely the need for heating coils. In any event, this ship was wreathed in an unconscionable smell. Warm molasses, sure, but sweeter, darker, more keening, more trenchant: more. It penetrated every part of the ship. It was a heady thing, this scent, not so much because of the way it smelled as because of the way it made the smeller *feel*. It was a scent of pure urge. Imperious, nearly intolerable. Whoever smelled it wanted something—badly—but did not know what it was. The closest feeling was lust, but it had nothing to do with the loins and their rind-deep tantrums. This urge plumbed deeper, and knifed higher, a hot anxious hole in the chest, and the tender rim of that hole prickled and throbbed with the overlivened sensation of inflamed throat and funny bone rung fresh against doorjamb and summer toothache, and with every breath of deep dark sugar the hole would pucker and ache and very badly *want*. That wonder air unhinged the *Vestalasket's* seamen, mad to offer their lives for whatever might sate the hot holes inside them, flummoxed about what that might be.

The ship's motion only put flame to the fever. Molasses is a peculiar cargo, liquid enough to shift constantly in search of level, but viscous enough to shift slowly and

stubbornly. It is an intransigent sludge that traps and intensifies whatever momentum it is afforded. For this reason the movements of a molasses ship are different from those of every other ocean-going vessel. Any given movement proceeds more gradually, yet more extremely. The feel of a molasses ship, in sum, is the feel of a dream.

Nobody who has not worked a molasses ship can understand. Odysseus, who tied himself to the mast so he could hear the siren song, who sensed first a lip-gentle summoning, a tease across the skin, spreading so innocently it could not be denied, anointing every bit of him with garden light, enrobing his cock in a velvet that furled and tugged, warmer, steadily warmer, glorious, almost perfect almost perfect and, finally, replacing his insides with a lake of sweet pain for all the things he could never have again, who understood that not yielding was the same as a thousand razors, could understand. Nobody else who has not worked a molasses ship can understand.

Combine in your mind, please, the unremitting pulse of urge and the distended feel of dream and a mounting desperation at how to reconcile these, let alone resolve them, and a panic that there can be no relief because the ship itself, the only planet under a seaman's feet, is responsible, and you'll understand how men without religion will pray absurd and impossible prayers, not for a safe and speedy journey to port, but for the ship to be there, now, already there, immediately there, there *now*.

"When were you on a molasses ship?" Stamati asks the Gentleman.

"You're the lawyer," says the Gentleman, so matter-of-factly he may be talking to himself. "Every crew has a lawyer."

Stamati wears two pairs of shorts to sleep. The pay he sends home is all his parents and sisters have. Wearing two shorts lets him ignore the blood that seeps out by morning. Were the Gentleman to get to know Stamati, he'd know Stamati is no lawyer. But the Gentleman will never get to know Stamati. The Gentleman continues. Neither Stamati nor anyone else thinks to stop him.

This Swedish freighter had a clever chief officer. He hit upon a way to focus his unsettled crew and vent their wildness: safety drills. Fire, collision, man overboard, abandon ship. Eighteen drills in five days. Eighteen drills, and then the drills were suspended.

Because during the nineteenth drill aboard *Fifth Star*, one of the crew—

"I thought the ship was *Vestalasket*," Stamati interrupts. Not a little haughtily. Like a lawyer, really.

The Gentleman pauses, then resumes, without change in tone or pace. Wave against rock.

During the nineteenth drill aboard *Vestalasket*, someone noticed the missing deckhand. The third officer went to find him. Minutes later, then many minutes later: still no news from the deckhand, and now the third officer was disappeared. It was the

steward who, passing by the captain's cabin, saw the door to the cabin swinging freely and, inside, spied both missing men. On the bed was the captain, on hands and knees, naked. Standing behind him was the deckhand, wearing only pants and shoes and making love to the captain's backside. Standing in front of the captain, but facing away, was the third officer. He was bent over. He rested his forearms on his own thighs, and wore only a shirt, and this shirt was flung up over the back of his bent frame and his neck and part of his head, too. The captain, face buried in the third officer's ass, was sobbing.

Shirt and pants and the nakedness underneath: the three wore the costume of a single man.

Standing and bending and kneeling: the postures of a single man.

Avid, resolute, miserable. His varying heart.

Then there was an American ship that carried molasses from Mobile to Newark.

"You don't have stories about Greek ships?" Tasso interjects, laughing with his whole laundry-bag abdomen.

"You like stories about what you already know?" The Gentleman makes a sound in his throat, as if to clear away the foulness of this inanity. "Everybody raise their hand, they want to hear this man tell a story about shitting and farting. Nobody? What a surprise. What a shock."

Tasso looks around, still laughing. He is too comfortable for humiliation.

THE GENTLEMAN NEVER tells stories about himself. The youngsters need to learn ships, to hear about ships. He doesn't tell them about the roofless jail in Curaçao, the inmate he saw there, hair to his elbows, face half gone from cancer, who maintained very steadily, if you asked him, that he'd been there thirty years.

Or about Osaka, where they sent him to take a wiper and an ordinary to see a doctor. Both had had fever for over a week. Normally the second officer would administer a trip like that. But others on the crew had started fevers two days previously, and the officers, scared of contagion, didn't want to go ashore. It made no sense. If there was contagion, it was aboard the vessel, not in Osaka. But he had some Japanese from years ago, when he'd spent three months on a refurbish crew at Yokohama. They gave him both patients and too much cash and the Osaka agent's phone number and six hours.

They spent most of that time waiting for the doctor. No reception room. Instead they were shown into a tiny outdoor courtyard by a young woman, prim and impassive and sharp- boned, wearing a white pleated skirt. The courtyard was pleasant, in fact. There were flowers everywhere like little sunburned cheeks. It was only after they seated themselves in wicker chairs, when she offered the men a last settling look

before returning to the clinic proper, that the Gentleman realized with a start she was only a girl, nine, maybe eight. By the time they finished at the clinic and took a car to the port, it was dark, and they were half an hour late. Unbelievably, the ship had left without them. The Gentleman would learn later that the captain himself had come down with fever, and suffered in his cabin, and the first officer, wishing not to appear weak, had overcompensated.

Freshly abandoned, the Gentleman knew none of this. The three men went to the lobby of a posh hotel where the Gentleman used the telephone. He called and called and made a point of doing this with exquisite calm. Neither of his shipmates suspected his fury.

The Osaka agent wasn't picking up. The Osaka agent had gone home.

"Let's stay the night," the ordinary joked, surveying the lobby's ceiling.

"No," the Gentleman said. "It wouldn't be right."

They left and the Gentleman brought them in a taxi to a different, still more luxurious hotel. It had glass doors that, from the street, revealed only a kind of heaven-puzzle: honeycombing light, bright shining angles. As they crossed the lobby it was the wiper who observed the pile underfoot was half again as thick as the last hotel's carpet.

One room for one night cost the rest of the cash. The Gentleman slept on the floor.

Neither the wiper nor the ordinary had ever slept in a hotel. Neither spoke as they got carefully in bed, not even to pretend it didn't mean so much.

"SHUT UP, TASSO," Spiro says.

Spiro steals from Ianni, who bunks in the next cabin. Spiro doesn't want anything from Ianni. He wants, more or less, to be Ianni. Or at least to imagine he is, and a comb helps, and a handkerchief.

"Just—let him talk," is what Ianni would say, which is why Spiro says it. Even though Ianni is right there and not saying it.

Tasso snorts. "I'm not stopping anybody from anything."

When the rasp of the Gentleman's fingers against his own cheek is the only sound, he continues.

Two engineers fell into an argument. One of them got hold of a flare gun. He shot the other in the chest. The flare knocked the man over and caromed out over a deck rail. The flare stopped the man's heart. When after a minute the man stirred—his heart started up again—he coughed. Out of his mouth plumed the same dense gray smoke that pours from a lit flare.

On another American molasses ship—Americans have the most stories, America is a story and ants in a dunghill like to make more dung—the chief officer himself

climbed onto the stern rail. As if to leave no doubt that this was not impulse but a considered venture, he perched for a frozen moment on the rail, pressed his hands together over his head like a showboating child, and dove an arc into following waters. For three hours he treaded. He ignored his friends' entreaties to swim closer. He disregarded his superiors' increasingly shrill demands to take hold of each successive rescue device thrown to him. Finally he was retrieved. Asked why for three hours he had appeared to work his hardest not to allow himself rescue, he pointed out that safe operation was the chief mate's responsibility and explained: if he threw himself overboard, with all the shouting and excitement and logistics, nobody else would.

Once a molasses ship docked in evening at Milazzo and could not be unloaded by approved stevedores until two the next afternoon. That night it brought a whole suburb of smell to the port town, a scent of dark intimacy, of treats iced with risk. The air swelled and spread its swirling precipitate of mights and coulds. The smell tendriled out to the water-facing street, and the foothill street behind it. Not once but twice, men from the town tried to get aboard the ship. They were repelled both times, but the second time the men on port watch, addled, nearly beat the intruders to death without especially meaning to.

Men on shore leave from molasses ships report anomalies. They get frank and disproportionate looks. These are not the standard communications of interest: animal slyness, head cants and smiles. These are startled looks, looks of wonder, the kind two people indoors who hear a detonation outdoors give each other to ask, What is happening? Is something happening? In bed the men have the molasses odor sunk into their skin and their lovers beat it out of them with their crotches and pry it out of them with their tongues and try to snatch it out of them with their ten fingers and two nipples and ten toes. They put these flesh parts to prodding and gouging. They are needy like cobra charmers in front of a supper crowd to finally raise a teat of some kind from that stubborn skin, so that they might, must, now, suckle out the rich brown candy broth so obviously on offer.

THEY WANT TO hear about storms. Everybody wants to hear about storms. Let them learn about ships first. Walk before running. Youth thinks it knows things it doesn't know, and this is the same as peril. They know with waves at ten feet the steward wets the tablecloths and at twenty feet the bow watch wears a harness.

They don't know that time in the North Atlantic, winter, when the waves reached thirty feet and nobody could see them. The sky had turned so black it sucked the shine out of the ship's lights. The lamps seemed bits of paint. The wind sheared at the ship, made whistles from its parts, made from these a keening whole. The ship, in short, was screaming.

It was just as the rain started—in great lashing sheets—that the Gentleman saw Dimitri, the ordinary from the eight-to-twelve watch, barely twenty years old, lift off the deck of the ship on a gust of wind, blow over the port rail, and vault into the black.

This is not why the Gentleman remembers. He remembers because of what happened next. After a good half-minute, he heard a scrambling thud on the deck. Like a sack dropped and come undone. It was Dimitri. The storm had spat him and his boy limbs back onto the ship—*but from over the opposite rail.* Two other men saw this.

An hour later Dimitri woke up. He didn't eat much and said nothing, no matter what they asked him. When finally he did speak, he said only one word: *When?* Those who heard it understood it was a question, despite the flat tone.

A day later he was eating well enough the officers decided he didn't need a hospital. Still he said only a single word, in greeting, in response, his only sound: *When?*

Three days later, the captain altered course for the nearest port. Physically Dimitri was the picture of health. But he had them worried, still saying just the one word.

Nobody ever learned if or when Dimitri got out of the hospital, got better, whether he ever returned to the ships or went home to Aegina. It was all speculation. That he was convinced even after tumbling out of the storm, even as he convalesced, that he would soon die, and this is why he asked *When?* That he was ripped out of the intelligible world so viciously, and shoved back so abruptly, that he entirely missed the second part, the part where he returned, and this is why he asked *When?* That a man who, to all appearances, had flown around the world in one piece would know very well, better than the ancients among us and the most profound, that anything was possible, that all was inevitable, that everything that could be fathomed was destined to happen, it was only a matter of time, and so he asked the only question that mattered: *When?*

INSTEAD THE GENTLEMAN says: There are three kinds of ships to which Greek captains give wide berth.

First, dry cargo ships carrying explosive materials or bomb parts. Each of these is a stuck valve away from disaster. None sane loves to share close ocean with them.

Second, Norwegian ships in winter. They carry two cargoes: the stuff in their holds and inebriates. The man at the helm, like as not, will be drunk and unaccountable. His motivations, obscure and fluctuating. There is every reason to steer generously around.

"That's not true," Ianni says.

"Just shut up," Petro says. Petro hates himself and the sound of his own voice. Ianni knows Petro talks only when he is upset.

"He doesn't know what he's talking about," Ianni says, without rancor.

"You're a famous idiot," Petro says.

"Most of the sailors on Norwegian ships aren't even Norwegian."

"What?"

"A quarter of them are Spaniards. From Spain."

"I know where Spaniards come from."

"Most of the rest are Danish and British. Not too many Norwegians on Norwegian ships. Everybody knows."

"You're proving his point."

"What?"

"That's his point. They have to constantly replace the Norwegians. They're always falling overboard. They're drunk, they're wandering into the ocean. Of course they need Spaniards. Just shut up and listen."

Third, molasses ships in summer. Molasses ships in summer are like Norwegian ships in winter. Except drunks are unaccountable in accountable ways, while sugar-mad sailors are unaccountable in unaccountable ways. A Norwegian helmsman in winter will steer straight for a passing vessel. He will overlook the need to do otherwise. A sugar-mad helmsman in summer will steer straight for a passing vessel. He will think it carries his darling.

The Gentleman stops and looks in the faces of the seamen around him. "Don't you see?" he says, with such vigor that it gives him a coughing fit. He goes red in the face, then pales again. "Don't you see?"

"See what?" ask Ianni and Spiro, almost at the same time.

"See what?" asks Stamati, like a third knife.

"Even the lawyer is not so smart," says the Gentleman. Stamati looks exasperated. He never purported to be a lawyer.

"An oil tanker is almost the same as a molasses ship. The cargo is liquid but thick." The Gentleman says this with his eyes closed, nodding. "If the ship moves a little, then the ship moves a lot. And the smell? Well you know, lawyer. You've been on tankers before. The smell is from between the earth's legs. Deep musk. You don't want to smell it and you want to smell it."

The men bend closer. They want to know. They already know. From above they look like a fist closing around a gray wool scrap.

"It's a vapor that catches in your heart. Breathe too much of it and finally you're sure. You don't want to live the next day like the last fifty. You don't want to be anything forever. The world is too big. You want the chance at everything. The lawyer understands."

Stamati does not look like he understands.

"Only the possibility is real, that's what's real," the Gentleman says, then opens his mouth still wider, but with no sound, as if on the brink of pronouncement, but all that

comes out is a stuck winch noise. He's just clearing his throat. He pauses to taste and continues. "It's the possibility we want."

IT WAS BABI, the four-to-eight ordinary, who found him the next morning. The Gentleman had fallen out of bed. No blood or bruise. Just age. He was grasping his bedclothes with both hands. The sheet and wool blanket had slid out of the bed with him. It looked less like he'd fallen out than like he was climbing determinedly back in. As witness, Babi had to do paperwork, along with the chief officer, and so was spared further business with the body.

An hour later, it was Tasso who changed the Gentleman's shoes. He put on the old man's best shoes, which were his other pair. He did this with exquisite calm, so nobody could suspect his grief. He didn't do this to make it easier for Ianni and Spiro to wrap the body in plastic sheeting and place it in the walk-in cooler, but he knew it would. Neither spoke as they walked it carefully to the far end, not even to pretend they weren't surprised at how heavy it carried.

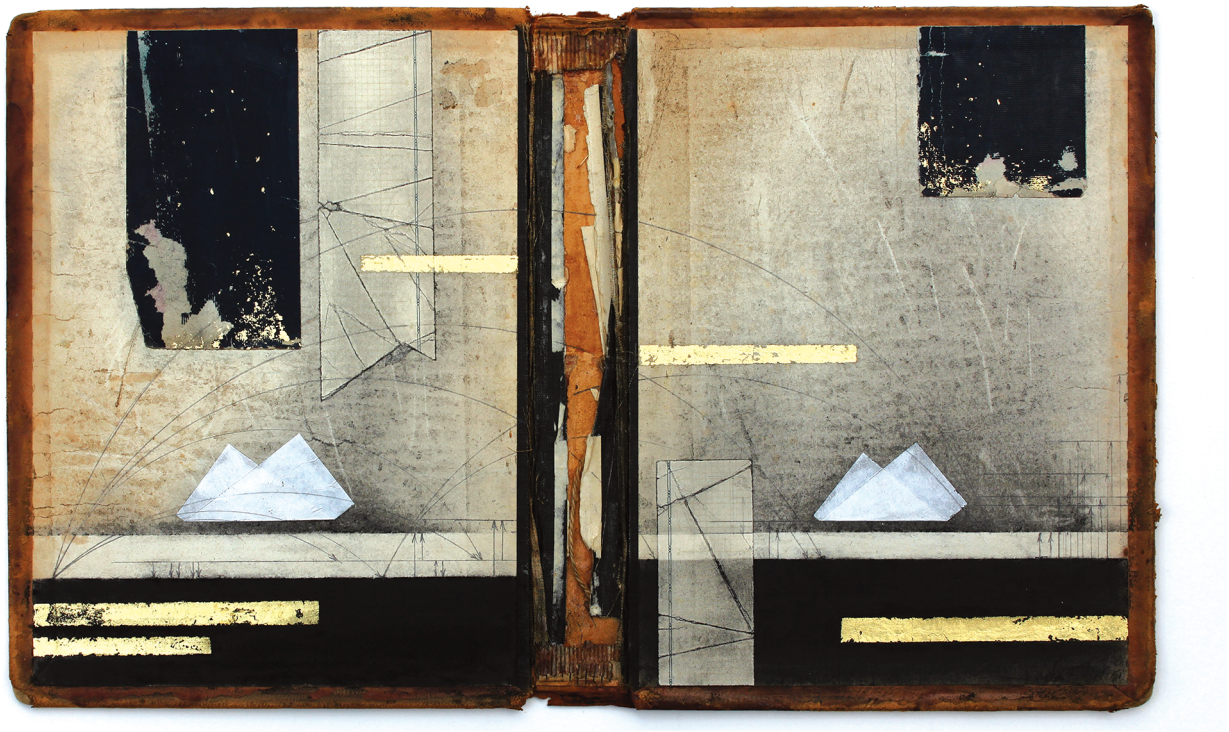
A day later, they had a ceremony. There'd be one in the mountain town in Epirus where the Gentleman's only surviving relative lived, a cousin, after the body was returned. But this was the ship's memorial. The captain was probably the most religious among them and he didn't believe in God. They sang the national anthem. When it was time for anyone to say anything, Petro knew nobody wanted to say small busy things just to say them. But he knew what they all were thinking. The silence didn't get any less impatient, and finally he jutted out his chin and said it: "None of us want to die forgotten. We won't forget him." Someone cleared his throat and mistaking the sound for confusion Petro tried to clarify. "We can't forget each other."

Three days later, they went running to the second officer.

"The old man," one of them choked, out of breath.

They explained, taking turns, blurting over each other, not making sense. Finally Stamati took over and disciplined the message. The body was missing. The body with its plastic sheeting was gone from the cooler. Nobody awake had seen anything. The cook who discovered the blank space in the cooler could not stop crossing himself.

The second officer knew, without having reason to know, there would be nothing to find. But he said it anyway, a single word, a question. . .



PAUL ROORDA. *The Book of Sea and Hope,* 2016.
Antique book cover, vintage paper, charcoal, graphite and gold leaf. 12 inches x 19 inches.

PAUL ROORDA: ARTIST STATEMENT

Falling Sky, Rising Sea is a collection of mixed media works that make reference to skies, icebergs, and ocean horizons. Aging paper, photos, and book covers are used to explore themes of memory and nostalgia but the art is also a warning about the future of our skies and seas. These works evoke the memory of clouds, the lapse of time visible in melting ice and the gradual rise in sea level. Fata morgana, the illusion of distorted horizons visible when warm air moves over cold seas, is an element in the double horizon seen in some of these works and is an apt metaphor for the climate crisis we are anxiously experiencing. This effect is a twisting of reality where inverted, stretched, or floating images appear. Delusion and deterioration are not easily remedied and even the reflective light of gold leaf can't mask the weight of truth in these sobering beautiful horizons.

PAUL ROORDA. *Ice Blink,* 2015.
End papers, gold leaf and chalk. 10.5 inches x 8 inches.

PAUL ROORDA. *Ice Berg II,* 2015.
End papers and gold leaf. 8.5 inches x 6.5 inches.

PAUL ROORDA. *Sky Watch II,* 2014.
Vintage photos, postcards, paper and watch parts. 24 inches x 16 inches.

ADRIEN SEGAL. *Tidal Datum: San Francisco Bay from the Tidal Datum Series*, 2007 (side view).
Walnut and Steel. 26 inches x 32 inches x 72 inches.

ADRIEN SEGAL: ARTIST STATEMENT

Tidal Datum is a series of sculptures that physically capture unseen patterns in the ocean's tides as the sea level rises and falls in a daily and monthly cycle. Twenty-nine consecutive days, or one full lunar cycle, of observed sea level measurements were compiled and translated into a three dimensional time-series, revealing temporal patterns in the tide cycle.* The curves of the daily graphs were translated into flat bar steel, which was bent by hand, and then framed within a wood framework. The first in the series uses data sourced from San Francisco Bay. The series also includes versions with data collected off the coast of Louisiana and from Kachemak Bay, Alaska, which is a permanently installed public artwork suspended above the lobby of the Harbormaster Building in Homer, Alaska.

Tides are caused by the combined influences of the moon's and sun's gravity on the earth and its oceans. In most places on Earth, the tides go in and out every 12.42 hours, a little more than twice daily. The moon takes approximately twenty-nine days to orbit the Earth, thus the tidal cycle repeats monthly. Today's tide measurements are recorded every six minutes with electronic sensors, which are sent via satellite to NOAA headquarters, analyzed, and posted immediately to a public online database where anyone can access real-time tide data.

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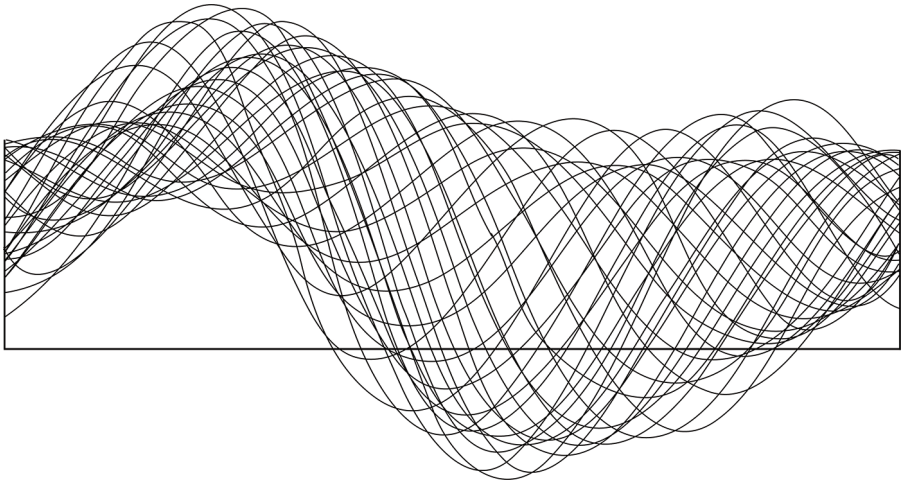
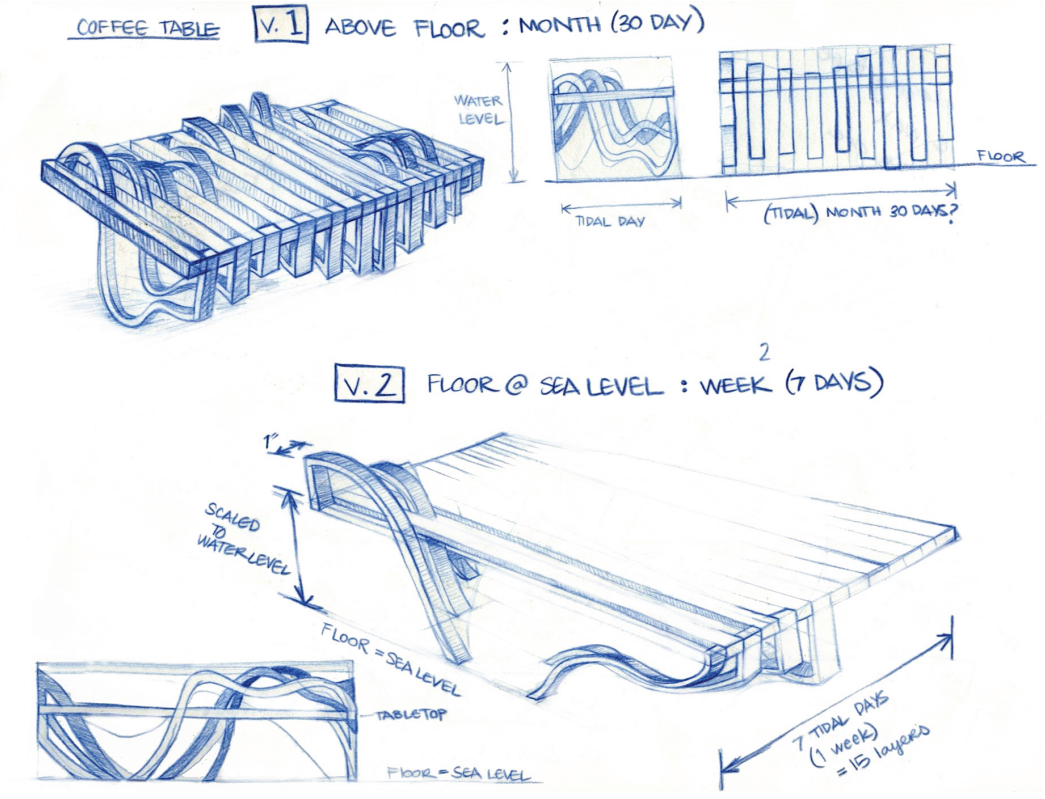
*__Data Source:__ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Historic Tide Database

ADRIEN SEGAL. *Tidal Datum: San Francisco Bay from the Tidal Datum Series*, 2007 (front view).
Walnut and Steel. 26 inches x 32 inches x 72 inches.

The San Francisco Bay tide station is the longest continually operating tide station in the Western Hemisphere.

NOS Station ID 9414290 San Francisco, CA
Dates 4/27/2006–5/24/2006
Established: June 30, 1854
Latitude: 37° 48.4′ N
Longitude: 122° 27.9′ W
Mean Range: 4.09 ft.
Diurnal Range: 5.84 ft.





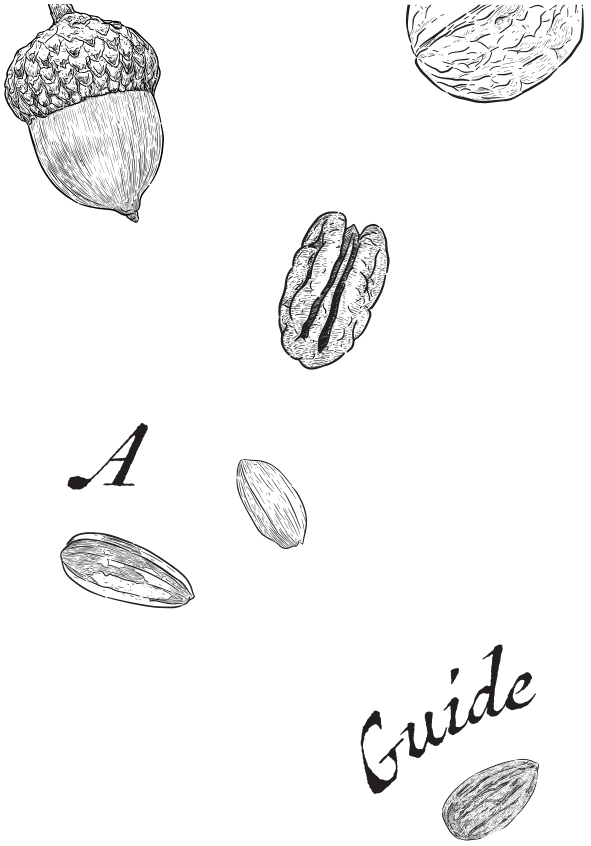
Top: ADRIEN SEGAL. *Tidal Datum: San Francisco Bay from the Tidal Datum Series*, 2007. Illustration of Tide Charts (Twenty-nine days). Digital Drawing. 8 inches x 14 inches.

Bottom: ADRIEN SEGAL. Concept Sketch from the Tidal Datum Series, 2007. Pencil on paper. 8 inches x 10 inches.

ADRIEN SEGAL. *Tidal Datum: Kachemak Bay, Alaska from the Tidal Datum Series*, 2015 (installation view).
Walnut and Steel. 26 inches x 32 inches x 70 inches.

The tidal range in Kachemak Bay is 25 feet, one of the greatest in the world. At the lowest, the water level is 4′ below sea level and 21′ above sea level at its highest.

NOS Station ID 9455500 Seldovia, AK
Dates 05/01/2014–05/30/2014
Established May 24, 1964
Latitude 59° 26.4′ N
Longitude 151° 43.2′ W
Mean Range 15.53 ft.
Diurnal Range 18.04 ft.



A Guide to Removal

AMBER BLAESER-WARDZALA

NO ONE BELIEVED me when I said a squirrel had moved into my room. I had been sitting before my dollhouse, helping Ken and Barbie have a very important conversation about their relationship status. Barbie thought they should see other people. Ken was not pleased.

I heard a thump and turned. Suitcases in hand, a squirrel had walked right into my open window, wearing sunglasses and a baseball hat. He set down one trunk and wiped at his forehead.

"Woo-wee! I'm beat," he said.

He looked over the tops of his sunglasses and scanned the room, his head turning with his eyes.

Then he met my startled gaze and said, "This is my room now."

I set down Ken and Barbie. Their conversation could wait.

I told the squirrel that this was my family's house. My grandfather's and my home. He couldn't just come in and claim my room for himself. He said he could and he would and there was nothing I could do to stop him. I told him I wasn't leaving. He said that was fine for now, but sooner or later, I wasn't going to be able to stand him anymore, and I would leave.

I left my room to find someone who could do something about this invasion. It couldn't be legal for a squirrel to enter a nine-year-old girl's room and tell her it was his now. The dining room and living room were right outside my bedroom. Grandpa and an old man (who referred to me as Cuz whenever he came over and whose name I had not bothered to remember) sat at the table playing cribbage.

I tugged at my grandpa's blue sleeve. "Grandpa, I need you."

He paused in his game but didn't set his cards down. "What is it, sweetie?"

"There's a squirrel in my room. He won't leave. He says it's his room now."

The other guy grinned at me. His teeth were crooked and stained from all the tobacco he chewed. "Is your squirrel's name Christopher Columbus, Cuz?"

Grandpa laughed loud and hard. I didn't understand the joke. I went back into my room and asked the squirrel if that was his name.

"Just Chris," he said.

I returned to the two men. They had resumed their game. I pulled on Grandpa's sleeve again. "He says his name is Just Chris."

"Very cool." He laid down the ace of hearts. "Thirty-one."

"Ah fuck," the other guy said, and Grandpa moved one of his pegs. Grandpa's dog tags jingled against each other as he leaned forward.

"Grandpa, aren't you coming?" How could he be playing games at a time like this?

"Coming where, honey?"

The other man subtly reached for his peg.

"Ay! *Gibichiwebinan*!" Grandpa said and smacked the man's hand. "Stop trying to cheat."

"I wasn't cheating. My peg used to be up there," The Man Whose Name I Didn't Remember said.

"*Gagiinawishki*," Grandpa said. "You are always lying."

"To kick Just Chris out of my room," I said.

"Sweetie," Grandpa turned to look at me, patting my cheek, "Grandpa is busy with his friend. How about you go play with Just Chris and I'll play with you later? How does Crazy Eights sound? And I'll make tacos for dinner, okay?"

"But Grandpa, I don't want to play with Just Chris. I want you to make him go away."

But my grandpa wasn't listening anymore. I tried a few more times to get his attention, but every time, Grandpa told me he was busy. He tugged one of my braided pigtails and told me to run along. He even handed me a deformed caramel from his back pants pocket, but he never followed me to evict the invader.

Finally, I gave up, went back to my room, and shut the door. Just Chris was unpacking. His suitcases brimmed with acorns, black walnuts, and hickory nuts. He was running around the room on all fours hiding the nuts and saying, "Oh boy, oh boy!" over and over again.

I went to my dollhouse and resumed Barbie and Ken's conversation, trying to ignore Just Chris.

When he finished unpacking, Just Chris came over, took his hat and sunglasses off, pushed one of my Barbies out of her bed, and lay down in it instead, pulling the quilt up to his chin. He grinned at me. "Hope you aren't a light sleeper," he said. "I'm a bit of a snorer."

A WEEK WITH this roommate squirrel went by. I tried to make it work. I was a good roommate, cleaning up after myself, turning off the overhead light when Just Chris went to sleep, trying to keep the noise down when Just Chris had work to do. I even shared my trail mix with him. After all, I didn't know what he had gone through before he came here. There must have been something that happened that made him decide to invade my bedroom.

But despite my efforts, Just Chris was a horrible roommate. With every nice act I did for him, he seemed more determined than before to have the room to himself. He got up early in the morning and turned on all the lights. He left empty shells of nuts everywhere. He invited birds and other squirrels over when I was trying to do my homework.

Worst of all, Just Chris had a hoarding problem.

The two squirrel-sized suitcases of nuts were fine, but soon he got more. And more. And he stored them *everywhere*. In my shoes, in my clothes, in my drawers, in my bed, in my pillowcase. When he ran out of room everywhere else, he began to rip open my stuffed animals and replace the stuffing with nuts.

"Enough!" I yelled one day after I discovered my favorite stuffed horse maimed, her innards decorating the floor. I sat down on my bed, hugging her to my chest. "Enough already, Just Chris! I was here first. You can't just treat me and my things this way."

He sat on Barbie's couch, watching her TV while he ate some of his nuts.

"If you hate our living arrangement so much," he said, "just leave."

"I'm only nine years old. I can't just leave, Just Chris."

"For the last time, it's just Chris."

"That's what I said: Just Chris."

"Christ, I hate kids."

He sounded like how my mom's husband used to when he said that. Their noses scrunched up in the same way when they looked at me too. All Just Chris needed was a family size bag of chips between his legs and seven empty cans of beer at his feet.

There was a knock on my door then. Just Chris beelined it under my bed, pulling the bed skirt so low that even his paws weren't visible. The door opened, and Grandpa stuck his head in.

"Hey, sweetie, Grandpa's going to head down to Alan's with his friend for a bit."

I looked at my alarm clock. "Grandpa, its only two."

"Dinner's in the fridge." I don't know if he didn't hear me or if he just pretended not to.

He began to close the door.

"Wait, Grandpa!"

He stopped. "Yes?"

"When's Mom coming home?"

He looked to his scuffed-up work boots. "Oh, in a couple of days."

He'd said the same thing last week. And the week before.

"I won't be out too late," he said. "My friend just owes me a few beers. If you really need me, just call Alan's and ask the bartender for me, got it?"

I nodded. Grandpa came into the room and kissed me on the forehead. "When I get back, you, me, and your new friend, Just Chris, can play some Go Fish."

I stared at my hands clenching the faded quilt and nodded again.

Grandpa shut the door, and I went back to my dollhouse. Just Chris came out of hiding, a big grin on his face.

"Ho-wah! All this time, I really believed you when you said that your family would do something about me if they found out I existed, but you've just been telling lies, eh?"

I picked up Barbie and began to change her shoes. "Shut up."

Just Chris chuckled as he plopped down onto Barbie's bed. "You're a convincing liar, I got to say. I never would have suspected your grandpa was a drunk and your parents had high-tailed it out of here."

My eyes welled up. I dropped Barbie and stood. I grabbed my backpack and shoved my long hair into my baseball cap.

"Where you going, kid? Going to go cry to Mommy about the mean old squirrel in your room?"

I whirled around. "*Awas*! Go away!"

Just Chris popped part of a nut into his mouth. "I'm not going anywhere."

I ran out of the house, stuffing my feet into my too small tennis shoes and grabbing a fall jacket on my way to the front yard. When I got outside, I looked up at my open window. Just Chris stood on the windowsill, laughing.

"Told you the time would come when you couldn't stand me anymore," he said and slammed the window shut.

I STARTED SLEEPING on the couch after that, going into my room only when I needed a change of clothes. Grandpa asked me after the first few nights why I wasn't sleeping in my bed. I told him it was because of Christopher Columbus. He nodded knowingly and didn't question me again or try to make me move back into my bedroom. Dropping the double C name in our family was a logical excuse for any form of behavior. That's what Mom always used to say after she and my step father would get into a fight, when she was picking the broken pieces of glass off the floor or applying salve to a new black eye. Our faces took turns housing his anger. Only my face ever housed hers.

I thought my relocation would be the end of things. I moved to the living room, and Just Chris got my bedroom. I thought the problem was solved. It wasn't.

"I need more space for my nuts," Just Chris told me one day when I went into the bedroom to grab new clothes.

"You have my entire bedroom," I said as I picked out a pair of black moccasins and a t-shirt that said Canada on the front.

"It's not enough space anymore. Winter is coming, and I need to stock up. I've already used all the hiding places in your room. I'm going to need the rest of the house too."

"Absolutely not. Where would Grandpa and I live?"

Just Chris rubbed his chin. "Alright, a hard negotiator now, I see. What about this? You two move into the basement. It's too damp for my nuts—they would end up rotting. Besides, there's enough space for the both of you down there."

"No, Just Chris. Grandpa and I aren't moving into the basement."

Just Chris hopped up onto the bedpost. He looked me in the eye. I took a step back, wanting more space between me and the squirrel. My stuffed horse, before she had been ripped apart, held more emotion, more soul in her eyes than could be found in Just Chris's.

"Here's the thing, kid: I wasn't asking."

I left my room, t-shirt and moccasins forgotten. I rushed to the kitchen where Grandpa was singing to himself as he made scrambled eggs.

"Grandpa," I said, "we have to move into the basement."

He glanced at me, still stirring the eggs. "What, sweetie?"

"We have to move into the basement. Just Chris needs this level of the house to store his nuts for winter."

He set down the spatula and turned to face me, arms crossed. "What are you talking about?"

"Just Chris says my room isn't enough space for his nuts anymore. He says he needs this level of the house, but that we can have the basement since it's too damp for his nuts anyways."

"You sure your friend's name isn't Jackson?" He chuckled to himself.

"Grandpa, this is serious. We need to move."

"Go tell Just Chris that his request has been denied." Grandpa turned back to the stove.

"But, Grandpa, he isn't asking."

"Set the table, *noozhishenh*," he said over his shoulder. "Breakfast is almost done."

I scurried back to my room. Just Chris was lying on my bed, flipping through a magazine. At my entrance, he sat up. "You come to pack your things?"

I shook my head. "Grandpa told me to tell you that he refuses to move into the basement."

"Well, prepare for war, kid."

JUST CHRIS'S RETALIATION started small. Surprisingly so. A nut or two here and there. Grandpa chalked it up to a spirit or to his own drunken self. I stayed quiet. He wouldn't have believed me if I told him it was Just Chris. It wasn't bad as far as wars go, especially compared to the stories Grandpa had told me of the last war he had been in. Would I earn my own dog tags once this war ended? I started to relax. I could live with this. My mind moved on to other things.

A while later, I woke up one night to find Grandpa leaning over me, smelling of whiskey and cigars. He was trying to kiss my cheek but kept missing.

It took him a moment to notice my open eyes staring at him.

"Did I wake you?" His words slurred together.

I nodded.

He pushed some of my hair out of my face. "You know Grandpa loves you, right?"

I nodded again. He chuckled, exhaling a puff of rancid breath into my face. I stifled a cough.

"I'm sorry about your mom, kid."

"It's okay," I said. It wasn't, but Grandpa had that sad drunk look. His hands dug in his pockets searching for a caramel to give me, but all he found was an acorn.

Grandpa sat down heavily at my feet. "Sometimes Grandpa has to blow off some steam at Alan's. Do you understand?"

I pulled my blanket up to cover everything below my eyes.

"It ain't her fault. It ain't none of our faults. After five centuries of shit, how are we expected to act like everything's alright?" Grandpa pulled out his lighter and tried to light a cigar that wasn't in his mouth. "I get it though. Sometimes I wanna take off too. Sometimes I want to head to some place sunny and never look back. Just keep driving and driving until I drive so far no one's ever heard of Indians. You know? Some place where I could start fresh and forget everything. Forget colonization. Forget my little brother and sister who died in the boarding schools. Forget *all* our absent relatives. Wishful thinking, I know."

Grandpa sighed and pushed himself to his feet, swaying slightly. "I'm gonna hit the hay. See you in the morning, sweetie."

He stumbled toward his bedroom.

"Grandpa!" I called.

He turned, using his door frame for support. "Yeah, honey?"

"Mom's not coming back, is she?"

There was a long moment of silence, the creaking of the floorboards under his swaying body the only sound.

"No," he said into that silence. "I don't think she will."

He walked into his room and shut the door behind him. It echoed in my mind like a phone with a bad connection. I turned over on my side and blinked rapidly to hold back the tears.

I heard a loud bang and Grandpa yelled, "What the fuck is this?"

The door slammed open, and he came storming out. "Young lady, why is my bed filled with nuts?"

I sat up, eyes wide. "It wasn't me! It was Just Chris!"

Grandpa stared at me. "Are you insane or just lying to me?"

"No, I promise, Grandpa. It's like I've been trying to tell you. Some squirrel just showed up out of nowhere and claimed my room. For himself and his nuts. That's why I've been sleeping on the couch."

Grandpa stared at me for a long time, his eyebrows low. When he spoke, he only said, "I'll deal with this in the morning." The door shut behind him, and I turned on my side, wondering: me or the squirrel?

THE NEXT DAY, Grandpa went down to the local hardware store. When he came home, he set up traps all throughout the house. I sat at the kitchen table, my feet

swinging some inches above the ground. Grandpa had brought out the colored markers and pieces of paper and told me to draw him a picture, but I was having a hard time concentrating on that.

When Grandpa finished setting out the traps, he looked me dead in the eyes and said, "You better not be lying about this squirrel."

"I'm not."

He sat down across from me and pulled out a deck of cards from his back pocket. "Want to play something?"

I nodded, taking the cards from his hands and shuffling them.

It was while we were playing our fourth hand of rummy that we heard a metal clang and a loud, angry scream. I jumped. Grandpa coughed violently, his coffee having gone down the wrong pipe. I set down my cards and crept to the kitchen door, peeking around the corner.

Just Chris sat in the live trap, wearing his Indians cap and looking livid.

He jumped to his feet when he saw me. He grabbed the bars with his little paws. "Let me out of here *right now*, kid! You have no idea who you're dealing with."

I felt a hand on my shoulder and looked up. Grandpa chuckled.

"So this is the infamous Just Chris." Grandpa walked over to the cage and bent down to get a good look.

"My name is Chris, just *Chris*!" Just Chris said and stomped his foot.

Grandpa looked back to where I hovered in the doorway. "I'm sorry," he said.

I looked down, traced a pattern in the tile with my right toe. Grandpa picked up the trap.

"What are you gonna do with him, Grandpa?"

"I'll take him for a ride in the truck and drop him somewhere far away from here."

"You may have won this battle," Just Chris screamed, "but I'll win the war!

Grandpa grabbed his keys from the counter and kissed me on the forehead. "Be back soon, okay?"

I went to the kitchen window and watched Grandpa get in his truck. My hand brushed an acorn on the windowsill. I picked it up as Grandpa slammed the truck door. I rolled it between my fingers.

I heard Grandpa pull out of the driveway as I walked to the trash can and dropped the acorn in. It clanged against something, the only noise in the silent and empty house. I peered in and saw it nestled between Grandpa's empty beer cans like a mother and a child cuddled together. . .

ELIZABETH TERVO

The House is Empty Because People are Beginning to Dare

The chickens are wandering home
up the grassy road as if they own it.
Don't you like my garden and my trees?
I have the man trim them the way I like
so the shadows fall in sharp leafy pancakes
on the white walls of the empty house.
Everyone has gone down to the demonstration.

Chickens come home expecting corn and a dry coop.
A car could come down the road at any moment,
but chickens don't care. They can fly.

People expect to come home too,
and they will today,
to a warm house and dinner,
and I'll have it ready for them,
but that is because the soldiers have no orders yet.
Tomorrow they will have orders.

I know the cause is right but I won't go down today.
I'll be here, catching the last sunbreak before the storm.

CATHERINE MARENGHI

Crickets

They huddle under the door jam,
where it's moist and dark.
They think it's night. Wings ridged
like baby teeth rub together. Shrill
echoes skitter across the tile floors,
the male cricket's wolf whistle
to his soft-spoken mate.

The chirping lifts my stucco house
from its foundation, carries it over
the Gulf of Mexico, as if borne
by the blessed Virgin of Loreto,
northward to Massachusetts,
backward in time, plunking it down
by the muddy frog pond of St. Mary's,
rank primordial swamp that brewed
life as I first witnessed it:
dragonflies with glass wings, big-headed
tadpoles finding their first feet, water lilies
floating like long-tentacled jellyfish, and
always, as the evening fell, that chipper
cricket mating call.

I wade across my living room
knee-deep in memory, slick as mud.
The years fall away like dew-covered
spiderwebs in my path.

PAUL FELSCH

The Burros at Orthwein Farm

Burr-clung, foul smelling, mud-caked,
they are my morning walk's version
of Yeats' *mysterious, beautiful* swans.
Nothing special about these creatures
of pure domesticity and utility,
just a gray-brown, homogenous mass
that today has moseyed right up
to the wooden fence near the roadside.
There's the sound of an occasional bray,
but mostly, it's the munching of dull,
square teeth upon still-dewy grass.
Had Yeats treaded this same stretch
of road like my German Shepherd and I,
I doubt he would have bothered
to count them, though they are
far less than *nine-and-fifty*. But when one
pokes its pulsing snout through
the rails and sniffs my Shepherd's,
and when I offer a flat palm of grass,
my palm whiskered, teethed, and lipped
by a cluster's frenzied appetite, I think
how wonderful that they're right here,
and the rails are just wide enough
for their huddled heads and my foolish hand.
I watch another group slip through
a narrow, wooded neck to the more
private part of the farm now;
more follow suit. They *wander*
where they will, leaving behind
hoofed-down, half-grazed-upon grass
that, when the noon sun dries it
and it springs back up, will seem
as if nothing were ever here.

ABBIE KIEFER

On *Anne of Green Gables*, Matthew Collapses in the Pasture

and Anne rings herself
around him as the score becomes
swollen as the camera slips
skyward

  making certain you know
Matthew is gone
  his Holsteins still
grazing
  still needing
someone to bring them back
to the barn.
  Now cut
to the pledge drive
  the host pressing
her request. She promises
you can keep what you love
  on the air. She promises

to send you the mug that says
Member.
  Your hands could circle
its circumference
  the way Anne curves a palm
to Gilbert's arm as they walk

until he galls her and she stalks
toward home puff sleeves shaking
like a maritime squall
  Gilbert's mouth rounding
a remorse
  hollering his sorrys
the Canadian way

so they sound like *orbit*
like *moat*
  they sound like *of course*
when you call for the mug when you
ask them to send it
soon as they can.

DEVON MILLER-DUGGAN

Perhaps a Prayer for Surviving the Night

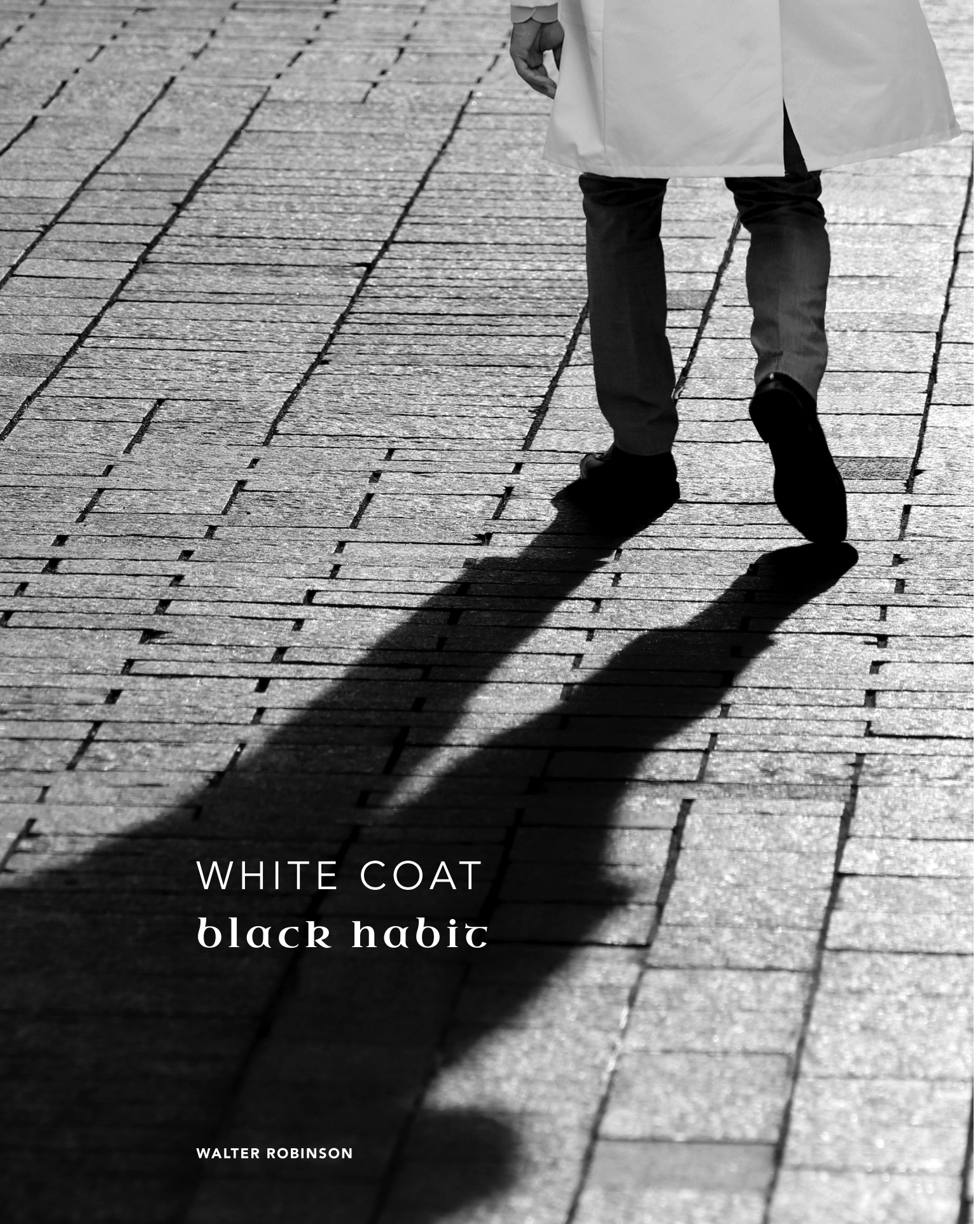
In the story, I would be Janet, king's daughter, and
if the dark grew thorns and petals, became a wall of roses
only my human-bright love could walk among, I'd bloody my hands
stealing roses too dark to see. I'd make a story of it—

choose the roses and the sacrifice, choose the mortal knight,
the same any Faerie Queen had chosen for her harvest and
her hunt at the turning of the year toward night. I'd choose
to pull him from his horse as he rode toward his earth.

I'd choose to hold the snake, the venom, he became. Choose to hold
the lion, the pitiless teeth he became. Choose to wrap his nakedness
in my black cloak and blood-hunger so the Huntress Queen could see only me, and
in her anger turn me to a tree, then all the darkness in my roots and bark

might crown, running upward toward light and leafing, breathing
sugaring the air, as the almost-born crown between their mothers' bones.
And even my breathing would have purpose, even my balsam-pinyon-loblolly breath
would scatter darkness and death away or learn to feed on them.

All my landscapes end, and where they end, no air or faces, no tastes
or forgivenesses of sleep—only the blood of those I love
and an unstarred endlessness which smells of rain-on-ashes. If this
is the garden of black roses, then these are my thorns.



WHITE COAT
black habit

WALTER ROBINSON

I am defeated by the smell of blood

In the last hour of the day in a coal mine ten miles out of town, a top-mounted conveyor caught a man between the belt and the roof of the mineshaft, scraping his body along the jagged seam. Only his helmet kept the machine from crushing his skull. Someone shut off the diesel engine and pulled him from the mechanism and someone else got him to the surface, his moans echoing through the shaft.

The EMTs rolled him into the ER on a narrow stretcher and placed him on a trauma bed set like an altar in the middle of the treatment room. The nurse put EKG leads on his chest and an IV catheter in his left arm, checked his pulse and pupils. Only once she was sure he was stable did she begin to peel off the dressings around his chest. A wave of blood crested onto his plaid shirt; she clamped a thick white bandage over the wound and called for the doctor, "Hey, back here, *now*."

I was a twenty-three-year-old volunteer in the ER, one year before starting medical school. I stood uselessly outside the door of the treatment room. The stench of so much blood, the stained clothes, and the low moans of the miner collided against me. I felt as if my head were lifting off my neck and floating over me; the hallway seemed to jerk sideways and spin forward. The ceiling lights narrowed into a spiky cone surrounded by inky dark. I could feel my feet inside my socks.

I sat down heavily on a low metal stool, my head in my hands.

I thought: *Do not fall over. Do not pass out.*

I thought: *Do not make a fool of yourself.*

I thought: *You will never survive as a doctor.*

I see the molecules of God

When I was seven, I could see round circles of shining gold filling the bars of the cross behind the altar at our church, forty-eight perfect circles aligned in hollow rows. I thought they were the building blocks of holiness. God was made of golden molecules, divinely symmetric, glowing above my head. I could not get the cross and the circles in focus all at once. The cross floated in front of the wall behind the altar and I thought the molecules of God's holiness held the cross in place. I had no choice but to gaze at God's solid, inexplicable presence, the buoyant proof of living divinity.

I didn't take Jesus very seriously. He was a pale man in a pastel bathrobe on a filmstrip and we only saw him in Sunday School. Jesus smelled too much like paste to be a serious part of the divine world. He was full of advice, but all the men in my childhood were full of advice, none of which I could follow: *Keep your eyes on the ball, keep your sights set on target, don't think too hard, don't be so sensitive*. Golden molecules of God made more sense than any of that. Jesus said Drink ye all of this, and I thought he meant that you had to drink the whole cup of wine at once, which no one seemed to do, and anyway this command sounded like Jesus telling us to clean our plates.

What I loved when I was a boy was the language of the service, the *Thee* and *Thou* and the rhythm of the words, but especially the sameness of the words every week. Morning Prayer was the first play I ever learned by heart. As I got older, like everyone who has seen a play over and over, I became a connoisseur and critic of the performance. I could tell when the minister said the words with hesitation or added

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I wanted to have the words of the prayers flow out of me, come forth as if commanded, so that I could feel their meaning, even if I did not understand them all. The words were a script for talking to God, and I wanted to get my lines right.

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some new inflection. I cringed when he didn't have the right solemnity in his voice. I thought of the service as poetry. The only poet I knew was A.A. Milne, and I was a great reader aloud of his poetry. I won a prize for poetry recitation every year from first grade until fifth, except in sixth grade when I wanted to recite a poem by Robert Service about how Adam did not have a bellybutton, but was not allowed because it might confuse the children in the lower grades. If I hadn't read the poems just so, I wouldn't have won the prizes, would I?

These words were written down centuries before I was born, and if the words were said out of turn or in the wrong tone of voice then the holiness might not descend. If we didn't get it just right, the golden circles might just be metal, and the church might be just a big room, and Sunday morning might be nothing special.

I practiced not needing the prayer book, because I thought God would want me to know his words by heart. I criticized those adults who still used the book, including my father and mother, and hoped that God would have patience with them for not studying enough. I wanted to have the words of the prayers flow out of me, come forth as if commanded, so that I could feel their meaning, even if I did not understand them all. The words were a script for talking to God, and I wanted to get my lines right.

I cut open my first patient

In the dissection room, a week into my first year of medical school, I surprised myself by being unmoved by the proximity of twelve dead human beings. After that first

evening in the ER I was never truly squeamish again. Dissection didn't bother me at all. Gloved-up and holding a new scalpel in my right hand, I made a line straight down the sternum and then laterally across the top of the chest near the collarbones—I had not yet learned to call them *clavicles*. I peeled back the cool gray skin to reveal the thin flap of muscle called the *platysma,* a word that even now sounds perfect in my mouth, the second syllable emphasized in the same manner as *epiphany*.

True, the smell was bad, and it seemed to cling to me. The perfume of formaldehyde lived inside my nostrils and sometimes I thought I smelled preservative every time I blinked. But the senses exhaust themselves, and a few breaths on entering the room each day were all it took to no longer notice the reek while I worked on the body.

Our cadaver was a large bald man with a body shaped like mine is today, flabby and round. He was hairless except for his groin. I am anything but hairless, so I will be the polar bear to his walrus, if they still do human dissections by the time I am a candidate. There will be one other difference: our cadaver's eyes were empty sockets, cotton balls with white flame-like wisps licking the air through his eyelids, his corneas harvested to give sight to someone still living. My incipient cataracts will ensure that medical students will be able to look right into the windows of my soul, should they feel the need.

To cut open a stranger's dead body you have turn off your imagination. You have to refuse to ponder the indignity of death. You have to focus on the usefulness of the human husk. What once was a person is now a lesson plan. You hope to benefit people you have not met. Your cadaver is your first patient, and you are not yet a doctor. I spent a lot of time picking globs of fat away from something I thought was the vagus nerve, only to discover that I had been carefully uncovering a strand of connective tissue so irrelevant as to be nameless in the textbooks. Near the end of the months of dissection the body looks very much worse for wear, usually cut in half through the spinal cord so that the different student teams can work on the upper and lower body at once. You discard all the organs and tissues already examined, so that the body shrinks each week, and what is left falls apart in your hands, shredded as it is by all the poking and prying of your tools.

I was solid now, fearful of failing but not of fainting. I had come to understand how to distance myself from my imagination. I began to reconfigure frailty into curable sickness. I was learning to see people as bodies.

I put on the white coat

Before the third year of medical school, students buy their first white coat. We had to be sure to buy the right sort of coat because the hierarchy of the hospital was based on the length of the white coat. Woe be unto anyone who wore the wrong length coat. Students and residents wore the shortest ones, the length of a sports coat, but often

short-sleeved because of the heat; the fellows, one step closer to divinity, wore coats that descended to just above the knee. The attending physicians, the walking gods, had coats that fell below the knee and were spotless, made of a thicker cotton and washed-starched-pressed to a stiff sheen for them by the hospital laundry. Their names were embroidered in red cursive above the left breast pocket as proof of their magisterial rank.

Medical students' coats were made of thin cotton bleached hard white, and had large flapless pockets on both sides, as well as a large breast pocket for pens and the ubiquitous eye chart with a ruler on the side that every student carried but never used except when the attending wanted to prove to you that your measurement of a wound edge was imprecise. We always needed a pen or two, because as medical students we weren't really allowed to do much other than write things down, and no one lends a medical student a pen in the hospital.

In their coat pockets, the residents carried paper sheets folded lengthwise and sticking up under the arm of the coat; these were their sign-out sheets for all the patients on the ward. The residents would recite from them during the liturgy of morning report with the sing-song efficiency used by doctors to talk to one another about the bodies under their care. A fellow's coat held similar lists, but the fellows were expected to memorize their patient lists and use sheets on rounds only, to check on obscure lab values. If the information was important, they should know it by heart. Nothing graced the pockets of an attending's coat, not paper, not a pen; their coat pockets were often still starched closed. If they needed something, it would be handed to them.

On the left sleeve of our white coats, just below the shoulder seam, we were instructed to sew a blue square with the name of the medical school on it in small letters. The school made it clear that it was a matter of ethics: we must have that patch to identify us to everyone as not-yet-a-real-doctor. Of course, no patient could see that patch, nor would anyone who was sick take the time or effort to read the finely sewn script lettering. We were doctors as far as the patients knew, but peons to anyone who mattered.

I consider the black habit

I became a doctor, and twenty years later, I wanted to become a monk as well. I wanted to put on the black habit and white rope belt of The Society of St. John the Evangelist, an Episcopalian order. About fifteen monks lived in the monastery. For one year, every day before going to work at the hospital, I went to the Morning Prayer service at the monastery. Outsiders like me could come to the monks' services and sit to the side of the central aisle. We spoke and sang the service together, although I mumbled in exhaustion some mornings.

I wanted to join the monks because in their presence I thought I could speak to something like God. I wanted to leave the relentlessly contemporary language of medicine for half an hour and rest inside the solemn vocabulary of my childhood. It was a relief to return to the Book of Common Prayer.

The yearly cycle of the Psalms turned upon a wheel forged by certainty about human nature. During one week, the monks and I begged a vengeful God to smite our heathen enemies in ways too terrible to say aloud: leave them yowling in pits of oily despair, rend their limbs, break their ungodly teeth, cover them with running sores and pinching pains. Through the Psalms I might delight in the suffering of the ungodly and join my voice to others in the expectation that He might hound them trembling from their strongholds and cast them like dirt into the streets.

In the following week the monks and I might leave off calling down plagues and instead chant our frustration at our human smallness, at the drudgery of being in a life "waxen old with heaviness." The next month we would sing about how hard it is, and how glorious, to see the mystery of the heavens from our pitiful vantage in this

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I thought I had found the words to show me the golden molecules again. I returned to the monastery each morning like an addict.

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ordinary world. Later we would wonder at the heavy burden of faith, how poorly we are equipped to shoulder it, and how often we stumble under the weight. A few months later we would speak all week only of waiting in fervent patience for the solace of a God who might provide something so rare and wonderful that it required its own compound word: "loving-kindness."

I heard these verses with new ears, spoke them with a voice grown tired, and wrapped up my soul in the new opportunity to understand myself. I thought I had found the words to show me the golden molecules again. I returned to the monastery each morning like an addict.

I think I am a perfect candidate

The Psalms we chanted at the monastery knew the seduction of vengeance. They knew that all of us have at some point wished a boss, a bomber, a professor, a colleague, or a parent to be cast down by a vengeful God into a fiery pit of damnation so that we, the righteous, might finally triumph. The Psalms know that sometimes we are children

who send prayers like wishes up to a Santa Claus figure in the sky, and that at other times we humans talk to God with "the honesty of a drunk," as Anne Sexton wrote, giving the Almighty the what-for and telling him how to run the universe.

That year at Morning Prayer I needed to say my human desires out loud instead of putting them privately into the lap of a therapist. I wanted to announce my nature under the cover of anonymity in a vaulted stone room with strangers in black robes. All of us rage against our enemies, and it seemed to me better to admit this in unison using the beautiful and strange words of a few centuries ago than to imagine that my sufferings were unique. Reading the words of the Psalms in a small dark church with fifteen other men reminded me how foolish it was to think that the solutions to human suffering are simply a matter of better laws and more justice, better diagnoses and stronger treatments. Our suffering is part of us. My suffering is part of me. The Psalms join me to my species, bringing me into the fold of humanity, if not the fold of believers. I could hear the past and the present in the voices of these men in robes and rope belts. I could join them entreating the most powerful thing into the universe to come down here, reward me for my faithfulness and honor, revenge my wrongs, give me solace. It didn't seem delusional to wish that my smallness had a purpose beyond the turning of the days. I knew there was no being in the sky, no power above me, nothing supernatural that has a consciousness to which I might matter, nothing that will or could come to my punishment or rescue. But I wished there were.

I was tired when I was forty-three, and I felt lost in the middle of my work and life. The marks of success I had gained had meaning only for themselves: research grants that would lead to publications that would lead to more grants that would lead to

Our suffering is part of us. My suffering is part of me. The Psalms join me to my species, bringing me into the fold of humanity, if not the fold of believers.

promotions I didn't care about. I was tired of working so hard to make all this matter to me with the same fervor that it mattered to everyone else.

The reasons I became a doctor seemed to me then to be a mix of selfishness and suspect altruism. I had wanted to make the world a better place but also I had wanted an escape from myself. I had wanted to join a group dedicated to serving an unbidden

self-sacrifice, but I also wanted to put on a cloak of respectability every morning in order to justify my own fragility, fears, and inadequacies. Medicine could be a sword for the sick and a shield for myself. But by that time I had realized the dullness of my sword against the suffering of others.

Becoming a monk seemed to offer what I wanted then, a life free of the noise of the world so that I could hear myself in the echo of days. In the dim light of winter mornings, I called upon God, knowing I was only asking myself to let the disheartened residue of living flow out of my mouth and into the air. The monks offered more than just religion. Their lives seemed to embrace the combination of solitude and union I craved. At prayer they did not pause to shake hands with the other people in the pews, as so many services do. I imagined that, like me, they didn't think of peace as something passed from man to man by a scheduled gesture. Peace worth having is elusive; it hides from workaday politeness. I thought I felt it in the rests and repeats of those morning services.

I depended on the power of the monks' voices to free me from the burden of being alone in the world, and most days it worked. After a few minutes I could let go of the fact that I didn't have any real enemies and didn't believe in a Being in The Sky. I saw the power of collective language to remind ourselves that solace can still arise from shared invocation. I had no real idea what the monks thought or felt, no idea whether they said the words in the grip of nothing greater than wilted habit or if, like me, the words were searing themselves into their hearts as soon as they left their mouths. I never asked; I did not want to hear the answer.

When I was forty-three, I was a perfect monastic candidate: single, no attachments, debt-free and in need of humility. The three monastic vows didn't really worry me. I thought I would have no problem with chastity, because desire had not turned out well; it would be a relief to be rid of it. I could get used to their comfortable version of poverty; the monastery was beautiful, on a river in a cultured city. I wasn't so sure about obedience. "Obedience," as one of the monks put it to me, "is a bitch."

I wrote a letter to the brother in charge of the novices, Brother Jonathan, about my thoughts of becoming a monk.

> *"I have thought deeply about why I am drawn to caring for children and families for whom there is no cure. I used to say to myself (and to others when asked) that I could do this work because I believed in Heaven, but this just does not explain it, and anyway, I am not so sure of Heaven. What seems special or important is my sometime ability simply to watch and wait, a 'sometime ability' because it is not easy or always possible for me. Even the apostles in Gethsemane cannot wait with Jesus; they want to fight, to raise swords against the approach of death, but when only their presence*

which is requested, they fall asleep. Later, only John and Mary can wait at the foot of the cross—how hard this must have been, how easy it would have been to give in to their despair and make their waiting into a story about themselves instead of about the one who is suffering. This sometime ability to wait with my patients and their families is a gift from a giver who I need to search for, someone I need to know, though I am wary of the pride which lurks behind the sense of being given a gift, wary of thinking that I am special.

I am trying to understand how God figures in my work. I suppose I started noticing the change at the funerals—when I sat there, in church for the first time in years, I began to remember what being in church felt like, and to remember with my heart being in the presence of something or someone greater and larger. I think this something greater is God. I have started going to church again, but it is hard, and I admit it unnerves me. Now often in church I am so moved, so full of something I cannot put words to, that I find myself with tears on my face, my heart so full it feels like it will leave my chest. It is a hard and powerful feeling, not a "feel good" feeling. It is not joy, nor is it happiness, but a sense of the nearness of something strong, a connection which I cannot describe clearly.

So why think of being a monk? I am no Merton. I am touched (but I want to write "refreshed" instead) by your Rule: "We will recognize that the concern with individualistic fulfillment and private security that prevails in our culture is a trap from which we are being set free." And "We also need to let go of any grasping for immediate results; much of what the grace of God achieves through us will be entirely hidden from our eyes."

I can see now that the release from expectation was part of the lure of the monastery. The monks knew that we cannot add to the good of the world without work and struggle, but they had decided to struggle together in a way foreign to the world of the doctor. They wanted to share the work and never take credit individually for the things that happened by the grace of something more powerful than any one of them. The monks knew that fate or something like it ruled the course of lives.

I sit in silence and make a decision

I spent a week at the monastery with a group who were also thinking about becoming monks, going to service five times a day and eating together in the big refectory, listening to one of the monks read a book on Scottish history at lunch and dinner. I was surprised that being silent was not a chore for me, and there were no moments when I felt the need to speak; my life was so full of talking, so full of arguing about

the right thing to do, so full of the noise of everyone getting his words in and no one listening. That week there were no comical miming moments when I could not get the salt when I needed it. The monks' rule was clear that speaking when necessary was permitted during the periods of chosen silence. They wanted you to think about necessity differently. Outside of the monastery, I lived in a world where speaking was hard to distinguish from arguing: my diagnosis is correct, this treatment is needed, this grant deserves money, I am worth a promotion. All speech had an agenda of persuasion. Inside the monastery, I thought, there would be nothing to argue for or against, nothing to gain by insistence or assertion, no truth to prove.

I spent most of that week in silence on a hard chair in the cool stone sanctuary, a scarecrow trying to run through all the words in my head, to imagine myself as innocent enough to abide, or quiet enough to keep watch. But my mind was full of talking, an inexhaustible supply of language. I got only partial relief during the services. The words gave me distraction but not replacement; I could not experience the words of the service as a single scroll of meaning in my head, because every sentence asked me to think about it, asked me whether I really believed the words I was saying. I could not live inside the language of the Book as I had done as a child.

But how I wanted to! I wanted to feel God as close as the ceiling. I wanted to let the

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What am I doing here, I thought, spending my rare vacation in a room with a single bed, scratchy sheets and a bendy table lamp, taking tepid showers down the hall at 5 AM?

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lyrics of my childhood convince my adult self that the molecules of God were real. I wanted to give up the parts of myself that I didn't like and adopt someone else's way of living. I wanted to recite the poetry of the service and be done with talking. I wanted to trust in something other than myself.

At night I sat at the desk in my cell on the third floor listening to George Harrison on my iPod. Not monastic, I know. The plaintive certainty of *All Things Must Pass* seemed an instruction manual and a consolation. Harrison was warning me not to listen too closely to the material world, that darkness and sorrow was pervasive but not permanent, that connection without manipulation was still possible.

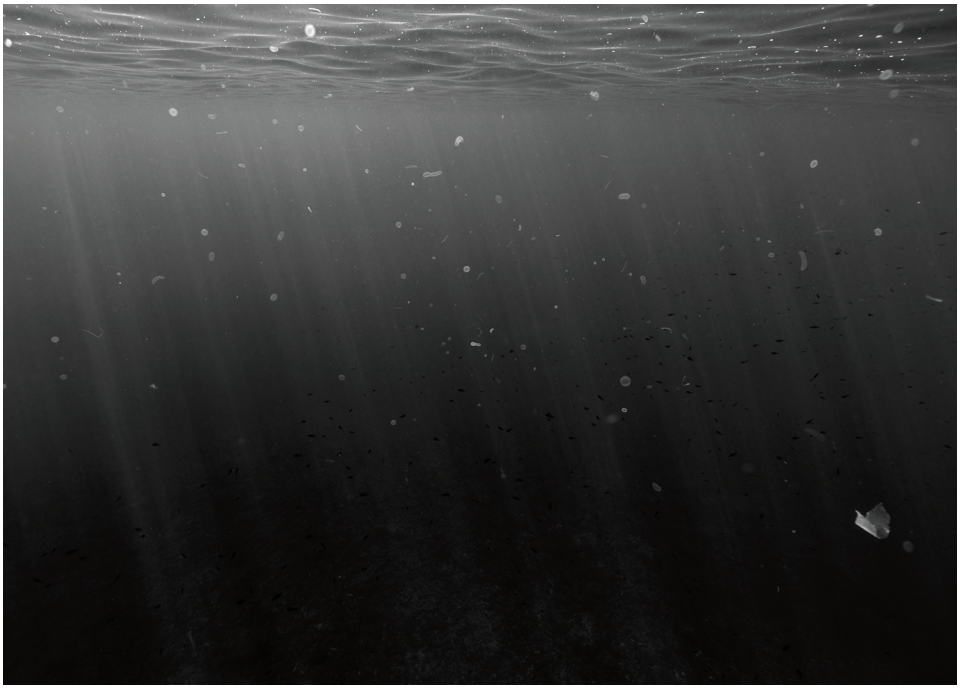
I wanted to have his sort of confidence.

I didn't.

What am I doing here, I thought, spending my rare vacation in a room with a single bed, scratchy sheets and a bendy table lamp, taking tepid showers down the hall at 5 a.m.? What am I doing in this anachronism, a nineteenth-century place in a twenty-first-century world, repeating the words of people who lived in a time before antibiotics, when all of my patients would have died in infancy? Who am I to think that my own salvation is worth ignoring the lives of others?

• • •

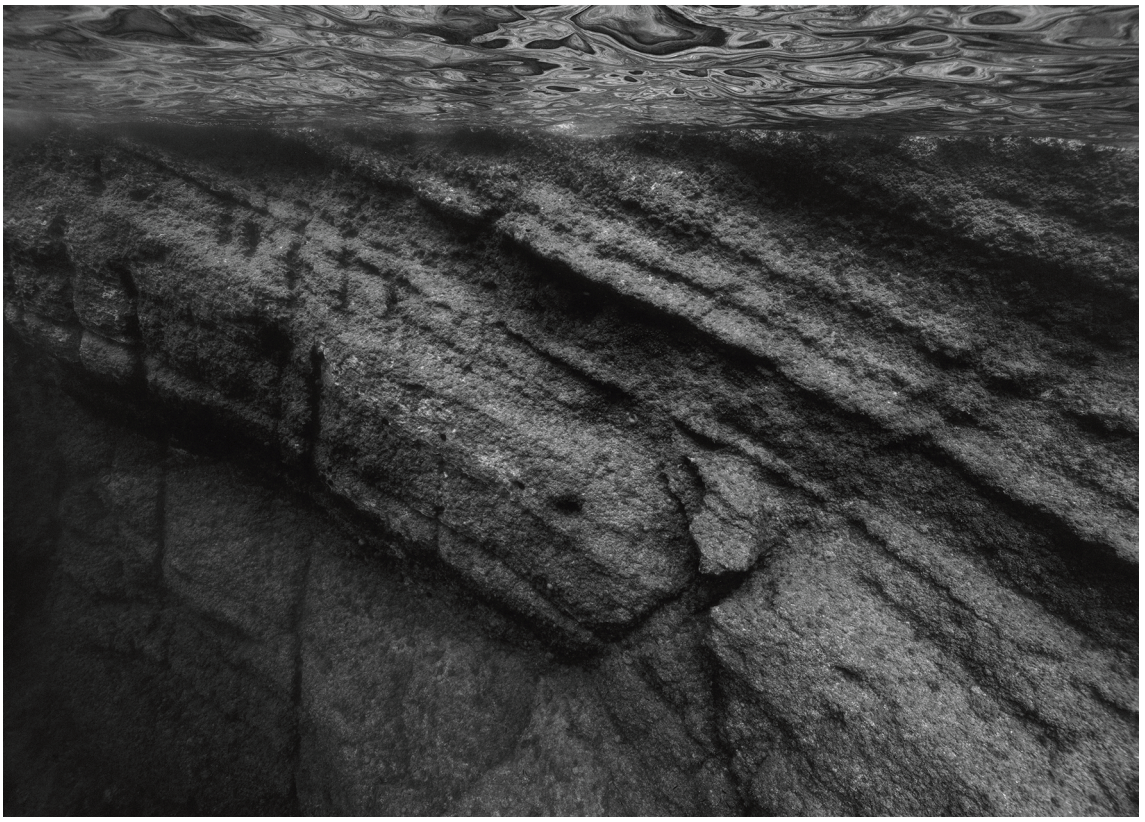
I DIDN'T BECOME a monk. The feeling of something transcendent faded like the breeze; so strong during the services, so weak when I left the chapel. It would not be enough to experience the fullness of the heart I wrote about to Brother Jonathan. A full heart runs dry in time. God was no longer the mysterious answer to some question I felt foolish asking. God would always be my own shadow, clear enough in the bright sun, but indistinct most days. The black habit would not sustain me. I put my white coat back on and headed out the door to work. ∴



NICOLAS FLOC'H. *Productive seascapes, Invisible*, *Anse des Enfers,* 2018.
Water Column, zooplancton and plastics. Carbon print on fine art matte paper. 43 inches x 31 inches.

NICOLAS FLOC'H: ARTIST STATEMENT

The *Paysages productifs* (*"Productive Seascapes"*) photographic series, begun in 2015, is a continuation of the *Structures productives ('Productive Structures')* series (2010). It brings together a series of projects on the representation of underwater seascapes and habitats, and their role as productive ecosystems. The color of the ocean and the state of the seascapes, which are essential indicators of major societal issues, enable the visualisation of phenomena such as the modification and habitability of environments. They also evoke the regulation and transformation of the climate, the degradation and preservation of biodiversity, and a global approach to the biosphere. Nicolas Floc'h's mission is to photograph the major typologies of French underwater seascapes, based on the exploration of different coastlines, and to put them into perspective in the face of climate change and anthropic pressures, thereby showing the changes in their productivity and building up a definitive photographic database. *Initium Maris* (2018–2021) provides an approach to underwater seascapes and their transformations in the west of France, between Saint-Malo and Saint-Nazaire, as well as in Japan. *La couleur de l'eau* (*"The Colour of Water"*) (2016–2021) immerses us in the ocean, the history of art and living things, from the north coast of France toward several oceans. In the south, *Invisible* (2018–2020) reveals a peri-urban environment in the Mediterranean.



NICOLAS FLOC'H. *Productive seascapes, Invisible, Cap Sugiton, -15 m,* 2019.
Carbon print on fine art matte paper. 43 inches x 31 inches.

NICOLAS FLOC'H. *Productive seascapes, Initium Maris, Sargassum muticum, -3 m, Hœdic,* 2019.
Carbon print on fine art matte paper. 43 inches x 31 inches.

NICOLAS FLOC'H. *Productive Structure, Artificial Reef, –18 m, Kikaijima, Japan*, 2017.
Carbon print on fine art matte paper. 43 inches x 54 inches.

NICOLAS FLOC'H. *Productive Structure, Artificial Reef, –23 m, Tateyama, Japan,* 2013.
Carbon print on fine art matte paper. 31.5 inches x 40 inches.

NICOLAS FLOC'H. *Productive Structure, Artificial Reef, –24 m, Tateyama, Japan,* 2013.
Carbon print on fine art matte paper. 31.5 inches x 40 inches.

NICOLAS FLOC'H. *Productive Structures, Artificial Reef, –23 m, Tateyama, Japan,* 2013.
Carbon print on fine art matte paper. 31.5 inches x 40 inches.

NICOLAS FLOC'H. *Paysages productifs, The color of water, Water Column, Atlantic, Ouessant, -10 m,* 2016.
Pigment print on matt paper. 43 inches x 61 inches.

CAROL ALEXANDER

Restraint

In August I missed winter's restraint,
how a branch bisects a field, one apparent bird.
The universe of discourse spans the north and south of breath,
saturating fields where a medical student has paused with a cigarette
and runners spike low clouds of dust in intervals along the frieze.
Still the taut edge seems to judder in zero's metallic wind—
boats tied up in the gray chop, flickering lights from the Palisades,
transmontane to the landlocked side. One river knotted to the sea
over which the ice boat glides: by which I mean the nadir in cold bloom.
Slick and randy summer pits the cormorant against a thrashing eel
while December's ax, I think, would shatter the river's glass.

UGOCHUKWU DAMIAN OKPARA

Mother is the Only God I Know

since boyhood // i've been searching for a name that i do not know // this // is the only truth i know how best to paddle // my mouth is a wretched morgue // & everything that i've tasted // is heavy // with grief

mother // says otherwise

she takes me on evening strolls // to parks & malls // so i could see what joy looks like // how it morphs into little & bigger things // how it sits on a stranger's face

//but//

what is joy // if not a guest // if not a rodent latching on its host // swaying through merrier moments // still // there are no such moments here // save we count the blade opening up my skin // this too is the only way i toughen like a man // to reach solace through pain // like my father

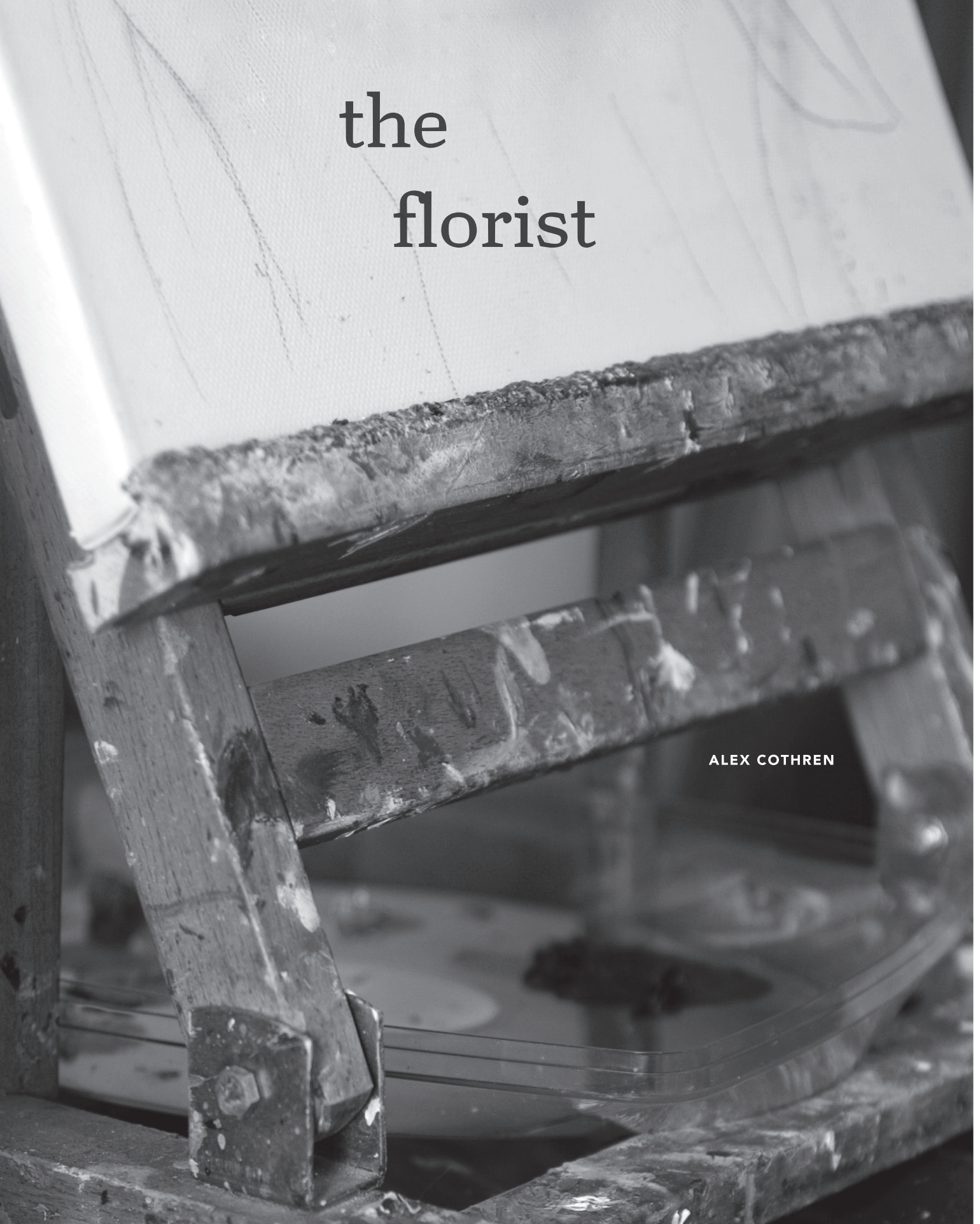
my mother is the only god i know // & the only god i wish to run to // with questions tugging the hem of her dress // mother once said that at age four // the only thing i wanted to know // was how a boy behaves like a girl // & i felt something break in her // her voice rattled in search of a cloth to press to a wound // but mother believes it's a phase // & we both have been searching for its end

CHINUA EZENWA-OHAETO

Aubade as a Poem Knocking At the Door

I have to teach myself that I can be many things:
that I can be the air you see, the conscience you feel.
I have to teach myself how to dance on satin shoes.
It has been five months now for the light magnets
buried in my throat. Five months
for the Polaroid memories tending my worries.
It has been years for hands black-outing history.
Years for history asking for ordinance, recalling.
I need to learn how to wait for twilight to understand really
that it's a terrible time to be alive,
that there's a sad dent on every love story.
But this poem operates on the last command a dying body remembers.
I write you my father's name, his father's name,
his father's father's name, his father's father's father's name
to make you understand what has been taken from me.
Hence I keep looking for what it means to celebrate;
what it takes to know the excitement in celebrations.
Dogwood diaries shake off the dust settling on their pages.
Sometimes we surprise ourselves.
Sometimes we make for ourselves.

the florist



ALEX COTHREN

"GO ON," DARRELL says, "think about her," and I do. I think about ice clinking against her yellow teeth, the way she would close her eyes to sing, the flecks of paint vivid on her stone-gray sweater. Then she arrives, and looks nothing like the Mama I remember at all.

Her flawless skin has the glow of youth. Her hair is thick and brown and curves about her neck like a bell. Both breasts push against the thin material of her sleeveless summer dress, which is the baby blue of birthday cake icing, a color so vividly bright it's hard to believe it wasn't here three seconds ago.

"I bought her that dress our last Christmas," says Darrell. "Didn't I?"

He did. Though I don't recall her ever wearing it.

"Saved up my allowance for months and then bought it for you," says Darrell. "Didn't I, Mama?'

Mama blinks twice and walks out the room. From the kitchen comes the sound of running water.

"What is she doing?"

Darrell cranes his neck to spy into the kitchen. "Well, shit. Wouldn't it be just like our Mama to make the dishes her first port of call?"

"She can do the dishes?"

Darrell snorts.

"Good lord, Carol-Lee."

I DON'T THINK I understood how completely alone I was about to be until I picked up and held her wrist those final moments. It felt as light and inconsequential as a used toilet paper roll. I couldn't feel a pulse, and I was too scared to press deeper in search of one. I kept imagining her bone snapping like honeycomb in my hands.

She had slept well that morning, and I had used the time to empty the hospital gift shop of flowers and arrange them all about her little curtained-off quarter. The second she opened her eyes, I knew this to be a mistake. The space was too small, the flowers pressed in too close, an O'Keeffe painting brought to life. I had to watch regret play out upon her face as she died.

WHAT I SEE in the kitchen is the dishes being washed, but also the dishes staying dirty in the sink. "Witchy Woman" by the Eagles is playing from an old iPod dock I swore gave out my freshman year of high school. Mama hums along to the tune, high and chipper.

I decide that I have seen enough, but when I turn to go, Darrell wraps his arms around me and walks us back toward her.

"Hey Mama," he says. "You think you could put them plates down long enough to give your ol' Carol-Lee a hug?"

I don't even bother struggling. Darrell is like a Chinese finger trap when he has you.

"Well heck," Mama says, turning toward us, a quizzical look on her face as she pats her hands all over the front of that *Pink Panther* apron I threw out after she died. "Now I could have sworn I had a spare hug lying around here somewhere."

Which is when it really hits home for me, because isn't that exactly what Mama would say, forcing her tired self to smile in the hope that I might follow suit, and no quicker do I think this than her skin begins to pucker and crease, and her chest deflates, and her apron is now an old woollen sweater splattered with paint.

"What in the hell," says Darrell, and his grip weakens just enough for me to break free. I run through the house and when I get into my room, I dive under the quilt cover of my bed like I am a little girl in a thunderstorm again.

Eventually, I hear Darrell come up the stairs and stand outside my door.

"Well, Carol-Lee."

"I think I'll just nap a spell if that's all right."

"Shit. Your Mama waits twenty years for a hug and then you go ahead and nap on her."

"I'm feeling sick, if I'm honest."

"Well. All right."

"Darrell?"

"Yeah."

"Did she hug you?"

There is a long silence, during which I can hear only the screeching of air through Darrell's once-broken nose, a sound like a rusty zipper going up and down in its track.

"Carol-Lee," he says, finally, "I do not appreciate you remembering her like that."

WHEN DARRELL FIRST began going on his rounds, he would bring back only the essentials. He'd commandeered a Toyota pickup from somewhere, and he'd fill it up with canned goods and bottled water and jerry cans of gasoline scattered about the abandoned houses of our region. As the years wore on, however, his disappearances would last for longer, and his clothes upon return would often be stained with blood. From these later trips he would bring back items of increasing strangeness. A television whose characters would step out of the screen and confide in you; pajamas that replayed your dreams in the morning; an amorphous blob that would cohere into a dog, or a lion, or an eagle, and which ran and flew about our house for weeks until Darrell tired of it and turned it off.

And then he came home this last time with a small, pulsing orb, and, pressing it to my forehead, he told me to think about our Mama.

AT SOME POINT in my cowering, I drift asleep. When I wake, the light has been quietly leeched from the day, and Mama is in my room. I pull the quilt up to my nose and watch her. She sings softly to herself as she puts folded laundry into the wooden chest of drawers I have had since I was a child. The clothes are little girl's clothes—frilly white

dresses, lacy socks, Wonder Woman underpants—and the drawers both open and do not open as she works. Every child knows the game where you make a static object lurch about by closing one eye and then the other. The beechwood panels of the drawers are like that but at a hummingbird pace, and I watch until my stomach begins to turn.

I WAS SIXTEEN, Taylor Swift on my headphones as I tried not to listen to Daddy getting at Mama in the living room downstairs. Darrell came in with his football bag on his shoulder, and he walked over to the bed where I sat and kissed me on the forehead. This was not normal.

"You be good, Carol-Lee," he said, and then he turned and left, a Swiss army knife open in his hand. Years later, Mama had to give a buyer ten dollars off our old leather three-cushion because he found blood in the zippers.

WE ARE HAVING grilled cheese sandwiches for supper, grilled cheese sandwiches being the only dish Darrell can prepare. I once joked, in our early days back together, before I'd relearned how he was, that he would be capable of surviving years out in the wilderness, provided he had a skillet and steady supply of Wonderbread and Kraft singles. Darrell had lurched out of his seat and slapped me right there and then at the table, easy as swatting a fly.

"Thank you for the supper," I say.

"Well you said you were feeling sick, and I thought I would treat you."

"I appreciate it."

"Well just don't get used to this living like a queen."

At the end of the dining room table, Mama is eating her sandwich. Her chewing is barely a sound, like termites in wood.

"You make her one?"

Darrell laughs. He does not have a handsome laugh, Darrell. It is always pointed at someone.

"No, I did not make her one, Carol-Lee. She don't eat. Not really."

"Oh."

As I watch Mama chew, I recall that Darrell had planned on going hunting tomorrow, and that I will be alone all day.

"Can she be turned off?"

Darrell drops his sandwich onto his plate and gives me the look.

"Now why in the hell would you want to do such a thing to your very own mother?"

"I was just asking."

HE COULD BE kind, Daddy. That was what made it all so hard. After a blow-up, there would be a calm spell during which he would try and regain our love with small favors: ice cream after school, an extra hour of television, trips to the minigolf, that

sort of thing. He would stop brooding in his armchair after work and take Darrell out to play catch instead, or he would set up the tent in the backyard and we'd cook out marshmallows. I was still plenty young when I figured out this cycle for what it was, but Darrell never seemed to understand. Each time Daddy showed him the littlest bit of affection, Darrell opened up like a flower to the sun.

WE SIT IN the living room after dinner, the three of us. Darrell pours himself long glasses from a bottle of Jack Daniels he brought back on this latest round.

"You remember that time Carol-Lee ate a slug, Mama?"

He and Mama both laugh.

"Unfortunately, I do," she says. "Damn me if it wasn't still squirming when she brought it back up."

It is her voice, and her words, exactly.

"How can she remember that, Darrell?"

Darrell gives me the look.

"Don't talk about your Mama like she ain't here, Carol-Lee."

"You two quit kissing and move along," says Mama. She's looking right at me, hot white light shining from her eyes.

No, Mama, I think. He doesn't need to know about that. I don't know what it would do to him if he did.

"I thought it'd taste like banana," I say, too quick maybe, too desperate. "Wasn't that what I told you?"

Mama's eyes go dim. She's back to smiling that familiar faraway smile.

"That you did," she says. "You were always our optimist, Carol-Lee."

Darrell's eyes do not leave mine until I excuse myself for bed.

WE WOULD GO for drives on the weekend. Nowhere in particular, just looking for little places to get a coffee and pleasurably spend what few dollars we had. Once, we stopped in a café and bookshop out on a little coastal town, the type of place where the best houses sit idle all winter. We were browsing the shelves, waiting for our milkshakes, when Mama gave a little yelp of glee. She had a large coffee table book open in her arms, shaking her head in a sort of disbelief. I looked over her shoulder at the glossy photos of paintings which at first looked like abstract grooves of color, until they revealed themselves to be flowers, except zoomed right in, like you were a child with your face up against them.

"Georgia O'Keeffe", said Mama, still shaking her head. "There was a time in my life when all I wanted to do was to paint like this woman."

"You painted?"

"Minored in art at college. Even won a prize or two in my day."

The deeper I dug down into the strata of Mama's previous life, the more I was amazed by the artifacts I found there.

"Why'd you stop?"

She looked up from the book, sudden venom in her eyes.

"You know why, Carol-Lee."

THAT NIGHT I dream that I am walking the streets of a city undergoing some unnamed catastrophe. There is smoke in the air and bodies on the ground. Everywhere I look people are holding one another and crying. It is a very alive feeling.

After walking for an indiscernible period of time, I stop outside a florist, and peer through its shopfront window, which has been shattered. Amongst the gloom there is a woman with gray hair pinned up beautifully in a tortoiseshell clip. She is sweeping up the broken glass with an old-fashioned straw broom, humming something mournful to herself as she works. I go in. There are scattered petals all over the red and cream linoleum floor, but otherwise not a flower to be found. The vases that remain unbroken show dark mouths.

"I don't understand," I say. "Why would anybody loot flowers?"

The woman stops sweeping, and, leaning on her broom, stares out the ruined window into the distance, as if the question had not until then come to her mind. Finally, she looks at me with very kind, very blue eyes, and out of her open mouth comes not words but reams and reams of ribbon.

I wake to a deep darkness in which my breathing is like the clawing of a caged and desperate animal. My thoughts go immediately to Mama, and to how Darrell's childhood room is now full of canned goods and old magazines and ammo, which necessitates Darrell sleeping in what used to be Mama and Daddy's room.

I get up and creep along the hallway. For forever, the moonlight has shone through the transom window of the front door and used the balustrade of the landing to paint prison bars on the white door of Mama and Daddy's room. I knock. I can hear Darrell's snoring cut off like a car engine.

"Darrell?"

"Shit."

"Darrell, Mama in there with you?"

There is a long pause, during which time I figure Darrell to fallen back asleep. I knock again.

"Yes, god damn it," he says. "She's in here."

"Well."

"That satisfy you?"

"I suppose so. As long as she's comfortable."

I hear him snort, and I know he is giving me the look in the darkness.

"Why the hell wouldn't she be? It's her bed ain't it?"

"Well. All right."

"Ain't it?"

"All right. I might have a glass of milk while I'm up. Can I get you anything?"

"Some uninterrupted sleep might be nice."

I creep downstairs and open the fridge, but decide that milk, or anything else for that matter, is impossible. Instead, I lean on the counter and look out the dark window over the sink for a while, until I see her standing behind me.

"Why didn't you call him and get him home?" I ask her reflection. "He was your boy. I know how he was, but he was still your boy."

For a long time, she doesn't move or say a thing. And then in a sudden jerk she enters me, her flesh warm inside my own, and she starts to fill the sink.

TRUTH BE TOLD, Mama did not have all that much of a capacity for it. Her paintings looked like simplified pastiches of those in the book. I on the other hand, to both our surprise, did have something of a knack. I took the general concept of this O'Keeffe woman's—that anything viewed particularly up close can yield a new mysterious beauty—but I ditched the flowers. I'd spent a childhood focusing on things—the curvature of curtains, the number of grills on a heating vent—with such ferocity that their patterns detached from the things themselves, and went floating untethered through my mind. It is a technique I perfected during the long hours in which I did not want to understand the muffled going-ons occurring in other rooms of the house, and I found that I had that ability still, and could paint for hours, applying and reapplying this or that touch of color to better capture the edge of a screw or an unruly tuft of carpet. To others, the paintings could never be traced back to their source, which remained my secret alone. Only the colors and patterns remained, and these were often pleasing in a strange way, or so said my mother. On her recommendation, I sold a few around the town, including some in the old-folks home we both worked at. Encouraged by my success, Mama tried to do the same, but did not manage it. After a while she lost interest in painting, and I would have to travel by myself to the only arts supply store around, a good hour away.

I DON'T DARE go back to sleep. The rest of the night I spend in bed trying to weave together the still frames of my life—dried blood on my thigh, a coffin lowered into snow, honey-yellow stigmas—into some comprehensible narrative, but by the time the sun arrives and butters the white walls I am still as bemused as ever.

I hear Darrell get up and boil water for his coffee downstairs. After some time, he comes lunking back up and opens the door to Mama's room.

"Well I'm off then, Mama," he says.

"Well. All right then."

"You have a good day, Mama. I love you.'

"You go on and get you a buck, Darrell."

"I love you Mama."

"Well. All right then."

I don't even realize I am holding my breath until the front door shuts and it all comes out in a whoosh. I lie there dizzy as Mama pads quietly past my door and the kettle again begins to whistle in the kitchen. There comes the sizzle of bacon frying. Mama is singing along to Patti Smith's "Because the Night" in her good, deep voice that was always richer and sadder when she thought no one else was listening. After a while, I hear her come up the stairs, still singing softly to herself, and she knocks on my door.

"Were you planning on sleeping all day, Carol-Lee," she calls, "or just the sun-shiny part of it?"

"That's alright," I say. "You go on and breakfast without me."

"Now you know I burnt your bacon how you like it."

"I'm feeling sick, if I'm honest. You go on."

To my horror, the door both opens and stays shut. Mama comes in wearing the loose, blue-jean button-up shirt she liked to wear around the house those last precious years. She has her hair tied up in a red bandana, making her look like one of those "can do" women in the old World War Two propaganda posters. She looks like the Mama I want, is what she looks like.

"Let's see what the Mama thermometer thinks about your condition," she says, raising her left hand.

She comes over and sits beside me. The bed dips a little beneath her weight, but also doesn't. I feel seasick. Mama puts her hand on my forehead, and I almost pass out with the shock, because I can actually feel the heat of her palm, and within it the little cool oasis of her wedding band.

I HAD PLANNED on escaping the day I finished high school, but two weeks before school finished, the phone rang. Mama was in bed with what she said was a headache, one I'd plainly heard Daddy putting the ache into the night before. I answered.

"Hello?"

"Janine?" said a man's voice. "'It's Carl from the rig. I'm afraid I have something very hard to tell you."

"This is Carol-Lee," I said.

"Oh. Hi, there Carol-Lee. Um. Would you be a good girl and grab your Mama for me?"

She sobbed hard on the phone and then stopped the second she hung up.

THE BACON TASTES exactly how I remember it, but all it does is leave me ferociously hungry. I get up quietly so as to not disturb Mama at her coffee and

crossword, and I go get some baked beans from the kitchen pantry stacked floor to ceiling with them. Our old oven ran on gas, and that turned off long ago, so I open the can of beans and pour them into an electric skillet set up on the counter. One of the first things Darrell did after he returned was to hook up a generator in the basement. It keeps us with power when we need it, although we have to take care, as Darrell's rounds turn up less and less gasoline.

Mama comes into the kitchen and starts filling up a sink suddenly full of dishes. I watch her a while. The sight of that tall figure at the sink, her back hunching down toward the lathered water, was so common in my childhood that it might as well have been burnt onto my retinas. I decide that I cannot and will not watch it anymore.

WE BURIED DADDY in ground made appropriately cold and hard by winter, and then we went home and got drunk on his whiskey. Mama added orange juice to mine to make it palatable. It still made me gag, but I liked the warm feeling in my stomach, like swallowing doused embers. We sat at the dining room table and watched each other a while as we drank.

"He was a complicated man," said Mama.

"He was a son of a bitch is what he was."

She laughed, a sound that actually startled me, so uncommon was it.

"Well."

I rubbed at a blunt dent in the edge of table, where Daddy once brought down a chair whilst enraged at something or other.

"Are we going to let Darrell know?"

Mama stopped mid-pour.

"And how would we do that?"

"The rumor is he joined the army."

Mama looked at her half-empty glass a long time, before finishing the pour and tipping the whole lot into her mouth.

"I'll look into it," she said.

WHEN DARRELL COMES home from his hunt, Mama and I are cuddled up on the couch, watching *Matlock* on the television Daddy put his foot through thirty years ago.

"Well ain't this sweet," he says, leaning his rifle up against the wall and studying the easel Mama had set up against the window.

"You catch anything?" I ask, in my brightest voice.

Darrell snorts. I get a whiff of whiskey fumes.

"I ain't convinced there's anything alive out there to catch. Now you all been doing anything constructive or just vegging?"

Mama jumps up and walks into the kitchen. The easel disappears along with the tubes of paint and the vase of flowers.

"Darrell. You can really feel her. We've been cuddling all day.'

Mama comes back in with a plate of cookies in her hand. She's back in the blue dress again. Darrell takes one from the plate and bites into it, and as he chews, Mama turns and gives me the look.

"So how come she'll cuddle this bitch and not me," she says.

DADDY NEVER GAVE out to me what he did the other two. I might get my arm pinched, or my ear pulled hard, but that was it. Nonetheless, his attentions filtered down to me through Darrell. After dark, my door would creep slowly open, and then he would be at the side of my bed, his little sweaty hands pulling my hair until clumps of it came away and I was in tears. Once, I felt a sharp pain in my leg, and then wet heat. "You think you're such a perfect bitch" he said, so close to my face I could smell our meatloaf dinner under a mask of toothpaste. When he was gone, I lay awake for hours before finally rising and turning on the light. There was a three-inch incision on my right thigh, his Swiss knife. The blood looked like cooling lava, black and sticky. I knew, and he knew, I wouldn't say a word. If I told Daddy, he'd kill him.

I AM SITTING on the edge of my bed, doing nothing at all, just watching the striped shadows of the blinds lean into night, when Darrell knocks at the door.

"Am I to be expecting supper," he says, "or should I just go ahead and start squirting ketchup on my forearm?"

"There's beans in the pantry if I'm not mistaken."

Darrell swings the door open so hard it bounces back off the wall and nearly hits him in the face.

"Does somebody need quizzing again, Carol-Lee?"

"God damn it, Darrell. Why can't you just ever let me be?"

He pounds across the room and grabs my arm, starts twisting.

"Question one: which one of us had nearly starved down to their ribcage upon the other's return from service?"

"God damn it, Darrell."

He twists harder.

"Say it."

"Me."

"Question two: which one of us most likely would have died, or else have been taken by some roaming gang for much worse, if the other had not fortunately intervened?"

"Me."

"Good. Question three, and this is a crucial one: which one of us is so thankful for all of the above that they are going to march their fat ass downstairs sans backtalk and start getting at some dinner?"

"Me."

He lets go. Finger marks like cherry tomatoes on the thick cheese of my arm.

"Heed my words," Daddy used to say, "because they're hell of a lot softer than what comes next."

ABOUT TWO YEARS after Mama died, I lost my job at the old-folks home. I was not the only one. In fact, even the folks living there were kicked out on the street. Something was going wrong in the country. I tried to watch the news about it, but it never gelled in my mind. Something about long-standing debts being called in by our debtors. The result on the street was plywood boards tacked across shopfronts, people living in the streets, their nice clothes growing mold. I was lucky in that Daddy had paid off the house, so no one came knocking to evict me like they did so many others. Still, I had no income, and the small savings I had became worthless when the bank went under. The electricity shut off, followed by the water. I ate cold what was left in the pantry, and then I simply began to go hungry. By the time Darrell showed up, I had taken to licking the morning dew off the lawn.

IN THE KITCHEN, Mama is making meatloaf. It smells so good. Mama used to incorporate basil and mint in her meat mixture, herbs of which I thought I had forgotten the smell. I get a can of beans out of the pantry, and I go over to the cooker, but the dial is still switched to "On" from breakfast. My heart drops down into what must be the pointy end of my intestines. I turn the dial back and forth, feeling for any sign of heat on the range, but no. We are out of gas, the gas which Darrell only brought home yesterday, talking of its increasing scarcity. Mama silently watches me, and I can smell her meatloaf start to burn.

"It's alright, Mama," I say.

"What's alright," asks Darrell, standing behind me.

HE DIDN'T DIE that day, though I don't know how. By the time I got downstairs, Darrell was already gone, and the blood coming out of Daddy's neck spurted between his fingers like fine ribbons. Mama wrapped a towel around him, and they drove off to the hospital. A few hours later, she called.

"He'll be alright," she sighed.

SUPPER IS A strange combination of Mama's steaming meatloaf and beans as cold as a corpse, the two laid over one another on the same plate.

"I am awfully sorry again."

Darrell just grunts and spoons another mouthful.

"Well. I sure wish I could cook you real meatloaf as an apology," I try.

"Carol-Lee your meatloaf wouldn't ever be shit next to hers."

All three of us chew for a while to the whine of Darrell's nose. When he's finished, he leans back in his chair and watches us.

"What's with the painting?"

I look to Mama, as if for reinforcement, but she is staring straight ahead into nothing, a wide smile fixed on her face.

"Just something we used to do."

"Something to fill the days, I suppose."

"I suppose so."

"I guess tracking down your brother didn't sufficiently fill up your spare time."

Just then Mama raps her knuckles down on the table, one, two, three, so hard that the plates both rattle and do not.

"Well if it isn't Carol-Lee Sanders," she says. "You got in touch with that crazy brother of yours yet?"

Darrell stares at her, wide-mouthed, as her eyes light up.

I STARTED MESSING around with boys, something I would never have contemplated when Daddy was alive out of fondness for the boys' safety. I'd tell Mama I was going to the movies with a friend, but she knew. We would at least keep the pretence alive: I would walk two blocks to the main road before the boys would pick me up in their battered second-hand cars and take me somewhere to make out. Once, in the parking lot of an abandoned gas station, three loud raps on the window startled us. We wound it down to find a police officer with a sheepish grin on his face.

"You two quit kissin' and move on," he said, with a wink. "You can't park here."

He turned to go, but then he stopped, and shined a flashlight in my face.

"Well if it isn't Carol-Lee Sanders. You got in touch with that crazy brother of yours yet?"

I slipped my bra up over my shoulder, my face burning against the cold wind that came hushing in through the window.

"Um. We ain't heard anything on his whereabouts, yet."

The police officer made a face.

"That's strange. I could have sworn we passed on to your Mama that he'd joined the army out of Nashville."

I DON'T KNOW if my jaw is broken, but it feels sore enough to be, as if someone replaced it with a ball-end of a Knight's mace. I lay on my side in bed, letting blood and drool drip onto the sheets. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the door open and stay shut. Mama comes in wearing her bright blue dress. She kneels by my bed and puts her warm hand on my forehead.

"I am sorry," she says, her voice like fingers through gravel.

"I know."

"It's who I am, Carol-Lee. I wish I could stop being him, but I can't."

"I know."

"I love you, Sis. I do."

"I know, Darrell. I know".

TWO YEARS OF quiet joy, and then one day Mama asked me to come into her room. I could hear fear in her voice, and worse, an attempt to hide that fear. When I came in, she was standing naked in front of her vanity mirror, one fat breast full in her hand.

"Honey," she said, "I'm being silly, but could you feel something for me?"

THE SAME DREAM again, the ruined city, the beautiful florist, her eyes gazing out the window, and when I wake up, there is something huge growling in the inky dark. I sit up in bed. It's Darrell's truck, warming up for another trip. Just then, he knocks at my door.

"Carol-Lee?"

"Yes?"

"I'm heading out. See if I can't find us some gas somewhere."

"O.K. I'm sorry about all that again."

"It's alright. I'm gonna take that Mama device with me and throw it away somewhere. I know it was bothering you some."

"Sorry?"

"Bye, now Carol-Lee. Don't open the door for anyone."

I stand up too quick and the pain in my head arrives like a comet. I have to close my eyes and grit my teeth. By the time I can think clearly, I can hear the truck disappearing down the road. I open my eyes. Mama is sitting on the edge of the bed in her blue dress. She's transparent and, when I reach for her, as substantial as smoke.

"Goodbye, Mama I'm sorry about the flowers."

Her skin sags and her chest collapses and her cheekbones emerge like rocks at low tide. That blue dress is once again my favourite gray-wool sweater flecked with paint. She smiles at me. Her real smile.

"I believe they mean to eat them," she says, and then she disappears. ∴

PEGGY SHUMAKER

Gifts We Cannot Keep

for Eva Saulitis

At the Old Kona airport,
past soccer fields and
abandoned hangars,

cracked asphalt spreads—
taxiways for miles
parallel the Pacific.

We had just come from
Body Flow, a class that,
in your words, "Kicked my ass."

By then, though, you'd caught
a second wind.
You wanted a run.

I have never wanted a run.
We did not yet know
what coursed again inside you.

You took off, gazelle in grubby
gym clothes. I clambered up
onto lava rocks

to watch the surf—
white foam turned spume
over jagged black.

You study animals, orcas,
white and black, far from here,
gorged on seals and porpoises.

You knew already that
after the spill you were witnessing
their last days, listening

underwater for the language
spoken only by this pod,
pod that after the spill

did not make babies.
You saved your breath
for prayers in wind,

for poems and songs
and long hours glassing the water.
We had no way then

to know that they were back,
the cells that could not control
themselves, those cells.

You ran beyond where I could see.
I faced vast waters.
One moment calm, then

the ocean explodes—
barnacle-crusted humpback
full body breach

splashes me, wild eye
huge and watching
whale pausing like Baryshnikov

in rarified air
the great gift
of all we cannot know

laid out
before us, broken
as asphalt,

mended
as water
mends, then mends again.

contributors

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CAROL ALEXANDER is the author of the poetry collections *Fever and Bone* (Dos Madres Press), *Environments* (Dos Madres Press), *Habitat Lost* (Cave Moon Press) and the chapbook *Bridal Veil Falls* (Flutter Press). Alexander's poems appear in a variety of anthologies and in journals, including *The American Journal of Poetry, The Canary, The Common, Cumberland River Review, Denver Quarterly, The Goose, Hamilton Stone Review, MER, One, Pangyrus, Pif, Poetry Bay, The Seattle Review of Books, Southern Humanities Review, Sweet Tree Review, Terrain.org* and *Third Wednesday*.

AMBER BLAESER-WARDZALA, a recent graduate of Denison University, with a BA in English—Creative Writing, is Anishinaabe from the White Earth Nation and grew up in rural Wisconsin. Her poetry and photography have been included in regional publications, and she has received several awards for her short fiction. Blaeser-Wardzala was co-captain of her university's Varsity Fencing Team, and, before COVID-19, she volunteered at Licking County Humane Society in her free time. Currently, she is a fellow for the Authentic Voices Program. In the fall, she will begin an MFA program in Creative Writing at Arizona State University.

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contributors

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PAUL FELSCH'S work has appeared in *Tar River Poetry, SLANT, Pacific Review, The Cape Rock, Big Muddy*, and *Rock & Sling*, among others. He has a BA in English from the College of the Holy Cross and an MFA from the University of Southern Maine. He lives in Kirkwood, MO, with his wife and two daughters.

NICHOLAS FLOC'H is a multidisciplinary artist working with installation, photography, sculpture, and performance to question our changing times. He seeks to create socially engaged work that can create awareness around social, environmental, and economic issues. Nicolas Floc'h has exhibited internationally and his solo/collective shows include FRAC Bretagne, SMAK (Ghent, Belgium), Centre Pompidou (Paris), MAC/VAL (Vitry-sur-Seine, France), Palais de Tokyo (Paris), Contemporary Art Factory (Tokyo), and Winzavod (Moscow). He will be in residency in 2022 at Villa Albertine in the USA working on the Mississippi River. www.nicolasfloch.net

ABBIE KIEFER is a writer from New Hampshire. Her recent work has appeared in *Arts & Letters, The Cincinnati Review, The Common, Passages North, Poet Lore*, and other places. She is on the staff of *The Adroit Journal*.

CATHERINE MARENGHI is the author of *Breaking Bread: Poems* (Finishing Line Press) and *Glad Farm: A Memoir* (Tate Publishing), which President Jimmy Carter called "inspiring." An award-winning poet, she received first-place honors in contests judged by poets Richard Blanco and Jennifer Clement. Her poems also twice received first-place honors from the Academy of American Poets university poetry prize program. Her work has appeared in literary journals in the US, Canada, Mexico, and India. She holds an MA, BA summa cum laude in English from Tufts University.

DEVON MILLER-DUGGAN has published poems in *Margie, The Antioch Review, Massachusetts Review,* and *Spillway*. She teaches at the University of Delaware. Her books include *Pinning the Bird to the Wall* (Tres Chicas Books), *Alphabet Year* (Wipf & Stock), and *The Slow Salute* (Lithic Press 2018 Chapbook Competition Winner).

UGOCHUKWU DAMIAN OKPARA, Nigerian writer and poet, is the author of the poetry chapbook, *I Know the Origin of My Tremor* (Sundress Publications). He is an alumnus of the SprinNG Fellowship, and Purple Hibiscus Trust Creative Writing Workshop held annually by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. His works appear or are forthcoming in *African Writer, The Masters Review, The Penn Review, 20.35 Africa,* and

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WALTER ROBINSON is a writer and physician in Massachusetts. He is an editor for EastOver Press and the literary journal *Cutleaf*. His collection of essays, *What Cannot Be Undone*, won the River Teeth Book Prize for 2020 and will be published by University of New Mexico Press in Spring 2022.

PAUL ROORDA has exhibited extensively in Canada, the United States, and Germany. His art examines climate change and nostalgia in a variety of media including slow moving kinetic sculptures, publicly installed musical microgalleries, abstract landscape paintings, cyanotype photography, and a mail art project called *Somewhere Anywhere Postcards*. Paul Roorda looks for the poetry of a moment, the story of an object and the possibility of layered meanings in his art. www.paulroorda.com

NICHOLAS SAMARAS is from Patmos, Greece (the "Island of the Apocalypse") and, at the time of the Greek Junta military dictatorship ("Coup of the Generals") was brought in exile to be raised further in America. He's lived in Greece, England, Wales, Belgium, Switzerland, Italy, Austria, Germany, Yugoslavia, Jerusalem, thirteen states in America, and he writes from a place of permanent exile. His first book, *Hands of the Saddlemaker*, won The Yale Series of Younger Poets Award. His current book is *American Psalm, World Psalm* (Ashland Poetry Press). He is completing a new manuscript of poetry and a memoir of his childhood years lived underground.

ADRIEN SEGAL is an artist, teacher, and writer based in Oakland, California. Drawing from landscape, science, history, emotion, and perception, her interdisciplinary work bridges the gap between scientific rationality and the emotional nature of human experience. Her work has been exhibited internationally and she has been awarded Artist Residencies across the US, Canada, and Europe. In 2022 Adrien will be the US-UK Fulbright Scholar at the University of Dundee in Scotland. www.adriensegal.com

PEGGY SHUMAKER served as Alaska State Writer Laureate and as the Rasmuson Foundation's Distinguished Artist. She received a poetry fellowship from the NEA. Shumaker is the author of eight books of poetry, including *Cairn,* new and selected. Her lyrical memoir is *Just Breathe Normally*. Professor emerita at University of Alaska Fairbanks, Shumaker teaches in the Rainier Writing Workshop MFA at PLU. She serves on the boards of *Storyknife*, the Alaska Arts and Culture Foundation, and the Raz-Shumaker Prairie Schooner Book Prizes. Shumaker edits Boreal Books (an imprint of Red Hen Press) and the Alaska Literary Series at U of AK Press, and is contributing editor for *Alaska Quarterly Review*. Please visit her website at www.peggyshumaker.com.

ELIZABETH SCOTT TERVO'S memoir *The Sun Does Not Shine Without You,* about the tumultuous end of the Soviet period, came out this year from Azri publishers in the republic of Georgia. Her poetry has appeared in the *Wheel, St. Katherine's Review, the Basilian*, and *Eye to the Telescope*, as well as short stories in the *New Haven Review* and *Ham*Lit*. She is a Presbytera, or Greek Orthodox priest's wife, and co-coordinates the Doxacon Seattle writers group for Christianity and speculative literature.

last notes

On the second morning on the ship off Svalbard, we see him across the long fields of ice, a spot of yellow moving among the shades of blue and white.

"He smells our bacon breakfast," the naturalist whispers.

And so he comes, lured by the promise of warm fat. He can read this frozen world like a menu, sorting the enticing funk of living seal from useless fetor of yesterday's carcass. All I can smell is diesel fuel.

He approaches. Cracking seams of ice, tipping at the edge with his weight, dipping below the water's surface as he jumps between the floes. He crosses three hundred yards to reach us where he pauses, nose up, recalibrating.

He is a full-necked creature, a smooth body of pale yellow ending in ink-black nose and lips, his coal-chunk eyes staring out at us. He walks with the rangy grace of a linebacker, his front paws curling under him with each step. He is everything but lumbering and anything but timid. Powerful legs and haunches propel him forward, and the claws on his front paws grip the floes like icepicks.

The clicking of cameras is the only sound except for the splashes of his jumps across the cracking ice. His paws are dinner plates, his body an upholstered race car.

Twenty yards away from the ship, he reads the air, and it disappoints. Nothing to eat here. He walks back into the ice field, a hermit of the cold and floating world.

I have slowed my breath in his presence. He is magnificence, and not a vessel for my pity. He is time itself, tracking the unwary across a melting world.

WALTER M. ROBINSON, NONFICTION

A fellow poet first taught me buoyancy but I kept going down. He said trust the water. I lay tensed on my back as he held my legs and told me to look up, chin up, but every time the water became a coffin I sank into, slamming its door on my face.

This is what I mean: to stay afloat, your body's physics require you to get water into your ears. After I ascended the pool ladder, I couldn't get the water out for a week, as if the liquid wanted to speak into me. All I heard was a gurgling deafness. A confusion insistent on making itself known.

Three weeks later, I finally understood what the water said. I am on my back now in a swimming pool, buoyant, chin up, as I get air in my lungs and exhale a little at a time, arms spread out like the wings of the bird gliding above me. My fear of water is overtaken by an obsession to swim every day.

According to experts, when you go more than four days without swimming, your connection with the water decreases. But there are some waters you only cross once. I have confronted my father one time and his name wasn't enough to save us both from drowning. I crossed him once and he sucked me into his name. "My mother said no matter what, a father is a father." What he meant was that a father is a water. No matter what.

O-JEREMIAH AGBAAKIN, POETRY

PAUL ROORDA. *Sky Dossier I,* 2014.
Vintage photos, postcards, paper, book cover and ribbon.
10 inches x 8 inches.