

descant

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Fort Worth's Journal of Fiction and Poetry

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We welcome submissions of poetry and prose from September 1 – April 1. Submissions received outside of the reading window will be discarded. We prefer potential contributors use our online submission system, Submittable (descant.submittable.com/submit). Those wishing to submit via U.S. post may send work to descant, c/o TCU Department of English, Box 297270, 2850 S. University Drive, Fort Worth, TX 76129. Submit up to five (5) poems, or one (1) single prose submission, limited to 5000 words. Please submit no more than twice during each reading period. A self-addressed stamped envelope must be included with traditional submissions to guarantee reply, return, or acknowledgement of submissions.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

As I write this note for *descant* Volume 54, a follow-up to a novel published fifty-five years ago—a sequel that is, in fact, parent to its prequel—has just been released. That a work of literary fiction can, in 2015, enjoy the ubiquitous, cultural PR machinery usually reserved for summer blockbusters featuring caped crusaders and ear-ringing explosions, is an odd phenomenon. Harper Lee's second novel, *Go Set a Watchman*, is a follow-up to her debut *To Kill a Mockingbird*—though again, *Mockingbird* was constructed from *Watchman*'s bones; its courtroom drama set twenty years prior to the story told in *Watchman*. This new book (which is actually not new at all) has prompted many a critic and fan to question and downgrade its worth, even though the Pulitzer Prize-winning book it birthed has long been lauded and beloved. Talk about an identity crisis.

The contents of this volume of *descant* were not chosen with a theme in mind, yet one seems to have emerged of its own accord: one of identity and authenticity, and the wrinkling and wavering of both. This theme's presence may be felt in Nancy Reddy's first suite of poems, as the speaker of "Understudy" compares herself unfavorably to a "single singing woman" in a performance. "At dress rehearsal you were costumed / as your better self. Now she's the critics' darling and you're // a cast-off prop." It can be felt in Sharon Goldberg's "What Makes Us Human," where an otherwise unexceptional narrator—"the sort of chameleon who blends in on a street in Boise or Minneapolis or Des Moines"—secures elite status by virtue of his ability to laugh raucously in a studio audience, as often as called for, "a finely-tuned orchestra" of aped mirth and spontaneity. Goldberg's exploration of the cloying canned laughter, and poignancy when that laughter fades, made this story a winsome delight. Also delightful is an impish streak in Bruce Cohen's poems, such as the mild indictment in "Non-Emergency Room" as the speaker hears about the woes and misfortunes of friends and acquaintances: "I practice being gracious & sympathetic, half-charming, / But mildly obsess about what sushi rolls will be on special."

The identity crisis can be writ large, as in Brent Katz's "Fake," short fiction that is both playful and dark. The young characters in

Katz's story embody a troubling, engrossing herd mentality that cannot, once joined, be wrested free from easily. Poet Nicholas Regia-corte's "American Mastodon" series offers an even grander herd as his focus, and a correspondingly grander ontological insecurity. The series' titular species ponders the coming extinction of its kith and kin ("but it's no ruse / to be the only Pleistocene / in a loving but / Holocene house"). Finally, there is the nuanced mingling of mystery and ruminative examination in the short story "Treble Seven, Double Naught." In it, Hasanthika Sirisena's Sri Lankan narrator wrestles with nostalgia for her homeland, along with relief over having left it behind, though the success of her detachment leads to unintended consequences.

Sirisena's story, which won our Gary Wilson Short Fiction Award, is one of four pieces from this volume honored with prizes. We are grateful to the benefactors of the Wilson Award, along with those sponsoring the Betsy Colquitt, Frank O'Connor, and Baskerville Awards. We applaud all four writers, noted on the inside back cover, on their accomplishments.

Visual imagery contributes greatly to the identity of *descant*. For our color covers, we have both Nicola Mason and—as you can see in Mason's Artist's Statement—the late poet Claudia Emerson. I had an opportunity to meet Emerson at the Sewanee Writers' Conference, where she and her husband played guitar and sang into the night sky for a group of us gathered on the porch. Her voice as she sang was as authentic and resonant as her voice on the page. I will miss, and am grateful to have known, both.

We are also grateful to Andy Schoolmaster, Dean of the AddRan College of Liberal Arts, who has, in augmenting his support of the journal, enabled us to expand its voice and vision. My thanks also to Department of English Chair Karen Steele; the TCU Press staff; the editors and assistants listed on our masthead; and the writers who submit and entrust their work to us. I feel similarly indebted for the continued support of the loyal subscribers and donors to the journal, along with the many libraries that offer these issues of ours a home.

—MATTHEW PITT

UNDERSTUDY

BY NANCY REDDY

When the curtain splits, the stage contains a single singing woman.

She hits the final crystal goblet high note
on her solo and then sheds a cinematic tear. She's bathed
in stardust and applause. You're the other

woman, stranded just offstage,
mouthing words you've learned
by heart. At dress rehearsal you were costumed
as your better self. Now she's the critics' darling and you're

a cast-off prop. Darling, you're an asterisk
in the program's slick pages. You study
her body. Learn the way when striding to her mark
she leads with her hips, how beneath the flood lights

her slender shinbones flash like knives. Her clavicle's a coat hook
in the Act II strapless gown and so you fast until your shoulder blades
float up from your spine. You file your nails
until like hers they're perfect crescent moons. At the encore she's a streetlamp

gathering moths but in her dressing room
she dozes after a sold-out matinee, pancake foundation
smudged across her satin pillowcase. You smear her beauty cream
beneath your eyes. You lean into the mirror at her vanity

and paint your mouth to match her practiced pout. Watch
the unplucked fuzz above her upper lip
as she exhales in sleep. Match your breath to hers.

Hum the closing notes.

LITTLE, RED

BY NANCY REDDY

As a girl she gorged on words. She swallowed up
the grainy yellow paperback the housekeeper slipped behind the sofa,
the newspaper clippings that greeted her each morning

at breakfast with her eggs. She walked for days inside the gilt-edged forests
of the storybooks Father presented her each time he returned
from whatever elsewhere swallowed him from time to time. Her ribcage

was papered with fables, her sternum sheaved with verse
and *ever after*, belly plump with rising action. Roads, she'd learned,
could not be trusted. Where, for example,

was Mother? What road had gobbled her
the day she set down the path with Father's billfold
to buy the Sunday roast and did not come back? Better to stay inside

with chapter books and tea, the fire cracking consolingly. In books,
fires were emergency or escape hatch. Wet wood would smoke
and were she stranded on a desert island she'd simply gather kindling

and wait for an airplane to swoop down in rescue. Here, the fires were ordinary
and not quite warm enough, lit with pine trees the woodsman chopped
and laid neatly on the hearth. Where, she wondered,

was the woodsman? She hadn't seen his mustached face, his ax
in ages. And even in the quiet castle
she was never lonely, not with grandma's smile

framed above the mantle, the carnivorous rumbling from the bookshelves.
Sometimes she heard a distant howling but mostly she slept soundly
and woke with fur beside her on the pillow. One night

she found a hidden *Grey's Anatomy*
and saw the girl pinned to the page in vivisection. Could she
be pink inside like that? No decent girl

would go around the world uncooked. Girls, she saw,
were caverns. Better to be a forest instead. The last fall leaves
are falling on the well-trod path, the wolf inside her

making his way to the cabin and the garden.

GIRL-TERRARIUM

BY NANCY REDDY

The girl beneath the glass
liked it. Her world was very small
and still and smelled only
of the forsythia blossoms she'd gathered
that morning, just before the armed guards
put her under. Beneath the glass
she didn't have a body, so she became
a plant instead. In fall
her pale arms turned to birch bark,
flaking and delicate, and come first frost
she was a holly bush, her mouth
a wreath of stiff and glossy leaves
studded with berries. Her torso stayed flesh
and her nightdress rose to meet the glass
when she exhaled. In spring she was
a hedgerow of honeysuckle, a blooming earth
that no one else could touch. The guards
came back, though in the end no prince
would have a girl half-tree. The king's man
came and roused her with his tongue
between her teeth.

BEFORE THE CATALOG OF BOATS

BY NANCY REDDY

Every year they cut the cake together,
their twinned arms becoming one hand

on the knife, the jelly filling cadaverous
between layers of white box cake. Asleep,

you couldn't tell the girls apart, Helen nestled
against the other sister like a teaspoon

in the kitchen drawer. In Math they counted out
the times together and in Home Ec they cut

tote bags and circle skirts from the same cloth. But one day
Helen's sudden beauty flared up like a brand.

Boys came calling, but her father
wouldn't look at her, not even when she soloed

at the Easter Mass, not even when as Harvest Queen
she wore a beaded gown and waved beside her date,

a boy slack-jawed with her beauty and his luck,
as they looped the track in the shop teacher's

borrowed truck. *Where had this girl come from?*
and her parents wondered, too. Even as the sisters

hung their graduation tassels
from their Chrysler's rearview mirror, Helen always knew

her real life waited elsewhere. She sometimes wondered –
her father in the sky, the man with masks and feathers

does he watch her ever? Had she been a man
she could have gone to find that father. The pretty sister

finds a prince and goes to war. The other sister
stays home and simmers.

MY FATHER FLYING HOME FROM WAR, 1975

BY NANCY REDDY

Because her dying is slow, he's waited months to ask for leave
and board this plane. Frankfurt, first, then London, where he'd changed
into civilian clothes, the button-down and Levi's his father hates,
and now, contained in the recirculating oxygen and polyester seating
of the economy cabin, he presses his wrists against the rivets,

raising welts. She's not dead yet. Or if she is, there's no way to know,
held high above the Atlantic while his mother's a web of IVs
at home in Philadelphia. She loved all creatures, even crows, and labored hard
at drinking herself to death. In the long years of her dying,
one president was killed and another thrown from office. We landed

on the moon. He waited out the war in Germany, playing Army soccer
and rarely writing home. The airline coffee's bitter in its paper cup,
the creamer pasty where the mixer didn't reach. She won't live
until they land. He doesn't know. The airplane cradles its cargo above water
so far and dark it might as well be plate glass.

REVISIONIST LOVE STORY

BY NANCY REDDY

My Darling Z –

Though you have not asked,
I will try again to say
what happened. He left me

in a rented farmhouse. The cows
passed long days lowing in the far fields,
the hides of Holsteins dappled

like a Rorschach. Once I saw
a horseshoe and once a pitchfork.
In those early scooped-out days

I was ravenous. I stripped the green beans
from their vines, fried bacon
in a blackened skillet. When the farmer's sons

left on the porch steps fresh-bottled milk, warm
and smelling still of back field hay
I gulped it down. And then my body

said no. Because I could not eat
I settled in to plan for winter.
I raised the piglets mean and cooed

when they snapped my feeding hands.
I harvested habaneros and scotch bonnets,
lined them on the counter

like plucked molars. I cleaned and canned them
barehanded, filled the mason jars
with their flesh and syrup, held them in the boiling water

until the seals slurped shut. After,
blisters rose around my nailbeds like the harvest moon.



WHAT MAKES US HUMAN

BY SHARON GOLDBERG

My career as a professional laugher began with the first season of *The Nanny* and ended with the final episode of *Friends*. Eleven glorious, giddy, glee-filled years during which Jerry Seinfeld shook my hand and Jennifer Aniston presented me with a bottle of fine merlot. Eleven years during which Isabel and I married and she gave birth to our own little giggler who we named Joy. Eleven years during which our finely tuned team of thirty created symphonies of hee hee hees and yee hah hahs and whoop whoop whoops for ABC, NBC, CBS, and FOX. It all came to a mirthless halt when sitcoms were displaced. When I sank into a deep depression. When reality shows ruined live audience TV.

It was purely chance that I became a pro. I'd worked periodically as an extra on films and soaps to pick up cash in between my freelance tech-writing projects: manuals, data sheets, application notes. The frenetic environment was a welcome change from solitary hours instructing users to insert Cable A into Slot B or right-click the hyperlink to access a pull-down menu. I'd done some acting in high school and enjoyed being part of the entertainment industry, even if I was only playing Walmart Clerk or Corn Farmer #2 or Generic Office Drone at Coffee Machine. I'm a pretty ordinary white guy, average height and weight, in my thirties back then, with thinning brown hair and a pleasant face, the sort of chameleon who blends in on a street in Boise or Minneapolis or Des Moines. You'd never expect a laugh so startling, so sonorous, so raucous would burst forth from my inconspicuous body. It's a laugh worthy of an Emmy.

My destiny was determined one smoggy LA day in 1993, when I was shopping in the international food section at Ralph's. My cell phone rang: Callie from Central Casting.

"I wanna hear you laugh," she said.

"What?"

"I need epic laughers for the audience of *The Nanny*."

In 1985, as Callie explained, the show's star Fran Drescher was assaulted and raped in her home by armed robbers, and later, when her show became popular, she was stalked. Fran didn't feel safe with random, potentially dangerous people in the audience and asked if they could be screened. The producer hired Callie to find 30 to 40 vetted extras to replace the usual ticket-holders. Callie figured she'd choose people who'd do more than fill seats, people who'd guarantee an enthusiastic response.

“This is your audition,” she said. “Laugh like you’re about to pee your pants.”

So I did, right there in front of the soba noodles.

“I love it,” she said. “You sound like Freddy Krueger on meth. Be at Culver Studios at 4:00 p.m. Your name will be at the guard booth.”

And so began the best years of my life. Just for sitting in a comfortable seat and laughing, I made \$75 a day, a little more than the typical extra gig. I would have done it for nothing.

Callie assembled three groups of laughers, each one half men, half women, ages 20 to 70: a top-tier Group A, a second-string Group B, and a “when hell freezes over” Group C. I was in the elite A group. Within the group, I wouldn’t go so far as to say I was the Magna Cum Laude Laugher—that was Mona, a boisterous, mid-fifties Hamburger Hamlet waitress who would explode with a mwaaahewhawhaw that could trigger an earthquake—but I humbly submit I was in the top five. When we first gathered, our collective laughter was spirited but somewhat forced; we were trying to do the right thing and ensure our future employment. But after a few episodes, we began to gel like a finely tuned orchestra. We learned to build, blend, modulate and layer our laughter. We learned when to murmur, when to snigger, when to chuckle, when to howl, when to woohoo and yip yip yip. We learned how to create a cacophony of cackles and a geyser of guffaws. We learned when to pause. When to punctuate.

We got so good at our job that we would deliver exactly the laugh the director wanted at a particular moment. And unlike an audience of non-pros who might laugh only the first time they hear a joke, we delivered on every retake, every pick-up line, every running gag. The actors played off us holding for laughs, sustaining a surprised or shocked or pained expression to milk the moment and we provided the froth. Our relationship was reciprocal, even symbiotic, like ospreys and rhinos, like shrimp and sea anemones.

Soon our reputation spread. Other producers hired us as “ringers” to instigate and reinforce laughter in their studio audiences. Laughter is naturally contagious—scientists will back me up on that—the sound triggers responses in the brain and preps the face muscles to join in. We’re wired to laugh, to share our joy, to ripple with rivulets of frivolity.

During our peak years from 1994 to 1999 we worked three to four days a week, 5 p.m. to midnight, on shows like *Friends*, *Frasier*, *Everyone Loves Raymond*, *Mad About You* and *The Fresh Prince of Belair*. And we didn’t just laugh for the loot; we were personally invested in the success of our shows. We wanted them to soar during sweeps week. To win their time slots. To earn higher ratings than their competition. Did you know that *Frasier* earned the Emmy for Best Comedy five

years straight? I'm not saying it wouldn't have happened without us, but I have to believe we played a role. Best of all, we got to know the directors and the crews—cameramen, gaffers, script supervisors—and, especially, the actors. They thanked us, they knew our names, they invited us to their Christmas parties. They treated us like family. We were collaborating contributors to the comedy compendium.

Imagine laughing for seven hours straight. Imagine the adrenaline surge, the pulse quickening, the blood pressure boost, the increased breathing sending more oxygen to your tissue. Imagine the rush, the high, the euphoria. No wonder they say laughter is the best medicine. I even started scheduling my writing around my TV gigs. And more than once I turned down projects because they conflicted with the career that fed my soul if not my wallet. I'd found my calling, my ministry, my church.

I was addicted. But is laughter such a bad thing to be addicted to?

Isabel wasn't part of our original group. She was a transplant from Group B on the second season of *Friends*. As soon as she sat down next to me, I was intrigued. She was petite, with a halo of curly copper hair, emerald eyes, and a smile that warmed me like oatmeal.

"I'm so glad to be here," Isabel said. "I feel like Central Perk is my own neighborhood coffee shop."

"Me, too," I said. "I'd order a latte there anytime."

She giggled a melody of such genuine joy that I was smitten; love at first laugh. Isabel synced with our group dynamic quickly and instinctively played off me. Her laugh was the perfect counterpoint to mine; the treble to my bass, the trill to my staccato, the lyricism of Vivaldi to my Mahler dissonance. After the show, I invited her for coffee. We drove to Bob's Big Boy and shared a slice of strawberry cheesecake. We talked about her family in Santa Barbara and mine in Bakersfield. About the yoga classes she taught. About our favorite films and books. We talked until 2 a.m.

Afterwards, we drove back to Burbank Studios and I walked Isabel to her car parked outside the gates.

"Good night," I said. "See you soon."

"How soon?" she said, her voice a sweet tease.

"Is tomorrow soon enough?"

"Yes," Isabel said. "That's perfect."

I kissed her gently on her cupid lips.

Six months later Isabel and I married with all of Group A at the ceremony. The cast of *The Nanny* gave us a case of Dom Pérignon for the reception and Mona offered a toast. We rented a bungalow in the Hollywood Hills, just a fifteen-minute ride from Paramount Studios, and settled into a life blessed with love

and laughter. I loved that Isabel's eyelashes were pale as whispers. I loved that she thought rubber ducks and live chickens were inherently funny. I loved how she massaged my head, lulling me into semi-conscious contentment. I loved how she tee-hee-heed when I tickled the inside of her knee. I loved the way we warmed up together, practicing our laughter repertoire like opera singers practicing scales.

We shared so many magical moments of merriment. Remember *The Nanny* episode when Fran climbed a telephone pole? We laughed fourteen hours straight that night. After the show, we fell asleep in each other's arms, spent but totally satisfied, a soundtrack of mirth accompanying our dreams.

Our daughter was conceived after we taped an episode of *The Fresh Prince of Belair*. As we watched Will Smith and Alphonso Ribeiro dance the wacky "Carlton" named for Ribeiro's character, Isabel and I produced a parabola of laughter, the sound version of the wave at a football game. Our post-show love-making was a somersault of passion interspersed with uncontrollable giggles as we remembered Alphonso swinging his hips and bobbing his head.

And Isabel's contractions were triggered during the "I Hate Rachel Green Club" episode of *Friends* guest-starring Brad Pitt. That's the one where Ross revealed that he and Brad's character had started a rumor in high school: Rachel had both male and female reproductive parts. The dialogue sparked three laugh segments, each building on the one before and culminating with a high pitched howl from Mona when Chandler said Rachel was known as the hermaphrodite cheerleader from Long Island.

Isabel turned to me, her eyes round as spotlights. "It's starting," she said.

We made it through the episode then hurried to our car. Isabel timed her contractions as I drove out of Burbank, down the Hollywood Freeway, through the streets of Fairfax, onto Beverly Boulevard, and right up to the entrance of Cedars-Sinai Medical

Joy was a lovely replica of Isabel; the same coppery curls, the same jewel eyes, the same cupid lips. I remember her first word, of course, and her first step, but most of all her first laugh; the glint in her eyes, the dimples in her chubby cheeks. Soon Joy's laugh joined ours to form a harmonic trio. She laughed spontaneously for no apparent reason, perhaps because she liked the sound or wanted to see our reaction. Or because she cherished childhood secrets inaccessible to us. For two years, our life was Elysian.

When Reality TV first hit the screen, it struck us as an oddity. An anomaly. A cheap way to fill time without paying actors. Why would anyone care to watch petty, self-involved people bickering, cursing, getting drunk, eating insects, faking romance, and fomenting manufactured conflicts? Still, the genre proliferated and sitcoms were a casualty. Around 1999, work started to slow

down. To compound the problem, some newer comedies didn't use laugh tracks at all, especially on HBO. Anthropologists say humans prefer to laugh in groups, which is why the tracks were created in the first place. But producers of shows like *Sex and the City* and *The Larry Sanders Show* decided at-home viewers no longer required a communal atmosphere to know what was funny or to feel comfortable laughing out loud on their own.

Isabel had already cut back to once a week to stay home and care for Joy so when opportunities became sporadic, she stopped altogether. Normally, during summer hiatus, we'd laugh on pilots we hoped would be picked up for the next season, but fewer and fewer sitcoms were in the pipeline. When *Friends* announced that its tenth season would be its last, I knew we were in trouble. It was the end of an era.

For the final episode, Isabel rejoined Group A to laugh, then celebrate at the bittersweet wrap party. We hugged Matt Le Blanc and Matthew Perry. We took pictures with Courteney Cox and Lisa Kudrow. Executive Producer Ted Cohen presented each of us with a copy of the script autographed by the entire cast. We said our good-byes. Isabel and I walked hand-in-hand out of the studio. I was heartbroken we wouldn't see the actors again. Wouldn't gather with the gang to laugh at Ross and Monica's arguments or Phoebe's silly songs. Wouldn't hear the announcer say "Filmed live in front of a studio audience."

I fell into a foul funk. Without the laughing for balance, my freelance jobs felt oppressive and depressing, the plodding precision dragging me down, down, down. I missed Mona and my team. I missed *Seinfeld's* foibles and Kramer's pratfalls. I missed "hanging out" at Central Perk and *Frasier's* radio station. I missed the exquisite, heavenly high of purposeful, exhilarating laughter.

Isabel was sympathetic at first; she knew I was suffering from withdrawal. We watched reruns of our shows, listened for our laughs on the track, laughed along, even added embellishments. But after a while, she lost interest. I tried to draw her back in but she resisted.

"Honey, you're living in the past," she said. "There's more to life than laughter."

Her words sliced my spirit like a razor slits a vein.

I searched for replacement gigs to ward off depression. I called Mona and some of the others and asked if they'd join me at the Comedy Store to resurrect our cadre and build enthusiasm for the new comics, but my buddies were busy with on-camera extra jobs or didn't feel like laughing for free. I went to the club anyway, thinking I might find like-minded laughers, but the crowd had no sense of unity. Some folks were drunk. Some heckled. Some looked just plain bored. I felt odd and misunderstood. No sense I was part of something bigger.

I bought tickets for Hollywood tour bus rides to help out the guides who relied on lame patter and cornball jokes. I tried to engage and energize the tourists, but my inflated laughter made them uncomfortable. The third time I rode the same bus, the guide told me not to come back. He thought I was harassing him.

I went solo to movie matinees of whatever comedies were playing. I hoped to galvanize the audience, but film actors don't pause for laughs and my fellow fans were reserved in their reaction. I had to settle for the sound of my own laughter ringing in the dark.

Isabel grew suspicious about my afternoon absences. When I explained I desperately needed my laughter fix, she was upset.

"Things need to change," she said. "You're barely working. You're never home."

"I'm sorry," I said.

I tried to change. I tried to see things Isabel's way. I focused on writing. I played with my daughter. But I grew antsy, sullen, out-of-sorts, shaky. Even Joy could sense something was wrong.

"Daddy's mad at me," she said and began to cry.

"Daddy's just sad," Isabel said. She hugged Joy. "Daddy won't be sad tomorrow." She shot me a warning look.

After Joy was in bed, Isabel had more to say. "You're slogging around like a zombie."

"I know."

"You're staring into space."

"I know."

"You're leeching the laughter from Joy."

"I'll get it together. I promise."

But addicts make lots of promises. And I couldn't go cold turkey.

The next day I told Isabel I was meeting with a client. Instead, I drove to the Santa Monica Mall thinking it would be a good place to inspire spontaneous laughter. I picked a spot next to an escalator and let it rip. As shoppers descended, some looked at me like I was nuts, but a few smiled. A twentyish guy wearing a *Wayne's World* t-shirt sauntered up to me.

"Hey, are you filming a reality show?"

"Uh, yeah," I said. "Wanna be on it?"

"You bet!"

So we laughed together. "Yeehahyeehahyeehahyeehahhahhahhah!"

Six or seven more people joined in and we attracted a crowd of onlookers. What a performance! We were hyperbolic, tectonic, stereophonic. When mall security vectored in our direction, we dispersed. But I felt revived, restored,

renewed. No more shaking. Just a blissful buzz. Isabel could tell.

“You seem happier,” she said.

“Yeah,” I said. “A good meeting. A new project.”

She smiled and kissed me on the cheek, thinking I was finally moving on. Two days later, encouraged by the Mall experience, I tried my luck on Hollywood Boulevard. I chose a square on the Walk of Fame near the Chinese Theatre right on top of Jack Nicholson’s star. Jack’s laugh is megalomaniacal so I thought it was a good omen. Locals bustled by on their way to lunch and tourists strolled down the sidewalk peering at names, stopping to listen to the Elvis impersonator or have their photo taken with a platinum-wigged woman dressed like Marilyn Monroe. I began to laugh, warming up my vocal chords with a few isolated hee hees. No one paid attention. I increased my volume and added a donkey-like he HAW he HAW he HAW. A couple of women glanced at me shaking their heads, rolling their eyes. Marilyn scowled and relocated several squares away. Elvis stopped singing “Heartbreak Hotel.” I stepped into Jack’s footprints.

“Heeere’s Johnny!” I unleashed my pee-in-your-pants-break-the-sound-barrier EEH HA HA HA HA HA hiccup HA HA HA hiccupEEH HAHAHAAH!

“Weirdo,” someone called. “La-La Land.” I didn’t care. I needed to laugh, was driven to laugh, compelled to laugh or I’d die. A police cruiser crept up the street and parked. Two cops stepped out and sidled up to me. They looked like they were sent by Central Casting—clipped hair, good posture, grim expressions.

“Buddy,” the taller one said, “you need to move on.”

“I’m just laughing,” I said. “Something wrong with that?” I revved up my best Nanny climbing-the-telephone pole laugh. “WAHYIPYIPHEHOOPYIPYEEHAAH!”

“That’s enough,” the second cop said.

“Why?” I yelled. “Is laughing against the law?”

The first cop took another step toward me. I pivoted left. I jumped up on the cruiser. I threw back my head and let go with a high-pitched Wicked Witch of the West cackle. People on the sidewalk slowed to watch. Drivers in cars rubbernecked. I laughed and laughed and laughed. I couldn’t stop.

The tall cop dragged me off the car. He pinned my arms behind my back. He cuffed me. He shoved me inside.

The next three days were a series of blurred scenes I wish I could edit out: fingerprints, mug shot, strip search, straight jacket, sedatives, mandatory stay in the Cedars-Sinai Psychiatric Unit. Hardly material for a sitcom. The following six months played out like a show on the Lifetime Channel: trauma, tribulations, realization, redemption, renewal.

Isabel retrieved me from the hospital.

Isabel and Joy moved in with Isabel’s sister.

I got help. I took responsibility for my actions. I learned from my experience.

I returned to my normal, ordinary, odious occupation.

Isabel and Joy and I reunited.

The End. Run credits.

Aristotle said what separates humans from the rest of the animal kingdom is the capacity to laugh. Now that I'm laughing less, does that make me less human? I've resigned myself to a life of mediocre laughter. Nothing flamboyant. Nothing ostentatious. Nothing incendiary. I've learned to control laughter like binge eaters control the amount of food they eat. To stay within an acceptable and healthy range. I chuckle to myself like my daughter. I titter politely when I hear a joke. I no longer seek out compatriots to share expressions of rapture.

Every once in a while I'll watch an episode or two or three of one of our shows I've recorded or catch a rerun on cable. I pick out my laugh and remember. Sometimes Isabel will even join me. Whatever ill-effects our sitcom stint yielded, she realizes we wouldn't have met, wouldn't have fallen in love, wouldn't be parents to Joy had it not been for laughter.

Last week, out of the blue, Callie called. I hadn't heard from her in three years. Sitcoms are coming back, she said. She wants to get the old group together again.

"Can you make it for a pilot on Tuesday?" she said. "Can you still pull out that killer laugh?"

My first thought was Yes, yes, yes! But then rationale kicked in. What if I go back and get hooked again? What if sitcoms are supplanted again? What if I'm deflated and crushed again? What if I OD? So I made excuses. Said I had a sore throat. Felt like crap.

"I'll try you for the next one," Callie said.

When I told Isabel, I swear her curls drooped. "You're not considering..."

"No, no, of course not."

But then I got to thinking maybe it'd be safe if every once in a while I went in. Just an occasional pick-me-up. Nothing regular. Nothing I can't control. I can't help but wonder, what if? Can I still deliver a Top Five performance? Still amp up an audience? Still foster a near-psychic symbiosis with the cast? I waited until I was alone in the house—Isabel and Joy out shopping. I threw back my head. Stretched my face muscles. Wiggled my tongue. I imagined Fran and Jerry and Jennifer and Alphonso all together on the set of a brand new comedy. I pictured Mona sitting next to me. I heard her interstellar laugh, then my laugh folding into hers, then Isabel's splashing into mine. My adrenaline surged. I took

a deep breath. But I couldn't laugh.
I just cried.



THE DEAD EAT EVERYTHING (REMIX)

BY MICHAEL MLEKODAY

I was always my own sister
somehow, tinted and wrapped

in split lip. I danced like a man,
like a jawbone in fragments,

left lung made of light,
my chest waiting like a bird feeder

to spill. I had a gun pulled
through the hum of my body,

the sweetgum of my sex.
Today, my milk cascades

and I flinch at you, big tent,
big emptiness in the throat.

My mouth is a cloud, moves
slowed-down in both directions

until this boy frame runneth over
with lady grit and glitter. Shush,

darken, snarl through the praise.
You will wake up mistaken for July.

THE DEAD EAT EVERYTHING (REMIX)

By MICHAEL MLEKODAY

I crossed myself against the girl
I found within me, kneeling.

I crossed myself with gin, with slang
and bad neighborhood vernacular,

with everything mustached
and broken about me,

but still I was overflowing
with woman names: fox

and wedding feathers,
peonies, a voice like syrup

pouring from me, the worry
of girlfriends my own.

Watch me remix you, she said.

Watch me stain your lips

designer red with sex. Welcome
this fresh undressing, sister,

this baptism by hairbrush, garden
swelling thick with the moon.

I THINK I'M ALMOST READY TO SEE THE OCEAN

BY MICHAEL MLEKODAY

pretty as the gaunt cheeks of hunger
allow, pretty as a girl whose tongue
is outlawed in her own homeland
can be, pretty as my great-grandmother

crossing an ocean alone, make me
pretty as a bootlegger during Prohibition
in the Midwest, hovering over a vat
of bathtub gin and hearing the waves

that carried her here. pretty as preservation.
pretty as each bootlegging city's king,
my great-grandmother wearing a man's
crown, driving down from the border

one-handed, fingering a pistol in her lap.
make me pretty as a barroom broke up
by some god-fearing yankee, pretty as
her hatchet buried in her left foot, make

me king great-grandmother,
retracing her footsteps in reverse,
smelling in the waves the sour, motherly

slap of vodka which brought me here,
crowned and jeweled, driving one-handed,
bootlegging my own blood to the coast.

THE DEAD EAT EVERYTHING (REMIX)

BY MICHAEL MLEKODAY

In the wilderness of my bedroom,
I saw a thick fog lift from my body
one night and take the shape

of a moose, then a man, then
the rush of animal desire. I was
untouched no more, my own musk

blinking off my fingers like rain,
my own fog my lover. My hands
danced a cave painting in me.

My teeth now fangs, my want
now black ghost and electric,
I swallowed the bitter hail

of the body and it kept coming.
It struck like a nightstick but sweet,
stuck in the blood like an overdose.

Maybe I took the whole flood
into me and it was the good drunk
of summer. Maybe it was paint.

Maybe I smeared it across my face
and slept, growing wet and wild
with hunger, ready for war.



The diener pulled the sheet down to the girl's collarbone. The face was swollen, the nose broken. The skin, already graying.

The paperwork read: *Elana Richter, 17, brown eyes, 5'5, 111 pounds.*

Her SUV had been swerving down the Long Island Expressway. It was discovered upturned on a patch of grass near the Jericho Turnpike off-ramp, on Lakewood Road.

A fly did a lazy spin, then landed on a lesion above Elana Richter's right eye. The diener's pink nails blurred as she shooed it.

“My mom just texted,” Allison Sanford said. “Their flight's delayed until tomorrow. And my uncle already went back to the city.”

The three girls sat before three blue plastic trays, plates loaded from the salad bar. Every day the sneeze guard would reflect the girls' discriminating pouts as they'd hover the tongs above some wet leaf of lettuce or choicely neon beet. Then they'd carry their trays to the parking lot and smoke Marlboro Lights—these answered a lingering tang from the vinaigrette—and blast Hot 97 from whoever's SUV was closest. But today it was raining. So they were eating in the cafeteria, like freshmen.

“So you're going to throw a big rager or what?” Olivia said.

“I can't,” Allison said. “My parents are still pissed at me about New Year's. I'm only gonna invite a few chill people.”

Jenna—whose salad was just baby-corn—was cramming for a biology test. She had a stack of pastel-colored flashcards with terms like “cerebral cortex,” “mirror neurons” and “basal ganglia” written in girlish loops with glittery ink. Monica Jensen had taken the same test that morning. (Mr. Leonard had sworn his 10:15 class to secrecy, so it had to be the same test—unless Mr. Leonard was trying to trick them.) Then Monica sent Jenna an email with as many of the answers as she could remember. There was a section on autism, another on dopamine receptors, another on sham surgery and the placebo effect. You had to describe a study in which a bunch of college students with clinical depression got cured by breath mints.

Jenna had the email open on her phone and kept poking the screen to keep it from going black. She was sorting her flashcards like a croupier into the subjects that were on the test and the subjects that weren't.

“Are you going to invite Elana?”

“What choice do I have?” Allison said. “I think Elana's really annoying

and fake, but if I don't invite her, and she finds out, she's going to bitch to her parents. And then they're going to call *my* parents."

"If this was the '70s we'd be allowed to smoke cigarettes in the cafeteria," Olivia said.

"Being a slut is one thing," Jenna said, looking up from her flashcards. "But Elana is actually the fakest person I've ever met in my life."

Elana Richter—whose first name was pronounced like 'Madonna' or 'piranha,' with a soft *a*—was applying bronzer in front of her bedroom mirror. An old Cam'ron album streamed through her laptop speakers, two little orbs, sunken into the down comforter, at the foot of a mountain of clothing. Whenever she was deciding what to wear, these mountains of discarded tops and jeans formed on her bed. There they stayed until moments before she went to sleep, at which point she would use her forearm to topple them onto the floor.

As Elana applied bronzer with her contour brush, she answered texts and thumbed through her Instagram. Her brother and his friends were downstairs. She could hear them over Cam'ron. They were about to go to the Islanders game.

There were shoes, bras, hairpins all over the carpet. Assignment sheets and reading packets gushed from her Givenchy bag, the stitching of which seemed increasingly *off*, even though she knew it was from the Givenchy store at the Roosevelt Field mall. She'd heard a story once about a thief who broke into a Louis Vuitton and stole all the real bags and replaced them with knock-offs. Louis Vuitton sold knock-offs for weeks before anyone noticed.

Her mother opened her bedroom door and stood in the frame. "Did you alter that skirt?"

"No," Elana said, not turning around.

"That's the skirt from Nordstrom's?"

"Close the door. Ryan's friends are here."

"My mom never would have let me wear anything like that."

"The times they are a-changin'."

Elana stepped on a red sparkly top. A shooting pain ran up her leg. She removed the top by pinching it between her big toe and pointer toe, and—lifting it away—revealed the metal web of her lacrosse goggles. Outside the window it had stopped raining.

"I want you home by midnight. We're driving to Williams tomorrow. We need to get an early start."

Elana laid her contour brush on the dresser and stepped to her bed. She clapped closed her laptop, but not before Juelz Santana, whose voice was like Cam'ron's but a hair higher in pitch, rapped, "They DTP's: deep throat professionals."

“You’ve got to look the part,” her mother continued. “An admissions director won’t be impressed by you coming in looking like you tied one on last night. It doesn’t show respect.”

“Tied one on? Ew.”

“Don’t drink too much.”

“What about 1:15?”

“Midnight.”

“Parties don’t even start until midnight.”

“Then 12:30. I’ll pick you up.”

“Mom, no. I’m going to take Dad’s car. I won’t drink.”

“Stick your head in when you get home. I’ll be up. 12:30 doesn’t mean you leave the party at 12:30. It means 12:30 the car is in the driveway and you’re getting ready for bed.”

“Fine, great. I’ll see you later.”

Elana’s phone buzzed. A text from Jenna.

“Bye,” she said again to her mother, who then turned and left the bedroom, not closing the door behind her. Elana stepped over and kicked it shut.

“Sup,” the text read.

“Bout to go to Al’s,” Elana typed. “U there?”

“Yup.”

And then, a moment later, another text: “Can you bring liquor??”

Elana held the phone in her hand, thinking it over. Her fake ID had been confiscated two weekends prior by the bouncer at Dawn, a club that served Red Bull and Vodka Jell-O Shots, off Exit 41-A in Mineola. She typed the emoticon where the mouth frowned thoughtfully, replying: “See what I can do...” She applied lip-gloss. Re-plugged in the hair-straightener for one more clamp and swipe. Then, checking the mirror a final time, she collected her purse and Burberry trench coat and left the room.

Downstairs was quiet now. Her brother and his friends had piled into their SUVs and were off to Nassau Coliseum. She clopped across the kitchen, which was filled with still-deflating potato chip bags and empty beer cans. If she and her friends had left empty beers all over? And the living room TV still on? She passed its flashing screen. It showed the Menu page, and, in the top right corner, an old ‘90s movie. She’d seen it before. Or part of it. This was the one where the lead actor died in real life because, when they were filming an action scene, there was a real bullet in the gun instead of a blank. And still they made a sequel.

Elana didn’t stop to turn the TV off. She was heading for the liquor cabinet. Trouble was, there weren’t enough bottles in that cabinet. If she took one, it’d be obvious. So she swerved over to the wine shelf: three rows of bottles and beside it a crate, which always had several extra bottles, separated from each other

by little cardboard partitions. Nothing made Elana wince like when her parents pronounced the names of these wines in French.

She reached into the crate and brought out two bottles at random. She knew nothing about wine. It all tasted the same to her. She examined the two labels. One was from Italy, the other, Australia. She heard a noise upstairs. She wrapped both bottles under her Burberry coat, clutched the coat under her arm, and started towards the door. All of this—passing the TV, pulling out the two bottles of red wine, heading towards the door—happened in just a few seconds. She shouted, “Bye,” and closed the front door hard behind her. She reached into her purse, fished out the keys to her father’s Infiniti SUV and pressed *unlock*.

Next to Dr. Marin’s computer was a vase of daffodils, a framed photo of her son Parker in his baseball uniform, a stack of paperwork, and an empty grande frappuccino cup upon which her first name had been misspelled. She was in a constant state of slight bobbing and rolling around ever since they’d delivered the aeron chairs.

She frowned and rolled in closer towards her desk. She was flipping through Elana Richter’s toxicity report. She wondered if it was a misprint. Or maybe they’d mixed up Elana Richter with someone else. Had they put the wrong name on the form? Analyzed the wrong blood? What else could explain:

Benzodiazepines—Not Detected.

Cocaine—Not Detected.

Alcohol—Not Detected.

Alcohol not detected?

No marijuana, no opiates. According to this report, she didn’t even have ibuprofen in her system. Just nicotine. So why had she been swerving down the Long Island Expressway?

In the last two weeks Dr. Marin had gotten a bunch of overdoses that were maybe suicide, maybe accidental, and a self-inflicted gunshot wound that, when you truly examined the angle, could have been inflicted by just about anybody. It had been a relief to get a case like this, where the family would receive a straightforward answer. A blood alcohol content. A number.

She looked at the photo of her son.

She called the lab, which was on speed-dial.

She caught Bruce Miller—one of the analysts who’d worked on Elana Richter’s blood samples—just as he was about to leave for a deer-hunting trip to Maine. “Nope. Nothing in that blood,” he said. “You can send over some tissue and urine samples, if you’ve still got her in the cooler. Sheryl can run ‘em.”

“Her doctor didn’t have her on any medications?”

She heard rustling papers. Bruce started whistling the Jeopardy theme.

“Up, here it is. Adderall,” he said. “But none in her system.”

The doorbell rang. “Is that Rob?”

“It’s probably Elana. If she doesn’t bring alcohol, don’t let her in,” Jenna said.

Olivia was looking up liquor stores. “I can’t believe none of these places deliver,” she said.

“Maybe we should have gone to Luke’s.”

“We still can.”

“No.”

Allison clopped over to the front door and opened it to reveal Elana Richter, wearing too much bronzer, holding two bottles of wine.

“Hey hey,” Allison said.

They kissed on both cheeks. Elana said, “I stole some wine from my dad.”

“You rock,” Allison said. “*Elana’s here. And she brought some wine.*”

“Awe-some,” Olivia sang.

Allison led Elana into the living room. There was a laptop on the coffee table. Allison’s Facebook was open. A girl they all hated named Samantha Fields had just gotten into UCLA and was posting pictures of herself in a Bruins sweater.

“How long is this shit going to last?” Elana’s mother said to her husband.

They were up against the headboard, their legs stretched out on the sheets, CNN on mute. Ryan and his friends had left for the Islanders game. Elana had just shouted “bye” in her attitude voice and slammed the front door.

“How long is what shit going to last?” Elana’s father said.

“This whole obnoxious teenager phase,” she said. “When do they stop being teenagers? Nineteen? Twenty? Twenty-five, this generation? Could there be eight more years of this?” She thought to herself, *Ryan wasn’t this bad. He fucked around, but he was never inconsiderate. It’s her friends. If she were homeschooled, or if she went to a less catty school where she had nicer friends.* And she said out loud, “It’s her friends. She’s so busy copying what they wear and how they talk, the person she actually is has gotten buried. I miss that girl.”

“It’s her age,” her husband said.

“She used to be smart, and play lacrosse, and have interests. An admissions director isn’t going to care if she’s pretending to be ditzy or is an actual ditzy. To them, there’s no difference. Ditzy is ditzy. Obnoxious obnoxious.”

“It’s true,” he said. “I agree with you.” “My point is that it’s an act. To impress her friends or attract boys, I don’t know.”

“She’ll snap out of it. Once the act stops working for her.”

Elana was on her second glass when Jenna got a text from Luke Masterson. He, Rob, and James wanted to come over. Jenna read the text aloud and turned to Allison and said, “*Come on*. Invite them. This is a fucking clam bake.”

Meanwhile, Elana was using her iPhone as a mirror. She put on some more lip gloss, and then happened to catch sight of Olivia staring in her direction. Staring with something between fascination, amusement and disgust. Elana’s face became hot. Was something wrong with what she was wearing? With something she’d said?

When the two girls met eyes, Olivia’s mysterious expression disappeared. Her lips were purple from the wine, her legs crossed at the knee, her raised foot bobbing. When she smiled, Elana noticed the glint of her Invisalign.

Olivia and Jenna collected the glasses and went back into the kitchen for refills. Elana didn’t register anything strange about the fact that they kept the bottles in the kitchen rather than bringing them in and leaving them on the coffee table in the living room. She didn’t notice the faint microwave hum that occurred for a few seconds every time Jenna and Olivia left the room.

Jenna and Olivia stopped their conversation as they returned from the kitchen. Olivia placed Elana’s glass down in front of her and gave Elana a big smile. “More vino,” Olivia said.

The girls went out to Allison’s backyard. They opened the screen door, stepped over a rolled up slip-and-slide, which Allison hadn’t catapulted herself down since she was thirteen, four long years ago. Elana planted herself in one of the plastic deck chairs only to realize that she should have first tipped it, to pour out the mothy rainwater. Olivia and Jenna watched her like nothing in the world had ever been so fascinating. Elana could feel them straining not to laugh. She wanted to know why they were staring at her. What was this big joke?

Four ribbons of Camel Light smoke squiggled up into the night. The moon was big and flat. It was fall. Soon they’d be second semester seniors. Elana’s damp skirt made her shiver. She took another sip from her glass. Maybe she shouldn’t have taken two bottles. One bottle, her parents wouldn’t have noticed. They rubbed out their finished cigarettes in the wet grass. Allison collected the butts, wrapped them in a paper towel, which she’d brought out for this purpose, then carried the paper towel back into the house. “One of you’s got to take these when you leave,” Allison said. “Just throw them out your window when you’re driving home.”

They returned to hear Miley Cyrus on Spotify, belting to an empty living room.

A few songs later, the doorbell rang. Allison went to get it. The sound

of male voices gave the girls a sudden hopeful feeling and caused them to sit up straighter. Luke, Rob and James walked into the room carrying two six packs of Miller High Life in plastic bags from the King Kullen off Hempstead. Rob popped one open with his lighter.

Dr. Marin clicked down the receiver with her finger, then speed-dialed Melody, the teenager in charge of digitizing their files going back to 1987. Melody sent up the police report on Elana Richter.

Jim and Audrey Howard were the first to discover the SUV upside-down on the grass off Lakewood Road. The Howards—according to their police statements—were driving back to Jericho from a friend’s wedding in Manhattan. They were in a hurry to get home. The babysitter hadn’t responded to Audrey’s last three texts.

They first noticed Elana’s SUV driving erratically on the Expressway a few miles earlier. Jim Howard said he slowed their Lexus SUV to put more distance between themselves and the swerving Infiniti. When asked if the driver seemed to be intoxicated, he answered, “Definitely.”

When they turned off of Jericho Turnpike, Jim Howard noticed the Infiniti SUV up ahead. Both got out of the car. Audrey called the police. The officer told them to stay there.

Jim approached the overturned Infiniti. He saw a girl’s hair and a deflating airbag through a shattered window, glass everywhere, the frame of the door and the roof of the car both collapsed, the metal bent. He didn’t know if he was supposed to move her. He had heard that sometimes that was more dangerous. He’d also heard that overturned cars sometimes explode into flames, so he didn’t want to stand too close. He’d left his phone in the car with Audrey, so he couldn’t look it up. He decided to wait. Let the trained paramedics be the ones to pull her out.

Dr. Marin pictured him, coming from a wedding, maybe wearing a tuxedo shirt and an undone bow tie, no jacket, dress shoes flattening the grass, standing there beside the overturned car, doing nothing, just waiting. Why had the girl been swerving if she hadn’t been drunk or on drugs? Dr. Marin flipped to the part of the report that said “Cause of Death.” She stared at it a moment, then rolled backwards in her aeron chair. Maybe the girl had gotten sick, or dizzy? Dr. Marin had heard of cases in which a simple ear infection can completely disorient a person. Or maybe Elana Richter had just received terrible news. Dr. Marin had learned of her mother’s fatal heart attack while at a friend’s daughter’s graduation party. Could she have operated a vehicle in that moment, at Angelino’s restaurant, ten, no, twelve years ago, having just heard the news?

Dr. Marin rolled the aeron up to the desk and looked at the to-do pile.

There were so many. Her pen hovered over the blank space beside “Cause of Death.” After a long pause, she wrote haltingly, “Car Accident,” then added in parentheses, “Reckless Driving.”

She looked at what she’d written. She looked at the photo of Parker with his baseball bat, and her computer, whose black screen reflected her face, and the vase of daffodils. “Car Accident (Reckless Driving).” She said it aloud with a grimace. She was about to cross it out and write something else—but what?

“Oh fuck,” Elana realized. “I have to leave.”

“It’s not even one,” James said. “Fuck that.”

She had just finished her third glass. It was already 12:10. This was what happened when she drank and listened to music: the hourglass let out its belt. “My mom is such a fucking evil cuntress,” Elana said. “I have an interview at Williams. She’d rather I just sit in bed than enjoy the few hours I have a week to have fun. I’m not going to fall asleep anyway.”

“When do you have to be home by?” Luke said. “Whoa, are you okay?”

Standing up from the couch, Elana slammed her shin into the coffee table. Jenna almost laughed, but managed to catch and transpose it into throat clearing noise. Olivia openly guffawed.

“12:30,” Elana said, now sitting again, wincing, rubbing her shin dent.

Rob’s phone lit up with a swipe of his finger. He looked at the time. “Shouldn’t you go now, if you’re gonna go?”

“Or, if you’re gonna be late anyway...” James said. “Beer?”

“He has a point,” Luke said.

“I wish,” Elana said. “I don’t even want to go to Williams.”

Elana closed her eyes, then opened them again, trying to suppress a hiccup. “I can totally see her thong through her skirt,” James said to Rob.

Or maybe she was going to puke.

What would happen if she puked in front of James Brody and Luke Masterson? And Allison Sanford and Olivia Kaplan? She would have to commit suicide as fast as possible. Like, dash to the oven.

The nausea passed. The hiccup was mercifully demure. But she still felt like the room...wasn’t *spinning*, but it was definitely *something*. Everything was like the pencil, when someone does that trick.

She started putting on her coat. She got the arms in fine but it must have been taking too long or she had looked stupid doing it, because Olivia and Jenna were still watching her, kind of smiling, kind of staring in wonder. She shouldn’t have had that third glass of wine. Now her mom was going to start a fight with her, accuse her of being drunk, and of driving drunk, and the girls she wanted to hang out with were going to think she was a lightweight. She *was* a lightweight.

She shouldn't have tried to match them drink for drink.

Elana kissed everyone goodbye on the cheeks. Luke grazed her butt with his fingertips when they hugged. Allison said, "Oh, take the paper towel." She handed her the damp clump with yellow-brown stains bleeding through the quilted pattern.

Then, after a few more *goodbyes*, and *I don't want to gos*, she was outside the house, just her and the insect static, looking at the upside-down welcome mat, which had a golfer on it, and the straps of her shoes and those ten red toenails, too widely spaced, like an ogre's smile.

She felt dizzy. She closed her eyes. She heard, or imagined that she heard, an explosion of laughter from inside the house. She could smell the tobacco-spiked paper towel and wondered if her mom would smell it on her hands. She reached into her purse for her keys and looked up at the stars, which were out of focus and perpetually oncoming like a screensaver. She kept pressing the unlock button as she wobbled on her heels from the house down the stone steps to the driveway, but the car wasn't beeping. Why are you mad at me, car? What did I do to you? I fed you gas just yesterday.

She kept pushing the button. She was going to be so late. It was already 12:27.

Oh shit. She'd been pushing the *lock* button.

She stuck the key in the ignition and let out some cross between a hiccup and a burp. The car was still sitting there in Allison Sanford's driveway, but the dizziness made it feel as though she were rolling backwards onto the street. Twice she shot a terrified glance at the gearshift. There in the moving and not moving SUV, she imagined how the interviewer would smirk at her tomorrow. Williams was in the middle of nowhere. She wanted to go to school in a city—the bigger, the better. Meet new people. Have everything be different. But still. She'd rather be accepted by Williams than prove her mother right by being rejected...Why did this rejection seem so inevitable? Even before stepping foot on campus and meeting the interviewer, even before entering the state of Massachusetts, Elana already felt like she'd blown it somehow.

She turned the key. The dashboard awoke. The headlights shone on the Sanford's garage door. The speedometer ran its needle over the numbers like a piano player warming up. The paper towel of cigarettes was in her cup holder, balled-up atop some pennies and dimes, which were frozen in the amber of dried Diet Coke. She took hold of the white cable and plugged in her phone. She mistyped her password, retyped it correctly. She clicked on the iTunes app and scrolled through the artist names. She was running late—in fact, she should already be home. But she had never driven in her life without music playing. Even in a serious, mother's-gonna-kill-me situation like this, she had to take a minute

and find the right song.

She put a playlist called “Weezy F. Baby” on shuffle.

She pulled out of the driveway and started towards the L.I.E. She made sure not to drive too slowly on the Expressway. That was what cops looked for when they looked for drunk drivers. People being too careful. Too “sober.”

She tried to keep the needle between fifty-five and sixty. She felt another hiccup coming, and with it a burning foretaste of throw-up. She was afraid she might either puke while driving or else have to pull off onto the side of the road. She took the Expressway to Jericho Turnpike. She merged into the right lane so she wouldn’t miss her exit. She only had a few more miles. One or two more Lil Wayne songs.

She knew at this point she was swerving. She thought she heard police sirens, then realized they were part of the song. She turned the music off, just to be certain. There were no sirens. Just the tires grazing the edge of the rumble strip—which scared her. It told her the truth about how fast she was going. Regular blacktop was a lie. The whole highway should be rumble strip.

She pushed the stereo’s power button. The music returned. She felt another burp coming. She thought about leaving Long Island for whichever college it ended up being. Or if she didn’t get in anywhere, finding a job. Moving out of her parents’ house. She thought about James Brody and how she’d probably just humiliated herself in ways that she wouldn’t understand until tomorrow.

Deciding to turn the music off again, she approached the turn onto Lakewood Road.



Olivia took the bottles from Elana and led Jenna into the kitchen to uncork them and grab some wine glasses. As soon as they were out of the room, the two girls exchanged a look.

Elana is so fake, the look said.

They began opening and closing drawers, hunting for the corkscrew.

“Did you ever hear the story about Marta, the transfer girl?”

“Moose Knuckles Marta?”

“Yeah. Did you hear about her at Abby Gilbert’s Fourth of July party, with the non-alcoholic beer?”

“She was such a slut. Marta, not Abby Gilbert.” Jenna was reading from the wine label. “2003. This wine is old, dude.”

Olivia opened the kitchen door, causing some loose double-A batteries to click together and roll around in the condiment shelves.

“She was such a fake,” Olivia said, “and she was always pretending to be much more wasted than she actually was. I saw it once at that kid Malcolm’s

house. Then one day, one of her friends gave her a non-alcoholic beer, as a kind of experiment, *and she still started acting drunk and slutty.*"

"Savannah Grant told me," Jenna said. "But I also heard she might have had a tampon soaked in vodka in her va-jay-jay, so."

Olivia was looking though the shelves.

"I bombed my bio test today," Jenna said. "Even with the answers. I can feel it."

Olivia pushed apart a carton of soymilk and a two-liter bottle of Diet Coke to reveal a container of grape juice in the back. She reached her arm in, lifted out the grape juice and held it up to the light next to the wine, comparing the colors.

Jenna noticed what she was doing and said, "They're not even close to the same color."

"They're not *that* far off," Olivia said. "This one's a little purple-er, I guess."

Jenna found the corkscrew. One of those fancy Rabbit corkscrews where you just pull a lever and it pops out.

"What if we drink grape juice too," Olivia said, "and then all the glasses'll be the same color? We could pretend it's really good wine and that we're getting super drunk. I guarantee you she'll go along with it."

"It's Friday night," Jenna said. "I don't want to drink grape juice."

Olivia pulled back the Rabbit's ear and uncorked the wine from Australia. She poured it into three of the four glasses. Then she unscrewed the cap of the grape juice bottle and poured it into the fourth glass. "You can tell, because you know. If you didn't know, they'd look the same, so you wouldn't notice," Olivia said.

"But it's cold. The wines are room temperature."

A thin layer of condensation had formed around the glass of grape juice, though not around any of the glasses filled with wine.

"Put it in the microwave," Jenna said. "Do it for like, five seconds."

Olivia stepped to the microwave, popped the door open, and placed the cold glass inside. She closed the door, pushed five seconds, then Start. The microwave began to hum and glow. The two girls watched the glass rotate atop an unexpected lazy susan.

Bleep.

"Well that did nothing," Olivia said. She pressed the button and the door sprung forward. She touched the side of the glass with her finger. "Completely the same."

"Put it in for fifteen," Jenna said.

The microwave began to hum again, the glass of grape juice to spin.

“It’s not good to stand in front of these things.” Jenna said.

“Yeah,” Olivia said. She reached in, grabbed the glass, and pressed the microwave door closed with her knuckle. “I think it worked,” she said.

The condensation had vanished from the glass. Jenna stuck the nail and tip of her pinky into the purple juice. Then she lifted her dripping finger to her tongue.

“It feels like room temperature, but tastes too sugary to be wine,” she said.

“We can say it’s a dessert wine,” Olivia said. “Trust me, she’s not gonna say anything.”



HUMAN MATHEMATICS

By BRUCE COHEN

People in my neighborhood mostly got dead
End gigs right out of high school, saddled with faces they deserved.
After snow melted folks lined up at seasonal shacks to slurp soft

Serve ice cream in a tizzy before *it* melted & no amount of plastic surgery
Could change that. Many were not amateur photographers but spent most
Of their spare time in dark rooms & it was frustrating as an unrepeatabe

Decimal, like π , for their eyes to acquiesce when reacquainted to daylight.
We had weather though: one leaf floating in a kind of artificial arrogance
Like an unemployed unmarried man halting traffic with his outstretched

(Notice the mismatched gloves)

Hand to allow a license plate-less van with no side view mirrors
To back up, but in this case the universal uncertainty was the heavy traffic.
Wind, you are, are you not, rushing to get home before curfew,

Before your stepmother smashes your cold uneaten dinner against
The wall & pours herself another bourbon neat? The solipsistic clock
Always thought about its narcissistic self, though most months

Got bored after a few weeks & people with actual faces taped the word
Genius to their foreheads, but backwards, which rationalized their sad
Addictions to mirrors. In my neighborhood people were way too good

At human arithmetic, specifically subtraction (The never coming home),
Division (one person entering another, sometimes without permission)
& multiplication (baby-making). Folks unboxed their winter coats &

Snowflakes doubled as prime numbers; (as I said, we had indivisible weather),
& many scribbled private messages on bar napkins. A percentage of men could
Not be divided by anything other than themselves—contagious: quarantined.

NON-EMERGENCY ROOM

By BRUCE COHEN

Whenever I bump into an old acquaintance & hear
So & so kicked the bucket, or his wife ditched him,
Or remember her luscious wavy head of red hair—
She's a skinhead now due to the chemo—I lightning
Bolt to my previous thought because it doesn't affect
Me. I practice being gracious & sympathetic, half-charming,
But mildly obsess about what sushi rolls will be on special.
We already nosh too much raw bitterness in this life
So why pretend to act like a man in a man's vanishing
Skin? Sometimes I see an exquisitely handsome couple
At the sushi bar & project their raw bodies into versions
Of decomposition—salamanders slithering through
Their hollowing eye sockets. Saturday evenings,
Sunday mornings technically, after the bars let out
& cabs are invisible, I dine alone in a diner perusing
The funnies. Sometimes I drift over to the obituaries
& butter both sides of my toast & leave an extravagant tip.
After this post-last-call I take a mini-vacation to the local
Emergency Room. I have been accused of being
A hypochondriac but at that hour my heart starts its
Irregular gyrations. I eavesdrop on the other emergency
Patients' conversations, if one can call them that. Mostly
The talk is barely-sane monologues or monosyllabic moans
Or half-intoxicated dialogues directed at no one real.
Conclusion: very few fully grasp the entire scope of suffering.
Who hasn't impersonated a medical professional
By performing minor surgery on himself? I look at patients'
Fingers to see which are wearing wedding bands, not that
That means anything. Love is more about perseverance.
The deterioration is rapid. They check your vitals & if you
Appear stable they make you ungodly wait—but for your

Own diversion they have an out of reach television whose
Channels no one without authority is permitted to change
& pop culture magazines three months behind. Rarely do
I bump into anyone I know at the Emergency Room.
Eventually they call out my name & I am ushered into
A partitioned room, a curtained-off section really of a partial
Makeshift room where anyone can overhear what's being
Spoken, but I try, in this space, not to listen, I don't want
To listen because it might be intimate, not for my ears,
& who wishes to intrude on another's suffering, though
Aren't we somehow comforted by others' misfortune, even
Knowing ours will inevitably happen too soon enough?



YOUNGSTOWN: CAPTURED LIGHT STAINED GLASS (AFTER THE ART BY KIMBERLY NELSON)

BY SEAN THOMAS DOUGHERTY

This city-scape made of light, each block we live,
each block we bury our dead
who become light,
each square like a coffin,
or are they sheets of granite,
like the ones our fathers
hailed from the quarry,
or the sheets of steel
our fathers unrolled at the mill,
the black smoke & molten ore,
how long since the doors
closed? Oh mother

as you rock in your chair
I see you and your house
hidden in the dark lines,
all those years of shifts
as you drove to Martin
Luther elementary, to serve
lunch in the cafeteria
now it is all an absence
except when you speak
& the room fills
with the light of stories
of those other children
you loved far from me
that streams through the stained
glass window when I wheel you
to the cathedral on Sunday
to hear another kind of music,
we hear inside our chests,
and each evening when I lift
you out of your wheelchair
and you press against me,
I know to live inside this fragile skin
is to be the light captured by stained glass.

YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL AS THE ABSENCE OF THE AIR

BY SEAN THOMAS DOUGHERTY

You are beautiful as a dialect of glass, as the longest slide in a little girl's dream. I'm Nobody, but you are Conch shells and haikus: asleep you become/ marshland full of nesting birds/ at light you are songs. Beautiful as the Metropolitan Opera singing Aida, as a full grocery cart, pushed in the hands of the old lady with the green scarf at the Kroger's, who I gave my food stamps. As the biggest pot of collards, as punching out on the factory clock, as a kennel full of sleeping Siberian Husky pups, you are full throated dark knowing, beautiful as scarved women, suddenly rising from the picket line outside of the gated mill, on the last day of the strike. As Portuguese madrigals sung in a far off cathedral, as painkillers and cigarette stained hands, on the counter of the last bar open in town, and the neon casting azure shadows on the parking lot gravel, when I am waiting to take you home after working a long shift, you are as beautiful as the stone our daughter finds, on the beach, which is we see a piece of glass, worn tear shaped and ruby red, you are beautiful as Miles Davis pouring through Bitches Brew, as the intricate threads woven by Monks in a medieval tapestry at the Cloisters, as women in their black netted wailing along the ditches, as the joy of my dead grandfather opening up a can of sardines or a grinning face scripted in coal dust on a window by a child's finger, down at the bus station where we waited in West Virginia, remember the freshly fallen snow covered with our daughter's imprint as she lay down making angels, she is a grammar without translation. You are beautiful as any gerund unattended, my random winning lottery number drawn.



FEATURED ARTIST, NICOLA MASON



BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Nicola Mason was born in Jacksonville, FL, and grew up along the southern East Coast. After earning her MFA, she created ceramic sculpture and wrote fiction, publishing stories in numerous journals and anthologies while working as an editor for *The Southern Review* and Louisiana State University Press. She was awarded an NEA Individual Artist Fellowship in 2000. Upon moving to Cincinnati in 2002, she began taking art courses at the University of Cincinnati and was soon experimenting with mixed-media flatwork and assemblages. In 2003 she started *The Cincinnati Review* (www.cincinnatiareview.com), an outgrowth of the university's creative writing program, and is presently its managing editor.

STATEMENT ON THE WORKS

FRONT COVER

Elemental evolved around the figure of flame, the happy result of treating an old *National Geographic* page with Citra Solv, which causes the ink to bleed in interesting ways. As I began the piece, I was following the Facebook posts of the wonderful person and poet Claudia Emerson, who was weakened by cancer, and yet her spirit was, as always, incandescent. I situated her flame in a place that, to me, spoke of similar grandeur---with building blocks of language in the ether.

BACK COVER

Thicket began as an experiment with a sheet of gelatin, which I inked and placed various objects on. I then pressed down paper, removed the objects, and pressed down more paper. The negative prints were usually more interesting than the positive prints. The tree tangle is one of these negative prints, which I placed in a context that emphasized its "thicketness."



something is everything and nothing simultaneously. For instance,
a pair of gloves. Once observed,
one is the right-hand glove and the other is the left-hand glove,
but in the moments before they are observed, before they
have glove-ness—before *space is sewn together*—
both gloves are left- and right-handed. And one isn't
the other until the other is defined.
Einstein called this *spooky action at a distance*. I

III.

call it thickening, a thing permitted,
gleaming, understood
(though we read for over an hour, our eyes soon tired,
and our hands suddenly awake
(once a couple marries, scientists observe a decrease in passionate love
and an increase in deep attachment. This enables them
the longevity needed as a couple to raise children)
we fell until the morning blanched our shades—
she came I came she came I came I came I came—
there's a lesson to be learned here,

but I don't know yet what it is—)

like song

brought forth, an acceleration

of feeling.

Fatherhood. I am tired.

A child's

fist.

A child's

fist in my own. *Where has she always been?*

Here.

Beside herself.

IV.

There's no way back. She's told

no

and becomes

indignant. *Are you made at me?* she asks often enough that I doubt

myself. Was I too stern? How else to learn—

like this we come to appreciate one another's gravity—

we orbit, but give and take—

There is

a center, a hinge, but none of us can admit it's there—

or the illusion—

the salt and pepper and paprika and thyme—ends

before we can believe it. She's learned now to roll

her eyes, and the circles they make like moon

will move more men

than will conquer her.

THE NIGHT BEFORE CAL'S SECOND SURGERY

BY CRAIG MORGAN TEICHER

To subject a son
to pain even if
it promises to help him,
—is *this* love?—
to remember I have
sentenced him to this
life, which has no
interest in justice,
only in proceeding
from event to
event, as if to watch,
though it doesn't.
So I say there is
a good reason
for everything, because
it sounds true when
I say it. In fact
it sounds true
only *because* I say it.
The sound is the only
truth, and it is only
a sound, not a meaning.
I'll wait for Cal
to emerge drugged and
distorted, having held
my breath for years.
I wanted a different
life for him, have made
myself learn not to
want anything else
but what already is,
at least for him.
Steady-handed
man, tell me when
all went well.

THE NIGHT AFTER CAL'S SECOND SURGERY

BY CRAIG MORGAN TEICHER

Like ivy, hope
doesn't ask much
to cling to--because
today went smoothly
it's already ten
months from now and
steps three and four
have also gone well.
I feel clever
tonight, not so
grimly profound. Dare I
confess I'm happy?
Why not? The power
of words is either
to change outcomes
or to make them
bearable. Either way.

ON BEING REJECTED BY THE SECOND ARTIST'S COLONY THIS YEAR

BY CRAIG MORGAN TEICHER

I had hoped art
would carry me
up and out

of the cycles
of days and nights,
out of thoughts

and feelings,
beyond the reach
of muddied

everyday pain
and into a realm
of exquisite

immortal pain
which feels like
the soul-piercing

radar glare
of the fierce owl
hunting his prey

through the black,
catching it and
eating its guts.



NEW HAMPSHIRE

BY ANN GLAVIANO

Ms. Audette was young and pretty and easily impressed. She wore her hair in brushed-out curls like a cloud around her face, and when she got excited, which was often, shook her head from side to side so that her hair released an exotic scent into the classroom—not the strawberry-candy shampoo smell of the sixth-grade girls, all of whom adulated her, but the scent of something dark, spicy, fecund. We took turns struggling to pin that scent down, boys and girls alike.

“Like the air before a thunderstorm,” Mimi whispered, staring at Ms. Audette’s back, watching her skirt lift and ruffle on the breeze coming off the Mississippi River. We sat in safety with the rest of our homeroom on the orange plastic chairs of the Algiers Point ferry, returning from a field trip to the old courthouse on the West Bank. Only Ms. Audette was permitted to stand while the ferry powered through the river. She leaned over the railing, looking down at the fast brown water and across to the cityscape on the far shore.

“Like the pavement after a flash flood,” I offered. “Like the underside of a rotten log.” Mimi slapped my thigh. She was a flirt, but I knew better than to take her response as an invitation. She loved Ms. Audette. Everyone did.

“Smartass,” Mimi said, “you’re just jealous.”

“Of what?”

“Don’t even pretend, Sean. You’ve got a hard-on for her just like every other dude.” She paused. “I bet you’re still pissed about that exam.”

I was still pissed about the exam. “Who cares,” I said, and Mimi laughed her cackle laugh. Irritated, I stood and strode toward the railing on the other side of the ferry, out of view of Ms. Audette. The exam had tested, among other things, our mastery of masculine and feminine nouns in English. She had tried to trip us up with “cow,” which I initially labeled as neutral before I recalled the existence of bulls. When Ms. Audette returned the exams, I was pleased to see I’d gotten “cow” right, but she’d marked off for my response that the word “hunter” was masculine. When I found “huntress” for her in the dictionary, in front of the whole class gone silent, she gave me the point back but told me that, really, I was wrong. If anyone else had asked her about a mistake on the exam she would have given the point back and a bonus point besides. Ms. Audette was easily impressed, but never where I was concerned.

The ferry slowed as it approached the East Bank ferry landing. I felt something brush against my foot and looked down to see a small book with a

beat-up cover. Figuring it had slid out from someone's bag, I glanced behind me to see whom the book belonged to, but nobody was there.

On the other side of the ferry my class was lining up behind Ms. Audette. I picked up the book. The spine said, in faint gold letters, *New Hampshire*. From a tourist, I guessed, a travel book, but when I flipped through, it was nothing but poems. On the inside cover was the black-ink scrawl of a guy's name. Robert Frost. I was in the habit of writing my name in all of my books—our teachers drilled it into us—but I knew better than to look around for Robert Frost on the ferry, because Robert Frost—I knew—was an old dead poet. Back in September, before everyone fell in love with Ms. Audette, she had forced us to memorize a long and relentlessly rhyming poem by Robert Frost about riding a horse through a forest in the snow. Things most of us had never seen and didn't care about: horses, forests, snow. But Ms. Audette made a big deal about how much she liked this corny poem, and we were required to stand and recite it every morning for two weeks while she stoked her wild hair with her fingers. Whenever we got to the part about the horse being *queer*, Greg would cough loudly. By October, though, Greg was drawing tender colored-pencil portraits of Ms. Audette in the back of his English binder.

"Hey," I said, pushing my way past the other students to get to Ms. Audette, who had not, apparently, noted my absence as she counted the students in line. "Ms. Audette. Look."

"What is it, Sean?" she asked. She never called me Sweetie, the way she did Joel.

I handed her the book. *New Hampshire*, by Robert Frost. "It's autographed."

She ran her fingertips over the signature; her eyes went soft. This time, I knew, I had her.



She asked if she could hold it till we got back to the classroom, and I magnanimously agreed. On the bus I played the big shot in the back row, fielding questions from my classmates—no, I didn't see who might have left the book behind; yes, it was worth a lot of money. I couldn't wait to get back to the classroom, to Ms. Audette, after the bell, imagining the private conversation we'd have about my impressive discovery.

At last the school day ended. I lingered at the pencil sharpener, watching the other students file out into the hallway, and once the classroom was clear I approached Ms. Audette's desk, sweating behind my knees. "Yes, Sean?" she asked, smiling.

I grinned back. I went so far as to rest my hands on her desk, leaning

towards her, casual, but taking care not to disrupt the papers she was grading.

“May I have my book?”

“Oh, but you said I could keep it.” She kept on smiling, her eyes tight.

“I did not,” I said, indignant, and as fast as I said it, I regretted it. I heard my protest—such as I might raise when my older brother tried to scapegoat me to our parents—and I hated the familiar sound of it, my own wheedling little-boy voice when I knew I had been trapped.

“Sure. On the ferry, you don’t remember?” she asked, patting her desk drawer. “Safely locked in here. I’ll take good care of it. Robert Frost.” She shook her head, as if in disbelief, but what she meant was *don’t even try to argue*.

I took a deep breath, to fight my sudden rising tears, and my nose pricked with the sharp scent of her hair. Marigolds from my mother’s garden. And something else I couldn’t name, and knew I’d never figure out.



FALLOUT

BY SARA ELIZA JOHNSON

The sky spews black rain over the field, trembling the leaves
and our skin, so we run back home with hoods up

and laughing, muddy patches of grass
giving beneath our boots like fontanel.

This is the old way: singing as we wash the mushrooms
we hunted, scrub swirled maps from their skullcaps, cut the brain-
stems, scrape out the black gills, as we break
the cherry skins with our teeth, tongue out the sweetness.

But quiet—something is breathing inside my palm, through a hole
in my hand (or is that you, breathing into it
right after you've kissed it?).

I think I'm bleeding, my blood radiating
under the water of the faucet, I'm washing the glow away—

(or is the glow the sun through the window, dusting the surface
of everything with the residue of stars?).

Now you're singing a song you're making up as you go along—

I gave my love a cherry, it had an eye
I gave my love a baby, it could not cry

—your voice a white warp, a little flame that needs its wind to root,
to flower our skin, the field, the forest, the whole earth with light.

And was there a detonation of pollen, a radiant cloud?
Am I inside out? Have I been flayed, scraped clean?

BLACK HOLE
BY SARA ELIZA JOHNSON

"If you jump into a black hole, your mass energy will be returned to our universe, but in a mangled form."

—STEPHEN HAWKING

Six-hundred and forty light years away, a star is dying, shedding cells of photons into the black. The astronomers at the observatory think they can see it: the star wheeling back, the star caving in like a skull at the bottom of an ocean.

The man disappeared last week, left one shoe in the street. His wife worries; the neighbors call his name through the woods, the alleys, shining their flashlights in all the darkest places, waiting for his answer.

The star turns its skin invisible. The star is no longer itself. Inside the star a white dot forms, the spot where everything deforms: a crushable pearl, plucked like a word from a tongue.

Outside the compound, the stray dogs twitch moonlight from their skin. The dogs bite at flies in the moonlight, drag trails of it around with their tails, as if orbiting a void.

They will cut out his tongue, so that when he opens his mouth nothing comes but a mangled sound. They will dump his body into the ocean, where it will fall deeper. When his voice returns it will be as a birdcall in Spring, on a planet of blind and earless birds.



UNTITLED

By LIGHTSEY DARST

1/19/14. I want to have a baby without being
infantilized myself. Accept that I will
baby gate socket guard phthalate-free plastic rattle & the like & have all necessary etc
because I do for the cat. Aesthetics of cat things don't bother
me invisible to me. I'm writing like Sontag. Who
had her baby early.

Delete the catharsis.

Do you need it? Yes of course. But do you deserve it?

Black salt latte in the modern, well-lit, spacious
pleasure-dome. Everyone wants to be here, away from everything
real.

(your hand grows its bones grasping for me
I a slippery bladder give no purchase as yet)

Darling come take me. Into my new no time.

UNTITLED
BY LIGHTSEY DARST

There's always a sex scene. But that's not how you do it, that's how
you did it in your days of despair.

Go for reinforcements.

Wear a slashed shirt to work (that kind of work)

Then each act felt new. The kissing, I loved that.
The scenery—"mote" spray-painted behind your head.

She doesn't know, she's never loved a man like you.

Loft a wrist. heft of lost self.
a sheaf of what wheat.



TREBLE SEVEN, DOUBLE NAUGHT

BY HASANTHIKA SIRISENA

Chamika checked her iPhone and discovered several messages from her aunt in Sri Lanka. “We need your help,” Chamika’s aunt rasped in the last one. Chamika was close to her uncle, her father’s youngest brother, but since leaving Sri Lanka, she had spoken to her uncle a few times a year. She rarely—she could think of only two times in the past decade—spoke to the aunt.

Chamika canceled her plans for the evening so that she could return her aunt’s phone call. She ordered takeout because she felt too anxious to cook and watched three hours of television shows, none of which she had watched before or enjoyed now. After the local newscast had finished, Chamika placed the call to Colombo. When her aunt picked up, Chamika started to promise as she always did to transfer money to her uncle’s bank account in Sri Lanka. Her uncle had been sick over the past year, and she assumed that her uncle and aunt needed help with his medical bills. But her aunt stopped her. “It is not for us. My brother has asked that I call you. He needs money for his daughter.”

“For Amanthi, *nenda*?” Chamika asked. “Is that who you mean? Amanthi needs money?”

“Yes, Amanthi.” Chamika had no blood ties to her aunt’s family but had befriended her aunt’s niece, Amanthi, in school. The last time Chamika had seen Amanthi was nearly fifteen years before when Amanthi and her husband had first arrived in the States. They had not spoken over the phone for twelve years. What made Chamika even more curious was that her aunt had not used Amanthi’s name, had spoken as if Chamika didn’t know her.

“I can give her any money she wants,” Chamika offered. “Ask her to call me.”

“You are not understanding,” the aunt protested. “Amanthi is having some sort of difficulty. My brother would like you to transfer money into her account.” Chamika didn’t respond. “One thousand dollars,” the aunt added. Chamika was used to the family asking for money. She lived in the States. She was single. She had a good job, made a salary in the low six-figures. Because she didn’t need much herself, because the act was a simple gesture that had an impact, she didn’t mind giving the money. The year before she had given nearly three thousand dollars to her uncle for his surgery. But Amanthi lived in the States, and she had a husband. Why would Amanthi have need for such a lot of money? And why would she call Sri Lanka asking for such a large amount, nearly one lakh? There seemed something irresponsible, very unlike the Amanthi Chamika had known.

“I will give you the information you need,” her aunt informed Chamika in a crisp, business-like tone. Chamika heard a brief commotion on the other end and then her aunt returned. “The bank is Northern Bank. The daughter’s name is Amanthi Gianopoulos. The account number is five, two, four, treble seven, five, double naught, three.” It took Chamika a moment—she had been in America that long—to retranslate the treble seven to three sevens and the naughts to zeros. She asked her aunt to repeat the numbers to be sure she had not misunderstood, writing it down onto the first piece of paper she could reach: a pink Post-it with a cartoon heart in one corner, a bumblebee, its flight path marked by a trail of dashes, in the other, and the heading ‘Don’t forget to—’

“What has happened to Amanthi?” Chamika’s aunt explained that Amanthi’s husband had lost a lot of money recently, and Amanthi needed help. As Chamika stared at the account number she felt an instinctual suspicion. She had never liked her aunt or her aunt’s siblings. Chamika’s family belonged to the Govigama caste and the aunt’s family belonged to another. Chamika’s paternal uncle was a sweet man but easily taken in. The feeling in the family was the he’d married beneath him. “This doesn’t look like a bank account number, *nenda*?”

“This is what was given,” her aunt replied.

“*Nenda*, I will send the money,” she insisted. “Have Amanthi call me.”

“If you cannot,” the aunt replied tightly, “I will find some other way.”

“I’m not worried about the money, or about being paid back.” Her aunt already knew as much. “But there are laws in this country, *nenda*. I cannot transfer money into unknown accounts.” She imagined what would happen right after she did that, a call from the FBI, or Immigration, or Homeland Security. She heard lots of stories of deportations for minor infractions. Transferring money into strange accounts must list among them. “I need other information, the routing number for example,” Chamika insisted. There was more silence on the other end. “I don’t even know where she lives now.”

“They are in some city there,” her aunt replied. “Vermont. That is the name.”

Chamika sighed. “Get Gamini-*ayya*, to call me with the information tomorrow,” she said. Gamini was her aunt and uncle’s eldest son. He worked for a bank in Colombo. He was the one who had helped Chamika remit money to her uncle’s account and if there was anyone who could help, he would. Her aunt agreed reluctantly. “You will be helping her, no?” her aunt demanded.

The reception on Chamika’s cell phone faded and her aunt’s voice became muffled. Chamika used the moment to apologize and ring off. She stared at the number her aunt had given her. She fished out a checkbook from her purse and compared the numbers. Something was off.

The next day, as Chamika was browsing online, a text box appeared. Gamini was trying to reach her through Skype. Chamika's cousin apologized profusely. "But I want to help," Chamika interrupted.

Her cousin's image popped up in a window in the corner. Chamika could see that he was seated in the bedroom of his apartment in Colombo. Behind him was a set of sliding doors, and behind those Chamika could make out the clay-tiled rooftops of the bungalows next door, of coconut palms, and of a crescent of shoreline. Chamika experienced a swift pang of nostalgia; her voice caught in her throat.

"*Amma* should have not have involved you in this," Gamini said.

"But what is wrong *ayya*?"

"Nothing is wrong," her cousin said, too quickly and with a forced breeziness.

"Amanthi and her husband are having financial problems?"

Gamini lowered his voice. "She is not having problems. She is just trying to worry her father. She knows that none of us here have that kind of money."

"Have you spoken with her?"

"I don't need to. She has always been this way. A very cruel girl." This struck Chamika as wrong. She remembered Amanthi as a timid girl who had done whatever she was told. She had decorated her room with posters of angels and kittens and unicorns and had copied in her notebooks aphorisms that exhorted her to love herself and others. It was Chamika that the family described as cruel. "*Amma* over-reacted when she heard about the call," the cousin continued. "I have reminded her of what that girl is capable, and *amma* agrees. There is no need for any of us to be sending money."

"You can't be serious, *ayya*? You're not even going to try and help Amanthi?"

"She is playing pucks with us," Gamini insisted. "Two years we hear nothing. She never calls. Only sends a Christmas card. Then after such a silence, she phones out of nowhere."

"Maybe there's something wrong, *ayya*."

Her cousin pursed his lips. "It surprises me you care so much." When she asked why, he replied, "You, Chamika-*nangi*, are not exactly overflowing with the milk of human kindness." He punctuated this with a tight laugh meant, she knew, to make it seem he had just made a joke. She was used to this kind of petty nastiness from certain family members.

"I give money," she pointed out. "I have given every time anyone there has asked."

Gamini shrugged. "It is just that. Money."

"It is not just money when you need it," she replied.

The subject of Amanthi clearly no longer interested her cousin. Gamini ended the video feed. "Unless she calls to explain herself, we are not going to help her. You are not to help her either."

Chamika sat back in her chair. "Is that a command, *ayya?*"

"I am asking you, *nangi*, to stay out of something that isn't your business," offered the disembodied voice. "But you have always done what you wanted," He wished Chamika well and ended the call.



Chamika had arrived in the States in the early Nineties. When the government closed the universities in Sri Lanka, she applied to Mount Holyoke in Massachusetts and was accepted. She worked now as a physician's assistant at a wealthy plastic surgery practice in Westchester. In her mid-twenties, after a string of relationship with men and women, she had recognized that she was a lesbian. She was open about her sexuality with Americans. She thought of herself as focused but fun loving, free-spirited and independent. She was convinced her friends saw her the same way. She didn't allow herself to think deeper than that. There was a sinkhole you fell into if you thought too long and too hard about yourself.

Amanthi had been a cautious, quiet girl. She and Chamika had attended the same school and belonged to the same circle of friends. Despite the family relationship, Chamika and Amanthi had never enjoyed a true friendship. Their relationship was more of two sisters: one, older and more self-assured, tolerating the younger, more enthusiastically adoring sibling. They were very different. Chamika was spirited and brave; Amanthi, placid and reliable. Chamika had been far too concerned with her own life, going with boys, defying her parents, to form a strong bond with a girl like Amanthi.

The day after her conversation with Gamini, Chamika went to the bank. She was friends with one of the accounts managers—the manager often helped Chamika file her overseas remittances. Chamika stopped by the manager's cubicle and showed her the number. The manager studied it. She began typing on her computer. She informed Chamika that there was no Northern Bank in Vermont but there was a TD Banknorth. When Chamika pressed her about the number, the manager demurred. "I can't," she replied. "There are privacy laws. I can't give out that kind of information without a very good reason."

When Amanthi had become engaged to a foreign engineer working in Sri Lanka, the aunt lauded the impending marriage over Chamika and her family.

Amanthi was marrying a well-educated and successful white man. Chamika was twenty-five and lived in the States and was not yet married. Worse, it was rumored she was a lesbian. She had never denied the rumors—it was true after all—but she had never outed herself to her family. That was an American cultural ritual with no place in her own family, and they would hear what they needed to know from Sri Lankans living in the States. She had nothing to prove to them. Chamika had made some excuse that she was sitting for exams and had skipped the wedding. Amanthi called when she and her husband arrived in the States, and they'd met for dinner at a hotel in Manhattan. The husband had not impressed Chamika. This was not the person Chamika had conjured when her aunt had told her Amanthi was marrying a handsome Greek man. He wasn't a young and strapping Adonis. Instead he was unnaturally pale, at least a stone overweight, and nearly two decades older than Amanthi. Chamika might have forgiven these deficiencies if he had proven to be charming or kind. But Amanthi's husband had acted tetchy the entire dinner. Chamika had detected little love between the couple and it had occurred to Chamika that Amanthi had married solely to escape her family and Sri Lanka.

Chamika went home and looked for her cousin on Facebook but couldn't find a profile under her cousin's name. She tweeted—PRT@Chamisaok any1 hear from cozin Amanthi? LMK ASAP. A few friends retweeted her post but Chamika heard nothing else. She typed Amanthi's full name into Google. She came up with one listing under Amanthi Gianopoulos. The listing gave Amanthi's age, described her as married, no children. She discovered that her cousin worked as a secretary at a law firm in a town in Vermont. She took down the firm's number. She typed in the husband's last name. There was only one man living in the town with that last name. A Christos Gianopoulos. The link led her to the web page of the local university where he was faculty, a professor of Engineering. She found another link to an article he'd co-authored a few years ago. Another link took her to an article in a newspaper. There was no mention anywhere of Amanthi. Finally, she used the reverse lookup. She was able to find the address easily but the phone number was blocked. She printed the information and tacked it to the board underneath the unidentified bank account number.



Chamika was surprised when her acquaintances, her patients, her lovers referred to her as American. She once had caught the pastor of her church off guard by reminding him that she was a Sri Lankan. He had looked confused and then had started to explain, "But you're so..." He thought better of whatever it was he was going to say and changed the subject. He never finished his thought.

There was no question for Chamika. She had never stopped being a Sri Lankan. She never would.

She went to the Sri Lanka Society's gatherings. Despite the fact that she was Christian, she traveled to the Buddhist vihara in Hollis to meditate every Wednesday. It was far easier to be Sri Lankan in America than it had ever been in Sri Lanka. All she had dreamed of as a child was fleeing her parents, the nosy, bossy aunties and uncles, the constant meddling in her life, the pressure to be married and to have children. There you were bound by far too many social obligations; you were always doing things for people. Here, she maintained her freedom while also praising the culture and tradition and telling stories about how wonderful her childhood was. She could rave about home, the cooking, the parties, the people, and nobody knew enough about Sri Lanka to contradict her or cared enough to grill her.

When Chamika dialed the last cell number she had for Amanthi, the call went straight to voicemail. Chamika left a message that she was sorry to bother Amanthi after such a long time but she had heard Amanthi was having some trouble and wanted to help if possible. When she didn't hear again, she left another message. She received a call a few days later. It was a man—someone young Chamika guessed from the high-pitched quaver in his voice. "Look, I'm calling you because I can tell you're worried about your friend. But you got the wrong number."

"Can you tell me how long you've had this number?" Chamika asked.

The boy hesitated. Chamika knew that he was wondering if Chamika might be conning him. That was one thing Sri Lankans and Americans shared: a deep suspicion of strangers in need. "Two years at least," he finally admitted.

She looked at the number her aunt had given her. The only Northern Bank was in Ireland. Chamika tried looking up phone scams based in Ireland but found nothing that matched. It might not have been an account. Maybe it was a telephone number. But 524 didn't match any known area code, though 52 was the international country code for Mexico. This last fact seemed significant, at first, to Chamika. Later, she dismissed it as coincidence. She called the law firm that listed Amanthi as an employee. The woman who answered the phone informed her that no person by that name currently worked for them. Chamika asked for the manager. The manager politely informed her that for legal reasons she could only say that Amanthi no longer worked at the firm. "Please, can you tell me? Did she leave two years ago? I am family."

The manager hesitated. "As I said, for legal reasons we don't give out information about present or former employees."

Chamika finally broke down and charged the fee for reverse look up and found a phone number for Christos Gianopoulos. She called that weekend. When Chamika asked for Amanthi, the man on the other end informed her immediately that she had the wrong number.

“Christos?” Chamika asked. She gave Christos her name. “I met you a few years ago.”

There was a long pause on the other end. “Of course, of course, I’m so sorry. You know these connections. It’s sometimes hard to hear.” This man had a light remnant of a Brooklyn or Queens accent. She had always thought Amanthi’s husband was Greek—that was what Amanthi’s aunt had claimed—but Chamika realized now he had probably grown up in New York City. Had she really not noticed that before about him?

“Can I speak with Amanthi?”

“She’s not here.” He answered too quickly and there was an edge to his voice.

“When will she be back? I’ll call back.”

“You know she’s in and out.” He hesitated. “Can I ask why you are calling?”

“I haven’t talked to her in years, and I just wanted to know how she is.”

There was a long silence on the other end.

“She keeps her own schedule,” he replied. “How about you leave her your number, and I’ll have her call you back?” Chamika gave Christos her information but had a feeling she wouldn’t hear anything. When she tried the number again a week later, a message informed her the line had been disconnected.

A month passed. It was mid-October. Chamika was busy at work, and she might have forgotten all about Amanthi if she hadn’t one day been looking for a phone number and found still tacked to her board, under a pair of receipts, the mystery code. 5247775003. Gamini had never emailed her back. Chamika guessed Amanthi had not called again demanding the money so they were all of them proven in what they had believed about Amanthi. They were content to wait for the Christmas card. She mentioned the mystery to her girlfriend—a woman she had met in a bar in Jersey City and had started dating recently. She showed her the number. Chamika’s girlfriend listened attentively and politely and then joked she should ask that famous television show—the one with all the murders—to investigate. No one has been murdered, Chamika had replied, trying to keep

her voice even.

“But something has got to be wrong,” the girlfriend had replied after some thought. “You said she’s not the kind of person who asks for things. And a thousand dollars? That’s a chunk of money. That’s an I’m-in-a-lot-of-trouble amount of money. If it were you, wouldn’t you want to know someone cared you had disappeared? Especially as a woman.”

“Because she’s a woman she should know how to take care of herself,” Chamika replied. Her girlfriend had peered at her through narrowed eyes, her expression stony.

But Chamika did not believe she was wrong. She had come from a much harder culture than any of her American girlfriends, and all there had ever been for Chamika was to be strong. After all Amanthi had lived through, a civil war that had lasted most of her childhood and adulthood, how was it possible she could come all this way to America and be in such trouble?

The next day Chamika took out a map and judged the distance between her home and the town in Vermont where Amanthi lived. She had never been to Vermont, but she heard it was lovely in the fall. Chamika did some research and picked the date of a local festival. She made plans for a weekend stay in the town where Amanthi lived. She would take a chance. She would drop by Amanthi’s house briefly, just to say hello.

The address led her to a gray sidesplit on a neatly kept but cramped suburban street not far from the university. The garden was elaborately landscaped with a cobblestone walkway and flowerbeds now winter-barren and adorned with an abundance of lawn ornaments—frolicking wood nymphs, angels, and stone frogs of varying sizes. An American flag hung above the doorway. Chamika stared at the garden surprised by the overabundance of kitsch, out of place in this otherwise tastefully decorated, upper middle-class neighborhood. She recognized Amanthi was responsible and the idea that her cousin would still, at this point in their lives, indulge a childhood aesthetic moved Chamika a little. It also reassured her. She could rule out one possibility because surely, if Christos had murdered Amanthi two years ago, he’d have cleaned up this front lawn by now.

Chamika rang the doorbell. The man who opened the door was at least an inch taller than the Christos of Chamika’s memory and, though late middle-aged, more muscular and trim. This man could, in fact, be described as handsome.

“Chamika?” Christos’s eyes opened wide. “What’s happened?” he whispered, and she thought, though it made little sense, that he looked terrified. “Why are you here?”

“I’m here to see Amanthi.” She tried to sound nonchalant. “I called a while back but no one returned my call so I thought I’d put a visit.” She tried to grin.

He shook himself and looked past her as if expecting someone else to be standing behind her. He looked back at her. "It's a surprise." He paused a beat. "A pleasant one of course."

He stepped to the side so that she could enter the house. He led her through a short hallway into the kitchen. "You know, Chamika," Christos pronounced her name without hesitation, the way a Sri Lankan would, putting the stress on the first syllable. "Amanthi is out of town. Visiting friends in California."

Christos led Chamika to a long counter and pulled out a stool for her. He offered her a cup of coffee. "I wish you'd called," he said, pouring the remains of a large, glass coffeepot into two mugs. "I could have told you this and saved you the trouble."

Chamika took the mug from Christos. "You have disconnected the number."

Christos cursed to himself. "Of course. I'm sorry about that." Christos exhibited the puffiness around the eyes and the slackness at the jaw line that came with age but his Bob Marley T-shirt was tight enough to reveal a broad muscular chest and a tapering waist. His hair was streaked with gray. The color of his eyes surprised Chamika most. They were blue. She would have sworn the Christos she met had brown eyes. "And she was supposed to call you back I know but things got crazy with her going to California and all." He took a sip of his coffee. "Still, this is a long way to come. I'm surprised."

"We are really worried. Especially after her phone call." He appeared not to understand. "Her phone call to her father. You knew she called, no? A few weeks ago."

"How many weeks ago?"

"Six, I think."

Christos appeared puzzled. "No, I didn't know." He breathed deep. "What did she say?"

"She called her father and said you are having financial trouble. You need money."

Christos snorted. "Yeah, I'm sure *that* worried her father. He's usually the one asking for money." Christos looked around the kitchen. "I don't know why she called. We don't need money. We have plenty...or enough." He leaned forward and propped both elbows on the counter so that his head was level with Chamika's. Christos exhaled slowly. "You sure her dad isn't trying to scam you guys?"

Chamika had wondered that herself when her aunt had first called. "The thing is we're worried," she replied.

"We? Who's we?" His tone was slightly annoyed but the truth was Chamika was surprised by how affable Christos was acting. She was an intruder,

after all.

“Her family.”

He opened his mouth and closed it again. He smiled slightly and Chamika was struck again that Christos must have been beautiful when he was young. He still exuded an easy-going sexuality. The kind of man who was aware he was attractive but ambivalent about it. “Her family is worried. That’s surprising,” Christos observed. “Because her family hasn’t cared enough to call for a long time now.” He snorted. “When was the last time we saw you?”

“I’m sorry that I lost contact. And I would like to see Amanthi-*nangi* again.”

Chamika fished through her purse and pulled out the slip of paper with the number on it. She handed it to Christos. “She gave her father this number. I think it’s a bank account? But it doesn’t match a known bank.”

He looked at it. “This isn’t our account,” he finally replied. He stared at the paper a little longer before handing it back.

He straightened and took the mug from Chamika but when he saw it was still half-full slid it back toward her. “Like I said. She’s in California visiting friends. Some Sri Lankans. Maybe you know them? She calls them...”

“Batchmates.”

He walked over to the sink and placed both mugs in it. “She’s visiting batchmates. I can have her call you.”

“You could give me her number.”

He shook his head. “No, I can’t,” he said. He stared out the window when he spoke. “She tried for a long time to reach out to you, and she was really hurt when you didn’t call her back.” He paused. “You know, she was the one that cared about you. When she heard that you were dating women, she tried to call. To let you know it didn’t matter to her. Then, she figured you had just cut off all ties.” The words themselves were harsh, but his tone was remarkably gentle. “So I think that what I’ll do now is this. I’m going to give Amanthi your number and have her call you when she’s ready.”

Christos suddenly stared into the sink, his expression one of sheer, pathetic devastation. The slip was momentary but pronounced. A man barely holding deep anguish at bay. There was a story here deeper than a family insult. It was personal and most likely none of Chamika’s business. But she wanted to hear that from Amanthi.

By the time Christos looked in Chamika’s direction again, he had managed to re-invoke his former affability. He chatted with her about where she was staying. He told her what restaurants to go to in town. The best Thai. The best Indian. He explained that if he’d known she was in town that he would have taken her to dinner, but he had already made plans. He gave her his cell number

if she needed anything.

Christos led her to the doorway. When he shook her hand, she was struck again by that Christos was someone easy to like. As she walked toward her car, Chamika wondered how she had possibly gotten Amanthi's husband so wrong.



As she replayed their conversation, Chamika decided that Christos's demeanor must have been a charade to throw her off. He had been too kind. She had shown up out of nowhere, and he had let her into his house. She had questioned him as if he might be guilty of something. Any normal man would have been, should have been, angry. But throw her off of what?

She decided to eat an early dinner at the Indian restaurant. When she left the restaurant, she noticed the mannequin in the window of the thrift store next door. It was wearing a sari. The sari had been inexpertly wrapped by someone who had not known how to drape one.

She entered the store. A young woman standing at the front desk greeted her with a smile and a wave. Chamika browsed through the racks of worn, discarded clothing. The clothes were neatly folded, hung and classified only by size. She had made her way through two racks of jeans and slacks when she found what she had come into the store looking for: three blouses batiked and hand embroidered in a style common to Sri Lanka and a row of saris. She was fingering one of the saris when the shop clerk appeared next to her asking if she could help. "Do you know who left these?" Chamika asked. The clerk shrugged. "You must not get saris often?"

"There's a bunch of Indians who work for the university," the clerk replied. "And people in the community like to buy them. The fabric is good for decorating." Chamika found a label still attached to one sari. The label was for a sari shop in Colombo.

"Do you have a lot of Sri Lankans in the community?" The clerk stared at her blankly. She probably hadn't heard of Sri Lanka before. Chamika turned her attention back to the sari. Most likely, it had never been worn or the owner would have cut the label away. She took the sari from the rack. "I'd like to buy this."

The clerk pointed to a vitrine in the store. "We have some cool Indian jewelry up front."

Chamika recognized the jewelry immediately: a silver crochet necklace tipped with beads of amethysts, a matching pair of earrings, and a ring. Amanthi's grandmother had identical jewelry handmade for all of her grandchildren. The jewelry was elaborate but inexpensive, costume jewelry mostly, but they had meant something to the grandmother. Amanthi couldn't have made much money from

the set at a place like this thrift shop. The jewelry had been dumped by someone who had wanted to get rid of the items quickly; someone who didn't even care enough to try and profit. Chamika circled the glass case. The last piece was a pendant, a silver cursive 'A' with a garnet set in the right stem. Chamika owned a matching 'C,' a gift from their uncle and aunt on their eighteenth birthdays. Chamika bought the sari and the pendant.

When they had both been teenagers, Chamika and Amanthi and their boyfriends had skipped school and gone to Majestic Cinema instead. This was during the height of the civil war when it seemed as if a bombing occurred nearly every week. Midway through the film, a group of muscular, tattooed men, heads shaved, wearing camouflage pants entered the theater. They looked like JVPers. The men found seats in the front and watched the movie quietly but Chamika had wondered what might happen if some violence took place. Her body would be found there with her friends, and her parents would know then that she had spent the afternoons with boys. They would not only be sad at her death; they would be ashamed. The image of her parents' humiliation had amused her a little. Better to be the one committing the hurt than the one being hurt. She looked over at Amanthi and recognized that Amanthi was experiencing the entirely opposite reaction. She was sitting arms wrapped around her torso, shivering, leaning away from the boy next to her. Amanthi had noticed the camouflage men as well. And now her defiance was making Amanthi miserable; she had, after all, most likely only come to please Chamika.

The next morning Chamika called in sick to work. She drove to the town's police station. When she told the secretary seated at the front desk that she wanted to report a relative missing he took her contact information and asked her to wait. Ten minutes later a man in a suit walked up to her and introduced himself as a detective. She followed him through the station to his desk.

The detective explained the procedure for filing a missing persons report. As he spoke to her, Chamika became increasingly aware of how silly she was being. She didn't even know what Amanthi looked like now. She couldn't tell the detective if Amanthi had long hair or short, if she had put on or pulled down. She couldn't offer a photograph. She told the detective about the phone call and about her conversation with Christos. She told him about the jewelry. She even showed him the now heavily creased sticky note with the number. The bumblebee had been ripped away and the top of the words 'Don't' and 'Forget' looked like they'd been chewed on. As they spoke, the detective's demeanor shifted from professional concern to amateur psychotherapist, a role, Chamika realized, that was by now well-rehearsed. He explained patiently that he understood Chamika's concern. The department took seriously any report of a missing person, but an adult had the legal right to cut herself off from her family. It was horrible and

cruel—he himself didn't understand the motivation—but it happened.

The call from Christos came late morning as Chamika checked out of her bed and breakfast. She had picked up because she thought it might be Amanthi or the detective. “What the fuck, Chamika?” Christos demanded. “You called the police. The police? What the hell did I do to deserve that?” But his voice wasn't angry as much as bewildered. Chamika cringed and waited for the hammering she knew she deserved. But all she heard was his breathing, shallow and rapid, as if he'd run miles. Chamika relaxed and started to explain that she needed to start driving if she wanted to get home at a reasonable time. Christos interrupted her. “No, what you're going to do is you're come here to my house, *our* house, and I'm going to tell you the truth. I don't believe this sudden act of yours Chamika. Now? After so much time you care? But you know, if any little part of you is sincere, then maybe yeah, you should hear the truth.” She considered not going, but she knew Christos was right. She'd made a rum hash of things, coming to Vermont. She would have to see it through.

Christos ushered Chamika into the den and asked her to have a seat on the couch. He didn't sit. Instead he paced the length of the coffee table. He had his cell phone in one hand. A day's growth of beard covered his jaw. His clothes were disheveled and his eyes bloodshot. Christos told her that he was going to call Amanthi right there, so that Chamika could speak to her. But he wanted to explain his side first. His tone was drained of inflection or emotion, a man too tired to do anything else but explain the facts. He told Chamika he would never hurt Amanthi, especially not physically. Amanthi was the one who had left him. Three weeks before. But the separation wasn't final. Christos still had hope.

Christos had called Amanthi after Chamika had left and Amanthi had admitted that she had called her father for the money. She had wanted to believe, for a moment, that her father would be willing to help her. Christos sighed. That was the thing, wasn't it? Amanthi's family? Amanthi had long ago come to believe nobody in her family cared. Amanthi's family rarely called unless they needed something. The few times she asked for help, they ignored her. When Amanthi had stopped calling, when she had pretended to cut herself off hoping someone might notice and respond, she had received nothing, not even an email. Amanthi had been so depressed by her family's behavior it had affected their marriage. That was why no one returned Chamika's phone call. Christos had disconnected the phone not because of Chamika's call but because he couldn't stand explaining to Amanthi's friends who still didn't know she had left. And, he hadn't believed Chamika serious about wanting to speak to Amanthi. Amanthi had assumed years ago that Chamika had given up on their friendship.

Christos stopped in front of Chamika, head bowed. She tried to tell him not to worry, she was leaving and wouldn't bother them anymore, but he

ignored her. He appeared consumed by the need to admit all that had happened. If Chamika was so interested in their lives then she should know he too had betrayed Amanthi. In a near monotone, he related how he had gone and made several dumb mistakes. And now Amanthi had just decided she wanted to start again. The number Chamika had shown him in their first encounter? Two zeroes were missing but it looked like the number of the account Amanthi had opened for herself before she left him. She wanted a clean break. Away from her family. Away from her husband. She wanted to be her own person. He repeated those three words. Her own person. Then, he closed his eyes and swayed. Chamika embarrassed that she had compelled this confession and afraid for him, that he might reveal even more to her, wanted only to distract him for a moment, to relieve him of the need to admit anything else to her.

She reached out and grabbed his elbow to steady him. His body collapsed at her touch. Christos was heavier than she expected, so much so that she was forced to stand and brace herself against his weight. For a tumultuous moment, she thought they would both end up crashing into the coffee table but she didn't let go. Eventually, Christos regained his balance, and Chamika helped him to sit on the edge of the coffee table. She returned to the couch. He huddled, elbows propped on his thighs, face in hands. "I just want her to come back," he sobbed. "I love her."

"I can see that," Chamika replied sincerely. She held out her hand. She didn't want to. She wasn't the sort of person who comforted people by physical touch, but it seemed in that moment what he needed. Christos stared at the open palm as if not understanding at first what it meant. Eventually, he placed his hand in hers.

Christos sat breathing hard, clearly spent. Chamika held his hand in hers, forcing herself not to flinch or pull back. She couldn't predict everything that would happen. She couldn't promise Amanthi would come back. But Chamika knew from experience there would come a point when Amanthi realized escape was only the feeblest of protests. The act of closing herself off, of inuring herself to the loss of all she had left wasn't an indication of strength or willpower but a pretense, an indulgence. It was equally as weak to be the one to go, as it was to be the one who remained. It was as weak to cut someone off, as it was to be cut away.

Christos let go of Chamika's hand and started to punch numbers into the phone. Chamika heard the phone ring on the other end. A woman answered. The voice was familiar. Chamika hadn't realized until that moment how happy her cousin's voice would make her. Christos didn't answer the phone. Instead, he handed it to Chamika. She could hear Amanthi's voice repeating Christos's name, asking what he wanted.

Chamika took the phone and placed it against her ear. "It's not Christos,"

she said. Chamika heard the sharp intake of breath. “He called you because I asked him to,” she explained. “I’ve been trying to reach you *nangi*, and I’m here at your house.”

“Who is this?” Amanthi demanded. “Is this a trick?”

“No trick. It’s me,” Chamika replied. The initial joy on hearing Amanthi’s voice was already fading. She had been foolish to pursue this, and she’d done so never truly anticipating this moment. Chamika would have to invent a suitable explanation for her silence. And what could she possibly say? Chamika had not cared fifteen years ago, when it mattered about the harm she might cause. It struck her as meaningless to care so much now. “It’s me, Chamika-akki.” Amanthi still hadn’t spoken. There was little chance that Chamika and Amanthi could right their friendship. All Chamika could hope to do was, by the sound of her voice, briefly put lie to the fact no one had cared. But even that Chamika doubted. She had long ago forsaken any chance of having any such effect. “I’m very sorry,” Chamika said. “I’m sorry about everything that has happened.” Only silence. “I’m sorry, *nangi*, I waited too long to call.”



AMERICAN MASTODON

BY NICHOLAS REGIACORTE

I always know weather
seven feet before I enter it
tusking into a day
like any other

but how can I convey
a sense of my girth and
melancholy yes
fattening on the
same grind
of corn

I'm no mammoth but
look at these molars
I could grind an entire
mill's worth of flour
why don't you

bake me my Nonna's bread
but you do you did
without even a brick oven
I remember

dear one it's not mood
it's congress it's
climate that catches
up with me

who couldn't outrun
a cloud well who could
I know I know

AMERICAN MASTODON

at home

BY NICHOLAS REGIACORTE

head on I was an anvil
or enraptured
cross-eyed to see myself counting
rings down or
rings up
from the grasping & spouting o
every single
thing seemed cornered by
my falling or raised
proboscis eyeing
everything all tilt and if
I didn't watch it
skewered—
I lanced my letter my
sandwich
my poor dog Lupo
a lonely life
if not for you who found me
in profile a massif
and led me
out into this bog wading out
and driving
down through mud to be
like a forest of
larch trees new ground upon
which you'd raise
your palaces with canals in
between and bridges
over them an entire Sea
Republic though
subject as we knew to plagues
and I didn't want
any plagues on my back but
think of Santa Maria
della Salute

you said floating domes
in honor of
our survival IF we
survive I said
and that's a big IF
Okay then let's start with
a city lot a
modest two-bedroom
here and
good light from
the south.

CHINA IN A BULLSHOP

BY NICHOLAS REGIACORTE

No saucer can show its face without
their falling for it
bull of unanswered psalms and
now this bull-
eye to bull's-eye the dreary bull of
Byzantine lolling
too heavy your head bull
of shirked homage
bulls with an unrescuable sister
Ford-competent¹
bulls from one beating that race
into the train maw
of the next—like Berrymans who take
their own mugs
wrongly bulls who'd skewer the hand
that fed them
something far too light & gently
in this hour in
too small an arena of kitchen
news' dark tallies
an offer that stings in your nose
of saltpeter
or dirty joke in the sepulcher
and seems to
ask for it like the loving reminder to
“Eat” that asks
for a left horn or the last hope held
out for forgiveness
that always begs for the right.

¹ phrase “Ford-competence” derived from a capital murder case *Ford v. Wainwright*, 477 US 399 (1986), whereupon Justice Lewis Powell affirmed a “constitutional minimum” with regard Florida’s obligation in assessing Alvin Ford’s awareness of his impending punishment.

AMERICAN MASTODON
contemplates himself as art object
BY NICHOLAS REGIACORTE

I miss my little bipeds
for whom all the world's disparate falls
sprung from one great fountain!
What imaginations
they had—not only to ape but
in time to raise
each thing above itself. Why
wouldn't I
lie down after all how earnestly
they pursued me
how unassuming their spears
but straight
ribwise & sharp how admirable
their cause I imagine &
industry in quartering me
employing every piece
tail to trunk eyes ears
my ivories of course into which
they might (one day)
hollow out architectures carving little
ivory baldachins
over miniature ivory
altars delicate cups
over invisible ivory
crypts. Why why
wouldn't I put death behind me
instead racing
across the river again and
again for cover
watching the tree-line for movement my
40-pound heart raising the
dust beneath their feet.

AMERICAN MASTODON

ponders the flowers of his youth

BY NICHOLAS REGIACORTE

I scaled the volcano but found myself
wading into lava-flow
at least in theory and cracking
jokes when I heard
Cocco through the fog Where are you
you crazy bastard
but I stayed quiet basked only then in the glow
and memory of slope-
flowers blue-green spurge and
Etna Broom yellow
that we'd snapped off for all our mothers before
the summit charred up
then clouded over could I actually live
on the thought of
bougainvillea or prickly pear while Cocco
and Claire kept calling
in a panic all cloud and the guide too
lost they must descend
shouting We must descend from the rim
and grandest discovery now
all to myself succored by how bright all
matter before it cools
before all pitch the hungry mastodon tossing
the understory for cones
and before that half-lost in woods little Nicky
cooling his feet among minnows.

AMERICAN MASTODON

in which the conceit of himself weighs on his prospects for happiness

BY NICHOLAS REGIACORTE

Someone will
doubt my right to just be
so large

Is that all, Oh and
the whole trunk & tusk
thing?

Be the elephant in the room
if you want only don't be
that one

but it's no ruse
to be the only Pleistocene
in a loving but
Holocene house

where a suppressed laugh
sob growl makes
the whole frame shrink
in around

the unexploded shell
of me—

when chairs stutter back
from the table

dinner goes pale in each dish

floorboards
down the hall choke
on word of

my unsecret and self-
immolent
wish

—everyone's face
even the baby's
ruddied with love and
terror.

AMERICAN MASTODON

to his fading vestiges

BY NICHOLAS REGIACORTE

O tusks O spits to my opposable trunk how
tossing my head
can swath into crowd forest any traffic or party

or the nagging tune that
only to sway
you name

O tuning fork that in sunlight sends
D-minors
or in rain sends G's down to my toenails

what volumes
of marsh and crosshush of pines did I
displace raked
my earflaps and ribs and washed in
behind me

the dream of
an acre of fruit trees what couldn't I do
if I lived upright
more than reaching the choicest fronds to bellow
a name and lord it
over the other males father an entire nation
you know I would

if my forelegs didn't swing like this
like dead weight
of mute trunks' tolling how mute

how flat the world
without you my trunk you blind eye and lip
you periscope
stretching higher the deeper I felt
you trumpet

and flag-waver drooper grasper sprayer the swifter
I dive who plume
the air the loss of which proves these hands
poor heirloom
poor heirs to you cup and straw together

and more than any O straw tail who
sprouted in clay hills
and kindle even in bog in snow you spark meter
you swaying fuse
smolderer chasing me from boat ride to bone school
you metronome
beating 4-3 on my haunches
as my little ones who squeal after and flicker me
ahead of and back to
my sole self haloed and singed
anew anew.





CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

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AWARD WINNERS

descant 2015

Frank O'Connor Award for Short Fiction (\$500)

Ann Glaviano for "New Hampshire"

Gary Wilson Short Fiction Award (\$250)

Hasanthika Sirisena for "Treble Seven, Double Naught"

Betsy Colquitt Poetry Award (\$500)

Sean Thomas Dougherty for "You are Beautiful as the Absence of the Air"

Baskerville Publishers Poetry Award (\$250)

Nancy Reddy for "Little, Red"

