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Letter from the Editor

Valpo after a stint as a seamariner

“escribí la primera línea vaga,
vaga, sin cuerpo, pura
tontería,
pura sabiduría del que no sabe nada”

I had to go to the end of the world to find the happiest man alive, but found him I did-one-eyed and shiney nosed, making candy in Valparaiso. You can call him Papi because his name is of little importance. In fact, he had forgotten it, age twelve, the day he walked into his first confitería. From then on his name was azúcar, and his life was dulce.

Every morning Papi wakes in his cupboard-sized room and watches the Chilean seaport come to life like a child’s pop-up book. He lowers a plank from his window to the roof of the shack next door, somersaulting out of bed and shimmying across the small cavern above crisscrossed clotheslines. His house sits bright blue, sideways and precarious, over the side of another building; cherry blossom pink and ready to tip at any moment. Papi walks up the mountain to get to work, collecting a trail of strays as he passes their hideaways and havens. The crew patters through the cobblestone painting of the Chilean seaport in the crisp morning air, stopping to smell the bread at each of the Panerías on the way up. Papi pretends to drop breadcrumbs by crumpling his hand and chuckles at the dogs’ hunger-whistling, swinging his keys.

Papi’s confitería is perched on a hill between a mural of a salsa dancer and graffiti of a gang-war. The door has seven locks, each rusted, cracked but sturdy. On a good day, there might be two customers. Papi doesn’t even particularly like the people who wander into his store; Americans smell a little too clean and check their watches often, sticky-fingered children think all sugar tastes the same, recklessly shoving handfuls of mixed flavors into their mouths. He speaks to them only about candy. Papi will bring out every little box of candy, letting them try pieces again and again, taking two for himself for every one he doles out. When they make their selection they might buy two boxes, but Papi accepts their 500 pesos with wide eyes and a friendly chao as he watches them disappear down the alley. He retreats through the back and does a jig under the poplars, dancing with the dogs and birds and singing a mariner’s song about calm seas and bright skies.
He scurries back to his desk and takes out a list of all the different types of candy he can make with that extra 500 pesos, imagining their colors and flavors and shapes. On days when he makes a sale, Papi stays until late in the evening, unable to stop himself from making at least a few more batches. He watches the sun set over the peaks of the sailboats and down the edge of the world from his window as he kneads and kneads, singing and popping bits of soft sugar into his mouth until the city below melts into small, square lights that blend with the stars and the sea.

Your name is coup d’etat and your life will be dulce. I think fondly of my dulce hombre as I sip on a G&T from my skytower in Santiago, peering over the mountains towards Valparaiso and ignoring an ambassador chatting about his chateau. This capital city of capital knows nothing of the wisdom of having little and wanting less. It has long-ago given up on the spirit of sugar shops and salty celestial seaports. If you spend too much time here you’ll begin to believe them, dismissing dreams of Valpo as frivolous folklore: the fancies of children and lovers. But when I look at you, my lucretius literary loons, you are where the chilean

Waxley Grafton

With an albatross around his neck, Waxley Grafton inspires greatness and revolution in the form of Coup d’etat. Ageless and unique as a sand dollar washed up on the beach, this man of mystery also enjoys pina coladas and getting caught in the rain.
my domino darling sits at her piano for twenty seven hours each day
she knocks me out with her crystalline gazes
chasing me *sixteentimesasecond*
running her fingers through men and god and me

she pushes pedals, touches black and white
simple songs she plays for me

i sit between her and him and i feel whole in my heart
which is not used to steady rhythms, careful keys
i know not where i will die but i was born right here i think,
tripping over daisies, seeing moonbeams in the eyes of ordinary
creatures,
reaching for madness,
dancing into death with a curious smile.
The Rag & Bone Man
Ray Greenblatt

The rag & bone man
fashioned the ancient mummy
the prototype of mankind
made the first golem
to serve all those in need

from bones of fierce beasts
bone filled with brave marrow
weapon against the unknown
he constructed a unique form
wired and hot-wired it

to stand to articulate
wrapping it in rags
of dignity not
dingy but bright dyed
stuffing it to lend form

the rag & bone man
never at a loss
made soup when necessary or
even more enlightened
changed rags to printed word.
Everyone was petting their petals and pruning their leaves in preparation for Picking Season. The prickly competitiveness floated through the air like pollen. The Choosers would begin arriving soon, and the flowers all knew that any feigned loyalty was soon to be forgotten, as no union could withstand the programmed need to be desired by the Choosers. Snide remarks were made by all the flowers, particularly the ones whose damaged self-images had been wilted by years of not being Chosen.

In the corner of the garden, Rose brushed her royal velvet petals and filed down her thorns. Her tall stem took up much room, so she asked Lily if she'd mind moving over a bit. Lily beamed her a snide sideways glance before shifting a few inches to the right, but not before remarking, Careful, Rose, you wouldn't want to come off thorny to the Choosers. The other flowers smirked, and Rose replied, Well at least I'm not flashy, as she withdrew into herself so as to hide her still fairly sharp thorns from the flowers' judgmental gaze. Lily laughed off Rose's criticism but couldn't help a slight self-conscious covering of her petals. After all, perhaps she was showing off a bit too much of her carpel, and the Choosers never wanted a flower that was already in full bloom before they'd even gotten their hands on her.

The flowers nervously prepared, presenting only their nonchalant enjoyment at the primping process, for any glimpse of weakness or any hint that they may care too much about the Choosers' arrival would leave them vulnerable. Aster, a bright, talkative flower, was often criticized for her cynicism and her ability to find fault within anyone. She, like Lily, attempted to make herself seem smaller by shriveling in her petals to make them appear more sparse and less full. As she creased her long, rounded petals, she eyed Rose and Lily and attempted to mimic their preparations. For while Aster resembled the Dandelions in some aspects, or could easily be mistaken for a Daisy, both Rose and Lily always stood out in their unique, original beauty and their sweet dispositions. The way their petals crinkled ever so slightly when they laughed, and the way they seemed to open up only once Choosers arrived, made them both quite popular and likeable.

Rose's long stem seemed to go on forever, and her deep red velvety petals never failed to entrance the Choosers. She possessed both the quality of carefree coolness and of regal authenticity. Rose held a classic beauty that always captured the Choosers' admiring and awe-struck gaze. Lily had the appearance of being big and full of adventure and passion, while still possessing a sense of quiet restraint and purity, a combination of features that attracted so many Choosers.

Aster's yellow button center and long, straight petals overwhelmed the Choosers, and her strong personality that she never seemed able to hide, try as she might, often made sure to scare Choosers off from even considering her as an option. But Aster was patient, and though memories of painful Picking Seasons past had over time made her cynical and hard, Aster's bright center still held warmth, and her long preparation helped her create an outer cloak of confidence, which motivated her to remain hopeful about this Season's Picking results.
Aster’s envious judgments were cut short by Lily’s announcement about some last minute sales for ribbon purchases and stem trimming services. Upon mentioning the latter, she shot Rose a quick look. The flowers surveyed the garden, trying to see if others had adopted this new style of trimmed stems and ribbons. The garden fence seemed to indicate that this trend was necessary, with its painted images of Sunflower adorned with large, floppy ribbons and her stem trimmed at an angle. Sunflower was adored and worshipped as an image of floral perfection. Sunflower did not live in this garden, but her idolized image was painted all over the fence that kept in the flowers of the garden. Her bright yellow petals were mimicked by all the flowers, but with no real success. Whatever frills and bows Sunflower wore, the other flowers wore. When Sunflower was depicted sitting passively in a vase, the other flowers longed to obtain vases. But of course vases were much too expensive for the ordinary flowers. Nevertheless, illustrations of Sunflower, painted on the fence by the Choosers, were well known by all the flowers of the garden, as they served as the unattainable example of what all flowers should strive to become.

This new fad of trimmed stems was said to please the Choosers, as they allowed the flowers to be smaller than their natural state, thus proving not so intimidatingly large. This way, Choosers could more easily care for the flowers without so much fuss. Trimmed stems also allowed for Choosers to fit their Chosen flowers in a vase, another extremely expensive fad. Vases allowed the Choosers to place the flowers wherever they wanted, to be admired as a delicate and beautiful aesthetic in the Choosers’ lives.

As Aster finished her last few fixes, all the while avoiding Rose’s sideways scowl, Lily announced that the Choosers were arriving. Everyone suppressed squeals of anxious, hopeful anticipation at the prospect of being Chosen. Aster attempted to calm her stem from nervously shaking, for she still held out hope of being Chosen, despite her knowledge that she had not previously been deemed worthy of the honor and despite Rose’s condescending aside to Lily that Aster was nowhere near the standard of beauty that the Choosers sought. But Aster had straightened out her petals and attempted to thin them, so as to more closely resemble Sunflower, and she felt her altered appearance had, at the least, increased her chances of fulfilling her lifelong dream of being Chosen. Although Aster knew she would never be as beautiful as Rose or Lily, she had been told all her life that being Chosen was her only goal, and if she could not become desirable, then what else was left for her in the garden?

The Choosers arrived, and all excited murmurs were hushed by their presence. The flowers fluffed out their petals so as to both catch the Choosers’ eyes and perhaps outshine the other flowers. The Choosers mulled over their options as the flowers waited patiently in anticipation. Rose was the first to be Chosen, and as she was snipped from the ground, Lily fought to hide her disappointment. Soon, however, Lily too was separated from her roots and carried away. Aster presented herself as pleasantly as she could, only to find herself overlooked by all the Choosers. As Aster scolded herself for being so unappealing and began to recount all the aspects she could have changed and all the remedies she could have done to fix herself in preparation for the Choosers, she heard a strong voice declare, That one. As Aster looked up, she saw that a large, thick, and slightly grimy finger was pointing right at her. Aster lit up, and she became consumed by glee as she realized that she had finally been Chosen.
A Chooser finally saw beauty in her. Aster stood up straight so as to make the Picking easier for the kind Chooser. Grubby fingers came swooping down to pluck Aster from the soil, and she felt a slight pinch. Aster recoiled a bit at the surprisingly unpleasant feeling, at which point the Chooser pulled her more forcefully. Aster, fearful that she had angered the Chooser and ruined her one chance of being Chosen, quickly made herself easy to carry once again. The Chooser carried Aster away, and she looked back at the garden with some sadness and nostalgia, but quickly corrected herself. How could she be thinking about the garden when all she’d ever wanted was to be Chosen? She scolded herself for being so foolish and unappreciative of the Chooser for Picking her, extinguishing all feelings of loss and pushing away the faint gnawing suspicion that perhaps this was a mistake.

They soon arrived at the Chooser’s home, which looked nothing like Aster’s garden. The Chooser placed Aster in a glorious glass vase, which resembled a less glamorous version of the vase portrayed in Sunflower’s fence paintings. Aster felt like a princess as she was placed into the vase, and she immediately concluded that she was incredibly fortunate, any fears or misgivings consequently vanishing. Aster stood proudly in the vase, and she presented herself as beautifully as she knew how—surely the Chooser deserved anything he wanted after being so kind as to Choose her.

Aster presented herself every moment the Chooser entered the room, and she stood tall, petals extended and poised to provide aesthetic pleasure to the Chooser for as long as he remained in her presence. Aster continued this for many days, feeling as though her debt to her Chooser would never be paid. For this great, powerful Chooser, who could have Picked anyone at all, had picked her—simple, little Aster.

On the fifth day, Aster began to feel weak. She felt so guilty that her once vibrant, full petals were shriveling into a dismal brown, a most unappealing shade for the Chooser to survey. Aster’s one purpose had been to provide beauty for the Chooser’s gaze. But now she was beginning to falter, and she feared that she was disappointing the Chooser.

The next day, Aster’s petals became more brown and more shriveled, and she felt an odd, unfamiliar sensation—a petal was becoming heavy and brittle. She fought to keep her petal, but despite all the strength she could muster, the petal separated and spiraled down, crashing into the tablecloth. Aster looked down at the fallen petal in horror. She pondered, what had she done wrong to destroy her beauty? When the Chooser entered the room that day, Aster swelled with Shame, and she could feel his disapproving glare. The Chooser had been so generous to Choose simple, plain Aster, and yet she had failed, and she had disappointed him. Aster continued to weaken, blaming herself and wondering what misstep she could have made to deteriorate to this state, unfit for the Chooser’s gaze. Each hour, another petal fell, and the brown brittle lifelessness poisoned even the brightest, healthiest facets of the flower. Aster became weak and wilted, and the pain of losing so many petals caused her to cry out. But the Chooser had stopped coming, for Aster was no longer of any value to him. So Aster faded silently, her vivaciousness stomped out. As she lay crumpled over in the glass vase from which she could not escape, memories of her beautiful garden, prior to the toxic weeding out of the Choosers, flourished in her mind. Aster’s final thoughts overflowed with images of happy flowers basking in the sunlight, and of wishes that the next generation of Roses, Lilies, and Asters would thrive and grow together.
She, who loves you, and whom you love as well, snapped on the disposable Kodak bought at CVS downtown before you got to the inn, you seeming to soften, melt, evaporate, with the hazy morning, the white strand foregrounding the distance there. Why would she do that? Keep you standing there? Obviously to keep all that morning whole, fresh, and to keep you with it, to keep, even after check out, you for a while. Otherwise you could have melted farther into the horizon: lighthouse, houses, the sand swallowing you like a cod cake... like the slug of time in the ferry’s wake.
"You better go," said my husband. "It always makes you feel better." I drove the truck up highway 101, heater blasting on my feet as the chill air blew in through the window. I stared at the low, gray fog bank streaking across the horizon; the tops of the islands hung in mid-air. I parked across the street from the beach and carried my board down the rocky bank to the sand, zipped up my wetsuit and plunged in. The cold bit my neck and hands, the smell of brine and oil tar filled my nostrils. I was surrounded by roiling foam Flags of seaweed that dangled from hollow bobs and wrapped themselves around my legs. I paddled out past the white water.

The waves rolled in, strong and high, breaking first at the point and curling all the way down the beach. I rode them one after another, the whole length of the space between the point and the first houses on the south side, but the paddle out was tough. I struggled forward against each crashing wave, back arched above the board, flying up then thumping down into the after-swell. Limp and exhausted, I'd run out of breath. My arms moved, but it felt as if I couldn't get enough oxygen to power through the water. I kept stopping to clutch my chest and suck air into my lungs. Pissed off at the biggest waves as they crashed into my face and shoved me back ten feet, "Damn you!" I'd mumble. "So this is how you're going to be." Once I was in position, a good time to rest, there'd be a wave I had to take or get crushed by, so I'd take it, even though it was too early, I wasn't ready.

I rode a lot of fast ones but the stoke wasn't coming. I was too tired. But I couldn't stop. I was looking through the salt built up on my eyelashes, the world a spotty haze. I wiped my face with a cold wet hand. For a moment, just cresting over the back of a distant wave, I saw somebody in the water who looked like Bill Monroe. I'd been in for about two hours already, just trying to raise my spirits, getting all kinds of nice long rides down the beach, but I was still pissy. Just cuz. I said to myself, "That's not Bill." Then I realized, "I may never see Bill Monroe again in my life and I really don't care. The time for caring about Bill Monroe is over. Good riddance!"

So then, of course, it turned out to be Bill Monroe. We were floating on our boards not far from each other but he never said a word and neither did I. He paddled to catch a wave and I watched him pop up and turn immediately into the sweet spot, turn again into the white, and keep that fast weaving motion all the way down the beach. Tall and thin with a big head and long arms, he'd lost a lot of weight, making him smaller than I remembered him, even a little fragile. I'd always heard about what a great surfer he was and now here we were, finally in the water together, and I was close enough to see his every move. He played with the wave like a master, not being a hot shot, just sliding into a groove, riding the inner curl, slicing up and down, a few big backward steps here, then smaller steps creeping forward, constantly adjusting, sensitive to the speed and shape and movement of the water.
He paddled back to the line-up and as he was coming toward me I caught one of the bigger waves of the day. I pretended not to notice him, just glanced over my shoulder, lowered my head and paddled forward. At this rate we would never say, “Hi.” Then, as I was paddling up from that ride, he caught a wave and came shooting toward me. He looked so great, so tall and gangly. As he glided forward I yelled, “Whoohoo, Bill!” He glanced my way, grinned widely and waved his hand as he swept past. “Hi, Caroline,” he said, nice and friendly. He paddled up afterward.

“I’d seen you before, but I didn’t recognize you,” he said, “I’d been admiring your hat. I like it that it has earflaps as well as a visor. That would keep my ears from getting burned.” He was wearing a lot of thick white sunscreen smeared haphazardly around his mouth and cheeks, but his head was bare and his hair seemed a lot thinner than I’d remembered. He must be in his fifties by now and thirty-five years of surfing in the sun have carved deep lines around his mouth.

“I love Mondos,” he said. “I used to come here a lot-- but now, without a car, I can only come when somebody else takes me. Is this the only place you surf?”

“Usually. Sometimes I go to C Street, and on a bad day I’ll try Rincon.”

“I think Mondos is underappreciated for all the right reasons,” he said. I didn’t ask him what he meant, though I wondered afterward. It was the kind of cryptic remark for which he was famous. He told me he hadn’t been to Mondos since August, the last time I’d seen him, when he appeared in the water one day and just as quickly disappeared. I told him I’d bought a new board since then and patted the rails of the one I was sitting on. It was long with a key lime edge around a white center. He eyed it, nodded his head approvingly and said, “Looks like a nice board,” in the way other guys have said it, almost covetously; but with him I felt it was a bit of a put on, to be nice, to make me feel that he was taking me seriously. I liked that he was being surfer-dude cool about the board, asking me how long it was, who made it, but I couldn’t help suspect him of patronizing me. He knew I’d been in love with him once.

I’d heard he was homeless and asked if he still house-sat because I needed a house-sitter some time in July. He squinted into the sun and said, “I hesitate to answer. I can’t even make plans for tomorrow, let alone July. But I’ve got a cell phone now, so if you get in a jam you can call me on that.”

“It would be a very unfussy job,” I said. “Just a couple of cats. But it is far from your usual haunts.”

“That might be the good part of it.” He flashed a wide grin.

“And you could use the cars.”

“Oh, I have no problem with driving cars,” he said. “I’m just phobic about owning one. No, that’s not true. That was malarkey.” He laughed, peered at the horizon through squinted eyes, turned back to me, said, “I’m just full of malarkey today,” and paddled off toward the point. Lower now, the sun glowed in the distant haze and I watched as Bill glided over the swell and dropped out of view.
During the next hour or so, in between catching waves, he complimented me on the rides I got and I told him how much I enjoyed watching him ride, that I liked how long his rides were. “They should be good. I’ve been doing it a long time,” he said. Actually, I’d been getting some long ones too, but when I saw him weave back and forth along the waves I decided to try some of that myself and it actually worked. On my last ride I zigzagged the whole length of the beach; but something odd happened. A guy on a blue board without a leash lost control of his board farther down on my wave. For awhile his upside down surfboard was skimming the top of the white water right along side me, on the same wave. It looked strange all alone like that, riding with no rider. I surfed into shore and saw the blue board still alone and bobbing up and down. I waded through the churning foam and held the board stable, scanning the water in search of its owner. A tall young man flung his arms in the air, then swam over to retrieve it. He wore his curly dark hair coiffed in a kind of Gorgeous George ‘do, and stared at me through long curly eyelashes. I’d seen him before, but where? Oh yes, my neighbor’s ex-boyfriend, a hairdresser from Oregon; I should’ve known by the hair. Last year he moved down to Santa Barbara to be with her and then freaked out over the commitment. Now, apparently, he was learning to surf. The water was full of old stories today. You couldn’t turn around without running into a failed romance. Bill rolled in as I was carrying my surfboard out of the water, still thinking of my neighbor and that guy.

“Your second-to-the-last ride was awesome!” Bill said.
I couldn’t even remember my second-to-the-last ride. “Thanks,” I said.
“Looks like you’re going in,” he said. “So bye. You’ve been in longer than anybody in the current crew.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ve been in about three hours, longer than I meant to be.”

“Great!”

“Let’s see if I can make it up those rocks though.”

“That’s always the question, isn’t it?” We both walked away, he toward the retreating foam and I toward the rocky bank. It didn’t seem that important to have talked to Bill, not like it would have twenty years ago, when we were in college literature classes together and everything he said seemed brilliant, even the odd, cryptic I didn’t understand. But a guy you used to have a crush on in an unusually lonely and unhappy time in your life, even twenty years later, even after he’d already fallen in love with your best friend and lived with her for eight years and been overbearing and jealous until she finally had to break up with him in a really ugly way; even after all that disillusioning knowledge you get from knowing the old girlfriend so well, hearing the gorey details of their fights, the way he used to beg for sex; even then, the guy you used to have a crush on still has some kind of special power over you. I always hate it that he does, minute as that power now is. But I had to admit I loved being told my second-to-the-last ride was awesome. And the time spent in the water with him, that last hour, was better than the first two. Happier. Not the great happiness I used to imagine I’d feel if only he and I could be a couple, traveling to Hawaii and Italy, being glamorous and artistic, reading side by side in bed and talking for hours about Boswell
and Johnson or Jane Austen versus the Brontes or the news of a new art exhibit, making each other laugh, feeling smarter just by the quickening effect of each other’s conversation. No, that dream still lives somewhere deep inside me, makes my heart beat faster whenever he’s around, but that wasn’t what I was thinking of then. He’d been good company out there and that, as it turns out, was all I needed. That, and three hours of rigorous exercise.

I walked to the makeshift concrete steps in the rocky bank, arms shaking. I stood still a long time, waiting for the strength to step up those rocks without hitting my board on the the higher rocks or the ones behind me. It felt good to have strained myself, to have worked so hard. I was tired but it was good.
Killer Cop
Marwa Sayed

In the minutes between
myself here and myself
again

more have died and many more
yet to die
and children understand though yours
do not

listen
this is despair.
when the future stretches only
as a certain end
and no one

hears
but desperation is unseemly
when you are begging for a shred

mourning is no good
there is no aim
no goal

mourning must be action
or else
not enough

listen

I was not made this way
never born
only squeezed and trodden
until I could withstand
protest is not a crime

there are only the words
that spew out of my throat
and i am alone

you must understand
you must know
Sculpture Garden
Thomas C. Dunn

there is a tiny flutter before sleep enters
in which reality’s children become runaways
and the home of thought can barely keep its ghosts

then a slip like an ordinary star
held and too long sagging with the weight of light

this is the identity of the spirit and us
we would cling to life even in the stirring of leaves
if they had not formed as hearts and points

the lips of statues are always shaped in aspects of a kiss
and knowing this, we all must choose our waking

but I have too long borrowed your breath for a voice,
lungs transplanted from a baboon in a flower bed

and perhaps it is long past the glossy evenings
when the moon shared the sky like a groom
and dreams were startled free from ocean plots

emptiness simply will not remain with substance
as stillness after a scream

if an open hand is a sign of letting go
then it is also a gentle gesture of waiting
like stones, smooth under the eternal erosion of tears
“Are you a boy or a girl?” The pink child, pacing around inspecting my bust, is no higher than the wedding cake. I feel a twinge but instead my throat knots in a mechanical chuckle. Growing breasts shrink beneath my white shirt, descending tranquil over a lot of black. The three straps of my sneakers, black also, pull tighter around my feet.

I never wanted to dance in the liquid light. Under the neons soaking my body with color, saturating my brain with chemicals I don’t quite understand. The bride says I have a beautiful body. But I only feel sicker.

The stung surface of my cheeks prickling, I begin to shuffle faintly to the sounds. Dresses with liquid grace, white lilac olive green and gold, flow about the room. The lights flicker almost as fast as my limbs tremble in my damp skinny black jeans. The long skinny agile legs I do not have kick and lick the hardwood floor. I hate every chaotic motion my body makes. Girls like me don’t dance. Instead, I find refuge against the farthest wall until it is too late for kids to stay up and the bride trips over her heels and I over broken glass and my back soaks up the wallpaper. Instead, I let my thighs suck onto one another like silent lovers, insatiate, seeking in each other the love they were never taught how to find in themselves.
First
Simon Perchik

What more proof do you need! jagged
left behind -- a beautiful stone
torn to pieces and near its heart

a tiny rock half drift, half moonlight
that blossomed to become the opposite shore
--all these years in the open

though every wave still smells from stone
the way this sea from its start
was never sure, even now a doubt

splashing as your blood or throat
or better yet next time at breakfast
reach out with just your breath

and god-like touch the boiling tea
hold up the evidence, the first wave
and the emptiness it counted on.
God’s Little Button
Alina Stefanescu

Her avatar is a purple rose with flapping angel wings emerging from both sides of the flower. At first glance, the avatar strikes you as kitsch but generic— the smiley face in the center, typical. A smiley face that never stops smiling. At second glance, the unconventional part reveals itself as a perpetual winking motion made by the left eye. She is GodsLittleButton.

The first meeting took place when she entered the amateur crime-solvers web forum with a harp in her hand and the following announcement in bright purple serif font: I hope they fry that man until his weenie shrivels up and turns black and he’s crying his eyeballs out in pain.

SleuthyCat welcomed her to the forum with a pink carnation emoticon.

I swallowed the taste of vomit in my mouth and typed a reply: “Capital punishment isn’t supposed to be torture. Under the rule of the law established by our Constitution, that kind of death would be considered cruel and unusual punishment.”

SleuthyCat proceeded to give me a pink carnation as well. But that doesn’t mean much because she gives a flower to anyone that enters the forum. I’d be lying if I said there isn’t a part of me—a big, mushy, apple-pie part— that wants to be the one she gives a pair of clapping hands. But that’s only because so far, she’s bestowed the clapping hands to one other person, a sleuth who goes by the screen name BiblioSmack.

I like BiblioSmack. He reads a lot and posts without rushing to judgement. He also adds facts to the jambalaya of speculations and takes care to elevate the conversation when it flounders in frivolous gossip. He’s subtle. In web forums, the folks who drop discreet hints wind up being the most likable.

There’s something else about BiblioSmack— like the taste of a melted sherbert when the orange and lemon and grape flavors are left in the sun to merge together and the tongue says it tastes good, but the brain finds no name to attach to the flavor, and the lack of name looks like a lack of rationale. That’s how I feel about the other reason I like BiblioSmack. Not only does his clear-headed thinking rub me the right way but there’s something special about a man that ends a post with Inshallah.

So far, he’s only done this once; during the month of Ramadan, in that final week of fasting when I imagine the joy and excitement breathes fresh air into the sweltering summer days. But I keep hoping he’ll do it again, drop an brilliant Inshallah at the end of line. Give me a crumb to follow.

Part of me thinks SleuthyCat and BiblioSmack share more than their three-syllable screen names. Part of me imagines they are both Muslims, hidden from the ways in which their habits make them suspicious to us. Fact: SleuthyCat offered BiblioSmack the clapping hands on that single post that end with Inshallah. That’s salient, though I’m not sure yet whether it’s evidence or just a clue. What I mean is that I’m not sure if I’m looking at a crime or solving a mystery.
“I don’t know about you, Bombay, but I’m a Christian!!” GodsLittleButton exclaimed in purple letters. Bombay is my screen name. I chose it because I loved backpacking through India. Mumbai is a mirage of hot dusty streets, swathed in gemstone silk saris, set fire to my imagination. I’m not Indian or anything: just a fan of cool cities and elegant colors. And a city that shifts between Mumbai and Bombay.

“What does being a Christian have to do with anything?” I typed. Having attended a Lutheran college, I was slightly curious about which part of theology GodsLittleButton was skewering.

“Watch all ye pagans lest I come down and kill you with my thunderbolt if you disobey my commandments,” thundered GodsLittleButton. She put her words in quotations, though she failed to cite the source.

KittyLover stepped in: “The deposition shows he has a super-clean background and his wife is defending him. I don’t know about this one, guys. Looks like he might be (gasp) innocent.” Sealed with a smiley face and a high five.

“The Lord will make sure that man’s wife burns in Hell, too, for what that man did to that poor, innocent baby,” asserted GodsLittleButton. The bolded font deserved consideration. The bolded font meant GodsLittleButton experienced no cognitive dissonance in ignoring the commandment about blasphemy. She was the real deal—a believer who felt capable of speaking for her Lord and Savior, thus turning her anger into Holy Writ.

I grew up in the Bible Belt, so I’m no stranger to leather and twisted childrearing practices. Personally, I didn’t think the husband was innocent, but cases of infanticide are hard to prove without physical evidence. Unplanned pregnancies can be devastating. Seriously, who hasn’t wished away a pregnancy or two—even if only for a second? A second is all it takes to end a life.

In the media coverage you see the man—this father figure—staring down at the ground, cheeks drawn in, looking scared as a nun in a barbershop. He looks worried, possibly guilty, but looking guilty is not a crime in itself. We’re all guilty of regretting some things. A face flush with guilt might be any old ordinary Sunday face, rode hard by regret. Those faces pack the pews, especially on the weekends after the Super Bowl game.

My grandmother used to say regret was the sign of a strong conscience. She told me about how much she regretted putting her Dalmatian to sleep when he got bladder cancer. Maybe gran wanted me to think she had a strong conscience. I read in a magazine that most of the time regret is the way we feel over something we failed to do—not something we actually did. It all boils down to whether someone is the kind of person you’d invite to sit around a campfire and roast marshmallows.

“Take a chill pill,” advised KittyLover, in reply to GodsLittleButton.

At times like this, someone in the forum will usually spill a personal secret they can’t afford to share with friends in the flesh. There are even members—I call them “lurkers”—who wait until the case discussion in a forum goes flat and then pounce into the silent space to spill their privates. HotMama#32 digs into the void: “If I stopped getting plastic surgery, my husband and I would have nothing to talk about or look forward to. It’s marriage maintenance, folks.”
Sure enough, SleuthyCat drops a pink carnation into HotMama#32’s digital lap.

“I think you look pretty just the way you are,” adds SleuthyCat.

“That’s just cause all you see is my hot avatar,” sighed HotMama#32.

I had the feeling SleuthyCat was assembling a bouquet for HotMama#32. Bibliosmack stepped in: “We’re talking about twisted dads here, last time I checked. So let’s keep the convo moving that way. JMO.”

“Uh-oh… my toddler is crying. BRB.”

It didn’t surprise me to learn that SleuthyCat had a toddler. She flirted in that wan, unpretentious way I’d observed in young mothers. They stand in the grocery store checkout line, sucking in their innermost whipper-snappers, smiling and making eye contact. Their gaze beguiles—a glassiness with appetite—except with all the sex and romance stripped out of it. As if they’re going through the motions of a ritual that no longer means anything.

I wanted to ask SleuthyCat about how it feels to flirt without flirting, but I’m not sure how to broach the subject. I began typing—“At what point did you find yourself flirting but not believing in it anymore?” Then I erased. Because what I really wanted to know is how it looks from the other side of the glass wall. What I really wanted to know is resentment—how it feels to not have any reason to flirt anymore.

“Looks to me that whatever happened, the husband and wife were in it together. They consistently uphold the same story, and cite the same events leading up to their discovery of the baby’s death.” Bibliosmack led us back to the case. He’d make a great leader or moderator.

“True,” I added. “Seems to me the company that made the four-wheeler bears some responsibility. Shouldn’t they have a warning sticker on those machines that says riding them in the third trimester might result in miscarriage?”

“That sick son of Satan was driving the four-wheeler that killed his baby!” screamed GodsLittleButton. “He knew very well when he took his wife for a ride that the baby would be killed! That’s motive! Wanting to kill an innocent baby is motive!”

I wondered if GodsLittleButton has a gin blossom. And if she was drinking. There was something drunk about her fervor. Something drunk and something vapid.

Bibliosmack stayed calm: “We don’t actually know what he knew. Both husband and wife claim they didn’t think a four-wheeler would cause them to lose their baby. Both were surprised when the bleeding started. And both look pretty devastated by their baby’s death.”

“Well, I’m just sorry they don’t live here,” pouted GodsLittleButton.

“What do you mean?” asked HotMama#32. I imagined her buffing bright coral toe nails.

“They live in Texas, which is real liberal. But here in my home state, that poor baby would have his own lawyer.”

“What are you talking about? They’re putting this man on trial for murder in an accidental death? How is that liberal?” HotMama#32 sounded pissed.
“Here in Alabama, every unborn baby gets a lawyer.”

“WTF? In the state of Alabama, where kids can barely read, every fetus gets a lawyer? Are you freaking kidding me?” HotMama#32 no longer sounded pissed. She sounded furious.

“Amen,” snapped GodsLittleButton. “God doesn’t care if kids can read he just wants them to be born so they can get saved.”

“That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard anyone say in my life! You think God can’t save babies unless they’re born? You think God is that freaking weak? Do you have any clue what the word ‘omnipotent’ means?” HotMama#32 was beyond flabbergasted. I love it when members get flabbergasted—it’s like a combination of fury, frustration, and awe. Intense within the online stage-set of late Angela Lansbury.

“I don’t see what Viagra has to do with God,” sniffed GodsLittleButton. “I mean, sure, God can do anything, but how can he save a baby if it’s not born? If it never gets the chance to be a human being?”

KittyLover’s avatar entered the conversation. I could almost hear her purring. “If it only becomes a human being once it’s born, then it’s not a baby before it’s born—it’s a fetus. So it’s not a life at all—it’s a potential life. IMHO, of course.”

“God is going to put all you pagans in burning hellfire,” whimpered GodsLittleButton. “And you’re gonna die there with this Satanist dad who killed his unborn baby and with all the doctors that kill babies and people—and with all those Muslims too.”

I wondered when SleuthyCat would come back and if her toddler was sick.

“I think you need to get out more,” I suggested to GodsLittleButton. “The world isn’t such an awful place, you know. Life isn’t some preamble to hellfire. Plus, if you keep using those words, the moderator going’s to step in and silence you.”

A pulsing brown bible emoticon appeared just before GodsLittleButton’s fiery words. “I won’t be the first martyr to die for speaking God’s truth! I won’t be the last to walk among the snakes and vipers! You can’t silence the Word of God and his innocent baby Jesus!”

“Anyway, I don’t know about the rest of you but I hope Texas doesn’t actually indict this poor dad for his wife’s miscarriage,” I typed.

“Agreed,” nodded BiblioSmack.

“Mercy is the greater part of justice.” I typed the next words carefully to make sure everyone heard me right. “Everyone makes mistakes. Let’s hope we can show a little grace to others. Inshallah”

It seemed clear to me that every clue is an opportunity to use as evidence for one side or another. But I was definitely surprised to get a pizza party emoticon from HotMama#32 and a white flapping dove from BiblioSmack. Of course, the best part was that pair of clapping hands from SleuthyCat. The next time I see her (or her shadow) in the grocery store line, I won’t worry so much about whether she likes flirting.
Ammo Montage
Dylan Krieger

please stay calm
this is only inventory
for the apocalypse:

full clips
armored ships
the face that launched a thousand

summer box-office hits
we don’t get to see him finish
[insert obligatory mistress]

but what red-blooded american
would think to censor this
dizzying weaponry blitz?

grenades in spades
landmine maze
need that gauze for lighting off

molotov cocktails
there’s no time for first aid
nowadays such

graphic violence sets
the going price of fame
framing the mundane

in fire & bloodstains
O stockpile of explosives
bio-hazardous oceans

what happens next
when we run out
of you into the moonlight

drunk on lighter fluid?
Blue Swallows
A.J. Huffman

my nights, not the merciful black of temporary
oblivion. I am a creature of constant
color, smothering in the silent stillness
of a false sky without stars to count or follow.
This perpetual day is draining
my desire. I no longer care if or when
the sun rises to burn this façade away.
I have become its prisoner, fearing
its absence as much as its presence. I am
its lonely cloud rising, waiting
for it to surround me, consume me, make me
a permanent part of its imaginary plane.
Cabin Fever
Marian Eiben

Lily-pad lies
scan treelines
spying
amber ale and North Carolina green.

Jack and Ginger whispers.
Stubborn shit-kickers,
bank-strewn, brittle bark and
bottles broken.

Empty fire ring,
tire swing. Rotting
grassdirt mud-pond:
fishless, pointless,
still.

Dead leaves coat trees’
moss-dusted trunks;
fur-brush forest seal
failing fruitless
fields.

No-top horizon dissolving
fog-trapped overcast:
swelter screen
stifled, simmered
hush.

Country jar seafoam
catches porchlight rye shimmer:
beer-washed throats,
half-hearted hopes.

Don’t look at me with your
murky muddled
North Carolina green,
can’t catch blue winter’s chill.

You’ll love it in the summer,
Rock-tossed wishes,
lily-pad lies,
You’ll love it in the sun.
Look after this rock, it needs
your help, left on your headstone
where the sea has always come

for the stillness that lasts
though your hand never opens
as shoreline further and further out

--calm this child, let it nurse
and from your breast another hour
another sky --let it sleep

float up as mountainside
that is not a mouth
filled with that strange milk

all stone once was, what a heart
still does yet it will never remember you
or the empty cradle-song

half white-marble, half
breaking apart from want
--care for this flesh

that has your cheeks or perhaps
in the darkness it called you
by name without leaving.
On the day she was born, every child became mine.

If I could lose all mother now,
I might be able to stir macaroni
while a kidnapping that could be hers
filters through the air from the living room.

If I could lose all mother now
I would not see the choking possibility of her in photographs of a child’s arm
sticking out of rubble, pale and streaked with earth.

I would not feel something heavy in my womb for these children I never knew,
but were mine.
Meditations at the Rijksmuseum
Anita Olivia Koester

I’ve split the pomegranate,
felt the six seeds like calcium deposits

between my legs, saw Eve from the front,
Persephone from the back, and who mistranslated

my concept of love anyway.

In Armenia, the bride grabs a pomegranate
and launches it against the wall,

motherhood bound in the symbolism of a fruit,
and if it doesn’t break, will it alter the way

Adam touches her, or Dante with his tongue.

The Dutch have a way of painting fruit
alongside skulls and the fretting of insects,

they call them Vanitas, which translates to— emptiness,
which must have something to do with vanity,

and the lies we were told about our body,
and how without pomegranate seeds we were merely

a nest of rotten apples.
I.

I am enveloped by the shadow of existence: the chair, the ground, the plaster wall cracking near the door, a potted bonsai in the window.

These are shapes under and apart from a form—the form of chair, the perfect ground, the one true wall, the rightly cracking plaster, the door and the door.

Light above, and separate from, the light coating a bonsai’s branches. This pen is one doppelgänger, scratching one certain deviation of thought into the refracted image of true paper, and on this page I map the location of that other plain, but the map itself is false, tracking roads and borders and trolley rails that fail to cup the fog of abstraction, instead capturing its concrete casting. This isn’t contentment—a mirage can never scratch that spot on my skull where perfection lives as blood and bone.

II.

Mathematics reaches across the no-man’s land, a suspension bridge to that other place. Numbers are a drop of substance in this hollow log, for they condense into pools both of tangibility and abstraction. Three doesn’t live here.

I can’t hold it, feel it, make love to its shape, but three occurs in impervious form;

in breath; in me, my brother, and my sister; in the chimes of a Florentine clock tower at midday when the heat coats the grass and trees and bricks like dust or frost.

And three flourishes when men dabble in structured abstraction—Trigonometry is the savanna where three stalks and naps in the thickets of sandy dry shrub,

and yet we are only sightseers, for the edges of that plain advance and recede with moon phases, and safaris are frequently abolished when our Humvees run low
on petrol. It's then when shadows of worldly objects swamp me, saturate my clothing, weigh and drag me down, and I grab for variable-driftwood and attempt

a makeshift raft of broken formulas— and I drown in what isn’t real, in the Walden Pond of the page, in the carved-out oaken trunk of algorithm.

III.

But what of the time we swam in Haifa Bay? It was night. We navigated the streets that weren’t streets, under streetlamps and over sidewalks and through tunnels of what we knew to be a crude illustration of a city’s form. And the air was cool, but we stripped down, tearing and ripping our shadow-clothes, tossing them in a shadow-bag, and ran to the ocean— and the ocean too was cool. The water shocked our bodies into a tempered recognition. There were stars.

I drifted on my back and lost count of their vestiges and considered how I didn’t see stars but the light of stars, and I didn’t mind. My heart ached— the sky was my geode, the ocean my observatory, the water’s surface was my womb. Across the water shown the light of unreachable cities more holy than form or falsehood.

We looked out to sea; there the isolated lights of tankers dipped below the margin of sight, and the question of existence shrank to the form of a shell, tossing in the undertow, being pulled and spun by tides that weren’t tides in an ocean that couldn’t be so.
A Lesson Gatsby Never Grasped
Jace Smellie

I was just getting to the part where
Tom confronts Jay
in the hotel room, and Jay
was about to turn to Daisy with
eyes filled with hope for what she’ll say.
They’ll wait.
And wait.
And wait.

You wear sweats because you say I know you
well enough, and you’re pretty sure
no one you know or care enough about
will find us here.
But your eyes still twitch
toward the door every time
the bell clicks like clockwork.
You remind me for the seven times
seventieth time just how much
my line of lies
brought you down—
because I just can’t seem to grasp it
you say.

I am tempted to remind you who called who,
and how I left a favorite
book to meet you here.

I wish
I had read just a moment longer before
grabbing my best coat and hat to beat
back into this past.
Vesuvio
Gracelyn Kuzman

I walk along these stones
on the edges of roads turning to rivers.
The sky is releasing grenades of hail
and I am drenched
and this is a calm day in a suffocated city.
There are no ashes so this is peace.
I have a ticket to see the remains:
Dogs burying their faces in the ground
Lovers tangled in their resting places
Mothers with hands over the mouths of their children
as fire occupies the space in their lungs reserved for life.
I find shelter in a bedroom turned tomb
and through a hole in the wall can see
the height of the assassin.
I climbed it earlier and spit in its crater
and it swallowed my saliva
but it did not swallow me.
No, wait—there's more.

This just in:
sired spawned invented produced
engendered
for magia, kef, aliety,
bruslery and cherte,
a quoz
formed to quop flob and footle,

to write this stuff only for fun,

born to escape from jail
and never be shot in New Mexico,
Chicago, or anywhere else.

Born for Beyond,
beyond concrete and steel,
dumpsters garbage and power lines,
potholes parking lots,
faces like glazed doughnuts,
blank screens,

to send this one out
on big, fat chords—

conceived for conception,
to carry on for a cookie,
call collect,
change
rearrange
estrange,

born to be hatched,
reincarnated,
born to be born no more,
killed for a near-life experience,
gestating toward germination
for geraniums,
to pupate, metamorphose,
become a household spirit,
rise from dormancy,
branch

and bloom . . .
Refusing to Talk Under Torture

Dylan Krieger

mama america always told me:

*don't negotiate w/ terrorists*

but she never had to tangle
w/ jumper cables or a taser

gainful testings of the faithful
christlike scourges
curses plague-fog

bond's testicular flogging
in a bottomless chair
winston smith's 101:
a mask full of what scares

me the most is a fair-weather friend
who'd hesitate to eliminate
my waterboarding assailant

at gunpoint what we crumble for

isn't a conscience per se
but a loud lizard brain

the *bang bang* up the spine
that says Y E S

*fight | resist*

*keep just enough fingers to squeeze the trigger*

w/o breath for regret
there's only death or success

and after such a seminal
adrenalin rush

the not-yet-rated
open variable
of every threat gets you wet
Exalt the post-humanity of the guillotine—
the way it put pretty man-gods out
of their pre-ironic misery, laughed hands
clean, painted Lady Macbeth’s portrait
with bleach.

Post-mortem, he looked
more like the sun than crushed velvet
and virgin blood. The Last Sun God
died on stage: gravity starred in black,
left the executioner with nothing
to believe in

but the void barbarism
of simple machines. Agape with guiltless
grins of action at a distance, we spewed
oil from gaping jaws to paint the night
a more sensual shade of abyss.

Pre-mortem, he told me not to look
at the simple machine: bunny anvil;
bloody foothammer. Too juvenile
to slaughter the paternal signifier,
I obeyed

with eyes closed, dreamt
of willing wire cutters in the basement,
prayed it was thunder or a thick stick
of dynamite Bugs Bunny had slipped
in Elmer Fudd’s shotgun. But, wish
fulfillment rarely fails,

and though violent
twitching is hard to stage, bunny went
off with a bang at the backyard cabaret;
heads asunder with bouquets of aporia,
our split lips warping in all directions.
You obey with eyes closed, all hands like you’re reading a guide to stripping Morticia Addams: start at the neck, find her half-moon zipper, shimmy its silver to her waist.

Take her dress off. Put it on and take her skin off. Put her skin on and rouge yourself to exhaustion. Wear her like a lab coat while she twitches on your table of jumper cables, a few sutured to her neck. Ambivalent, afterwards, to the nature of taboo, she lights a cigarette and drags on: if only simple machines got us off…
September the 5th
Jean Ann Owens

While watching T.V. at 5 o’clock
While crying and grieving
over Princess Diana’s
death
making coffee and toast
then sitting on my bed
listening, now
about Mother Teresa
death
remembering back
Princess Diana’s words
In the New York Times newspaper article
I know there’s someone
else out there
that has something in common
like me
who has not had
a chance to speak out
and tell their story
when I received the news
about Princess Diana’s
death
getting off the bus
walking to work
going to that grave-yard, shift
I worked as a part-time, nurse
In Department Unit, Sub-acute Rehab
A co-worker told me
I stopped breathing, for a second
at work
majority of patients
are sleeping
some T.V.’s
are on
repeating the news
about Princess Diana’s
death
my second dream
ended
I’m disappointed and hurt
my dream was
to one day meet her
Divorce
Jessica Wiseman Lawrence

Miscounts overwhelm,
rise up like waves, and crash
against a field of sand.
The lawyers dig out, then,
crabs hanging from their ties,
becoming more polished as they come
toward us, smiling.

We are so overpriced. I was spent
long before the credit ran out.
We couldn't afford
blue-white electricity,
so much brighter than us,
and good for something
when we weren't.

I was a family.

We both know every family has a flavor,

and ours was wild-cherry popsicle –
mixed with grape soda, gray as cold
bathwater filled with cells and soap.
I still taste it when I try

to ignore this noise about tradition
and a ringtone breaks my inky sleep
and a voice on the other side, saying
it is done, and each
receiver is fresh from the flames –

and what we were ceases to burn.
While A Bee Landed
Thomas C. Dunn

it’s a miracle
and nothing more

a brain, alone
on pavement

trying to decide
whether to trip the nerve

to trigger the muscle
to hoist the gun first

the thought staggered
from a second, split from this

like skull we perceived
as whole as Christ’s blood

less time than the opening
of an eye to morning

the choice of exertion
to still-born birth

but the instant repercussion of body
will never sting the mind

focused on a second
past and flat

it will take too long
to trip through a lifetime

of protest choked tears
and women kissing children’s missing fingers
mountain girl
Amber Rose Walsh

once i met a hollow man
whose eyes were full of echoes
his hands were shaped by wind and rain
his face was full of freckles

when i asked him what's your name
he held up the number 5
he was a giant silent
he barely spoke a word

his mouth had a mona lisa madness
with the sanest sounding voice
i knew our days were numbered
but i didn't have a choice

i tried to fill the hollow man
with hemlocks laced in gold
i drowned in his reflection
danced for sun and him and god

i played him muses’ music
‘til my bones turned into stone
i watched him die in mirrors
his words the only left on my wasted tongue
Ni Una Menos
Marwa Sayed

Do not fight your wars upon my body
Do not fight your wars upon the bodies
of my sisters
Do not fight your wars between my body
and hers

No more was
and
only
the wondrous is
Speak and breath
breathe and speak
hear me, hear me

sky witness and
earth that has bled
moon has beckoned and
I who have sunk my roots til
the water is no more and

she alone
do not fight
you wars
on the body
Sinking
A.J. Huffman

after Breach by Vladamir Kush

The waves are a trampoline and I am humpback, returning to the sky, pretending I can fly, a bird without wings. For a moment, I remember a song about mountains, the lyrics have something to do with the moon and maybe a plane, but too soon I am back in the water with hands pulling lines intended to lure me somewhere I don’t want to go. Sushi be damned! I’m not going out that way. My pieces will be in tact in a black casket at the bottom of the sea, baby. Count on that. Here come the jokers. They hold the springs for the next wave. I want to jump again, but know better. Memory is a fickle beast. Too much of a good thing can weigh you down.
Not one true thing was said about Herschel W. Scott at his funeral. The church even got his name wrong on the program. It listed the W. as standing for William, a name passed down from his great-grandfather, when really it stood for Wilbur, the first man his mother had ever kissed and someone whom she’d never fully stopped loving.

Overall, most of the discrepancies were small. He played the trumpet, not the trombone. His month abroad was actually spent in Northern Ireland. They added a year to his time spent in the military, subtracted a couple of beers from the amount he drank per week. Almost entirely inconsequential things, and to their benefit, the people saying them did believe they were true.

Some lies, of course, were bigger. Herschel had never been to Philadelphia, much less saved the life of a local politician there. He did not have a purple heart stashed away somewhere. And the three years after he was discharged from the military, during which his hometown neither saw nor heard from him, were not spent traveling the country as a home appliance salesman with some sort of affiliation to Sears Roebuck. Instead, he headed up North to a small, woodsy town in Canada and joined a cult.

It was a small cult — there were 30, maybe 35 of them total. Mostly bearded, off-the-grid types and their diminutive blond wives. How exactly he ended up there was a bit of a mystery, even to Herschel himself, but he rose up the ranks quickly. Within five months, he was second-in-command for the entire commune. There were three large homes spread across 15 acres, and it was Herschel’s duty to make sure that each home was doing their fair share of work. If someone was too sick to tend to the cows or till the crops, they would need to wash the community’s dishes or patch holes in the other member’s socks. He believed in their little utopia, and he was happy to do what he could to help it succeed.

When he’d arrived, a man named Dirk was leading the cult. Everyone liked Dirk. He was quiet but intimidating. He didn’t have to tell anyone what to do; they just did it. You didn’t want to be on Dirk’s bad side, and everyone knew that. After a little over two years, though, Dirk took ill. No one really knew why, but the cult didn’t believe in modern medicine, so things went bad pretty quickly and on a cold October morning, Herschel stood out by the corn and the chickens and watched as two men dug a grave.

It would have made sense for Herschel to take over, but that’s not how things worked. Dirk had a son, five or so years younger than Herschel, and lineage counted. It counted more than experience, and it counted more than age. Herschel didn’t mind.
He liked the kid — he was a little squirrely, but he cared about the cult. He was named after his father, but everyone just called him Junior. A name like that was cute when he was younger, but once he became a man, it set a precedent that he was just an offshoot of his father, not a leader in his own right. When he looked back, tried to relive those years, Herschel always thought that maybe if he’d just had a different name, something with some weight behind it, like Jack or Kurt, things could have turned out differently. Things were deteriorating fast under Junior’s rule. People didn’t have the same respect for their new leader. As much as Herschel tried to avoid it, they were coming to him for answers, and he couldn’t really blame them. Crops were dying, and there was talk of people leaving. A couple people were caught stocking up on supplies, hiding them beneath haystacks and behind furniture like they were preparing for a quick escape. It was Herschel who first suggested doing something drastic. He discussed it with Junior in hushed tones late at night, telling him he needed to identify himself as a leader who could come up with his own ideas. Herschel meant something along the lines of expansion or recruitment. Maybe even moving to another town. He thought Junior was taking his words to heart, and he was, but his idea of drastic surpassed anything Herschel ever could have imagined.

The first time he heard about it, it was in one of the morning debriefs. It started out like any other — divvying up the tasks, deciding what the meals would be for that evening. Then, instead of dismissing everyone at the end, Junior asked them if they trusted him. They all said yes, of course. That’s when he grew impassioned. Everyone was shocked, but pleasantly so. This was the first time he had shown how much he cared about the cult and its message, the first time he fought to be their leader. He spoke of milk and honey, of chosen people, of doing God’s will. He told them how they were the appointed ones, the strong ones, the righteous ones. How they deserved salvation more than any other people on this planet. And they ate it up. They loved it. They would have agreed to give up everything by the end of the speech and, once it was over, they did.

No one even questioned the suicide pact. Herschel was shocked, but everyone else treated it like it was inevitable. They began preparing — coming up with the best method, deciding who would go when, talking about where they’d end up and what they’d do when they got there. It was, without a doubt, the most exciting thing that had happened to any of them in years.

Herschel considered trying to talk Junior out of it a few times. The kid wasn’t unreasonable or malicious. He was just a little misguided. But he took too long to come up with the right words, and soon intervention became impossible. One foggy dawn, Junior got up before his followers and told them everything was in order. It would happen during dinner, a week from today. And everyone clapped as Herschel looked on. He saw the fervor in their eyes, the determination in Junior’s. He knew there was nothing left to do.
That night, he lifted his mattress from the floor, pulling up the floorboards underneath. There, he kept money, clothes, and a small book of addresses and phone numbers — the little he still had from when he first came. He left at three that morning, sneaking out an hour before anyone would be up. He caught a ride on the back of a post truck to the nearest town, then took a train to a small city right by the border. He stayed in a hotel there for a month, waiting for the news of the mass suicide in Manitoba to die down. Then he wrote a letter to his mother, and five days later she picked him up a couple miles outside of Niagara Falls.

He died almost sixty years after that, blind and senile in one of Connecticut’s many senior homes. After they lowered him into the ground, Herschel’s neighbor turned to his wife and said, “He’s lived quite a life, ain’t he?” He was right about that.
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Special Thanks

BU Arts Initiative
Julia Brown
Anna Henchman
A Project of

The Boston University
Literary Society