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letter from the editor

Another year past, and I find myself facing a paradox of old age, one of life’s delicate little miracles: though my eyesight continues to deteriorate, I can see more clearly now than ever before. I have arrived at an understanding.

In the years following my unfortunate baptism and ensuing ecclesiastical enjailment, I was taught (among a number of other phrases that flashed like billboards and sleek neon cursive next to the crucifix) that the meek shall inherit the earth. It turns out, as I have since seen, that they were wrong: it is the Youth.

Allow me the anecdote…

Time has proven that many of our kind subscribe to romantic visions of reclusion, myself among them. But recently, I find that I have become increasingly receptive to sociability—craving it, in fact.

It began last year, just before the first snowfall, when a group of six fifteen-to-twenty-somethings arrived at my door. They explained, after assuring me that no directions were needed, that they had come to talk. “To me?” “Yes, to you.”

It then dawned on me that I had spent so much time out of sight, buried beneath bushels of better writers, that I was now among the crowd of those for whom the Youth had developed a certain underground fondness. A surge of empathy swelled upward and I was reminded of the familiar mission—driving all night and braving the cold on doorsteps while uncomfortable wives explained that they had tried their best, with no success, to coax their husbands down from their desks.

Due to the hour, I offered the six fifteen-to-twenty-somethings lodging in the barn and promised to speak with them in the morning.

I made a simple breakfast—coffee, toast, cantaloupe—and we sat down to eat at sunrise. Suspicious as I may have been, I soon forgot the unexpected circumstances under which our conversation had commenced. We slipped, it seemed, out of time and with ease entered into questions of eternal return. They asked about a book I had written (the
last book I published) that attempted to deal with such a subject—the ongoing return of writers, voices whirring in and out and back in to generation after generation. By the time I embarked on this book, the idea of participating in this tide had begun to tire me. There was nothing new to be written, all endless mimicry. So I bought a barn, a gallon of paint, and a hammer, and I moved here.

Pouring a new pot of coffee, I listened as they inquired about my efforts, shared their own stylings, and came to the defense of writers (many former friends) who had since fallen out of favor. We exchanged phrases in foreign tongues and laughed and spoke with a certain style and music that I had not heard for many years.

Perhaps an increasingly frequent sensation of déjà vu is symptomatic of my Septembering age—my disc, spinning so long, has perhaps returned to the first track. Perhaps. I felt, speaking to these six fifteen-to-twenty-somethings, that I had been part of this conversation before, that things were the same as they always had been. But, in another of life’s delicate little paradoxes, it all felt new, timeless, a refreshing tide.

Undoubtedly articulate, the fact remained that they did not know everything as thoroughly as they should and their uninstructed opinions flew utterly without restraint. Once, during a period of extreme fatigue, I wrote a series of papers denouncing this sort of thing. As I listened, though, I recalled the pleasure of soul before study, of the time before I felt I had begun to know too much. I could see myself through the steam rising from the rims of their cups:

A fresh-faced revolutionary—lounging on university lawns, sipping Beaujolais on balconies, reclining fireside with a stack of manuscripts and unfiltered cigarettes, well before I had a white hair in my beard. Cramped rooms with piles of pens, scrolls balanced on the heater, books flapped over lampshades like lazy birds. Sneaking into the bathroom so as to not wake others with the light. Sitting on the edge of the tub with ink and pages spread like towels around the sink. Every word was mine.

I began, as they retired to the barn again for the night, to do something that I had not done for many years: I began to write.

The kids returned for breakfast next day and the day after that.
Then they left. A few months later, they returned with folders full of new work. They had been creating at a furious rate and wanted somewhere to go with it, some way to talk back, to cast a new line into the tide. Papers started arriving at my door; they had given friends across the country my address and circulated the idea that I would be editor of a new publication: Coup d’Etat.

A fitting title, at first, for the fledgling venture, sure—a way to position it in the world. Going into the third edition, however, it seems to me to be as much an inward expression as anything else. We turn over, as we must. We rally against ourselves to produce a constant newness. In the words of that insolent rat Sinatra (who really did it Anka’s way), we will do it our way. Each generation, each issue, will have its own voice, and that is right and good.

I am proud to come to you, now, from across many miles, maybe even from across five thousand years. I come to you proudly from a record of reincarnation, an edition between the second and future fourth that shares nothing with its siblings, save for its most elementary aim: to arrive at your door, as a group of six fifteen-to-twenty-somethings once arrived at mine, and encourage you to write.

This is an eternal record of writers for whom words are always new. This is a reminder from the Youth to conceive and contribute, to conspire, to create, and to do.

This is the Coup.

Waxley Grafton

Made of both myth and flesh, Waxley Grafton is the inspiration behind Coup d’Etat and every other small rebellion in which our young hearts partake. He is immortal and fleeting; and he enjoys the company of his English Cocker Spaniel, Pete.
My suitemate, Morgan, plays her music too loud.

I roll over, curling Nana’s quilt up to my pudgy chin. My eyes won’t close, despite how heavy they feel, and all I can see is the flat blank surface of the wall as my eyes adjust to the dark.

Her playlist blasts in the other room. The country chords pass through the far wall. Her cowboys surround me, and my eyes won’t close.

I told her I don’t have a problem with her music. She pressed her hands together and said, “Are you sure? It’s just how I cope with things, and you go to bed so early... I really don’t want to keep you awake.”

“You’re not keeping me awake,” I said. “I sleep like a log.”

Usually I do. But since that conversation each guitar strum reverberates in my brain. Since then, I’ve barely slept at all.

Morgan’s open to a fault. She asks for it. She’s like a country song herself. She begs you to play her tune, to let her vomit all the drama of her so-called pain on to you.

We saw a cat once out near the quad and she told me, “My cat died last year. Her name was Fat Cat, and I’d had her for eight years before she died.”

“That’s so sad,” I said. She wanted pity, and I gave it to her.
But her thirst is insatiable. “Fat Cat’s not my only loss...”
I said nothing. I hadn’t asked about her cat, or whether she’d had one, or whether she’d loved one. I never offered to carry that.

So, when she asked about the volume of her music, she said it was how she copes.

“What are you coping with?” she wanted me to ask. Like she’s felt pain.

Once I told her about my dad dying.
Her response? “I know how you feel.”

Whatever. I’d seen her dad. He helped her move in. She’s always talking with him on the phone. Or with her mom or her therapist. And
there I had poured out my soul, and she said, “I know how you feel,” so the conversation would become about her.

I take a breath and try to calm down.

In the past few weeks, the music’s been running almost all day and all night. I’ve hardly seen her come out of her room. She’s waiting there for me to come over and ask her what is possibly wrong. It almost might be worth it. But I just want to sleep.

My younger sister Leah counted sheep until she was twelve. I try that for a minute, but all the sheep I see are flocked around Morgan’s sad man with a guitar.

I want to throw something at the wall to make her music stop, but that would seem an overreaction. I already told her I don’t mind.

I count sheep like Leah.

I wake suddenly and sit up. My whole body is warm, and shaking, and there’s sweat in my armpits and on my forehead.

The music has stopped. Something’s wrong;
I scramble out of bed trailing a blanket and dart across the hall.
“Morgan?” I say. The lights are out, but already I can tell the room looks wrong: Morgan sways from the ceiling.
Someone sits up in bed. It’s Leah, her hair pulled back in a fuzzy braid.

“Where’s Morgan?” But even as the words escape my lips and Leah’s sleepy eyes turn to worry, I already remember: this isn’t school. I came back home, and this is Leah’s room.
I hear Mom skirting down the hall in her fleece pajamas, flicking on the hallway lights as she comes.
Leah’s getting out of bed coming toward me, to hug me and to tell me everything’s okay, but I’m already retreating to my room.

“It’s okay,” coos Leah. I’m not listening. “There was nothing you could do. How were you supposed to know? Don’t blame your-”
I slam the door and click the lock. My mother’s fist beats the door.
I hear Leah hiss to Mom. “Why did you turn off the CD?”
“I just wanted you to get some sleep,” Mom begs me through the
door. “You need to sleep.”

I hit play on the stereo, and Chesney fills the room. My mother slides down the other side of my door to the carpet, and Leah tries to tell her everything will be okay. I climb into bed and pull up the quilt.

In Morgan’s room, it was just her and me and her music. Then the resident assistant, and the police, and her parents came. The coroner was the one that finally closed her laptop and made the playlist stop. They got her down from the ceiling. Her mother put her hand on mine at the funeral. “Morgan mentioned you quite a bit,” she said. “She admired you. I’m glad she had you as a friend.”

I stare at the blurring blank wall.

Morgan plays her music too loud. And I’m listening.
Sitting in front of you is not a woman
Nor a daughter
Not even a self.
Sitting in front of you is a hue of colors,
Ranging from grey
To deep, breathing indigo.
She is a collection,
A heap, a modgepodge
Of death and evanescent laughter.
Her eyelids are sprinkled with rain
And the wrinkles show in the back of her irises.
Sitting in front of you is stagnation,
Chained by the abstract shackles,
Too afraid to pick up her feet,
Too afraid to cry.
Sitting in front of you is your child,
Ready to give up,
Ready to die.
Sitting in front of you is a poem,
A note, a written
Goodbye.
I was a misty meadow baby
picking weeds out of the boundless Earth
for my mother on Tuesday afternoons—
she tossed the tulips into the garden
and put my weed bouquet in the climber’s vase
she said I will forget you not my little wildflower
and then she read me stories about the lupine lady
and planted love in my head swollen with tales as
tall as the weeds growing round the old meadow

Is it time for Fall already? She will not wilt and fall,
not yet my father said over the wire

I left home and I did stumble
into receipts and responsibilities
and realism made my acquaintance—
but among other things, I still wish
the world turned sepia on Sundays
and swing music blasted from speakers in the sky
I still find muses in most things however simple
and I still pick weeds and arrange them into
extraordinary bouquets of invasively unclassical music.

Forget me not.
creed

constantly conducting excavations in the skies,
searching with a fine tooth comb coated in curiosity
for the supernatural hope that once existed or
cascaded out of her glassy soul windows and
sang from her shoe soles forever leaving footprints
of sunshine upon petrified surfaces
of cynicism and defeat

the discovery would mean more to others than to herself,
reconstructing stairways of sand to the pinnacle of salvation,
at least that’s what was read to her
under crimson table cloths drenched in sacrifice

-conformity was today’s most coveted epidemic
flocked to by preservers but evaded by academics-

these days she wasn’t sure whether
to water the sacred flowers planted in her by her forefathers
or whether she should find a new altar in the backwoods
where a congregation of individuals was waiting on the girl
with too many questions for the crowded chapels she used to dwell in
when fear came first and love was second
i will not ask you  

marissa comeau

My fingers are dumb and thick as they hover over the page, futilely fumbling the pen in my hands. I’m not used to leaving notes, because no one ever asks where I am. The house is too big; too empty; too quiet. I wonder if a passing ghost might come through, glance at the half-formed thoughts I’ve laid bare, and pity the mind from whence they came. I decide to abandon the cause, and slip the scrap of paper into my pocket. A note wouldn’t change anything, anyhow.

I hope that ghosts do not exist, for my sake.

—

The woods open their arms in welcome to me, an unschooled beast returning to native soil. I am at first a definite being of blood and flesh, slow and plodding, but the further I go the more my lines blur until I am a pearlescent sliver of moon or bone fragment moving like a sibilant sound. Many are the miles, or so they seem, but finally I become an untraceable shape careening wildly in the depths of this dark plane. My corporeality becomes so foreign that I see myself at a distance. Who is that girl whose swift feet leave precious few divots in the earth? I want to call out to this little alien, this little bird so soft a whisper might shatter her, but I cannot. Doesn’t she know that running into the dark does not soften the blow, doesn’t she know that escape does not necessarily mean freedom, but instead gives birth to fresh pain, doesn’t she know, doesn’t she know?

The earth reaches up to pull me back down, forcing body and soul to reunite in a cosmic crash. I am all at once aware of the hot tears etching ancient riverbeds upon my face, of ragged breaths tearing from my lungs, of the red latticework upon my knees, of the unnatural angle at which my ankle rests. In spite of this sudden stream of consciousness, I feel no pain. I do not know if I believe in signs, but if ever there were a time, let this be it. Here is as good as anywhere else. When I look up, it is as though the trees branches part, the fingers of humble giants pulling back so that I may see the stars, bright pinpoints of light amongst a
sea of inky black.

Here, then.

This is where I begin, I tell myself, then laugh soft and low, because there is a sort of dark humor in the idea that I should begin at the close. With no other tools at my disposal, I begin to dig. The first layer of earth is tightly packed and unyielding, and I scratch at the dirt until it begins to creep in dark rings into my nail beds. I break through to the topsoil and the digging becomes easier, and I am elbows-deep in a bed of black. Earthworms blindly nudging their way to destinations unknown encircle my fingers and pill bugs disturbed from their dreaming curl into dark little pearls at my touch. My work is slow but deliberate, and I feel the dampened chill of sweat forming on my forehead and back. The dull ache in the arch of my spine tells me it has been a few hours, and yet the hole I have dug is only a few feet deep. I do not know how much longer the moon will hold out, and I begin anew, clawing at a feverish pace, until I scratch at something soft and warm. I pull back my hand and see that my fingers are dotted with a soft wash of red, a cluster of long, coarse hair tangled in my palm. I withdraw and fall back as the dirt begins to shift of its own accord, putting pressure upon my forgotten injury until it bites and causes me to cry out.

The shape beneath the soil struggles to emancipate itself—first a head with long dark hair, then pale sloping shoulders stained with mud. A pair of long, slender arms attached to hands with spidery fingers work themselves free, and as the figure pulls itself from its tomb my heart threatens to shatter my sternum. It stumbles for a moment, sinuous limbs dancing like a newborn fawn’s; I am struck mute, forced to watch in silent terror as the figure grows steadily more confident in its footing. A small, cruel voice in the back of my head laughs at the irony of my being afraid now that death is no longer on my terms. The sharp cry of a barn owl reverberates through the trees behind me, and the figure shifts its focus in my direction. It—he, I realize—seems spooked, but curious, and begins to approach me at a crawl. Knowing that our fear is mutual, I am made bold. I prop myself up as he draws close, and extend a wavering hand to part the hair that falls in his face. A pair of
eyes, large and soft like an animal’s and dark as the earth that bore him, stares back at me.

I do not know if I believe in signs, but I start to wonder if he is one.

The steady march of seasons carries on unobtrusively, and we are none the wiser. Your presence in my world has become such a given that I can no longer remember a time when you did not exist. You are a friendly shadow, a discreet hand, a mother’s lullaby. We are two embers burning quietly, unassumingly, feeding one another’s glow. You bear me through the winter, telling me stories into the long hours of the night about cities below the earth and tying knots into my hair, each a promise to love me more and more with each passing day. I want to know where you come from, but I’m afraid that if I ask I’ll realize that I dreamt you. Each moment is luminous, and I tell myself that I am happy. You tell me I am as pretty as a moth’s wing as we dance clumsily in the firelight, and when you draw me close and kiss my mouth I swear for a moment that it is true.

As the days grow longer and warmer we climb trees and pull blankets onto the lawn, where we lie for hours staring at stars. You tell me that one day you will have counted them all; I tell you that it is not possible, but you say you do not care, and when I see the warmth in your eyes, neither do I. You bake me bread, sing to me when I cannot sleep, and listen intently when I rave about Modernist poetry, even though you’ve never read a page of Eliot or Pound. You are full of endless kindnesses that I know I will never be able to repay. I search your eyes for the version of myself that you see, but I cannot find her.

You catch fireflies in the summer and ask me to join you, but I tell you I’d rather watch. It is a half-truth—you move nimbly, effortlessly, and I am simultaneously entranced by you and embarrassed because I know I’ll never be able to join in such grace. Your stories have become epics, and you fill the leather bound journal I gave you with tiny print that looks like little bugs squirming on the pages. I never tell you that I gave it to you because no matter how many intricate details you weave into your words your oral storytelling can no longer hold my attention;
some part of me thinks you already know that, though. I sleep long into the warm afternoons even though you try to stir me, and sometimes I do not sleep at all. You still sing to me, but your voice seems to have lost its magical sway over me. I close my eyes anyway and mimic sleep to avoid hurting you. I catch you quietly observing me from time to time, the specter of a question in your eyes, but you never ask.

The season changes again and I find myself spending long hours marveling at the death of trees, wondering at how they slowly grow brittle and then burst into bloom after a great sleep. You tell me jokes for which I can muster only a sleepy half-smile, but you hardly notice through your own laughter; I think you are trying to compensate for the both of us. You find beauty in everything, from the wash of grey sky on an almost snowy morning, to an eyelash on my cheek. Somehow you still manage to find beauty in me. I grow envious of your smiles, but then I hate myself for resenting you, because I know they’re all for me. We light fires in the evening and your wrap me in your arms, trying to close all of my fractures, but I am made of too many sharp pieces, and I cut you. The questions have migrated, now haunting the corners of your lips, but they never pass through.

I’m so sorry. I’m sorry for fooling you into thinking that I could be a real person. It’s a small consolation, but I even fooled myself for a time. But the lusk creeps in—it always does. You could never erase the pain, but you dulled it; I suppose that’s the most I could ever ask of you. I knew long before that night with the bugs and the dirt that I was an unfixable thing, and it was wrong of me to pin the little hope I had left to you. People make for poor foundations; I know that now. But please, my brief spot of light, do not ever doubt that I love you and let yourself turn cold. I did, I do, and I will. I just never loved you in the proper way, the giving way. There was so little left of me to give, and so I became afraid to give at all. I allowed my love to become a selfish thing, but I won’t allow it to consume us both. Maybe there’s a way to change the way I am. It seems unlikely, but I suppose I’ll never know unless I try.

—

Morning light crept through cracks in the sill, golden but cold,
illuminating the room. Sleepy eyes stirred and he shifted to face her, but was met with blank space. Sitting up, he pulled back the covers and traced the once-warm imprint where she had lain with his hand. He crept into the kitchen, half expecting to smell burnt coffee and find her at the table with a look of concentration on her face and a dog-eared copy of *Four Quartets* in her hand, but something told him she wouldn’t be there. Instead, on the table laid a single sliver of paper with two lines of small, childlike scrawl across it.

> This is not your fault. I’ll see you again.
> PS. If you had asked, I would have answered.

Turning the piece of paper over in his hands, he looked out the window, just past the yard to the very edge of the tree line, where he saw a freshly turned pile of earth.

*This is a reinterpretation of the song “Like Real People Do” by Hozier, told from an alternate perspective.*
Everyone was talking about Montana, while the nicotine stained moon shed its light over the sad whiskey-drunk outside the dive bar, Closing Time playing softly through broken glass and furtive glances.

The careless of me floated through conversations, was pushed away by my own fluttering hips and the sobriety of being somewhere unfamiliar. The careful of me smiled at the smoke, reached and stumbled through the point of no return.

Arms slung around hips, sleepy, disinterested laughter: everyone slow-dancing their way home. Me: drawing in the dirt between the curb and the road, the asphalt sweetly jumping up to meet me.

Me: kissing the nearest kneecaps, please be my Montana.
On an overhead wire,
a string of crows
await the next round of kill.

Dumb animals skitter,
scamper, across the roadway.

Cars and tracks
pummel toward them
at high speed.

A crow is black
and sleek and patient
and has long since
done the math.
a stillness, a struggle; reading,
And in what prayer’s palm do we echo?
angels write, devils explode
as though writing gives themselves in love.
But all that confronts us, yourself and me,
Demanding windfall from such a rose,
high above your head, my eyes.
How should I hold my courage back, now gravity
Insidious as a thorn, into your tenderness?
Into this wretched plunge, this crack in time,
is devoted and celebratory
is like a bow to us and joins two disparate things
lest it devour your own? How should I not revert
like a dark beast moving through the clear
Look, where pain goes it disrupts the night
my soul to something lost that darkly clings
Oh gladly I would simply consign
Only his misery stirs as if ‘trapped
quite still when your own inner depths shudder.
Sadly lose shine, as all do by erosion.
Sarcasm seems to choose someone, raises his hand
So does it stay with us, grin from below
Sweet song.
the question. And the image, the reflection
the world in ripples:
to an eerie quiet place, a place that won’t let go
to things written down on paper; God,
To what blind chains have we been bound?
together, so that one tongue only speaks.
which is where his blackness is—
Who, then, received the news? Who knew what when?
1. At his daughter’s backyard wedding, champagne spouted from the mouths of frogs, and the police chief tried to recruit me: *The force needs more good Jewish cops*. I was fourteen, and drunk. My girlfriend had dark half-moons under her eyes. We went to dances in the dusty legion hall, where anything could happen. After school we smoked joints and watched *Dragnet*.

2. I didn’t figure I was good cop material, Jew or no. I got into construction. City officials came to inspect. The main man, his name was Worthington, like the guy in the TV commercials. I took a two-by-four and let him have it.

I was smoking an *El Primitivo* cigar. A cop grabbed it out of my mouth. Where it went, I don’t know.

I was gone a little while. In the nuthouse, they called me Tiny.

3. I didn’t like those harpies waking me. I couldn’t get my legs to move. It wasn’t that I “refused.” After I got out, in my father’s foyer, when I went to see him, my guitar-playing circuits didn’t connect. The instrument fell from my hands. I had only my voice, but my throat was choked. Some musician I was, mute, toneless. By the glinting pool some whore dabbed on perfume.

4. Now I’m back on the job.

Some days I plow the fat furrow, the furrow in my brain that holds unquenchable appetite. In other words, I eat ding-dongs from morning to night. Then, another day, a high-whine power-saw slices thru plywood. I eat celery and starve off the pounds.

I’m skinny as sawdust. I’m done.
the last stop

Subway station to subway station, tens of thousands of ceramic floor tiles going in every direction. The colors mute, dull under savage lighting and the dirt from shoes, feet, trash; detritus. No jazz leaking from cafes. No Legend of Zelda playing on the tv; the iconic music no longer tucked between ears like the earworm it was. The moon has ellipsed tonight. Its light never reaches the insides of those dark tunnels. The tiles. No matter which direction you walk and how big the station, they all, at some point, end. Like the last stop. Striking red robins sing forlorn notes deep into black skies. Grief fills their nests. Empty. Dirty. Rueful. Each one a singular jewel. Where will all of it go? Nowhere. Yellow parchment leaves fill the soft air, spilling; millions falling. We very often forget that people like you can die.

Dedicated to Robin Williams. Rest in peace.
hiking in echo canyon, Arizona

In spring dusk, indigo mountains nestle into the desert’s back. We stop to rest and paste ourselves onto the dirt, hazy-eyed, pressing ears and cheeks into cracked, dry ground. The earth breathes a deep, soft rhythm. Valleys cup our bodies, hills swell into the arches of our backs, mold to the curves of our shoulder blades. The chollas reach their branches skyward, humble thirst, souls sighing the night in.
saudade
(sou’däde)
marian eiben

It’s a Sunday morning with the windows fastened; cold seeps to your toes nonetheless. Coiled, crevassed under the fleece. Vertebrae awry, arm gently strewn, as if another was occupying the space next to you. The curls of your not-lover inspire sensation, cheek to chest, an unintelligible mass of might-have-been exposed by the early morning cloudrise.

Except not: just an unmatched sock and the prospect of a morning coffee spiked with whiskey. The Irish do it best. Slouch out of bed and try not to wake the neighbors that live beneath you with your clanks – lead feet and clipped wings anchored by your resolve not to fly any time soon.

It’s a word, unpronounceable, with foreign ridges and curves. Place it on your tongue – salivating to lap its texture, roll it around to and fro, swishing across taste buds. Seasoned with mystery and caked deep to hide its meaning. The dictionary with its salty celestial and cajun catacombs can’t tell you what it is, much less what wine you might pair with it.

You can almost taste it, the way you can taste the bourbon in January he poured from nowhere amidst the crowd of people and haze. Best damn shot of bourbon you might have had. The warmth is still just under your cheeks waiting for flint to spark when you hear something that sounds nothing like his laugh but still could be. He didn’t wait around to even finish the bottle, so you douse water on the ember-y memory hoping it will go out.

It’s a cigarette pack with nothing inside, left by the river where you wandered hoping to find one along the way. The knowledge that this will kill you and the prospect of dying by your own hand. Smoke wafts sweetly from your finger, mixing with the puffs – clouds under cloudy
judgment – misty thoughts of her that never form into solid matter because everything is water on this coast.

Like the wind after a violent storm, when it tugged your now skeleton, once umbrella. You stand patiently in the calm on the corner of Beacon and Beckoning waiting for the feisty foe to return your stolen good-prongs awkwardly sprawled above your head, failing to keep you dry.

It’s falling in love with the girl in the song that makes your chest heave. Your heart can play the tune so well that you think you might have written it long ago. It’s knowing that she’s not real except that she might be, her face is in puddles that line the cobblestone, deformed by boots of those who want you to think you’re all alone. You know everything about her: dimples to sullen eyes to the left crooked index finger that you swear you’ve sucked on and yet she’s still nowhere. You stow that song under a bridge on the stream with its deafening memories of her on repeat. Pools of water reflecting what’s almost there – a vapor-ized song that won’t let you see through the fog of her. A fun house sideshow, coated on murky mirrors and one that you could drown in.

An addiction and a sensation– wandering for wanderings sake. It’s your umbrella without its skeleton and waking up to another day without a person you swear exists. It’s knowing that somewhere else could be better – definitely is better – but you’re not a bird and don’t want to be. You’re longing for what’s not coming back, craving what was never there.
slowly,
sprawling sidewalks rise
concrete and
disintegrating into water-like
varying footholds my
best boots sunk by
pirates of pavement
it is a halting –
standoff the bricks are
worthy adversaries to
content sharp elbows with,
lifting ribs one-by-one
as a taciturn friendship or
doctor or
forklift and still-
standing simply yields
pacific tongues so
open your mouth
and untie your
shoes.
tuesday the professionals say

there is all the tangled detail yeah
details details all I know etc.
fits on the head of a pin
if that’s angelic I’m a baboon
a splended creature marauding at the zoo
the natural habitat’s boundaries thereunto
gerald

he ropes the chickens and feeds the ladders
of a Sunday morning in April
nothing better for him to do
nothing at all a brimshowerful in the water tank’s the gal
the day the church burned  
jaylee marie strawman

The day after I stopped praying for anything,  
the church burned.  
A wire shorted out, a spark spread into  
flames engulfing the church,  
consuming it like a communion wafer.

Gallons of water filled the sanctuary,  
the pews floating up to swim  
over a red carpet sea  
as sirens wailed through the night.  
Above the ruined altar,  
the wooden cross hung charred and broken.

Finally. A sign.
The elevator stopped on the fifteenth floor. Kate wasn’t sure why, because the fifteenth floor was listed as “unoccupied” on the directory in the lobby, and the company website skipped over it completely. Mark motioned for her to follow as he exited the elevator. He passed her a metal flashlight, which she turned on.

“Why—”

“Are we here?” Mark said.

“Uh, yeah. I mean, there’s nothing in here.” The place smelled like mold and old paper. The linoleum floor was dirty, covered in dust and cobwebs and what looked like rat droppings. The few pieces of furniture — three or four broken swivel chairs and an ugly floral print love seat — were covered by dusty, translucent tarps. She pointed the flashlight up at the ceiling, which was a similarly unremarkable drop ceiling, black-speckled white tile broken up at regular intervals by fluorescent lights.

“Looks normal, doesn’t it?” Mark said, and darted past an old copier into a back room. She followed him hesitantly. The room had probably been, at one point, a break room. There was a square of grime in the corner next to the counter where a refrigerator had been and a microwave with a broken door under a cabinet. She opened one of the cabinet doors to find a half-empty box of coffee filters and a few packets of Sweet’n Low.

“This,” Mark said, gesturing to the only door in the room, “is the Door.”

“What’s the door?” It looked normal, like it would lead to a pantry or a supply closet. The knob was brass, though, and smaller than most, which didn’t seem to mesh with the sterile mid-’90s-tech-company feeling she got from the rest of the floor.

“The Door,” Mark corrected. “And, well, it’s easier to show than explain.” He cleared his throat. “Middle of the Pacific Ocean, a few feet above the water, please.” He turned to her. “Don’t want the place flooding, after all.” He waited for a moment, and then turned the knob.

Sunlight streamed through the doorway, and the smell of saltwater
hit her a few seconds later. Waves lapped softly against—something. The water was about a foot below them, but when Kate looked down, she couldn’t quite tell what they were standing on. The only sound was the waves and the stiff ‘breeze. Mark pushed her away from the Door and closed it abruptly.

“What was that?” Kate said.

“That was the Door.” Kate scowled. “Hey, that’s all we know,” Mark said, raising his hands mock defensively. “We don’t know if it’s alien technology, or some sort of weird dimensional gateway, a friendly ghost, a demon with a sense of humor, or what. But every time you open it, the other side is different, and if you ask nicely sometimes it’ll go to where you want. But we’ve got no clue why or how it does this.”

“What, you didn’t get, like, physicists or something to look at it?”

“We did. It ate them.”

“It what?” Kate started to back out of the room.

“Don’t worry, they were fine. Well, mostly. They went through the Door and turned up a week later in the middle of Alaska. Nearly froze to death, though.”

Kate looked warily at the Door. By this point she was outside of the room, backed up against a square column. “So it’s, what, evil? It tried to kill people? Why don’t you just, I don’t know, pull it out of the wall, or set it on fire?”

“Someone tried. Remember that big fire back in the ‘90s, the one that was all over the news? Nearly burned the whole building down? A bunch of guys from 38 — the R&D guys, they’re all a little nuts, by the way, you should try to avoid them — they thought that it was evil, so they snuck in after hours, set the whole floor on fire. After the firefighters put out the rest of the building, they got to this floor, and it was completely fine. Everything was fine. Baffled them, too. It was kind of funny.” He smiled fondly. “So we think it’s just got kind of a sense of humor. Oh, come back in here, it isn’t that scary. Want to try? It won’t bite.” Kate looked apprehensive, but nodded. “Just tell it where you want to go. But be polite.”

Kate cleared her throat. “Um. Hi, Door,” she said, feeling stupid for
talking to a door. “Uh...Paris, please?”

“Now give it a minute,” Mark said. “If you open it too soon...well, just don’t. It didn’t do anything good for the last guy.” He nodded to himself: “Should be fine, now.”

Hesitantly, Kate opened the Door. Hot, dry wind gusted through the doorway, and she could see the Eiffel Tower in the distance — but it was topped by a cowboy hat.

Next to her, Mark laughed. “Told you it had a sense of humor,” he said. “I’m guessing this is Paris, Texas.” He shook his head. “Better luck next time.” He closed the Door. “Anyway, that’s why this floor is abandoned. Come on, your department is on 29.”

“Wait, that’s it? You just tell me you’ve got a weird semi-sentient ghost portal thing in the middle of your building, and you just leave it there?”

They headed for the elevator.

“Well, yeah. What else are we supposed to do with it? Look, if it bothers you that much, just ignore it like the other half of the company. I just think it’s interesting.” He pressed the button for the elevator, which was currently on 19 and going down. “It’s no big deal.” The elevator dinged softly. The doors opened, and they got on.
lately, i’ve been sleeping
through sunrises

dainiz almazan

So:
today I woke up early.
Drinking black tea by the kitchen
window, watching the sparrows
move from willow bush to power
line and back,

I don’t think
the sky will be this same color,
this same time tomorrow.
A jellyfish will die in a standard fish tank—they’re made of stuff’ so soft the filter will eat ‘em right up, and this is a sad fact of life, but say you wanna keep one anyway—then, we can carve out a section of the sea like a slice of cake by putting a moon jellyfish in a special round tank that lights up.

However: your new moon jelly (named maybe Artemis or Selene or Hekate; these names will let everyone know you’re clever) will expire after a year or so. This is perhaps longer than it would live drifting through the sea, where there are turtles with jaws that tear through the epidermis and devour the mesoglea (this is the jelly). Perhaps, you have done a great act of kindness.

Artemis-Selene-Hekate does not have a nervous system, and cannot fall in love, but maybe it knows you love it because you feed it fresh baby brine shrimp you hatch yourself, presuming it’s aware of your particular existence on the other side of the invisible barrier it is unable to cross. And if it can see you, maybe it can see out the window, though everything is morphed strange, and—just maybe—when the stars come out it might remember the sea, instinctually, though it’s never been there, when the stars are distorted as though there were a bloom of jellyfish in the sky. And a moon jellyfish that can do all this, what might it know of loneliness?
“Two cents to guess the beads of light on the horizon,” from the man with sausage links dangling where string lights should be.

The group looks at the mess of whites and reds and greens, closeshaves throttling toplike to the show, Airhorns and fiberglass slapsongs on the waves.

Looking at the lights: “Ten thousand,” “Two-ninety,” “There are four-hundred-forty-four!”
“Look up! Up! Infinite lights and they’re all dead!”
“Two cents goes to the biggest smart-ass stranded on shore.”

The Sausage Man flips his coins, forgets his flat-top, eyebrows peaked at pretty passerbys: “A Swiss-cheese jacket for has-it-all princess?” Eyes up,

Rolling blankets across the dockends, the girls catch lines and splash and drag toes, blink at beveragy boys.

The incoming armada slows—
a match strikes and sparkwhistling sends flashbulbs skyward:
concuss and cloud up—
Powder sails at random into tree
Tops, Oohs, Ahs—
the whole show through until
“This is what freedom looks like,” more airhorns, and Annual fuss over.

Engines turn,
Boats topple towards darkened docks,
Sausage Man shacks up,
Passerbys depart in tandem.

Smoke gathers and Two-Cents stays behind to read the design of original whites and radio reds, gridlocked on radar assignment, blocked—guiding fiberglass, lost loons, and airplanes into bulks of dark rock.
sur
drew mcloon

Five hundred miles (ragged and stiffassed since TJ)
stopping only to split gas
from ten-gallon men
reclined highwayside on faded cans:

Men in rawhide who stood and shuffled at the mere sound of motors,
brewed stenchy oils and gasoline, cruder than crude—
Who before you dug themselves a place in the dust.

Haggard as all hell,
fumbling with el dinero,
we dragged out a deal.
Payed what we thought was half price.

Next morning,
shelter in the shade of a taquería,
tortillas and tortillas.
Lugs lugging about in decadesold race decals,
talking to glassbottles through frosted panes,
scouring our pockets for free smokes, inquiring about beer:
Sí, sí, sí.

That night:
tequila and tequila and
bob and weave with the locals,

All to the lonesome nylon rattle of makeshift mariachi.
I could see his whole future in a handshake.

He introduced himself as Ben, which I later found to be his substitute for Benedict. (His name was the only overly pretentious thing that I didn’t fault him for.) The shake itself was strong but concise, the eye contact a bare minimum and the wealth winking at me even then, in the guise of a slick Rolex worn with easy habit. I got the feeling that we would not have met had it not been for circumstances that forced our acquaintance now.

Today, however, we did the small talk, because it’s what hordes of people forced in a group of strangers do. I quickly found out he was going into economics or finance; it was one of the things that defined him. Wall Street bound then, and maybe one day politics, too. The suit would slip on as easily as the Rolex, and from then on he’d never be anything else than what was written for him.

It wasn’t a terrible life, I suppose. When money came easy, most other worries washed away. He was good looking enough to be deservedly confident, and everything else from there barely paused to tumble into his lap. He’d fuck a string of girls simply because they were pretty enough or easy enough, and one day he would marry one of them because it was time, and duty insisted he make a son to foist his history upon, as all the generations had done before him.

Still, I knew that nothing that looked perfect ever was, but I also knew that if misery should ever cross ways with him, he’d never find a friend his money couldn’t buy.

I’ve always wondered if boys can smell easiness on a girl the same way we smell desperation on them. Eau de Douchebag is far harder to sniff out, or maybe I just don’t care.

I would have posited this question to him, but that isn’t in the sphere of our limited conversation topics, and it’d incite unnecessary judgment. On his part. I probably judge enough for the both of us.

Naked and sweating, my first instinct is to pass out or better, grab
my clothes and escape. His is to reach for a Marlboro. He proffers one. I don’t smoke, but I grab it anyway with the distinct feeling it is a test I have to pass.

Nicotine is probably the safest of his sins. With money and minutiae like his, it is only too easy to pilfer his parents’ prescriptions or finagle a way into his own.

I don’t wonder why he’d done it; the 3am text said it all. Options 1 thru 5 had said no and he must’ve smelted the easiness on me, since we both know I don’t fill his other requirement.

I have to wonder about me, though. What do I hope to accomplish? There is no long-term game here; we’re both pretty much the opposite of what the other wants to marry.

We smoke in an almost companionable silence. It’s not my first cigarette, so I don’t cough, but the tobacco taste crawls down my throat, unwelcome.

“You staying?”

I look at him. Even covered in sweat he is the picture of cool confidence. He doesn’t look to me, but the half-turned angle of his head almost gives the illusion of it.

I look at my phone. 5:17am.

My pile of clothes are limp, in an almost artful disarray on the floor. “I’ll go,” I say. I don’t say anything as I put on my clothes, and I don’t look to him again.

—

Of all my friends, Cess offers the least judgment, so it’s her I confide in, after the fifth time.

She’s quiet, which worries me because she’s never quiet. Then: “You never stay?” I shake my head.

“And you never talk in the daytime?” Another shake.

She peers at me with her too keen eyes. “And you’re okay with this arrangement?”

I shrug. “He’s the last kind of guy I’d date. It’s just sex.”

She leans back. Her eyes are not full of judgment, but pity. I think that’s worse.
“Just be careful, alright?”
I’m surprised Cess won’t try to convince me to stop, but that’s not her style. I wouldn’t have come to her if that’s what I wanted to hear.
“I’m fine,” I say. I’m not sure how honest it is.

—

My friends are chatting about inane things: lousy professors, parties, love lives. Having gotten home at 6am again, I have no energy to pay attention, until I hear his name.
“What?” I ask. My voice is too sharp: they look to me with eyes narrowed and eyebrows raised. “Andie’s dating who?”
“Ben,” Karen repeats, still looking at me curiously. “From Delta Tau.”
I have to allay suspicion. “Ohhh,” I reply, like I just recognized it. “I think I met him once. Good for her.”
“Yeah,” Karen continues, “he asked her out with roses and everything, it was so romantic. They went to Bella for their first date, too, he’s pulling out all the stops.”
But he’s only pulling out for me, I think.
“How long have they been dating?” I ask.
“Just a month, I think. They’re taking it slow.”
In the past month I’ve seen him at least four times. I would feel guilty but I can’t decide if I feel like I’m the one being cheated on.
“Well, I’m happy for her,” I say. The pleasant smile feels foreign, but I’m a halfway decent actress. “She deserves a nice guy.”

—

3:42am
Come over?
I glance at my phone in the midst of putting on my pajamas. It’s been a week since I found out about Andie.
I pick up the phone and type with angry fingers. Perhaps this is a conversation better said in person, but we don’t do conversations.

3:42am
Ask your girlfriend.
I toss the phone back onto my bed and shove my leg into my pj shorts harder than I did before.
A part of me still hopes for that telltale buzz and flash of the screen. I wait another half hour before I let myself give up and go to sleep.

—

Cess finds me in the campus Starbucks.

“Are you guys still fucking?” She does the courtesy of whispering but the accusation still slaps me.

“No,” I shoot back tersely. “As soon as I found out about Andie I stopped it.”

She breathes a sigh. I still glare, so she reaches for me with kinder eyes.

“Look, I was just worried about you, okay? How are you taking it?”

“I’m fine, really.” It feels more honest this time. “Like I said, we were never serious.”

Her lips quirk as they slide to the left. I’ve seen Cess’s disbelief too many times to miss the sign.

“I know you say it was just sex but... It’s okay to admit it stings, you know. He’s an asshole.”

She’s not wrong, but I still say, “He’s a gentleman to Andie. I’m sure they’re happy together. I’m happy for them.” I smile to complete the picture. “Honestly, Cess.”

Her mouth stays quirked. For a few moments, Cess just stares, so I stare back with that bright little smile.

Her intake of breath says volumes, but I keep that smile, so when she finally speaks she just says, “So how are you doing with that philosophy paper?”

—

It’s been a good five weeks of mid-semester hell, with longform essays and memorization-heavy exams to occupy most of my brainspace. When my phone buzzes at 1 something, I assume it’s someone asking a question about enzymes or worse, Kierkegaard.

1:13am

Come over?

I stare at those eight familiar letters on my lockscreen. It’s not the words that are foreign to me but the time, which is why instead of un-
locking my phone to type a reply (and quickly deleting it) or tossing my phone aside the way I had a month ago, I can only read the time over and over until the 3 switches to 4.

1:14am
Please.

These letters are new. I watch them even as my middle finger slides to unlock with deliberate slowness, and the five letters blow up into stark white text on a royal blue bubble. I watch them and not the keyboard as that same finger types my two letter reply.

1:16am
Ok.

I don’t quite know what I expect when I knock on the door with three short raps.

The first thing I feel is his hand swooping my hair behind my ear as he guides my head to his with easy dominance, his lips firm, insistent, too insistent. I remain unmoved until he pulls away with a sigh that echoes syllables of frustration: *why are you not following the standard procedure?*

I step back and look up at him. “Where’s Andie?”

He shrugs. “Not here.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” I bark before I can check myself. Then: “You’re still dating her.” It’s not a question.

Another shrug. “We had a fight, my dear Watson.” The shrug I could take for ambiguous if I wanted to, if it weren’t for the challenge in his eyes. “You coming in?”

My body leans forward without me taking a step, but despite the idiocy that had me come here, I can’t slide back in just yet. “Andie’s my friend, you know.”

He doesn’t quite laugh, but a smirk appears and I know he wants to. “Didn’t see you at her birthday.”

We both know I wasn’t invited. “She’s still my friend,” I repeat, words still firm, mind resilient, voice a hard granite, and yet my idiot body still tingles from that gentle little caress he opened with.

Silence stretches as his smirk fades and I don’t move. But I don’t
leave, either. After a few moments of our staredown, he says, “Come in. Please.”

That stupid word again. Before today I’d never been gifted it, but now he’s whoring it out like the cheap (effective) manipulation tool it is. Then: “I have something for you.” He lets the door swing open as he turns back into the apartment without waiting for me to say something, anything. It’s an arrogant move, but the new words work their charm anyway.

I step over the threshold and shut the door behind me, my curiosity stronger than whatever self-preservation I was pretending to have. Still, I cross my arms and hug my stomach before looking at him with silent expectation.

Keeping our locked gaze, he opens his hand. I glance down to see an Alex and Ani bracelet. There’s nothing particularly significant about it, nothing that screams personalization for me. It could be a gift Andie rejected for all I know, but my traitorous hand moves to touch it anyway. His other hand moves to hold my wrist with athletic swiftness, and he clasps on the bracelet easily. “I didn’t say I accept,” I argue, sliding my wrist back towards me, but his grip is firm.

That nearly laughing smirk returns. “Didn’t you?”

I jerk my wrist with more force this time, so he lets go. I stare at the bracelet as I turn my wrist over to admire that shiny charm that I’d never buy on my own. “What’s this for?” You’ve never given me anything before is what I don’t say but we both hear.

His hands free, he moves to swoop my hair again. “For you.” Even in this quiet I know it’s a non-answer, but it’s a coupled with a move he knows I love, that manipulative bastard. I hate it, I hate him because it works, and as his fingers reach the ends of my hair I move in, lips first then hands everywhere, my new bracelet ringing with guilt and weakness. As his hands move down and his lips press more firmly, his Rolex brushes against my thin little bracelet and behind my shut eyelids I see this is the first of many bribes, and I hate myself.

But then he does that other thing I love and I gasp, he breathes a laugh deep into my neck and I think I should take what satisfaction I can get, and then I don’t think anymore.
Freight boxes stacked along the railroad track pile up, built between the middle finger and thumb of some small god: blue, red, and rust orange.

The pajama pants I am folding & putting away smelling of coffee and another’s detergent, a fly rubbing its front legs together like it’s plotting something, read further

adaptation for flight is the reduction in the number of neural ganglia, the female with her mandibles1 which sounds like man nibbles when you read it fast, oh, to put an optimistic number of coins into the coin meter. Birds of lipstick stain take flight from the ledge of a porcelain mug, feed me words when I sip, glance out the peephole of my flying submarine.

Boats run like meteorites on limpid bay waters, strike with vengeance. A man leans over, all cigarette and smells, which one looks most like a mobster? The whites of an over-easy egg popped bubbles & I remembered when you poured the egg from its shell, yolk coming last with a golden egg of a plop. You, who held the spatula high and mighty.

The floor below resonates with the voice of my landlord settled deep in his wheelchair, a honeyed lullaby carried up the stairwell, broken in planks of wood pound reckless into the closet floors. Afternoons his sound traverses the lawn, reaches his son
who picks all the wrong vegetables, builds a fort from our trash.
Sunday some deep well

opens up, sweeping everything from the top shelf I had kept for safe
keeping, kneeling to gather the last tomatoes fallen, too plump to
cling under their own weight. I pick one with

a window where a small insect has dug too deep and laid eggs. I
want to cut the bug from its nest, tell it that this tomato is not a
home. The tomato is already softening in the heat,

flesh crinkling up and browning around the wound as if to say never
mind, never mind that, the last of the juices seeping from its belly.
Tomato knows the summer of massacre, earth

riddled with tiny red bodies the dog noses in disinterest. The
doctors they stroke the sole of a dead man’s foot with the sharp end
of a reflex hammer and perhaps it is the most

human thing in the world to know without knowing that he is
dead. Step into the heavy fug of Atlanta so I can slip a hard candy
between your teeth. Suck on it,

tell me why we are still here, heaving the viscous clouds of a dragon.
morning mysterium

matt schroeder

Morning skies buzz electric steel,
Harmonized against further
Honing hues of grey grey grey grey grey grey grey grey grey grey

(Here there are too many to pull a face)

They lie low in this country
As if sky sinks lower in
Certain places on Earth
Where diffused sighs slow and many
Slink back onto clouded minds,
Live wires as much a mirror of
Atlas as the veins heaving:

Sear the water from the land

A cat pretends to be a bicycle
I swallow truisms of the invisible
Hop hazardless propeller dreams that
Float to counter my clockwise eyes
As trains rush the people passing

I forget myself
Pedal hard and home.
The rain falls in a fine phosphorescent mist, the streetlights glitter in the puddles at their feet. Christian and his father enter the little church of the Guardian Angels. Its wooden door is heavy, but swings easily in his father’s hand. They pass through the tiny foyer, pause at the stoup to sprinkle themselves, and walk up the aisle, vinyl tiles creaking beneath their feet. The tungsten lights burn garishly. The stained-glass saints in the little windows are solid black. They genuflect and enter a pew.

About twenty-five people attend this evening reconciliation service. Directly in front of them sits an old man in a black suit with frayed collar. He has opened a little tattered prayer book, the place marked by a devotional card he absent-mindedly strokes with a thumb, the nail cracked and yellow. To their right two women lean their heads together. Their whispers do not penetrate the surrounding silence. The air is still, and the votive candles burn without flickering. A middle-aged husband and wife sit near the front. She kneels with her beads hanging over the pew in front of her. He stares at the ceiling. Ten paces in front of them God is in his box.

The sanctuary light is switched on with a click and the priest enters. He is in somber black; no color vestments tonight. He prays briefly before the tabernacle, then walks to the ambo and speaks, his native Italian tongue imparting a melodious and pleasing tone to his English. But his countenance is grave. His features are gaunt and austere. He speaks of sin, of the hell man has made on Earth, and the escape opened by God’s merciful death. Acknowledge the evil in your souls, he says. Pray to our Blessed Mother, for faith in Holy Church, and true contrition to make a courageous and sincere confession. When he finishes he takes his stole from the credence table, kisses it, lays it over his shoulders, genuflects, steps down from the sanctuary, and enters the confessor’s box. A man rises from the congregation, enters the sanctuary, and recites a public examination of conscience.

_Do I accept honestly my need for spiritual direction and correction? . . . Do I_
truly believe the Church can absolve me of my sins through the power invested in her by the Holy Spirit? . . . Have I been guilty of idolatry through attachment to worldly things? . . .

The old man in front of them rises and hobbles towards the queue. What sins is he capable of, what monstrous inclinations or thoughts has he to confess?


The two women who before the service were chatting have finished their confessions and have returned to their pew to do their penance. Have they been guilty of anything but inattentiveness in church? The middle-aged husband and wife have gone. Perhaps he confessed to an absence of faith, and she to a vain confidence in her own piety. Among the few who have not yet risen are Christian and his father. His father turns his head and says something into Christian’s ear. Christian does not respond. His father turns his head back and they remain sitting stiffly.

. . . Have I been faithful to my wife or husband? . . . Have I loved my children? Have I guided them, and attended to their religious instruction? . . . Have I committed impure acts with myself or others? . . .

His parents had sent him to Holy Cross, an excellent Catholic College in Vermont.

Mrs. Fieldwalker came into Christian’s room one evening when he was sixteen. He was sitting at his desk on which were spread the pieces of an ancient telephone he had disassembled, and which he was going to put together again. The mysterious parts were all laid out neatly for his admiration.

“Dear, are you busy?”

“Uh-huh.” Not looking up.

“What are you doing?” she asked, as though curious.

“Putting this phone back together.” Picking up the earpiece, slipping it into the headset, and screwing on the plastic cover. That was the easiest step.
“I see.” What she saw was a pointless exercise: the phone had been assembled before he took it apart. “You aren’t neglecting your studies, I hope.”

“No.”

“How many exams do you have left?”

“French.”

“Just French?”

“Yeah.”

“You think you did all right on the others?” She pushed aside some clothes and sat on his bed: a signal that she was not going to be driven away.

“Yeah.”

“And what about next year’s courses? Have you got those picked out yet?”

“We did that a month ago.” Taking up a screwdriver. All these questions had been asked before. “Good. I guess one of these days you’ll have to start thinking about what you’ll do after high school.” She mentioned this, too, as if it were a new subject.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Have you thought about it at all?”

“Mm. Maybe engineering.”

“Engineering? That’s interesting.” She didn’t sound as though it were. She cleared her throat. “Have you given any more thought about the priesthood?”

“Mm . . . a bit.” He hated himself.

“Just a bit?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I suppose it will all become clear in time. As long as you’re open to what God is calling you to.”

“Uh-huh.”

“By the way, Fr. Martino is coming to dinner next week. On Wednesday. I thought I’d let you know in case you wanted to be here.”

“OK.” Screwing a metal bracket to the chassis.

“What does ‘OK’ mean?”
He didn’t say anything for a minute. Then, “I don’t know.”

“Then who should I ask, Christian?”

“Well”—Pause—“I guess I’ll be here.”

She exhaled forcefully. “You don’t have to be if you don’t want, Christian. I’m not forcing you. I just thought you might be interested. You know, eventually you’re going to have to make some decisions about your future. Your father and I can’t make them for you.”

“OK.”

Mrs. Fieldwalker told Fr. Martino, when he came to dinner, that Christian was curious about the priesthood, and had some questions.

“Yes, and what are they?” he asked, turning a grave smile on the boy.

Christian mumbled a few half-formed questions, feeling red-faced and stupid, and Fr. Martino gravely answered with his usual sagacity. He had no special gift with young people. Christian stared at his plate and nodded lamely at the priest’s words.

While the priest donned his overcoat in the foyer, Mrs. Fieldwalker explained that Christian was a quiet and sensitive boy who had difficulty expressing himself. Searching for something positive to say, Fr. Martino murmured that the boy showed promise. Mrs. Fieldwalker was pleased. As they were washing up, she told her son what Fr. Martino had said, and asked whether he could still picture himself a priest. He shrugged and said maybe.

A year later he went on a vocation-awareness retreat. When he came back she asked whether he still felt called. He said he thought so. After graduating from high school he applied to the seminary. In the interview he was told that many young men need time to discover their true vocation, and he was advised to pray about it for another year. This threw the family into a crisis. What was he to do for a year? The safest haven seemed a general arts program in a good Catholic college. Holy Cross was highly recommended by friends of Mr. and Mrs. Fieldwalker who already had children there.

Of course they would have preferred him to be in one of the college residences, but as they applied late, there were no remaining vacancies. Mr. Fieldwalker and Christian drove down in August to find a room off
campus. The journey took four hours. When they got there, everything left was overpriced or filled with rowdies. They were losing hope when they came across an advertisement for what might be a respectable establishment, even if it was a little farther from the college. After repeated rings, the door was opened by a miniature elderly lady. Her name was Mrs. Elena Feschuk, a widow, and in addition to being hard of hearing she was nearly blind from cataracts. She shouted that she didn’t like young men: they were dirty and noisy. She had had a young man once, and he left terrible rings in the tub that her housekeeper almost had to scrub off the enamel to remove. Mr. Fieldwalker, impressed by the cleanliness of the premises, and the evident strictness of the Feschukian regime, attempted to dispel her prejudice, explaining that Christian was a quiet, polite lad who had been brought up in a well-structured home environment. The old lady nodded with grudging approval and said she would need five hundred dollars’ damage deposit, in case the boy broke something, and there was to be no music after ten p.m.

On the second of September, Mr. and Mrs. Fieldwalker bade goodbye to their son at the bus depot, both wiping tears. As the coach pulled away, Christian breathed deeply, experiencing relief like a pallet of bricks lifted off his chest. Freedom. Of course he was still under obligation to phone home once a week, but that was a small price to pay. During their brief conversations his mother’s concerns never varied. Was he eating enough? Was he getting enough sleep? Was the course load too heavy? Was he remembering to attend Mass? Yes, Yes, No, and Yes (guiltily) were his answers. There was also the visit home at Christmas. But overall it was a light probation.

Six months passed: a mere 180 days on the calendar, but eons of time for change in a nineteen-year-old tasting the first fruit of independence. He was lolling in bed late one Saturday morning in March nursing a hangover when there was a knock at the door. He threw on his housecoat and answered it. There was his father, large as life in his V-neck curling-club sweater. Christian nearly collapsed from the shock. His father explained that he was down for a tournament and thought he’d popped by. Just out of the blue.
“You should have called,” said Christian, turning deathly pale. “I would have cleaned up.”

“My God,” said Mr. Fieldwalker, his eyes like saucers. “My God, this place is a pigsty.” He didn’t know where to look first, but stared open-mouthed from the clothes heaped on the floor, to the unmade bed, the dirty dishes littering the desk, and the beer bottles on the radiator and lining the window ledge. That was on his first sweep. Christian felt weak. He wanted to sit down. On his second sweep Mr. Fieldwalker perceived much more: outside the window, a make-shift line with panties fluttering gaily in the breeze; among the tangled clothes on the floor pink socks; jostling for space on the nightstand little glass bottles and jars. Christian waited for the explosion. But no explosion came. His father simply deflated. Performing a feat of self-control that amazed Christian, Mr. Fieldwalker snapped his mouth shut, swallowed hard, and invited his son to lunch.

Lunch consisted of an interrogation, cordial, but firm. Perhaps what Mr. Fieldwalker had most difficulty accepting was that the girl was also a freshman at Holy Cross. He would have preferred that she waited tables for a living, or danced on them, so he might class her as a hardened woman. But as she was the same age as Christian, attending the same Catholic college, and had also been brought up in a well-structured home environment, a case could hardly be made that she had taken advantage of his son. When he learned all he wanted to know, Mr. Fieldwalker gave Christian a long talk on love, commitment, the purpose of marriage, and the dangers of a casual lifestyle. Christian hung his head, ashamed and humiliated. His remorse was profound: how could he have been so stupid not to foresee the possibility of his father showing up without warning? At the same time resentment smoldered. His father had no right to interfere in his privacy, to lecture him as though he were still an adolescent. He was an adult. Despite this resentment, he felt relieved when Mr. Fieldwalker told him firmly that the girl had to go. The truth was, he too wanted to be rid of her. Living together had been fun for a week; a drag after three. He was glad for a compelling reason to
extricate himself. But how was he to do it?

As with most of his problems, Christian’s solution to this one was to avoid it. He began to stay out all day and all hours of the night, often sleeping on a buddy’s floor. Finally one day after an especially long absence he returned to his room to discover that the underwear on the line, the pink socks, and the problem were gone. On the nightstand where the jars and bottles had been there was only a little scrawled note full of angry and hurt sentiments, which he read impatiently before throwing into the wastepaper basket. He would not make the same mistake next time, and as it happened, the next time might be just around the corner, for he was already interested in another girl. She worked part-time in the library, where he had spent a lot of hours studying during his avoidance tactic. Only glances and a few words had been exchanged, and they had bumped into each other occasionally on campus and said hello. Then one night Christian went to a house party, and in celebration of his newly won bachelorhood became drunk. By happy chance she was there too. Her name was Vanessa. They danced, he held her, they kissed. He asked if she wanted to go home with him. “I’d like to,” she said, “but don’t you think it’s too soon?”

This fledging romance was paused with the end of term and Christian’s return home. His brief cohabitation was already ancient history to him, but it was soon clear that there was little else on his mother’s mind. She was still in shock, but managed to wait until her husband was not in the house to confront Christian. She made him a sandwich, then watched him eat it with incredulous eyes. Her son, the future priest, shacking up. “What if you had got that girl pregnant?” she asked. “What would you have done then? Christian, what’s wrong with you?”

What was wrong with him? What was wrong with her? She was the one with the problem, the one out of touch with reality. Modern parents were supposed to worry that you wore a condom, but of course to her condoms were worse than pregnancy—or STDs—and she was asking what was wrong with him! Then, as though his eyes
had told her what he was thinking, she demanded to know if they had been using contraceptives. He shook his head.

“No?”

He shook his head. “It’s none of your business.”

She received the answer like a slap on the face. None of her business? How could he be so ungrateful! Her voice rose nearly to a shriek. She brought him into this world. He was promiscuous, sleazy, wicked. “Out of my sight!” she screamed, but it was she who left the table in tears.

The next day his parents confronted him with grim and drawn faces, his mother clearly lacking sleep. Mr. Fieldwalker gravely, calmly, asked him what he intended to do in September.

“Going back to Holy Cross,” Christian said.

“So you have definitely decided against reapplying at the seminary?”

“Yes.”

“And who is going to pay the tuition?”

Christian had no answer.

“Can you afford the tuition yourself?”

“Yes.”

“Yes?” repeated his father. “How?”

He hated them.

“I don’t think you can afford it, Chris. Where would you come up with that kind of money?”

A week later the ultimatum came: confession, or no Holy Cross. Christian thought about it. He thought about his buddies. He thought about Vanessa. He thought about how even the name Vanessa made him tingle. He thought about how he could tell the priest whatever the hell he wanted in the box, a lie, even the truth if he wanted, even that he wasn’t the slightest bit sorry and didn’t give a damn if he wasn’t absolved. He thought about how it would really be his parents who would be judged by God. So he agreed. And that is why he is sitting in the pew beside his father, and like the cat that climbs the tree and learns that it has not the courage to come down, Christian has discovered that he hasn’t got the courage to stand up.
Have I been guilty of gossip or calumny? Have I refused reconciliation with another? Do I try to hide my sins from myself, and have I in the past told my confessor everything?

The queue dwindles. The last confessant enters the box, and Christian still sits. His father bows his head. Now the priest has emerged from the confessional. He is disappearing into the sacristy, removing his stole. He switches off the sanctuary light.
vote hitler!

brice ezell

There’s not much you can say except anything. War buried us in reparations, pockets turned out for crimes we didn’t commit.

We’re past the point of starvation; oh, what we would give to feel the bomb-drop punch of hunger.

So please, tell us of strength and solidarity. Surely it’s a lack of words that fuels our misery, an inability to speak truth or power.

But these cynical thoughts, the last self-defense we have, are so suddenly crushed by your words, raining down like anvils through despair and unending.

Lockstep our eyes fix on you, the master of language and lore. Your words taste different in the air; our mouths gasp, taking in breaths scented with resolve and the promise of justice. Where once we spent the weeks trying to figure out if we’re the widows to the Weimar, or she to us, you remind us that death is just a roadblock to march past.

And you’re even kind of funny up there above us, talking so big beneath that silly little moustache.
autumn maze

ray greenblatt

In the middle of a cornfield
I saw a set of wooden
observation stairs.
Autumns ago we had strode
into that labyrinth hand-in-hand
my mantra “Bear right, always right”
yours “Alternate.”
Sun arced higher, shadows longer
corridors curved onward
our faces flushed from many things.
I, a Mobius going
in unending circles,
you I half-expected
to remove a mask
reveal wings and soar away.
In this growing creaking place
this green whispering world
someone on the stairs
helped us find our way out.
I come flying in out of the sky all airy and flushed from my head in the clouds running through Arrivals until my Nik there he is I see him. Holding signs he waiting for me cries Zoe oh my Zoe here he is I am here we are here. Flying me to him I see his face and now I am in his arms oh home. I am home I am home this is home. My Nik picks me up and we spin legs and hands in the air with shouting so happy the airport is smiling. The arrivals hall is smiling for us we are together home at last. Home is wherever I’m with you he say as we walk through this new place. I smiling, him grinning. Both we are glowing radiant souls.

He say let’s go are you ready love yes let’s go we’re always ready. So much new he is new here and me just visiting. Look at his golden bright face. Look this is my Nik my best friend. He is the strong stake that keeps me growing towards the sun. Serious of face and free of heart he is a steel beam he pulls me straighter as we move together through his new city. Montreal is great he say. I says Nikky are you happy Nik, he say yeah very happy I says good and we go running through them old hallowed streets spinning until stars strike us down.

My Zoe she is alight she come spilling off the plane in a white long dress its lace climbs her throat and arms and keeps her light inside her. So long since last together we were we are never apart. Now I show her through the new city take her winding around through the buildings my ivy is growing on she say look you touched this place here it is radiant. I says no it was radiant before me will be radiant long after there is no me. She takes my hand and say she no you are the light of all lights you are my Nik and my light. With her light becomes me though. No lovers can take our friendship away this is a fact of our hearts here as we walk through the pagan temples of our fathers who art in heaven.

The snickersnack my camera makes as I take the pictures while she dances her way down. Cobblestones are slippery I says look out my love. In poor French whispers the names of her ballet she does chaîné
turns spinning endless each turn is a picture is a little square of happiness on a roll of film. We are bottling happiness I says she laugh while she pirouette til she gets too dizzy to stand. Stumbling through French words she say *nous sommes le bonheur* - we are happiness. Always have we been this happy I asks. She say Nik do you remember. Remember nights when I was drunk slipping up on myself. I remember. Zoe she look at me say I was sliding through time and you held my hand you holding my hand now my love thank you always. I hug her close through our warm wool coats. I tells her. I loved you then and I love you now for you are mine forever mine my lovely summer girl.

On the bridge we put our names on a lock and throw our fiery hearts into the water. May we always be the best of friends pray us together in atheist inviolable vows. The night is our cathedral the angels unseen are our witnesses to the marriage of our hearts friendship is a leaden chain we lovingly loop around ourselves. So unknowingly did Persephone tie herself to the Underworld but it’s not like that, look: from our holding hands gardens are growing.

Through champagne bubbles I says Nik I’m sick Nik please help me it’s beyond help. Us, lying down in fear for lives barely begun living. We lie on park benches world without end the hills rolling up past our lines of vision past our sight. My love can I do anything how long do we have left he says. Stars are dripping through rice-paper eyelids impossible we swear but we know. End coming over those rolling hills if you look close enough. As it was in the beginning is now and ever shall we weep us fragile things. Made of glass and light so pretty shake us and we shatter.

Ceramic statuettes we part all cracked. Surgeon General’s warnings in vain telling us love ain’t enough baby ain’t enough to keep the despair out of my lungs. Me yelling at her why you smoked those cigarettes why’d you burn out your soul Zoe my darling dying Zoe her crying she say I was so broken I thought a little more won’t hurt. Now her, broken too broke to glue back can’t even superglue hold her throat in. Now
me, shattering new for now where’s the romantic they talk about when people kill themselves huh.

Here we go, she say through them stars in her eyes it’s an adventure my Nik. My Nik, she say, it’s all a road trip and you can’t see the road for the bumps but we get where we’re going don’t we though? What do I know me but maybe we are stronger than we look so young and stupid but blessed with that bravery of the foolish and desperate. I tried to light up my heart when it was dark Nik. I tried. She say broken crumbling mouth the ash slipping through her teeth, we choking old Romans in Pompeian basements.

Still we go flying down the streets us burning young stars filling up aching old Montreal. We’ll outlast this city don’t you worry it was here before us but never was the city so shining golden as when we ran through the streets. The sun glancing off your dark holy hair, my dress long blowing behind me in the sacred wind, and black immortal cameras spinning our way up to whatever gods may be our unconquerable souls.
contributors
Theresa Krupka
S.L. Maloney
Amber Walsh
Marissa Comeau
Nina Misra
John Grey
Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois
Mike Jewett
Amanda Whitehurst
Marian Eiben
Anna Leah Eisner
Christopher Mulrooney
Jaylee Marie Strawman
Zoe Neubauer
Dainiz Almazan
Drew mcLoon
Jamie Lin
Liana Meffert
Matt Schroeder
Bryan Young
Brice Ezell
Ray Greenblatt
Zoe Kemprecos

other work
illustrations by David Zhang
cover art by Drew mcLoon
layout & typesetting by Kristen Gast with help from Marian Eiben

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