

Segue

online literary journal



issue 12 fall 2014

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JAMES CHAARANI

What My Mother Taught Me

My father died of a brain aneurism when I was two. As a child, it was just Mother and me alone on our olive farm twenty kilometers south of Trablous in Lebanon. Mother did not marry again despite the interest of many suitors. She said she could never love another man, and she never did. Over time, she learned to run the farm herself, but hired students during the harvesting season to help pick the olives. Looking back on my childhood, before the civil war, we lived a very happy life.

When I was twelve, Mother pulled me out of school and stopped hiring the help so it was just the two of us year round. She felt it was a waste to be paying a stranger for help when she had me. She said that I was pretty enough to marry a rich man who would take care of me anyway, and there was no point in continuing my education. I didn't think of myself as pretty. My hair was often tangled and dirty, and some of my teeth were rotten, but Mother assured me that I would mature into a beautiful woman.

During the spring and summer we maintained the grounds and cultivated new trees. We harvested from autumn through winter to get different variants of the fruit. Our black olives became famous in town for their sweetness. Mother knew exactly when to pick them, and how long to cure them for. We often couldn't keep up with the demand, which afforded us a very prosperous life as a child.

We'd spend hours in the field milking the olives into sacks tied around our waists. I always found it peaceful: the solitude of being in the trees with only the sound of wind streaming through the leaves and the sight of the sky in the distance. I could've slipped away in those trees to live the rest of my life and never come down. I told Mother this once, but she thought I was being silly.

In the evenings, after our chores were complete, we would make dinner together. I loved to cook, and Mother taught me how to make many traditional dishes like stuffed grape leaves and meat pastries with hummus. I could make an entire meal myself by the age of ten. Mother was proud and said that I would make somebody very happy one day.

The farm had been in our family for five generations. Mother and I were born there and I'd always hoped that my children would be too. During the war it was our paradise, untouched by the cruelties that affected the country. It was like an oasis in the countryside. When I heard that some of my school friends had died from crossfire in the city, I felt guilty for living on the farm, but Mother said that the farm was a gift.

I loved wandering the farmland through the rows of olive trees, and playing in the shadows of their gnarled, twisted trunks. Our house was at the foot of a hill that was covered with bushes and boulders. The land seemed to go on forever, and I'd often walk until I could walk no more, using the large snowcapped mountains in the distance as my compass to help find my way home.

After dinner I'd go outside by the pond, which was next to the barn, and wait for the feral cats to come. They became my only companions during the war. I loved them very much, and they loved me too because I always fed them. They came most nights, and we played for hours.

Sometimes I chased them or they chased me. It makes me laugh to think that such games can amuse you as a child.

As the war got worse, it became impossible to travel into town without trouble. One day, on our way back from Trablus by bus, some armed rebels stopped us as we left the city. They forced the driver to open the door and turn the engine off. Mother put her arm around me and tightened her grip without saying a word. She didn't need to though, even as a child I could sense the danger and remembered thinking, this is why we were warned not to travel the roads. A young rebel, who couldn't have been more than a year or two older than me, walked down the aisle of the bus. I'll never forget his face. He smirked like he was drunk on power as he surveyed the bus with his machine gun. He ushered us Muslims to the back of the bus, and forced the Christians out onto the street. There were cries and pleas from both sides, as our fates lay in the hands of a child. He lined all the Christians up along the gravel by the side of the road and the children too. The young rebel shot them all in cold blood with one sweep of his machine gun. It happened so quickly the victims didn't even have time to scream. They dropped to the ground in the order in which they were shot. Blood spilled out of their heads and drained into the gravel. I think I cried, but it's hard to remember. I do recall the young rebel coming back onto the bus, and people screaming, and Mother whispering a prayer. Mother's prayer got the attention of the rebel. As she squeezed me tighter, I was sure that we were next: that the rest of us were going to die too. I closed my eyes and wondered what a bullet to the head would feel like.

"Allah is with you, my sister," he said to Mother. She kept praying. Once I realized he wasn't going to kill us, I opened my eyes again. He made his way back to the front of the bus and instructed the driver to proceed. He then looked at me and smiled like he was a hero, and exited the bus. When we continued down the road, my hands began to shake and I felt like I couldn't breathe. I needed to get off—I was going to run out of air, I was sure of it. Mother told me that everything was going to be all right, and stroked my head until my breathing returned to normal. I convinced myself that the rebel would come back and shoot me in the head just like those children who were left to rot in the gravel.

I didn't sleep properly for months after that. Anytime I closed my eyes I saw the rebel covered in blood, smiling at me. Mother had become much quieter too, and often couldn't keep her focus during conversations. She didn't let me go for long walks alone, nor did she let me go out at night and play with the cats.

One evening, while we were doing dishes, I asked Mother why we were at war. She said people were sick and that religion had nothing to do with it. "Everybody is killing everybody," she said as she put a plate in the cupboard. "The whole country is going to die."

Over the next few months we didn't make a single trip into town to sell our olives or to buy food. Mother became nervous during this time, going over to the window if she heard the slightest sound outside, and insisted that we kept all the lights off in the evenings. She'd even yell at me if I brought a candle too close to the window.

One day she announced that we were running out of food, and had choice but to travel inland, up the mountains for a couple weeks to hunt enough meat to last us the season. We had

stocked up on food just as the war started and our supply seemed plentiful from what I could tell, but she was determined that we left as soon as possible. I didn't question her.

She found my father's rifle in the basement that he used to use to celebrate weddings and birthdays. She spent the next few days teaching me how to use it as she felt it was a good skill to have. I'd taken to it quite well. "You don't look good with a gun," she said during my third lesson. "A young girl shouldn't have to fire a rifle." It was odd. She had learned to hunt as a child on the farm, but had forbidden me to. I was only to use the gun in an emergency.

The next week we packed the pick-up truck and made our way inland. We hadn't taken the truck out in some time, and it stalled twice but was fine after that. Along the way mother explained that we would mainly hunt foxes, jackals and boars. Although they weren't the tastiest meats, they were food. It was *haram* to eat the boars, but Mother said that if it was for survival, Allah would forgive us.

The trip into the mountains was exciting. I'd only ever been as a young child, and as we drove up, I found myself getting lost in the curves of the mountains and in their silhouettes that flowed like waves as they tumbled over each other as far as you could see. The clouds were low, on our way up, creating a puffy floor beneath us. I imagined that's what being on an airplane must've been like, moving high above the earth, leaving the humanly world behind. "Momma, do you feel like your ears are blocked?" I asked as we drove further up.

"Do this," she said, looking over at me and yawning. When I yawned my ears popped and everything became louder.

When we got high into the mountains, just below the tree line, we parked the truck and made our way across the side of the mountain by foot. The soothing wind moaned, causing the grass to dance and the trees to shake. It was easy to forget about the ordinary things up there. Mother said that in Islam, mountains are the pegs that stabilize the earth. "They do not shake when you shake," she said.

I didn't understand what she meant. When I looked at them, they just reminded me that we are part of something bigger.

As we walked along, I picked yellow horned poppies and gazed up at the clouds that gathered beyond the horizon. "Look, Momma," I said, pointing at one. "Do you see the man with the cap?"

"What? Where?" Mother grabbed me with one arm, and lifted her rifle with the other.

"In the clouds, Momma."

She lowered her gun and smiled. Without looking up, she turned to me. "Yes. I see him, I see him."

After an hour of trekking we stopped. Mother removed her *hejab* and wrapped it around her neck. She admired the valley below for a few moments without saying a word. Her face carried the burden of a thousand women, so very hard and proud as the wind blew her hair back, turning her tangles into curls. Her eyes changed then, like they swallowed the moods of the sky: the savage and tame, and fearful and brave.

We set up camp by a cedar grove to give us protection from the wind and rain. Mother still had the tent that she and her father used when they'd go on their hunting trips. It was green and made of lacquered canvas with black patches all around. She instructed me to dig a hole for the fire pit a few meters away from the tent. She pitched the tent and hung the clothesline up. After lunch

she put aside enough food for dinner and tied the rest up in a tree so animals wouldn't get to it. We then went out and collected firewood to last us for a few days. I tried to carry as much as I could in hopes of impressing Mother. I collected so much that she sang me a silly song about how I was the smallest yet strongest cat.

The next morning, I went to the nearby creek alone to wash up for prayers. The creek led to a large forest of cedars that continued all the way down the side of the mountain. As I sat and began washing my hands and arms I sensed the presence of something around me, so I quickly lifted my head towards the forest. Although I couldn't see anything, I knew there was something out there. I removed my towel from around my neck, placed it on the ground and slowly made my way towards the trees.

"Samira, where are you going?" Mother said, sneaking up behind me.

"Nowhere."

"What is it? Do you hear something?"

"No." I went back over to where my towel was and continued washing.

When Mother looked over at the trees, I wondered if she too felt it, or if it was just my imagination. "Never go into the forest alone. Who knows what's out there."

After prayers we got ready to go hunting by covering our faces with ash so that animals wouldn't see us coming. Mother grabbed some ash and sprinkled it onto my head. "So pretty," she said, laughing. "My pretty girl."

We made our way deep into the cedar forest at the side of the mountain because Mother felt we'd have good luck hunting there. The forest had a mystic hue to it that morning, like we were looking through pale, green glass. The roots of the cedars covered the boulders. Moss stained both the stone and roots, and reached all the way up the trunk of the trees. While we walked I threw my hands up and reached for the rays of sun that peered through the branches and needle-like leaves.

"Samira, enough playing," Mother said. "Come."

"Yes, Momma."

"Do you know what this is?" She pointed to tracks in the mud.

"A tiger?"

"No, not a tiger, dear."

"A kitten?"

"They're wolf prints."

"A real wolf?"

"Yes. And they're fresh, so we must be careful."

When we continued through the forest, Mother turned to me and smiled. "We're going to play a game," she whispered. "From here on, no talking, okay?"

"Yes, Momma."

"And do not step directly on the ground. We must clear any twigs or leaves before we put our feet down."

"Why?"

"Because those are the rules. We must be quiet," she said.

I wanted to laugh for no reason because I knew that I couldn't. A chuckle escaped me, but Mother gave me a look like I'd betrayed her, so I swallowed it. I followed her through the forest,

clearing any twigs or leaves from under my feet before stepping down. It took me a while to get this part, and I'd slip up from time-to-time, cracking a twig under my heel, but Mother was very forgiving.

After about an hour of miming and tiptoeing, Mother stopped and twirled her finger in the air. "Turn away," she mouthed, so I did. Moments later, she fired her rifle. Birds flew out of the trees and filled the sky. Something began to shriek; it was the most unusual sound, like the distorted squeal of a monkey. Mother fired her rifle again. The forest was silent. She killed something, I thought. I turned, expecting to see a monkey, but it was a fox. She said a prayer, threw the fox over her shoulder, and we continued on. The fox's body was so limp, it looked like some doll that was never real. I was surprised, though, by how peaceful its face looked in death.

"I feel sad for the fox," I said.

"Shhhh!"

"I can't look at it."

"Samira, I feel sad too, but we will be the ones dead if we don't eat. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Momma."

"Feeling sad is good. It means you're human."

A few hours before dawn, after Mother dressed the fox's carcass, we placed it in cloth bags and climbed to the snowy area of the mountain. We put the bags in a larger sack with snow, and hung it up in a tree so scavengers couldn't get at it. Mother said we'd collect the meat at the end of our trip.

Once I finished evening prayers, I sat listening to the crackle of the campfire against the steady wind. Mother prayed on the other side of the tent, off in the darkness. I was falling asleep sitting up, exhausted from the day. I should go and sleep in the tent, I thought. When I opened my eyes briefly, I heard a sudden cry. I dazed at the fire for a moment, groggy—I thought I was dreaming.

"Stop!" Mother screamed, startling me. My heart took off, like it tore through my chest. The first thing that crossed my mind was the wolf whose tracks we'd seen in the mud earlier that day. I convinced myself that it was attacking Mother.

Mother's rifle was leaning against a log to my side so I grabbed it and stepped slowly past the tent. I found her with her shirt ripped open and breasts out. Her *hejab* was tangled around her neck, with strands of hair hovering over her face. I immediately looked away and closed my eyes, embarrassed for witnessing her in such a state. But where's the wolf, I thought?

Mother cried again. It was followed by the most sinister laugh. Who is that, I wondered? I opened my eyes and sidestepped further past the tent. It was a man, not a wolf, and he was pointing a knife at Mother. He was an older man, perhaps in his sixties. There was a caged frenzy in his eyes, like he'd been starved, and was feeding for the first time in months. He laughed as he tugged at Mother's shirt, a laugh-turned-hiss that lingered in his throat. He wore an oversized, white button down shirt, the kind that's sold at discount in the market streets by beggars. Neither Mother nor the man noticed me approaching. He pulled again at her shirt. Her arm got caught in the sleeve and she fell to the ground, screaming. He laughed again.

My hands were shaking as I lifted the rifle. I aimed at his shoulder and pulled the trigger. I was worried that I'd missed, but a moment later he began moaning and blood rushed out of the palm of his left hand.

Mother stood up, untangled her *hejab* and covered her breasts with it. The man staggered about, then moved towards Mother. I aimed the gun at him again and fired, this time hitting his knee. He dropped to the ground. "*Sharmoota!*" he yelled.

I ran over to Mother and hugged her. "Good girl," Mother said, taking the gun from me.

He continued to scream, calling me a bitch and a whore. He then picked up a rock and tried to throw it at us, but Mother shot him in the head before he could.

I covered my eyes, thinking that somehow I'd been shot too. When I heard Mother's heavy breathing, I knew that I wasn't dead. I opened my eyes and looked down at the man, who had a hole at the side of his face with blood pumping out of it. The rest of his body had stopped, but his neck looked tense as his head shook.

My stomach felt heavy, but I couldn't look away. I kept staring, and Mother too, we both stared for the longest time. He's dead because of us, I thought. Who was he and why was he in the mountains? Did he deserve to die?

Yes, he deserved to die.

The wind swept through our camp, shaking the tent and rattling the trees.

The stars twinkled above.

It was a full moon that night.

"Are you okay?" Mother said.

I looked over and tried to smile. I felt like I was going to vomit.

"Help me move the body before we attract unwanted guests. Grab his legs," she said, as she reached for his arms. I couldn't move. "Samira, you're not a little girl anymore. We have to move the body."

I finally went in between his legs and tried to pick them up, but screamed and dropped them. They didn't feel real. He didn't look real either—he seemed sub-human in death, with such a wound on his face, still pumping blood into the soil. His blood looked exactly like mine. It was the only thing that looked real.

"Please, my darling," Mother said. "We must move him. Wolves will come if we don't."

As I reached for his legs, I turned my head up so that I couldn't see him, and tried to imagine that I was carrying logs. We dragged him into the forest. I was always frightened of the forest at night, thinking that some monster would appear in the shadows of the trees, but I wasn't afraid anymore, not after that. We dumped his body in some bushes. Mother assured me that the wolves would dispose of him by morning.

We washed our hands and went back and sat by the fire for the rest of the night. Neither Mother nor I felt like sleeping. I thought about Lebanon and what it'd become. Then I thought about the moon and wondered how a man ever got up there. After everything was destroyed on Earth, would people go and live there? Would they just destroy that too?

Hours went by, silently, before Mother turned to me, without making eye contact, and said, "You must learn to hunt."

I just wanted life to go back to the way things were, but my desire to have an ordinary life, to pick olives and play with cats on the farm seemed trivial. The world was so much bigger than us, and we had to survive.

Couples Therapy

SUITCASE / LETTERS

Our basement had a trapezoidal space under the stairs where we kept all the suitcases. When my mom left there were three of us, thirty suitcases, and in my recollection, no more than five vacations.

Things that don't add up don't subtract either. I wish I could fill that luggage with half the memories of my brother's girlfriends, surrogate sisters, but I can only watch them fill with lint. The suitcases, that is. My brother would try to convince me there were mice in the suitcase space, but every time I'd check I'd only find moths. Then I'd throw his exercise ball at him and miss, every time.

My favorite toy as a kid was this stack of enormous rubbery puzzle pieces that had letters in the middle you punch out. Each piece was arm-length; the letters reached my elbow. I'd spend hours assembling them into some kind of Baby Mozart-y house. My mom was never impressed. I'd pretend the finished product was a space ship, come to terrorize the Victorian dollhouse. The imaginary ladies and gentlemen would stand on the little porch and say "Egads," but my imagination wasn't that sweeping so they'd rarely say more than that. Once I got a butler to wrangle one of the moths and head for the cosmos but the plot fizzled in the thinning atmosphere, especially after I tried to turn it into a musical.

When my brother got sick it was like there were only two of us, and the suitcases disappeared like they'd all decided to vacation without us. What my brother lost in muscle mass he made up for in charm. As for me, I have a box of punched out letters. I'm still trying to imagine a story that only needs a poke or two to feel self-contained. It doesn't need to get kicked to the curb, only to part ways with the banister, to roll merrily along.

BATHTUB / CANDLE

I tried to make perfume when I was eight because I had weak bladder control and weaker chops to tell anybody about it. I'd traipse around with my brother's mechanical pencils and stab them in tree trunks for sap extraction. I'd throw it in the microwave with pads of moss I'd jammed into a measuring cup, then add the steaming results, cup by cup, to a bathtub full of floral weeds upstairs.

I knew perfume involved some liquid that would kill things so into the tub went all the vinegar and rubbing alcohol and nail polish remover in the house. I stomped on the lot of it, dancing a little, like a winemaker I learned about in our Ancient Greece unit in school. I called what I was making "honeysuckle" though I didn't actually know what honeysuckle was (I added our jars of honey, too). I liked that the concoction was the color of pee. I'd worked so hard I wouldn't admit that it smelled worse.

I wasn't good at math back then but I was good at margins. On any given homework assignment you could find wild circuses, lacy dress designs, sleeping jungle animals, whatever struck my fancy. The other elementary school math failures were less creative, priding themselves on their ability to space their name just right so it filled the line at the top of the page. This is why whenever it was someone's birthday, I would decorate the cards and they would sign their names.

My teachers worried that my slowness was symptomatic of something going on at home. I only know this because I'm thirty-four now and I finally realize something *was* going on at home. Back then I only knew that I couldn't get away with taking over an hour to eat dinner in the week following parent-teacher conferences – and usually not even a week, as giving up was a talent both of them had already perfected, maybe even before my brother was born.

I bring up the math homework because one day I thought it would be cool to use my finger to stamp a spot of perfume onto the bottom of the page. I'd already gotten soup on it so I figured what the hell. I left my food on the table and went up to my bathroom. But the tub was empty, and even the weeds that hadn't made it into the tub yet were crammed hastily in the window box just outside, smothering the birds nest that didn't have any eggs yet but still. I was mad, so I sat on the toilet lid and hummed until one of them noticed. When they didn't I went to bed.

That week I started making candles.

THRESHOLDS / LAKE

When my brother and I were kids, our parents' fights began ending with "Can't take it anymore," so our aunt convinced them to send us to summer camp, or as she called it, "O northern land of logs and string and hand-clap games."

The lake at camp knew itself like an adult. Very deep and still. I was afraid of the cold but my brother would run in and stand in it up to his scarred-up knees. His feet were scarred-up too. He was always holding rocks. He only skipped the ones with little pits in them.

Between rocks he'd tell me stories about cool girls my age going back in time. In return I'd make rhymes for new clapping games. When I'd run into him with his friends he'd recite them at the top of his voice like they were some birdcall. Me being the bird. I've never seen him lean in a doorway but whenever I see someone else do it I picture him. He was like that.

Some of the spoons in the food lodge were bigger than others. The two biggest I stole and kept in my pocket. Sometimes I worried the pointy ends would create holes in my pocket and that the spoons would slip through and not be together any more.

PRINCESS / CHAMPAGNE

In the room across from mine in the girls' dorm by the student center, I once knew a Psych major who rarely laughed but was willing to go by "Princess." Possibly on account of her having been deaf in one ear. Serious girl. Father a budding alcoholic. The photos she had in her wallet of her mother, a hairdresser, reminded me of ones my mom had of herself. The hair was so straight. Princess's roommate, a foreign exchange student, masked her undiscovered lesbianism in meanness (Princess's curling irons would go missing and whatnot), so Princess spent a lot of time lounging in my room.

I went to her house over Thanksgiving break. There was nothing remarkable aside from a refreshing shortage of flower arrangements. I liked it immediately. I wasn't good at making conversation in those days – we'd discussed Ming and her latest girlfriends to death – so we watched a movie. She was good with her DVD player; the operation seemed to involve a dozen buttons, which she hit with swift intensity. By the dozenth button it occurred to me she too was a rotten conversationalist, and that for all our lounge time, silence was what we'd really had in common. That, or the thing about our dads. I sat down.

And sat back up. I had sat on a bottle of champagne. "Princess," I said, "what just happened?" Her hearing ear was, I presumed, the one closer to the suddenly roaring MGM lion on the widescreen.

I don't remember her answer. Or what my parents did that Thanksgiving, the first of their first reconciliation. But I remember last week. I got called in to the principal's office at three o'clock in the afternoon. My daughter got in trouble for hitting a boy. The principal and I said little to one another. We just gave my daughter napkins for her demure and incorrigible tears. "He was mean," was her explanation. "Mean how?" the principal pressed. No dice.

On our way to the parking lot, her slippery hand lax in my own, I decided it was high time I tell her about the world. "There are two types of people." She looked behind her, a little Eurydice. "There are Princesses and then there are bottles of champagne." I just wanted to be sure she was listening.

LOTION / VERONA

Before I took my postcolonial narrative class, when I got dry skin I'd think about how much I'd have to spend on hand cream if I got a nose job. There's probably special nose cream but I'd never go that far. One operation is less of a vanity trip than the sum of all the trips I could make just for that stuff that comes in little sample kits shaped like the lateral view of a wedding ring. They say the little bit of glitter in the gunk is from some kind of healthful mica but I don't believe it. Minerals aren't healthful. People are. Some of them. Write that in your law and smoke it, saleslady.

These days when I apply hand cream I think about Eurydice, all the ways a person can turn to stone. My postcolonial narrative professor was some kind of Crabtree addict, and my critical essays would always come back with these sketchy grease prints. That would have been okay if he hadn't gone so overboard on the Sartre. I'd wanted to take a Shakespeare class but someone in my family called just before registration and they would have hung up if they'd known but I lost track of time, as I tend to do when someone in my family calls.

The last time they called, I decided to start an on campus humor lit mag. I needed all the laughs I could get with these people. But then I discovered campus already had one and what's worse, everyone in it was funnier than me. So I decided to make one only for dick jokes. Three by fifteen inch margins or something cray like that. I wanted to call it ART THOU FISH, because this college is a highbrow crowd, and because that's about as far as I can make it through *Romeo and Juliet* before getting sick of ol' fair Verona. When I gave out copies of the first issue at the extracurriculars fair lots of people thought it was a cookbook. I thought that was funny, at least.

I have sneezed three out of the last five times I tried to impress my postcolonial narrative professor. "But don't you think Agamben... ACHOO!" The class is really amused. None of them appear to have hand cream allergies. I glanced behind me, just once, to guesstimate how many were already messaging about it. At least three. Two of them have had nose jobs, I'd bet anything. They ought to mind their own business.

CHOCOLATES / LIMO

I backpacked through Europe for my twenty-first because I was a fool. I got stuck in Paris in the rain, on Montmartre. A lone guy on his way down from the Sacre-Coeur said to me, “This stuff is ephemeral. Yet eternal. You know what I mean!” He didn’t understand that the statement is a question. I tried to think of rhetorical exclamation and couldn’t. I wondered how he could tell I was an American, and then realized how lost I looked. I knew I looked lost because loss had become a permanent feature of my face. Like a third eye.

I hadn’t tried European chocolate yet. I was waiting to do it in that windmill whorehouse, or maybe on one of those bridges with all the lovers’ locks on the railings. I checked my surroundings. Mr. “Ephemeral” was a few chunks of stairs below. I asked a heavy-set couple where to go for chocolate; to my surprise, no English. At the base of the hill I saw a soaked set of newly-weds clamor into a limo. I couldn’t tell if they were happy. I knew I wouldn’t be able to tell close-range, either.

I hadn’t planned on going to prom in high school. I stayed home three out of the four years, but got roped into it as a senior. It was a friend who’d just come out of the closet and was hell-bent on going back in. After downing a single flask of bootlegged vodka, he ditched me for one of our linebackers. Then I went to state school and tried to get wild and he went to art school and tried to re-popularize Fauvism. He got high up the ass one time and mailed me a postcard that read, “Your heart is very precious to me.” In those days, our culture was refining its treatment of irony, one individual at a time. I stayed out of that; I didn’t write back.

Things hip adults don’t tell you about their formative backpacking adventures is that when they ran out of money they went home right away. When I ran out of money I took up pickpocketing for three days and four nights and then got beat up by someone smaller than myself. Uncanny. One moment you’re slipping your hand in a fanny pack the next all the boulevards are eerily green. Hélas, the power of proximity. I never got to try the chocolates, a regret that darkened like pavement when I got caught in the rain a second time the day before my flight home. C’est la vie! I approached the nearest stranger and asked him how to say “ephemeral” in French. His English was stunning but I don’t remember his answer.

CUFFLINKS / LIPSTICK

I quit illustrating children's books when I thought I wouldn't have children. I became a copy-editor because putting little marks on pages for people couldn't be so different than putting marks on pages for little people. I stopped seeing the ones who didn't laugh at that, and soon found myself getting lots of copyediting done.

The thing about being an adult as a child is that you don't fit any of the shoes they give you. Just kidding, the shoes fit fine. It's that you have to keep your sticker collection a secret, trading them in the schoolyard long before your parents show up. They pick you up at the same time and start reciting whatever they just heard on the BBC, which is part of why you're already an adult.

I'm not a lipstick-wearing adult, though. After a birthday party at a classmate's house, I come home in her lipstick because that's all they had to play with (single mom). My parents are livid. I have to talk them out of calling my friend's mom. I don't mention that I nabbed a stick of her eyeliner too.

That night I go to their room when they're asleep and hold my dad's cufflinks in my hand. They feel like teeth. I think about stealing them, hoping it would keep my dad from going to so many fancy events.

The other thing I've been thinking about is hiding myself under a back-up tux and tucking myself into the backseat of his car. I wouldn't have lipstick on so the tux would be okay and I'd be able to make a joke about that when I got found out. I'd get found out because my mom would never think to pack him a spare tux because she hates that he goes to fancy events, too. My plan doesn't extend past getting caught. I just want to see if he'd outright send me away.

I took up drawing when I decided to elaborate my plan. I designed the ball gown I'd wear at the gala, and even styled the hairpiece, but I needed to get the nuts and bolts just right. The mechanics of the stilts were delicate; too tall and I'd arouse suspicion. I was on the second stilt, realizing it wasn't identical to my first one, when his car left. Then I wrote a story about a man whose car breaks down but I never finished it because I needed to look up how to spell "Poughkeepsie."

SAILBOAT / MOONLIGHT

Grandmother Mary expresses anger with presents. When I was seventeen she didn't like overhearing me say "fuck" in front of my nephew when I fell on the deck of her husband's sailboat. I'd tripped over an oar. Who keeps oars on a yawl? She didn't answer. We were in the Lake Erie doldrums, a phrase usually reserved for a frame of mind but this time literal, too. She let a few minutes pass then handed me a white square that said "STIM-U-DENT" on it, from Johnson & Johnson: "for the plane back to Charlotte," she said. It looked like it was from 1973. Inside: 25 orange slats of wood that smelled like mojitos.

I like the idea of "fuck" being an object, and a weird-ass object at that. As it turns out though, STIM-U-DENT was on to something. From the time I stuck a slat between my teeth and iced my leg to the time the ice pack melted to reveal a North Carolina – shaped aubergine bruise, my mouth felt the way my mind feels after a slasher flick. Part of me knew my nephew was trying to explain how to tack to Gran Mary, but the rest of me floated in minty bliss, dreaming of summer camp.

Looking back, some of it makes sense. The women in my family don't wrap dental floss around their fingers because too many people are already there. I mean, Grandpa never liked sailing. But we girls like ropes, and being on a certain end of them during man-overboard drills. That oar on deck was probably for a lifeboat we've hidden in the galley unbeknownst to our own brothers. I was still looking for it years later when my daughter called from college. I wanted something outrageous to report. She was making few A's and fewer friends. I told her to join the rowing team, be the little shouter at the bow. Inflict her bad mood on her peers in a safe, controlled environment, and get a tan. I could tell she missed her dad because she said *I love you* before she hung up.

That night I dangled my feet off the stern and called Johnson & Johnson. I had a loose script all set up: "Step 3 says not to 'force into tight spaces between teeth.' Does that mean I should floss, too? How do I reach those dark, damp little crevasses? Do you realize the absurdity of the phrase 'gentle in and out motion?' Have you personally tested this product?"

I looked at the moonlight on the railing. No one's snoring could be heard over the water. I wondered what I'd hear the next morning if the railings disappeared.

WHITE HORSE / ISLAND

For a while, my brother was able to bury our childhood grief in *The Lord of the Rings* fandom, but all I liked from all that was Shadowfax. You whistle, he calls, you ride off. Lots of people whistle when they're lonely, and people in movies whistle to fake innocence. If the world went my way, a big-ass white horse would show up in all of those situations, and take those people off to where the *real* action is. What I mean to say is, my parents should have stayed separated the first time around.

I've never been able to whistle. I don't like calling attention to myself. My poetry-writing first boyfriend was really good at it but he was also unoriginal. He did it the movie way, even though he wasn't aware of all the things he should have felt guilty for.

He used to say no man is an island, and I always thought he meant islands were for women. I also thought that because I got smashed at my aunt's bachelorette party on Mackinaw, and I tend to get poetic when I'm drunk. Of course I didn't know that because before that night my only exposure to alcohol had involved pouring it over forsythia and stomping on it. I don't remember drawing these, but I still have a bunch of the off-white country club napkins bearing sketches of my youth: figure one, little girl pouring milk on moss; figure two, little girl stripping leaves from saplings; figure three, little girl raiding the neighbor's beehives.

My daughter has them now. If she still does.

After that night I didn't want to get drunk. I didn't want to act like dad. Clearly my relationship with nature was conflicted enough; if I let myself fret over genetics I'd melt down and make a scene.

RING / FIREPLACE

A little before my parents' first separation the local Home Depot started selling logs that burned different colors. My parents think their biggest mistake raising us was not buying us any – jealous of his friends' families, one night my brother borrowed my Dad's axe without telling any of us, filled our bathtub with wood and wall paint, and tried to see if he could make a light show with Mom's hand mirror. I caught him before the house caught fire. We kept chipping flakes of paint off the side of the bathtub for weeks, and though we thought we could bathe fine, our parents started looking at us like we weren't clean and we slowly began to believe them.

I got back at them by stealing mom's wedding ring from the creepy white hand on her nightstand. I put it in a box in another box. They kept going until I had a seven-layer Russian doll of boxes to cram in the back of my underwear drawer. When I showed her three weeks later she grounded me for as long as my brother because I'd also stolen two of her bras, convinced surely I'd need them soon, and forgotten about them when it turned out I was wrong. I was only in trouble for a little bit though because Dad was in worse trouble than either of us.

My first marriage fell apart for very different reasons, but I still hate fireplaces. My desire to contain everything manifests itself in my forgetting to open the flue. I consequently found myself dusting all the time, and saw my husband less and less clearly. I felt dirty, like I did as a kid. I bought perfume but it smelled like cleaning products. But maybe that was what he wanted – wife as maid. If our marriage had lasted, I would have been punished for voicing doubt in him. So I hijacked his car, ditching it in the airport parking lot a few hours before my flight to Europe.

My brother's widow lives around the corner from Gran Mary's old house. She takes the family to retreats every summer. I used to come with my daughter but she's in her father's camp now. Every year my nieces retell stories from the years before until there's no time left for all the adults to contribute. I politely quip a story of my own, always a made-up episode from my epic and formative backpacking adventures or a ghost story about my Victorian townhouse in Charlotte. Everyone believes me because by then they are all too tired to pay attention. They head to bed in our rented cabin while I put out the fire. Then I stay up and look out on Lake Erie. After a while I hear everyone's breaths synchronize from the second floor window, and know it's because they love one another. I never think about what their lives would be like otherwise.

The Rider

We soon knew how the hole in the fence was made. From our breakfast table we could see through the rearward facing kitchen window: a hole, in the fence, surrounded by the fence remaining. At least three boards were busted, their jagged edges leaning out from the anchoring posts like an illiberal lion's teeth, the tan of the wood peeking through where only white overcoat had recently been.

We pondered it for a while, and scanned the portions of our backyard contained as a picture within the window, looking for any remains that might not be fence – that might instead be the shards of the thing that broke the fence and stole its suburban utility. I was about to go to change from my morning slippers into shoes that would do in the yard, steeled in my house coat to confront the cause, when the apparent impetus of the damage wandered ponderously into view.

It seemed to be following the ridge of grass that grew near the guttering, where water collected from our infrequent rains. In bar shuffles half the length of one of its own feet, it moved. It clipped the lawn near level to the ground. I thought at first it was ripping the grass out, roots and all. But no. It was severing the blades to ground level; daintily beheading each proud leaf in short, unhurried movements; its massive head bent down from the basketball jointed shoulders; its single horn tilting forward, swaying only slightly, swaying perhaps reluctantly, swaying unchecked, or not swaying.

I had seen a rhinoceros before, at the zoo. I knew there were many species of rhinoceros, some more endangered than the others, some more common; but I could have no way of knowing how to differentiate one variety from another. I knew of no category of rhinoceros generally native to southeastern Virginia; though, at the time, that was immaterial: in my backyard, after surely damaging my fence, was a rhinoceros. With these facts – damaged fence, rhinoceros, grazed grass - species and subspecies blended into one omnipresent effect: a rhinoceros.

Each of us watched for some time, wanting to make sure our yard held but one rhinoceros. One lone animal, mired in its own agenda. A herd of rhinoceros would require that we consider the event differently. The creature milled slowly about, following the best of the ordinary lawn grass, and we drained our coffee – my wife with her smaller cup actually having a second, while I worked slowly down the level of liquid in my oversized vanity mug. The beast cruised through the best of the top-notch grass, passing in and out of the rectangle of our window – I, keeping a mental list of the idiosyncratic features found on our rhinoceros, so to be sure that the rhinoceros wandering back into sight later was the same one that had earlier wandered out of sight.

Eventually, we thought to move about the house, and to look out of the many wondrous windows it supported: looking for more holes in the fence; or more rhinoceros in the yard; or signs of further, extended, or cumulative, damage.

By the time we had finished our pancakes, the consensus was that there was but one hole, and but one rhinoceros; and that he clipped the grass, not pulling it out roots and all; and that,

after harvesting the greenest and sweetest of our grass, he was moving to the less calorically profitable, though still digestible, ground vegetation.

Our rhinoceros.

What to do? I slipped into day clothes as my wife lingered at the table, learning the grace of a rhinoceros, its imponderable promptness, its sterling sense of oblivion. She poured herself a third cup of coffee. She remarked how rough the skin must be, yelling up the stairs where I had disappeared in search of pants. She leaned forward on her elbows across the table, the cleft between her breasts deepening as she lay out almost immodestly, almost in contact with the table top, the whole of her focused like a neon arrow of advertisement. Here, our rhinoceros. Here. She adjusted a snarl of hair that cried loose from the translucent reflection of her, dimly staffed on our side of the window; a reflection only seen when the rhinoceros, on his side of the glass, was standing collected in the light just so, and ignored.

I would need to fix the fence. Soon. One day. Later. The rhinoceros was first mine to deal with.

There was so much to know. He could be two thousand pounds. He could be three. I knew no numbers for rhinoceros removal. And did I want him removed? How many people receive the gift of a rhinoceros? Possibilities fell into permutations, grew into complexities, slipped into cautions.

I thought I could enlist the help of the neighbors. But I knew that the neighbors would think their options through, would count their opportunities, and rise up self-serving to plan what was best for them and their families, not what might be fair to me and my indirectly destructive rhinoceros. They would agree with what I could already tell, festive at the corners of her eyes, were the rising expectations of my wife; those Saharan neighbors expecting themselves to extract a share of the gains she was surely imagining. Her morning gown barely containing the wrap of her collecting thoughts and arguing engrams, already my practical howl of a wife had been thinking of heat and oil, of wax paper and freezer bags, and of spent boxes of aluminum foil. She has always wanted a top load freezer for the open corner of our not too cluttered garage. One of those virgin white freezers where the whole top flips up, and frost rolls menacingly out over the edge only to dissipate in the air as it nears the floor. The type of freezer that a man could lie down in; or that you could - with an eye to geometry and a pattern of mind disciplined into seeing things in three unyielding dimensions - pack the best parts of an entire, sudden gift rhinoceros in.

One conclusion that meets all sizes.

But before I can think meat, I have to try leather, and stitchery, and the thrilling industry of dispassionately taking measurements by sighting from the second story window. The front half of my arm will be a yard stick. The width between my fingers will be multiplied by distance, and compensated by angle, for girth. A saddle. Before any irrevocable actions, I must try a saddle.

After all, it soon will be I who engages the contractor to fix the injured fence, who will see the yard dourly reseeded. I think it should be my right to try my crisp and brotherly idea first; to hold reins I have cut myself, and press my knees against the muscle that destroys fences, bedazzles women, befuddles men. If I fail, meat it can still be. I want my time in leather chaps, on a leather saddle, my leather hat waving unyieldingly in the air. I want to bound across my yard, fence to opposite fence, astride more power than any man has a right to wrangle. I want to hold on with but one hand and raise my free hand selflessly electrified in the air!

For years I have loved the feel of wearing a costume; of my costume growing thinner and lighter from contact and use; and of power prodded to action by the presence in my thighs driving together, by my shifting side to side; of finding, in what might have been meat, the well of civic mastery. Horn proudly in the air, and me shouting encouragement from his back, he will have no need to break more fences. He will be pure domesticated power, ferrying me down our bedroom-community streets, cracking our pavement as he goes: a thundering conveyance, a conveyance of me, one that school children will run after and uselessly imagine that someday, with their paper route money, they might possibly own for themselves. Foolishly, they will be engorged at the sight of me. Yes, their own power and purpose; yes, their own rhinoceros.

Just look what he did to the fence!

But, if meat it comes to, my wife - for all her dark imaginings - has at least to leave me the best parts to unravel with my fearful grill.

RAYMOND M. WONG

Hate

Author's note: Some names in this piece have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

Beijing, 1996.

I stood in the hotel room gazing out the sliding glass window at the frenetic activity in the street below.

My mother's voice rang out from across the room. "Boy, they not do good job cleaning here today. The cup for brush the teeth still the same. They not change that."

I turned to see her come out from the bathroom in pajamas with a damp blouse and pants draped on hangers. She hung them in the closet.

I said, "You think those will be dry by the time you need to wear them again?"

"Will be. You see."

Mom walked to her bed. She threw back the thin spread, sat, and inspected the sheet tucked into the mattress. "And you see this?" She pinched at something on the pillow and held it up for me. "See? This my hair. That mean they not change the sheets, you believe that? They just make the bed and go."

"Maybe they were in a hurry today."

She shook her head. "In Beijing, hotel, restaurant, everything run by government. Government job, nobody can fire you, so they not do good work."

"Does that include the tour we're on?"

"Sure! You see the restaurant they taking us for dinner?" She scrunched her face. "Food lousy. Vegetables cook too long, not the good flavor. And not much meat. We already pay for, so they taking us to cheap restaurant make more money for them."

My mother leaned toward me as if to convey a secret with national security implications. "I tell you something. The man and the driver, they drop us off at restaurant, then come back pick us up later. Must be they go eat somewhere else."

I walked over to my bed. "They do this all the time, so they probably get sick of eating the same food. Come to think of it, they must get tired of seeing the same sights over and over again. I know that going to the zoo or Sea World every week would get old real quick."

"But that the job, so they need do."

I flung myself on the mattress. It felt like landing on a trampoline. I sat up and looked at the phone on the nightstand. "Hey, you think I can call San Diego from here?"

"Who you call?"

"I was thinking about Quyen."

"Long distance, another country, you know. Costs lots money for that."

"It won't be long. I just want to tell her everything's okay."

She scooted toward the phone. "Let me see, I think the tour man say we have to tell worker before make the long-distance call." She picked up the receiver, listened, and pushed a number.

My mom spoke briefly, hung up, and handed the receiver to me. “Have to push oh, oh, one for English line for long distance.”

I entered it. A recorded female voice, in broken English and barely audible on a static-filled line, told me my call couldn’t be connected. I hung up and tried again.

“What wrong?”

“I don’t know. I’m getting a recording.”

“You use oh, oh, one?”

“Yeah. I did it twice.”

“Let me try.” I passed her the phone. She made an attempt, then looked at me and shrugged. “Not working. You want me go down to lobby, find out what wrong?”

“You’d have to change first. Don’t worry about it.”

“You sure?”

I nodded.

She put the phone on the nightstand. “You must be really like this girl, hah?”

“What, just ’cause I’m trying to make a call?”

“Must be if you try from China.”

∴

In the hotel cafeteria I couldn’t stomach much of the rice soup and cold rolls the hotel always served for breakfast. Instead I amused myself by performing a math “mind reading” trick for a trio of teens from our tour: a hyperexpressive boy with an infectious smile named Hon Hung who spoke some English, his contemplative cousin, Lok Him, and a bookish girl named Yen Liu the two boys had met on the tour.

My magician friend, Henry, from elementary school had shown me the trick. He would have me pick a number in my head and, without my divulging it, run me through a series of arithmetic steps. Then he would hesitate a moment with a set of fingers pressing into his temples and call out the number I had arrived at. The day he revealed the secret, I must’ve gone through a hundred sequences trying to find one that didn’t work. The trick never failed.

Hon Hung begged me to show him the solution, but I just smiled. He kept at me throughout the breakfast, and by the time we boarded the bus, he even attempted to bribe me with money. I reminded him that I lived in America, a land of incalculable wealth. His face was a study in disappointment as we made our way to the back of the coach.

He and Lok Him took seats in front of my mother and me. Yen Liu and her aunt sat across the aisle from them. As we started forward Hon Hung turned and asked me about America.

I said, “How about if you give me your impressions first?”

Hon Hung looked confused.

“Tell me what you think about the U.S..”

He consulted his cousin and both nodded. Hong Hun said, “U.S. rich, many cars.” His eyes grew big, as if to mimic the vastness of our perceived wealth. “Drive fast.”

I laughed. “That’s probably true compared to China. What else?”

He paused, then pointed at me in the manner of a game show contestant with the answer to the million-dollar question. “Many guns. Ah . . . shoot, kill. Ah . . . steal the money.”

I looked at my mom and she shrugged.

I turned to Hon Hung and said, “You think we have a lot of crime?”

“Yes. U.S., many guns.”

“Tell me more.”

“U.S. have much sexy, no clothes.”

It was beginning to sound as if he had taken in too many James Bond flicks.

“How do you know all this about America?”

He paused and spoke Chinese to my mother.

She said, “He watching American movies and listen to music.”

Sylvester Stallone and Madonna were educating other countries about our nation’s culture. Lok Him spoke and this prompted a question from my mom. Yen Liu responded.

My mother reported, “They say U.S. number one powerful country. They agree about that, but they say we little bit selfish. They say U.S. have big army, many guns and ships, so try to scare everybody. They say we helping Taiwan so that show we selfish.”

“I don’t know the ins and outs about Taiwan. I only know we were trying to help people,” I said.

My mom conveyed this. The youths’ restrained nods indicated they heard, but didn’t necessarily agree.

Lok Him commented.

My mother said, “He think America hate China. He ask if that true.”

Hate? That’s how they thought Americans viewed them? It seemed preposterous. Yet prior to this trip, I equated China with Communism and authoritarianism. Tiananmen Square. A government and people who couldn’t be trusted.

I regarded the three teens and said, “Hate is a really strong word, and I wouldn’t use it to describe the differences between our two countries. Maybe we just don’t know each other very well.”

∴

Our driver let us off at an expansive cement courtyard surrounded by prominent government buildings. At one end, across a busy street, I saw a gigantic marvel of ancient Chinese architecture. An imperial palace crowned with a sloping, two-tiered, golden-tiled roof stood in majestic dominion over the entire area. Below the roof, ten evenly spaced, royal-red pillars framed a series of vertical windows decorated in gold trim. A thirty-foot-high protective wall in front displayed a huge picture of Chairman Mao Zedong between two long banners of white Chinese characters.

The tour leader informed us we were in Tiananmen Square, that Chairman Mao proclaimed the People’s Republic of China here in 1949. My mother translated his presentation: established in 1651 at the transition between the Ming and Qing dynasties, enlarged in 1958 after the formation of the People’s Republic, the literal translation, “Gate of Heavenly Peace.”

The enormous courtyard could hold a million people. Walking across, I pictured it in 1989, an early summer morning filled with young, idealistic, Chinese students protesting in the name of freedom and democracy.

A chill shot through my body, and I shuddered at images of armed soldiers marching toward the square, firing into the surrounding mass of demonstrators, wounding and killing.

Screams. Panic. People running blindly. Hysterically. Unable to get away. Blood-soaked cement. More gunfire. Loud. Rapid. More screaming. Bodies crumpling to the pavement. But not just bodies. People. Young college students with families. Spouses and loved ones. And children.

A single haunting question knifed into my thoughts: How could they do that to their own people?

The rest of the day dissolved into a blur. My mom told me we visited the Chairman Mao Mausoleum, the Museum of Chinese History, and a military exhibit.

I didn't remember. The images from Tiananmen Square kept flooding my mind.

∴

That night in the hotel room, I lay on my bed.

My mother said, "Raymond, you okay?"

"What? Yeah . . . Why?"

"You quiet."

"I was just thinking." After a silence, I said, "What did you think of today?"

A pause. "We see lot, walking too much. When we go that place for Mao Zedong, how they keeping his body, make me feel strange."

"They really worship him here."

"Look like in China, he the great man. Everywhere go, have pictures for him. All I know is my family happy before, have the good life."

My mom was twelve when the Communists came to power. They ransacked her village, murdered her father, imprisoned her mother, and forced a distraught little girl to flee from her family. Why? For what possible reason?

Lok Him's question crept into my mind, reverberating with greater and greater force. Did the U.S. hate China? Did the Communists hate my mom's family?

How could they? They didn't even know them. Then why? My grandparents had money and property. If one family could possess wealth, wouldn't others want that too?

And if a band of renegade students was allowed to protest for democracy, wouldn't others soon follow?

Threat. Fear. That explained how the Communists could rip a family apart, one that had done them no harm. How a country could fire on its own people. How we could lock our own citizens of Japanese descent in internment camps during World War II. How our soldiers could take part in the My Lai massacre in Vietnam. How Nazi Germany could slaughter over six million Jews.

And if people and nations continued to destroy what they were afraid of, that which they didn't understand, what would become of us?

∴

The bus driver dropped us off at a bustling shopping district in the heart of Beijing. My mom and I walked with Sok Wai and Mui Ying, the woman and her daughter my mother befriended in the hotel line the first day of our tour. Pedestrians packed the sidewalks next to an array of modern department stores boasting shiny glass displays and multiple floors of merchandise.

Sok Wai stopped at a women's shoe store, while Mui Ying kept tugging at the strap of her mom's purse. Sok Wai reprimanded her and continued to browse.

My mother and I wandered ahead to the window of a tea shop displaying an assortment of boxed teas from China. We stopped there to wait for Sok Wai and Mui Ying. My mom said, "Sok Wai have the hard time now. She and husband getting divorce soon."

"Really? Why's that?"

She shook her head. "Her husband want son really bad. When Mui Ying born, he disappointed about that. In China, only supposed to have one kid, but he have to have son. The husband very successful in business, so they pay lots money for government, let them try again. But they have another girl."

"You buy the right to have a second child?"

"After first one, have to pay. In China too many people, so government not want you have kids. You see? We in China almost two weeks, not see one woman carry the baby in stomach."

True. I hadn't seen a pregnant woman in any of the Chinese cities: Shenzhen, Chashan, Guangzhou, and now, Beijing.

"So what does that have to do with their divorce?"

"Her husband get upset. He say waste the money have another girl. Because he successful, lots women chasing him, say will have son with him. So he have boy with another woman. He supporting the other family now."

"You're kidding."

"No kidding. He leaving Sok Wai to marry the woman with boy." She shook her head again. "Sometimes I really not understand Chinese people."

"She told you all this?"

"Sure."

"So what's she going to do?"

"Prob-ly go Hong Kong, marry somebody there."

"Just like that?"

"That what she say."

"And the children?"

"She taking the young one go. And husband taking Mui Ying. That why Mui Ying come this trip, so can be with Sok Wai before go with husband. Maybe they not see each other again."

A final trip between mother and daughter. Did Mui Ying know? It struck me as absolute insanity for the girl to lose her mom just because her father wanted a son.

Sok Wai strolled toward us holding her daughter's hand. The girl's little innocent, button eyes gazed about as she followed her mother's lead. Sok Wai clutched a bag full of shoe boxes in her other hand.

I offered to carry Sok Wai's package and she smiled, but shook her head. My mom spoke to her and Sok Wai looked at me and nodded. I took the bag and strode behind Sok Wai and her daughter, watching them go down the sidewalk together.

∴

On the last day of our tour my mother and I ate another round of the hard rolls and bland rice soup at the hotel cafeteria for breakfast. The place's star rating dropped at least two notches in my book with culinary fare that made me long for hospital food.

Neither my mom nor I ate much. We carried our bags out to the bus and took seats when the tour guide rushed aboard and dashed through the aisle to my mother. He communicated in an urgent manner.

She said to me, "We have to go back to hotel. He say something wrong."

"What do you mean something's wrong?"

"I not know, but have to go."

The man led us off the bus, across the lot, and into the lobby. He pointed to a woman at the counter whose face seemed almost too narrow to prop up her wide, black, horned-rimmed eyeglasses. When my mom approached, the woman reported something and handed her an invoice. My mother disregarded it, shook her head, and responded in a tone of heightened irritation.

An argument ensued, their voices rising with each exchange. The woman kept gesturing at the slip. My mom continued to shake her head and pointed to the elevator.

Then the woman picked up the phone on the counter, punched some numbers, and spoke into the receiver. My mother didn't let up while this clerk talked on the phone.

I went to the counter and said, "What's going on?"

My mom looked at me with angry disbelief in her eyes. "She crazy, say we owe money for long-distance phone calls. She try to show me day and time we make."

"We didn't make any long-distance calls."

"That the night you try call your girlfriend."

"But I didn't get through."

"That what I tell her, but she keeping say we make three calls, have to pay. I tell her we not going to pay for that, so she getting the boss."

"How much are they saying we owe?"

A disgusted sneer formed on her face. "Three hundred dollars Chinese."

Forty American dollars. "That's ridiculous!"

"That what I say." She whirled and launched some seething words at the woman, who issued an icy reply. This sparked another barrage.

A tub of a man with bloated cheeks and a bulging lower lip came down the hall and joined the fracas. My mother paused as he conferred with the desk clerk. The man—his girth taxing a plaid jacket—picked up the invoice from the counter, scanned it quickly, and rendered his

decision. My mom shook her head in defiance and the supervisor engaged her in a replay of the earlier confrontation. The gaunt-faced woman appeared relieved to let him assume the battle.

My mother and the new combatant went at it. I watched my mom: eyes riveted, tendons bulging in her neck, head lurching forward with the fury of each verbal volley. I had never seen her this bitter, this intense, even in the worst fights with my stepfather. Sheer unrelenting hatred rained from her words, as if she were attacking someone who had done something heinous and unspeakable to her.

At that moment I realized it wasn't the money. My mom wasn't just mad or upset. I heard anger in her voice, but more than that, I could feel her frantic desperation. Her anguish and horror. She was yelling as if her very life depended on it, as if the man in front of her had stolen something treasured and sacred.

Then I saw it in her eyes, the frightened eyes of a twelve-year-old girl, watching, helpless, as soldiers took her mother and father away.

And now she was venting her rage at this man, the supervisor, a person in charge, a symbol of China. Like a child who never had the chance.

I stepped slowly to my mom and put my hand on her shoulder. She turned and I saw the traces of terror on her face. In as calm a voice as I could muster, I said, "Mom, it's my fault. I'll pay the money."

She stared at me a moment before recognition came to her eyes and her face changed, as if her darkest enemy had transformed into her son.

She didn't say anything. But in that brief instant I caught a glimpse of it, stark and raw. Grief.

She managed a blank nod.

I unzipped my belt pouch, removed two twenty-dollar traveler's checks, signed them, and put them on the counter.

I went to my mom, placed my hand on her arm, and guided her out to the bus.

CL BLEDSOE

It's Snowing Inside My Daughter's Head

And in her eyes. I can see the flecks reflected
when she smiles, each a perfect, individual

normalcy. *Huffington Post* ran a piece
on negligent parents who don't shovel

the walkway from their children's smiles
to the outside world so that a thick crust of ice

forms between father and daughter, mother
and son, and every time they try to bond, someone

slips and bruises a knee. This is the problem
with Gen Xers; we know how to shovel

but can't break the ice. I never meant to read
so much it ruined my eyes so I couldn't see

you. It was poor planning, bad advice. A cartoon
in the *New Yorker* said I'm doing everything

wrong, and I don't even have a subscription.
Someone just keeps leaving them in my mailbox.

EMMA BOLDEN

Because of the House We Have Built for Our Language

Both moss and nightfall creep and crawl,
neither respectfully nor respectively. Over time,
paper leaves its spine, which lacks the durability
of bone. Bone is strung to bone with spinal cord,

which is not a sound. Tongue is both a sound and
the muscle that makes it. Skin is both the covering
and the act of uncovering. The heart is an organ
that seventy-two times per minute pumps blood

into meaning, which is not blue but red. The heart
is an organ with four chambers, which are not rooms.
Rooms are places we build for ourselves to live.
There will never be enough of them.

JOTA BOOMBABA

Days in Pattaya

—*Thailand, 2013*

On aching hot days, I pray for cool dusk
band of orange across the western sky
rising moon, planets, stars
each an old acquaintance—silent, serene

Come sunset, as thirsty mozzies swarm
as motorbikes buzz, I dream of dawn
band of orange across the eastern sky
smooth beach bare of night

Mornings, sizzling like a plate of eggs
I pray again for dusk—all its disappointments
my monkey mind cannot sit still, cannot
find satisfaction in a cup of tea

Day by day, I plant no purpose here
only pen and paper, only hope
a garden might bloom, leaves full of fruit
a summer flower bending toward the fall

JENNIFER BURD AND LASZLO SLOMOVITS

Edges

Collage. Mosaic.
Paper, torn,
pottery, broken—

all things whole
may release
new edges,

changed lengths
from new centers.
What is now is

one, and does not
know the many
it may become.

Pieced back
together,
fragments

of a life alter
the landscape
of its meaning.

Here we are
at the changing
periphery—

escarpment
of a shattered shape
healing toward us.

Something Waits

There are nights
when something hidden
wants to show itself—

anxiety signals
but can't talk.

The full moon, waning,
lights the clouds,
casting night shadows.

Kindling leaves walk
down the winding staircase
of calm air.

Something waits
to open, to flare,
in you, in me,

there, where
awareness balks

but returns again
and again to stare
at what we're scared of.

KATE GARKLAVS

Letter to a Wife from an Almost-Wife

This deserves a letter because we've met twice IRL. First, your wedding day: Greenpoint, chorizo, clams. Sweating through a dress I didn't foreshadow to ruin. Second, coastside, December: didn't know a soul and dominated the bread basket. Shit: thrice, or maybe the third is imagined. My last smoking weekend though I hadn't planned it. We will always need mothers because we can't sew zippers ourselves, will always love thrifting for romantic salvage & rescue vibes. I'm writing on your two-thirds anniversary because every month needs fresh champagne. I'm hungry for Hugo's pocket of towns, five daily whiskeys, street cred of a Boeing job. I'm so bourgeoisie I mark books with gift cards, so laissez-faire this tattoo sits unfinished as the moon. Your town's fountain blooms like a jellyfish; my town has static cloud. Yesterday I blanched at the Paleo bar. Today, blisters from imitation huaraches. Tomorrow's reserved for Pucci and TI wiseff. I burn candles from both ends but haven't seen a candle in years. Each day a new disruption lesser than the last.

SUSANNA LANG

Fullerton Avenue Bridge

Bridge Out the sign says, though it's clearly in service, cars passing, slowly, one lane open while construction continues, over the narrow water where the black-capped night herons have already left their fishing, already found their own way out before the long dark arrives for the rest of us—for the fish that haven't been caught, the geese that have forgotten to leave, for ourselves who might have remembered there are other bridges, might have exited early and found a way around this slow meditation of moving and not moving; the barricade set aside to let us through, but the sign left standing.

LESLIE ANNE MCILROY

Herself to be a Mansion

She is a wrecking ball apologizing
for hitting the house next door—amends
like brick breaking, dust settling.

She is constructing, she says,
herself to be a mansion. We wear
hard hats and bright coats, learn

not to look up, to scrub toilets,
do laundry, fry fish sticks in her absence,
to brace, to lie. We go it alone knowing

the importance of actuating, finding
oneself despite children. Travel,
sex and Tao take lots of space.

I fix nothing with this hammer
of forgiveness, my tools chisel-like,
prying open small doors, chipping away.

I'm all locks, alarms, dogs and shutters.
And no, I don't invite her in. Light
only makes the room smaller.

SUSAN SHAW SAILER

Upright

St. Francis on the grass,
concrete arm broken at the elbow.
Vandals pushed him from his pedestal
last night, left him face-down,
basket empty.

This morning someone
righted him. Among the cattails
redwing blackbirds issue sweet commands.
It's not a high-wire act whether
we fall or rise.

A goddess walking
to the swimming pool demands
our eyes, fans herself, wears 5-inch
spikes. American as apple pie,
brass knuckles.

ANDREA WITZKE SLOT

Regret

I am sorry I didn't return your call
or answer your second call, or return
your text or email or Facebook message.
It is hard to hear when I am turning, turning,
pulling down computer-lidded eyes, packing up,
walking away. Did you know I wake in the night
thinking of you—yes, thinking of you—wondering
why I didn't return your call, or answer your second call
or kept my phone on silent for days and then for weeks
or didn't type a response while the computer-
lidded eyes remained propped open toothpick style
for so very long? Don't get me wrong. I love you.
And I have tried to hear you ring and ring and ring,
like phones used to ring when we were children,
when we all jumped up and ran a mad-dashed race toward
the large yellow-belled instrument, wanting to know
who it was and my sister would win and she would
answer breathlessly and sigh as she surrendered
the plastic dogbone to me, and then you and I would talk
for hours as I leaned against a bright orange kitchen wall
with my fingers sweating and wrapped tight around
the heavy receiver, and I miss you, even more now since
the empty message voice turned up to stop your clear rings
in their tracks, in the way I wish it could stop all that is now
turning, turning, pulling down, packing up, walking away.

JOHN SIBLEY WILLIAMS

Conceived in Violence

Certain, in permanent ink, the desperate
inscribe their verdicts on the wall dividing us.

I am here in caricature, accurate as a shadow,
understood as *other*.

Safe in blame. Safe in writing
of each other's blood with our own.

Bone and breath transparent,
we inhabit the bottom of this place together.

*

I am told there is a ladder.
I am told too much
and again the sun ascends
only half-way and is red.

I wonder if we are climbing
any closer to the sun
or if the earth is sinking
beneath us each step.

*

To live happily I know
someone must suffer.
When I struggle with breath
another will always be singing.
When *I* sing it's as if I'm sharpening a knife.

I wish it could be some other way.

Though we were born together
sharing a room without walls,
we are no longer children,

and I know the dead weight
of your body on mine
has become the price of my home.

AUTHOR NOTES

CL Bledsoe

CL Bledsoe is the author of eight books, most recently the poetry collection *Riceland* and the novel *Man of Clay*. Bledsoe lives with his daughter in Alexandria, VA.

About the Work

This poem came from my experiences trying to be a good parent. From the day my daughter was born—really before she was born—people, strangers—have been telling me how to be a parent, usually without actually knowing the specifics of my or my daughter’s situation, and frequently without invitation. There’s a vast amount of marketing put out to feed on the fears of parents. If you don’t buy certain products and do certain things, you are a terrible parent, a horrible human being, and your child will suffer, will have disadvantages, these advertisements and people often come right out and say, even when, in reality, some of these products are actually harmful to children. It can be difficult to quell these fears, but it’s necessary for a parent to trust his or her instincts. The poem is hyper-honest to such an extreme degree that it transcends rational fears and crosses over into absurdity; the narrator of the poem listens to all these marketers and is crippled with fear and self-doubt because of it, and we, the readers, can shake our heads at it, but secretly we feel these same fears.

The most difficult part of writing this poem was achieving the proper tone. I didn’t want the narrator to simply whine or express doubts; the tone had to go far beyond that to push the situation into absurdity in order to match the absurdity of these mixed messages. To achieve this, I simply channeled my own fears to an extreme degree. I listened to the marketers telling me that I was a failure, a bad parent, etc. Of course, an awful lot of parents DO listen to the marketers. Some parents plop their kids in front of educational television programming, and others refuse to let their kids interact with technology until they’re older. Some buy gas-guzzling SUVs to be safer in traffic, and reinforce gender roles so the kids will be “normal,” as if the worst thing a child can be is different. And this is the lie in our ideals, isn’t it? Being different might seem like one of the worst things a kid can be, to the kid; the reality is that we don’t live in an egalitarian society. For me, being different meant being picked on. But being normal meant mind-numbing boredom in the working-world. So which path should I be trying to set my kid upon?

This is something I couldn’t resolve in the poem, because it’s not something that can be resolved in life. Life is far more complicated than that. Poetry isn’t meant to sum up a situation in a neat argument, but rather to explode seemingly simple things and show their true complexity. Poetry is an opportunity to examine the vastly complicated emotional reactions we have to the world; poetry lets us question the world in an attempt to learn how to live, how to be human.

CL Bledsoe on the Web

www.cbledsoe.com

Emma Bolden

Emma Bolden is the author of *Maleficae* (GenPop Books, 2013) and *medi(t)ations*, forthcoming from Noctuary Press. She's also the author of four chapbooks of poetry: *How to Recognize a Lady* (part of Edge by Edge, Toadlily Press); *The Mariner's Wife*, (Finishing Line Press); *The Sad Epistles* (Dancing Girl Press); and *This Is Our Hollywood* (in The Chapbook). Her nonfiction chapbook, *Geography V*, is forthcoming from Winged City Press. Bolden's work has appeared in such journals as *The Rumpus*, *Harpur Palate*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Conduit*, *the Indiana Review*, *the Greensboro Review*, *Redivider*, *Verse*, *Feminist Studies*, *The Journal*, *Guernica*, and *Copper Nickel*.

About the Work

I started playing this game with language when I was very young: I look at a word and rearrange the letters, seeing what other words I can make (and, at times, what nonsensical but exciting quasi-words I can make). When I was four, I told my mother about my most exciting discovery yet: that “dog” spelled backwards is “god.” This shocked my (very Roman Catholic) mother, who told me that I should probably not tell my kindergarten teacher (also very Roman Catholic, and at a very Roman Catholic school) what I'd discovered. Though I didn't realize it yet, in that moment, I began to see that language has great power, and that part of this power comes from its sheer malleability, its ability to shift almost capriciously from one meaning to another—often completely different—meaning.

I was thinking about the nearly alchemical properties of language—and how I felt as though my own language had lost all of its magic—when I jotted down notes for “Because of the House We Have Built for Our Language.” I'd been participating in the Grind, a project founded by Ross White in which writers write a poem a day and send it to their group, for several months, and I was definitely feeling “ground” down (forgive the pun—another doubling of meaning!). At the same time, I was dealing with chronic illnesses and felt, as many people with chronic illnesses do, as if I both couldn't and shouldn't talk to the people around me about it. Poetry became, for me, the one place where I could speak freely.

However, I soon became as sick of writing poems about sickness as I was of dealing with sickness itself. I was tired of writing about the body, and I was especially tired of the language I'd been using to talk about the body. I always seemed to build my poems about the body around the metaphor of a house, a structure in which we live our lives. When I wanted to explore the destructibility of that structure, I found myself writing about the separate parts from which the body as a whole is built, especially skin and bone. I was sick of it. I'd written so many poems about the feeling of being trapped inside of the body that I felt trapped inside of my writing about the body as well. Raymond Queneau once described the OuLiPo as “rats who build the labyrinth from which they will try to escape,” and I felt very much like a rat, trapped, in a strangely Escher-esque way, by the labyrinth of my own language.

Much like Queneau and his fellow OuLiPians, I found my way out of the labyrinth by playing games with language. Ironically, I first began to find my way out of this trap in the waiting room of my doctor's office, a place where one can't help but think of the body, and a place that literally feels like a trap. Perhaps this collision of metaphor and matter primed me to notice the

multiplicities of meaning in language. I sat next to two other patients, who were in the middle of a talk about the damp weather and Spanish moss so ubiquitous in Savannah.

“It just sneaked into all of my trees,” one patient said.

“It’ll do that to you,” the other patient replied. “That moss just creeps over everything it sees.”

Perhaps it’s because we’d been waiting for a very long time, or because I felt loopy after writing a poem every day for so many months, that I was captivated by her verb use. I imagined, for a moment, the moss as a burglar, creeping around at nightfall. I then thought about that word—“nightfall”—itself, how it itself is a metaphor for darkness in descent, and how night is also said to creep. I started thinking about more words with multiplicities of meaning—how a spine can run through the center of a body or the center of a book, how “skin” describe the tissue that covers a body and the process of removing that tissue from a body. I was playing a version of the game I’d played as a child, and it gave me the very same sense of joy and pleasure in the mysteries of language. I was able to reconnect with language and once again see the labyrinth as a game, as a maze that offered new directions and realizations at every turn.

Emma Bolden on the Web

emmabolden.com/

therumpus.net/2014/03/about-the-human-hymen-disambiguation/

blog.bestamericanpoetry.com/the_best_american_poetry/2014/02/book-preview-emma-boldens-meditations.html

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<http://www.genpopbooks.com/emma-bolden/maleficae/>

Jota Boombaba

Jota Boombaba, when not on the road, writes poetry in and around San Francisco, where he lives and explores with his son.

About the Work

In July, 2013, I spent a few weeks in a seaside town in southeast Thailand, a place I'd never been before, hoping that all its unfamiliar surroundings would inspire some new poems. What I discovered on that hot and humid beach was that I am rarely satisfied with the way things are. I am always craving something else, something more, something new. That very discovery inspired "Days in Pattaya."

I suppose I have the same experience when writing a poem: I'm never quite satisfied with a draft, which keeps me revising over and over, at least until a poem is accepted for publication. At that point, with that editorial acceptance, I consider a poem complete, at least for the time being.

The older I get, the closer I get to death and the further I get from birth, the more I see my life as one long poem—never quite satisfactory, never quite what I had in mind, always open to revision, even when admired and applauded by others.

Jennifer Burd and Laszlo Slomovits

Jennifer Burd has had poetry published in the *Ann Arbor Review*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Acorn*, *Antiphon*, *NEAT*, *Issa's Untidy Hut* and *Modern Haiku*. She placed as a semifinalist in the World Monument Fund's 2012 haiku contest and tied for second place in *Bluestem* literary magazine's 2012 postcard poetry contest. She is the author of a book of poems, *Body and Echo*, and a book of creative nonfiction, *Daily Bread: A Portrait of Homeless Men & Women of Lenawee County, Michigan*, based on her experiences reporting on local homelessness for the Adrian, Michigan, *Daily Telegram* newspaper. Jennifer received her BA in English and her MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Washington. She currently works as an editor and writer for HighScope Educational Research Foundation in Ypsilanti, Michigan.

Laszlo Slomovits is one of the twin brothers in Ann Arbor's nationally-known children's folk music duo, Gemini (GeminiChildrensMusic.com). In addition to his music for children, Laszlo has set to music a great range of poetry—from Rumi and Hafiz, 12th and 13th Century Sufi Mystics, to the American greats, Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost, to contemporary poets such as Naomi Shihab Nye and Michigan poet Linda Nemec Foster. Laszlo is currently at work on a new selection of Rumi poems set to music, as well as song-settings of the contemporary American poet Jennifer Burd, with whom he has also collaborated on joint poems and a children's play. In addition to his work in music, Laszlo has had or is about to have poems published in *The Ann Arbor Review*, *Lilliput Review*, *Third Wednesday* and *NEAT*, as well as haiku and tanka in *Issa's Untidy Hut*, *Acorn*, and *A Hundred Gourds*.

Jennifer and Laszlo have been collaborating for the last three years on joint poems, shared readings, and most recently on a children's play for Wild Swan Theater.

About the Work

We have found writing poems jointly to be an inspiring process and one that is full of wonderful surprises—the kind of surprises that stimulate other creative ideas. One or the other of us sends an opening line or two to the other one via e-mail, and then we go back and forth growing the poem. We have no rules about how many lines we each must contribute or in what order. For the most part, we go about composing a poem jointly much the way we would when writing our solo pieces, but as we pass a poem back and forth the other person often will change something in a way we might never have thought of, which generally sparks even more ideas for the other.

In the case of both "Edges" and "Something Waits," published in this issue, one of us was initially inspired by an image and idea. In the case of "Edges," Laz was contemplating the properties and uses of broken edges and how new creations (on both a physical level and an inner, subtle one) can come out of what has been broken. In "Something Waits," Jennifer initially put down some images and ideas inspired by the autumn season and how the feeling of autumn connected to an inner mood. In each case, the other was inspired to join in, add images, revise lines, and change some

words. We passed the pieces back and forth by e-mail, making revisions, and occasionally meeting in person before our final pieces took shape.

Burd and Slomovits on the Web

<https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/110675372/Winter%202013-2014/NEAT.%20Issue%203%20Winter%202013%20-%202014.pdf>

James Chaarani

James Chaarani's work has appeared in the *Blue Lyra Review*, *Instinct*, *Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide*, and *Fab Magazine*. His play, "Everybody's Whore," was named "Best Bet" by *Eye Weekly Toronto*, and his interactive narrative, *Painting the Myth*, received a Gold National Post DX Award. Lethe Press will publish his first novel in August 2015.

About the Work

Both of my parents immigrated to Canada from Lebanon during the Civil War, after witnessing unspeakable cruelty and instability. Violence and death were recurring themes in their lives, and the lives of many Lebanese people. I was born in Canada but I'd traveled to Lebanon on my own a few years back and lived there for a year to get in touch with my roots. "What Mother Taught Me" was inspired by my experiences there, as well as my parents' stories and the stories of people that I met there. This story was initially about Samira living in modern day Trablous as an adult. She was a widow herself, shamed by the illegal actions of her late husband. As I started exploring her childhood through flashbacks, I became fascinated by this young girl I was creating and soon the story shifted so it was solely about her experiences as a child with her widowed mother.

Living in Lebanon made it very easy for me to write about the country and the mentality of the people: their hopes and fears. I also connected with the landscape, in particular the mountain region. I went on several hikes while I was there. The most difficult part was writing in the voice of a young girl, and to understand what a mother-daughter relationship is all about. To get this right, I got the opinion of many female friends and bounced ideas off them. This was followed by many rewrites.

For me, writing literary fiction is all about connecting with an emotion, an idea, or some type of philosophy. It's a form of expression and exploration that helps me understand the world around me by diving into certain themes and characters.

Kate Garklavs

Kate Garklavs is a writer and editorial analyst living in San Francisco. Her work has appeared or will appear in *Tammy*, *Two Serious Ladies*, *The Tusculum Review*, and *Thrush*. When she's not writing, she's most likely broadening her taxidermy collection.

About the Work

For the longest time I was intimidated by poetry. I studied fiction as an undergrad and grad student, and during my course of study I convinced myself that poetry was off-limits—accessible only to individuals deeper or more worldly than I. Slowly, intentionally, I debunked this awkward formally-focused myth and began writing a series of epistolary poems inspired by Richard Hugo's *31 Letters and 13 Dreams*—to date, my favorite poetry collection. My own work has always hovered in that space between comprehensible narrative and big-old collection of images, and I found (and find) Hugo's work accessible in a way that many poems aren't. I fast latched on to Hugo's focus on place—the comparative fixity of its physical elements and the transience of the people who contribute equally to its emotional resonance—and invariably my writings find their beginnings on the side streets of underpopulated Midwest towns, on highways, or in neon-bleached dives where a beer and shot will set you back five bucks.

“Letter to a Wife from an Almost-Wife” is addressed to an acquaintance that I someday hope to count among my good friends. I first met Lauren at her wedding—my fiancé grew up with her husband—and met her again at another wedding we attended last year. None of my close friends is married, and I'm fascinated by the bonds that spring up among partners and plus-ones at the nuptials they're invited to and (sometimes hesitantly) attend. On the brink of wifedom myself, I wrote this poem from a place of transition: of deep nostalgia for the almost-past and anticipation of a new role, a modified self.

I'm also rabidly aware of my cultural surroundings and love to incorporate time- and place-specific markers into whatever I'm working on. I've been warned against this practice (and reasonably, I think), but I can't dismiss the knowledge that our cultural identifiers—fad diets, textile patterns, slang and emoticons—are central to our shifting identities. As much as I like to rail against the Paleo diet in conversation, I realize that my stance speaks to larger truths about myself. Therefore, the references stay.

Kate Garklavs on the Web

www.kategarklavs.com

web.tusculum.edu/tusculumreview/back-issues/the-tusculum-review-vol-42008/

www.twoseriousladies.org/letter-to-jane-from-northern-california-by-kate-garklavs/

tammyjournal.com/issuetwo

Susanna Lang

Susanna Lang's most recent collection of poems, *Tracing the Lines*, was published in 2013 by the Brick Road Poetry Press. Her first collection, *Even Now*, was published in 2008 by The Backwaters Press, and a chapbook, *Two by Two*, was released in October 2011 from Finishing Line Press. She has published original poems and essays as well as French translations in such journals as *Little Star*, *New Letters*, *The Sow's Ear Poetry Review*, *The Green Mountains Review*, *The Baltimore Review*, *Kalliope*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *World Literature Today*, *Chicago Review*, *New Directions*, and *Jubilat*. Book publications include translations of *Words in Stone* and *The Origin of Language*, both by Yves Bonnefoy. Lang lives in Chicago, where she teaches in the Chicago Public Schools.

About the Work

When I tried to remember the process of writing "Fullerton Avenue Bridge," it felt as if I had written it a long time ago. I had only a blurry memory of being stuck in traffic on the way to the farmers market, maybe in October. It turned out to be November 2012—not so very long ago! I was able to find most of the drafts between my notebooks and electronic files, along with the feedback I received from friends who live and write at a distance from my Chicago. One of the virtues of an online writing community is that the feedback lives on in our hard drives and email inboxes, unlike our discussions in coffee houses and friends' living rooms, however fruitful those were at the time.

Rereading everything I found, I am struck by how little I was writing that fall. I had started a new job that I wanted to love, but it was swallowing me whole without giving me much in return. In addition, or maybe as a result, I was more than usually troubled by the seasonal diminishment of light. That November Saturday, I was indeed stuck in traffic on the bridge over the harbor, where the city had (as usual) neglected to remove construction signs and barriers though the project was complete. I wrote a quick note, which led to an assignment. Assignments are not usually part of my process, but they can help when I have trouble getting started. I decided that I would begin with the sign announcing that the bridge was out when it wasn't—that failure of communication—and then write the poem in one sentence, ending with a quotation. I had been impressed with someone's poem that did something similar. I wish I could remember whose poem, but the only one that seems relevant of the poems tucked or copied into my notebook is Gerald Stern's "Day of Grief" (<http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/day-grief>). He has the one sentence and the sense of a coming "cold and dark," but not the insertion of another poet's words, which was an important part of my initial idea. I hesitated among several evocations of herons before settling on a line from "In a Dark Time" by Roethke (<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/172120>) for my first complete draft. It was a mess, but by the end of the month, I had a smoother draft of the same idea, and I needed to hear from readers. I took it to a writing circle here in Chicago and emailed it to my online group:

11/29/12

Bridge Out,

the sign says, though the bridge is clearly in
service, cars passing, slowly, one lane open
while construction continues, over the narrow
water where the black-capped night herons
have already left their fishing, already found
their own way out before the long dark
arrives for the rest of us—even the fish
that haven't been caught, the geese that have
forgotten to leave, ourselves who might
have remembered there are several bridges
to choose from, might have exited early
and found a way around this slow meditation
of moving and not moving, of living
as Roethke says, *between the heron and the wren*.

The comments were astoundingly consistent: while my readers were engaged by the images, no one wanted me to end with Roethke's words. They accused me of name-dropping, said Roethke was a distraction, said his line was confusing. Despite the unanimity, it took me more than another month and innumerable drafts before I found another way out of the poem, as well as a new title. I tried holding onto Roethke in an epigraph but eventually recognized the truth of what my writer friends had been telling me—my poem was better off without him. You can lead a horse to water, as they say, but you can't make her see her own reflection clearly.

The other concern I was struggling with in the fall of 2012 was the scope of my work. I had written bigger poems over the summer when I wasn't working full time, and I was measuring success against those big, ambitious pieces. "Fullerton Avenue Bridge" is not big, though it gestures toward the larger issues of time and language, as all my writing did during that fall toward darkness. Just as it now seems obvious to me that I needed to break free of Roethke, it also seems self-evident that poems don't need to be big in order to be worthwhile. But maybe the simplest lessons are the hardest to learn. The essential truths can be captured in a short lyric as effectively as in a big sprawling epic, as Roethke and Stern should have taught me.

Susanna Lang on the Web

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Liv Lansdale

Liv Lansdale is Book Reviews Editor for poetsatwork.com. Her favorite sentence of the 18th century is from Wollstonecraft, and refers to men as "bugbears." She is actively seeking the perfect mojito.

About the Work

My parents were separating when I wrote this story, and I had recently picked up a copy of the delightfully titled lit mag, *Armchair/Shotgun*. I decided to start a project based on romantic tropes. Prose poetry has a rich history in objects (Ponge, Mallarmé, etc.) so I thought I'd pick some and split them with a slash. A loose narrative started to form so I downplayed the role of lyricism (realizing ruefully I could never be Ponge or Mallarmé) and decided this would be my first shot at flash.

Having only rarely attempted fiction in the past, the easiest part of the project was forgoing poetic concern, writing without thinking about line breaks or meter. But of course, for me, those elements of craft are more manageable than the gargantuan task of developing a person (or however you want to define fiction), so nearly all other aspects of the project felt unwieldy.

I didn't know my narrator, or how she would talk. I didn't know how to craft plot – which I maintain *is* really important, even in "literary" fiction. The object structure worked for me because it allowed me to chart her development around markers unrelated to plot. And no episodes would have emerged unless I'd challenged myself to incorporate the objects I'd chosen.

I wanted to go back to poetry exclusively since finishing *Couples Therapy*, but more conceits have come to mind. Some fiction writers claim their stories begin with an image, or a vision of a character—nothing like that happens for me, but I'll sit down at an oddly themed restaurant and wonder, what if there were a story behind each of the wonky items on this menu? My early poetry relied heavily on lists. Hopefully someday my fiction will become less dependent on formulae the poems have.

Liv Lansdale on the Web

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Leslie Anne Mcilroy

Leslie Anne Mcilroy won the 1997 Slipstream Poetry Chapbook Prize for *Gravel*, the 2001 Word Press Poetry Prize for her full-length collection *Rare Space*, and the 1997 Chicago Literary Awards. Her second book, *Liquid Like This*, was published by Word Press in 2008, and *Slag* is forthcoming from Main Street Rag in 2015. Leslie's poems appear in *Jubilat*, *The Mississippi Review*, *PANK*, *Pearl*, *New Ohio Review*, and more. Leslie is managing editor of HEArt (Human Equity through Art) and works as a copywriter in Pittsburgh where she lives with her daughter Silas.

About the Work

I don't believe this poem was "sparked" as much as surfaced. It is a very personal poem, as many of my poems are, and attempts to capture a sense of damage by abandonment—the struggle to understand a certain kind of selfishness guised as personal growth/self-actuation. There is a tone of sarcasm, a mocking sense on the part of the speaker who is trying to resolve the effects of desertion as a child, trying to understand the boundaries this creates between a mother and daughter in the long run. The speaker has learned a protection, a way to keep from getting hurt again—maybe a revenge of sorts, a closing of doors.

The poem was not a hard poem to write once honing in on "home" as a reigning metaphor and wreckage as a consequence. I guess the poem is really about an inappropriate selfishness typical of young mothers, who have yet to "find/know themselves" and find that more compelling than attending to the needs of a family.

The images (I hope) are chosen carefully to move the narrative forward in a fresh and unexpected way. The phonetic quality of the words (brick breaking, dust settling; hard hats and bright coats) were used to have the harsh sound, a hammer-like quality.

I love images and the idea of a person as a wrecking ball (I pray to god I didn't get that from Miley Cyrus), especially a person who is so caught up in trying to become whole, that they don't realize the collateral damage of their self-centeredness. So, the images were very clear to me—the idea of a living space/a house/home that is constructed/ruined and rebuilt with a protective/defensive armor.

Perhaps the most difficult part of the poem was addressing the anger/smallness of the speaker—the inability to forgive. I tend to write at night with a drink (which I am doing now) and revise in the morning with coffee (which I will do tomorrow). This poem took a number of shapes, but essentially ended up being built on the format of imagistically tight (for the most part) triplets (is that the right word? Three-line stanzas). I felt it suggested the construction of a self that is protected/compacted/limited in an ability to emotionally give.

Most times I just keep writing. When I get stuck or when the poem seems at a dead end, I put it away or begin it again in a completely different way. I think I was in love with the line "herself to be a mansion" and that resolved most everything in the poem for me, always coming back to what it means to want to be so big and enlightened (almost a Deepak Chopra parody), that you are blind to what you are willing to sacrifice to appear illuminated/cultured/experienced and free.

I have folders and folders of drafts I never go back to (lord forbid anyone gets my hard drive when I die—I would be mortified). Often if a poem doesn't work in a few days, I give up on it and believe the process of writing it will somehow inform some future work.

I have some poems I am in love with that have been rejected a billion times, but the hard trick is to keep believing if you feel strongly, keep sending out. Workshopping is also a huge asset, but these days I tend to write in a vacuum, only sending drafts to a few intimate writers, if that. I am often disappointed with the response, but try to heed wisdom.

Poetry for me is a very intense kind of communication that can make a reader feel very intimately something new and raw and real, with deft juxtapositions of image, narrative tightness and a risk-taking. The poem has to have heart. I even love prose writers who write like poets: Jeannette Winterson & Carol Maso, for instance. For me it is a willingness to imagine something radical, to witness a truth, to express a secret, to challenge the reader with an openness that can be brutal or beautiful, or both.

Many of the poets I love are far more accomplished/educated, take far more chances with form and let their poems go places I am afraid I often avoid. I use these poets as inspiration, try to learn from them: Jericho Brown, Naomi Shihab Nye, Sekou Sundiata, Saeed Jones, Sharon Olds, Suheir Hammad, Andrea Gibson. Sometimes I am dumbfounded by their ability to get from here to there, leaving the reader changed in an emotional way that is inescapable.

I believe that poetry's essential power is to alter the reader in some way—make her or him feel something/see something they have not necessarily felt before, and if they have, to give it some clarity, emotional presence on the page.

Leslie Anne Mcilroy on the Web

lamcilroy.org

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Ken Poyner

Ken Poyner lives in the Tidewater region of Virginia, with his world-class powerlifting wife, four rescue cats, and two demanding fish. His first book of poetry, *Cordwood*, came out in 1985; his second, *Sciences, Social*, in 1995; and his most recent book, *Constant Animals*, short fictions, in 2013. He has appeared in *Poet Lore*, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *The Iowa Review*, *The Alaska Quarterly*, *Analog Science Fiction and Fact*, *Watershed Review*, and about eighty other places. He has had multiple Pushcart Prize nominations, and taught once on an NEA Community Teaching grant. He is looking for a home for his latest book of short fictions, and working on a collection of poems rooted in radical cybernetics.

About the Work

I am a creature of revision. Yes, getting the idea can be tough. Usually, I will go through dry spells, but then the backed up ideas start stumbling out all on their own. Someone else's good work prods them loose, or some other experience that knocks me a bit off kilter pushes them to the exit, and I have Morse code in my hands to work with.

Generally, the first draft is little more than an outline, punctuated with passages here and there that are idyllic romps through the story line, or around the emotion of the developing piece. Immediately after my race to the end of the story, I turn around and begin again, often expanding the work by as much as a third. Then, I will go back and start yet again. Elements in the story inform me that they need more substance; others tell me that they have their middle, but no beginning or no end. I apologize, and try to meet the story's demands. I can place perhaps a new longing here, a closed door there. A rude handshake for the butler. Carnivorous butterflies in a gentle afternoon rain.

I can go over a draft initially four or five times. It is here that it moves from a musing to an attempt at something literary. It is here that it moves from opinion to politics. I twist and turn the possibilities, looking in each dark corner and deciding if it is there I want to go. I watch my original idea slip away and I learn to love the construct that has replaced it. Then I leave it alone.

A few days later the story and I box for a few turns, and quite often what may have started as 700 clipped words has, by the end of these sessions, become 1200 or 1400, or even 3000, with a character I did not suspect, or a turn of the tongue I was not originally looking for. The goal is for the work to surprise me. If it does not at some point push me with the unexpected, then it is hardly worth working on.

In the end, the story must tell me what it wants to do. It must have an independence. It must stand its ground without me. When the story and I sit glaring at each other across the computer screen and I have no keystrokes to give it, then it is ready. Ready, at least, for its first trip off the reservation.

I stand by to help it with its wounds should it come bedraggled back.

Ken Poyner on the Web

www.kpoyner.com

www.downdirtyword.com/authors/kenpoyner.html

www.microliterature.org/search/poyner/feed/rss2

www.friggmagazine.com/issuethirtytwo/poetry/poyner/gatherer.htm

www.fullofcrow.com/poetry/archives/ken-poyner-611/

Susan Shaw Sailer

After retiring from the Department of English at West Virginia University where she taught 20th Century Irish and British literature, Susan Shaw Sailer completed an MFA in the low-residency Program in Poetry at New England College in 2007. Her poems have appeared in such journals as *Persimmon Tree*, *THEMA*, and *Paterson Literary Review*. Her chapbook, *Coal*, was published in 2012 by Finishing Line Press. Her book, *Ship of Light*, was published by Port Yonder Press in 2013. Her reviews and articles about poetry have appeared in *Indiana Review*, *Prairie Schooner* and *Alehouse Review*. Sailer lives in Morgantown, West Virginia.

About the Work

Usually my poems evolve over a period of weeks and months, going through at least a dozen revisions, but “Upright” is an exception in that it arrived to me nearly in the form in which it has been published. The basis for the poem grows out of an experience:

I walk my dog, Loki, after lunch. We live in a condominium in Morgantown, West Virginia, and there’s a driveway leading from the top condo building where we live down between buildings two and three. At the bottom of the driveway is a three-foot statue of St. Francis, placed there by one of the residents. One day I noticed that the statue had been knocked off its pedestal.

Next day, the statue was back on its base, the worse for wear since the fall had broken its arm at the elbow. That arm had held a basket of seasonal flowers, but with the arm now a stub, it could hardly do so any longer. I felt outrage that this figure of love had been so badly treated and wanted to write about the incident.

Continuing down the driveway, I heard redwing blackbirds singing to each other, which echoed the spirit of St. Francis with his love of birds. I couldn’t help but think that we are often not in control of our lives, for better and for worse.

I tend to write concise poems and realized that this poem would be more powerful in a brief structure than in a lengthier one. In the little revision I felt the poem needed, I deleted an image that competed with the St. Francis statue in order to focus on where I wanted the reader’s attention to be.

Susan Shaw Sailer on the Web

www.portyonderpress.com/ship-of-light---susan-shaw-sailer.html

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Andrea Witzke Slot

Andrea Witzke Slot writes poetry, fiction, essays, and academic work, and is particularly fascinated by the spaces in which these genres intersect. She is the author of the poetry collection *To find a new beauty* (Gold Wake Press, 2012), and recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Southeast Review*, *Poetry East*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *Mezzo Cammin*, *Nimrod*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and in academic books published by SUNY Press (2013) and Palgrave Macmillan (2014). She lives just north of Chicago with her husband, the youngest of her five children/step-children, and her crazy West Highland Terrier Macbeth.

About the Work

This particular poem, “Regret,” was sparked by the constant feeling of being too busy in our lives—too busy to write letters, amble around the garden, take go-nowhere walks with friends, and make long, catch-up, just-for-the-sake-of-it phone calls. The poem came to me slowly over a period of time, as they often do, but was initially prompted by the experience of waking in the night thinking, “Why didn’t I call so-and-so back? Why didn’t I answer that email?” Then I’d feel terrible and send him or her some telekinetic love. The second experience that sparked the poem is in direct contrast to the first—the long hours I once spent in my youth chatting to friends on our yellow house phone, long before the advent of texting, cellphones, or any kind of social media. I have powerful images of the large, bulky, screwed-to-the-wall phone we used to use. In the 70s, we didn’t even have “cordless” phones, so we were quite literally tied to the wall, which meant standing within a ten-foot radius of the handset. Our phone was located in our kitchen, too, which was painted in my mother’s favorite color—bright orange—so the color imagery as well as the buzzing centrality of family life in that kitchen were key accompaniments to those phone conversations.

When writing and developing this particular poem, the most difficult part was getting the flow and movement between now and then and back to now to unfold in a way in which time matters. In my prose as well as my poetry, I rework poems relentlessly as I attempt to create the right tone, music, and metrical lengths that allow images to linger in the reader’s mind for the right amount of time and then connect easily and smoothly to the ones that follow. The easiest part of writing the poem was having strong images already in mind—my computer, the midnight sorrow, and the old phone in my childhood kitchen. The poem is an apology of sorts, too. As much time as I spend at my computer writing, I am not always good at returning emails or phone calls.

And the craft of poetry? To me, writing poetry has always been about trying to create an image and *sensation* that is as powerful in words as it is in my head and heart. This means creating a kind of movement in a piece that will make the subject come to life and, I hope, make readers feel and think differently about the way we live our lives. When I reread the poem, I feel reminded of

the urgent need for me to take the time to call my sisters, friends, parents, and extended family more often. And if just one reader is likewise prompted to make a long overdue phone call after reading the poem, then perhaps the poem has succeeded in its goals, however small they might be.

Andrea Witzke Slot on the Web

www.andreawitzkeslot.com

www.tupeloquarterly.com/tag/andrea-witzke-slot/

muse.jhu.edu/books/9781438449067 (free access through college libraries that subscribe to Project Muse)

www.versedaily.org/2012/terraincognita.shtml

www.connotationpress.com/a-poetry-congeries-with-john-hoppenthaler/may-2011/867-andrea-witzke-slot-poetry

John Sibley Williams

John Sibley Williams is the author of eight collections, most recently *Controlled Hallucinations* (FutureCycle Press, 2013). He is the winner of the HEART Poetry Award and has been nominated for the Pushcart, Rumi, and The Pinch Poetry Prizes. John serves as editor of *The Inflectionist Review* and Board Member of the Friends of William Stafford. A few previous publishing credits include: *American Literary Review*, *Third Coast*, *Nimrod International Journal*, *Rio Grande Review*, *Inkwell*, *Cider Press Review*, *Bryant Literary Review*, *Cream City Review*, *RHINO*, and various anthologies. He lives in Portland, Oregon.

John Sibley Williams on the Web

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Raymond M. Wong

Raymond M. Wong's family is his inspiration. He lives in San Diego with his wife, Quyen, and children, Kevin and Kristie. He earned the Eloise Klein Healy scholarship and the MFA in Creative Writing from Antioch University Los Angeles, and his writing has appeared in *U.S.A Today*, *U-T San Diego*, *LA Daily News*, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, *San Diego Family*, *Asia: The Journal of Culture and Commerce*, *City Works 2006*, *Small Print Magazine*, and other publications. Wong has been an assistant editor on *Lunch Ticket*, Antioch's online literary journal, and he works as a counselor at San Diego City College. His memoir, *I'm Not Chinese: The Journey from Resentment to Reverence*, will be published by Apprentice House in October 2014.

About the Work

"Hate" is an excerpt from my upcoming memoir, *I'm Not Chinese: The Journey from Resentment to Reverence*. In 1996, I was an emotionally empty 33-year-old, an outsider in every aspect of my life. I had disowned my native language and culture. I was disconnected from my family. My mother and I were polar opposites and grated on each other because we were so different. I hadn't seen my father in twenty-eight years and didn't get along with my stepfather. I harbored a profound distrust of people: I had few friends and my relationships with women could be summed up as a series of catastrophes.

Then I took a trip to Hong Kong, the city I left at the age of five. I met a father and an extended family in a place so utterly foreign, it could only be categorized as alien. Yet, these virtual strangers welcomed me despite the fact we couldn't talk to each other—they spoke Cantonese and I spoke English. I discovered an appreciation for my mom, who had witnessed the murder of her father at the hands of Communist soldiers when she was twelve. In mainland China, I learned to be open to a relationship with Quyen, the woman who would eventually become my wife. And on a windswept and rainy morning on a remote rural hillside in my mother's hometown, I embraced my family's history and found my purpose at the foot of my grandparents' headstone. This journey changed my life.

When I returned to America, I began to write about my experience and the words seemed to pour out of me. I completed the first draft of my book in 1997 and initiated countless revisions and an endless stream of submissions to agents and editors in the ensuing years. In 2011, an independent press in Florida finally offered me a contract and planned to release my memoir in 2013. I was ecstatic. Then on July 11, 2012, I received an e-mail from the publisher with the subject line "Unfortunate news." The owner was closing her business at the end of the year for personal reasons and wouldn't be able to publish my book after all. I went from euphoric to despondent.

I was working toward my MFA in Creative Writing at Antioch University Los Angeles at the time, so I shared the news with my mentor, Bernadette Murphy. She encouraged me to start submitting again and I did. I endured more rejections before finding Apprentice House, a student-run university press in Baltimore. Their program taught students how to operate a book publishing business by actually acquiring and producing their own titles. My work would help to educate future industry professionals. It was a perfect match.

My memoir will be out in October 2014. It's been a long and often daunting road to publication, but as writers, it's what we do. It's why we embark on a path of self-discovery by putting pen to paper and fingers to keyboard. I have not regretted a single moment of the process.

Raymond M. Wong on the Web

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