

# *descant* 2014

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Volume 53

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## EDITOR'S NOTE:

No Hall of Fame exists for the Editor's Note; no annual "Best-Of" anthology commemorates soaring literary journal letters. With good reason: In most cases, such prefatory notes offer a pedestrian gateway to what truly matters—the voices that editors are privileged to proclaim and publish in their pages. Notes by editors typically attempt to nudge readers toward particular pieces of poetry and prose; they might take stock of how the current issue solidified, or the state of contemporary literature in general. Sometimes a note centers on a milestone; sometimes, a suggestion of new hands on deck, or a movement afoot. There is often a grateful scrolling of names, which, while unfamiliar to readers, made every page of the final product possible. Just as teasing issue highlights does some credit to the table of contents, but falls prey to Flannery O'Connor's admonition that truly creative works "resisted paraphrase," a journal masthead tells some measure of the devotion involved in production, but only the beginning notes. There is always an echo out of earshot.

Here, for Volume 53 of *descant*, the new hands on deck include my own. Our staff will soon unveil an upgraded website, and have already launched an online means for potential contributors to send work. Please consider sending yours via our Submittable account. This past year, I teamed with two fellow fiction writers to create "Six Weeks of Soap," a collaborative project included in this edition. I view our story as a kind of opening offering, which I hope will lead to future creative connections between writers and artists. Perhaps those will include ekphrastic works, like those longtime *descant* editor Dave Kuhne implemented in Volume 50, collaborating with the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, one of Fort Worth's essential cultural institutes.

Last year, Dan Williams presented *descant*'s first color cover. For this issue, we offer images by Leo Wesson, a talented photographer hailing from Fort Worth, who provided our stunning cover, as well as a rich, layered portfolio. Some of his subject matter is remarkably tender, some abrasive, all of it, humane and moving. I knew I wanted one of Wesson's photos before even seeing it. As he described a photo of the reflected Arc de Triomphe and a mallet, I heard a plaintive echo from poet Heidi Zeigler: "My hours will become hammered gold / a burden beaten so thin it will appear / lighter than dreams of you shrouding my sleep." The juxtaposition of the celebratory and destructive in his image conversed with Zeigler's hunt for solace;

no matter that the two artists had never met. Wesson's portfolio demonstrates our aim to maintain local community ties, just as the collaborative fiction project is part of a plan to hatch harmonies between accomplished writers scattered through the nation.

We are grateful for the continued support of subscribers, libraries, and donors, including a quartet of sponsors who enable us to bestow four awards in each issue. Recipients of the Betsy Colquitt, Frank O'Connor, Baskerville, and Gary Wilson Awards for Volume 53 are all terrific writers. Their winning submissions range stylistically from the madcap ride and surprising pathos underlying Tyrone Jaeger's "To Thy Speed Add Wings," to the slanted suburbia anchoring Jennifer Moffett's "A Peculiar Apocalypse Behind the Gates," to Ada Limón's hauntingly vibrant verse, "Day of Song, Day of Silence," and finally, "The Great Soviet Space Dog Experiment," a mosaic by Henry Israeli mingling history, humor and horror.

I hinted at a roll call of thanks, and my note has reached that point. I wish to express deep gratitude to Andy Schoolmaster, Dean of the AddRan College of Liberal Arts, for maintained and augmented support; Department of English Chair Karen Steele; the TCU Press staff; the editors listed on our masthead; and lastly, the writers who submitted and entrusted their work to us. I feel similarly entrusted to honor a journal that has, through the decades, proudly published works by Joyce Carol Oates, Charles Bukowski, Kelly Cherry, and Andrew Hudgins, among other luminaries, and which strives now to connect with a new octave.

You have read me descanting about *descant* long enough. Enjoy discovering the works offered this year. I do not claim to have broken any mold with my penned comments, or uttered an original note. The voices arranged in the following pages, though, do just that, and often, and I hope they call out to you to consider and continue their song.

—Matthew Pitt

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## This Is Not an Exit

She doesn't remember, but one summer, I left her.

It was a long time ago. Early in all of this. I had just failed out of grad school, and I had just broken up with this bartender at work, who, when I asked if he loved me, said, Sort of. So, at twenty-eight, I sort of had no relationship, no degree, and a job serving jalapeño poppers and beer steins to frat boys. I thought things couldn't get worse, and then she called with the news.

I left her sleeping, all alone in the house. I left in the dark, like a fugitive. Headed north, to the woods. I took her car. She wasn't supposed to drive, anyway.

That cabin. Cheap, but no electricity, broken windows, about as clean as a bus station bathroom. That first night, I barricaded the door and woke up on the hour, listening to the thuds and creaks, the wind gusting in the pines. At one point I heard a thin wail that sounded like a lost baby in an old dream. I tossed around on the little daybed, the smells of rotteness all around me. I remember thinking, *Serves me right for leaving her that way.*

In the morning, I went down the road to pick up cleaning supplies and a lantern. I bagged up beer cans, clumps of lint, beetle carcasses, a decomposed field mouse, something that looked like a human liver. I couldn't even look at the toilet yet and had to squat out by the car. By midmorning, though, the wood floors gleamed with sunshine and lemon oil. If nothing else, I could clean a house. Fix things. I got good at this as a kid when I stayed with her. I didn't have much else to do those days. I knew something about being left alone, too.

Out on the porch, I breathed in the mountain air, there in the shadow of the San Francisco Peaks, ringed by piñons and oaks. Twenty degrees cooler than in Phoenix, two dirt-road miles from the store, a cellphone with an iffy signal. Two weeks away. From her.

I walked down the porch steps with my millionth trash bag, and at the bottom, I nearly stepped in a pile of scat. In the dust were paw prints as big as my hand. I didn't know much about animal tracks, but I knew enough about mountain lions from the news: during droughts, they had been known to turn dangerous, to stalk and attack humans. We were in drought that summer. My stomach twisted. I remember I pressed my hand in the imprint, dug my knuckles into the soft dirt.

## Chancellor 8

And just like that, or at least it seems to me now, things took a turn. The sound of an engine on the dirt road. A cab, black with lime green letters across the hood. And there she was. Inside the cab, riding shotgun.

She rolled down the window and said, "Hello, dear. I see you're still alive."

I tugged at the locked door. "What's going on? Are you all right?"

The driver, a young man with a shaved head, held up a sheet of paper. My In Case of Emergency sheet. He said, "We GPS-ed you!"

I asked, "Where's the nurse?"

She snorted like she did, like, Nurse—ha. She pointed at the driver and said, "We've been listening to death metal music." She laughed. She had pink lipstick on her front teeth.

The driver said, "Like you say, Miz Carol, it's no Brahms."

She said, "But we're expanding our horizons."

"Mom!" I yelled.

She looked at me. "What? I'm right here."

I never knew how she'd be one day to the next. One hour to the next. She was only sixty-six then, but it had come on fast. The doctors said she could live in this state for a decade or more, leaking memory and reason like water from a cracked sink pipe. They were right. I was twenty-eight that summer. I'm thirty-seven now. She just had her seventy-fifth birthday, though of course she had no idea. We had cake. Marble with vanilla frosting.

The driver pushed a button on his meter. Almost \$400 for that little two-and-a-half hour cab ride.

She said, "Oh, dear."

The driver popped the trunk. "I take credit cards."

I said, "Of course you do."

My card was maxed with bills, so I got out hers. She stood next to the cab with a leather suitcase that was almost as big as she was.

I snatched the card and receipt from the driver. He stopped grinning and rubbed his scalp. "She said the nurse didn't show up this morning. Someone tried to break in. She seemed pretty scared when he got there, just so you know."

"No one tried to break in." I sighed and tipped him with the last cash I had. I watched as he pulled away, the cab bouncing over the ruts, dust pluming under the chassis.

She let her gigantic bag tip over into the dirt. I remember she had on her favorite blue linen pantsuit. The top bagged now, the matching



pants rumped and twisted on her hips. Her blue eyes seemed more hazel, red-rimmed, milky. She looked smaller. Not the woman I knew growing up, the one who wore suits and French twists, hurrying out the door in pointy patent leather pumps, a leather briefcase strap denting her shoulder. This wasn't her. The shape, the size, the moth-winged smell of her — all wrong.

I nodded at the cabin. "I just need to close up, then we can go home."

She said, "I thought this was your home now."

"No, only for a couple of weeks. Just vacation. Remember?"

She scrunched up her nose like she did. "You smell like turpentine. Have you been huffing fumes?"

"What in the—"

"It's all over the news."

I said, "Mom, I failed out of grad school. I'm not a drug addict."

She said, "Well, nothing would surprise me at this point."

I didn't tell her that I had quit my "job"— she liked to put air quotes around it, as if waiting tables was just another bad joke in my bad joke of a life. I'd gone to grad school because she offered to help with tuition. She told me I was a good writer. *Do something with that, Stella. Do something.*

I am trying to do something. At the very least, I'm trying to get this story down.

I told her, "I'm not huffing fumes. And Derrida's an asshole."

She waved her hand and smiled. The lipstick smudge shone on her teeth. "I could use a vacation. Work's been crazy. I've been running, running, running."

I wasn't supposed to correct or to reason with her. I was supposed to nod and agree with patient and even tones, but I couldn't always help myself.

I said, "You're *retired*, Mom."

She narrowed her eyes. "You know nothing about my life."

She got me there. Of course I didn't — she hadn't been around to know. Now it had gotten more complicated: even that elusive sense of her was slipping, leaving me with, what? I didn't know. Even that word was turning on me: Know. No.

"I'm staying," she said. She picked up her suitcase and dragged it through the dirt, her bent torso aimed at the cabin like a missile.

## Chancellor 10

We drove the two miles to the local store for supplies. She stayed quiet, looking out the window, where pine trees flashed past like an old book animation, flip, flip, flip.

“Where are we?”

“Flagstaff.”

“I’ve never been here.”

I couldn’t stop the snap again. “You came up for work all the time. Your department had an office. You had a season ski pass, for Christ’s sake.” I punched myself in the leg for saying it.

This time, though, she just laughed, her eyebrows jumping up. She touched the edges of her hair.

The store was a pulloff for travelers on their way to the Grand Canyon. I remember gas pumps, a market and diner, RV hookups. That summer day, it swarmed with cars and families. Kids crowded the Slushee machine and magazine racks. She tensed up at all that youthful chaos. She wasn’t a “child person,” as she put it, again in air quotes. *That* I have always known about her. The owner, a woman with two long gray braids whom I’d met that morning, called out Hello from behind the counter. I waved but hesitated to introduce her: This is my mother. Sort of.

I loaded our cart with hundreds of dollars of camping gear and food, more cleaning supplies. I got out her card again.

She poked my arm and launched into one of what I have come to call her Public Displays.

“Doctor Bryson and I have sex now. *Great* sex. I didn’t know it could be like that.” She sighed and rubbed her arms. “Certainly not with your father.”

I thrust her credit card at the smirking teen cashier. “She’s not well.” I lowered my voice and said, “Mom.”

She said, “Oh, don’t be such a prude, Stella. Just because you don’t have sex doesn’t mean the rest of us can’t be happy.”

The cashier kept his eyes on the register. I signed the slip, ready to crawl under the Slushee machine, but she waltzed regally out the Entrance side of the doors, almost plowing down a tourist family, who stumbled to get out of her way.

Back at the cabin, she helped me clean. “I taught teachers how to teach. I think I can handle this,” she said. She snapped on yellow rubber gloves and started spraying cleaner on the windows while I tackled the revolting bathroom. Why is it that the image of that black-ringed toilet

stays after all these years? I gagged as I doused it and the moldy shower tile with bleach and Ajax, coughing at the fumes. After scrubbing awhile, I stepped back and felt a bit of pride of over that salvaged white porcelain. I could fix it.

I'd learned this early, when I was fourteen, aka The Divorce Year. I moved to San Antonio with Dad, Marie, and little Cam but came back to Phoenix to live with her in the summers. She traveled most of the week around Arizona to lead education seminars, leaving me envelopes of cash and checks—plenty, she said, for food and shopping with my little friends. By then, I didn't have friends in Arizona—as if middle schoolers had time for pen pals. So I stayed home, floating in the pool or roaming the neighborhoods on my ten-speed. My first fix: the vacuum cleaner. With Dad's leftover tools, I found the busted belt and rode down to the hardware store. From there it was a dishwasher coil, a squeaking bathroom door, a loose kitchen cabinet. I bought tools and how-to books, hauled them back on my handlebars. She checked in from Kingman, Gila Bend, Sierra Vista, her voice thinner on the line. Dad called every couple of weeks, Cam screaming in the background. I would lie in bed and listen to the clicks and moans of the empty house, straining to hear the garage door, that reassuring hum. Mom was home. I'd pretend to sleep and wait for her to lean over my bed. Sometimes, she'd climb in next to me, flip our pillows to the cool side. In the morning, the sheets would still smell of her perfume. I would hold her pillow to my face. Half-dreaming, I would reimagine my life. First, of course, I gave myself boobs and straight hair instead of the frizz-fest that I got from Dad. I added a wise-cracking best friend who would ride bikes with me to Big Surf or come over to tan out in the backyard, where we'd pluck lemons from the tree to squeeze into our hair. I gently erased Marie but kept Dad and Cam. I gave her a job at the local school district, where she baked things like cobblers and blondies for weekly meetings. We'd have pizza just about every night, on plates that she'd make at her weekly ceramics class. Later, alone in a house where the tiles echoed, I re-grouted the kitchen floor. Replaced the shower diverter. Cleaned every inch of the bath and kitchen with a rag and toothbrush until they shone like charm bracelets.

At the cabin, I came out of the bathroom to find her staring out the smudged window. I picked up the paper towels and cleaner from the ledge.

She grabbed my wrist. "I'm using that."

"I was just going to help." I yanked my arm away.

## Chancellor 12

"That's not what you're doing. Stop treating me like a child. I changed your dirty diapers. I put you through college, for all the good it did me."

Before I could stop myself, I said, "Yes, you were the exemplar of motherhood."

She said, "Stop feeling sorry for yourself. You're too old for this sort of thing. All alone, in the middle of nowhere. What in the world do you think you're doing with your life?"

I said, "Getting away." I don't think I said, *from you*, but my meaning was clear.

She nodded. "So this is punishment. You're punishing me."

"No." But maybe I was. After all, how many times had she left me alone? I said, "This is my life, too."

She said, "Such as it is."

She said such things to me.

My life. I still dreamed then, in half-waking states, now not of what I'd change but of what might happen. Sometimes this took shape as an adobe house filled with bookcases, sippy cups and animal crackers on the countertops, and an accountant who, when asked if he loved me, said, *My dear, you are the plus or minus to my margin of error*. Other times it was a loft with hardwoods and a purple lounge chair. In between there were Mexican beach houses, Italian seaside resorts, Parisian apartments, Tokyo high rises, old cabins in the woods. I know these dreams were silly and romantic, but it was the *unknown* that hovered at the edge of my eyes, beckoning like a flickering candle in a dark attic window. Now, that unknown was disappearing, slipping bright and silver down the drain before I could catch the edge of it.

She spritzed the window and ran a finger through the mist. The rubber gloves squeaked on the glass. She said, "I'm getting away, too. Away, away, away." She flitted her yellow-gloved fingers.

Something about that gesture, its light mocking, enraged me. I said, "What have you ever done but get away? From me, from Dad." I still remember the sting of bleach in my nose. I said, "You never gave up your goddamn life, and you were the mother."

She sprayed the cleaner in quick bursts until foam ran down the wall. "Is that what mothers are supposed to do? Give up their lives?"

"How would I know? I wouldn't know."

She peeled off the rubber gloves. A red rash ringed the bones of her wrist. I reached out to take her arm to examine the skin, but she

crossed her arms, hiding them inside the folds of her shirt.

For the rest of the day, she sat on the porch and wouldn't speak to me. She barely picked at her dinner. That night, she fell asleep on the daybed. I set up the new cot next to the bed and zipped myself into the new sleeping bag. The room smelled of lemon cleaner and pine and bleach. I was exhausted, but I couldn't fall asleep. Her breathing was deep and raspy. The moon lit up the room, almost bright enough to read by. I watched her chest rise and fall.

I sat up, took her purse from the side of the bed, and dumped the contents into my lap. I held objects up into the moonlight. Clorets. Pale Autumn lipstick. A compact with powder and mirror. In a wallet, five one-hundred dollar bills—I had to laugh, thinking of the cab—and a picture of me around age six on a swingset, my legs stuck out stiff. I took the cash and stuck it in my shoe. A miniature spritzer. I squirted it on my wrist, though of course I already knew the scent. I put the purse back. I sniffed my wrists. I grabbed my pillow and hugged it to my chest.

Something creaked outside the front door. Rustling, a thump. I crept to the door and peered out. A raccoon dug in one of the trash bags. I stepped out and clapped at it. It didn't look at me, just kept digging. I slapped the railing, saying, "Get, get!" in a loud whisper. It finally scuttled off into the darkness. I scanned the edge of the forest. The trees' shadows were in motion, but I couldn't make out any exact shapes.

When I came back inside, she was sitting up.

"Where'd you go? I thought you left me."

I sat on the edge of the bed. I picked up her hand, smoothed the fingernails. "Where were you?"

"When?"

"All those years."

She pulled her hand away. "Do you remember the time I took you to summer camp up in Prescott? You glued yourself to me, and I had to drag you to your cabin. You always were so stubborn." She laughed, rocked herself a bit.

I had never been to summer camp, but I said, "I remember."

The wind gusted, pushed against the cabin's beams. Something scratched the window, a branch perhaps. She peered through the dark. "What was that?"

"It's nothing. Don't worry."

## Chancellor 14

She said, "I do know you. I do."

Know. No. I remember that I pinched the insides of my elbows until my eyes burned.

She patted my arm and then lay back down. She turned on her side, flipped the pillow. She said, "I like the cool side."

"Me, too." I picked up my pillow and held it to my face.

When I woke the next morning, she was not in the bed. I called out. No answer. I hurried outside. She was not on the deck. She was not in the car.

I started to call for her. "Mom!" I yelled. After my voice echoed to me, I stopped and switched gears. "Carol! Carol, where are you?"

After ten minutes, I spun myself in a panicked circle. I stopped and listened hard: *Was that a rustle, a growl, a scream?* Thin clouds covered the sky like netting. Wrong. All of it, wrong. "Help," I called out. "Someone help."

I climbed to the roof of the car and held my phone to the sky. No service. *Drive*, I thought. I left a note in the crack of the cabin door: CAROL: WAIT HERE.

I drove with the cellphone flipped open, watching for a signal. When I reached the store, I ran inside and asked for the phone. The teen cashier stared at me wide-eyed. He said, "She was trying to call you." He pointed to one of the aisles. "Over there."

And there she was: lying down on the concrete floor, taking a little snooze next to the charcoal briquettes and lighter fluid. She had pine needles in her hair. Her perfect hair, all ratted and poofed. A streak of dirt ran from her right temple to her lip. Scratches on her arms. A hole in the knee of her favorite blue pants.

I leaned down and shook her shoulder. "Mom. Mama. Wake up."

She bolted upright. "Don't touch me."

I said, "Mom, it's me."

She blinked in my face and scrambled to her feet. She yelled, "Get away from me!" and ran down the aisle. She ran through a doorway marked This Is Not An Exit.

The owner put a hand on my shoulder. "That's the storeroom."

People were looking in the windows. I said, "I'm so sorry."

"Please, no. Sweetheart. What can I do?"

I shook my head. I had no idea what to do. I wasn't sure I ever would. And I was right.

I opened the storeroom door. She sat on a milk crate under a single fluorescent bulb. The string from the bulb dangled in her hair. A twig stuck sideways from her temple like a horn.

She said, "I went for a walk." She dug her palms into her thighs. "I was looking for something, but I can't remember what."

I bent low to examine the scrape on her knee, which was matted with dirt and pebbles. I held out my hand. "Will you come with me?"

She ignored my hand but got up, dusted off her pants, and walked toward the car. The owner had shooed the gawkers away so we had a clean getaway. In the car, I pulled out the first aid kit. She sat still, looking out the windscreen.

I handed her a gauze pad to put on her knee and started the car.

She said, "Where are we going?"

"Home."

Her eyes filled with tears. "What is this place?"

I pulled a pine needle from her bangs, rubbed at the dirt streak on her cheek. "It's just vacation, Mama. Don't worry."

We rode back to the cabin in silence. I stopped the car a few feet from the deck and cut the engine. I told her we had to pack up. We couldn't stay.

"I know this place," she said, staring through the windscreen at the cabin. She looked at me for a moment, and then sat back in the seat. "Is this your new home?"

I stared at the cabin. I envisioned sheer white drapes at the windows, burgundy throw pillows, gleaming wood. A place of dreams.

"No," I said.

She touched a scratch on her arm and inspected the blood on her fingertips. She looked up at the car's roof. And then she said the strangest thing. She said, "It's terrifying. It's like the universe handed you a box of puzzle pieces and a bomb, and said, 'Get to work. That will go off if you don't get it right, so be careful. Don't screw this up!' And there you are, with all these little cardboard pieces in your hands, and you're so afraid, just standing there, while the bomb ticks and ticks, and the universe waits."

"Mom?"

She kept on. "But the bomb doesn't go off. Ever. Every time you snap in a piece and hold your breath, it just sits there and ticks. Tick, tick, tick. Turns out it's not a bomb at all, just an old clock that *looks* like a bomb. And still the universe waits."

Chancellor 16

"I don't understand," I said. "I don't know what you mean."

She said, "Never mind."

"No, tell me, please tell me."

She patted my hand, but still she didn't answer.

It wasn't the first or last time that I would be left to wonder what she meant, but for some reason, that moment more than others has stayed with me. I come back to it, over and over, in part, I think, because she was still mostly herself then, still the only mother I knew. Was it a metaphor? Was she talking about me? Was I the puzzle or the bomb? What I have wished for these nine years—really, what I have always wished—is that she leaned over, tucked my hair behind my ear, and told me, "You're the universe."

But she didn't. She hasn't. She won't.

They tell me that this time, it's happening. This time she will go, and so she is back home now. I moved her back from the facility last week when they assured me that this would be it. I have tried to fix this old house up these past few years, thanks to her savings. She wouldn't recognize the place. New paint, new windows, new cabinets and wood blinds, nice rugs over the tiles, plants, paintings, silk throw pillows. I turned the guest room into my study, and I actually study there. I'm back in school, finally. For nursing. I'm so old compared to everyone else. Such a late start. Maybe too late, but I'm doing it anyway.

It's October, and it has just rained. I have thrown open the windows in her room. I have always loved the smell of the desert city after a rain: creosote, warm dirt, pavement. I don't know if she loves it too, but I'm going to say that she does, that it's something I remember about her. I have turned her pillows, covered her with a store-bought quilt — perhaps some day I will say that she made it. The warm afternoon sun slants through the blinds, casts a bronze heat.

This old house. The place where I have always waited for her. Who knew that my future would be right here? After that one exit north, I haven't left since. Some days the thought of what I have lost lands like a punch, steals my breath, and I have to get away from her again. Not permanently, but I will stand where she can't see me and wait for her to call out. Sometimes, though only sometimes now, I don't come. Other days, I feel no loss at all for those old dreams, that old half-shaped life. Because what I didn't understand then is that the unknown never *really* disappears. Every day has been new for us, hasn't it? I could never have imagined this



version of us. And I cannot imagine what's next, in my next life without her.

That summer. I don't know why I had to write about it today. It wasn't for her, was it? She won't read this, and even if she did, she wouldn't remember. What she knows now, where her mind has taken her, is beyond me, beyond any of us. Maybe I'm trying to make myself finally understand that. Maybe I'm trying to forgive myself, or I'm trying to punish her one last time. Am I trying to hold her close, or let her go? I don't know. I'm certain that I got most of it wrong, because it's fading for me too, becoming a warped cardboard box of a memory. But that last moment comes back, fresh as today's rain: the puzzle, the bomb, the universe. No answer. We sat for a long moment in silence. I gripped the steering wheel, rested my chin on it. I blinked hard at the bug carcasses on the windshield. Finally, she opened the door and started to step out. Something moved near the deck, only a few yards from us. "Wait," I said. I grabbed her elbow and shut the door with a quiet click.

At the sound of the door shutting, the mountain lion lifted its head and looked straight at us. The animal was starving: painfully thin, its spine knuckling out of the matted blond fur, the ribs in sharp relief. It stared at the car then dropped its head to sniff the ground. We watched as it climbed the steps to the cabin's door and paced a moment on the porch. It looked less like a wild animal than a lost child, confused, waiting for someone to open the door and let it in. We watched as it left the porch and cased the perimeter of the cabin, as it sniffed, peed, left scat in the dirt. We watched as finally, it wandered toward the edge of the trees. I kept my hand on her elbow. We sat there for I don't know how long, waiting to see if it would turn back, waiting to see what it would do. But it never even looked back as it disappeared into the shadows of the pines. It never made a sound.

HEIDI ZEIGLER

## The Earthquake Dreams

The first earthquake dream  
was a film of crashing  
outside watching  
and inside falling  
for if the building  
across the street  
is falling now  
this one is next.

The next earthquake dream  
was running from falling  
just slipping from beneath  
the part to fall next  
in endless last seconds  
the running tracing a line  
through a building *sin fin*  
of crashing stone  
door after door opened  
in to more crashing  
never out to sky and tree.

The earthquake dreams  
are dreams in small.  
The earthquake dreams  
are on *pedregal*.  
The earthquake dreams  
are dreams long after the big one,  
are in a city rebuilt,  
more flexible, stronger, rooted  
deeper, luckier. Luckier.

The last earthquake dream  
is never the last earthquake dream.  
The sleeping doors  
still open on interiors  
beginning to creak to sway

to shake and the waking doors  
open on a second's delirium  
dishes in the sink slide away  
the couch slips beneath me  
the bathroom tap shifts  
to one side in the last dream  
everything moves.

The earthquake dreams  
of big made small.  
The earthquake dreams  
of solid *pedregal* replaced by lakebed.  
The earthquake dreams  
of the next big one  
of the city flexed past its strength  
of buildings pulled down into its embrace.  
The earthquake dreams  
of us in our beds asleep beneath stones  
luckier but not  
lucky enough.

HEIDI ZEIGLER

## Nuestra Señora del Cerebro

If you will take care of my momma's brain  
My thank yous will flourish rain lily like  
Popping up even more abundantly  
Than her Will you help me  
My gratitude will spin you dizzier  
Than her hand reaching for the hoverings  
Between us Who am I to measure you  
But if the plaqueing and tangles defy  
Your moon-cuticled slender digits  
Just take Pietà on her and lift her to your lap  
She's light enough now: her own shadow  
Your heavenly blue seems nice enough a place  
Where she could weed dig replant  
Do you narrate that blue with cardinal chirp?  
She'd love that even if it is just their song  
Not the birdbath splash she would watch  
From her ancient Singer at the back window  
Her eyes drawn from making seams hems buttonholes  
They must have caught too her ear  
How not? I am filling in blanks of course  
I don't recall her naming their songs as she did  
Their antics in the water I have been  
Filling in blanks all my life though her storyline  
Appeared seamless until the past half decade of  
Now only missing an adjective or article but now  
Her news has no headline cutline no lede no jump  
No byline as I guess at when and who she might  
Be among the numberless I do not even know  
To listen for a wishful thought tying her to my own  
Windows into the room of her with imperfect glass  
Sash that hits at eye level warped wood framing all I have  
Ever known Querida Virgen del Cerebro  
Won't you open the door and draw her  
Into your garden strike up a little rain on leaf  
Birds' loud gladness at the wet to ease  
My mind to fill her with purpose again  
Let me pass through this room of angry furniture  
Will you? Put her hands in the dirt again spiked  
With cardinal noise and blue clamor

HEIDI ZEIGLER

## If It Would Erase the Distance

I would drain the sea to salt.

I would pour it as drink for my guests,  
invite the world and not run dry.

I would plunge every dish  
into a soap-filled sink,  
empty cabinets to scour  
plates and bowls, and then  
scour again until the bone china  
is worn to archaeological shards.

I would irrigate my garden  
with water that feeds the sea,  
raise summer tomatoes that kiss  
the lips with their own salt  
before being quartered and served  
as glistening jewels plucked  
from fertile land. Not barren as ancient  
fields sown asunder with salt,  
this land would flourish as I wait.

I would fill the lion claw tub  
for bath after bath, scrubbing myself  
into a pillar with shining limbs.

I would post encrusted cards to you:

*Today the salt blows off the sea fine  
and light as your hand brushing  
a strand of hair from my eyes*

*or The salt hangs in the air  
today, filling the house with a heaviness  
and my heart with sorrow*

or *When I measure your absence*  
*it is in grains.*

With each hour and act the sea will shrink away,  
my pulse will replace dark depths  
that reflect the thought of you.

My hours will become hammered gold,  
a burden beaten so thin it will appear  
lighter than dreams of you shrouding my sleep.

I will call to you—here lie bones.  
Bring yours to this seabed  
that is now as empty as my own.

## Eleven

Her toes push off  
in a leap...  
held  
by the sudden  
gravity  
of her mouth  
closing. Now  
her knuckles,  
and now  
her head,  
her legs,  
her arms,  
her chest,  
her spine  
all pump toward sky  
she can't reach  
even on these big swings  
with their legs sunk deep.  
I join in with an arc  
that matches hers

but then settle  
into another rhythm.  
I pump higher, gain  
on the top bar, lose  
my stomach with each  
return until I can see  
over the edge, until  
another launch  
will send me to complete  
the circle I've begun.

Next to me  
mouth open  
she flies  
tongue hooked

Zeigler 24

at the corner

of her lip.

I drag through the gravel  
to slow this blur. This time

she opens her hands

on the forward bell

arms wide to embrace hard grass

or open sky.



## Psalms 151

1  
hey god i'm talkin  
talkin talkin  
to you

2  
hold?  
cause it's been long  
are you puttin me on  
since we been close

3  
i think you lost  
my number  
cause lately we just been creator  
and created  
and created  
and created

4  
not leanin  
on the fence  
talkers  
not some kind  
of sisters  
or brothers

5  
i been pickin up some hell  
that aint rightfully mine --  
but aint all hell  
everybody's  
til it aint  
nobody's?

6  
so i been collectin pain in pieces  
to sew  
to sew  
into quilts

Zeigler 26

to sow  
into gardens

7

i don't know  
no other place  
for this pain  
but over our sleep  
back into the earth  
where we come from  
where it come from

8

i'm plantin a quilt  
cause i can't stand  
another spring's bitter blood  
yellow bouquets in my house

9

gonna grow some comfort  
and i need

you  
the man  
herself

to help me till this red  
clay ground get it soft  
work it til it  
folds real easy and takes  
the seed

10

like low talkin in a dark  
you can't see your way through  
but that voice is leadin you through

11

i wanna know god  
can we meet over coffee  
and eggs

sunny side up

descant 27

and  
white bread  
toast triangles

12  
with the saints  
the whole damn gospel choir  
singin at our elbows

"you want a warm up  
on your coffee

coffee

coffee

hon?"

13  
and i wanna know:

god  
god  
god

are you there?  
are you here?  
are you hearin me?

14  
just pick up  
the line and say

yes

i am here

15  
cause here am i

16  
just press your big  
hand against the small  
of my back

## San Antonio

The software company where Melanie worked was in the majority of how start-ups ran—less glamorous than the swanky dotcoms of Silicon Valley, with their organic catering menus, on-site yoga, and complimentary Roling massage coupons—and more high-acid paper files sweltering under the heat of a hundred laptops, payroll cobbled out of questionable revenue recognition processes, and strings of code written under the damp pressure of a hangover. Their space in Denver was not sky-high and bathed in clean, filtered light, but rather occupied the ground-floor wing of a crumbling office park where the air-conditioning was troubling and unreliable. When they had been acquired, the founders and a few of the earliest employees had cashed out, and the rest of them stayed in the office, typing toward a different destiny. Melanie had no idea that a sale was even being considered until she was asked to proofread the press release. Like an iffy check, it was postdated by several weeks and gave her a queasy feeling.

“Are there going to be layoffs?” she asked. She was in a small department, and she knew how acquisitions went. People were made redundant, and then the rest of the employees plowed through, scared for their jobs, picking up all the dropped pieces—almost like a confirmation that, yes, the others had been expendable. It was as true a corporate prophecy as any.

“Please don’t talk to anyone about this,” her boss said. “Also, now that you know, don’t make any stock purchases. You could be considered an insider.”

“I don’t usually buy stock,” Melanie said.

“Then you’re safe,” her boss said.

Later, when she was not let go and she told her new coworkers she had never even heard of their company until the day of the release, they were shocked. *We are on the Fortune 500*, they said. *Right*, she said, *there are five hundred of those?* Her former boss had been one of those who walked with a hefty check and a new understanding of tax law, and Melanie’s days were mostly easier without her. Now she reported to someone who she had never met; he always approved her PTO requests, so she liked him well enough, even though she understood that he probably wasn’t really sure who she was.

The parent company talked about moving them to a better space

with a faster network and an improved telecom system, though only one material change to the office had actually been made, in the first week after the acquisition, which was to install a video-conferencing system, which Melanie had been trained on. It was a huge screen on a cart. The cart was wheeled into their conference room. The screen was mounted with a camera, and it was possible to call any of the network of carts in offices throughout the country. In training, they dialed a cart that the directory listed as “Tulsa, South Meeting Room.” When the Tulsa cart answered, they saw the inside of a facility with stained walls and a brown veneer table and empty chairs.

“Wouldn’t it be kind of weird if they had been having a meeting in there?” Melanie asked the trainer.

“For security purposes, the audio is disabled until the receiving cart accepts it, so be assured you cannot be overheard,” the trainer said.

“Only overlooked,” Melanie said.

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing,” Melanie said.

The trainer showed them how to do more basic functions, like run a PowerPoint presentation on the thin, high-resolution screen, and use the cart’s speakers. The trainer called the speakers “integrated audio,” and while she spoke, the eye of the camera was focused on Melanie and her coworkers, broadcasting them back to themselves. Melanie rarely liked how she looked in reflection, but the cart was tilted, just slightly, like the mirrors in boutique dressing rooms, smoothing off a few pounds. Before the trainer left, she shut the unit down, and it went dark, save for a string of LEDs along the base, pulsing a gentle blue. Melanie waited for the other trainees to file out of the room and then she put a pink sticky note over the eye of the camera and unplugged the Ethernet cable from its rear.

In the year that had passed since the acquisition, the cart had not been used once, and the sticky stayed tacked to the plastic, though the hue faded, and it was spring in Colorado again, where the temperature swung in wide, dramatic swaths—her potted petunias were wiped out one chilly morning, but by the time she came home, the gerbera daisies were sizzling in the afternoon sun, and she poured an entire can of water across the wilted leaves, hoping.

On Monday at work, the air-conditioning would not come on. The administrative assistant called building maintenance, and one of the developers opened up the door to the server room and turned on a stainless-steel fan, ordered for this specific purpose, which made a sound

like a jet taking off. There was a sweet spot in positioning the fan where it would suck the server room heat and send it like a warm river current, like a patch of pee in a pool, out the front door, which was propped open with a stack of old C++ *for Dummies* and *Mastering the AS400*. Melanie watched two developers argue over the fan, as the administrative assistant looked on and told her that her own air-conditioning had gone out, the night before. Melanie knew she lived by the airport with her husband and her husband's kid brother and her husband's disabled mother and her husband's disabled aunt. She said that they had been happy to discover that the unit had not actually been broken at all; it was just clogged with hair, because they had three cats, a dog, and two ferrets, so once they cleaned the filter off, it worked just fine. It was also quieter, she reported. Melanie wondered where the woman had found such a husband, with so much dander in tow, and how this man could be considered to be even remotely marriageable, but she did not say this.

"We were glad," the admin said. "Saved us a bunch of money." Melanie thanked her for calling maintenance and suggested that it might be worthwhile to invest in some new filters at home, instead of just peeling off the pet hair like separating the adhesive strip from a maxi pad.

The office she sat in looked onto the parking lot and was extremely noisy, but she was okay with this. She followed the business journals, and she knew that the trend was to move everyone into pods or low-walled cubicles, and this depressed her, because she understood that *collaboration* was code for *you will never take a personal call on the clock again, ever!* and she clung to her office, sneaking in over a three-day weekend to paint the walls the same yellow as her childhood bedroom and bringing in an enormous palm that she cultivated in a red ceramic pot and changing out the overhead fluorescent lights for Repti Glo terrarium bulbs. The package read:

*Without the sun's energy, all life on earth would cease to exist. It is by the sun's energy that all life forces are driven. Although the sun and its light are very complex, there are only three elements of light that are important and easily reproducible for reptile husbandry: ultraviolet light, visible light, and infra-red light. It is important to know that it is almost impossible to accommodate all of these needs in a single light source: a combination of different light sources is necessary in most cases.*

With the yellow paint and the faintly pink glow of repti-lights, Melanie felt that she was creating a productive environment. Her palm had healthy green leaves and her office a more rarified ambiance than those

around her. Some of the other offices attracted miller moths when they migrated from the Kansas plains to the Colorado foothills, but even with the repti-lights blazing, her space was clear of the dusty wings and cocoon debris, and while she had no intention of actually breeding reptilian life, the fact that she could sustain creatures outside of *arthropoda* was sometimes a comfort for her, when a long night had turned the comfort of her champagne walls to the pissy shade of decaying newspaper.

The office was heating up and Melanie worked on an analysis of the industrial marketplace—the parent company had suggested expansion—and she was disturbed some, by how many times the word *penetration* was in the report request, alongside the more benign *fastener* and *HVAC*. She worked on her paper and started to sweat. She read the *New York Times* online while she thought. She created a chart (she was very good at charts). What Melanie liked even more than the *Times* were advice columns, Jeffrey Goldberg, Amy Alkon, Dan Savage; the whole genre was enthralling. In a different life she would like to have this job, offering wisdom on a variety of topics from etiquette to sex.

In fact, she thought about the column frequently, while she was eating tuna fish over the sink—because single people could do this; single people did not have to care about dinner unless they wanted to—and she thought about it as she listened for the rumblings of the air conditioner to finally come on, though it did not until late in the afternoon, when they had turned off all the lights, opened the adjacent stairwell door, and shut down the oldest and most susceptible to heat server, which required argument over the choosing, since all of the servers were old. The phone panel had also been disabled, and the office was eerily quiet without the constant sounding of the ringers, and all of the printers powered down. Someone had raided the ice in the kitchen, and Melanie saw hunks of freezer-burnt blue melting quickly in a series of disposable bowls through the server-room windows when she was on her way to the bathroom. She came back with some paper towels and placed one under each of the bowls, which she lifted gently. The cardboard was already soggy from condensation.

On Tuesday Melanie flew to San Antonio.

On Wednesday she woke up in San Antonio with a headache and a return ticket and a snoring man in her bed. In software and technology in general there was the industry advantage of men outnumbering women by four to one, usually, and they were easy—either introverts or

married so long they had temporarily forgotten how their cocks worked. She spent days on the road with some of them, hawking a product they didn't always understand—they called the software a *suite*, like in a building—and saw what women liked about these kinds of jobs, when they could get them; it was a profession like being a wife, except it paid. She was the one who made sure everything ran smoothly, she reminded her male colleagues to catch every loop on the waist of their trousers with their belts, when traveling, and she sent them back to their rooms if there was powdered sugar from breakfast donuts sprinkled on their shirts, and she did it cheerfully. *Just saying*, sometimes she said, *that's not a good look*, and flashed a wide, toothy smile. She offered wet wipes for grubby hands and antacids for rumbling bellies. She scheduled their lunch breaks and made dinner reservations. Her real role was to keep them on message, but she had found this was much easier when the crew did not have diarrhea and blisters, so she stocked up on Imodium and Band-Aids when she picked up her birth control at the pharmacy. She'd spend long hours on hard, concrete floors at a trade show or long hours in a hardly decorated conference room with her coworkers, and then they would hit the hotel bar and pretend that they were wholesome by eating salads. They would spend their company's money on too many beers, and this would lead to being shackled up in Austin or Anaheim, one of their rooms—usually hers—sitting empty, 179 dollars a night to hold a discarded lip gloss. They liked her because she fucked, and they liked her because she asked questions. When the wheels came down in Denver, they would go home to their wives, energized at the reminder that a sex life was still possible, and she'd go home to her town house and take a shower, shave every place that they'd been, and move on. Back in the office she would see the technical staff staring at her shyly, the sales staff leering more openly. She didn't think that she actually had a bad reputation at the company, but if she did she didn't care.

Sometimes in early spring the moths would be fluttering through the telephone closet and the server room, and she would think about something she'd read that had described moths as being a rich food for predators like brown bears, because 72 percent of the moth's body weight was made up of fat, making it more calorie-rich than elk or deer, and she would wonder about her colleagues' home lives. Were they happy? Did they like spending their days in a cramped office among the hum of machines, and did they like fighting traffic back to their wide, open-floor-plan homes in the immediate suburbs and beyond; did they like



wrangling a car seat into the back of their Honda and going home to a canned meal because everyone was too tired to cook properly, or would they rather be with her, tangled in hotel sheets with their cell phones on mute, pretending to have a different life where you never had to make the bed or run out of beer.

On her way back from San Antonio, she saw an older man in business class come out of the lavatory with piss on the front of his pants. She related a little to this man who couldn't be bothered with drying because he probably couldn't be bothered with anything. If she had to guess, she would guess he had worked in sales once, and if he had the same job now, he would be angry that there are no secretaries anymore, and he would also insist on calling them secretaries, just as she heard him refer to the flight attendant as a "stewardess" as he rattled his empty glass. She liked traveling by air, with the low hum of the jet engine and the sheer speed and the purser bringing her drinks, but it was strange to see how people behaved.

At work on Thursday she was composing an email when one of the sales staff—the one from San Antonio—came into her office and closed the door. Her indoor windows looked into the hallway, carpeted in blue-gray, and she looked beyond him, past the articles and cartoons she had taped up in reverse so the text faced the outside. One of her clippings was from Easter, with two chocolate bunnies, one, missing his hind-side, who said, *My butt hurts*, and the second, missing his ears, who said, *What?!* and she focused on this as he was speaking.

"I've been thinking about you," he said. Melanie thought the force of his breath made the palm rustle, but she ignored this.

"Okay," she said. "And?"

"I told my wife," he said. "She was not happy, but she understands. Or, she says she understands. I am not sure she really understands."

"Understands what?" Melanie said. The bunnies were a classic, she thought, relevant beyond the crucifixion at Calvary, beyond Peeps.

"I can't stop thinking about you," he said.

Melanie turned her head. The palm was definitely rustling. "You should," she said. "You should stop. You have children."

He looked at his hands.

"I haven't thought of you," she said, "if that makes a difference."

"Nothing?" he said. "It's only been two days."

Her email was beeping and the room was growing warm. She worried for the air-conditioning, and she held up her index finger to him, just

*wait a minute*, the finger said, and she dialed the admin. “AC?” she said, and the admin said she was working on it.

“Once,” she said to him. “I have thought of you once when I was thinking how creepy SeaWorld was. Because remember that? Remember the beluga whales, and remember how I had to check my GPS because I was pretty sure that San Antonio was landlocked and so SeaWorld was giving me the heebies?”

“I remember that,” he said. “You were upset that the dolphins and everything were so far from the ocean.”

“I was. I was really upset,” Melanie said, and this was true. She had eaten meat her entire life, but there was something about an inland-Texas shark tank that made her want to swear off the flesh of creatures forever. “So I was thinking that you made that easier, and I am happy for that,” she said. “Thank you,” she said.

“Anything else?” he asked.

“No, nothing else,” she said. “It was just that one time, and like I said, thank you, but that’s it.”

“And that night?”

That night after the driest SeaWorld in existence, Melanie drank too much white wine, and she took him to a bar that was near the hotel that served nothing but off-brand spirits and peanuts—the peanut shells covered the floor, and she complained that she had husks in between her toes since she was wearing open shoes, and he had done something that she thought was ridiculous and charming, which was to throw down his sport coat over the discarded hulls and allow her to crunch unmolested to the bar, where she ordered a Crystal Palace vodka tonic. She had thought he was sweet then, though she wondered what his dry cleaner would think. Also, he was in a junior role, so it was probably his only good coat. After that they had gone to his room; he had been nice to her, she did remember this, fondly even. In the morning they had been at a seminar that smelled like pork from the catered breakfast. She couldn’t touch the meat and so had soy milk and oatmeal. And now she knew that he snored.

“That’s it,” she said. “Your jacket was okay?”

“Sure,” he said.

“Good,” she said. “I’m glad.”

There was silence, though her laptop hummed. She had it plugged into a larger screen to prevent eye strain, but the screen was flickering and making a whizzing electronic sound that she did not like.

“But, I told my wife,” he said.

“Good for you!” she said. “They say that honesty is important in a relationship.” The palm whispered to her. *End it!* it said. “Thank you for this conversation,” she said. “I have a call now.” She picked up her phone to punctuate. It was 11:17, and she started to dial her mobile phone, which she hoped he would not notice vibrating next to her.

Melanie lived in a town house that had a tiny yard and nice trim. It took her seven minutes to mow the lawn, but four of that was getting the lawnmower started. She had planned on getting a push mower, but she’d seen a power one in a neighbor’s yard with a “free” sign on it, so she took it home and called a friend who coached her to pour gasoline on the carburetor and then just crank until the engine engaged. She wasn’t exactly sure which part the carburetor was, so she doused most of the mower, but the solution, besides killing a patch of her already spotty turf, worked. The lawnmower sounded like a train coming off the rails, and the dull blades seemed to more push the grass over than cut it, but this was okay for her. She had planted iris and sunflower, a cascade of purple and yellow. She also planted lilies, which stubbornly came up in the same shades, even though she thought she had picked orange and red.

That night she sat in her yard and ate a Lean Cuisine and thought about the San Antonio Man. He believed he was different, but he wasn’t different. She felt bad he had told his wife—he felt guilty so he passed his guilt onto his spouse. One of the things about married guys, she had found, was that it was hard to get them to use condoms. Either they were just enough older than her that they didn’t quite get the reality of sex and infection or because they were partnered they believed they were clean. Melanie didn’t say to them that if they were considering sleeping with her, their wives might be sleeping with the manny, and if she were considering sleeping with them, then probably she had slept with someone else like them, and that was the same issue with San Antonio Man: They *all* thought they were different, and they thought if there was a problem, it was someone else’s problem.

The grass was cool and her entrée warm. She had her BlackBerry with her and her email was beeping; she wanted to think her email was beeping *again*, but it was always beeping.

Subject: Kyle Walker  
 From: Employee Updates  
 To: PB Soft Business Unit All Associates  
 Body: We have just received news that Kyle Walker passed away this

evening. Kyle faced his battle with cancer bravely, and we will always remember his service to the company. Many of you knew Kyle well and we suggest that you keep his wife, Amanda, in your thoughts. Some of you have already inquired if there is a memorial fund for Kyle: management asks that you please refrain from soliciting or collecting donations on behalf of the Walker family on company property as this could have tax implications. The Company Foundation has provided a fruit basket and as a courtesy, your name is signed on the card as it appears in the HR records; please expect to see a \$2.18 automatic deduction on your next statement from payroll.

Melanie read the message again, then tossed her phone into the yard. She ate some more of her noodles. The magnolia tree she had painstakingly weaned off a big-box home-improvement store fertilizer addiction was drooping in the corner against the cedar fence planks. Sometimes she sprinkled a little Miracle-Gro around the base of it, just to give it a taste of its old life, and she wondered if this would be a good time. What she liked about the magnolia was that it could reproduce with the help of beetles. The leaves and flowers were tough and ancient, evolving before there were bees. She had not ever seen a beetle in her yard, but she imagined their hard bodies doing the delicate work of pollination, and this seemed practical and therefore calming to her.

She put the cardboard tray of her meal into the compost bin and looked for the red LED light of her phone—when she picked it up, there were more emails beeping with the news of Kyle. She had worked with him before the acquisition.

Once his team had done her a favor, and she bought them Starbucks cards, and he had come by her office to thank her, and now she felt bad that she had then turned her receipt over to the office manager, who also did expense reimbursement and never asked questions.

*Please expect to see a \$2.18 automatic deduction on your next statement from payroll.*

Kyle had gotten sick very quickly. He was doing a lot of things, she thought. He was close to getting his pilot's license, and he was billing hours. She remembered talking to him just before he went on leave, only two months ago; she had told him how good he looked because he had lost so much weight. She didn't know it was because he was sick—he didn't know then either. He was wearing a purple shirt, and the fabric had a nice sheen against his dark hair and dark eyes. Kyle said that he was happy he was reducing, but he felt like shit.

"Maybe you're hungry," she said.

"I'm not hungry," he said. "And I'm usually always hungry."

"Me too," Melanie said.

They talked about work after that, and the next time she saw him, he asked her to keep an eye on the orchid he grew in his office.

The Lean Cuisine turned over in her stomach. She only ate them because the travel was making her gain weight, and cooking for one was depressing.

She was thirty-three years old. Kyle had been thirty-two.

On Friday, the office was not so much somber as disorganized. Kyle had been on sick leave for some time, but he was the Adam Smith of the technical staff, the invisible hand who governed, who corrected, kept things reasonable, who made the distinction between foreign (parent company) and domestic (them!) interests. When the air-conditioning went out again on Friday, it was a very warm day and the wind was blowing westward, wrecking their chances of angling the fan, because when they propped the door, warm air whooshed into the office like an oven being opened. Melanie overheard one of the engineers say that he was sure Kyle would know what to do, and that set the rest of them off nodding and sobbing, and Melanie went to find the admin, who was painting her nails in her office.

"Go fill up the ice bowls," Melanie said.

"I'm not dry," the admin said.

"I don't care. I'll help you."

They scooped all the ice available into as many containers as they could find, and Melanie send the admin to Safeway with her corporate card to get more.

Melanie went to the server room with all the bowls and mugs that she could carry, her hands and forearms freezing, and maneuvered through the technical staff as best she could to set everything down. She wasn't sure if it made much of a difference, but when her hands were free, she switched on the fan.

"Hi," said her man from San Antonio.

"Hi," she said.

The machines were whirring; Melanie smelled something like over-heated plastic.

"What if we just shut it all down and went home," she said.

"Let's wait," said one of the engineers. "I'd rather see it blow."

When the admin finally came back with a melting bag of ice, the air-conditioning had already come back on.

“What took you so long,” Melanie asked.

“I got it as soon as my lunch break was over!” she said.

The building manager came and made a round of apologies, and since Melanie had heard there would be a memorial for Kyle at the Masonic Lodge on Saturday, she arranged to carpool with San Antonio Man. *What’s the harm*, she thought, *it’s a funeral*. She traveled with people she knew and didn’t know and people she had fucked and hadn’t fucked all the time.

She shopped for a while on Amazon for a portable AC or even a swamp cooler, and then she shopped for shoes. She thought about San Antonio and the way the river snaked through the city, flanked with a low boardwalk dotted with margarita joints and platters of TexMex aching under the weight of American cheese. What had she wanted, when she let the San Antonio Man court her when they had no business courting, what had she thought would happen?

*Nothing*, the palm rustled, *nothing*.

**THOSE WHO FEEL THE HEAT WILL NO T  
KNOW YOU'RE THE CAUSE OF IT/** All the spillage  
having made the old floor as sticky and unforgiving as fly  
paper, is what death is like, and at first you'll peel your  
shoes in an exaggerated manner, and then being stuck  
but not stuck as what death is like is as thrilling as a  
wake from a speeding boat is to a lake's indigenous  
things—to ducks and water bugs—death like a perpetual  
finger through the perpetual belt loop of somebody  
perpetually taking you home, life after death like song  
after song selected by whomever plugged the jukebox  
before you, really good tunes, but not the ones you're  
waiting to push through your bones, filling you, bottom-  
up, like steam fills a radiator's fins

MATT MAUCH

**WITH YOUR EYES UP, FIXATED ON SWIRLING  
SPURTS OF BREATH/**

you feel like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle depicting a crowd of strangers trying to do the wave, then like snakes in a cave, knotting and unknotting in the dark to the pornography of *The Complete Book of Knots*, then like one of the kids sloshed and writhing at a club, barely restraining a need to be inside of, bodies teasing souls with sweat, with scent, with imitation after imitation of fusing, afraid of accidentally inside-outing yourself, of the exhalation of exhalations, swirling spurts of breath all that's left of the you we're here to name.



MATT MAUCH

## **When will it be too late to apply lessons learned?**

The ice I'm on is so thin an hour of 40 degrees will melt it,  
and I'll be like a bullet

shot through the window  
I've been peering into,

hoping to see what's been hidden in murk

by the planet's great hidiers of things. Only crows or gulls  
will be able to find a foundation or solace or respite

on the ice after I fall through.

I'm neither crow nor gull. I'm not the tie around anybody's neck.  
I'm no one's pantyhose, not their dress shoes.

None have ever dropped me off at the dry cleaners, nor forced me to sit  
in the ironing board's pew listening  
to the steam's sermon.

I wouldn't mind being a belt as it's pulled through loops  
as long as the person whose pants I'm cinching's got a tattoo that says  
"Always wear a belt, even with your jeans."

I've hidden the treasure you're looking for  
in a cave that looks just like a chamber of my heart.

You won't be able to locate it  
with your phone, nor even on a very old map.

All of this is a clue.

MATT MAUCH

**This is the brain wishing Dr. Frankenstein  
had perfected his procedure,  
that one of his progeny could transplant it  
into a body made of younger parts**

The wish is a flower grown from a seed dropped here.

The seed was a flier tacked to an electrical pole, a photo and the words  
“Lost Dog.”

At the time the brain was helping the heart cope.

The heart was losing a love, so the flier didn’t help.

The brain raised the hands and closed the eyes and explored the rough  
skin  
of a stuccoed wall.

It was mimicking the actress preparing for a role in which she’s eyeless.

The brain was telling the heart that things could be worse.

This nurtured the seed, and although the dog on the flier was mature,  
the brain, with a little misdirection, like a pump fake,  
took to imagining a puppy born in summer, who, if it survives ownerless-  
ness,

will, as a stray, invent God  
when the tree it pees beneath in the park  
sheds its leaves.

Brain to heart: I’ve been speaking to some senior citizens I’m close to  
and can report *within the normal range* is a cave you hide inside  
when the matter is a count of the cells

that fight cancer and cancer-like shit.

A stem grows, and leaves.

descant 43

One day the brain makes motivational pleas,  
says we all should try to be more like the sparrows who delight in a bath  
in the alley  
where the trash receptacles are lined up for pick up,

the sparrows ecstatic because, so late in the year,  
the dirty water that collects in the potholes between 40th and 41st

isn't frozen. It's the knees that ache vaguely at the understanding

that if you're beautiful and are chewing with your mouth open wide  
you not only won't offend, but will seduce.

Pushing a bud through takes a toll on the stem  
is all I'm saying,

and after the flowering the tired stem's got no place to go.

There's this crow in my neighborhood without a tail, an aeronautic mess  
that has taught itself to fly, to takeoff and land without a rudder,  
so against the odds and yet so in control  
that even the blue jays don't fuck with it.

It's a crow the stem idolizes, and makes it not mind  
how the gild of the golden years rubs off  
because we always touch them too much.

There is morning and there are passages from dreams, 7-minute spans  
that seem to last longer than that, when the brain speaks as the I,

promises to keep on wishing its wishes for wishing's sake,  
doing so as an offering to the god whose name it would have to look up,  
whose secondary or tertiary duty is governing the passage of time in bed,

when you're not sure whether it's *you* you, or the one in the dream,  
or her there beside *you* you

who's in control of the hands  
touching what you've learned to call *yourself*.

MATT MAUCH

## Half of the battle of learning is learning what it is you can write for yourself

One thing I can write for myself is the book of pulling on socks,  
book of tying laces so my ankles are harnessed in the manner of oxen

pulling my body and its paying customers, the heart and stomach,  
taking them on a sightseeing stroll.

The other half of the battle of learning, whether you're learning on ice  
or on the stickier oval of a roller rink

is accepting that certain things have to be written for you.

If you can skate forward only, you'll never forget the girls  
you would've loved to hold hands with

but who would only skate with those who could skate in reverse.

Time throws a girl into the air, into an *up there* from which she might  
never return.

Breath-holding feels like a test run at killing oneself, is in the category of  
things  
others will have to write for me to read about.

Time, with its penchant for seizing a heart, using a farmer's own grain  
against him  
to smother him in a bin,

stands naked before the full-length mirror in its hotel room,  
wondering if a medal against its chest would be cold.

I stand just as naked on the other side of the wall,  
in an adjoining room, with the door locked, writing the story

of the goose that fell asleep dreaming of its thin-air high

## Mauch 45

and woke with its feet frozen in ice, like it was a kind of handle  
on a kind of lid covering the lake,

which is the story of the promise of pressure building  
until it becomes the story of flight.

LEO WESSON

## **Cleaning Graves in Preparation for Mother's Day**



First Baptist Church of Cornelia, Georgia

“I asked if they did it for Father’s Day also, and was told that nobody visits their fathers’ graves there.”

## *Escalator*



Arc De Triomphe, Paris, France

“I followed this guy up the elevator. You never know what’s going to happen when you follow a guy in public carrying a big hammer. The scene reminded me of an old, Russian, avant-garde poster.”

## ***Dead Coyote on a Fence***



Calera, Oklahoma

“Ranchers like to shoot coyotes and hang their carcasses on the fence to rot. The folk tale is that it will act like a sentry to discourage other coyotes from visiting. I photographed this coyote over a six-month period; it finally dried, rotted and fell off the fence. Then the body disappeared.”



LEO WESSON

## ***Windy***



Fort Worth, Texas

“A child, photographed from the back, blown hair, stormy light: a nice day after school.”

LEO WESSON

## ***Rodeo School***



Fort Worth, Texas

## ***Art, A Shadow of Art***



MOMA, New York City

JENNIFER MOFFETT

## A Peculiar Apocalypse Behind the Gates

*“Home may be where the heart is but it’s no place to spend Wednesday afternoon”*  
—Walker Percy

### What You Think You Want

High ceilings. An open concept. A view of the water. A puppy. A baby. A pool. A boat. To lose 10 pounds. Dinner at 6:30 instead of 8:30. A meaningful conversation with someone who isn’t looking at their cellphone.

### View of the Main Artery

From the widow’s walk you can see every cul-de-sac, paved out like crop circles, all the way to the gated entrance. Large, borderless lots with imposing structures—each labelled by distant places. *Mediterranean. French Acadian. Greek revival. Italianate.* Luxury sedans and SUVs trace the main artery, where the yards edge into the blank expanse of bayou—a muddy curve fringed with tall marsh grass. They will sell you on the “million dollar view.”

### The Galactic Center

Your husband will set up his telescope on the balcony, even though you should be unpacking boxes. He will lift the iPad so you can match the app constellations with the real thing against a darkening sky. You will see Orion. The Big Dipper. Sagittarius. Scorpius. “See that fuzzy star?” He will point. “That’s the Galactic Center.” You will squint through the glass circle of the telescope and pretend you see it, but everything around it will flicker in the exact same way and you will never know for sure. You will kiss like teenagers while holding half-empty wine glasses and you will tell yourself it doesn’t matter if you really saw it or not.

### Lucky Thing(s)

A UPS package, the size of an adult, propped against a front door. A shimmering redbird caught from a backyard pier. A tax refund waiting in a mailbox. A husband back home at noon to make love to his wife. A megaphone or football or basketball cutout staked into the landscaping. A ladybug landing on your arm when you are pulling weeds. A Japanese Lucky Cat statue relentlessly waving from a front bedroom window. An alligator will appear every spring when the April showers flood our swollen ditch-

es. It will squat and remain motionless – indifferent to our marveling – until it seizes a moment to slowly rise and tiptoe away. They will say the house it chooses will be blessed. (They will tell you anything to make you stay.)

### **Nothing Worth Saving**

Emails from anyone named Rx4Mail or SlutsOnline or SIZEMATTERS. Hot pink flyers with grammatical errors. A thread of green text-bubbles that end in frustration-filled expletives. (Logical communication will no longer be a possibility.) Mud-covered Mardi Gras beads on the curb. Mismatched tennis shoes piled in the garage. A Facebook message from an old flame. Catalogs and time-sensitive material crammed into mailboxes. Every afternoon, you will bow your heads to sift through stacks of paper, which will be shredded and recycled in a ritual.

### **Everything You Know**

You will have to report a break-in next door, noting the suspicious cars violating our roads. A battered Mercedes with a rock-shot windshield. A construction truck with tattooed white males pretending to work on an abandoned foreclosure. Two young policemen will ask for information. (They will offer to protect you.) Everyone around you will say you are crazy. “Not in *our* neighborhood!” A day later, a dark-haired man in a suit and tie – gun holstered to his waist – will ask to come in. You will tell him everything you know as he patiently writes down your words in a leather-bound notepad. You will offer him a piece of the warm bread you just pulled out of the oven. He will smile pretending to let his guard down before accepting. You will adjust your fallen tank strap against your shoulder when you settle into your couch. He will notice how your clavicle pushes against your pale skin when you lean forward, how a direct sunbeam ignites a red wave of your hair. You will know nothing of the darkened moving images from his thoughts buried deeper, and how later that day he will try to burn them out by staring into the lamp on his desk.

### **Bad Signs**

A small poisonous snake in your steam shower. Another single pink line on a pregnancy test. A recycling bin full of glass bottles and empty prescriptions. A tropical storm brewing in the Gulf. Another piece of paper taped to the window of a vacant house. Frequent use of the d-word (divorce). Someone will spray-paint a cartoon penis on the speed sign.

Rednecks will ride their ATVs in the nearby woods and shoot at squirrels with .22s. Teenagers will defile the abandoned foreclosure, whooping and swaying from a second-floor balcony before leaving beer bottles and a makeshift bong on the staircase. Homely women with long, permed hair will knock on doors, gripping bibles against their long denim skirts as they insist on your damnation. They will speak of earthquakes, floods, sink holes, giant meteors. “You’d better save your soul before it’s too late,” one will say through her brown stubbly teeth. You will politely say, “Okay,” and then, “Thank you,” before shutting the door and locking it. You will hold the officer’s business card for more than an hour before deciding not to report these things. *Let us all burn then*, you will think.

### **Without Power**

You will notice the interior lights of the largest house flickering, just before it glows like a three-story entrance to heaven. Your neighbors will stream out of their homes and walk toward the light shining through every open window and door. The children will meander behind the adults. Even the dogs and cats will follow. They will all mingle around a sludge-filled swimming pool, drinks or cupcakes in hand, stepping around cracked concrete, spent bullet casings and errant vines. A vibrating hum will emanate from the house, a cacophonous sound like the main floor of a casino. But you will decide to stay home, pour Bordeaux into a glass, and curl up on your outdoor couch. When your husband finally leaves to join them, you will report this occurrence by text, nonchalant above the clicking glow of your iPhone. You will sip your wine and nibble rosemary focaccia until every house behind the gates finally loses power. You will light your Spanish candles – Mary flashing a pierced-heart tattoo, a running devil, the 23rd Psalm – and kneel to blow out each candle, making a sign of the cross every time.

## 30th Street Station

My chopsticks fell out at the train station,  
tumbled from the wrapper that depicts  
the history of the chopstick along with instructions  
for occidentals and an illustration  
of a panda bear excited about soy sauce.  
How embarrassing. I bend over and snatch them up  
hoping no one noticed. A woman nods at her phone,  
agreeing with its text message. Have I been caught?  
I daydream of noodles,  
long noodles falling into a deep white bowl.  
I chase them with my chopsticks before me  
like a couple of horns. I'm going in for the kill.  
My stomach rumbles. My hand trembles.  
In my mind, I am making love to my wife  
in a bowl of noodles. I've read about a new virus  
that makes you do everything backwards—  
walk, talk, even sleep—and I think, as I straighten up  
and look around me, patting my pockets to feign normalcy,  
that I might have it. The conductor stares at me.  
His eyes appear to be asking, *Why would you want  
to climb aboard the same train  
you just stepped off of?*

HENRY ISRAELI

# Theory of the Big Bang

1.

Picture everything that exists  
not just on this planet  
but in the universe,  
once densely compacted  
into one solid mass

then exploding outward

its particles

becoming the cosmos

planets, gases

and debris between them.

Then, instead of slowing down

like shrapnel in an explosion

picture the countless pieces of the universe  
speeding up.



2.

Funny how each day seems to move  
    more quickly than the last. Funny how  
when someone walks in front or behind  
    a slow moving car I can picture her run  
over in slow motion as if her feet are stuck  
    in hot tar. Funny how the car first tips her  
over and then slowly moves across her hips  
    crushing the pelvis, severing the femoral artery.  
Funny how as I lunge toward her,  
    I move in slow motion, too, my mouth open  
as one drowning fights toward the surface  
    with eternal darkness in his mouth.  
Funny how all I can do once I reach her  
    is cradle her head in my arms the way  
she once cradled my soft lolling skull in hers,  
    a perverse parody of birth, her uterus  
flattened, me crying out *mama mama*,  
    a crowd of spectators forming a black curtain  
closing around us, the sunshine white  
    and blinding as the imagined afterlife.

3.

Life without a body,  
a brain without the senses . . .

I am asking you to imagine the unimaginable—  
to see the planets in other solar systems

without a telescope, without eyes,  
without reason  
or intelligence or perception, without so much as  
the nerve  
impulse  
of an oyster or the light seeking feelers  
of the blindly creeping morning glory.

Without without.

Remember, the earth slowly moves toward the sun  
and one day will be swallowed whole in her bosom.  
We live day to day as if watching  
ourselves being watched  
from far away,

a distance farther than we can ever conceive of  
and therefore can never truly fathom

that we are already dead.

HENRY ISRAELI

## The Great Soviet Space Dog Experiment

I.

Nipper, the rascal mutt of RCA  
fame, forever gazing into

a cylinder phonograph  
with an idiotic tilt of his head,

never made it into orbit,  
but Dezik the Soviet space dog did

along with his floozy Tsygan.  
He cheated on her with Lisa,

and they died in what might be  
the most romantic death in history—

paw-to-paw above Stalin's Georgia.  
Another Lisa paired up with a bitch

named Ryzhik and they made it  
a hundred kilometers without

a hitch into suborbital space, the first  
and only all-female space flight.

Smalaya managed to run away—  
not every dog is suited for fame—

as did Bolik, who was never found,  
making his mark in history

as the space dogs' biggest mystery.  
Kruschev beat a shoe against

his desk for days, but no dog came  
running, tail a-wagging, tongue agog.

Damka and Krasavka landed safely

but not so Bars and Lisichka,

burned to a crisp for mother Russia.  
Not much luckier was Laika,

first dog to reach orbit. Like many  
Soviets, she died of melancholia,

her petrified mug immortalized  
on a forty ruble stamp. Pchylka

and Mushka were blown to specks.  
Many said it rained dogs all day long

over Siberia. They said it without irony.  
Children looked skyward with mouths

open to get a taste of galactic glory.  
Veterok and Ugolyok spent a record

twenty-two days in space, their floppy  
ears flung high in zero gravity.

Their flight marked the end of  
the great Soviet space dog experiment

though no one today celebrates  
their accomplishment.

Since then there've been monkeys, mice,  
turtles, fruitflies, and silkworms, even a cat—

forbid the thought. Disappointments all.  
Stalin and Krushchev had it right—

they knew dogs were made for flight.  
2.

Krushchev said, "our dogs are cosmonauts,  
your dogs are assholes." And he's right.

*descant 61*

Our dogs sit, lie, heel, and lift their paws.  
Their dogs fly in rocketships.

Our dogs shit on a freshly mowed lawn.  
Their dogs' turds float in zero gravity

like wise, gloomy thought bubbles.  
Our dogs beg for scraps at our feet.

Their dogs catch each kibble in midair.  
Our dogs bark when the neighbors barbecue.

When their dogs bark, the sound  
travels deep into the galaxy.

Our dogs hump grandmas' legs,  
their furry pelvises gyrating over

white anti-embolism stockings.  
Their dogs fuck each other at angles

only dreamed of in the Kama Sutra.  
Our dumb dogs chase their own tails,

spinning themselves into dizzying circles  
until they collapse, retching.

Their dogs win the space race.  
How can one compare the two?

Kruschev said, "one day we will bury you."  
Of course, what he meant was,

"one day our dogs will bury you,  
and on another day they will dig you up,

gnaw on your bones, lick them  
clean, and then bury you again."

HENRY ISRAELI

## Missing Children

When a parent dies, the child goes  
missing, and takes on the dead dim glow  
of those computer aged faces on posters.

And when the missing child laughs, his voice  
cracks, as flashlights slash the darkness  
and boots plod through the marsh.

"I think I've found him," one cries out.  
But no, it is only a log, a log with a boot  
on one limb, and a mitten on another.

HENRY ISRAELI

## **Mesopotamia, Mesopotamia, Or, The War on Terror**

I am in love with fire  
and shrapnel and flesh  
burned clean off the bone.

I am in love with stars  
that cleave to helmets  
like grief to the grieving.

My voice is a lathe  
shaving ambiguity  
to a shiny sterling bullet.

The gates open, I let hunger in.  
The gates open, I let anger out.  
A porcelain wind thickens.

If violence were my edict,  
I would gleam with its beauty.  
I would know no reason.

If I knew how to sing  
I would sing of treason.

ADA LIMÓN

## Lashed to the Helm, All Stiff and Stark

—After “The Wreck of the Hesperus” by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

There is a spreading frost  
trilling its white agony on the inside of the window,

where my guitar has been frozen for days,  
the heated song gone out of the instrument.

Let me start here: I am as cold as I have ever been.

Two days ago, a week? A mythic wreck came—  
*such was the wreck of the two of us.*

I’m such an ignorant boat—  
a lost sea-tossed daughter pierced by time’s spiked icicles,

begging for the original mouth’s thawing water.

Isn’t it funny? How the cold numbs everything, but grief.  
If we could light up the room with pain,  
we’d be such a glorious fire.

Clock: turn back, turn back—  
everything you’ve dialed to black.

What was it I wanted?  
The captain to sail safely? To land alive and, like survival, loved?

*But colder and louder blew the wind.*

And still there were books to read, and dishes, the dog’s needy tongue.

What good is bravery—  
*on the rocks and the hard sea-sand?*

If I can have a child. If I cannot have a child. If you do not care.

I am gleaming. Promise you’ll see me gleam.



## The Quiet Machine

I'm learning so many different ways to be quiet. There's how I stand in the lawn, that's one way. There's also how I stand in the field across from the street, that's another way because I'm farther from people and therefore more likely to be alone. There's how I don't answer the phone and how I sometimes like to lie down on the floor in the kitchen and pretend I'm not home when people knock. There's daytime silent when I stare, and a nighttime silent when I do things. There's shower silent and bath silent and California silent and Kentucky silent and car silent and then there's the silence that comes back, a million times bigger than me, sneaks into my bones and wails and wails and wails until I can't be quiet anymore. That's how this machine works.

## The Vine

I can almost hear the kudzu growing. The rain is hitting the pavement hard and across the street, in the bunch of tangled woods where I think the owl lives, though I'm not terribly sure, I can hear the kudzu creeping. Is it weird to say that I could hear you dying like that? Slowly, but viciously, inching your way toward the gray sky, tongue out to catch what was left of the world. You floated in the sea for a bit before, swam with the dolphins off the coast before, you drank maitais before, and smoked pot under a palm tree before, but the before was always that, *the before*. And underneath you could hear it coming, not like a train or something metal, but something clearly unstoppable, and it made a sound, like wet leaves, a weed spreading its runners, stretching out to meet what was next, feeding delightedly, unaware it was about to darken our whole world with its rapid climbing toward the sky.

## Miracle Fish

I used to pretend to believe in God. Mainly I liked so much to talk to someone in the dark. Think of how far a voice must have to travel to go beyond the universe. How powerful that voice must be to get there. Once in a small chapel in Chimayo, New Mexico, I knelt in the dirt because I thought that's what you were supposed to do. That was before I learned to harness that upwards motion inside me, before I nested my head in the blood of my body. There was a sign and it said, *This earth is blessed. Do not play in it.* But I swear I will play on this blessed earth until I die. I relied on a Miracle Fish, once in New York City, to tell me my fortune. That was before I knew it was my body's water that moved it, that the massive ocean inside me was what made the fish swim.

ADA LIMÓN

## Day of Song, Day of Silence

The strange crying sounds  
of the peacocks on the private  
school grounds echo on perfect  
lawns, and I remember the unruly  
feathered fowl of my earlier years  
that draped the flimflam landscape  
of the home of the first girl I ever kissed.  
The students today make a vow  
of silence to honor gay and lesbian kids  
who've been bullied. So when we visit  
and read poems, they can't speak,  
they are silent for those that are silenced.  
And I'm thinking now of making out  
with Sarah, and how later we made  
pickle and mayonnaise sandwiches  
and sat by the edge of her empty pool—  
our legs swinging into nothingness,  
the sun's heat at our backs, the sounds  
of peacocks screaming, at first harmless,  
then like some far-off siren.

BRYAN FURUNESS, ALLISON LYNN, MATTHEW PITT

## **Six Weeks of Soap**

—Collaborative Project—

### SOAP DIGEST: RECAP OF “THE SCORCHED AND THE SMOLDERING”

#### EPISODES FROM THE WEEK OF JUNE 3-7

Phil shows up at Ursula’s going-away party in Thorntown, though numerous residents specifically texted him not to. At the party, Phil speaks discreetly with Tod, his now grown, but long-hidden son. Tod was the product of a short-lived marriage to Ursula, ending with Phil’s disappearance when he was mistakenly launched in a grand fireworks display. Tod tells Phil to stay out of his life forever. Phil explains that he recently joined the priesthood. Tod suggests Phil remove his priest’s collar, so that he can look at him as a father, and not as a “father.” Phil complies. Tod punches Phil. “What’s the penance for not teaching me to ride a bike, jerko?” he demands. “For making me cut and bag grass alone for all these years? How many Hail Mary’s? Or would you prefer the sting of my fist?” A cake celebrating Ursula’s accomplishments as a trauma nurse—and wishing her well in her new career as a chess Grandmaster—arrives. However, it turns out not to be a cake, but chess pie. Partygoers suspect this is the doing of Ursula’s jealous sister Katerina, who knows Ursula is allergic to vanilla extract. Meanwhile, Micah despairs that he is suffering both from rheumatoid arthritis, and from an inability to spell rheumatoid arthritis. He keeps thinking it should be like “room.” As in, there’s no more room in his joints for anything but pain. In sympathy, Katerina kisses him wetly, then demonstrates the disease’s proper spelling on a whiteboard.

### SOAP DIGEST: RECAP OF “THE SCORCHED AND THE SMOLDERING”

#### EPISODES FROM THE WEEK OF JUNE 10-14

After witnessing the kiss between Micah and Katerina, Tod and Phil rage-bond. They are resolute that no one should get kissed at a party except the guest of honor—unless the kiss is between two recently-and-tenuously reconciled relatives (Tod and Phil, for instance). At any rate, father and son aren’t going to take the kiss lying down, so they decide to trick the usurper Micah. “I’ll bet you two million dollars you can’t stay in solitary confinement for five years,” Phil says to Micah. Tod nods, but adds nothing. It turns out his jaw is broken from continual angry handsome clenching. Micah, never one to shirk a challenge, quickly gets up and follows Alphonse and a small group of armed men to a cake delivery

truck, which turns out to be a paddy wagon. Katerina, disguised with a curly wig and harp, visits him in jail, offering physical therapy as needed. When Tod learns about this, he smuggles himself into prison in a wooden box labeled CIGARETTES, then leaps out and attempts to punch the life out of Micah. Micah is saved by a sword, actually merges and lives with the sword, and acts as a sword for the rest of the episode.

Meanwhile, after learning that vanilla extract increases your chance to dodge an attack in chess by 1%, Ursula decides to confront her allergy directly. She travels to an Indian monastery to steep in their famous vanilla springs by day, and suffer through allergy-induced fever dreams at night, in which she plays the rook in an unending match between her father and the mysterious hooded “illuminati grandmaster” who goes by the name of “Alexander Romanov.” For her final test, monks milk the fangs of a thousand vanilla beans into a chilled martini glass. When Ursula drains it and licks the bottom, they stand and salute her, like soldiers in battle. She returns to Thorntown with a stylized V tattooed on her neck, calling herself Grandmaster Vanilla Thug of the Underground Mountain. Alphonse asks for a divorce; Ursula says no; Alphonse meekly accepts her answer, but secretly fills her nightly IV bags with *fake* vanilla extract.

Katerina enrolls in community college.

### SOAP DIGEST: RECAP OF “THE SCORCHED AND THE SMOLDERING” EPISODES FROM THE WEEK OF JUNE 17-21

Tod isn’t actually Phil’s son. You knew that, right? Phil had no one fooled except for Tod and Ursula, who desperately wanted to believe that at some point she and Phil had consummated their marriage. The truth comes out at Micah’s arraignment, where Tod arrives with his true father (alas, not a “father”), Roberto Ballatini, a man Ursula remembers sleeping with (she sure can’t say that about Phil) during her marriage to Count Coronato (Season 12). “Señor Ballatini found me yesterday evening,” says Tod, whose broken jaw hasn’t hindered his ability to monologue with bravado. “We cheek-swabbed at midnight. I’m his. We leave for his hacienda in Bogata at noon. Don’t expect to hear from me again.” This news is a great relief to Micah, who has had enough of both rheumatoid arthritis and of Tod, and also to Elena Monteban, who hears the truth about Tod’s paternity during her shift at Masseur Ooh La La that afternoon. If Tod isn’t Phil’s son, that means Elena hasn’t slept with her half-brother. She treats the M-O-L-L staff to a round of decaf cappuccinos (enhanced with vanilla extract), and calls Dr. Blackwell to cancel her therapy appointment for

the next day, as well as all future sessions. “But *ma chou*, what about the sex?” says Dr. Blackwell. “It was great while it lasted,” she responds, while massaging Micah’s pained loins. Alphonse funds a secret army in Syrlombria. Lydia comes back from the dead. Katerina, who apparently missed the sweeps-week memo, stays home.

SOAP DIGEST: RECAP OF “THE SCORCHED AND THE SMOLDERING”  
EPISODES FROM THE WEEK OF JUNE 24-28

Independence Day is a week away, yet Phil is already readying his home for a party—he is from Thorntown, and Thorntown is that patriotic. Their parties do not center, however, on grilled protein or light beer. Such parties cannot possibly pop on camera. A Thorntown Fourth of July party must be opulent; at the same time, only ersatz jazz music may play in the background, a low baritone sax hum. Nary a single of the dozens of red, white, and blue streamers may be mussed, and not one serving charger may betray stray dollops of spilled salsa. Partygoers must appear to eat and cavort, without actual evidence of food or fun transpiring. Also, there can be no fireworks: Phil has never fully recovered from being launched in that display years ago (Season 14), and remains terrified of explosions, even those sanctioned by patriotism. Lydia, recently back from the dead, dies again. Micah’s flaring rheumatoid arthritis prevents him from reviving her.

Alphonse’s Syrlombrian army is nearly battle-ready. They disorient the enemy by fighting in chess moves. They also employ incendiary weapons—such as seemingly innocuous vanilla beans whose husks contain gunpowder and fertilizer deep within. Their first mission will be to wrest control of Thorntown. Taking over this proud hamlet—filled with scorched and/or smoldering hearts—will send a shiver through all America.

Meanwhile, Tod and his true father, Señor Ballatini, relax in the Bogota hacienda. They compare chiseled, broken jaws. A distant noise catches Tod’s attention: a Fourth of July party is being planned, an ocean away from the hacienda. “But how do you hear this?” Ballatini asks, every spoken syllable a seed of agony.

“I’m an American,” Tod replies, sipping dinner through a straw, hopelessly homesick. “And a Thorntowner.”

All flights out of Bogota are canceled, but there may yet be time, in a soap opera space-time continuum, to bike to Thorntown. If only, Tod rhapsodizes, someone had ever taught him to ride a bicycle as a child.

Lydia, who recently died again, comes back as a sword. A rapier. Using her hilt to dial, she calls Syrlombria.

SOAP DIGEST: RECAP OF “THE SCORCHED AND THE SMOLDERING”  
EPISODES FROM THE WEEK OF JULY 1-5

Tod and Señor Ballatini join Alphonse’s army, mainly to hitch a ride to Thorntown. At Lydia’s suggestion (“So, I know this other sword...”), Alphonse attempts to recruit Micah for the coming attack. After a spitty argument in which the two men recount all the reasons they hate each other, with Alphonse occasionally glancing at the camera as though to apologize for this explanation masquerading as dialogue (or perhaps to apologize for its necessity), Micah agrees to join the attack—so long as he can be the one to kill Katerina and kiss Phil. “You mean, kill Phil and kiss Katerina,” suggests Lydia, after an uncomfortable pause. “Right!” says Micah, turning as dark as his scabbard. “Ha ha. Ha ha ha.” Alphonse hoists both swords to the ceiling and with an inexplicable but thrilling roar, leads his armed men out of the mead-hall to their boats. Hanging back, Tod pulls out his cell phone and does that hot squinty look of frustration at the lack of bars. Then he notices a clutch of doves at an open window of the mead-hall. Hastily, he scrawls a message on a receipt, and scrolls it up inside of a discarded vanilla bean. While strapping it to the bird’s leg, he coos in pigeonese, which Closed Captioning helpfully if somewhat ineptly translates as *Take his to Throntown. Find Mom.*

At the Fourth of July picnic, Phil gets scared by a sparkler and chokes on a cucumber sandwich. Ursula Heimlich him, which turns into affectionate spooning. The two finally consummate their long-defunct marriage behind rows of bunting and miniature flags. Elena Monteban drives around town, buying up leftover stock of M-80s and Roman candles on the cheap.

SOAP DIGEST: RECAP OF “THE SCORCHED AND THE SMOLDERING”  
EPISODES FROM THE WEEK OF JULY 8-12

Here’s what it’s come to: three truckloads of Roman candles, at least one real son, two fake fathers, one “father”, twenty-five feet of streamers drooping with post-Fourth hangover, six uneaten Independence Day tortes, and an army descending on Thorntown that both *carries* swords and *exists as* swords. Despite the network’s primo cutting-edge lighting, it’s impossible, on the small screen, to tell which swords are the kind you might steal from the Medieval exhibit at the Met and which the



kind that were born as Micah. Or the kind that died as Lydia. Let's just say that this is one strong Syrlombria army.

Of course, the army is a week late, having missed their opportunity to wreak havoc in the heat of Phil's July Fourth party. They'd planned to pull what is, in fact, the oldest trick in the oldest book: a community lets its guard down at holiday time, and insurgents take this distraction as an opportunity to attack. History repeats itself, as they say (History repeats itself a week late, as they also say). And yet, Thorntowners have never seen themselves as part of history. Some, mostly Katerina and Señor Ballatini, place themselves above what has come before, largely due to the truly impressive size of their costume jewels. Others, however, understand something deeper. That Thorntown was never meant to be your average city, or even your average small town, or even your average hamlet, or road stop, or exurb, or suburb. Thorntown possesses something special. For starters, its exteriors are all facades, fronts backed by plywood and a crew that is union and somehow still underpaid. The mansions' closets are empty. The town's (hamlet's, road stop's, suburb's) refrigerators are merely fiberglass shells. At the end of the day, Ursula and Katerina and Phil's wardrobes are sent back to the network for use in that evening's sit-coms. Some might be callow enough to call the entire enterprise a fake. But beyond the plywood and paste, what is real in Thorntown is the love. Or the illusion of love. And what, after all, is realer than illusion? That's what Phil is heard to scream ("What, after all, is realer than illusion?") as he's felled by Lydia the Sword in what will heretofore be referred to on *The Scorched and the Smoldering* wiki as the Attack of 7/11. The hostility is spectacular. Vats of vanilla extract, emptied entirely. Gleaming swords, once alive and sharp with life, now dulled. When the smoke clears, there is only one survivor. At least as far as Tod knows.

## To Thy Speed Add Wings

As was his practice of two months, at precisely 10:00 a.m., Donald Mota shuffled across the false balcony that stretched along the second floor of his mansion. His intent was to observe his accountant, Joanie, while she used the toilet during her coffee break. Donald lived on the third floor, and the first and second floors had been renovated into the offices and classrooms of the institution of higher learning that he had founded. The sandstone was February cold against the paper of his eighty-five year old skin. Two months prior his wife had died, leaving him lonely and lustful, despite his equipment not having been fully functional for a decade. No matter. Sometime around Watergate, his wife had replaced his apparatus with an electric back and foot massager. Such were the ways of progress.

Donald stretched until he was peering from the side of the window and could see Joanie pulling up her skirt and sitting upon the commode. Though cigarettes had given Joanie's face the texture and color of an overripe cantaloupe, her hair was wavy and lustrous. When Joanie and Donald studied the account ledgers, he would lean over her shoulder, yearning to lose himself, louse-like, in her bouffant. He had founded the Nat Mota School in 1969, naming it after his father. For over two decades, the pencil pushers at the IRS kept a careful tally of his tax indiscretions, but near the turn of the century, he had the sense and good fortune to hire Joanie. The IRS hadn't knocked on his door in fifteen years. Having too much respect for Joanie's artful manipulation of numbers, he had never attempted to lay a hand on her.

His breath warm against the window, Donald watched as Joanie turned away to reach for the toilet paper, one cheek lifting from the commode seat to reveal the soft white curd of her derrière. He loosed his grip from the railing and in benediction touched a single finger to the windowpane. Such woe: Donald Mota, a man without a friend to whom he was not also employer.

In that bittersweet moment, Donald heard what he thought was machine-gun fire, and lost his balance. He toppled over the railing but not before locking eyes with Joanie, her face holed with a scream. Falling two stories, his hands batted the air uselessly, attempting to cling to Joanie's siren sound, which happened to be percussed by the rat-a-tat-tat of a woodpecker beating its mating call against a rain gutter.

*Thank God, he thought, this fall is not long enough for my life to flash before my eyes. I devoted my entire life to my country and to education. And now I am reduced to voyeur, a peeping Tom and a clumsy one at that.*

Young and virile, I shipped to Korea with the 2nd Infantry Division, Sergeant Donald Mota. When the 2nd was decimated by the Chinese near Kunu-ri, I was hit by shrapnel and came to without my squad, my socks, or my boots. I hid and scurried for days, a rat on two bloodied paws. The sun rising on the Kaechon River I stumbled upon a sleeping giant of a Korean soldier. With a rock the size of a softball, I brained him dead. Eight minutes later, medics from the 2nd found me fifty yards from my kill, sitting behind a tree and lacing my stolen boots. Only when I realized that I had been in UN territory the entire time and that I had killed to obtain shoes that I wore for less than hour, did I feel regret.

I returned to Fort Logan and trained recruits to hate the enemy. Not a hard task. You just show them the right way to look into a mirror. Nightly, the Korean giant would visit me in my dreams, whispering sweet nothings like Kunu-ri, Kunu-ri.

*This falling seems tedious,* Donald thought. Joanie's scream echoed across the campus. When he hit the spruce hedges below the false balcony, the air went out of him. He remembered his wife, Anita, dying, her eye whites yellowed and tired, and he thought, *good God, I'm still breathing.*

The early Sixties had offered nothing but promise and we were filled with the verve to milk it. After the war, I had taken a speed-reading class with famed Mormon Evelyn Wood. I wanted to know everything. I became a concert promoter. I got The Beatles to Red Rocks in '64 and later booked Led Zeppelin's first American show. I didn't so much favor the music as I did the profits and power of mass appeal.

Anita drove drag races—funny cars—out at Bandimere Speedway, hers a turquoise GTO she christened Gypsy. She was the most eligible bachelorette in the Rocky Mountain region, and grown men would do back flips just to see her bat an eye. I drove a '58 Maserati, the fastest car on the Valley Highway, and I was liberal with Father's money. Before I proposed, Anita and I sat in front of the fireplace and she watched me read Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* in three hours. I wanted to show her that I was capable of deep thoughts.

The wedding took place in my Cadillac at one-hundred-twenty-

five miles an hour, the minister and witnesses in the backseat. Sitting on my lap, Anita steered, while we blasted Herb Alpert & the Tijuana Brass at such high volume that we needed to scream our vows, and even then our promises went unheard.

Anita hit the national racing circuit. Her pit crew was untouchable. After winning the Rocky Flats Cup, Anita sprayed champagne on the boys, a wry smile on her face. Her humor was not lost on me. Axel Maxime, a Frenchman who was her lead mechanic, sidled up close to me and whispered, "With Anita, it's like swimming, no?" He sniffed his grease-stained fingers and raised his eyebrows. He wore an impeccably groomed mustache.

"Back to France with you, grease monkey!" I said. I might have punched him had he not had the advantage of superior strength.

With Anita, the smells of gasoline and burned tire rubber were aphrodisiacs. Riding her from behind one Easter morning, I spied smudged handprints upon her hips. I slowed my pace, and said, "Did you disgrace our marriage with a member of your pit crew?"

"Harder!" she cried, slapping at me.

"With a wrench-head, frog eater?"

"You spend all your time in concert halls, schmoozing in the green room with groupies and hippies. When you come home, all you want to do is read!"

I had terrible insomnia in those days, and exercise only made it worse. "True, but I have never strayed."

She pretended not to hear. She was insatiable. I was beyond release.

After a week of spying and scheming, I knew Maxime's routine, that every morning he jogged a particular country road. At daybreak, I drove the Maserati to that very location and ran him over dead. I buried him in an abandoned silver mine on one of Father's properties, and then, wearing Anita's crash helmet, I piloted the Maserati straight into a mud and rock filled ditch. I totaled my beloved, but all the evidential mess of blood and hair was vanished in the ground.

Anita hired other mechanics, but no one had Maxime's touch. I felt no pride in the thing, no sense that honor had been restored. Maxime had given my wife the thing she wanted most—the glory of speed!—and I took it away in a jealous panic. She never suspected a thing, and in our marriage bed, we were active, though mournful.

Donald woke to a blanket woven of pain and haze. His left arm in a cast, he reached with his right to feel where his aching head should have been and found nothing but gauze and tape. It was not the first time he had woken up in the hospital. In the last ten years, he had had two heart attacks, a seizure while swimming laps, and just before Anita died of pancreatic cancer, he suffered a stroke that left half his face looking under-inflated. At what point exactly had his body committed mutiny? *To hell with it*, he thought. *To the light, Donald! Go to the light. Forget this mortal coil, its double toil and trouble.*

"Mr. Mota, can you hear me?"

"My head is killing me."

"You had a nasty fall, sir."

It all came rushing back to him—the curve of Joanie's posterior, the machine-gun report of the woodpecker's beak, and Joanie's anguished scream. He fell back to his pillow and bellowed.

"You can thank your lucky stars for the shrubbery," the nurse said.

"Lucky stars? I should have had those things removed years ago," Donald said.

"Your daughters were here earlier, sir."

"Add insult to injury," Donald said. He and Anita had six daughters, each dumber and meaner than the next. Hitting the morphine drip, he cursed death. *Why do you come so slowly, ravaging my body piecemeal? Perhaps I should have driven the Maserati off the cliff rather than run down old Maxime? Had it done with one resolute foot to the floor.*

In the spring of '69, Father demanded that I get out of the concert promotion business. The old man knew his stuff—he had been a missionary, a rancher, and a first rate capitalist with holdings in oil, minerals, and chemicals. *A church or school, that's the ticket*, he said. My tastes were too fast for religion. Seeing that I had been a motivational specialist in the Army and given my interest in speed reading, a school seemed the proper choice. I drove to Salt Lake City and consulted with Evelyn Wood. We shared a desire to change the world for the better. Her motivation came from pure generosity, mine from guilt. I returned to Denver and for my final gig, I promoted the Denver Pop Festival, which featured Jimi Hendrix playing for the last time with The Experience. There were clashes between the police and so-called peace activists. Tear gas, rocks, bottles. Flower power had run its course and withered on the vine.

The spring of 1970, radical leftists abducted Father from the man-

sion. They hadn't expected Anita to be in the house, so they bound her to an over-sized Remington replica Father had sitting in the garden. Before they left, they kicked her a couple of times and proceeded to say unpleasant things about her anatomy and her social class. They asked a ridiculous ransom that we refused to pay, and they gunned down Father while he sat upon the toilet. Crapped on the crapper at the ripe old age of ninety.

I was a wreck. Hung-over by day, blind drunk by night. The whole mess skewed my judgment. With a slice of my inheritance, I bought Anita and myself matching gold Maserati Ghibli SS Coupes. I had visions of us street racing away our pain. Anita, traumatized, soon quit drag racing and got hired on at UPS as a delivery van driver. While she looked good in the shorts, it was obvious that she had lost her fire. She cut her hair short, and spent her time packing the children's lunchboxes and knotting herself mindless with macramé projects. She lost interest in all matters carnal.

In 1976, while at a speed reading conference in Abeline, Kansas, Evelyn Wood and I toured the Eisenhower Library. Granted special access to the archives, we read feverishly. Although she was sixty-seven, nearly twenty years my senior, she enchanted me. We made love beneath Ike's portrait, and what I initially thought was Evelyn's climax was in fact a stroke. I feared for her life and hollered for help. Security arrived before I had a chance to replace her panties or pull up my pants. It was in all of the papers. They kicked poor Evelyn out of the Tabernacle Choir, though the stroke did such damage I don't think she was much for singing. Evelyn's husband filed a lawsuit claiming that I stole their speed reading techniques. They won a pittance.

Anita found out about my transgression while checking out at the supermarket and perusing the tabloids. She demanded a second house in Golden. Even when we slept under the same roof, we kept separate beds. Publicly shamed, I had no one to whom I needed to answer. I devoted all of my time to the school. I was a parasite upon my dead father's fortune.

One night after I burned a fish dinner for one, I called Anita. "Once you were a Frenchman's whore," I said. "Now, dressed in shit brown, you provide delivery service."

She said that she'd divorce me if she did not think it was the thing I desired.

*It was not, dearest. Does this mean I won?*

"What in God's name were you doing on the false balcony?"

Donald stared at his daughter, Pamela, the youngest and dimmest

of the six dim bulbs that were, unexplainably, he and Anita's offspring. "Never mind that!" Donald slumped back against the pillow. He hit the morphine drip, resisting a double dose. Who knew what kind of business he had ahead of himself?

"What have you heard from Joanie?" He hated to involve Pamela, dumb as she was, but he had no one else whom he could trust.

"She's tenured her resignation!"

"Tendered, you boor!" While Anita was dying, Pamela spent her days poking around and affixing little stickers on the bottom of things she desired once her mother was dead. Anita had always claimed that Donald was too hard on Pamela, but he saw her for the vindictive and greedy carp that she was.

Every item in the house with a sticker Donald pitched into the trash.

Pamela stood before him now, waving about an envelope. "She claims that you were watching her when she was in the ladies' room."

"Just read me the letter."

February 13, 2014

Dear Mr. Mota,

*While I have undergone various indignities these last fifteen years, I did not suspect that you would have the audacity to watch me during such a private moment. I have never in my life been so humiliated, and while I do value the years I spent in service at the Nat Mota School, I am afraid that I need to tender my resignation, effective immediately.*

*Yours Respectfully,*

*Joanie Alexander*

*PS*

*You'll find your claim tickets for your dry cleaning in the upper right hand drawer of my desk. In the left hand drawer, you'll find a list of instructions and to-dos for my replacement.*

"Yours," he whispered. The words on the page were an anvil dropped on his scarred heart. All those years with Anita, their love life as passionless as the passing of gas or the blowing of a nose, the charm of reflex.

*Yours*, Joanie wrote. Maybe there was more to senior citizenry than diapers and degradation. He was consumed with her handwriting. The hourglass of her eights. The zeroes with the belt cinched across the middle. Her fives with the perfectly curved bottom. He thought, *Take me now God. If you let me live, I will accept it as a sign. Otherwise, let me die.*

When he opened his eyes, Pamela was still sitting by his side, pinching her chin in that way she had when she was thinking deeply. “Do you think that Joanie might, you know, maybe tell someone about the books?” Pamela was lazy in habit and mind, but, to her credit, she had a mean streak that provided her best thinking. “We should probably start burning records.”

“Get my clothes,” he said.

A block away from the mansion, Donald spied the police cars that he knew were accompanying IRS agents. His pain was overwhelming. Fifteen years. He remembered when Joanie first walked through the door, a newly minted Masters in accounting from Regis University. She was Catholic, and fifteen years later, she was an underpaid spinster. He realized that he knew nothing of her home life, only that she had not married. A spinster. Good God. If nothing else, he owed her an apology. For one time, he would do the right thing.

“That bitch,” Pamela said. “After we employ her fifteen years, this is how she treats us?”

“Do what you can to keep them from going upstairs,” Donald said.

“I’ll call the lawyer,” Pamela said.

“Call all of them,” Donald said. He opened the door and limped away, feeling in his pocket for the keys to the one Maserati Ghibli (Anita’s) that was still operational.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“Do what I ask, Pamela. For once, I beg.”

There were two vehicles in Joanie’s driveway. The blue Nissan he recognized. It was a rust-bucket. He tried to remember when she drove something else, but he could not. He would replace it. If she wanted, he would buy her a Cadillac, though he was hoping she would want nothing more than a medium compact. *No, no*, he thought, *give her whatever it is that she desires.*

He limped across the driveway, brushing off the debris that remained from his fall. He knocked on the door and a stout, chiseled-chin man answered. “Joanie!” Donald called, standing on his tiptoes to see over the behemoth.



"Who are you?" Barrel Chest said.

"I'm her employer, you oaf!"

"Harvey, who is it?"

"I've come to beg your forgiveness, Joanie. I've been an awful cad."

Donald ducked beneath the behemoth's arm, falling in the process, but deftly landing on his back so as not to reinjure his arm. Still, he cried out in pain. He scuttled across the living room floor, where sitting on a recliner made for two—*Dear Jesus, I cannot think of this as a loveseat*—was his Joanie. A box of Valentine's candy sat on the coffee table. Standing, he stared at the box in disbelief.

"Candy?" Joanie said.

A thick finger poked at his back, and Donald dropped to his knees. He felt a great and profound pain in his chest. He lost his desire to apologize. He wanted to sing out in exaltation. "Oh, Joanie. All these years and only now do I have the courage to tell you the way I feel."

"This is the peeping Tom?" the man said.

Joanie muttered an affirmative.

"Why are you in my house?" the man said.

Joanie pressed the lever on the chair, and she sprung forth, quickly pacing in front of the television. They were watching drag racing of all things. Donald's heart dropped. "Your house?" he said to the man, though he still faced Joanie. Her face, the O punched in the middle like there had been the biggest of misunderstandings.

Donald crawled to the dual recliners and attempted to lift himself. He didn't have the strength. "These years," Donald said. He tried to speak but the words, the energy, where had it all gone? He felt a fist in the back of his head, and it was as if his heart seized. He clutched at his chest and fell onto his back.

Miraculously, he was now positioned such that he could see directly up Joanie's skirt. She was wearing underwear he had never seen before, thin cut. A thong, is that what they called it? Oh, how he longed to reach for her. So many things he had to say. *Dearest Joanie!* his heart screamed. *All these years and you cooking the books, never saying a word. My love, my life.*

Joanie stood next to the giant. From the floor, Donald saw nothing but her shoes, a pair of slip-on casuals that he remembered on Anita's feet. She had gone through her things before she died, giving away items of no real value to friends and employees. Still, it drove Pamela batty.

From the television, he heard the cars, pre-race, burning rubber,

the revving of the dreadfully powerful engines. From between Joanie's feet, he saw the Maserati Ghibli in all its golden splendor.

How many years had it been since the Maseratis had been delivered to their driveway? And she never drove the thing, not once, even went so far as to say that it was despicable to spend Nat's money that way after his murder. *You were wrong, Anita*, Donald thought. *You were wrong and had you driven that car, had we raced one another up and down the canyon roads, we would have survived. We would have loved until the end.*

Something shifted and the gold paint on the car shimmered. Anita stepped out. She was wearing her racing uniform and held out her hand. Donald's eyes closed. Then he was standing, walking to her. His first and last love. There were two Maseratis in the driveway.

Joanie stared down at Donald Mota. His body released a sound like a sigh, as if some great weight had been lifted.

ADAM CLAY

## Monument

I know that expecting too much drains distance  
into a pool  
not meant for swimming.

I pause too often.

Chasing from one state to another, a song.

Here the trees exist newly and simply—I had not  
seen so many of them before. I think in words

whereas I had ceased remembering before.  
To have two families might be not having enough family.

A nap blooms in this world and might it be worth

remaining in this space, carved out of sky, a sunburn  
in the shape of Kentucky on your back.

ADAM CLAY

## Progression All Lit Up

Each month more vacant  
than the last  
but expansive as if the space

left open is there to  
to contain what the mind  
cannot yet form. It feels like

we're watching the leaves appear  
before the day ends, bats  
overhead seeming to move

without purpose. Last night  
reading a friend's new poems  
in the backyard, my mind

failed to pause as I read a document  
of a thousand unfoldings. I assume  
each word divides or braids

the mind with another. I used  
to pause in each moment and wonder  
what future was being shaped

in the space between us. Now  
that the bats are here, the mosquitoes  
can't be all that far behind.

ADAM CLAY

## What Midwest Is This

No point in prairies

A blue heron drifting  
over Centennial Park

We all know

what it's looking for  
though the skies maintain  
forgiveness more heroically  
than we will

Should we forget the world  
from which we've come

it too will abandon us  
Our syntax unstringing apart

in the sky, a string without  
its kite, a definition of gravity

in space, the sun the only  
suspect light in the sky

## Contributor Notes

**Bryn Chancellor's** story collection, *When Are You Coming Home?*, won the 2014 Prairie Schooner Book Prize and will be published by the University of Nebraska Press; "This Is Not an Exit" is part of that collection. She was selected as the Poets & Writers Maureen Egen Writers Exchange fiction winner and received a Literary Arts Fellowship from the Alabama State Council on the Arts. Her short fiction has appeared in *Gulf Coast*, *Blackbird*, *Colorado Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *Phoebe*, and elsewhere. Previous honors include a fellowship and a project grant from the Arizona Commission on the Arts and scholarships from the Bread Loaf and Sewanee Writers' Conferences. An assistant professor at the University of Montevallo in Alabama, she is married to the artist Timothy Winkler.

**Adam Clay** is the author of *A Hotel Lobby at the Edge of the World* (Milkweed Editions, 2012) and *The Wash* (Parlor Press, 2006). A third book of poems, *Stranger*, is forthcoming from Milkweed Editions. His poems have appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Poetry Daily*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Iowa Review*, *New Orleans Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, and elsewhere. He co-edits *TYPO* Magazine and teaches at the University of Illinois.

**Wendy Fox** holds an MFA from the Inland Northwest Center for Writers and is the author of *The Seven Stages of Anger and Other Stories*, winner of the 2014 Press 53 Award for Short Fiction, which will be published by Press 53 in October 2014. Her short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *PMS poem memoir story*, *Washington Square*, *The Tusculum Review*, and *The Green Hills Literary Lantern*, among others. A complete bio and list of publications can be found at [wendyjfox.com](http://wendyjfox.com). She lives in Colorado.

**Bryan Furuness** is the author of *The Lost Episodes of Revie Bryson*. With Michael Martone, he is the editor of the forthcoming anthology, *Winesburg, Indiana*. His stories have appeared in *Ninth Letter*, *Southeast Review*, *Hobart*, and elsewhere, including *New Stories from the Midwest* and *Best American Nonrequired Reading*. He teaches at Butler University, where he runs the small press, Pressgang.

**Henry Israeli's** poetry collections include *New Messiahs* (Four Way Books: 2002), *Praying to the Black Cat* (Del Sol: 2010), and *god's breath hovering across the waters*, forthcoming from Four Way Books in 2016. He is the translator of *Fresco: the Selected Poetry of Luljeta Lleshanaku* (New

Directions: 2002), *Child of Nature* (New Directions: 2010), and *Haywire: New and Selected Poems* (Bloodaxe, 2011). He has been awarded fellowship grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, Canada Council on the Arts, and elsewhere. His poetry and translations have appeared in numerous journals including *American Poetry Review*, *Boston Review*, *Harvard Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *Smartish Pace*, *Grand Street*, *The Literary Review*, *Tin House*, *Fence*, and *Verse* as well as several anthologies. Henry Israeli is also the founder and editor of Saturnalia Books ([www.saturnaliabooks.com](http://www.saturnaliabooks.com)). He is Assistant Professor of English and Associate Director of the Certificate in Writing and Publishing at Drexel University.

**Tyrone Jaeger** is the author of the lyric novella *The Runaway Note*. His story collection, *So Many True Believers*, which includes the story in this journal, is forthcoming with Queen's Ferry Press. Jaeger's work has been published in *The Oxford American*, *West Branch Wired*, *The Literary Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Toad Suck Review*, and many others. Since 2008, he has been on the faculty of Hendrix College, where he teaches creative writing and literature. He lives in Conway, Arkansas.

**Ada Limón** is the author of three collections of poetry: *Sharks in the Rivers*, *This Big Fake World*, and *Lucky Wreck*. Her fourth book, *Bright Dead Things*, is forthcoming from Milkweed Editions. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Poetry Daily*, *The New Yorker*, and elsewhere. For more, go to [adalimon.com](http://adalimon.com).

**Allison Lynn** is the author of two novels, *The Exiles* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt/Little A) and *Now You See It* (Simon and Schuster/Touchstone). Her essays and book reviews have appeared in publications ranging from *The New York Times Book Review* to *People* magazine to *Post Road*. She has taught at New York University and Lehigh University, and currently teaches at the MFA program at Butler University in Indianapolis. She holds an MFA in Fiction from NYU.

**Matt Mauch** is the author of *If You're Lucky Is a Theory of Mine* and *Prayer Book*, and the chapbook *The Brilliance of the Sparrow*. He co-hosts (with Paula Cisewski) the Maeve's Sessions reading series, and edits *Poetry City, USA*, an annual collection of poetry and prose on poetry. Mauch teaches in the AFA program at Normandale Community College, and lives in Minneapolis.

**Jennifer Moffett** completed her master's degree in Creative Writing at The University of Mississippi. Her essays and book reviews have appeared in various print publications, including *Jackson Free Press*. She has published short fiction in the *New Orleans Review*, *Revolution House* and *The Citron Review*. Her novel was a short-listed finalist in the Faulkner-Wisdom Creative Writing Competition, and her poetry can be found in *Kudzu Review* and Sundress Publication's book *Not Somewhere Else But Here: A Contemporary Anthology of Women and Place*. She lives on the Mississippi Gulf Coast where she teaches creative writing and literature at a community college.

**Matthew Pitt** is author of *Attention Please Now*, winner of the Autumn House Fiction Prize and finalist for the Writers' League of Texas Book Award. Over thirty stories have been published in magazines, journals, and anthologies including *Best New American Voices* (Harcourt), *Everywhere Stories: Short Fiction from a Small Planet* (Press 53), *Conjunctions*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Oxford American*, and *The Southern Review*. He has received awards from *The New York Times*, *Bronx Council on the Arts*, *Mississippi Arts Commission*, and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.

**Heidi Zeigler** divides her time among her native Texas, Mexico City, and Athens, Greece. Her poems have been published in *Heritage Blue Anthology*, *di-verse-city anthology*, *tres di-verse-city anthology*, and *Promethean Magazine*, and her interview with Carol Muske-Dukes was published in *Oxford Magazine*.

### Featured Artist Biography — Leo Wesson

**Leo Wesson** is a Fort Worth-based photographer and videographer in love with light, gesture, composition, and sometimes, if he is there at the right moment, a little bit of oddity thrown in. He likes to travel (anywhere), and will gladly go over the mountain just to see what he can see.



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**Winner of the  
Betsy Colquitt Poetry Award (\$500)**

Ada Limón for "Day of Song, Day of Silence"

**Winner of the  
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Henry Israeli for "The Great Soviet Space Dog Experiment"

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