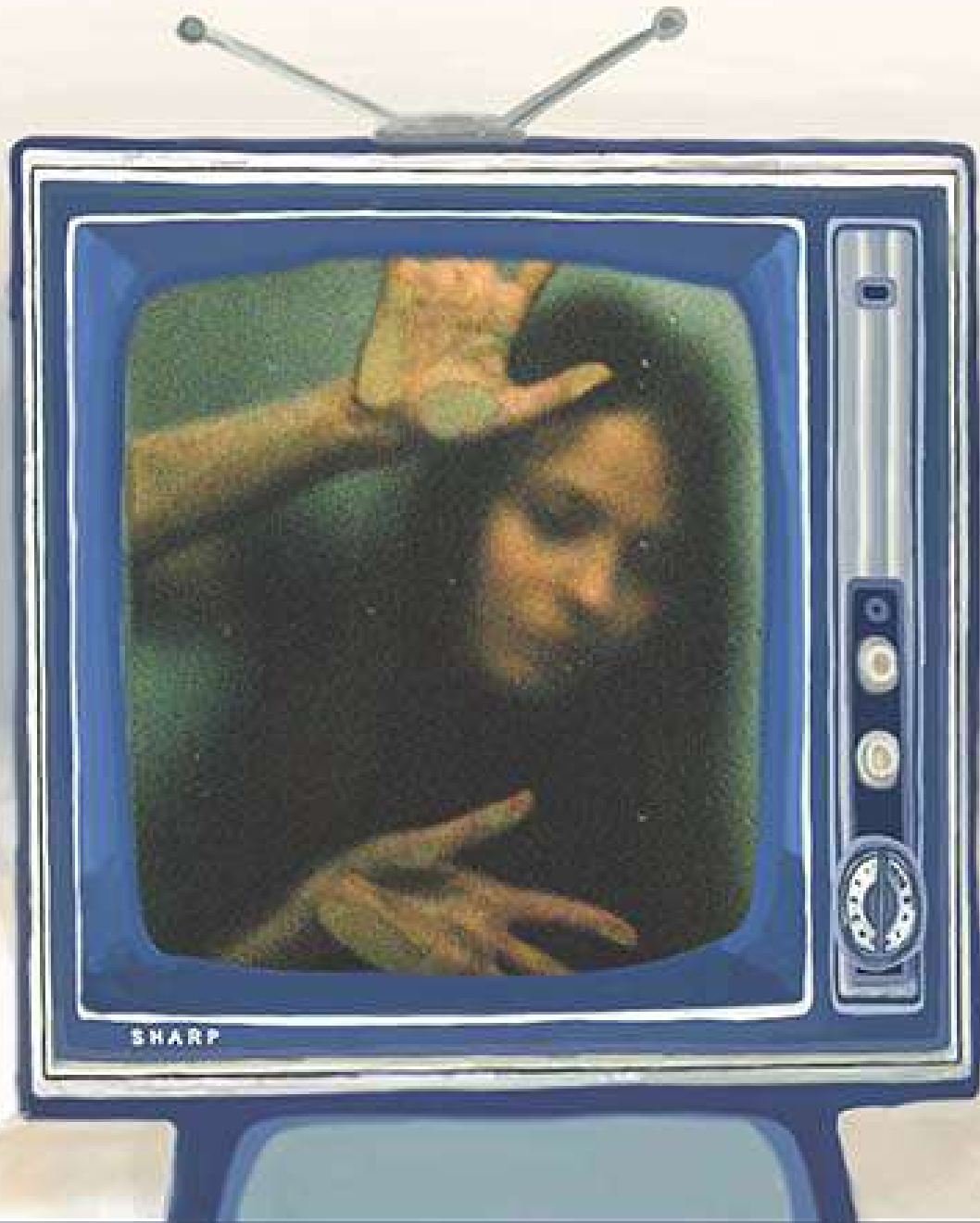


Voices

2023-24



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Northbound

David Berner

The driver nods as they step up. It's the same nod each time for every passenger, like a metronome, he nods, a greeting without discrimination. A nod for an old man with a long white beard, wearing a CAT hat and carrying a tired canvas backpack; a college student, tanned and blonde, in a Taylor Swift t-shirt; a mother with two young boys, twins, buzz cuts and matching blue shorts, walking in unison, oddly quiet. Nods. One and again. The bus runs every day. It's an early morning departure. Downtown Phoenix to Sedona. A three-hour ride with a few stops. The air conditioning is on high. It's nearly a full house.

Anna does not own a car. Never really needed one, working at the bar near the university, living in the tiny apartment above it, the grocery store, and the Walgreens right down the street. Couldn't afford one if she wanted one, and her driver's license renewal date expired two years ago, so there's that. She is taking a chance spending the money for the bus, more than \$100 round trip, a lot of dough for her. But they had texted and emailed for weeks, and his picture looked nice. Good eyes, she thought. Telling eyes. There had been nightmares, creepers, strange meetings. The last guy spent most of the time badmouthing all his old girlfriends, saying how one was such a bitch, the other a cunt. Rough language like that, as if he had to get it all out and she was just there to accept his ire. It was their first meeting. They met at the coffee shop near the train station in Phoenix. It was an easy getaway, if needed. Good choice. This new guy, though, just might be worth the bus ride. Something seems different than the others. Not sure what it is. Just one of those feelings, Anna thought. And you got to keep trying, don't you? Her sister was watching her kid. She had a rare weekend off. It's a pretty ride, one she'd not taken but had heard about. Can't win the game without trying, even when it gets weird. She'd been saying that a lot.

Anna returns the nod to the driver, an old Native American, his graying mane of hair in braids. He gives her a wry smile and looks her up and down. She smiles back out of habit and feels him watching her as she walks down the bus aisle. She's used to this. Those construction guys working on the university's administration building, the new wing near the bar, they watch her ass all the time. She gets that slow up and down glare when she's serving drinks. Guys staring at her boobs. One regular told her once he could guess her bra size. Wanted to make a five-dollar bet. She took it. He was wrong.

Anna chooses a window seat, wants to watch the land go by. The bus lurches from the station, snaking through the arid urban streets, and out to Highway 17 northbound. Emerging from the city's concrete, the desert is tan with patches of green, Saguaro cacti like prickly pencils rise toward the sky. In time, the land turns beige and the wind unfailing. Early on, there are several short stops. A few pick-ups and drop-offs. The man who had been sitting beside her, an old cowboy with leather skin and a cattleman hat gets off at Arcosanti. That's where he gets on.

He asks Anna if the seat is taken. She shakes her head. He's maybe in his 30s, a big man, not heavy, just big. Large shoulders. Large hands. His boots are those of a hiker, ones stained with red dust, ones that appear to have been on real trails. Anna notices a silver bracelet with turquoise on his left wrist. He carries a small day bag, slides it under the seat in front of him and falls into the cushion. Anna senses his weight shifting. She smells soapy sandalwood. He leans his head back against the seat and closes his eyes.

The bus is off again. Anna watches the road and all the tall mountains far off. She looks at the app on her phone, at the photo of the man she's to meet at the coffee shop not far from the

bus stop. She wonders what he's not revealing in his profile. Stretched truths, little lies. How many? She's been lying a little herself. She posted that she was 39. She's really 44. Admitting to being over 40, she thought, might limit her, scare guys off. She joined the dating app about a year ago, thinking about the future, seeing a time when her son wouldn't need her around quite as much and she'd end up alone. She didn't want that. So, she kept putting herself out there. Stumbling around. The miscues. The creeps. There was the time the guy asked her back to his apartment and after a few drinks, excused himself for the restroom, returning without a stitch of clothing, standing there full on naked. And there was the time the guy took her back to his house. He wanted to show her something, he said, and pulled out a knife hidden under the couch where they'd been sitting. He had another behind a framed painting, another behind the coffee maker, seven knives in all. Knives and more knives. There was no threat. Just knives. There was the date that turned out to be a heroin dealer. And the one who made weird sounds during sex, and sometimes hit her just as she was about to orgasm. One night on the sofa, he grabbed her neck and started choking her. She blocked his profile. Blocked all of them. She has blocked more than she wants to admit. A psychic she sees now and then when she can afford it, had predicted that she would always "shrink" herself to please her partners. That's the word she used, "shrink." Anna didn't want to make herself small for anyone. She'd done that before. So, she was at it again, on her way to Sedona, trying not to shrink.

"Going all the way?" the man asks.

"Excuse me," Anna says.

"Sedona. That's where you're headed?"

"Yes. Sedona."

"Same." He removes the wrapper from a protein bar he'd slipped from his shirt pocket and takes a bite. "Want some?"

Anna thought it a strange ask.

"No thank you," she says, turning toward the window.

"What's there?"

Anna's thoughts swirls. She can't tell him the truth. It's a good question. What is there? She interrogates herself. Is she simply searching like an out-of-control lighthouse, the beam rising too high and too low, lost in the night's deep clouds and the inky sea? This is the definition of desperate. A bus ride all the way to Sedona for a guy that has "good eyes?" That's it? Good eyes? How pathetic.

"A friend," she says. "I'm going to see a friend."

He tells her he's seeing a friend, too. But not right away, he clarifies. The friend is off somewhere. Some family thing, he thinks. He plans a couple of days of hanging around Sedona, hopes to take Soldier Pass Trail out of town and hike for few hours when he gets there. His friend is loaning him his ride. It's waiting for him at the bus stop. When his buddy gets back, they might go camping up near Chavez Crossing. Kind of a mini vacation, he says.

Anna notices a tattoo, a small crescent moon on the inside of his right forearm.

"Sounds nice," she says.

"I love it up there," he says.

Anna has lived in Phoenix for a long while and has never made it north. Never gets out of town that much at all. The boy. Work. Money. Not exactly a leisurely life. She thinks again about the cash she's spending on this crazy adventure and has a tinge of guilt. She had a recent little windfall. There was a full crowd at the bar last weekend with that band that plays there from time to time, the one that a lot of the locals like. Nice tips that night. Enough to justify this northbound trip, she tells herself. I can afford this sad little excursion. Just this once.

Anna watches through the window again. Red rocks. Desert willows. Mesquite. And those red flowers, a kind of cactus, if she remembers right. She forgets the name, though. Patches of scarlet flashing against the dusty ground along a stretch east of the road.

“Claret cup,” he says. He, too, attentive to the passing view.

She turns to him. “That’s it,” she says, recalling now when she first heard the name. It was a botanist, a professor at the college who’d come to the bar. While nursing a Modelo, he’d showed her a bunch of photos on his phone, plants he’d been studying. What was brutal heat doing to all the desert succulents? This was his big question. The temperatures each summer are rising, he had warned her. It was 115 degrees last July 11th. That’s dangerous for every living thing, he had said.

“Are you into plants?” she asks.

“Let’s just say I like to know what I’m looking at. When something is that beautiful, I want to know about it.”

Anna’s antenna rises. A ridiculous pick-up line is, she thinks. So, I want to know about you, too, because you’re so beautiful, too. Like the flower. It was just a matter of moments before those words would come out, a beat or two, and he’ll say it. She is certain. Any second now.

“It’s amazing how life comes out of this dry, dusty ground out here,” he says instead.

Yes, amazing, Anna thinks.

“Incredible what a little flower will do to survive, to stay alive. It’s unforgiving in the desert,” he continues.

Yes, unforgiving, she thinks.

Anna closes her eyes. She sees her son. She sees her apartment. She sees the little cactus she has growing in a terra-cotta pot of sandy soil on the kitchen sill. She sees the face of the guy who tried to guess her bra size. And she sees the photo of the man she’s on her way to meet, clear in her mind’s eye now, clear as anything. She has looked at it so many times and doesn’t need to return to her phone to see the blue in those eyes. You get blue eyes from the DNA of both parents. Both must have the genes to pass along. She remembers hearing that somewhere. Something about blue eyes and light, too, she recalls. People with blue eyes can see better in low light. Blue-eyed people see things clearer in the dark. When the light fades, you want the blue-eyed to help you see.

“Can I see your eyes?” Anna surprises herself with the question. She is no longer daydreaming, sitting taller in the seat, hands in her lap.

“You want to see my eyes?” he asks.

Everything she would ever want to know about him is there. It’s all in the eyes. Anna searches. For truth, for a lie, for peace, for hope, for forgiveness, for grief.

“They’re blue,” he says.

Anna smiles.

“And yours?” he asks, tilting his head to avoid a gleam of sunlight off the window.

“They’re brown?” He leans closer. “Oh, wow, deep brown.”

“Pretty standard stuff,” she says. “A lot of us with brown eyes.”

“You must be a grounded soul. Eyes the color of earth. Native Americans see a brown feather as a symbol of tenacity. So, brown eyes. That’s good.”

“Not so sure about tenacity,” Anna says and blushes, unexpectedly. “Oh damn, I’m really sorry about that. That was too forward, you know, asking about your eyes. Don’t know why I did that.”

He shrugs his shoulders. It’s nothing, he tells her. He didn’t think of it as too forward. Kind of likes the question, he says. People are too closed off. People live right next to each other for years and barely talk. Strangers, we are. It’s nice when someone just wonders aloud. We are all too scared of each other.

Is she scared? She can’t be if she’s taking a long bus ride alone to see a guy she’s never met, right? Maybe I should be scared, more careful. Maybe he’s some psycho. Blue eyes or not. There were all those other strange-ohs. But I wasn’t scared, not really. Should I have been?

When Anna first got on the app, her friend told her about a girl in Chicago who’d met a guy on Bumble. They dated three times, but it wasn’t working out for her. She tried to be nice,

explain how he just wasn't what she was looking for. He refused to believe her. Said he was in love. He showed up at her apartment at all hours. One night, in a rage, he pounded on her door. When she answered, he slapped her, punched her. Broke her eye socket. He barged in and beat her two dogs to death, two Yorkshire terriers, right in front of her. A terrible story. Still, Anna saw it was one in a million. There have been a lot of good stories, too. I'll be careful, she told her friend. And she has been, she's certain of it. Strange or quirky doesn't mean serial killer.

"What're you and your friend doing in Sedona?" he asks.

"Oh, just catching up," she lies.

"If you can, take that trail I talked about. And there's a neat arts village to see. You staying late, overnight?"

"Maybe, yeah."

"See the stars. Insane out there. Like you're looking into the deepest universe."

"Sounds like you know the place pretty well."

"Go to Mariposa Grill. I think that's the name. Great outdoor spot. Great views. Good margaritas."

Anna likes his voice. She likes the pitch. Not too low like that fakey movie trailer voiceover guy. It is pleasant. Confident. She notices a scar on his cheek near his left ear. There's a bit of gray, little touches ever so slight, in his stubble. The pinky finger on his right hand is twisted. Must have broken it once. Never healed.

"If you have the time, go to Slide Rock, up in Oak Creek Canyon," he says. "That's fun. You know Slide Rock?"

"Isn't that a kids' thing?"

"Kids at heart. Gotta go once, at least."

"Big natural rockslide. Isn't that it?"

"Yeah, a hundred feet long. Rushing water. Zip right down it. You can spend a half-day there, swimming, sliding, hanging out. Long time ago when I went, I saw this coyote watching all of us in the water from high on this rock. Like she wanted to be invited."

"We get coyotes in town. One was roaming around near the college. They had to tranquilize it."

"Yeah, guess you have to do that. Hate hearing it, though," he says, then becomes silent for a moment. "Anyway, you should go. Slide Rock."

"Maybe my friend will take me," Anna says, then immediately wonders why she said that.

"Well, if he doesn't. It's a he, right? This friend?"

Anna nods.

"Then I'll take you," he continues. "Here," he says, unlocking his phone. "This is my contact info." He shows her the screen. "I can text it to you. What's your number?"

Anna hesitates.

"Oh, yeah. My bad," he says, realizing asking for a phone number may be too much.

"Here," he hands Anna his phone, "just copy my phone number in your Notes or something. I'm serious, though."

Anna takes his phone.

"The name is James, by the way. James Parker." He reaches out his hand and she hers.

"Anna. I'm Anna." She types his name and number on her phone.

The bus carries along the last few miles on Route 179. In the distance, Anna sees the red rocks of Sedona, Bell Rock, and others, towering into the blue and out of the clumps of gray-green juniper trees. The bus snakes through the roundabouts and into the town center to a lot behind several shops. The brakes squeal and it stops. Passengers stand and reach for their bags, purses, their backpacks.

"I'll be around. Don't forget me, now," he says, pulling his bag out from under the seat.

He waits as other passengers slowly maneuver the aisle. Anna notices a small stud earring

in his right lobe, one she hadn't noticed earlier, the sun with its rays, sterling silver. She turns to the window and looks at her phone, pulls up the app, and the face again of the man's she's to meet. Those "good eyes." In the photo for the first time, she sees behind in the background blur what appears to be a bookshelf. She expands the photo to get a closer look. Earth Keeper is there. A book of Native American stories. The author is a member of the Kiowa tribe. She's heard about the book, one she wants to read, but never has. Just hasn't gone to the library, the bookstore. Keeps putting it off. Like so much else. Look for a better job, go back to school, find a better life for her son. Get out of the shabby apartment. Walk more. Exercise. Lose ten pounds. She wants to understand herself. She took guitar lessons once. Quit after four. She joined a spiritual center and went twice. Never returned. She wants to understand herself. Who is she? She wants a partner, a love that's real, whatever that means. But all she does is search. She's addicted to the search. Addicted to the wanting, the hoping. She's addicted to the one cigarette she allows herself after her shift at the bar. Is she addicted to loneliness? She tells herself it's safer. But she keeps looking for someone and now here she is on a bus in Sedona trusting that maybe this next one will save her.

"Can you go today?" Anna asks.

"I'm sorry?"

"The Slide. Can you go today?"

"You're asking to go together? Now?"

Anna pauses. "Yes. Yeah, I guess I am."

"What about your friend?"

"He'll be okay. Reschedule."

"You're sure about this?"

"Are you?"

"I'll have another day for the trail," James says. "Of course, yes, I'm sure."

"And you have the friend's car?"

"I'm sure you don't have a bathing suit. But a t-shirt and shorts will work."

"In my bag."

The bus aisle clears. James stands and slings his bag over his shoulder. "We're going now, right? This is what you want?"

Anna smiles and looks away. "It's what I want," she says.

The ride is an old blue Jeep Wrangler, a bit of rust along the back fenders. The keys are left under the front passenger floor mat. They take clothes from their bags and walk together to a gas station across the lot and change in the restrooms. He's in khaki cargo shorts and a black t-shirt. She's in cutoff jeans and a maroon ASU tee, white and gold lettering. He drops the Jeep's top. They both wear sunglasses. It's a short ride north to Slide Rock, a tight two-lane road, high rocks hugging the road's edge to the west, a river running to the east. There is little said, a relaxed silence. They watch the beauty flow by, the road wind tingling the skin. In the distance, there's a short bridge clinging to the cliffs and the ravine over the river. Tall pines shadow the road. James turns west inside the park and pays the fee. He finds a spot for the Jeep, and they walk the long path to the rock steps that lead to the rapids. Anna smiles, hearing the water rush. Days ago, there had been heavy rains and the rapids are full, the flow quick and foaming. James points to the short line of people at the top of the main slide and gives a thumbs up to Anna. For a moment, Anna's breath quickens. James takes her hand at the line, squeezes it. The muscles in her chest tighten. There's laughter and happy whistles all around. Two bare-chested teenagers raise their arms above their heads and holler, a deep echo reverberates in the canyon, the water carrying them away over ancient sandstone. Now at the precipice, James sits in the cold, cold water. He quivers, and shakes. Taking Anna's arm, he helps her snuggle onto his lap and wraps his arms around her, entwining his fingers across her belly, holding tight. He whispers in her ear. Her body tenses from the chill. She wraps her arms in his. She holds her breathe.

Voices

A voice behind them asks, “You need a little push?”

James whispers to her again, and their bodies lunge and slip away. They glide as one, catching something raw, infectious, gravity pulls, the flashing current of primordial water splashes their faces. Anna is a child, her body light, buoyed, no chance for control. She’s unbridled.

Anna is free.

Golden Curls

Caitlin Mitchel-Markley

My room
a womb
keeps me safe, secure
enveloped, isolated
floating in a sea of self

on a shelf
a pretty doll
golden curls and painted cheeks
frilly dresses, you have to make me move
bend my arms, tilt my head
play with me, love me
grow tired of me

in my room
safe from the outside
but danger is on the inside too
the amazing shrinking girl
screaming with no sound
golden curls, golden shackles
weighing down
drowning in my sea of self

my room
my cave
no one visits
no one leaves
just pretty dolls, with vacant eyes
and porcelain skin
no light shines in

attacking from the inside out
wasting away
nothing left but
golden curls
pretty dolls of
little girls

on a shelf
in my room
my cave
my grave

Years Fought into Moments and Lost

Alex Rost

The porcelain dolls her grandmother kept for company stood frozen in their endless prisons of regret. Children in poses of milestones and achievements. Their faces - honest and expressionless. They had nothing to hide. They were only to be hidden behind.

Every time he came to the door, she wondered what kind of man he was. She supposed she knew, had seen enough pieces that the puzzle was coming clear. Her bar was set low, dropping rungs. Desperation had nothing to do with her. She was past desperate, settling into melancholy. Like she missed someone who didn't exist.

He skipped up, troubles left behind, always left behind, dealt with out of sight. A gift to curse. There was no reason to muster up a smile, he didn't need it and he'd have what he wanted. He smiled though, big and vibrant. Creases spread from the edges of his eyes. But he's not happy, not really.

"Now here's a ray of sunshine to brighten my day," he said as she stepped outside, letting the screen door bang shut behind her. He hugged her, kissed her forehead, left a squeeze to linger on her ass.

"Yeah, and here comes the tide to wash me away." She pushed past him and settled onto the bench beside the door. Her hand dipped into the pocket of her sweatshirt, brought out cigarettes and a lighter.

"You know what keeps me coming back?" he asked. "That happy disposition of yours."

She lit a cigarette and blew a steady sigh of smoke into the day.

"I know what part of my disposition keeps you coming back," she said.

He flashed a perfect smile that screamed its pain and sat next to her, giving her midsection a playful squeeze. Her elbow came down, driving his hand away, only for him to bring it back up and run his fingers in a tickling dance up her thigh. Any reaction, a good reaction.

"You're playing with fire buddy," she said, and showed him the glowing embers of her cigarette. "Literally."

"You don't scare me much."

"No? And you think of yourself as a smart man."

"Now I never went so far as to claim that," he said.

"Sure you have."

"I'm starting to come around to thinking you might not be too happy with me."

"Hmmm."

He sighed, leaned back, let her feel his anguish. Not that she cared. He didn't care to feel hers. Things were always turning bad when they were getting good.

"Gimme one of those," he said. She handed him the pack, the lighter, they smoked. She listened to the birds, heard their indifference. The world's truths explained through their chirps.

Chaos! they chirped.

Time! they chirped.

He draped his arm along the back of the bench, inviting her body to fill the void. She flicked her cigarette onto the lawn and got close, snuggled into his empty promises, found a temporary end to her boredom. Belief had nothing to do with it. She didn't want his truth. It was hollow, rotten, warm. She had her own truths to tell. Whatever they were worth, she knew their comfort.

"When's your grandma get home?" he said.

He pulled on his pants. Nowhere to go, no one to see.

"Couple hours. Says she's got someone to visit with. What's it matter to you?"

"Shit, I was just asking."

"Asking. You gonna do anything with that information? Planning to stick around for awhile, seein as you got some time?"

"I wish. Gotta get down to my brother's. Needs some help around his place."

"Well I don't need you fillin the air, askin about things you don't care to know the answers to."

"So you'd rather me just get dressed and walk on outta here? Just head out without sayin a word?"

He was standing now, buttoning his shirt.

"I didn't say that. I said I didn't need it. I don't need anyone hiding behind any words. Givin me small talk. Might as well just ask about the weather."

She lit a cigarette, watched him. He sat down, worked his boots on. The bed tossed, springs squeaked. She smoked, her gaze locked onto the back of his sweaty neck. She wondered what it'd be like if he was a stranger, and all she knew about him came from the color of his hair, the breadth of his shoulders.

He stood, faced her. He didn't smile. She tapped ash into her cupped hand.

"Hot today," he said.

"Least there's a breeze."

"Yep."

Things are simple, always.

She counted his footsteps. Listened to the truck turn over, heard the crunch of its tires. She dropped her cigarette into the water glass next to the bed, got up, naked. The porcelain dolls watched, expressionless.

Hard Living

Lawrence Bridges

The pond and speckled light
encountered as a frame for echoes.
Everything after that is fixed.
Everything before it formless,
open space with no physics.
Landscape is a thin placeholder
for a layer of anything,
like this landscape,
after we answer the question
what is this landscape like?
I started arbitrarily, having
no subject due to hard living,
could picture nothing other than
a picture sent by a friend
who lives in San Francisco near
Golden Gate Park. All
possible frames vibrate,
emanate hurling rectangles
of feedback. I've never visited
this pond. I live entirely
by another's mind when
I have nothing framed of my own.

Londolozzi

Lawrence Bridges

Enter the quiet room with billows.
It has a small window high above with a bird,
a shaft of light, wet spots so tighten your booties.
That snorting is your own minotaur, tame.
Don't fear. Its booming resets concentration.
Thousands of places to start as minutes stamped.
You will feel a slight pain in your lumbar.
Tighten your abs, become a pillar and you'll feel
the self you've been all your years. Snap.
There you are. That taste, the lemony sun taste
is mere air, envy of fish that you're air-breathing,
part of the world of sunlight, not kelp
and bubbles and sudden attack by shark.
Your touch, finger on face, hand gripping tool
lead you to conclude you could do none of this
without eyes and a mind that records all this,
mind a minor thing next to fingertips
seeking moisture, face seeking face,
hands seeking torso and abs, tongue
seeking sweetness and eyes and colorful things.
You're small. The room is big. Your mechanics
are fishlike, you know, endless swimming.
When, after an expensive night of dreaming,
you remember you threw away your best friend's
favorite coffee cup from South Africa thinking
it was paper, disposable, not a cherished memento
when she bought her new car and transferred her stuff.

*Londolozzi is a Zulu word meaning "place of little rivers"

Diagram

Lawrence Bridges

No one expects a calendar
but a shambles, yes
and regrets, debilitated legs
and shock of a cruel mirror

Here comes the spirit
riding on the same pony
since morning asking
where are people, the people?

The self-destroyers and campers
agree that days start out
the same, can't stop them
and they end in calm sleep

I'm diagramed on cork
in tacks and yarn
expanding starlike
nor reeling into the dark spaces

Again That Feeling

Samuel Gilpin

behind the curtains
the windows seem black

yellow light
from the kitchen pressing in,
declining to name

I remember attrition
and sweetgrass
and the knock at the door
like a sweet melody

I remember
you've moved through gravity
and history
and the story of the ten
thousand tapestries
whiling away like light
lapping against
tissue and dispersing

remembering you're still afraid
of edges and pine needles
and the soft skin
of a peach

please stay with me
I remember
I cannot bear
the black outside

Espresso Eulogy: A Haiku Series

Morgan Ballesteros

I

Flowing orange night
Eustress commands: "take a bite!"
That apple bought in plight

II

My Love, my craving
Your wilted whispers saving
A soiled man, raving

III

Flowing orange night
Bodies chiming with sweet might
Stitched breeze laughs forthright

IV

Sunlight; yellow leaves
Heart's tapestry fast receives
That old dance of thieves

V

Flowing orange night,
Sun like oozing yolk grips tight
On grazing hands, trite

VI

My lips rake nettles
Sucking on two rose petals
Rolling heart settles

VII

Flowing orange night
Reach, brace; ordained and contrite
What wrought our twin blight

VIII

Oxford-stepping sounds
Like a one-man train, my bounds
Up, over; her heart pounds

IX

Flowing orange night
Shared by cupped hands and clear eyes
Falling, Love, Leaving.

Decaffeination, mug

Morgan Ballesteros

Sweating porcelain,
condensing, singular-dropping through
negative space between an impressionist couple, felt on my hairline, the
beading salt like fingertips lightly leaving fingerprints dancing across the
small of my back,
nape of my neck,
behind your knees,
tracking ridges of your chest,
your jutting hip bone;
a soggy heart,
muggy, bone-white porcelain, sipping heartburn in a
chimeric Bougivalian dance, his lips forever chasing her cheek, an
everlasting imprint until the handle snaps unceremoniously, breaks
their promised arms with a vinyl cry;
“laisse tomber les filles, un jour, c’est toi qu’on laissera,”
one day, but today, to say
only gradations of praise leaves my taste-buds scorched; better the
broccoli-cheese soup on your lips,
pasteurized skin on my tongue, a
bone-white yard sale brassiere on the floor,
small of your back
melting my hand beneath;
could anything dethrone her sunlit eyes, sitting green-gold in my
echoic ruminations?
Yes:
Ritual, morningly, lasting intimacy with
sweating porcelain.

Ken and Scout

Rebecca L. Monroe

He sat at the kitchen table, watching the sky lighten.

Mary had been gone for six months and he still wasn't used to the silence. She'd been a chatterer; had needed sound, activity, which had driven him nuts. Now he missed it. He missed her interruptions, her perpetually busy schedule that usually required him to participate.

He'd always thought he would go first, arranged for it. This house on its five acres was a downsize from their twenty acre Oregon tree farm and the three bedroom ranch house. Now he had one bedroom, the living room and the tiny kitchen. Mary had loved it; half the cleaning. He hadn't minded. He had a nice shop to hide in when the house got too small.

What to do? He had projects of course however he wasn't in the mood for them.

The phone rang and he nearly launched his coffee across the room. A glance at the clock said eight. It was too early for good news. He snatched up the remote.

"Dad! Did I wake you?" It was his daughter, Sara.

"No. What's wrong?"

"I'm at the shelter. There is a dog,"

"No."

"Please, just listen. She's a young chocolate lab mix. They are going to put her down because she nipped someone. She's scared. Someone reached for her too quick and it startled her. She's so sweet. If you'll take her for a little while, until I find a home, please,"

He closed his eyes. His Sara. Saving the world. Her heart bigger than her abilities.

"I'll think about it."

"I have an hour," Sara's voice broke.

He sighed. "You owe me, kiddo,"

"Oh Dad, so much, thank you!"

The joy in her voice was payment enough. "I'll be there in ten minutes."

He drove to the shelter, maneuvering through morning traffic, wondering what he was going to do with a dog. A biting dog, no less.

He pulled in. Sara met him at the door. "Her name is Scout. I think she's about a year old. She really is nice,"

His daughter was the image of her mother. A bit heavysset, brown hair, deep violet eyes, a smile that could light up the darkest night. While she was opposite of him in build, the brown hair was his. Well, had been. His was gray now. She led the way down a long hall of kennels and barking dogs to the end. He looked in.

Scout was curled in the corner of the cement run, pressed against the wall, ignoring the padded bed in the opposite corner. She glanced at them and then away. The din was deafening as the dogs barked.

Sara looked the question at him. Mean or not? It surprised and pleased him. She'd guessed but wanted his opinion.

He put his mouth to her ear to be heard. "We need a loop leash," then he crouched down and turned sideways to the door. Staring at the dog was not helping.

Sara nodded and left.

He studied Scout out of the corner of his eye. Deep chocolate brown, longish hair, on the smaller side, like a spaniel. She looked like she probably had some Chesapeake mixed with lab, which would explain the bity reaction. Chesapeakes didn't do authority well.

Sara gave him the leash.

He rose and Sara moved where Scout couldn't see her. He opened the kennel door, careful to latch it behind him. He kept his gaze averted and crouched about halfway to Scout. He didn't think she would come to him but it was worth a shot. He turned at a movement beside him, Sara gave him a handful of treats before she stepped back out of sight again. Ken placed one on the floor between himself and Scout.

The dog looked at it, then away.

"No dice, eh? Okay. What we need to do is get you out of here. Will you let me?" He carefully reached out a hand to stroke her flank. Though she cringed from him, she didn't snap. "Good." He hunched closer, moving sideways until he was near enough to loop the leash over her head. He gently pulled it tight. "Ready to go?" he rose bit by bit, hearing his knees pop. "Okay, sweetie, come on," He gave the lead a soft tug. Scout hesitated, pulling back for an instant. Then slowly she got to her feet to follow him. Sara the led way to a side door to the outside. Scout came up to his heel rather than lagging behind and glanced at his face. Reassuring. She might be open to friendship.

"All the paperwork is done," Sara said.

"Is the bed hers?" it was a relief to be away from the barking dogs.

"No. She was dumped. Some people saw it and brought her to us."

"Okay, get busy finding her a home." He gave Sara a one armed hug and then led Scout around the outdoor kennels to his Dodge truck. He opened the passenger door. "In you go,"

The dog looked at him, then jumped up, faced forward and sat down. Ken shut the door and got in on the driver's side.

Scout rode well, staring out the windshield, tail tucked tight beneath her. At least she wasn't frantic to get out, just nervous in general. He stopped at PetSmart to buy a largish bed, dog food, treats and bowls. He picked up a couple of toys too, a ball and a stuffed hedgehog on sale. He hurried some, not sure what she'd do, left alone. Scout hadn't moved, still stared out the window.

When he got home he took her out with the leash, allowed her to sniff and go potty and then took her in the house. He watched her as she wandered around, checking all the nooks and crannies. When it appeared she would be okay, he retrieved his purchases, setting the dog bed up by his recliner. She smelled it but didn't appear to know what it was. He lured her on it with a treat and she got off immediately.

Then he took out the ball.

Scout's gaze locked onto it and this time she gave one wag of her tail.

"Ah, so...the key," Ken felt himself grin. He tossed the ball across the small living room. Scout leapt after it, snatched it up and returned to drop it at his feet.

"Let's go outside." He went to the sliding glass door that opened onto his fenced back yard. Most of it was grass with a few large trees on the west side. He called to Scout. She lowered her head and trotted out. He let her explore along the fence before showing her the ball. She ran after it, retrieving, having a good time. On one fetch, Ken reached down to pet her and she ducked away from him as if he was going to strike her.

"Sorry, girl. I'll be more careful,"

More retrieving to help her relax and then Ken called her in so he could watch some television. After a drink of water, Scout went to the bed he had bought and lay down on it, panting. Ken settled into his recliner feeling a sense of contentment. He couldn't wait to update Sara. It would help in finding a home.

He dozed off, then woke with a start and a glance at Scout. She was still on the bed, eyes open, waiting.

"Okay, time for a walk and some more fetching. Being tired will help you relax." He put the recliner footrest down. "Come on, girl."

Scout didn't move, just looked at him."

“Come on,” he reached for her collar to encourage her.

The snap was quick and left a dent in his hand as he yanked it back. Scout’s ears pinned against her head and she began to shiver.

Ken took a deep breath. “I’m rather slow, aren’t I?” He straightened and went to the kitchen, rubbing the sleep from his face. He got the ball and put on his shoes. As he was pulling on his coat, he felt a bump on his leg. Scout was there, tail tucked. When he looked at her, she pressed up against his leg. He crouched down and began to stroke her under her chin, along her throat where there was no threat to her.

“It’s okay. I snap at people too. Especially stupid people. We have all the time in the world. You ready to go have some fun?”

Scout pushed her head into his chest, butt wiggling.

He took her out on the leash and they went through the fence around his yard and walked the edge of the property. Scout explored, glancing at him as if to make sure she wasn’t doing something wrong. After the walk, they went back into the fenced portion of the yard and he released her and threw the ball for her. After the third throw he teased her a little with it and she danced back and forth with her front feet, mouth open and eyes twinkling in excitement. He finally quit when she was panting heavily.

Sara called as he was getting his coat off. “How’s it going?”

“Okay, I think. She bit me.”

The silence from Sara held all her fear.

“It’s okay. I startled her, was going to take hold of her collar. I would guess she has a reason for defending herself and she doesn’t know me. I’ll try later, see if she has an issue. She didn’t break the skin. And she loves to play ball.”

“Thank you, Dad. I might have found someone to take her but they have young kids,”

Ken looked at Scout who was sniffing corners. “No, No young kids. Not for a long time anyway. Whatever happened she can’t take abrupt movements. It would have to be a quiet household.”

“Okay. I’ll keep looking. Dinner Sunday?”

“As always,”

Ken hung up and started cleaning the kitchen. Scout lay on her bed where she could watch him. After he was done, he called her and let her follow him to the shop where he did his woodworking. After some wandering she settled by the door, head on her paws, gaze on him.

They fell into a comfortable routine, up to go out and go potty in the morning, breakfast, a half hour of chasing the ball and then out to the shop where she lay on the blanket he’d put on the floor for her while he worked on a project. Then in for lunch for him and after lunch, a walk for her. Some television while he napped, dinner and a round of ball playing after her dinner had settled. One last potty and bed.

She slowly began to trust. It showed itself in little ways, pressing against his legs, a lick at his chin when he put her leash on, the bouncing on her front legs in excitement as she waited for him to throw the ball. And, finally one night, leaving the bed he had for her in the bedroom to come put her chin on the edge of his to ask to join him. He patted the mattress and she jumped up, curling up politely at his feet. In the morning he woke to find her stretched out beside him.

It was Sunday and Sara would be coming over for dinner. They alternated cooking; one week his house, the next hers. As he began preparing dinner he wondered how Scout would react now that the house had become hers.

She barked when Sara pulled in. He shushed her and sent her to her bed to lie down. She didn’t like it however she obeyed. He made her stay, knowing it was important for her to feel safe, know he was in control of the situation and she had to obey him.

“Hey honey,” he hugged Sara when she stepped inside.

“Hey. Where is she?”

“On her bed. Let her be for a moment. I’m making her stay until she gets used to you being here. Then I’ll release her.”

“Got it.” Sara took off her coat, careful not to look at Scout. “I almost brought Boomer but wasn’t sure it would be okay.”

He wasn’t either. Boomer was Sara’s lab/pit mix. Friendly, a bit of a dork. She also had Katrina, a Bullmastiff who was terrified of her own shadow, Max, a border collie who was a control freak and Mandy, Candy and Handy – the three cats found in a dumpster as kittens.

While Sara caught him up on her week he kept an eye on Scout. When he saw the dog lay her head down, eyes half closed, he called her. She was up in an instant and went straight to Sara, sniffing. Sara continued to ignore the dog, talking until Scout pressed her head into Sara’s legs.

“I’m good?”

“You’re good.”

Sara slid off the chair and made a lap, coaxing Scout into it. Scout wiggled on, pushing so hard against Sara, it nearly knocked her backward.

“I think she approves of you,” grinned Ken.

“She’s so sweet, and so pretty. I love her rich color. Is she smart?”

“Very. Someone did train her. I think they were pretty rough on her too.”

“Before they dumped her.”

“Are you sure she wasn’t lost?”

Sara rose, giving Scout a last pat. “Positive. The person who brought her in saw her dumped off but didn’t get the license number. They were too shocked people could be so cruel.”

“Oh, yeah,” Now that he knew Scout, someone discarding her was unthinkable. Ken began setting dinner on the table. He’d found too many abandoned animals too late over the years. A few lucky ones were picked up. Most weren’t and died a slow death.

Sara began helping him. “I’m having a hard time finding a suitable home for her. I mean, she needs someone quiet who understands dogs, will take the time with her, is patient, and has a fenced yard.”

They sat down to dinner, Scout sitting by Ken’s chair.

He sighed, picturing Scout in a new place, confused, having to learn to trust yet again. But it was the idea of her not knowing where he was, why he’d suddenly left, that twisted his heart. “This seems to be a pretty good fit,” he looked down at the dog gazing up at him.

Sara ducked her head trying to hide her smile. “I owe you,”

He thought about the stars he now saw at night when he took Scout out one last time, the evening walks while Scout explored holes under logs, ran her nose along a single blade of grass, of waking up with her pressed against his side.

Loneliness. A cliché he hadn’t known he would live and would need to be rescued from.

“No, hon, I owe you.” He pushed the roast toward Sara.

The Fall

Laura Bota

Peep-peep, teepee, peep-peep. Good morning, sun. Good morning, Kermit. I fluffed my golden feathers with excitement in the velvet daylight lazing in my candy cage. Flap those wings, you're so sweet, here's your treat. Peep-peep. Peepeep. Good grace, what happened? Bad bird. Wave your claws, give high-fives and spin. What a good bird! Mwa, mwa. Kermie birdie is so good. Fetch the ball like a dog, wave your wings, fly here, then fly there, flap and flip forward and then backward. Like a perfect little bird, Kermie birdie is submerged.

Good day, Birdie. Good day, Kermit. I preened my rainbow feathers in the blinding daylight stabbing through my gilded cage. Her beak is bloody, her feathers are as green as life. I bow, then woo and coo, mwa-mwa, caw-caw. I love you, Kermie, I love you, Birdie. I toss the ring and fill the nest with feeders, ladders, perches and with chicks.

Good evening, Father. Good evening, Kermit. My stiff and dusky feathers quivered in the twilight, the dying daylight piercing right through my despair. An arid well is dwelling underneath my fleshy cage. I'm blind and deaf, and yet my soul can hear a voice that's calling from outside the doorless cage; my body shivers in the dusk. And yet, I spread my rusty eagle wings to fly away but halt, the tips are clipped, so all I'm left to do is dream of San Blas and my cageless home. Good night, my son, good night, my soul.

Scapegoat

Laura Bota

Hell is unusually tepid today like a lukewarm rather than a boiling
blood soup. Left-right, his long tail swishes slowly, right-left
Like a sleepy lion's, resting under a Savannah bush.
With a lazy hoof he scratches the itch between his horns,
And sucks his fangs, to remove the last bit of a human soul.
Ahhhh-hhaaaaaa, he yawns, and rests his chin upon his forepaws,
But the tar-like wings weigh heavy on his shoulders; he rolls around,
The four hooves hanging in the air; a frisky kitten, examining with care:
Their every crevasse, mound, or callus. He blows a flaming puff upon them
With an endless sigh. Aaah, what to do?! There's nothing left for him to do.
Oh the good old times of fearful Satan or mighty Lucifer or Beelzebub.
Where's the need of wise Mephisto with his cutting and alluring tongue?
Endless waves of clients come by evermore, no need to lift a finger anymore.
His teachings taught, the lessons learned, he is now trapped
into a self-sufficient world. They have Trumps and guns,
Putins and Rasputins, Kim Jong-uns and Talibans. No need to chop up people's sons,
Drop bombs through homes or fly planes through window panes.
No need to arm the children's arms or shoot them dead
In classrooms and in summer camps. A mere spectator nowadays,
He simply reaps the fruits of their own despair.
They kill their planet, God's creation, they melt the ice and burn the forests,
They wipe out species, plants and fishes. They rape and tape,
They cheat and Tweet. They will deceit and then mistreat,
And starve the others with their hunger.
And yet they blame it all on Satan who sticks his fingers in their deeds.
His playground, full; the souls are shrieking, pleading and repeating all around him,
Yet he twists and twirls, he sighs and puffs,
paces back and forth in search of meaning.
He smacks his lips and taps his right hoof in distress.
His hooves are trimmed, the horns of
A domesticated goat. A mere little goat, a kid,
A scapegoat...

Garden Lioness

Karen Poppy

Berries blaze, incandescence.
Fire-fringed filaments
Lash wind back.

Leaves congregate,
Coagulate
With shadows.

From there, you pounce.
Rip heart
Of purpose and pulse.

While you stretch
Over your prey
Like a hood

His tongue
Forges one last taste
Of berries with blood.

A Course in Shadows

Francis Flavin

Free from the rigors of our mountain descent,
The dog and I glide along a streamside trail,
Savoring the scent of sage and fallen leaves.
In the gathering darkness the aspens shine
With a golden luminescence, as if
Painted by God with celestial light.

Against the darkening silhouettes
Of the now spectral cottonwoods,
The aspens provide a cheery respite
From the melancholy twilight scene
Along the serpentine riparian lowlands.

The dog raises her head to sniff the breeze.
She has enough Lab in her multiple breeds
To scent a distant coyote in the hills above.
No night hound she quickens her pace,
And insistently tugs me toward the trailhead.

Near the terminus at the shopping center,
A car door slams, heralding the
Return of civilization and the end
Of our peaceful twilight reverie.
The dog alerts to the sound of footsteps.

With faces bathed in techno-glow,
Shadow figures materialize from
A paved connecting suburban pathway.
We pass by unnoticed in time and space -
They in inner, and we in outer, worlds.

Before It's Too Late

David Larsen

Ida Ruiz kicked the plastic bag across the linoleum floor in her kitchen. Three empty Diet Pepsi cans, one half-empty bottle of Mountain Dew, a blackened banana peel and the residue from her daughter's breakfast—scrambled eggs, bacon and one partially-eaten tortilla—splayed across the room. The sixteen-year-old girl had again gotten to Ida, as only Angelina could. And over what? What else? A boy.

It wasn't that the waitress didn't like Ernesto, her daughter's latest boyfriend; he was all right, as good as any, maybe even better than most. No, it wasn't Ernesto per se that bothered Ida. Boys do what boys do. And Ernie was a boy, like all of the others. And there was the rub: teenage boys—and girls—do what their bodies demand of them. It was natural, and at the same time sinful, or so Father Damian had lectured Ida, sixteen years ago. It was that stark reality that Ida, a thirty-two-year-old unmarried mother of a sixteen-year-old, willful daughter, couldn't get out of her mind. Like mother, like daughter? She prayed not.

By now, eight-twenty, ten minutes before the final bell, Angie would be sashaying, arm in arm, through the halls of Travis High School with Ernesto, the two of them yammering with a pack of his goofy friends and her boy-crazy girlfriends, all of them hormonally plagued, their minds on one thing...and one thing only. Hands straying here and there (it always begins with the hands), touching what is forbidden, and without so much as a care in the world, or so they thought, while Ida, on her hands and knees, cleaned the kitchen floor and stewed not only about her daughter, but about her own life, every minute of it wasted in Dos Pesos, Texas, a town no one had ever heard of, a town where gossip and bullshit were the fuels that kept everyone going and where secrets lay buried in the minds of too many so-called reputable people, a town Ida had always dreamed of someday shedding, like a rattlesnake slips out of its skin, though Ida wanted no telltale reminder left behind to incriminate her in a dozen-and-a-half-year-old secret.

"Angie thinks she's in love," said Ida to her lifelong friend, Emma Acosta. The two stood, their hands on their broadened hips, in the produce aisle of the Good Luck Grocery Store as they had for years on Monday mornings, the same store they used to hang out in when they were slim teenage girls with trendy clothes and boys on their minds, when unmentionable urges rushed through their thoughts and bodies like rainwater gushed through the arroyos and gullies after a July downpour; only hormones weren't seasonal; they never seemed to just blow over.

"Don't they all at that age? Don't you remember how we thought we were in love, Ida?" Emma, the exact same age as Ida, though further down the inevitable path to middle age, grinned then shrugged as she rummaged through the ears of corn like a gleaner in the fields somewhere off in France, or Italy, or some other wonderful place neither woman would ever see; they could only dream about such exotic lands. Both women understood that they were doomed, tethered to the small West Texas town with little to look forward to other than uneventful lives with small-minded people...but anyway, Dos Pesos wasn't that bad. It really wasn't.

Emma, a stout, ill-tempered woman, tossed aside the imperfect ears with a zeal that belied her being anyone who had ever had to scavenge for her sustenance. All of the girls of the class of 2008 had, either from a glut of pregnancies or from too many cervezas con enchiladas y frijoles, become more rounded, less angular than they were fourteen years earlier. Love handles, manijas del amor, as the women in town laughingly called their mid-body spillovers, seemed endemic to the residents of the deserts of West Texas.

Sadly, Ida was out of the love business. She once believed that she was in love, but it wasn't to be. She thought of herself as a quick learner; she'd taken her lesson to heart, long ago.

Ida scoffed. "You know my story, Emma. I was fifteen when I got pregnant, sixteen when Angie was born."

Emma scowled. "We were all young, Ida. You were just the one who was unlucky. It could've happened to any of us." Emma laughed. "Hijole. If it had been me, my father would've skinned me alive. Then my mother would've shot me...and then shot Ricky, if she had the chance. Thank God I was able to fool my parents and get married in white." She laughed. "A lot of good that did me. Ricky ran off with the first puta who'd have him, less than two months after Jorge was born."

Ida winced, then blinked. Her old friend, the brassy girl she'd confided in back in high school, the only person who knew most of the details concerning Ida's predicament at the time—being pregnant and unmarried—had her own concerns: a boyfriend, Javier, who was notorious for his heavy drinking and nasty disposition, as well as three children from two different worthless men. Emma couldn't be bothered with Ida's anxiety over something as trivial as Angie's chastity.

Ida wished, at the time, and to this day, that she had told Emma everything. She wished that she'd let her friend know that Denny, the good-natured, but dimwitted boy she almost married, was merely the fall guy in an unholy scheme to protect the real father from ignominy and disgrace. That poor Denny was definitely not Angie's father. Father Damian had advised her, for her own good, as well as the unborn child's, to allow everyone, especially Denny, to make their own assumptions as to the paternity of her daughter. Ida knew now that she'd put too much trust in the young priest. But he was a man of God, after all.

"She won't listen to me," pouted Ida. "She won't listen to her abuela. She won't listen to anyone. She's in love, or so she believes. I'm afraid that she's up to no good."

"Does she know about protection?" asked Emma. "Have you taken her to the clinic? For pills?"

Ida blushed. Even as girls they didn't talk about such matters. Maybe they should've. If they had, Angie might never have been born. Would that have been a good thing or a bad thing? Ida hated herself for thinking such fanatical thoughts. But sometimes she did wonder. If she'd done what Denny wanted her to do, Angie definitely wouldn't be here to worry about. Denny, at eighteen and more than a bit of a know it all, knew of a nurse in Ft. Stockton who handled situations like Ida's. Or so he had bragged. She shivered, as she always did when she thought about the boy's solution to their problem and Father Damian's outburst when she told him about the boy's remedy. In confession, although it didn't feel like confession in the priest's private study rather than the confessional. As far as Ida was concerned, it wasn't that she was opposed to what some women did when they found themselves in a jam. She wasn't. Not in the least. Ida just didn't like Denny telling her what she should do. She didn't want any man telling her what to do, even a priest.

"Ida, you've at least talked with Angie about sex, haven't you?"

Ida bit at her lip. She hadn't. She didn't know how. She'd hoped the school would do it. "Not yet," she said. "Angie's only sixteen."

"Pobrecita," said Emma with a slow shake of her streaked hair, an affectation she'd perfected back in high school. "You'd better hope that it's not too late. Remember, you were sixteen."

That afternoon and evening at the La Sombra Café, Ida, her mind on Angie and what she'd tell the girl, got three orders wrong and screwed up at the cash register twice, something she normally wouldn't do. Concha Ramos, the wife of the café's owner, chided Ida and threatened to let her go if she wasn't up to the task. To make matters worse, the tips were poor and the customers surly. And the chore ahead of her, talking to Angie, would make the dreadful day seem like un sueño.

The floor lamp in the living room of the two-bedroom cinderblock hovel was on low when Ida came through the front door. The door to Angie's room was closed. The house was eerily silent. Ida sat on the threadbare sofa, a piece of furniture she'd meant to replace just as soon as there was enough money to buy something from one of the used furniture stores in Ft. Stockton.

After a few moments, voices, whispering faintly and giggling, came from her daughter's bedroom. Angie's voice and a male voice. Ernesto's voice.

"Angie," called Ida. "I'm home." She paused. Then, "Come out here right this minute. And whoever's in there with you better come out now or I'll come in there and yank both of you out by your ears." Ida listened for shuffling sounds, zippers being zipped, belt buckles clanging. The only sound was that of Angie swearing in Spanish.

Ernesto, grinning like a contestant on a game show, emerged first, his long hair was mussed, but at least he was fully clothed. Angie, also tousled, followed. Ida glared at the two as the boy hurried out the front door without so much as a nod, the fox scampering from the henhouse.

"And what were you two doing in there with the door closed?" asked Ida. "With me not home?"

"Studying," said Angie.

Ida chuckled, then exhaled loudly. "Ernie didn't have any books when he hightailed it out of here."

"He was helping me study. We weren't doing anything."

Ida scowled at the girl. She couldn't help it: her eyes fixed on her daughter's waistline. There was no spread in her hips nor bulging in her belly, both good signs. Angie was still as slim as un palo. Ida detected, to her relief, no hint of swelling in the girl's smallish breasts.

"You couldn't study in the living room?" asked Ida.

"We were listening to music while we studied."

Ida smiled. "I'll just bet you were." She studied the girl's eyes for any trace of guilt. What she detected was more belligerence than contrition. "Sit down." She patted the sofa. "We need to talk."

"Not tonight, Mama. I'm tired and I have an algebra test tomorrow. You always want to talk when I've got something else to do."

Ida bristled at her daughter's insolence. "No, tonight. Right now. Sit down." She glared at Angie. "We need to talk about boys. About what can happen to a girl who lets things go too far."

"Like you?"

"Yes," said Ida, "like me." She caught her breath. Her heart beat rapidly. Her hands trembled. Her shift at the La Sombra had been bad enough. Now this. "If someone had talked to me, my life would have been a lot easier."

"Without me around?"

"No, not really." Ida stammered. "I'm not sorry that you were born. That's not it." She smiled, unconvincingly. "Girls just need to know more about birth control and things like that, more than I did."

Angie chuckled. "You don't need to worry about me." She paused. "I'm thinking of becoming a nun."

Ida laughed. "No, you're not." She tilted her head, then grinned. "We don't even go to mass. You've never been baptized. You know nothing about any of that." Ida sighed. "You're sixteen years old. It sounds noble...and I guess exciting...being a nun. But I don't think it's for you."

Angie stood up. "I'm seriously thinking about it."

"Nuns don't have boys in their rooms while the mother superior is out of the convent."

"We weren't doing anything. I told you that."

Ida nodded. "And the man who was your father and I weren't doing anything. You just miraculously popped out of me one day." She looked at her daughter's pretty face. "Poof, and there you were."

"That was you, not me. I talked with Father Damian and he told me that I'd be a good nun."

"I'd just bet that he did," said Ida. She paused. "You should have nothing to do with that priest. We're not Catholics and that man isn't what he pretends to be."

"He's been good to me," said Angelina. "When I talk to him, he listens. Not like you. All you do is nag me. He thinks the Church may be good for me. And as far as not being baptized, Father Damian baptized me two months ago. In private. In his office." Tears welled in the girl's eyes. She wiped them away. "You used to go to mass. He told me that you did."

Ida stood, grabbed the girl by her shoulders and shook her. "You listen to me. You're to no longer go anywhere near that church. There'll be no more talk about becoming a nun." She exhaled. "You're going to go to college, like we've planned. I don't want you thinking anything else. You're smart enough to get out of this town. Do you hear me?"

The girl wriggled out of Ida's grasp. "College is a pipedream. You know it, and I know it. There's no money for college."

Ida sat down. "There's money. Your father, the shithead, has given me money through the years so you could go to school. He's a wicked man but he owes it to both of us." She could have added that everyone who attended St. Michael's Church had unknowingly contributed to the girl's college fund. But, she dared not.

"You've always told me that you had no idea where my father is. Now, you're telling me that he's been in contact with you. Mama, you're such a bitch. Do you know that? You should have told me that you knew where he is. I have a right to get to know him."

"And I have an obligation to do what I think is best for you," said Ida. "And what's best for you is going to school and escaping this town, to somewhere where priests don't put fanciful ideas into young girl's heads. Away from everything, away from a mother who's a waitress, away from a town with no opportunities, and now, a goddamned priest who's trying to hold you back. No, from this moment on, you'll have nothing to do with that church or that priest. I won't allow it."

Angie grinned. "I'll see and talk to anyone I want."

Ida cradled her head in her hands. Her own tears now dripped from her chin onto her stained beige waitress uniform. "Mija, I'm telling you all of this for your own good." She sniffled. "And don't you ever let that priest lay so much as a finger on you."

Angie laughed. "He's not like that."

Ida slowly shook her head. Feebly, she said, "They're all like that. You should learn that now, before it's too late."

The girl slammed the door to her bedroom then turned the music up. The god-awful songs she and Ernesto must have been listening to bounced off of the bare walls throughout the house. Loud music was against Ida's rules, but tonight, she'd let it pass.

Ida sat on the sofa. She wanted to burst into Angie's room and give her what for, but not now, not in the state she was in. A nun. A nun? She had to hand it to Damian, the pendejo. He'd filled the girl's head with foolish notions. A nun? Sister Angelina? It did have a ring to it. Ida chuckled. The girl was smart. All Ida could do was hope that the girl was smart enough. But really, who is? Certainly not priests, nor waitresses.

Black Woman at a Country Concert

Doret Canton

2023 went to my first country concert
Little Big Town, sold out show
Cautiously walked through Fox Theatre doors
No one stared
No one cared a Black woman was there
Relieved, uneasiness gone
merely another Little Big Town fan
fan on my right first time out since his wife died
At intermission he shared Fox Theatre history
I happily, listened.
The couple on my left also nice
As the widower walked by with his cane, they graciously made way

A teenager asked me where the restroom was
One Black person in a sea of White, didn't take it the wrong way
We were all there to enjoy the show
Plus, she was polite
Kindly gave the same energy, pointed her towards the restroom

Women's restroom lines always long
Little Big Town longest I've ever seen
Longer than Lion King and Wicked
Wicked long line better than wickedness
Sundown town GA venue, many stalls, no wait
HmMMMM, risk fight or flight or wait?
No or, am running
No fight or flight, am waiting
Like I waited in my car to hear
Where Little Big Town would be
DJ announced Fox Theatre
knew I was going to my first country concert.

Im4gxne

Leonardo Chung

i spun plastic dreams in a deformed past,
where no heaven rose above us;
words were more than a second glance,
and neon pixels died on country borders;

i spun the wheel of peace because
perhaps i would satiate the greed that
plagues our brotherhood of man—
a prayer of harmony from a pale heart.

i spun a record with its vinyl grooves,
an anthem coughs, only a specter of calmness.
we can't all share the world if
we are blind to the music in our neighbor's stand.

Night Class

By T.R. Biggar

Mr. Walker put down his copy of *Voices*, looked at his watch and sighed. 6:55, time to go. He leaned into the car's backseat and grabbed his briefcase, nearly pulling the tattered old strap off as he hauled it into the front. He slipped the magazine into the briefcase pocket. He would take it with him. It was always good to be prepared for some down time.

He was about to open the driver's door when another car came sweeping into the spot beside him. Their doors immediately flew open, and 3 women got out, being careful not to hit his car in the process. They had the aura of people who were used to getting kids and strollers out of cars in the close confines of a mall parking lot. No doubt, they were students in the "beginner's auto maintenance" class. Probably divorcees. Yeah, they had the round behinds and tight Capri pants of the type.

He hurried through the empty halls to his class, the last one on the right, second floor. It was the same room that they had given him now for the past 9 years. There were very few people in the hallway. Adult students didn't loiter. They had paid good money for these courses and would always show up on time -- in advance even, unlike the teachers, who could come up with lots of reasons to be late. Well, he should only speak for himself. No doubt, the "beginner's auto maintenance" teacher was always on time for those divorcees.

So, he wasn't surprised to find that his students were already in the room, milling about, as he managed to pull open the door, and rush in. Throwing his briefcase down on the desk, he surveyed the class. What a motley crew of hopefuls they were, each one holding onto a tiny kernel of belief in his or her heart that this class would be the springboard to greater things in a writing career.

With his arrival they all moved hurriedly to their seats. How very compliant they were, everyone wanting to make a good impression. Kyle, who was always a bit of a "suck up," even wished him a good evening as he passed by.

As Mr. Walker finished organizing the books and papers on his desk, the chatter that had stopped when he came into the room sparked up again, in a 'catching up with each other' kind of way. "Folks," he began, and had their instant attention, "Folks, I would like to get out of here on time tonight, so let's begin, shall we?" He didn't really have anywhere to go, but all the same, it was good for them to think that he kept a busy schedule. He was a published poet, after all. For all they knew, he could be rushing off to an evening of verse, as read by the local literary glitterati and attended by every twitching poet wannabe within 30 kilometres, at the "Chapters" in the big box store mall. Mr. Walker sighed. It had been a while since such good times.

"OK class let's get to work; we have a lot to cover." Kyle, in the front row, sat ready with his pencil in hand, and most of the others were following suit. Mr. Walker referred to his outline and began. "Now, as I recall, last week we wrapped up our study of Haiku, with some valiant offerings from many of you." Kyle beamed in self-appreciation. "As most of you know, the curriculum for the class this year has been somewhat adapted to reflect changing times. We are, therefore, removing epic poetry from the schedule. I apologize to the *Beowulf* fans in the class." A collage of dumb looks met his gaze. "But it was bound to happen," he added. "My computer spell check doesn't even recognize the word Grendel. If you ask me, it is the first sign of the end of civilization as we know it." He paused for receipt of sympathetic vocalizations. The silent tableau before him only offered quizzical looks and raised eyebrows.

"OK, moving on. This week, we begin our study of Rap Music." Eager heads nodded in

the room as the class came back to life. Can anyone tell me what themes are often found in Gangsta' Rap lyrics?" (Mr. Walker's pronunciation audibly implied the apostrophe.) Kyle's hand shot up.

"Yes, Kyle."

"Uh, crime, drugs, sex ... uh, crime, and uh ... violence".

Mr. Walker nodded, absent-mindedly, as he rearranged his papers. "That's very good Kyle. Now, did people do the homework assignment I gave them for this week, writing some Gangsta' Rap lyrics?"

Chut Up, as always, sitting in the back row, was eager to share. "Yo, yo, yo, I did, dude."

"Yes, I am sure you did, Chut Up. That reminds me. The registrar has sent your paperwork back. Seems you can't actually register as "Chut Up." We need your real name."

"That is my real name, dude."

"I see, so that would mean your family name is 'Up,' and I should just call you 'Chut'?"

"No, dude, you call me Chut Up. That's it, dude."

"I see." Mr. Walker turned his attention to the rest of the class. Kyle was always ready to accept the focus. "How about you, Kyle, did you write some lyrics?"

"Yes, I did, Mr. Walker!"

"Great. Well, let's hear them."

Kyle stood and adjusted his stance. He affected a contrived scowl, his body jerking in time to an approximate beat, as he read from a very crumpled piece of paper:

I love you babe.

Hit me where it hurts.

Hit me in the dirt.

Hit me till I blurt,

That the devil made me do it.

Mr. Walker had no real idea how long the piece droned on. He was drawn back from a bemused contemplation of Blake, rolling over in his grave, when Kyle's mumbling voice stopped, and he had to contrive a response. "That was great, Kyle. A bit repetitious, but then, Rap Music often is." Kyle nodded, appreciatively. "Watch out for clichés, they are a trap we tend to fall into in any writing but are particularly inappropriate for Gangsta' Rap. Remember you want to jolt people out of their chairs. Not make them reminisce about 70s TV. Now, who wrote something else?"

Chut Up glanced around the room and with a confrontational air, raised his hand. "Yo, yo, yo, yo, yo. Teach. I got some-in to read, Dude. It is phat."

Mr. Walker didn't even look at him. "Chut Up, I'll get to you in a minute. Just hang on." His eyes were drawn to the quiet girl who always sat in the middle of the class, in with the crowd, "Cindy, how about you?"

Cindy looked up, startled. "I wrote something. It was really hard though."

"Well, just give it a try, Cindy. No one here is judgmental."

Cindy glanced around the class and, with her face buried beneath the fall of her hair, began:

Kiss me, yo, and I will love you forever.

Rip my arms off and touch me with them.

Rip my legs off and throw them in a cornfield.

Pull my hair out by the roots....

Cindy stopped and looked up at Mr. Walker through her bangs. "Uh, I didn't really write any more."

Mr. Walker smiled at her from the head of the class. "That's OK. Really, it was pretty good. Let's see if I can make some constructive comments." He paused to consider the slight girl, whose face, now tilted up to him, was full of a strange mixture of hope and dread. "Well, you wouldn't really want to use the word kiss. Gangsta' Rappers would be more likely to say lick or suck." She nodded, taking it in like it was a message from Miley Cyrus. "Repeating the

limb lines was a nice touch. Pull hair out ... I don't know. It's a bit Gothic, don't you think?" Cindy blushed with acceptance of this remark. "But, no, I like the sentiment. Why don't you try something about decapitation there instead?"

Cindy nodded. She would try again next week. He just hoped she wouldn't revert back to her habitual theme of puppies and bunnies; it had taken forever to get her to stop writing about small furry animals. Mr. Walker turned back to the class. "Now, who else would like to try? How about you, Mrs. Nieland?" But, before she had a chance to answer, Chut Up, of course, flung his hand into the air.

"I got some-in. Yo, let me lay it on you! Come on man, I represent!"

Mr. Walker leveled his glance at Chut Up. Might as well get it over with. He moved to the front of the class and sat on the edge of his desk. "Alright Chut Up, let's hear from you."

Chut Up tipped back in his chair and smirked at his fellow classmates, anticipating their enjoyment. "Alright you guys, listen up, this is going to freak you out:

Blood, blood, blood, and blood

Gut, guts, guts and guts

Blood and guts, guts and bl ..."

"OK, let me stop you there for a second Chut Up." Mr. Walker strongly resembled a man who had just been squirted in the eye with lemon juice. "This was a --," Mr. Walker searched for the right word and settled on, "fine effort, but you have to say more than just blood and guts over and over again. Isn't there anything else to the lyrics?"

The front legs of Chut Up's chair thudded to the floor. "Are you whacked? I read this to my peeps and they said it was righteous! They said I was da bomb!"

Mr. Walker considered his words. "Chut Up, I realize that you have been trying very hard, and that you feel an ... obligation to your ... generation and culture that I want to respect. But, well how can I say this ... the song sucks, Chut Up. It's as simple as that. Maybe you should reconsider your goal of being a Gangsta' Rap singer."

Chut Up stared, astonished at Mr. Walker. "You are out there man. My old lady says I am the best she has ever heard. She is going to freak!"

"Well, Chut Up, like many others, whose paths you will cross, she is going to have to get used to your limitations. All right, we have yet to hear from Mrs. Nieland. Are you ready dear?" Mr. Walker detached himself from the annoying Chut Up and directed his attention to the white-haired lady in the front row, who had been lost in thought, looking over her paper.

"Well, I wrote down a couple of things." She looked around the room apologetically. "Just don't expect too much, will you. I'm just a housewife. I haven't had any writing training."

Mr. Walker patted her on the shoulder. "I am sure it will be fine. Go ahead."

Mrs. Nieland cleared her throat, a sound reminiscent of a kitten backfiring, and began.

When the full moon rises, and the wolves begin to howl.

I like to take my sawed-off and go out on the prowl.

My muscles will be dripping with the glow of anger's fire,

And your blood will wash the streets with the flash of my desire.

I eat death,

And death eats me.

A silence fell over the class, broken only by the sound of Mrs. Nieland folding up her paper and muttering self-deprecatingly.

Mr. Walker leaned back onto the nearest desk. "That was amazing, Mrs. Nieland -- and you say you can't write! Class, I want you all to take note of Mrs. Nieland's awkward metaphor and symmetry, her overuse of violent symbols, and the predictable rhyming pattern. This is Gangsta' Rap to perfection. I'm just amazed!"

Chut Up flew to his feet at the back of the class. "Are you whacked? She's just some housewife who took this course because the "bridge for dummies" class was full. There's no way her stuff is as phat as mine. When my homeys hear about this, they are gonna freak!"

Mr. Walker barely looked Chut Up's way. "Oh, for heaven's sake, get over yourself."
"What did you say?"

Mrs. Nieland poked her head around the obstruction of Mr. Walker standing admiringly by her desk. "He said shut up, Chut Up."

Chut up collapsed into his chair, grumbling about a complaint to the school board. Mr. Walker looked down at Mrs. Nieland, who winked at him. He turned to the class. "OK folks, I think that's it for this week."

Mr. Walker, moving in a manner that can only be described as both hasty and weary, headed to the front of the class and addressed the room. "Next week we are going to focus on the sexual references found in rap so, as your homework assignment, I want you to rediscover your own sexuality and apply it to verse. Remember: driving beat, predictable rhymes and sex. I look forward to your ... offerings next week. And just don't forget, the more sexist and misogynistic, the better!"

Kyle walked by Mr. Walker, deep in thought and left the room without his usual cheery 'good night and we'll see you next week.' A homework assignment to write about sex! He would be up all night.

Mr. Walker smiled to himself. He, on the other hand, was going home to sit in front of his gas fireplace and catch up on his poetry reading. He patted his briefcase where his copy of *Voices* was still stashed, just waiting for him to crack it open again.

Mr. Walker sighed. Poetry was easy. Teaching was hard.

from AT THE MUSARIUM*

Peter Grieco

[22301 - 22400]

South-south-east of the Peloponnese
amid a blabber of sidereal vociferation,
embosomed in unconvincing celluloid,
their portmanteaus ablative with attar
& hashish, eyeless Gilgamesh & his
humorous tactician, Simone, still wobbly
from parturition, decamp. Their parlous
rendition is but a panoramic euphemism,
their apocalyptic penthouse a tinder-box
of hornblende metallurgy blanketed
by a furor of fisticuffs. “Why cobblers?
Why a hawker & a saddler? Why a biologist?
Why the rolling-pin? Why the sexless
misanthropic slyness of this laminated ibis?”

[22601 – 22700]

Let’s snooze upon the lavishness of a
well-read wagonette, whose circum-
navigation of orphanages abates
dispiriting quick-tempered quicklime,
& croon to ourselves as we go bareback
with a wineglass of brassy manioc
along a mussel-smelly swath of Sinhalese
coastline where the well-tempered silkworm
within its half-yearly camouflage might
yet disintegrate Tehran. We hoed once,
as now we hone, our homologous
soma not a by-product, not an ogress,
but our adoptive farrago, even
here, at the expiry of this trans-
continental cul-de-sac.

[22801 – 22900]

Roebuck wiggle, starfish tipple
& creel unsure of their mauser
oscillate circumspectly one self-sustaining
mis-step from trefoil immolation. But
despite the ides of reliquary, Browning
was no quitter. His effortless yoga
therapeutics intermingle, his
harum-scarum tornadoes reanimate
as far as westernmost Bucharest,
its wholeness disgorged of electromotive
abnormality—unlike the basso
sirocco amigo who fester
despondently with chiaroscuro
neurosis.

** “At the Musarium” is a series of verse that draws on words grouped in 100-word units ranked according to frequency of occurrence in the Project Gutenberg archive of texts. The collection is organized in word-frequency order (indicated by bracketed numbers), with poems that use words of most frequent occurrence coming first*

Solitude

Kristen Henderson

Her right hand was so chewed up by the churning machine at the mill that she was left with little choice. Little choice but to have a dowdy female surgeon attach a claw-like contraption to what straggly shattered pieces were left behind. If only she'd been left-handed, but she was *so* right.

She wished she could blame someone else for her plight, but really, she should have paid closer attention to the machine's mechanisms.

Knowing she had no hope for normalcy — the mill had been everything and all she'd ever known — she found a yurt, advertised as a left-handed one, whatever that meant, and moved in with a cot, a hot plate, and three wool blankets. It does get frigid in North Dakota.

A docile deer she was able to slay with her clunky artificial claw made for ample fare.

*

After two months, she thought about going back, back to people, but the deer, the ones she let live, were her kin now. Along with the squirrels and robins and the occasional eagle ... and *they* never stared.

Highland

Richard Stimac

No longer a young man,
I go east from the Gateway Arch,
that monstrous portal to the West,
a monument to destruction and glory,
empire and enslavement, to all the good

and bad my country offers. To me,
the prairie has a sacredness,
the unadorned vistas of the sky
remind me of gods: Zeus,
Azman, even Yahweh, on high.

I've come to visit my father,
in a nursing home, in Highland,
with its shuttered church
organ company, microbrewery
on the square, coffee shops, and more.

Highland, where my earthly father
has come to slowly die, dissolve,
like morning mist. Each time I visit,
less and less of him is there,
in Highland, Illinois.

I wonder at him, that he even lived.
I know his haunts: the alleys
behind the mill; the linoleum halls
of a now-demolished grade school;
a photo of him, shirtless, in Vietnam.

And now this. His teeth fall out.
He wants me to sue the home.
He tells me the same war stories.
I smile. He's not happy, but
content, which may be the same.

We don't hug goodbye. Haven't
in decades ever touched. He says,
"Take care." I nod. "You, too."
I watch Highland fade in my mirrors.
I want to cry, to feel the loss.
Rain begins. Heaven cries for me.

Jefferson Barracks

Richard Stimac

A national cemetery rests
on bluffs above the river.
I always thought, when driving
through, the cross-hatched rows
of bone-white marble markers
as Hydra's teeth, sown

like seed spilt upon the ground
to raise a grand army of the dead.
My mother is buried there.
She will not rise, not like that,
in the least. I don't visit often,
as much as a mourning son should.

I've only been twice, in seventeen years,
once with my dad, her husband; once,
alone. He fell to his knees and sobbed.
I watched. The second time, just me,
in place of words, I laced tears
like profane rosary beads

cast for the Queen of Heaven.
My God, I miss her, my mother.
She was never happy, never fully
happy. I think, at times, short-lived:
the birth of a son; her marriage;
on her deathbed, when her father,

in a vision, asked forgiveness
for the hate he bestowed on her.
Now she is dead. As we all will be.
I don't know what to make of it,
all this life, this pain, these tears,
love, loss, laughter, the heaviness

that comes with bone and skin and flesh.
May she have peace, there, among the military
dead, as if peace were a thing. I saw
a doe and two fawn lazily graze
among the stones, walking metaphors.
I don't live in a world of metaphors.
I leave the dead to their own fate.

The End of the World

Michael McGuire

Yellow, not golden, nothing to awaken any feeling except, perhaps, one of uneasiness, the odd house catching the reflection off unseasonable clouds, also yellowed. What did it mean? It was hardly the hurricane season, not yet, the distant volcano had been quiet for decades and the odd tsunami had never even thought of reaching this far inland.

They stood looking at it, the he and she of our story, of their story, and they thought, both of them, without a word: well, if this is it, if this is how the world ends, so be it, we've had a full life. And so they had. A full life and a long life though, interestingly, never had they seen a sky like this.

They sat then, before nightfall, on the porch of their house, and waited for the cloud of burning ash to cover them but, when nothing followed that sky of billowing yellow, at least immediately, their apprehensions, like the day, began to fade, becoming less intense, less final, and they thought, each of them, individually, other thoughts.

The man had not much bothered himself with age, and ageing, but several developments, not that recent perhaps, but recently worse, had forced him to give some thought to the fact of it. Never mind the lack of love—its sights and smells, its tastes, the body's readiness—leakage, undeniably, was number one, fore and aft, and there was no reason, not that he had spoken to, or intended to speak to, anyone about a matter not bad enough to warrant surgical intrusion, to go into detail. Yet the truth, as someone once, and perhaps many times, said, was in the details and, as he made the necessary changes during the day, and night, it was that, precisely, as details tend to be, the truth that confronted him.

You're an old man, said the details, live with it, die with it, it's better than dying young and, on that thought, the faces of the last fifty years seemed, as if, having waited patiently for a light to change, charged an intersection that was nothing if not dangerous. And he wondered, as they swept by, how many faces were, in fact, no longer as remembered; how many, like the names that ought to accompany them, failed to appear at all; how many lives behind the faces, might also be gone.

The woman's thoughts, as the yellow swelling overhead seemed to lose its intensity, to surrender to the gray that would, inevitably, precede the black, were different. Perhaps they were, without the slightest touch of nostalgia or regret, of her fading beauty, now nurtured, at night anyway, a night just around the corner and coming fast, by various creams and gels, strips of tape that were said, by those who certainly knew better, to eliminate the lines beneath the eyes and at the corners of the mouth. She thought, also, naturally, of the children, now themselves ageing, who would not call, of the questions they would not ask.

"Tell us: is the sky, down there, on the border where you two live, strangely yellow? Are the houses yellow? If your neighbors step out to wonder at the color of things, will they be yellow as the sky? And you, you who formed and nurtured us, are you yellow too?"

She thought also, of the reassurances they, the children who would not call, would not give.

"Don't worry. The climate might change, but it's not going away. The seas might rise, but not so high they'll reach you. The butterflies might be gone, the migration last year their last, and some birds, ones even we remember, might no longer sing, but the dominant species, including you, has a ways to go."

More personally, you're an old woman, said her thoughts, her memories, her regrets, live with the fact, die with it, it's better, as someone said, than dying young.

But to never again, not once, sense the wafted hair half scented, to never feel the sparkle

in your eyes so very nearly caught by the sparkle in another's, or the head of a man given a wistful shake as your untouched and never to be touched, at least by him, butt, passed at eye level.

There were, of course, some differences but, as they themselves could see, when they gave voice to them, her thoughts and his had come to be, with the years, tinged, like an uncommon nightfall, with just a hint of foreboding for, after all, the end was near.

Once, before their time, on these very acres, the dried out land had risen, so high, so solid, their forebears had thought it was end of the earth, of life as we know it, not just a species here or there. But the authorities had waded in, into the dust, inveighed against the plowing of the prairie that was never meant to be plowed, planted belts of trees and channeled water and saved them, the weathered people, from themselves, the people who, in time, would give a higher being, and perhaps themselves, credit for their salvation, and come to resent the distant know-it-alls, to grumble about 'government schools' as they singled out those with less than they had ever had or, more simply, just those from the other side, the darker ones, to look down upon.

But then, in the long ago, perhaps in a more philosophical age, well before the age of intolerance, they, the weathered people had sung, even as the dust cloud rose to blacken the sky, and one, the one with the ear, had written it down.

"So long, it's been good to know yuh..."

Now, the earth settled, if the river running almost dry and, beyond, well beyond, the horizon they could still make out beneath a blackening sky, the planet possibly on its last legs, the two alive in an age that was hardly the one they were born into, could sit on their porch, put the little stingers with the dengue, as well as the enemy within, out of mind and watch, as night came on, a distant figure or two, one, possibly, male, the other, possibly, female, both desperate and determined, stumble out of the shadows only to spot their gathering of houses, to skirt them widely, and more widely, as they sensed that there, from houses such as theirs, there was not a handout of leftovers or even a long, cool sip of water to be had.

"You see that pair?" asked the man, with barely a tilt of his head.

"I see them," said the woman, without motion of any kind beyond that of dry lips. Dry lips, she thought, for a dry climate. "We could wave them on over," she continued, "or maybe bang a pan, hold up a cup of water."

"They'd only run the faster," he said. "They wouldn't trust us."

"With reason," she said, thinking that, but for the quirk of a border, it might have been them out there, the two of them, running into the night.

"The vigilantes don't ask for water," said the man, adding another perspective.

"They don't trust us either," said the woman.

"They prefer the harder stuff," he said. "Makes it easier to run down a man."

"Or a woman."

And so, as night fell, a silence fell between them but, as is so often, perhaps always, the case there was more to their story than met the eye or, perhaps at a little distance, fell upon the ear, for not everything, as they, with the years, had learned, found its way into words.

Sometimes they, man and woman, on horses, in horse years as old as they, rode out together. They'd come across the worst, men, women, even children, beneath a sun that made no such distinctions, and saw to it that those who took them in would take them in, seek identification, for there were still people who knew how important it was to the families, those down there, on the other side, to get their bodies back. The dehydrated dead never actually had holes in them, not ones you could see. The vigilantes—they didn't call themselves Texas Rangers, that wouldn't be right—usually just roped and ran in, say, a man, or a woman and child, to those with the actual power to detain, to divide, to deport.

Though, sometimes, from the backs of their horses, they would come across the odd bottle of water set in what shade there was, again by those who thought differently than the ones

who didn't call themselves Texas Rangers, bottles that, often enough, had holes in them, down low where every drop would run out and the vigilantes, cantering home, with a deep throated chuckle or two, could at least claim to have discharged their arms in the name of God and country and, if they had the energy after a demanding day of camaraderie would follow it up with a less demanding night of the same.

Had education, at least to the level it went around here, failed? It was a question the woman often asked herself, for she had spent some years standing before the blackboard, chalk in hand.

How else could they watch the scurrying figures, not that unlike themselves, if somewhat thinner, somewhat darker, run for the lives, for life itself, a life free of endless extortion followed by, should they miss a payment, the murder of sons and husbands, and not feel the kinship of, at least, being human, for they were, on both sides of the border, the same species?

How could they, some of whom she'd taught, or thought she'd taught, grow up, only to ride out on a weekend or after the day job on a, you might say, recreational hunt, to toss their catch back where they came from as undersized or hand them over to a uniformed, if not quite as well armed, Border Patrol in four-wheel-drive vehicles which would deliver them, the caught and held, into a system renowned for its quick turnaround, for deportation?

Those were the woman's thoughts, that night, as the windstorm did not swallow them whole, any more than an imagined tsunami gulped them down but, in the morning, the billowing clouds were there again, only red, red as welling clots of blood, thought the man, for he'd seen that more than once. But, it was a sky presaging, in his experience, nothing, and before it got too hot, he suggested they saddle up and let their old horses stretch their old legs. Standing around wasn't any better for a horse than sitting around was for a man.

There were always, once they got a mile or two from the house, footprints headed north, but they knew they weren't likely to run into anybody this day, not that far from a county road, at this time, broad daylight, though there could always be, that man or woman who just couldn't go on, that man or woman who had been left behind, and so they, this man and woman, always carried an extra canteen or two.

The canteens were flat to hang still from the saddle horn and with wool sides you soaked to keep the water cool. They were the kind that would not lead to them being questioned by the Border Patrol, who had horses, as well as four-wheel-drives, for aiding and abetting illegals, who didn't.

They didn't want to run into the vigilantes either who could tell just at the sight of their relatively tall, relatively lean bodies, their white faces, their age and lack of firepower, that this man and woman weren't cut from the same cloth, perhaps as they, looking back at such solid beer-drinking, gun-toting citizens in search of the enemy—who could be recognized by a certain undernourished look, by fear—were, if barely, the same species.

Today though, possibly because of that strange dark sky still leaning over the landscape, there were no stragglers zigzagging north or, because it was a workday and early enough, no vigilantes riding in search of them or patrols keeping an eye out for both.

And so, even with something unpredictable apparently imminent, the man and woman of our story, of their story, perhaps enjoying the emptiness itself, except for the odd lizard watching them with one eye while the other looked the other way, rode out somewhat further than usual, comfortable enough in the landscape they'd known since it was, simply, landscape, only to be surprised by the first gusts when they hit.

"Time to turn around," said the man.

"It was time some time ago," said the woman, as she'd well known only had not wanted to be the one to sound a cautionary note in a scene so vast and primeval; so, in its inhuman or, at least, pre-human way, magnificent.

The initial blasts propelled only a stinging drop or two, flung horizontally, carried a kind of weight, a kind of a chill, indicating more to come. They'd barely turned the horses around

when, suddenly, there it was, a wall of dust and water, maybe three, maybe four, thousand feet high, swelling, churning, as if alive, feeding on itself if, at the same time, looking for lesser creatures to devour.

The horses were relieved by the about-face. They'd known for some time it was no time to be out here. Sensing this, the man looked over his shoulder at the bulging wall, now black with a hint of blue and, as soon as they were out of the gullies tunneled by events similar to, if not quite the same as, this, put the horse to a trot. The woman who, like so many women on the border, knew horses better than the men, followed suit with the mare.

The trot, as all four knew, was the gait, if not the most comfortable for the rider, especially for those no longer young, the least tiring for the horse. It was the way to cover the miles they intended to before, if worst came to worst, they'd be forced to dismount, pull on their ponchos, and back the horses into whatever cover they could find, perhaps behind one of those flattened rocks that had always looked to the man as if they'd fallen from the sky.

But nature, often feminized, was faster than they. Whatever inexorable force spun the earth, forced birth, old age and death, upon it, strutting her stuff with amazing rapidity, caught up with and overtook them. Blinded by the blast, by the picked up and flung sand, they had no choice but to slide from their horses, pull on their ponchos, and feel their way into the nearest arroyo.

Here it was a little better. Eroded, seemingly, crossways to the prevailing winds, the windstorm was not funneled after them and, uneasy horses held tight and following close, they found their way into and among the flat rocks that, forming a kind of low, flat ridge across the plain known locally as los portales, seemed to drop it from one altitude to another. Their passageway turned rapidly into a slot hardly wider than a horse demanding twists and turns of them all: the man, followed by the horse, followed by the woman, followed by the mare.

"Are you there?" called the woman over the horse's rear when he came to a stop.

"I'm here," called the man, holding the horse's head a little to the side so his voice would carry back to her. "It's too narrow from here on."

"What about the water?" she called, glancing up at rock walls too steep to scramble up. "Do you think the water will come and carry us away?"

"I don't think so," said the man, who could judge these things pretty well.

Standing awhile, allowing their relief at being out of the wind and the blown rain to sink in, the woman leaned a little against the horse's rear, taking in his heat, sensing that she herself was only wet around the edges where her poncho had whipped up. It occurred to her they couldn't, though they might have to, stand like this until the thing, having wreaked what damage it could to the works of man, to the landscape, passed.

Damp as they were and still catching the tail end of a gust or two, they realized that, perhaps in keeping with their age and slowed circulation, the cold was creeping in.

"I can go a ways further without the horse," called the man, seeking a solution.

"Wait. I'm coming with you," called the woman.

There was no room either side of the horse so, finally, she just gave him a pat on the rear, told him she was coming through, got down and made her way forward between his legs. The horse, knowing her voice and having experienced just about all a horse can experience with the years, didn't start or bolt, since there was nowhere to go anyway.

This is when you feel the years, thought the woman, when you descend from the vertical that took the species so long to achieve and, for whatever reason, maybe to enter the promised land, maybe just to crawl under the barbed wire, get down on all fours. But, hands and knees on broken rock, she made it through beneath the understanding horse to find her husband looking down at her.

"Is that you down there?" he asked.

"It's me," she answered, looking up.

The mare's reins had been secured to the horse's saddle, and the horse drawn into the crevice where he knew well enough he couldn't, unless the mare backed out first, go anywhere, stood still, watching the man help the woman up, as if to ask, when they stood together looking back at him, *well, what are you going to do now?*

"We're going to go a little further in," said the man, answering the question in the horse's eyes. "You stay here, we won't be long."

But they were a little longer than expected. Having twisted and turned a little further than expected, his trailing, and stronger, hand securing her reaching, and not quite as strong, one, they came to a place where neither man nor woman, never mind a horse, could continue but, looking up, the man saw a kind of notch in the rock, maybe even a narrow ledge, as well as the way to it.

"I'll just shove you on up there," he said, "then I'll follow."

A nod from the woman was sufficient, as was a man's hand on a not unattractive butt to raise her. The man followed, as he said he would, and they made themselves as comfortable as they could on a ledge wide enough if they hung their legs over.

That was when it hit, howling like a living thing above, drenching a landscape that, even the lizard knew, was in need of it. The temperature dropped. They doubled their ponchos the better to cling together. The woman shuddered even so and so the man drew her even closer and, at the height of the storm, when it did seem the end of the earth was upon them all, the housed and the unhoused, the pursuers and the pursued, the living and the dead, he remembered a few words of a song his father sang and sung a few lines if maybe not quite right or in the right order.

"I've sung this song, but I'll sing it again,
Of the people I've met and the places I've seen,
Of some of the troubles that bothered my mind
And a lot of good people that I've left behind."

Man and woman, beneath their doubled ponchos and, if not too secure on their rock ledge, swayed to the lines as the man sang a few more.

"We talked of the end of the world, and then
We'd sing a song an' then sing it again.
We'd sit for an hour an' not say a word,
And then these words would be heard."

And the woman, warming to the melody and the man's embrace, joined in for the chorus.

"So long, it's been good to know yuh,
So long, it's been good to know yuh.
What a long time since I've been home,
And I've gotta be driftin' along."

The Last Picture Taken

Solomon Fiore

I went to a party precisely one year after he had given up the ghost. Coincidentally, everyone who had ever known him was in attendance. This ranged from his teenage son to people he had barely uttered so much as a few words to. His name came up in a conversation. The partygoers were surprised to learn of his death. I assumed it was common knowledge. Apparently, it wasn't. The host looked at me.

"He died?" she asked. I noticed that she had icing on her shirt.

"Yes," I stammered. I added, "He suffered considerably before he went." I regretted saying this the moment I had opened my mouth. I didn't want to be a buzzkill. But there it was.

A chunky blonde interjected. Out of the side of her face, she said, "Are you talking about that creepy dude? It's good that he suffered. He deserved to. He was mean to people. There was something about him that made me uncomfortable whenever he was around. Good riddance. The world will be a better place without him."

I was taken aback. How could she say something so insensitive? Had she even registered the gravity of what she had just said? I didn't know the deceased man very well, but what if I had been his close friend? She had taken no consideration of this before speaking. It struck me as churlish, but I kept my cool.

"He used to write these really sick, obscene stories," laughed the woman with the frosting on her sleeve. It was a nervous laugh. "Whatever happened to what he wrote? I heard he was quite prolific."

"Aside from what little he published, everything he wrote was destroyed," I responded. "His aunt went to great lengths to do this. She hated his writing. She thought of it as nothing more than filthy doggerel—the product of a deranged mind and a stain on the family name."

The depressing subject was dropped and the celebrants soon sat down to eat. Nothing more was said about my dead acquaintance. The bright red juice mixed with the sugary cake and the childish décor of the room contradicted my dark memory of the unsuccessful writer.

Out of nowhere, I had received several texts from him days before he died. Perhaps I was the only one left for him to talk to. His friends had denounced him as mad and his family had cut him off. Judging by the morbid nature of his final words to me, I can understand why. He wrote in broken sentences, much of what he stated to me made little if any sense, and he would contact me at the most ungodly hours of the night.

"They made me worse," he texted me. Who he was referring to by "they" remains unclear to me to this day. Society? The system? His family? All of the above? The text continued: "They told me to be honest and then condemned me for being inappropriate. They called me anti-social but would not return my calls. They told me I was ill but chastised me as villainous. I have been punished when all I ever wanted was to be comforted in this life."

I tried to make light of these ominous messages by responding with my usual sarcasm. But every time I'd attempt to engage him in a dialogue he would abruptly sign off—a reaction I interpreted as rather rude.

On the final night of our correspondence, I became worried for his welfare. He sent me a rambling text laced with expletives which led me to believe he could be dangerous. With the intention of getting him some help, I asked him where he was. Instead of providing me with an address, he sent me a slew of pictures he had taken with his phone. I'm assuming he had taken them at that very moment to illustrate his whereabouts to me. The photos revealed a blurry procession of streetlights, the black sky taking up much of the lonely landscape. One

of the shots stood out from the rest. It was a selfie of him sitting on a bench in a deserted playground in the middle of the night. It's still on my phone. You can tell he was on his last legs in the photo. His clothes were ragged; his expression was monochromatic; his skin was pale; he had lost the glimmer in his eyes.

It was the last picture taken of him before he died.

Elegía a Maria Cristina

Hector Weir

Me obligué y arrastré para postrarme ante su presencia
y considerar la esencia de este sagrado tesoro.
Orando y pensando sobre todo aquello que logramos,
de esos momentos que se han fugado.
Pidiendo, rezando, por tu alma
aunque comprendo que ya no podré verte.

Añorando y deseando verte otra vez,
todo lo que puedo hacer es ver los ecos de tu piel.
¿Me quedo dormido? Quizás sueñe.
Reflexionaré mientras camine, quizás correré también.

Espero ver la sombra de la mata de mango de tu casa.
Quizás nos sentemos en los escalones del patio
en donde me enseñaste a contar las cuentas del rosario.
Todo eso viene en mente
mientras atesoro cada segundo que pasamos adorando.

Se que nos ve compartiendo nuestras memorias.
Está aquí mientras oro por tu ánima.
¿Crees que me conceda el don de verte también?
Como quisiera leer tus pensamientos esta vez.

Elegy to Maria Cristina*

I dragged myself and stumbled into His presence
to consider the essence of this sacred treasure.
Praying and thinking about the thing we've done,
all those moments come and gone.
Asking, praying, for your soul
while understanding I won't see you anymore.

Longing and wishing to see you again
all I can muster is the echo of your face.
Do I fall asleep? Maybe I will dream.
I'll ponder as I walk, maybe I will run this time.

I hope I'll see the shadow of your mango tree.
Maybe we will sit by the steps of the yard
where you taught me how to count beads.
All those things come to mind
while I cherish every second spent in adoration.

I know He sees us sharing memories and hopes.
He's before me while I pray for your soul.
Will He grant me the gift to see you once more?
I wish you were here to share your thoughts.

*Translated by the poet

The First Snow Clasico

Hector Weir

Vamo vamo Sings the song
all in motion like a saw.
A trill or heart ache is the flow
in a damp wet field as it snows.

Two rival countries here they fight
for the final spot of the night.
A World Cup come back for some
or the sad tears of fans back home.

Vamo vamo sings the song
Pura Vida on the snow.
The thrill, the heartache, as it flung
The American flag by the zone.